
Poetry in the UAE

Shihab M. Ghanem

Introduction

Although the Arabs have known other forms of art such as calligraphy, arabesque, architecture and music, poetry has always occupied the first position in Arabic art since pre-Islamic days. Only in post-Second World War times did new art forms such as novels, short stories, songs and above all, the cinema and television, begin to dethrone poetry. It is worth remembering that in pre-Islamic days, the Arabs hung their greatest poems or odes on the walls of their holiest shrine, the *Ka'aba* in Mecca, perhaps in the same way that we hang painting masterpieces in museums today. Those poems known as the seven (or ten) *Muallaqat* (i.e. hung ones) are still read and cherished today even by schoolchildren despite their use of archaic words. It is, therefore, ironic that the first Arab to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature was not a poet but a novelist, Neguib Mahfouz. However, the art of story-telling was also known to the Arabs since the Abbasid era in the form of the fables of Ibn Al Muqafa, and later in the *Maqamat* of Al Hamadani and Al Hariri and in the magical stories of a 'Thousand and One Nights'.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw the revival of poetry and the appearance of several outstanding poets including the Egyptian Ahmed Shawqi (1868–1932), possibly the greatest Arab poet since Al Mutanabi, who lived a thousand years earlier. The poems of Shawqi were often published on the front pages of newspapers, and newspaper boys would try to attract the attention of buyers by calling out that there was a new poem by Shawqi in the paper. Shawqi was elected by major poets from all over the Arab World as the 'Emir of Poets', but the Nobel Prize eluded him.

The Evolution of Modern Arabic Poetry

Arabic poetry since pre-Islamic times until the middle of the twentieth century followed the sixteen meters formulated by the eighth century Gulf Arab scholar, Al Khalil bin Ahmed, (one of these sixteen meters was actually added by his student, Al Akhfash). Slightly modified forms were added in the shape of *Al Muwashahat* during the period of the Islamic civilization in Andalusia in Spain. The line or *bait* adhered to the two hemistiches form, each with an equal number of feet, all the second hemistiches ending in the same rhyming letter and sound throughout the poem. The subjects of poems were usually panegyric, satire, self-praise, elegy, ghazal, (i.e. amatory or love poems), description or gnomic verse.

Contact with the West in the earlier part of this century led to the development of the *Mahjar* (or immigrant) school led by Lebanese writers like Jibran Khalil Jibran, Abu Madhi and Mikhail Nuaima, and the anti-Classical (and anti-Shawqi) *Diwan* school led by the Egyptian Al Aqqad. The romantic 'Apollo' school was led by poets such as the Egyptians Abu Shadi and Ali Mahmoud Taha, and the Tunisian Al Shabi. However, all these schools adhered to the *bait* form. In their poetry panegyric, self-praise and gnomic verse became rare and satire was usually political. Meditative, humanistic, nationalistic and love themes were common.

Just after the Second World War the Iraqi poets Al Sayyab and his compatriot poetess Nazek Al Malaikah popularized the modern *tafila* form, in which the same foot is used throughout the poem, but the number of feet changes from line to line with irregular rhyming. Earlier attempts using this form had been made by Ali Ahmed Bakatheer and a few other poets. The form soon became popular, especially with such socio-realist poets as Abdul Saboor and Higazi after the 1952 Egyptian revolution and among Western-influenced poets in Lebanon such as Hawi and Adonis. In their wake came the *tafila* Palestinian Resistance poets like Mahmood Darwish and Samih Al Qasim. At the same time, prose poems began to appear, first in Lebanon and Syria and later in other parts of the Arab world; these still face strong opposition from those who cannot accept that it is possible to strip Arabic poetry, after 15 centuries, of its rhythm.

Nabati Poetry in the UAE

It is difficult to find records of verse written in Classical Arabic (i.e. standard Arabic) by poets who lived in the area known now as the United Arab Emirates earlier than this century. One of the exceptions is the *argozas* of Ibn Majid, the great fifteenth century navigator. However, some good early *nabati* poetry was written in the vernacular style and the best known of the earlier poets is Ibn Daher who lived in Ra's al-Khaimah in the seventeenth century. One could find many maxims and words of wisdom in his poetry such as:

*If incomes are obtained by strength and not Allah's will,
Then no lion would ever starve whilst dogs are full.*

In another poem he says about old age:

*You cannot prevent Allah's will to make us old
But perhaps He will reward us for enduring old age.*

Nabati poetry is still very popular in the UAE, especially since it is written by many of the rulers and sheikhs, including President HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and HH General Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Crown Prince of Dubai and Minister of Defence. Sheikh Mohammed is versatile, writing about various subjects including love. In one of his poems he expresses some of his philosophy of life:

*The dark nights and hard days
We take them as they come and worry not about the future.
We walk along an unbeaten track
And if the path is difficult I enjoy it more.*

One of his political poems entitled 'My Hopes', is dedicated to HH Sheikh Zayed:

*O! You, our brothers of Kuwait and Euphrates.
O! You, our brothers, north and south in the Arab world.
Zayed has called out to us with dedicated resolve
A call whose commitment rekindles true hearts.
Listen to Zayed! Abandon sleep!
He has called us to denounce division.
He who follows Zayed may hope to survive.
Following Zayed is a duty – a vital duty.*

Other well-known *nabati* poets include Al Khader, bin Yaqoot and Hamad Khalifah Bu Shihab who is also a well-known poet in Classical Arabic. In fact, *nabati* poets are numerous and almost every newspaper and magazine now has a weekly page for *nabati* poems. The subjects are usually love, meditation or praise for the leaders. Often the poems end with a prayer to Allah to bless the Prophet (peace be upon him). Occasionally, as with some of Rubaia bin Yaqoot's work, the poem is a criticism of modern social trends. Here, Yaqoot laments the change in traditions and some of the effects of modern schooling on girls and boys:

*They have taught her dancing and singing
And made the girl an artist.
They trained her to perform gymnastics like an imp.
And the boy when he walks sways
His hair down to his collar,
Addicted to alcohol,
Sleeping with the bottle in his lap.*

Classical Arabic Poetry in the UAE

Among the first Classical Arabic UAE poets to gain importance in this part of the world during the twentieth century were Mubarak Al Oqaili (1880–1954), Salem bin Ali Al Owais (1887–1959) and Ahmed bin Sulayem (1905?–1976).

Al Oqaili immigrated to Dubai from al-Ahsa in Saudi Arabia in his youth. He wrote in the fashion of the old classical poets and his ideas were nationalistic and anti-colonialist. Warnings by the British rulers silenced him only briefly, but he escaped imprisonment because of his blindness.

Salem bin Ali Al Owais was born in al-Hirah, a village between Sharjah and Ajman. He obtained a basic education and loved reading Arabic books and the few magazines and books that reached him or his friends from overseas. He was influenced by old classical poetry and early twentieth century poets like Shawqi and Hafedh of Egypt. His poetry was often nationalistic and he wrote several poems about the Palestinian saga. He was a great admirer of Egypt's President Nasser about whose deeds he wrote many poems, including one on the union between Egypt and Syria that took place one year before the death of the poet. He wrote of the ill-treatment of the poor divers by pearl merchants and warned the merchants of Allah's wrath.

Ahmed bin Sulayem had to emigrate to India because of his nationalistic views, but in 1948 was summoned back by Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum who appointed him to a senior government post in Dubai. Bin Sulayem had strong connections with Oman and many of his poems were about Oman or were addressed to Omani poets and friends.

Three other poets of importance in the UAE were Khalfan Musabah (1923–1946), Sheikh Saqr Al Qasimi (1925–1993), an ex-ruler of Sharjah, and Sultan bin Ali Al Owais (1925–2000). The three poets, known as the Hirah group, grew up in the village of al-Hira in Sharjah and were close friends. Khalfan Musabah was influenced by the Apollo and romantic poets. He suffered a serious accident whilst working on a ship and died after prolonged unsuccessful treatment at the age of 23. In one of the poems he writes about his ‘medical treatment’ with a branding iron:

*I want to cure you
And cure may come with the burn of flesh.
Do not make the slightest move and be forbearing –
For endurance is the hallmark of courageous men’
Allah is the greatest! Oh! When he arose and rolled up his sleeve –
Like the son of Zabibah, walking towards the fire,
And fetched his huge branding iron
Its colour like the tongue of a vulture! –
He forced me down upon my knees,
His rock-like hand clutching the ball of fire.
Alas! For my poor body when it felt that searing iron
As it was stamped, embedded, held there.
I thought of the fearful fires of Hell
As I dropped delirious, like a ball of tar:*

Sheikh Saqr Al Qasimi was ruler of Sharjah between 1950 and 1964 but was then deposed and went into exile. He was, however, allowed to spend the last years of his life in Abu Dhabi. During his exile Sheikh Saqr lived in Cairo and his poetry was published in Egyptian and other Arab magazines. He published a few books of verse and many of his poems were nationalistic. His poetry is written in the classical style, but his daughter Sheikha Maisoon writes poetry and also paints in very modernistic styles. In one of his poems he says:

*They ask me: ‘Wherefore is your poetry so always sad
When you are the son of a ruling prince?
Is this due to failure at love?
Or has the arrow of misery pierced you like well-aimed doom?’
I reply: ‘Love? Do I cherish a love other than that for my country
In the face of the darkening catastrophes of tomorrow?’*

Sultan Al Owais was one of the best known UAE poets and he established the well-known Al Owais cultural prizes which are open to all Arabs. Most of his poetry is about love and tends towards the physical description of the female form and its beauty. He was perhaps influenced by the Andalusian poets and to some extent by the Apollo and modern *baiti* poets. A book of his poetry has been published and many of his poems have been published in English translation. An extract from his poem ‘Rio de Janeiro’ says:

*Ah! For a gracefully shaped nymph
 As though God ordained: Be beauty itself!
 And she became beautiful beyond description.
 She asked me: Are you in love?
 I replied: Love is my resort,
 For it I sing, and in it I seek refuge.
 And she approached
 With a swinging gait*

Another poet of importance is Dr Ahmed Al Madani who was born in Dubai in 1931 and died in 1995. He was highly educated and studied in Baghdad, Cambridge and the Sorbonne. He published a few books of verse as well as a book about the development of *nabati* poetry in the UAE. He wrote in the romantic *baiti* style and also the modern *tafila* style, influenced by poets of Iraq such as Al Sayyab whom he met during his university days in Baghdad. In one of his *tafila* poems entitled 'A Dubaian Morning' he says:

*Do not imagine that I am unmindful of love's meaning.
 Deep inside me, the notes of longing stir my emotions
 And the endless artistic nights
 Throbbing with the strains of lute and guitar
 And poetry fills my dreamy thoughts
 Radiating from the heart.
 Do not think that my love for you is a youth's infatuation
 Springing from desire, with fire bursting in his chest.
 Shaken by deprivation, he calls: 'I am in love!'*

Hamad Bu Shihab (b.1936) on the other hand is a very staunch believer in the classical *baiti* form. He is one of the best known poets of the UAE and tends to polish his work. He is a good *nabati* poet and has compiled an anthology of UAE *nabati* poetry which includes most of the important UAE *nabati* poets. However, he has published only a limited amount of his own poetry in book form. One of his Classical Arabic poems is about the great benefits of the federation of the emirates:

*Yesterday these Emirates were torn apart
 In them destructive men created havoc.
 And today we are enjoying security and stability
 Forcing envious people to admire us.
 Yesterday these were disunited emirates
 Suffering ignorance, poverty, illness and chronic disease,
 And today the Lord has bestowed upon us his grace
 In uncountable abundance.
 Yesterday, few people knew of our name
 And today our voice reaches all corners of the Earth.
 Oh! What a difference between our yesterday and today.*

The author of this chapter, Dr Shihab Ghanem (b. 1940), writes both in the *baiti* and *tafila* styles. He has published eight volumes of Classical Arabic verse and a volume of English verse. He has also translated poems into English for a large number of twentieth century Arab poets and published them in several volumes including a volume consisting exclusively of UAE poems. In 1984 he won the UAE poetry competition and in 1997 won a Saudi Arabian prize for poetry from Abha. He writes about love, nationalistic topics and meditative poems. In one of his poems 'Will the Twain Ever Meet' he says:

*The gap yet widens
Between the developing third world
And the advanced first world:
The third world moves backward
Towards a fourth place –
At least materially;
And the first world moves forward
Towards a zero!
At least spiritually.*

Sultan Khalifa (b. 1942), a businessman from Dubai, has published several volumes of classical Arabic and *nabati* poetry. He writes in both the *baiti* and *tafila* styles. Dr Mana Saeed Al Otaiba (b. 1946) who obtained his doctorate in economics from Cairo has published around 30 volumes of classical Arabic and *nabati* poetry. He was, at one time, the Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and wrote several well-publicized and amusing poems about the difficulties faced by OPEC ministers in reaching agreement on quotas and prices of OPEC oil. Some of those poems were translated into English. Love and sentimentalism are, however, his main themes although he occasionally writes nationalistic poems. Other themes include his children and mother. His poetry is in the classical *baiti* style. In a poem about his daughter Arwa, he says:

*O rose in our house! How sweet!
Suffusing me with her perfume.
'Arwa', opening up in my life like a fragrant flower
Crowned by the morning dew.
Each time I see her my worries disappear,
And my heart simply smiles.*

Habib Al Sayegh (b. 1950), a journalist from Abu Dhabi, writes Classical Arabic poetry. He started in the traditional *baiti* style but has left it almost entirely and tends to experiment in most of his poems, trying styles which are modern both in form and content. In a sensitive poem about an Indian youth who was run down by a car whilst working as a newspaper boy he says:

*Every morning he says to them in a gentle voice 'Good morning'
Then calls loudly
'Ittihad – Ittihad
'Khaleej
'Ittihad' . . .
He calls
And calls . . .*

*One morning – fatefully
 He was killed by a taxi
 – May you all live long –
 In the same street
 At the unlucky top end of the street
 Behind the bank, brimming with the accounts of the gentry.*

There are approximately 50 other UAE poets writing in Classical Arabic whose names frequently appear in literary pages. Some write in traditional *baiti* style, others in *tafila* and some in both styles. Some try to experiment with modern poetry and even with prose poetry. Amongst the better known names are Mohammad Sharif Al Shaibani, Mohammad bin Hader, Salem Al Zamr, Saif Al Murri, Karim Matoq, Arif Al Sheikh, Arif Al Khajah, Ahmed Mohammed Obaid, Ibrahim Mohammed Ibrahim, Khalid Badr and Jaffer Al Jamri. Several of the younger poets who have been influenced by post-modernists have, over the past two decades, attempted to write prose poetry. The form can be difficult to understand.

There are also a number of female poets, most of whom write in the modern *tafila* or prose styles. These include Salihah Dhaiban (pen-name Rua Salem) and her sister Amina Dhaiban (pen-name Sarah Hareb), Salihah Ghabesh, Dhabia Khamees, Sheikha Maisoon Al Qasimi, Nugoom Al Ghanem, Aisha Busumait, Kaltham Shaibani and Kaltham Abdulla.

Rua Salem, in a poem lamenting the death of her father, also laments her childhood:

*I did not find Masood
 Or the shop.
 Nor did I find my uncle.
 I only found a mixture
 Of Indians and Pathans
 Living in that place
 Living in every corner
 That gave me in childhood a sense of security.
 How I long to rest my head on my dad's chest
 Like I did when I was a child
 Whilst my dad played with my hair
 And short locks.
 For I was a princess
 On the bosom of my dad.
 Oh! If only dad could come back
 And I could again return a child.*

Bibliography

- Al Tai'i, Abdulla M. *Contemporary Poetry in the Arabian Gulf*, The Arab Institute for Research and Studies, ALESCO (1974).
 Ghanem, S.M. *Pearls and Shells: Poems from the United Arab Emirates*, Dubai, Deira Printing Press (1996).
 Ghanem, S.M. *Coffee and Dates : 20th Century Poems from the United Arab Emirates* (manuscript).
 Nawful, Yousuf, *The Poets of the United Arab Emirates*, The Cultural and Scientific Association, Dubai, Bin Dismal Printing Press & Stationery (1994).