SHAPING THE CAST OF CHARACTERS: 
THE CASE OF AL-ΤAYYIB ṢĀLIḤ

How to define the characters

There are not many cases in which one writer—as opposed to a group—places a distinct stamp on the literature of his or her people and brings it to the attention of readers outside the country. This is true for Gabriel García Márquez (1928-), whose Colombian writing came to the attention not just of readers in Latin America, but throughout the world, primarily through his novel One Hundred Years of Solitude [Cien Años de Soledad (1967)]. Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ (1929-) has had a similar effect. This author has not only brought Sudanese literature, considered marginal in the Arab world, to the awareness of readers in and critics of the Arab world, but he has opened the doors of Sudanese literature to audiences throughout the world by way of translations primarily into English, but also into French, German, Italian, Russian, and Hebrew. Clearly al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ did not operate in a void, as he was influenced by both Arab and Western writers.¹

An earlier version of this article appeared in Arabic: “‘Atāwur al-Shakhsīyya fi A‘māl al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ,” al-Karmil, Haifa, 10 (1989), pp. 7-26. I am grateful to Professor Ahmad Muhammad el-Badawi who reviewed the material and provided useful suggestions. Unless noted otherwise, all excerpts given in English of the work of al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ are taken from the translations of Denys Johnson-Davies, hence the transliteration in these excerpts may differ in some respects from the transliteration used elsewhere in the text.


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Although Sudanese authors appeared as early as the 1920s, it was only in the 1960s that one can speak of Sudanese literary activity of real significance. Briefly, we can mention Abu Bakr Khalid (1934-1976), 'Ali al-Makk (1937-), al-Tayyib Zarrûq (1935-), Ibrâhim Ishaq Ibrâhim (1946-), and Mukhtar Ibrâhim 'Ajjâba (1946-). Nevertheless, the literary activity of the Sudanese writers, including al-Tayyib Sâlih, did not change the marginality of Sudanese literature among modern Arabic literatures, especially compared to leading Arabic literatures such as Egyptian, Lebanese, and Moroccan.
