THE MODERN ARABIC VERY SHORT STORY: 
A GENERIC APPROACH

Introduction

The development of literary genres is a function of a complex interaction between intra-literary and extra-literary factors. This dynamic leads to the perpetual change of existing genres and to the birth of new literary phenomena, which attain the status of sub-genres and aspire to become "well-established" genres in the future, whereupon they go through this process anew. As for the very short story in modern Arabic literature, from the viewpoint of the sociology of literature a certain connection exists between this form and the scientific development that the world has experienced in recent decades, with its effect on all aspects of modern life. Numerous revolutionary, technological, and cultural information sources have contributed

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to the appearance of very short fiction texts compatible with the fast pace of this development. Edward al-Kharrāt observes that additional reasons for the creation of this genre relate to political conditions and the serious consequences of the 1967 war for the Arab world—harsh social conditions and disappointment with socialist ideals. From a literary point of view, al-Kharrāt adds the major factor of the failure of the short story, as an institutionalized genre, to constantly innovate and explore new possibilities. Generally, the state of openness, fluidity, and blurring of borders among information, culture, and art appears to have contributed greatly to the interaction among various genres. In our case, the blurring of borders between the short story and poetry has led to the birth of the very short story, as will be discussed later on.

The number of Arabic texts written under the generic auspices of the very short story is extremely large and is constantly increasing. The amount of theoretical and critical research on the very short story, however, is immeasurably less. The wide gap indicates a state of confusion among researchers and theorists faced with this new, ever intensifying and crystallizing literary form. The embarrassment is reflected in continuous silence and a state of expectation. Such research as does exist concentrates on three main characteristics, namely the brevity of the very short story, its similarity to poetry, and the reader’s active position. These three contain numerous sub-characteristics concerning the various techniques employed.

The first characteristic, brevity, refers to the relationship between the very short story and the short story, apparently in technical terms of quantity. But this quantitative difference involves essential differences of type. A major consideration in the ordering of the narrative genres on the quantity contin-


3 In addition to all these factors that have spurred the development of the Arabic very short story, it seems that the tradition of classical Arabic prose forms the background to it. However, the link between various short genres of classical Arabic prose and the modern Arabic very short story has not been extensively discussed. I believe that this topic merits serious discussion in a separate work. For more information on this subject see Ahmad ʿAbd al-Rāziq Abū al-ʿUla, “al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣira Jiddan wa-Ishkāliyyat al-Shākī al-Qaṣaṣi al-Muʿāṣir,” al-Thaqāfa al-Jadīda, August (1989), pp. 40-43; Ghāli Shuqrī, “Min Ishkāliyyat al-Qiṣṣa al-Miṣriyya al-Qaṣira,” Ilbād, August (1989), pp. 7-19.

4 This genre has increasingly been the writing focus of many Arab writers, for example, Yahya al-Tāhir Abūdallāh, Hanaʾ ʿĀṭiyāʾa, ʿAbd al-Munʿīm al-Bāz, Riḍqī Badawi, Badr al-Dīb, Naṣīr al-Ḥalawānī, Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥasan, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Haydar, Muḥammad al-Makhdumī, Muḥammad Mustaṣir, Nābil Naʿūm, Muntaṣir al-Qaffāsh, ʿIbīṭhāl Śālīm, Sayyid al-Wakīl (Egypt); Muḥammad al-ʿRajabī (Jordan); Śālīm al-Ḥumaydī (Yemen); Muḥammad Shuqrī (Palestine); Zakariyyā Tāmīr (Syria); Ibrāhīm Ahmad, Muḥsīn al-Khaṭāfī (Iraq), Muḥammad Nujaym (Morocco), and many others.