Abstract

When asked to comment on his novel al-Raj' al-ba'id, Fu’ād al-Takarli said that it expressed traditional themes in an innovative form. This literary study of the novel, based on a close textual analysis, shows that al-Raj' al-ba'id can be considered as one of the most successful Arabic examples of the so-called “polyphonic novel”.

Introduction

According to the American critic Stefan Meyer, one of the innovative, modernist strategies introduced in the Arabic novel in the 1960s was the “democratisation of narration, or polyphony” (Meyer 2001: 9). He refers to Walid Hamarneh’s observations about the experimental development of the Arabic novel in the 1960s: authors started to replace the common, “editorial omniscient third person narrator or the first person” (Hamarneh quoted in Meyer 2001: 9) with a multiple narration. Meyer then offers an analysis of some novels by Ghassān Kanafānī (Rijāl fī 'l-shams, 1963; Mā tabaqqā la-kum, 1966), Najīb Mahfūz (Mīrāmār, 1967) and Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā (al-Safīnā, 1969; al-Baḥth ‘an Walīd Maṣ‘ūd, 1978) as examples of such innovative experimentation. Meyer, like other critics before him, such as Ṣābīr Ḥāfīz and Fāḍil Thāmīr, mentions Jabrā’s Arabic translation of William Faulkner’s novel The Sound and the Fury (1929) as exercising a great influence on most, if not all, of the above mentioned novelists.¹ In fact, what all those novels have in common with the American masterpiece is a division of the narrative whereby the novel is narrated by different voices or

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¹ Jabrā’s translation was published in 1963 in Beirut as al-Sakhāb wa-t-‘unwaf by Dār al-‘ilm li-l-malāyīn. Cf. Ḥāfīz quoted in Meyer 2001: 29; Thāmīr 1992: 82.
through the perspectives of more than one character. The same applies to Fu’ād al-Takarlî’s al-Rajî al-ba‘îd “The Long Way Back” (1980, 2001). In this article, we will focus on this novel, which is arguably the finest example of narrative polyphony and multiple narration in contemporary Arabic fiction. The literary analysis of the novel, albeit focusing mainly on polyphony, will examine other significant formal aspects and show how the author does justice to the complexity of the issues he engages by virtue of his skilful handling of sophisticated techniques.

The technique of multiple narration can be carried out in different ways, can be employed for different reasons and can produce different effects and results. One of the most obvious reasons why an author forgoes either a God-like, omniscient narrator, or an Ich-Erzählung narration by a character, is to weaken the author’s own voice within his work. Ideally, this could give the reader more independence of thought and substitute the one and only vision of the world with a more democratic representation of it. The technique could emphasize how the same event or character is viewed from different perspectives, and how each or none of these viewpoints is valid. In other words, the technique of multiple narration (or multivoicedness) causes the reader to be concerned about “the positioning of authorial discourse” within a work of fiction. The technique is also associated with a desire for more objectivity in the art of fiction, a more neutral authorial voice. Much has been written on this subject. Wayne C. Booth, for instance, writes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* about this topic and describes how the mere application of one technique instead of another does not necessarily mean that more objectivity is achieved. Genette echoes this conclusion and, refuting Henry James’s argument about *telling vs. showing*, claims that “the very idea of showing is [...] completely illusory” (Genette 1972: 163-164). This concept is present also in Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), the monograph in which the well-known Russian critic coins the term *polyphony*. Bakhtin takes a step further by discussing the problem of the formal and artistic position of authorial discourse “with regard to the hero’s discourse:”

This problem lies deeper than the question of authorial discourse on the superficial level of composition, and deeper than any superficially compositional device.

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2 Hereafter, every quotation from the novel will be followed by a plain number referring to the page numbers in the Arabic Dār al-Ādāb edition, and an italicised number referring to the English translation by Catherine Cobham (for further details on the editions see “References”).

3 Phrase borrowed from Bakhtin 1963: 56.

4 “Impersonal narration may, in fact, encourage the very subjectivism that it is supposed to cure”. Booth 1983: 83.