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ARAB ADVENTURERS AND THEIR DEPICTION IN ARABIC LITERATURE

Abstract

The present article deals with such historical phenomenon as oriental adventurers – street-wise tricksters or so-called *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār*, i.e., "vagabonds and cunning ones". Among epic pieces widely spread in world literature, particularly noteworthy are the stories about these oriental adventurers.

In the Middle Ages, the *ʿayyārūn* were called warriors grouped into brotherhoods – *muruwwa* or *futuwwa* ("courage", "boldness"). They were widespread in Iraq and Persia and later in Transjordan. Initially, these brotherhoods were guild associations, then turned into armed detachments, formally in the service of the Sultan but often opposed to the authorities.

Among the masses, the *ʿayyārūn* enjoyed the popularity of crafty tricksters. They robbed the rich, thereby expressing class protest. The people admired and treated them with great sympathy, telling stories, anecdotes, and heroic epics about them that were repeated from mouth to mouth and passed on from generation to generation.

It is interesting that most crafty heroes, considered fantastic characters, are real personalities with historical pasts that do not diverge too much from the artistic one. This historical past is confirmed by historical texts indicating their existence. Among such popular cunning heroes should be mentioned the wily Dalīla (*Dalīla al-muḥtāla*), ʻAlī al-Zaybak, and Aḥmad al-Danaf. The stories about them are found in the two most significant collections of Arabic literature about street-wise tricksters – *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Seerah of ʻAlī al-Zaybak*.

When talking about the oriental adventurers, the genre of *maqāmāt* that arose in the second half of the 10th century should also be mentioned. It was widely spread in medieval literature of the Middle East and forestalled the European picaresque short story.

The vast popularity of the various picaresque heroes is also confirmed by the genre of the short anecdote, which exists in Arabic literature and occupies a significant place in *One Thousand and One Nights.* Initially, the characters of the anecdotes were historical personalities. But the most popular character of the anecdotes should be considered Ǧuḥā, who later began wandering from one literature to another, from one folklore to another, permeating Sicily, Serbia, and Tuscany.

It should be noted that adventurous Arabic prose and anecdotes represent an essential part of Arabic literary heritage. Their study and research significantly enrich our knowledge of multiform Arabic literature.

Keywords: *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār, futuwwa,* ʻAlī al-Zaybak, *maqāmāt,* short anecdote.

Among epic pieces widely spread in world literature, particularly noteworthy are the stories about oriental adventurers or so-called *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār*. Arabic cultural heritage preserves numerous books, reports, stories, tales and legends, translations, biographies (Seerahs), poetic and prosaic works, aphorisms and anecdotes, telling about thieves and swindlers, their tricks, and "professional" traditions. In Arabic literary heritage, these works are known as *ʾadabu-l-ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār*, i.e., "the literature of vagabonds and cunning ones."

Oriental adventurers or swindlers and rogues were comprised of such categories of people as *ṣaʿālīk* ("idlers, ragamuffins, tramps"), *šuṭṭār* ("cunning, tricksters, artful ones"), *ʿayyārūn* ("vagabonds,

scoundrels, idlers, outlaws"), *fityān* ("young men"), *zuʿʿār* ("hooligans, thugs"), *duʿʿār* ("libertines, debauchees"), *ḥarāfīš* ("thieves, disgusting, immoral and worthless people"), and other owners of despicable professions. They appeared as a result of poverty and unemployment, facilitated by the indifference of the idle rulers to the interests of the people, as well as the dullness and silliness of military and government officials. The *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār* represent a social layer, undermined socially and politically, which unites poverty and dervishes. It appeared between the end of the 9th and the middle of the 12th century (Al-Nağār 1981, 7).

The term *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār* was used in Arabic in old times and is less common now. Today, to describe the risky adventures of rogues and swindlers, the term *muġāmarāt* ("adventures, risky ventures, hazardous enterprises") is generally used. And to denote a hero-adventurer is used the term *muġāmir* ("adventurer").

In the Middle Ages, the *ʿayyārūn* were called warriors grouped into brotherhoods – *muruwwa* or *futuwwa* ("courage", "boldness"). They were widespread in Iraq and Persia and later in Transjordan. In Syria and Mesopotamia, they were known as *aḥdāṯ*[1] and in Egypt – as *ḥarāfīš*[2]. Sometimes, this term is used with the same meaning as *fityān* ("young men"). Existing texts indicate that many *fityān* called themselves or were called *ʿayyārūn* or some equivalent name. Many *ʿayyārūn*, on the contrary, called themselves *fityān* or the followers of *futuwwa*. Thus, one of the leaders of the *aḥdāṯ* may sometimes be referred to as *raʾs ʿayyārān* and sometimes as *raʾīs ʾal-fityān.*

If necessary, they acted as loyal faith defenders in the border regions of inner Asia. In some areas, they were forming opposition groups in the cities, coming to power during the weakening of the official government and terrorizing the rich part of the population. Such was the case in Baghdad in 1135-1144 (The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1960, 794). Three centuries, from the 10th to the 12th, are full of stories about their "heroic" deeds. Robbery and theft stopped only during the period of strong rulers.

Naturally, the question arises: who were they, and what were their aims? To begin with, they were obviously poor young people from various social, ethnic (and even religious) circles. They came together to live comfortably in an environment of companionship with shared property rights. They did not have a "program" in the sense that modern parties have, and often, an inclination towards plunder seemed to be their sole motivation. It is remarkable that they had a specific aspiration – to join the police (*šurṭa*). Partly, this was due to the prospect of a regular salary but also because joining the police was the surest way to avoid trouble with them.

Thus, initially, these brotherhoods were guild associations, then turned into armed detachments, formally in the service of the Sultan but often opposed to the authorities. The salary given by the Sultan to the *futuwwa* representatives was, in essence, a ransom for their loyal behavior. The sources mention the reformed *ʿayyārūn*, who, acting as volunteers (*mutaṭawwiʿūn*), helped the government against their former companions. The leaders of these volunteers demanded official recognition of the title *qāʾid*, which, in addition to satisfying their self-esteem, gave them a secure place in the social hierarchy. As for religion, there were Shiites and Sunnis among them. The Ismailis may have attempted to infiltrate their groupings to organize political activities there. The Hanbalis also had their social "base" among some of them. But these diverse movements co-existed, and the *futuwwa* owes nothing to any of them (The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1965, 962).

It is noteworthy that the clothing of the *ʿayyārūn* was similar to that of the Sufis. Acceptance of the newcomers into the *futuwwa* was preceded by a probationary period and accompanied by a

[1] *aḥdāṯ* (pl. from *ḥadaṯ*) – lit. "young men", a kind of urban militia that played a considerable role in the cities of Syria and Upper Mesopotamia from the 10th to the 12th centuries and is particularly well known in Aleppo and Damascus. Ranged against the authorities, they simultaneously were entrusted with police functions (*šurṭa*). The term is found in earlier centuries in Iraq, especially in Basra and Kufa (The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1960, 256; The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1965, 963).

[2] *ḥarfūš* (pl. *ḥarāfīš*, *ḥarāfīša*) – "vagabond, ne'er-do-well", often used in the sense of "ruffians, rascals, scamps". From the 13th to the 16th century, the term appears in chronicles and other works dealing with the Mameluke domains of Egypt and Syria. The last author to make relatively frequent use of the term seems to be the chronicler Ibn Iyās (d. 1524). The *ḥarāfīš* represented the lowest element in the strata of Mameluke society, forming groups in the urban centers of Cairo and Damascus and also in Homs, Hama, and Aleppo (The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1965, 206).

ceremonial that included drinking a cup of salt water during a communal meeting at which a belt was buckled around the new devotee; he also adopted the distinctive clothing of the *futuwwa*, the trousers being especially significant. He was introduced by a sponsor to whom he was bound by the inflexible duty of the son (*ibn*) or junior, inferior man (*ṣaġīr*) to the father (*abū*) or senior (*kabīr*). Solidarity between the comrades had to be absolute. The organization had a kind of autonomous internal jurisdiction, resolving disputes by a procedure in which the *futuwwa* oath of honor played an immense role.

The members of the *futuwwa* were involved in the rearing and flying of homing pigeons (an ancient occupation of the *fityān* but despised by the aristocracy). They were engaged in the sport of the *bunduq*, accompanied by the shooting of birds (The Encyclopaedia of Islam 1965, 964).

Among the masses, the true *ʿayyārūn* enjoyed the popularity of crafty tricksters. They robbed the rich, thereby expressing class protest, and had no moral principles. But the people admired and treated them with great sympathy, praised their reality, sheltered them, and told stories, anecdotes, and heroic epics about them that were repeated from mouth to mouth and passed on from generation to generation. All these stories, of course, are not without exaggeration and are of interest from the viewpoint of meeting the reverie with reality and historical reality with literary fantasy. Although some of them also have a historical basis confirmed by historical sources.

However, apart from folk tales and some historical data, there are sources whose chroniclers were strongly prejudiced towards these cunning fellows. These chroniclers call them "...a mob..., otherwise a rabble, riffraff *(awbāš)*". From the Seljuk times, they were called "scamps" – *rind*[3]. Nevertheless, there were cases when the chroniclers sympathized with them and tried to explain to the readers that uprisings and public unrests occurred only "to administer justice, eliminate oppression and establish law...". In this case, these thugs were not thieves but rather the intercessors who fought the people's belittling. They presented themselves as the people who rebelled against their lack of rights. They were unable to find any other way to draw attention to their problems except through theft, trickery, vagrancy, and banditry. Thus, these communities were the same public communities that rapidly spread among the masses and fed the resistance movements in Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo. Here, it should be noted that the official political system was destroyed, and activated public resistance forces were trying to seize power under the pretext of national security protection (Al-Naǧār 1981, 10).

In their rebellion against the state, all these vagabonds lacked organization and cohesion. They could suddenly overthrow the existing form of government but were unaware of management and administration and had no idea about social, economic, and political issues. To a certain extent, their striving was to draw the government's attention and demand justice in governance. However, the state considered them lawbreakers and treated them as criminals rather than rebels with a specific mission (Abd al-Mawlā 1990, 4).

It is interesting that a considerable number of crafty heroes are abundantly mentioned in *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Seerah of ʻAlī al-Zaybak*. These are the two most significant collections of Arabic literature about street-wise tricksters. Such characters as the wily Dalīla (*Dalīla al-muḥtāla*), ʻAlī al-Zaybak, Aḥmad al-Danaf and others, can be considered fantastic ones, but, actually, they are real personalities with their historical past that does not diverge too much from the artistic one (Al-Naǧār 1981, 14). This historical past is confirmed by historical texts indicating the existence of the wily Dalīla. Al-Masʻūdī (d. 956) mentions her in connection with the events of 895 at the time of Caliph al-Muʻtaḍid, giving some reports about the deft tricksters in Baghdad. The reality of ʻAlī al-Zaybak is confirmed by Ibn al-Aṯīr (1160-1233), narrating the events of 1052 when the leaders of the *ʿayyārūn,* al-Ṭaqṭaqī and al-Zaybak managed to seize power in Baghdad and collect taxes in the bazaars. As for Aḥmad al-Danaf, he was mentioned by Ibn Iyās (d. 1524) in connection with the events of 1486.

It is noteworthy that ʻAlī al-Zaybak and the wily Dalīla originated from Baghdad, and Aḥmad al-Danaf – from Cairo. Moreover, historically, ʻAlī al-Zaybak and the wily Dalīla preceded Aḥmad al-Danaf by more than four and a half centuries. All this historically and geographically contradicts the folk legends telling about them. The literary or folk legend made Aḥmad al-Danaf of Cairo a hero of Baghdad and the "mentor" (*ʾustāḏ*) and "senior" (*kabīr*) of ʻAlī al-Zaybak of Baghdad, whom the folk legend

[3] *rind* (pl. *runūd*) – gangs that were noticeably active in Anatolia. Cp. *ʿayyārūn* in Baghdad and *aḥdāṯ* in Syria in the 12th century.

turned into an Egyptian hero and transferred the main action arena to Baghdad. As a result, confusion occurred in the folk tradition. Oral transmission rejected the time distance between these two people and made them contemporaries. Also, the folk epic recognized al-Danaf as the predecessor of al-Zaybak and attributed numerous adventures of al-Zaybak to him. However, historical contradiction, as we know, is very ordinary in folk literature, which leads to the disappearance or absence of time frames.

Two noteworthy aspects have a distant influence on the popularity of ʻAlī al-Zaybak, both from the historical and literary points of view. The first one is that al-Zaybak and his fellow (*rafīq*) al-Ṭaqṭaqī managed to seize power in Baghdad. The dismayed Caliph had to resort officially to the help of the *ʿayyārūn* to suppress the rebellion of 1051. The other aspect consists of the resignation of the Baghdad police chief. He sent a security team to guard the Caliph's palace and his carrier pigeons from robbers and thieves who terrorized the population and set fires. There is a possibility that this group consisted of the *ʿayyārūn* themselves, headed by ʻAlī al-Zaybak. But the historians are silent about that. In light of this, *The Seerah of ʻAlī al-Zaybak* was created and written in Egypt after the reign of Ibn Ṭūlūn. It is no coincidence that ʻAlī al-Zaybak is the only great cunning trickster not sentenced to death by the Caliph, as it happened with other great cunning street-wise tricksters. Thus, according to historical data, Aḥmad al-Danaf was killed in 1486. It means that his literary reality began at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries.

Aḥmad al-Danaf was more popular than ʻAlī al-Zaybak, not because he was his teacher (which is not historically accurate) but because the people attributed ʻAlī al-Zaybak's adventures to Aḥmad al-Danaf when he first appeared in the Egyptian environment. However, both were famous in their way, and both found a warm literary welcome in *One Thousand and One Nights,* confirming their popularity. Then the creators of the folk Seerahs emerged and combined these two heroes into one Seerah, making ʻAlī al-Zaybak the hero of this Seerah, and Aḥmad al-Danaf was "honored" to be al-Zaybak's "mentor" and "senior" in the art of theft and deftness. These stories later found their continuation in literature. The cunning tricksters rebelled against social, economic, and political reality, filling the historical and folk reality with a long memory. That is confirmed by the historical study of the phenomenon of the *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār* (Al-Nağār 1981, 64-72; Ajimyan 2006, 6-23).

When talking about the oriental adventurers, the genre of *maqāmāt* that arose in the second half of the 10th century should also be mentioned. It widely spread in medieval literature of the Middle East and forestalled the European picaresque short story. *maqāmāt* (sing. *maqāma*) are short stories written in refined rhymed prose (*sağʿ*) with numerous poetic insertions. Each *maqāma* has a traditional beginning, a standard ending, the same type of action development, and the repetition of situations with more or less significant variations. The narration in *maqāmāt* is conducted in the first person; the narrator is one in the entire cycle of *maqāmāt*.

There are at least seventy writers known to have turned to the genre of *maqāmāt*. Works in this genre were composed even at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the first authors of the *maqāmāt*, who is sometimes even considered the founder of a new genre, was a scientist-philologist from Hamadan – Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamad̲ānī (969-1007), who, according to his statement, had composed about four hundred *maqāmāt*, of which only fifty-one have survived. The genre of *maqāmāt* was further developed in the works of the famous Arab stylist from Basra, Abū Muhammad al-Qāsim al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122). He owns a cycle of fifty *maqāmāt*, the main character of which, the educated vagabond writer Abū Zayd al-Sarūğī, appears in a new shape in each of the *maqāmāt* but invariably deftly disengages himself from the most challenging situations (Filshtinsky 1965, 211; Borisov and Dolinina 1978, 3). It should be mentioned that the peculiarities of *maqāmāt* are discussed in the PhD thesis by Nino Dolidze dedicated to the genre of *maqāmāt* (Dolidze 2004).

The vast popularity of the various picaresque heroes is also confirmed by the genre of the short anecdote, which exists in Arabic literature and occupies a significant place in *One Thousand and One Nights.* Arabic anecdotes and picaresque short stories that go back to them are closer to the European medieval genre of fabliau. There, we find the same cult of the crafty rogue, unscrupulous about his choice of means and always ready to use human stupidity for selfish interests. The authors do not even try to instill into the reader the idea that such behavior of the hero can be justified from a moral point of view by the injustice reigning in public life or the irrationality of the social order, and thereby "ennoble" his behavior, as the Renaissance authors did in Europe. The hero in these stories acts soberly and cynically, trying to outwit someone, make money at someone else's expense, and thus win "a place under the sun."

The Arabic anecdote is characterized by "a lack of ideas" – its essence is in a funny situation; its primitive-comic plot is built on the effect of unexpected, clever answers or witty dialogue. Longer stories about funny foolery or deftness, craftiness, and resourcefulness of the city hero also emerge from an anecdote and are constructed on the comic element of unexpectedness. This distinguishes them from similar European Renaissance short stories, where the emphasis is extended to the dominant idea: the rehabilitation of human nature, criticism of the greed and hypocrisy of the clergy, and glorification of reason. The picaresque short stories are adjoined by the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights,* similar to them in content, dedicated to the tricks of swindlers, thieves, and robbers, as well as how their crimes were discovered. Although the crafty tricks of thieves and swindlers evoke admiration among the storytellers, their sympathy is entirely on the side of the characters protecting their property (Filshtinsky 1986, 21).

The word "anecdote" was not used in Middle East countries. The stories discussed here had different, most often Arabic, names. The most common are *laṭīfa* (pl. *laṭā'if*) – 1) "subtlety"; 2) "witty word"; "anecdote", "subtle joke"; *ẓarīfa* (pl. *ẓarā'if*) – "witty thought"; "joke"; "witticism"; "witty story", "bon mot"; *nādira* (pl. *nawādir*) – 1) "rarity", "curiosity"; 2) "funny story, tale", "anecdote"; 3) "extraordinary case"; *ʿağība* (pl. *ʿağā'ib*) – "miracle", "curiosity". Satire and lampoon were denoted by the term *hağw* – 1) "ridicule", "defamation"; 2) "mockery"; 3) "satire"; "lampoon". It was mostly applied to poetry works. Two of the mentioned terms – *nādira* and *ʿağība* – have the same meaning as the term "anecdote", i.e., "something unknown, rare, peculiar" (Osmanov 1963, 6).

Initially, the characters of the anecdotes were historical personalities. Thus, for example, in Arabic poetic anthologies, there are preserved anecdotes about the pre-Islamic poets Imruʾ al-Qais and Tāʾabbaṭa Sharrān. A significant part of the anecdotes was associated with the image of the lunatic Buhlūl, a contemporary of Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809). Another contemporary of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the hedonistic court poet Abū Nuwās (762-813), also became a favorite hero of various folk anecdotes.

But, perhaps, the most popular character of the anecdotes, the favorite hero of Arabic satirical and humorous works, was Ǧuḥā, who later began wandering from one literature to another, from one folklore to another, permeating Sicily, Serbia, and Tuscany.

The cultural and political connections of the Arabs, Persians, Turks, and other peoples of the caliphate, military campaigns, and trade led to a specific "common stock" of anecdotes.

Ǧuḥā was also very popular in Persian-Tajik literature. He was first mentioned by the poet Manūchihrī (d. 1040-1041) and later by Anwarī (d. 1190). Subsequently, in Persian anecdotes, Ǧuḥā was replaced by a new character – Mullah Nasreddin (in Turkish folklore – Hodja Nasreddin), who became the most popular folk hero. Today, it is no longer possible to ascertain the mutual influence and interconnection of Persian and Turkish anecdotes. A significant part of the Persian and Turkish anecdotes about Nasreddin can most likely be found in old Arabic compilations about Ǧuḥā. Yet this fact is not notable, but the one that all these wandering anecdotes ordinary in the plot acquire their specificity everywhere, and their characters become their own for each nation. Thus, if you ask any Persian who is Nasreddin by nationality, he will answer: "Persian", and a Turk will answer: "Turk" (Osmanov 1963, 8-9; Ajimyan 2006, 23-32).

Thus, the influence of the anecdote on literature is undeniable and has long been acknowledged. Some anecdotes did not survive, others gained popularity and passed from mouth to mouth, and sometimes from country to country. Many of them found their way into literature and fixed themselves there. Others started a peculiar life in literature, changed beyond recognition, and generated more complex literary forms in their development. However, written literature also influenced anecdotes, and there are undeniable examples of literary origin among them (Osmanov 1963, 7).

As for the *ʿayyārūn wa-š-šuṭṭār*, the most popular of them managed to carve their names in the memory of national and folk history, transforming with time from a historical core into artistic symbolic patterns for more than a thousand years (Al-Naǧār 1981, 15). And the names of such Arab rogues and street-wise tricksters as ʻAlī al-Zaybak of Cairo, Aḥmad al-Danaf of Baghdad, the wily Dalīla, and others, whose names reflect the characteristics of their bearers and give an idea about their mobility and enterprise[4], became familiar and widely spread in Arabic vernacular (Ajimyan 2006, 40-41).

[4] *zaybaq* – Arab. "mercury"; *danaf* – Arab. "trouble".

Hence, the adventurous Arabic prose and anecdotes represent an essential part of Arabic literary heritage. Their study and research significantly enrich our knowledge of multiform Arabic literature.

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