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**The evolution of Arabic historical literature
and its current trends: canons and invariants**

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Abstract. The study is devoted to the peculiarities of the development of the Arabic historical novel, the consistent transformation and “erosion” of its canons within the framework of the literary trends of the 20th and 21st centuries. The relevance of the topic, on the one hand, is due to the fact that the historical novel has not lost its significance in Arabic national literature. The share of works of this genre is still high, they occupy the first lines in the distribution of literary prizes. On the other hand, against the background of the general process of globalization, it is interesting to trace the trajectory of the development of the genre in the so-called “lag-ging” literature, to which many researchers rank Arabic literature. Some works of the genre fell into the focus of both Arabic, Western, as well as domestic orientalist-literary critics and were subjected to deep comprehensive consideration. Today, however, the novels of recent decades also require analysis. The purpose of the study was not just to identify the works of Arab authors that have received wide recognition in recent years, but to fit them into the paradigm of the development of the historical genre and thereby determine its direction in the near future. To do this, the authors tried to compare classical historical novels with modern ones, characterizing their heroes, describing the periods in the history of the Arab world that Arab authors addressed and continue to address within the genre, determining the degree of epic, historical authenticity, etc., in modern examples of the genre. It was found out, that classical heroes with a standard set of heroic qualities that influence the course of history are replaced by thinkers, scientists, dervishes, ordinary observers, and critical epochs and specific historical events are replaced by troubles periods – before or after a catastrophe, major transformations. Conclusions were drawn about the historicity of Arabic literature back in the pre-Islamic era, the long-term preservation of the canons of the Early Middle Ages in the genre, the sharp transformation of the genre and the refusal from the canons under the influence of postmodernism that penetration into Arabic soil in the mid 1960s coincided with the military and social upheavals of the history of Arabs. The direction of the genre, which is pronounced today towards ethno-literature, is emphasized.

Keywords: historical novel, Arabic literature, genre, hero, epic, ethno-literature

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Эволюция арабской исторической литературы и ее современные тенденции: каноны и инварианты

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено особенностям развития арабского исторического романа, последовательной трансформации и «размыванию» его канонов в рамках литературных течений XX и XXI вв. Актуальность темы, с одной стороны, обусловлена тем, что исторический роман в арабской национальной литературе не утратил свою значимость. Доля произведений этого жанра по-прежнему высока, они занимают первые строчки при распределении литературных премий. С другой стороны, на фоне общего процесса глобализации интересно проследить траекторию развития жанра в так называемой догоняющей общемировой тенденции литературе, к которой многие исследователи причисляют литературу арабскую. Отдельные произведения жанра попадали в фокус как арабских, западных, так и отечественных востоковедов-литературоведов, и подвергались глубокому всестороннему рассмотрению. Однако сегодня анализа требуют романы последних десятилетий. Цель исследования – не просто обозначить получившие широкое признание за последние годы работы арабских авторов, но вписать их в парадигму развития исторического жанра и тем самым определить его направление на ближайшее время. Для этого сравнены классические исторические романы с современными, охарактеризованы их герои, описаны периоды истории Арабского мира, к которым обращались и обращаются арабские авторы в рамках жанра, определены степень эпичности, исторической достоверности в современных образцах жанра. Установлено, что классические герои со стандартным набором героических качеств, влияющие на ход истории, заменяются на мыслителей, ученых, дервишей, обывателей-наблюдателей, а переломные эпохи и конкретные исторические события сменяются пограничными периодами – до либо после катастрофы, коренных преобразований. Сделаны выводы об историчности арабской литературы еще в доисламскую эпоху, длительном сохранении канонов Раннего Средневековья в жанре, резкой трансформации жанра и отхода от канонов под влиянием постмодернизма и совпавшими по времени с его проникновением на арабскую почву военными и социальными потрясениями в истории арабских стран середины 1960-гг. Подчеркивается ярко выраженная сегодня направленность жанра в сторону этнолитературы.

Ключевые слова: исторический роман, арабская литература, жанр, герой, эпичность, этнолитература

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Introduction

The Russian critic and publicist of the Gogol period V. Belinsky, using such a simple method for dividing classes into subclasses as a dichotomy, pointed out that there is a novel about modernity (a social one, designed to give an analysis of modern society) and a historical one.¹ This approach has become as classical as it was broad. This allowed researchers who later developed this definition to make additions, such as the condition that the heroes of a historical work take a direct part in the described historical events and determine fate, as well as the condition that a historical novel is a novel about affairs of bygone days. So, A.N. Kopylov writes: “Certainly, the fundamental principles of a historical novel are the presence of a description in it of some historical era that has already ended by now, events taking place in this era, as well as persons actively participating in these events” (Kopylov, 2011, p. 72). Afterwards in addition to the requirement that events should refer to a time distant at least three generations, another clarification was postulated: famous people should be actors in a historical novel, and not ordinary inhabitants. If this condition is not met, “historical figures do not appear, broad historical events are not highlighted, although the plot of the novel is often built on the fate of an individual at some turning point in history” (Zhachemukova, Beshukova, 2011), then there is a reason to classify the work differently – as a novel about the historical past, but not as a historical novel.

Since literary critics hold the idea that there is no canonical definition of historical fiction (Zhachemukova, Beshukova, 2011), and the classical, indisputable and recognized definition of “historical novel” is wide, an invariant understanding of the genre is inevitable, but leaving many questions about its boundaries. Bulgarian researcher of historical literature, orientalist Bayan Raykhanova calls the historical genre “a vexed question in the history and the theory of literature” (Rayhanova, 2004, p. 71). Thus, unlike scientific literature on history, historical literary prose, referring to the same event, reproduces the era in an artistic form, where historical fact is combined with fiction, and real historical figures are mixed with fictional ones. How free is the author in his imagination? If we agree that fiction is limited by the fact that “it is admissible to use artistic methods of amplification, but distortion of reality is not allowed” (Zhachemukova, Beshukova, 2011), then those works where an alternative history is presented (the series like “what if it weren’t for happened”) should be excluded from the genre. And this is a significant layer, for example, in Russian literature – “Ada or Ardor: a family chronicle” by V. Nabokov, “Island of Crimea” by V. Aksenov, “The heart of Parma” by A. Ivanov and others, and also in Arabic – a five-part novel “Cities from salt” (mudun al-milh, 1984–1989) by Saudi writer Abdel Rahman Munif, “Yaktynia, the old world” (yaqtyniyya al-aalam al-qadiim, 2015)

¹ Fridlender, G.M. (n.d.). *Belinsky on the problems of the novel*. (In Russ.) Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://lit.wikireading.ru/44450>

by novelist Yasser Bahjat, also from KSA, “2084” (2015) of the wide-known Algerian author Wasini al-Aaraj, etc. In this case, such works are credited to the fantasy genre, although there is only one fantastic element in them – the real history turned the other way. We should also exclude works that offer their own solutions to historical mysteries, such as the location of the library of Ivan the Terrible for example, since they cannot be verified either as distorting reality or as accurately reflecting it.

A number of researchers see ideology as an obligatory component of a historical novel, which consists in “revealing the contradictions of a particular era, political proximity to modernity” (Orlov, 1960, pp. 428–429), while they proceeded from the fact that the protagonist should be shown as a product of his era. This provision, in turn, takes out of the genre those works where, against the background of historical events, adventurous or love story is played out as main line, and the ideological component is weak (for example, the novels of A. Dumas).

And other issues remain controversial. To what extent does the author have the right to interpret historical events and characters in order to remain within the genre of the historical novel? Why will the novel not be recognized as historical if, with all other signs of the genre, its events are 30 years away from now, and not 75? Will the genre be respected if the protagonist of the novel is a figure who has not been involved in politics and not empowered, but, for example, a prominent scientist or famous artist?

In our vision, since the second half of the 20th century, due to a change in literary paradigms, historical prose no longer develops within the rigid framework once established by the classic novel. It is relevant to consider historical fiction in invariants, based on such structures as the relative, but not strict, remoteness of the described period and its rating as turning point of history, the prominence of the main character as a person of civilizational importance, but not necessarily a historical figure, and thirdly, the degree of politicization of the work itself, the expressiveness of the author's ideological position, which may not be fundamental, since the existence of art for the sake of art is also acceptable. It is along these axes that historical literature can deviate in one direction or another and acquire features characteristic of a certain period, region, artistic movement, method or author. Such assumptions have become organic in experimental, modern, postmodern, and later emerging artistic methods, which undoubtedly deviate from the line of the classical novel, including the historical one. This trend is clearly manifested in various national literatures and in the Arabic literature we are studying, which until the 20th century, according to the Russian orientalist and literary critic V.N. Kirpichenko, belonged “to the type of literatures that lingered at the medieval stage of evolution” (Kirpichenko, 2003, p. 3), but then received accelerated development and realized for today the most diverse invariants of the historical genre, which has always occupied an important place in Arabic national literature.

Discussion

Early forms of historical genre in arabic literature

According to the British writer and critic Hilary Mantel (b. 1952), who won the Booker Prize twice (in 2009 and 2012), as well as the Walter Scott Prize, and lived for 9 years in Africa and the Middle East, history helps us “place our short lives into context”,² that is, to give them meaning, which explains both writers’ and readers’ interest in this kind of literature. It can be assumed that historical literature in a broad sense, as an attempt to fix important events for posterity by artistic means, to capture the heroic, to mourn the lost and comprehend oneself, to describe the society to which one belongs, appeared along with historical and philosophical thinking in general, at least a grain of historical genre of literature should have been sown just then.

In the earliest extant monuments of pre-Islamic Arabic literature of the 6th–7th centuries poets recited the history of their clan, praised heroes, mourned the dead and vilified opponents. This is how the traditional genres of medieval Arabic poetry arose – lamentations ('ar-ritha'), boasting (fakhr), ridicule ('al-hijaa'), revenge (tha'ar) and others (Dayf, 1960, p. 190), which represented an emotional response in artistic form to specific events or history in general of one kind or another. The most outstanding, according to the unanimous opinion of critics, poet of Arab antiquity Imru' al-Qais left in verse the story of the murder of his father, the leader of the Nejd tribes, attempts to avenge him, his own defeat, his appeal to the Byzantine emperor for support and exile (Dayf, 1960, pp. 236–243). What is this, if not history comprehended in a filigree poetic form, that is, already historical literature, and in the first person?

Weep for me, my eyes! Spill your tears
And mourn for me the vanished kings
Hujr ibn 'Amru's princely sons
Led away to slaughter at eventide;
If only they had died in combat
Not in the lands of Banu Marina!
No water was there to wash their fallen heads,
And their skulls lie spattered with blood
Pecked over by birds
Who tear out first the eyebrows, then the eyes
(Imru' al-Qais³).

In the Bedouin and later court environment of the Caliphate (from the 7th to the 13th centuries), legends about key events in the history of the Arabs were in circulation. “Part of the Arab historical traditions of pre-Islamic times was included in the later collection ‘Days of the Arabs’, which contains stories about many

² Kass, L. (n.d.). *Why we read historical fiction*. Retrieved December 21, 2022, from <https://www.gramercybooksbexley.com/blog/why-we-read-historical-fiction>

³ al-Qais, I. (2005). *Diwan. Poem 2. Makki*.

years of wars and memorable battles between Bedouin tribes, raids and cattle thefts. These legends were passed down from generation to generation, later Arab philologists got them in special collections”, which also included numerous lyrical digressions, most often in the form of poems recited by warrior-poets – participants in the depicted events, which “emotionally color a dry, almost businesslike narrative”,⁴ which means that they give a literary character to the work, taking it beyond the scope of historiography and primitive dating of events.

With the advent of Islam, an ideologically justified need arose to fix and present the history of the Arab Caliphate and its prominent personalities from a certain angle. There are numerous *siras* (from *sirah* – “life path”): “Biography of Muawiyah and the descendants of the Umayyad family” (*siirat mu'aawiyah wabanii 'umayyah*), “Biography of Ibn Ishaq” (*siirat 'ibn 'ishaaq*) – an Arab historian, compiler of the Prophet Muhammad first biography, and etc. With the decline of the once strong centralized state, which from the 7th to the 12th centuries. was the Caliphate, first the Umayyad, then the Abbasid, and later, with the entry of most of the Arab world into the borders of the Ottoman Empire and, accordingly, into the “boiler” of its culture, in Arabic, which at that time ceased to be the state language over centuries, numerous biographies were formed, supplemented and processed by scribes and storytellers, but an entertaining element was added to them, bringing the genre closer to popular folk fiction, such as “*Sirat al-Zahir Baybars*” (*siirat 'adh-dhaahir baybars*), outlining the history of the actually existing Mamluk Sultan al-Zahir Baibars al-Bunduqdari (1260–1277) and others. At the same time, according to the Russian orientalist E.A. Krymsky, during this long historical period (from the 13th to the 18th centuries), high classical Arabic literature was affected by “impoverishment” and “quality exhaustion” (Kirpichenko, 2003, p. 3).

It should be also note that syncretism was the norm for medieval Arabic verbal culture, which was also expressed in the fact that a valuable scientific work, such as the sailing directions of Ahmed ben Majid (15th century), the Arab guide of Vasco da Gamma across the Indian Ocean, was considered worthy to be presented in a poetic, i.e. high form, with the help of rhyme and melody, creating both a scientific work and a text that has verbal value in itself, in addition to intellectual value. Therefore, it is quite natural that the historical genre of literature originated and developed among the Arabs precisely in poetic form, which became dominant for classical, in the periodization of the Arabs, Arabic literature (Harb, 2020).

It is obvious that the origins of historical genre literature go back to the mists of time, and Arabic literature is not an exception in this, but rather

⁴ Filshinsky, I.M. (n.d.). *The verbal art of the ancient Arabs (6th – the middle of the 8th century)*. (In Russ.) Retrieved June 22, 2022, from <https://nurrb.wordpress.com/2010/11/28/slovesnoe-iskusstvo-drevnikh-arabov-vi-seredina-vii-v-filshinskij-i-m/>

a convincing confirmation of it. We find various fusions of verbal creativity and history in many genres of pre-Islamic poetry, Arabic epic, as well as sirs of the Middle Ages, medieval entertainment literature – forms defined both by the religious and cultural traditions of the Arabs and by the rich history of the Arab world. The features of these works as an early historical genre lie in the fact that they mainly exist in poetry, i.e. in a high form for medieval thinking, they tell not only about distant events, but also about those events in which the author was a living witness, maybe even a participant, and the main ideological principle in them is defending the honor of one's clan and fixing its history, later, when the clan is replaced by the concept of the Muslim community of the ummah – a presentation of the history of Islam in faces. Since the pre-Islamic period is recognized as the “golden age” of Arabic literature, and its outstanding works are masterpieces of world literature, such as Mu'allaqat (a collection of poems hung out at one time on the sacred Kaaba), these examples of the emerging historical genre became the standard for imitation in terms of form (compositional construction, metaphors that have become traditional, etc.) and inspiration in terms of content (moral and moral cores of Bedouin culture, such as hospitality, the priority of the family over the personal, etc.) for Arabic literature for centuries to come.

As far as the historical novel as a major prose form in its European sense is concerned, it appears only in the New Arabic Literature by the 20th century. It symbolically begins from the same position from which classical Arabic literature went into decline in the late Middle Ages – canonical novels about the rulers of the Caliphate, but it develops rapidly, showing a range of innovative ideas.

Literary paradigm of Arabic historical prose in the 20th century

In the 20th century Arabic literature and historical prose as part of it were influenced by a number of factors (the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which included most of the Arab world for more than one century, cultural rapprochement with Europe, launched several decades after Napoleon's campaign (Said, 2006, p. 67), the opportunity to get a European education, the growth in the number of translations from European languages, etc.) begins to change rapidly, compared with the previous era. Arabic literature is shifting from the traditional centuries-old pole with its strict canons in theme, plot, stylistic norms, etc. in the direction of current European trends at that time. “A fundamentally new system of prose, poetic and dramatic genres is taking shape, typologically coinciding with the genre system of contemporary Western literature. Prose, and specifically the novel, came to the fore in this system” (Kirpichenko, 2003, p. 4).

The emergence of the Arabic historical novel by the beginning of the 20th century closely associated with the national revival (al-Nahda) – a period of cultural and educational reforms, especially noticeable in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. It is no coincidence that literary critics note a causal relationship between

the emergence of the historical novel and the rise of national movements in various countries⁵ and especially in Arabic World, describing this period as movement that “involved in varying degrees a combination of, first an encounter with the West and its different and more ‘advanced’ culture and second, and subsequently, a retrospect into Arab-Islamic past” (Allen, 2001, p. 206). The official founder of the genre in Arabic literature was the Egyptian writer of Lebanese origin Jurji Zaydan (1961–1914) (Arsly, 1967), the author of about 20 novels that made up a series of narratives from the history of Islam in the 7th–13th centuries. (“Ahmad ibn Tulun” (‘ahmed ben tuluun), “Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi” (salaah ‘ad-diin ‘al-‘ayyuubiy)), Mameluke Egypt of the 18th–19th centuries and contemporary to the author historical events (“The Ottoman Revolution” (‘al-inqylaab ‘al-‘usmaaniyy, 1911) Two of his novels about the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate “Abbasa Sister of Harun al-Rashid” (‘al-‘abbaasah ‘ukht ‘ar-rashiid, 1906) and “al-Amin and al-Ma'mun” (‘al-amiin wal-ma‘amuun) were translated into Russian. These are, in the classical sense, historical novels, as they are commonly called, “Walterscott’s” novels (Zhachemukova, Beshukova, 2011). They linearly narrate about historical events and people who are generations away from us, the plot and turns of events are important in them, a love line is obligatory, certain stereotypical character traits are attached to historical persons, but the images are not so deeply developed that the novel is considered psychological one. It is no coincidence that some researchers call Jurji Zaydan “contributor to the position of Arabic literature within what is increasingly termed ‘world literature’ ” (Rastegar, 2019).

In the works of J. Zaydan three important historical eras, which we have mentioned, are already outlined. They are reflected in Arabic historical literature for a long time to come. In the literary sense, they can be designated as chronotopes with a certain time, place of action and the attitude of descendants-authors to what happened. The first of them is adjoined, for example, by the novels of Taha Hussein (1889–1973), nicknamed “the patriarch of Arabic literature” – “Osman” (‘uthmaan, 1947), “Ali and His Sons” (‘al-fitnah ‘al-kubraa, ‘alii wabanuuh, 1953), “Al-Shaikhan (Abu Bakr and Omar Ibn al-Khattab)” (ash-shaykhaani 1960) and others, the second – the novel by Saad Makkawi (1916–1985) “The Sleepwalkers” (saa’iriin niyaaman, 1963), “Blood of the Mamluks” (dam ‘al-mamaliik, 2016) by Egyptian historian Walid Fikri (b. 1980), Egyptian professor of sociolinguistics Reem Bassiouney trilogy (b. 1973) “The Mamluk Trilogy” (‘awlaad ‘an-nas, thulaaththiyya ‘al-mamaaliik, 2018), bestseller and winner of the 2019–2020 Naguib Mahfouz Award in the best Egyptian novel category from Egypt's Su-

⁵ The writing of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* in the 12th century is a strong hypothesis, not an established fact. Interview with philologist Andrey Ranchin. (In Russ.) Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://gorky.media/context/napisanie-slova-o-polku-igoreve-v-xii-veke-silnaya-gipoteza-a-ne-ustanovlenniy-fakt/>

preme Council for Culture, etc. The third line – “Seferberlik” (safarberlik, 2019, longlist of the Arab Booker 2020) by the Saudi Magbool Al-Alawi (b. 1968) about the mobilization of the Arabs by the Ottoman Empire in 1914, etc.

Among the names of the pioneers of Arabic historical prose of that time, it is also important to mention another Lebanese who moved to Egypt, Farah Antun (1874–1922) and his novel “The New Jerusalem” (‘uurshaliim ‘al-jadiidah, 1904), as well as Ali al-Jarim, Mohammad Farid Abu Hadid, Saeed al-Aryan and, undoubtedly, the Syrian author Selim al-Bustani, who published in the 70–80s 19th century three historical novels, but did not become so popular as J. Zaydan.

In the first half of the 20th century Arab writers perfected the methods of realism and achieved world recognition in the person of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006), the author of the Cairo Trilogy (1956–1957), which the Russian orientalist V.N. Kirpichenko compared with “The Forsyte Saga” of the English Nobel laureate J. Galsworthy (Kirpichenko, 2003, p. 34). The trilogy, which includes the books “Palace Walk”, “Palace of Desire” and “Sugar Street” (baynal qasreyn, qasr ‘ash-shawq, ‘as-sukkariyyah), tells about the life of the conservative family of Ahmed Abdel Gawad – grandfather, son and grandson, who are respectively Islamist, communist and cynical careerist, the events cover 1917–1944.

Among the books of the historical genre, we consider that the most significant work of N. Mahfouz is his later novel “Children of Gebelawi” (awlaad haaritnaa, 1959, first Russian translation in 1992, second translation 2012) – a large-scale novel by design, where the history of the three world religions is interpreted in allegorical form. On the one hand, historical figures are not directly named in it, on the other, it is obvious to the reader which of the heroes personifies the Prophet Mohammad, who is Christ, repeating their path (Zarytovskaya, 2014).

The novels about Ancient Egypt by Abdel Hamid Goda al-Sakhhar, Adil Kamil and others can be considered a separate branch of Arabic historical prose. It is no coincidence that they appear in the late 30s and 40s on the wave of ideas of pharaohism – an ideology that referred to the pre-Islamic past of Egypt and claimed that Egypt was a historical part of a large Mediterranean culture, while the emphasis was on the fact that modern Egyptians are direct heirs of the Egyptians of the ancients. Naguib Mahfouz also addressed this topic in some his novels “Mockery of the Fates” (‘abath al-‘aqdaar, 1939), “Rhadopis of Nubia” (raaduubiis, 1943), “The Struggle of Thebes” (kifaah tybah, 1944) and others.

In the 50s and 60s both under the influence of European modernists and as a result of military and social upheavals (World War II, the defeat of Egypt in the Six-Day War in 1967, ideological persecution), interest in current social issues is growing in Arabic literature. The paradigm of national revival (an-Nahda) is replaced by the paradigm of national defeat (an-Naksa). The authors are

looking for new methods to comprehend it, creating texts that are innovative in terms of form – chronologically inconsistent, with a background, with the subtext of the events described, with the author-protagonist on behalf of whom the story is being told, etc. As for the content, they write psychological texts and with heroes who are characterized by introspection. Prose writers become the leaders and by them the genre of the historical novel is deformed in its canons. The historical novel does not remain classic, J. Zaydan's, even being formally similar to it, such as “Zayni Barakat” (‘az-zaynii barakaat, 1972, Russian translation 1986) by the Egyptian writer Gamal al-Ghitani (1945–2015) that got him fame with this text. The novel is written in the style of a palimpsest: the events of Egyptian history at the beginning of the 16th century are projected onto the events of the second half of the twentieth century.

No less striking can be considered the work of the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim (b. 1938), who graduated from the directing department of VGIK in Moscow. This author, of course, tried to feel the pulse of current history, for which he used inserts from newspaper articles, sociological and economic data and news reports in the artistic canvas, thus giving his texts a documentary dimension, as in his most famous novel “The Committee” (‘al-lajnah, 1981):

I mulled this over for a while, without getting anywhere. Finally, I decided to consider some well-known local names in various fields, without setting standards for a decision. By eliminating one after another I would pare down the search to a limited number of names and criteria. Then I could make up my mind as to the final standards of selection.

I began with political leaders and rulers (Sonallah, 2001, p. 34).

He wrote the review novel “Beirut, Beirut” (bayruut, bayruut, 1994) about the civil war in Lebanon in the 70s–80s of 20th century, the novel-chronicle “1970” (2019), where every day in the history of Egypt is recorded from January 1, 1970 to September 29 of the same year – the day of the death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the novel “Warda” (warda, 2000) about civil resistance in Omani Dhofar in the 60s, last century, etc.

It should also be noted that in some countries, like Oman, it was the genre of the historical novel that paved the way for large format prose, which was pioneered in this country by Abdullah bin Mohammed at-Tai (1924–1973) with his main works “Angels of Jabal al- Akhdar” (malaa'ikatu 'al-jabal 'al-'akhdar, 1963) and “The Big Sail” (‘as-shiraa‘ 'al-kabiir, 1971), dedicated to key events in the history of this country – the unification of the state, previously divided into imamate and sultanate, and the fight against the Portuguese invaders in the 16th–17th centuries.

Thus, for the 20th century the Arabic historical novel is rapidly moving from immature classicism to its high standards and then destruction. By the second half of the century, the system of artistry is being replaced, Arabic literature

is turning to topical issues, the contemporary events are described, the very status of the author is changing, but the novel becomes predominant.

The historical genre does not remain within its former boundaries, it is no longer just a novel, but a novel with specifics – an allegory novel, a palimpsest novel, a review novel, a documentary novel, etc. Historical prose in Arabic for the 20th century consistently existed in successive artistic movements, suggesting different aesthetics and methods (romanticism, classicism, then modernism and postmodernism), which led to the blurring of the very standards of historical literature, its experimentalism and invariance, but at the same time, the historical genre has finally remained in the prose of a large format.

Modern trends in the historical prose of the Arab countries

Most of the modern historical prose, which today, at first glance, continues the line of the classic novel, however, has significant differences from it. Without fundamentally abandoning the realistic method, Arab authors, probably catching the global changes and spiritual shifts taking place in the world, today turn to those historical segments that the pioneers of the genre and their predecessors rarely turned to. These are the eras that can be described as a troubled time for the Arab world, or one of its countries – the first centuries of Christianity, a decade before the “discovery” of Egypt by the Arabs, the period of the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, the Reconquista in Spain, the eve of the French colonization of Algeria, etc. The focus is on the era – its atmosphere is reconstructed, while the events of history remain in the background, not statesmen – caliphs and their heirs, generals, sultans and viziers – are brought to the fore, but the intellectual elite and spiritual ascetics of that time, outstanding natural scientists, theologians or ordinary people in a spiritual search. Often these are those who are known, with the exception of key facts, not enough to create a multifaceted artistic image. And it's the most difficult task for the author. Thus, the Saudi author, a historian by profession, Mohammed Hasan Alwan (b. 1979) considers history a source of inspiration and not material and compares a science fiction writer who is not bound by the laws of physics and other natural sciences in his verbal creativity with a prose writer of the historical genre.⁶

Such are the novels of the Egyptian writer and scholar, founder of the Center for Manuscripts at the Library of Alexandria, Youssef Ziedan (b. 1958) – “Azazeel” (‘azaaziil, the winner of the Arab Booker 2009), the main character of which is a monk who “lives during the ancient ideological struggle that followed the establishment of Christianity against Greek-Pharaoh dogma in Egypt – a period characterized by exerting physical and structural violence against non-

⁶ Between present and past: An interview with Mohammed Hasan Alwan. (2017, October 25). *Words Without Borders*. Retrieved December 23, 2022, from <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2017-10/an-interview-with-mohammed-hasan-alwan-marcia-lynx-qualey/>

Christians to convert them to Christianity” (Abu Baker, 2015); “Fardakan: Imprisonment of the Great Sheikh” (fardakaan: 'i'atiqaal 'as-shaykh 'ar-ra'iis, in the short list of the Arab Booker 2020), which introduces us to the personality of Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037), who was held due to political intrigues against the backdrop of civil strife in the fortress of the same name, and the principles of his medicine, knock into one the health of the body and the state of mind; “The Nabatean” (an-nabatiyy, 2009), whose hero is a Coptic Christian, married to a Nabatean, on the eve of the arrival of Islam in Egypt, he learns the spiritual culture of this Semitic people. “Events unfold in it... when a new world religion, Islam, is born on the Arabian Peninsula. This period turned the course of world history in a different way, when a new strong state-empire arose – the Arab Caliphate” (Al-Gibali, 2015, p. 71). It should also be noted that in a large number of these novels, real history is intertwined with the author's fiction, and the role of the latter is only increasing in modern Arabic literature (Sayd, 2017; Ayyoub, 2021).

Such is the novel by the above-mentioned Mohammad Hasan Alwan “A Small Death” (maut saghiir, the winner of the Arab Booker 2017) about the spiritual ascent of a Sufi philosopher of the early 13th century Ibn Arabi; the novel by Algerian Abdelouahab Aissaoui (b. 1985) “The Spartan Court” ('ad-diiwaan 'al-'isbaatiyy, the winner of the Arab Booker 2020) about the moods of the inhabitants of the coastal Algerian city of Constantine in the 30s of 18th century, which is abandoned by the Ottoman officials, while the first French soldiers set foot on its land; a novel based on a legend by Tunisian writer Mohammed Issa al-Muaddab (b. 1966) “Hammam with Gold” (hamaam ath-thahab, in the Arab Booker 2020 longlist) about the fate of Tunisian Jews during World War II; the trilogy “Granada” (thulaathiyyat granata, the best book of the Cairo International Book Fair 1994) by the Egyptian writer Radwa Ashour (1946–2014), which describes the life of the Arabs just after the Reconquista; a book by the Egyptian writer Rasha Adly (b. 1976) about the clash of epochs and cultures of the West and the East “The Last Days of the Pasha” ('aakharu 'ayyaam 'al-baashaa, long list of the Arab Booker 2020), the main character of which is a servant named Hassan, assigned to the gift of Mohammad Ali to the King of France – a living giraffe, with whom he was sent to Europe, etc.

A notable event in recent years in world literature has been the awarding of The MAN Booker Prize 2019 to the Omani writer Jokha al-Harti (b. 1978) for her novel “Celestial bodies” (sayyidaat 'al-qamr, Russian translation 2020). Her book, written in the technique of interweaving streams of consciousness and consisting of a large number of 1–2-page chapters-voices, shows us the history of Oman in the 20th century against the background of social and along with them moral transformations (famine in the First World War, the abolition of slavery, the illegal arms trade in the Persian Gulf, the resistance in Dhofar in the 60s, etc.).

The novel is also filled, in addition to historical events, with ethnic elements – stereotypes, recipes, traditions, descriptions of rituals, spells, pagan beliefs, etc. (Vlasova, 2021) and thus demonstrates national identity and national specificity. To convey the originality of the national life of the people and the peculiarities of the national character, locally colored proper names, toponyms, everyday vocabulary, for example, the names of dates at different stages of their ripening, etc. are introduced into the text.

Time after time she had made the same excursion. They were always successful, these of ferings of hers. The jinni Baqiia had never grown angry, not once over the long period that Zarifa had dedicated herself to the jinni' s service, nor in the era of her mother before her. Well, except that one time, when someone bewitched Umm Abdallah somehow while in her confinement. Before Zarifa, her mother had shouldered this duty and before that it had been her grandmother's task. All of them knew the most particular secrets about Baqiia, the jinni woman who specialised in stalking any woman recovering from childbirth who did not feed her from her own special food (Alharthi, 2018, p. 70).

Another contemporary Omani writer, Bushra Khalfan (b. 1969), whose historical novel *Dilshad* (dilshaad, 2021) reached the final of the Arabic Booker in 2022, also says that she is inspired by folklore, which is still reflected in literature.⁷

Thus, we observe how the genre of the historical novel in Arabic literature is currently shifting the focus from a historical turning point and from a historical person and hero in the full sense of the word, courageous, with an effective character, etc., to an era with a characteristic ethnic culture. Apparently, this is a global trend, which is reflected in the not yet well-established term “ethno-literature” and is perceived by critics “irstly, as an adequate response to the challenges of globalization, and secondly, as a means of replenishing the dwindling resources of plot, figurative and proper linguistic entertainment.”⁸

Modern Arab writers choose a borderline, “wilight” era – not a period of prosperity and strength, not the point of the historical catastrophe itself, filled with events, such as a change of power, great battles, etc., but the eve of decline, the eve of important changes, or the time immediately after the key dates of history, often tragic. And the tragedy that is depicted is overcome in the novel by a philosopher, scientist, bearers of national culture and folk traditions, who do not directly affect the course of history. History is conceived, rather, not as a series of raids, coups, formations, but as the spiritual history of the people.

⁷ Alhinai, M., & Alhinai, S. (2022, January 31). *How Oman's history inspires its novelists*. Middle East Institute. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-omans-history-inspires-its-novelists>

⁸ Chuprin, S. (2014). *Ethnoliterature*. (In Russ.) Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://litresp.ru/chitat/ru/Ch/chuprinin-sergej/russkaya-literatura-segodnya-zhiznj-po-ponyatiyam/315>

Conclusion

Historicity, closely associated with the tribal culture, worldview and way of life of the Bedouin tribes, was inherent in the monuments of the earliest Arabic literature that has come down to us. It is natural that the historical genre of literature originated and developed among the Arabs precisely in poetic form. The literature of that period is considered the “golden age”, and therefore, has an indirect influence on modern Arabic literature to this day, not only in artistic forms, but also in terms of content, which, among other things, is manifested in the postulation of the importance of the historical genre and the constant appeal of Arabic authors.

In the Late Middle Ages, the historical genre, like all Arab national literature, experienced a decline, but did not disappear, but was transformed into those literary forms that are commonly called “low”, becoming truly folk literature.

With the rise of the national movement and educational activities of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. within the framework of romanticism and realism, the Arabic historical novel appears in the classical understanding of its European literary criticism. By the middle of the 20th century. Arab realist writers achieve worldwide recognition, including for the historical novels they presented.

Due to the upheavals that befell the Arab world in the 60s, as well as the perception of the postmodern trend in the genre of the historical novel, innovative techniques began to be used, the genre ceased to exist within its former boundaries, it significantly diversified, changing the paradigm, whose system of values became directed to the present.

Today, the place and role of the historical novel in Arabic literature and culture in general is still great. The works of the genre are consistently included in the lists of laureates of various pan-Arab competitions and awards, two of the ones we mentioned – “The Cairo trilogy” and “Celestial bodies” – are the only two books in Arabic that have received the highest international, and not regional, pan-Arab recognition.

At the same time, modern Arabic literature, which for a long time retained its originality, and then sought to correspond to the European novel, demonstrates within the historical niche a noticeable transformation of the genre and a departure from those canons that seemed unshakable within the genre for the entire previous century, such as the heroism of the character, its historical and political significance, eventfulness, linearity, etc. This also affected the choice of historical segments, which modern authors most often refer to. Those historical periods, which we called “frontier” and which writers had rarely resorted to before, became predominant. Modernity as the material of the Arabic historical novel was also deactivated. The theme of Arabic historical prose, as it were, has taken a turn: the past – the present – and back to the past, but already different.

In addition, the Arabic historical novel “does not stand aside” from the current processes in literature, Arab writers of the historical genre boldly experiment. It is on the basis of the historical genre of countries that a new Arab ethno-literature appears.

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