



ЗАРУБЕЖНАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА

FOREIGN LITERATURE

DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2022-27-3-523-531

UDC 821.411.21

Research article / Научная статья

The Soviet Union in two Arab novels

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Abstract. The study aims to analyze the representation of the Soviet Union in two Arab novels, “Ice” (2011) by Egyptian Sun‘allah Ibrahim and “Time of the Red Reed Pipe” (2012) by Kuwaiti Thurayya al-Baq sami. Within the vast expanse of the Arab “emigrant” literature one can find relatively few works of fiction that have to do with the USSR despite the fact that in the 1960–1980s thousands of Arab students studied in the country. Among a couple dozen Arab writers who wrote some fiction about the USSR very few spent more than a couple of months in the country, and their works, as a rule, present idealized and rather superficial images of the Soviet Union. Unlike these authors, Sun‘allah Ibrahim and Thurayya al-Baq sami spent in the 1970s quite a long time in Moscow in the status of ordinary students, and for this reason their novels present a much more realistic picture of the Soviet Union. Without any noticeable warmth towards their Soviet hosts, the writers consider many negative features of Soviet social and economic life as commodity shortage, low quality of Soviet goods and services, illegal currency operations, etc. The two authors’ representations of the Soviet Union stand in contrast to the Soviet’s own idea of how the people from the developing countries perceived the “country of victorious socialism.”

Keywords: Arab literature, Soviet Union, Sonallah Ibrahim, Thuraya al-Baq sami

Conflicts of interest. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Article history: submitted June 7, 2022; revised June 25, 2022; accepted July 5, 2022.

For citation: Suvorov, M.N. (2022). The Soviet Union in two Arab novels. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 27(3), 523–531. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2022-27-3-523-531>


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Советский Союз в двух арабских романах

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Аннотация. Анализируется изображение Советского Союза в двух арабских романах: «Лед» (2011) египтянина Суналлы Ибрагима и «Время красной свирели» (2012) кувейтки Сурайи аль-Баксами. В обширной арабской «эмигрантской» литературе имеется относительно мало художественных произведений, тематически связанных с СССР, хотя в 1960–1980-е гг. в этой стране учились тысячи арабских студентов. Среди пары десятков арабских авторов, писавших об СССР, очень немногие провели в стране больше нескольких месяцев, и их произведения, как правило, представляют идеализированные и довольно поверхностные образы Советского Союза. В отличие от них, Суналла Ибрагим и Сурайя аль-Баксами провели в 1970-х гг. довольно долгое время в Москве в статусе обычных студентов, и по этой причине их романы представляют гораздо более реалистичную картину Советского Союза. Без сколько-нибудь заметной теплоты по отношению к принимавшим их советским людям эти писатели затрагивают такие черты советской общественной и экономической жизни, как товарный дефицит, низкое качество советских товаров и услуг, незаконные валютные операции и тому подобное. Изображение ими Советского Союза противоречит представлению советских людей о том, как именно граждане из развивающихся стран воспринимали «страну победившего социализма».

Ключевые слова: арабская литература, Советский Союз, Суналла Ибрагим, Сурайя аль-Баксами

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 7 июня 2022 г.; откорректирована 25 июня 2022 г.; принята к публикации 5 июля 2022 г.

Для цитирования: *Suvorov M.N. The Soviet Union in two Arab novels // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2022. Т. 27. № 3. С. 523–531. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2022-27-3-523-531>*

Introduction

After Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi, one of the leaders of Egyptian *Nahda*, published in 1834 his famous book on Paris, the Western world became a source of inspiration for many Arab writers, as well as a setting for their novels and short stories. The story of Arab writers’ views of the West has been the subject of many scholarly studies, the most comprehensive of which is Rasheed El-Enany’s *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (2006). In this work, El-Enany explores Arab responses to Western culture and Western

values as expressed through works of fiction and non-fiction written during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

El-Enany concentrates on Arab literary works set in Western Europe and in the US (with only exception of a Hanna Mina's novel set in the communist Hungary). Meanwhile, there was another part of the world, namely the Soviet Bloc, which is widely recognized to have had substantial political and cultural influence on the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, within the vast expanse of the Arab "emigrant" literature we find relatively few works of fiction that have to do with the Soviet Bloc, and particularly with the Soviet Union. This is all the more surprising since in the 1960–1980s thousands of Arab students, including a number of soon-to-be-famous writers, studied in the USSR, which provided educational aid for many newly independent Arab states.

Among a couple dozen Arab writers who did write some fiction about the USSR very few spent more than a couple of months in the country. Many of them had been invited and sponsored by Soviet state organizations within the framework of various "friendship" programs, like, for example, regular exchange-visits of the members of Afro-Asian Writers' Association. During these short visits Arab guests saw only what their Soviet hosts allowed them to see. For example, Palestinian Mu'in Bsisu toured Moscow, Leningrad, and several other big cities, met with Soviet Party functionaries and cultural figures but never visited provincial towns and countryside and never communicated with ordinary people. All this led to idealized and rather superficial images of the USSR in his and other Arab writers' works.

However, two Arab novels published twenty years after the Soviet Union's collapse, *Ice* (al-Jalid, 2011) by Egyptian Sun'allah Ibrahim and *Time of the Red Reed Pipe* (Zaman al-mizmar al-ahmar, 2012; unpublished English translation – *In the Time of the Red Crescent*¹) by Kuwaiti Thurayya al-Baq sami dispute this idealized portrayal of the USSR. Two very similar remarks in the two novels respectively may serve as a quintessence of the novels' shared idea of the failure of the Soviet ideal.

The protagonist of *Ice* says, "I was shaving with a Soviet blade, marveling at the Soviet. They build rockets, but have no ability or no desire to make a proper shaving blade" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 11).

A character in *Ice* says: "I do not understand how they build rockets that fly to the Moon but fail to produce a decent condom" (al-Baq sami, 2012, p. 119).

One may well assume that it is these two writers' shared experience in Soviet student dorms in the 1970s that led to the similar representation of the USSR in their two novels.

Sun'allah Ibrahim (b. 1937), famous novelist, known for his leftist views, studied at All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow in the 1970s.² Thurayya al-Baq sami (b. 1952), well-known Kuwaiti writer and artist, studied at

¹ See: Arablit & Arablit Quarterly. (2022). *5 Arab-Soviet Novels*. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://arablit.org/2022/01/31/5-arab-soviet-novels/>

² For more details see: Mende, T. (2022). *Sonallah Ibrahim's Moscow: A conversation with Margaret Litvin*. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://arablit.org/2022/01/31/sonallah-ibrahims-moscow-a-conversation-with-margaret-litvin/>

Surikov Institute of Fine Arts in Moscow in 1974–1981. She came to the Soviet Union following her Kuwaiti husband, who had earlier enrolled in one of Moscow institutes.

Although both novels are works of fiction, their authors did their best to convince the knowledgeable reader of the autobiographical character of their novels – probably, with the purpose of giving the novels documental credibility.

In *Ice*, which is narrated in first-person, the reader knows from the first page that the year is 1973, the narrator's name is Shukri, and that he is thirty-five-year-old Egyptian student studying at an institute in Moscow. These details lead the reader to the fact that the narrator/protagonist should be taken for the author himself and, at the same time, for Dr. Shukri, the protagonist of Ibrahim's earlier novels *Amrikanli* (2002) and *The French Law* (al-Qanun al-faransi, 2008), which are also autobiographical in some respects. Yet, in *Ice* Dr. Shukri tells about an earlier period of his life, namely about his studies in the USSR.

Time of the Red Reed Pipe, which is narrated in third-person, begins with Laila, the protagonist, witnessing an abundant snowfall in State College, a small town in Pennsylvania. The snowfall takes Laila back to 1974, when she, twenty-two years old, followed her husband to Moscow and enrolled there in the pre-university course of Russian language. These details also seem to be intended to indicate that Laila is the author herself.

Ice

Turning now to the texts of the novels, let us begin with *Ice*. The whole action of the novel takes place in 1973; there are no retrospective digressions. At the same time, the lack of an articulate storyline, as well as the laconic, “telegraph” style of the narration call to mind diary entries. The narrative focuses on small details of the everyday life, on trivial actions, and on unimportant conversations among the vast cast of characters.

All these many characters (female students, both international and Russian, Russian party girls, Arabs living in Moscow, etc.) are nothing more than marionettes. The narrator describes the physical appearances of these characters, especially of the girls, in great detail, but seems explicitly uninterested in their inner worlds and feelings. They rarely speak, and are all so similar that when a character appears in one of the scenes, the reader has to make an effort to remember what, if anything, has been told about this character before.

Essentially, the novel portrays the incessant wanderings of the protagonist, who is suffering from chronic prostatitis, through dormitory rooms and rented apartments, drinking vodka, preparing food, and trying to form intimate relationship with every woman he meets on his way. Sexual relationships may be identified – as in many other Sun‘allah Ibrahim’s works – as the central theme of the novel: there are countless sexual scenes and dialogues about sex, scenes of masturbation and accounts of the protagonist’s attempts to cozy up to a woman on public transport or in a store. At the same time, the complete absence of any emotions on the part of the protagonist – except for occasional irritation or boredom – towards these women, mostly Russian, conveys the impression of the protagonist being profoundly disparaging about them. Even the abundant sexual scenes in

the novel are totally devoid of any eroticism: they are just activities described in a mechanistic manner, at times with unpleasant physiological details.

American scholar Elliott Colla, who considered *Ice* in connection with Sun‘allah Ibrahim’s political views, writes, “Even as the novel explores the intimate details of cohabitation and conviviality, the novel essentially tells the story of a society without community. The protagonist is haunted by the hollowness of his relationships, and it is this alienation that is arguably the main theme of the novel. For 200 pages, Ibrahim explores the truism that we never feel so alone as we do in a crowd”.³

One may agree with Colla’s final remark, but his notion of the “society without community” may be disputed, because Shukri, as it comes in the novel, never made an attempt to become a member of a community in Moscow. The quotes from the books that Shukri reads, as well as other details in the novel, convince the reader that Shukri needed a loving woman, not a community. In fact, there were many women around Shukri, some of them pleasing him sexually, but none of them, as it seems, loved and appreciated him. The subconscious search for a woman that Shukri was constantly involved in is evident from the countless visual images of women whom he notices on public transport, in the street or in a store.

Shukri’s failure to find a sexually and emotionally satisfying woman conflicts with the pattern of the relationships between Arab men and Western women that is postulated in El-Enany’s work. Of course, there may be various explanations for Shukri’s failure (for example, Ibrahim’s personal negative experience in Moscow, or his experimental writing manner (see, for example: Kassem-Draz, 1982, p. 32–50; Meyer, 2001, p. 42–50), or something else), but what seems important for our study is the absence in *Ice* of the loving (or at least beloved) woman, who in Arab literature about the West very often constitutes or symbolizes “the soul of the other,” to use El-Enany’s words (El-Enany, 2006, p. 7).

The absence of a satisfying woman in the novel may well symbolize the absence of satisfying human contacts between Shukri and the Soviet people. Indeed, there are barely any friendly statements with regards to the Soviet people in the novel. Moreover, some passages seem to be of a “vengeful” nature, which can hardly be attributed to a kind of “compensatory representation of self and other” (again to use El-Enany’s expression), i.e. to the compensatory character of the reversal of power relations in the portrayal of the two cultural representatives, which can be found in many Arabic works of fiction (El-Enany, 2006, p. 53). Here are some passages of this kind:

“Finally the man came in with his wife: a white boar with a white pig in trousers” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 29).

“I said to Hamid (about a Russian woman met in the subway. – M.S.): She’ll read ‘Foreign literature’ magazine and go to a ballet or theater, while actually all she needs is a man, but all the men are drunkards” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 77).

“...She had grey teeth, as did the majority of Russians” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 102).

³ Colla, E. (2014). *Revolution on Ice*. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30039>

“I said: It’s that you (Czech female student. – *M.S.*) have long and slender legs, while Russian girls’ legs are crooked and short” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 158).

Shukri’s attitude towards Russians is also displayed in his interaction with his temporary landlady, an old woman, with whom he is very disrespectful. It is also notable that Russian men are virtually non-present in the novel; just two or three young men are mentioned in passing – with obvious disdain.

Another thing that is very indicative in the novel is the absence of any academician from whom Shukri could have received instructions. The only thing that the reader ever learns about Shukri’s studies is that he goes to the institute from time to time. What he studies there, who his professors are, how their interaction happens, – all these details remain out of sight in the novel. The implication is created that there is nothing to study in the Soviet institutes at all.

The atmosphere of alienation and discontent that dominates the narrative leaves the reader with a feeling of complete uselessness of the protagonist’s stay in the USSR. And it is hard to imagine that this feeling was not purposefully conveyed by such an experienced novelist as Sun‘allah Ibrahim. The features of the Soviet society and its everyday life appear in the novel through Shukri’s observations during his short travels around the city, in conversations between the students, and in the mass media reports.

Practically all of these features, related to various spheres, from everyday life to foreign policy, sharply contradict the postulates of the Soviet official ideology and propaganda. Shukri mentions such things as commodity shortage, low quality of Soviet goods and services, illegal currency operations and the black market, theft and bribery within the government institutions, property inequality of the citizens, flourishing administrative mafia in the Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, alcohol consumption in workplaces, secret abortions, anti-dissidence measures, and lack of democracy.

Apart from Shukri’s remark about rockets and shaving blades, mentioned above, here are other sarcastic passages of the kind:

“The glass showcase of the store – as well as those of all other stores – was filled with pyramids of the condensed milk tins. And nothing else” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 8).

“I started opening a bottle of wine, and the cork fell to pieces. I said, ‘I bet this cork was produced by the Soviet’” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 74).

“Having noticed that I was staring at her, she said, ‘Do you know why none of us wears a Soviet jacket or a Soviet shirt? Because any fashionable clothes have to pass ten levels of approval before they are certified, and this takes about five years’” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 135).

Sun‘allah Ibrahim’s excellent knowledge of the Soviet society is also evident from many small details in the novel including Soviet political slogans, names of Soviet cultural figures, popular jokes and anecdotes of the time, precise prices of various foodstuffs, stinking stairways and cluttered balconies, gestures of the drunks offering to partake, filthy couplets sung during celebrations. Moreover, the author uses transliterations of Russian words and phrases (there are forty-five of them altogether in the novel). All this is intended, as it seems, to add documentary credibility to the novel. And all these details, most of which are nar-

rated in the same emotionless tone, convey the atmosphere of dullness, sorrow, and weariness, which was characteristic of the Soviet Union of the 1970s.

In this regard, Elliott Colla writes, “Like these other (Ibrahim’s. – *M.S.*) novels, *al-Jalid* is concerned with Left Revolution – its defeats, its disappointments, its erasure – in Egypt and across the globe. And of all Ibrahim’s novels, *al-Jalid* is his saddest. Lacking the laughter of his other works, it offers little more than a laconic lament, a shrug, about the passing of so many revolutions”.⁴

Time of the Red Reed Pipe

Leila, the protagonist of Thurayya al-Baqami’s *Time of the Red Reed Pipe*, seems to have feelings for the Soviet Union similar to Shukri’s. Watching the snowfall in Pennsylvania, she confesses that she hates snow so much that she “never wears white clothes” and this color “is completely absent from her house setting, her car and all her personal belongings” (al-Baqami, 2012, p. 8).

Every time she sees snow, the sight immediately brings her back to Moscow. Although her memories of Moscow refer to nearly the same time and place as those in *Ice*, they are different from Shukri’s in content and in the tone of narration. The main difference is that Laila stayed in Moscow with her husband, and for this reason she had fewer chances for (and less need of) personal acquaintance and communication with Soviet people. Out of Soviet citizens appearing in the novel, some attention is given to a teacher of Russian, to a guy-interpreter, to the dean of the pre-university courses, and to a Party functionary, who is supposed to be working for the KGB.

Most of the characters of the novel are international students who stay in one dormitory with Laila and her husband. Most of the situations that these characters find themselves in – both comic and tragic – are associated with the conditions of daily life in the dormitory and in Moscow as a whole. The portraits and stories of these international students – some sad, others amusing, but always told with articulate emotions: sympathy, warmth, humor, or irony – take up a significant part in Laila’s narrative. It is this emotionality and expressed involvement in the fates of the people around that set Laila’s narrative apart from the seemingly indifferent narrative of Shukri. What is missing, however, in Laila’s emotional narrative is Soviet people.

The features of Soviet society and its everyday life are manifested in the novel mostly with regards to heroine’s firsthand experience, and nearly all of them are sources of annoyance to her. Her first impression of Moscow is the rudeness of an airport customs inspector, who assumes that most of Laila’s luggage is intended for illegal resale. Her next impression is the refusal of the dormitory administration to provide a private room for her and her husband, since the husband is already studying for a degree in an institute, whereas she is going to study Russian language. The room that they are eventually given is narrow, with “shabby old furniture” including a wardrobe that “could not hold even one quarter of the contents of her suitcase” and a bed “which made a disgusting noise if someone stirred

⁴ Colla, E. (2014). *Revolution on Ice*. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30039>

in his sleep” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 18). The room was at the fourth floor and Laila “was most annoyed by the fact that the showers were at the basement floor, since when in the evening she was descending down the dark stairways to the basement and taking shower there, all the stories of demons and ghosts that she knew sprang to her mind” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 22). Along with the difficulties of adapting to “the spirit of a commune, shared bathrooms, basement showers, and indigestible food,” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 23) other elements of Moscow life “drove her into the tunnel of disgust and desperation, such as the need to stand for several hours in long winding queues to buy a kilo of bananas or a bag of tomatoes, given that the queue began outside the shop, in the icy wind, which burned the face and tore at the cheeks” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 24).

Laila mentions student canteens, which are “same in all the student dormitories scattered around Moscow as if all of them were directly subordinate to the Central Committee of the Food Safety Management and Feeding the Starving People of the Third World” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 52). “A week after the first visit to the canteen,” says Laila, “the students understand that the menu does not imply any variety, and the food most remind of what Russian soldiers are given in the barracks” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 53).

Another feature of the Soviet Union of the 1970s that is described in the novel was black marketeering. There is a story about a deposit of imported clothes intended for illegal sale that was discovered by the police in one of the rooms of the dormitory. The owners of the deposit, two Arab students, were arrested; one was extradited to his home country, while the other received a stern warning. Laila herself received an experience of such activities when, being unfamiliar with Soviet laws, she decided to sell several branded plastic bags from “Beryozka” store (where imported goods were being sold for hard currency), which were very fashionable in the USSR at that time.

The harsh realities of everyday life in Moscow made Laila especially sarcastic towards official Soviet ideology and propaganda – much more so than in the case of Shukri in *Ice*. This sarcasm in particular was aroused by her communication with her husband, who tried hard to engraft in her mind the idea of the greatness of the Soviet Union and its political system, which contradicted her own impressions. Laila says that her husband glorified “the regime that had created in his young consciousness the image of the sun of freedom, bread for all, shelter for everyone, and a kind of Plato’s republic brought to life by the blessing of the mighty Lenin” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 35–36). Still, even Laila’s husband was at times uncertain of the real achievements of the Soviet regime, for instance, when remarking on rockets and condoms.

In the last chapter, Laila, while looking at a lapel badge with Lenin’s portrait, which was presented to her as an award for her finishing the course cum laude, addresses Lenin, whom she apparently associates with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the following words.

“Comrade Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, was that you who blew the red reed pipe and made the masses of people follow you? <...> Know, that I haven’t heard the sound of your pipe and hence haven’t joined the ranks of your followers” (al-Baqdami, 2012, p. 139).

Conclusion

To sum up, what we see in *Ice* and *Time of the Red Reed Pipe* is the expression of the two writers' own vast Soviet experience. This fact seems to have been purposefully underlined by the writers, who gave their own biographical features to the protagonists of the novels.

Indeed, both Sun'allah Ibrahim and Thurayya al-Baq sami stayed in the Soviet Union for several years in the status of ordinary students, little cared for by Soviet administration, and this made their respective real-life experiences in the country much richer than those of the other Arab authors writing about the USSR. The two novels share their authors' disappointment at the Soviet social and economic realities, as well as their sarcasm towards the official Soviet ideology.

Interestingly, these two representations of the Soviet Union stand in contrast to the Soviet's own idea of how the people from the developing countries perceived the "country of victorious socialism." According to the Soviet, those who came (just "having dismounted from their palm-trees," as the joke ran) to the USSR were having their first encounter with a "real civilization" and were supposed to be eager to build socialism in their home countries in the future, thinking back to the Soviet hospitality with warmth and gratitude. The two novels show that the Soviet were greatly mistaken in this respect.

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