

Arab Literature and the “Institution”

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Introduction:

There is no doubt that “the development of Arab literature” according to the planned projects is an unfamiliar issue, different from the questions which are usually raised in the field of literature. The term “development” is most often linked to reproducible tangible fields, to gauge and control the product and the ensuing impact, as it is the case in economy, farming, and social services. As to plan for the development of literature with a mercurial concept, changing throughout the ages and in the different contexts and incapable of defining its impact on readers and recipients, it has its differences and mazes. However, despite that, such an issue imposes itself with the decay of reading, the strong emergence of quick communication means and the predilection for ready-made and packed culture and rushed and hasty literature, the closest to the “kitsch”, which is not useful but to entertainment and pastime. From this perspective, development provides the best conditions for literature producers, the promotion of their creations and the launching of dialogue between the writers and the recipients.

In return, we are confronted with the difficulty of identifying the concept of literature concerned with this development. Literature touches a large indicative field, interrelated with other cognitive and expressive fields. It is also subject to changes dictated by the everlasting conflict between the old and the new, the classical and the pioneering. The definition of literature, although concise, is a linguistic expression of the creative interaction with the experiences it lives or it coexists with, conciliating between personal and non-personal dimensions, yearning for imitation, imagination and metaphors to illustrate the tangible reality, the hostage-like dream, the passing and well-anchored feelings, etc. Then, literature stems its essence from various discourses and dissimilar dictionaries to craft its own language from the dictionary of compromises and from the marks of absent texts.

So what is the relationship that we can imagine between development and literature? The relationship between development and literature cannot be based on “innocence” and “far from the goal”, because the elements embracing development and seeing for its execution (writers, institutions, and readers) have their own position within the society and has their own political and ideological illustrations. Every development project inspires itself from a significant ideological and intellectual background in the fate of the changes of the society and the conflict between its impacting forces. To this end, our conception of this relationship entails a trend which believes in the weight of literature and its role in holding accountable the rest of framed discourses for the culture and the value of the society. On this basis, the relationship between development and literature is based on the belief that it is the receptacle of knowledge, the tool for communication and dialogue, the means for the development and the renewal of language, and the observatory for the memory of the society and its history related to the lives of the people and their daily details.

Arab literature and the Institution

1) The form of the relationship in our contemporary history between literature and the institution: The institutions which are ready to share the development of literature are four: the State, the University, the civil society, the foreign institution in Arab countries. While reviewing the major characteristics in the history of the relationship between Arab literature and these institutions throughout the past one hundred years, we note the following:

a- **The State**: It is a relationship varying between interaction and support, between contradiction, control and neglect. During the European colonialism, the Arab national and nationalist ideology used to play a merging role of ranks and directions. Literature then responded to the joint popular aspirations, considering the "movement of revival" as a horizon to recover the heritage, restore the identity, invest poetry and prose to encourage people and incite them to get attached to the liberation of the country. However, this relationship has soon changed after the experiences of independence, because the national State turned into a totalitarian one, relying on the individual ruling, exercising repression over the civil society, imposing censorship over publication and creation, and resorting to the use of money and petrodollars to buy writers and put literature at the service of flattery, adulation and rigid eloquence.

b- **The University**: Despite the hegemony of the State and the lack of freedom in the designation and the election of professors and deans, the University plays a major role in the openness of Arab literature to the curricula of contemporary criticism, the modern forms of writing and their universal topics, through missions to the universities of the world and the graduation of students close to the production and the development of literature. Universities have soon become, within the Arab world, a forum to add legitimacy to literary works and consecrate some through research and theses of students. It is true that there is no coordination among Arab universities and that there is a discrepancy in the content of curricula to respond to the requested level. Therefore, the University achieved a positive relationship with literature, particularly in the training of potential writers and readers and in contributing to teaching Arab literature and widening its concept and its discussion.

c- **The Civil Society**: In fact, the institution of the civil society may be considered the major element in embracing and developing literature to become present, influent and renewed. Literature does not exist unless through the readers, through reading, interpretation and debate. Moreover, the high illiteracy level in the Arab world prevents the expansion and the promotion of literature on a large scale. This obstacle constitutes one of the key causes preventing the independence of literature, materially and morally, i.e. literature producers becoming capable of living on their writings, establishing a contract with the readers and responding to their expectations. However, if the institution of the Arab world has not sufficiently contributed to pushing towards the independence of literature and the consolidation of its physical existence, it has at least played a key role in the emergence of publishing houses which have endeavoured to embrace writers and poets and accompanied them from the stage of anonymity to the stage of notoriety. Within this context, the institution of the civil society has supported the "**schism**", particularly following the defeat of 1967,

between literature and the State, literature tending towards discovery and criticism, and towards recalling history in the light of the concerns of the present, without abandoning the artistic values which have crystallized since the forties of the last century. In fact, the generation of the sixties in Egypt, as well as the contemporary and upcoming literature generations in the different Arab countries, up to the wave of young generations in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia and in Yemen, are writing in the light of this "schism" from the State which has totally separated from the civil society and has become an obstacle preventing communication, revelation, introspection and accountability of the society. Part of this literature production has acquired the aspect of catharsis, testimony and angry rebellion, benefiting from the new means and vectors of expression. These moments within the literature production, liberated from the custody and from the temptations of the State's institution, have consolidated the relationship between literature and the institution of the civil society, which embraced, with various degrees, this innovation responding to its expectations.

d-The foreign institution: The relationship between literature and the foreign institution, whether within or outside the Arab world, at the end of the analysis, turns into the relationship between the Arab literature and the global literature, into the issue of acculturation and its ideological loads. This is what makes the history of the relationship flawed with some doubts, caution and condemnation. The tension within the relationship goes also back to the fact that such institutions see to define their culture, their literature and the publication of the achievements of its civilization; however, the colonial past continued to burden these institutions. Despite that, there are positive joint projects for the translation of literary marks with a human content and the earmarking of grants for Arab writers and authors to settle in foreign countries, allowing them to look at the literature and the peoples of other nations. In other words, the projects of the foreign institution were marked by seriousness and by the spirit of development when the Arab partners acquired a mature awareness to choose what contributes to enhance the dialogue of cultures and helps assimilating the achievements of universal literature.

2) The reality of the development of Arab literature in its relationship with these institutions: Throughout the past one hundred years, we have noted the vitality of Arab literature and its significant presence within "the symbolic goods" which contributed to the emergence of moral, lifestyle and political values, aiming at openness towards modern times and integration into the questions of the present and the future. Therefore, Arab literature, in its creative part, has become a tool of resistance to the totalitarian ideology of the past and a means to customize the discourse in connection with the surfacing of the individual identity of the Arab citizen, looking for freedom and liberation, for the building of the State of right, the rule of law and the democratic conflict. Although the relationship of literature with these institutions, particularly the State, was not in favour of its development, its expansion and its promotion, the "controversial dynamism" in its local and universal dimensions and expressions produces literature and authors who have created highly aesthetic and connotative tests, as it is illustrated in the experience of Najib MAHFOUZ and other Arab authors, who have underscored the necessity of literature and its role in accompanying Arabs in their journey from the era of degeneration to the borders of modernity. However, the development of Arab literature, nowadays, despite its importance, remains

vulnerable and exposed to destabilization and degradation because of the socio-economic and political situations, marked with totalitarianism and despotism, the lack of democratic institutions and the freedom of the thinking and the belief. Such situations negatively affect literature and its mechanisms controlling its path; they even make the modernity of literature and its achievements throughout the decades of innovation and the challenge of difficult conditions of production threatened by various risks, mostly censorship and the confiscation of the freedom of expression, the emergence of a matching ideology, which is fanatic to Islamic literature, is exploited in preaching and guidance! To this end, thinking about rectifying the relationship between literature and the institution is well-justified, to avoid the paralysis of literature creation.

3) Propositions to rectify the relationship between the institutions and the projects for the development of literature: In the light of the highlighted risks threatening the existence of Arab literature and its sustainability, as well as the preservation of its aesthetic and expressive achievements (particularly the expansion of illiteracy, the ideological use, the abstention from reading, etc.), the development of literature is called upon to get its projects inspired from a vision, aiming, on the one hand, at moving forward and ensuring the conditions for the independence of literature, and, on the other, at consolidating the relationship between the potential readers and the available texts about the artistic features and the issues about the questions of the present and of the future, so that literature becomes a forum for thinking, pleasure, and meditation in the existence, the individual and the world.

If we accept the term

rectification", with its biased and concise dimension, we are linking it, first, to the authors and their awareness, since they urgently need to achieve the independence of literature. In the light of the severe competition among the means of expression and the industry of culture, they are bound not to contend themselves with production, but have to knock on the doors of readers to set up tangible relationships with them and with the institution which is responding to the projects contributing to the promotion and the expansion of literature, without conceding the literary and aesthetic aspect of literature.

Within this context, we hereby present three projects related to the development of literature according to an implicit illustration inspired from the analysis:

1) A project undertaken by the authors, the poets, and the university, on the one hand, and by a publishing house, on the other, for the publication of a series of creations to achieve a difficult equation, conciliating between quality and the capacity to reach the largest number of readers in the Arab countries, with 300 million inhabitants. Critics, senior authors, university instructors, and prominent journalists supervise the selection of texts. This project also aims at "rationalizing" the best seller and maintaining a good level.

2- Producing television and radio programs providing well-produced readings for distinguished award-winning literary works, with the participation of critics, authors, and actors, targeting the awareness-raising of recipients regarding the importance of contemporary Arab texts and encouraging them to read them.

3) Organizing a global seminar in which authors from all Arab countries, as well as foreign critics take part, to present contemporary Arab literary works through samples illustrating the

major trends and tendencies, expressing the concerns and the wide imagination of Arab societies. More than one internal institution can finance the project, beside the foreign institution in the Arab world, seeing to have this seminar impacting more than an Arab and a foreign country.