

Libyan Stories

Twelve Short Stories from Libya

Edited by
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LIBYAN STORIES



Ahmed Fagih compiles thirteen of the short stories he edited during the seventies and eighties, all published in London in a magazine called Azure. Penned by prominent Libyan writers, these stories shed light on the human experience, especially the experience of those people who inhabit the eastern world. Featuring the work of Abdullah Algwiri, Kamel el Maghor, Ali M. Almistrari, Bashir al Hashmi, Khalifa Takbali, Sayed Gaddaf-Addam, Yousif Al Sharif, Ibrahim el Kouni, K. H. Mustafa, M. El Shwihdi, Yusef Guwairi and Ahmed Ibrahim al Fagih himself, the book illustrates a society in great transformation, as modernity meets tradition, and tension between the two opposing value systems rises.

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AHMED FAGIH**

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Thanks should be directed to *Azure* magazine, which ceased publication in 1984, where all these short stories and the introduction appeared.

Background Notes on Modern Libyan Literature

Ahmed Fagiih

In this introduction I will mainly be concerned with the achievements of modern Libyan literature in the last few decades. This period saw continuous activity, varied styles and means of expression, and the emergence of diverse schools of thought. The literary movement that has thrived since the early fifties had its earliest beginning at the start of this century; but it was stifled in the time immediately following the Italian seaborne onslaught on Libyan shores on 3rd October 1911. The Italian occupation ended what could have been a very promising literary and cultural movement. The start of this movement had been marked by the publication of the first Arabic newspaper in Libya, *Tripolitania* 1866, during the Othman period. The paper was a single sheet. It was later followed by the publication of a more advanced and independent journal published and edited by the prominent Libyan writer and intellectual; Mohamed al-Busairi. It was called 'Al Taraqqi' (progress) and was issued in 1898. There were other journals: *Al Arraqeeb*, *Al Kashaf*, *Alasr Alijadeed*, *Al Mirsad*, and the satirical journal, *Abu Qisha*, so-called after the pen name of its owner and editor. These published news as well as satirical articles, poems, and linguistic and religious studies. There was also a magazine specialising in science called *Arts*. It was the beginning of a literary and cultural revival, taking its cue from the new spirit that was prevailing in the Arab homeland. With Egypt holding the torch; the same spirit made one of Libya's prominent personalities, Suleiman el Baruni, travel, establish his printing press, publish his newspaper *The Muslim Lion*, and print the first Libyan book of verse – a selection of his poems. To quote the Libyan historian Khalifa Talisi, describing the period:

'The country witnessed a literary revival most manifest in classical studies, the publication of a number of newspapers and the emergence of new literary trends influencing and being influenced by the ones that already existed in the east.' He goes on to say, 'As was the case in other Arab countries, the dominant literary form was poetry as well as studies on language and religion.' Unfortunately all this had to come to an abrupt halt. Nothing could better illustrate the

loss suffered by cultural life in Libya than the record kept by the National Library that sixteen journals and periodicals which had appeared regularly just before the Italian invasion were all suppressed by the Italians.

The invaders met with a fierce resistance and for the following twenty years the country and its people had to undergo extreme hardship in the attempt to drive out the invading forces. The Italians' behaviour was contrary even to the usual imperialist philosophy and practice, which would leave some marginal outlet for the natives to enjoy a tiny scope for national development and education. The Italians, in their determination to assimilate the whole country to their own, took no chance. Mussolini called the country 'Libya Italiana' and named it the fourth shore – 'Quatro Spora' – as an extension of Italy. They launched a racist physical and cultural war of extermination. No schools were built for the Libyans, and places of education were limited to mosques, Quranic circles, or the schools of handicrafts which were established during the Ottoman period. The few papers that appeared in these thirty years ceased publication as soon as they came out. Amongst these ill-fated journals was *Alluwa al-Tarabulsi* edited by Othman Qizani, which lent voice to the Libyan people's aspirations. However three other journals managed to continue, they were Abdulla Banoun's *Aladl*, Mahmoud bin Moussa's *Alrageeb Alateed*, and Awad Abinghila's *Al Wattan* (which appeared in Benghazi). The only Arabic magazine which dedicated some pages to new forms of literature like the short story was the monthly *Illustrated Libya*, first published in 1935, under the supervision of the Italian administration. Poetry was the main champion during this period of struggle. The poet Suleiman Albarani was one of the leaders of the liberation war, yet he found time to write poetry and to publish in other Arab countries.

He continued to fight and write until he died in exile in India in 1940. Another poet that the Italians felt was dangerous to their rule was Rafiq al-Muhdawi. They banished him from his country; then he wrote his epic poem, 'Our separation is so painful. Farewell my redeemed land'. He lived in exile in Istanbul and never came back until the Italians left Libya. Ahmed al Sharif was another major literary figure of the period. He was a poet of great potential. He was also a scholar in Islamic law, serving as Judge in the Islamic courts. He had to go through difficult times himself, and wrote a poem urging people to fight.

You can take away our lives
Before our times are up