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‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ al-Waṣmī – Poet from the Heart of the Desert

Summary

‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ al-Waṣmī is a contemporary Saudi poet and writer. He completed his master’s degree at the Faculty of Literary Criticism and, subsequently, in Riyadh, he obtained a Ph.D. in this field and in the field of Rhetoric. He received the first prize in the Prince Faiṣal Ibn Fahd Poetry Contest for his poetry collection *Ṣifāḥ al-fitna* (“The lips of dissent”) and other literary achievements. His books contain poems on various themes, for instance: motherland, travel, poetry and the role of the poet. The literary oeuvre of ‘Abd Allāh Waṣmī is diverse and constitutes only a very small part of his literary and organisational activity. It is a mixture of inspiration, outstanding personality, hard work and poetry.

Keywords: ‘Abd Allāh Waṣmī, Saudi poetry, Arabic contemporary literature

‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ al-Waṣmī is a contemporary Saudi poet and writer. He completed his master’s degree at the Faculty of Literary Criticism and, subsequently, in Ar-Riyād, he obtained a Ph.D. in this field and in the field of Rhetoric. He received the first prize in the Prince Faiṣal Ibn Fahd Poetry Contest for his poetry collection *Ṣifāḥ al-fitna* (“The lips of dissent”) and other literary achievements. He currently holds the post of Secretary General responsible for the Arabic language in the King ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz International Centre for the Arabic Language.

He is the author of the following poetry collections: *Al-Baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-‘aṣifa* (2002), *Qāba ḥarfayn* (2005), *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-‘aṣifa* (2010), *Ṣifāḥ al-fitna* (2011).

The collection *Al-Baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-‘aṣifa* contains poems on various themes, for instance: motherland, travel, poetry and the poet. The poem *Qirā’a fī kaḥf al-waṭan* (“In the hand of the motherland”) expresses the lyrical subject’s emotions towards his

country and simultaneously focuses on all the obstacles he has to face as its citizen. The mood of the poem conveys anxiety, the very first lines stresses the fact that the poet's motherland is in danger:

“O my Motherland I feared
that the earth will write its book of poems in my veins
And the mother will give birth to her knight in peace.”¹

At the same time, in spite of his fear, the text focuses on the lyrical subject's readiness to take an active part in fighting the approaching changes. However, it is not explicitly stated who are the “they” revealed in the second verse (*When they begun to play on love*), and who exactly is the *demon*. However, one may notice the lyrical subject's hope for a quick improvement in the situation of his motherland and the phrase *my motherland* that conveys the speaker's pride every time it is repeated.

In the second part of the poem we discover that the lyrical subject's past and the history of his motherland are closely interwoven (“I search for my history in your steps”²) and that he himself is most sensitive both to his country's suffering and the pain of his countrymen. Comparing the speaker to Sindbād – that is the legendary figure of a sailor of Perso-Arabic origins – is an interesting concept. Who, however, are the pirates described by the speaker as those who follow him? Perhaps it is a reference to the same people who were mentioned in the first part of the poem – they also come across as enemies of the country who are to destroy its greatness (“it is they who will divide the remains of the greatness on my ship/ which has sunk”³). The lyrical subject expresses his longing for order and harmony in his motherland and stresses that only a peaceful Motherland can be his consolation (“Oh Motherland, be my shore!”⁴). Therefore, it can be said that his love for his motherland is idealistic, yet at the same time it vaguely resembles the love for a beloved (“Because my eyes are within you, and in my heart are you”⁵).

The mood of the third part of the poem seems to be the most touching. Once again the mysterious “they” are mentioned, and the situation of the country does not depend on anyone: “They say these words that wondered,/ they wondered off alone.”⁶ They also underline the lyrical subject's inability to change the situation: “your oath does not have the power...”⁷ Here, for the first time, the motherland is compared to paradise, to which the lyrical subject would like to return. However – as he claims – he will return only “as the drops of rain”⁸. From his words one can conclude that he feels lonely, for twice

¹ 'Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, *Qirā'a fī kaff al-waṭan*, in: *Al-Baḥr wa-al-mar'a al-āṣifa*, Al-Qaṣīm 2002, p. 7.

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

he stresses that only he alone has done something – he alone, the considerate musician, he alone, who burned the earth with the spilled blood. His musings lead to a rhetorical question in the form of an exclamatory sentence: “Am I a poet/ or perhaps a king?”⁹

The two main stylistic concepts employed in this poem are based on the repetition of the phrase “My Motherland!” – often in the form of an exclamatory statement. The notion of motherland has been personified in the analysed work, which manifests itself in the way the lyrical subject addresses his country: “Tell me”. The poem focuses on the affairs of the country and the description of unfortunate events may refer to the difficult situation of many Arab countries, which are politically or economically dependent on other states. There is also an echo of protest against Westernization in the poem, which can be ascribed to the pronoun “they”.

In another poem, *‘Awdat as-Sindibād*, the poet explores the subject of the journey, referring to Sinbad. Through travelling, man gains experience, knowledge about the world and can meet many people.

“Sindibād is laying on his ship
A seagull flew away from its nest
Never again will the journey throb in his soul
His longings have promised fire to his dreams.”¹⁰

The journey can also have a symbolic meaning; it may, for instance, depict dreams and realize itself only in the spiritual world. The lyrical subject may then reach a high level of perception and his journey becomes a mission to test his abilities and faith. In the quoted poem the speaker appears to be lonely and internally conflicted. On the one hand, he remains on solid ground, but on the other – he also flies as a bird in the sky.

‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī also focuses on the theme of poetry and the poet. He believes that poetry not only needs to proclaim the glory of love, but that it should also be a testimony of its nation’s culture. In the poem titled *Aš-Šā’ir* he writes:

“He sits in the corner of a cafe...
Hugging the pages of poetry and inviting no one!
To swim in the sea of poetry
He writes about Qays
He writes about Laylā.”¹¹

Words appear to be something fleeting, but it is thanks to them that we can create new worlds, affect the emotions of others and provoke thought. In the poem titled *Markabat aš-šī’r* the author writes:

⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *‘Awdat as-Sindibād*, in: *Al-Baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-‘āšifa*, Al-Qašīm 2002, p. 22.

¹¹ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *šā’ir*, in: *Al-Baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-‘āšifa*, Al-Qašīm 2002, p. 39.

“We run away to poetry from poetry
 There is nothing but poetry, which attracts
 Abla and the heart are my goal
 They are our magical world.”¹²

Horace claimed that poetry gives life to its creator and his thoughts, bestows eternity and immortality on them. It is thanks to poetry that we can learn so much about man – his ideas and emotions.

The poem *Sūrat Yā sīn* belongs to a collection by ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, titled *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-’āšifa*, which can be translated as “The distance between two letters”. The title relates to the name of the Qur’ān’s 36th sūra. The collection’s title is also inspired by the words of the Qur’ān, to be precise by the 9th verse of the 53rd sura: *wa-kāna qāba qawsayn aw adnā (and he was two bows away or even further)*.

The lyrical subject is a deep believer in Islam. He wishes to see, to experience God and so he begs Him for guidance:

“My Lord
 How to rise closer to You
 How to reach You.”¹³

He refers to his exhaustion and has most probably been trying to achieve this goal for a long time: “I was tired of running.”¹⁴ In spite of this, the speaker constantly strives to reach his goal: “I am close/ Two letters away.”¹⁵ In the concluding lines he believes that he hears and sees Allāh: “Am I seeing and hearing You?”¹⁶

There is an apostrophe in the poem; the lyrical subject refers directly to God by using the expression *Sayyidī* (“My Lord”). We can also see an anaphor: (*kayfa aša’du naḥwaka, kayfa aḡī’* – “How to raise closer to You/ How to reach You”). The lyrical subject employs the first person plural, for example: *qul lanā* (“tell us”). The verses do not contain the same number of syllables. Rhymes do not occur.

The poem is a kind of a prayer, a man’s conversation with God. On the one hand, the faithful man assures the Creator of his complete dedication and promises to never stop searching for the Lord. On the other hand, he feels sad that his journey to God has to last so long. However, in spite of his fatigue, he does not lose hope. He asks the Lord to give him advice and guidance that will finally lead him to God.

In ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī’s collection titled *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-’āšifa* there is one incredibly personal poem, *Ar-Rā’iḥa*, in which the lyrical subject

¹² ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *Markabat aš-ši’r*, in: *ibid.*, p. 77.

¹³ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *Sūrat Yā sīn*, in: *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-’āšifa*, Ar-Riyād 2010, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

recalls the memories of his deceased father, also a great Saudi poet, Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī:

“In my hand
 In my mouth
 I saw the ghost of my father
 And his burning embers
 I heard him
 in my blood!”¹⁷

The poet preserves the memory of those closest to him, giving the testimony to truth. Besides, the elegy, so popular in the Arab countries, is a reflective genre kept in the sad tone of contemplating the past. The lyrical subject finds it difficult to come to terms with the loss of the person closest to him and, therefore, he wishes for his father to remain immortal. This state can be achieved as long as his father’s blood runs through the veins of his descendants. The only remedy that may truly relieve pain is time.

Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī is a father of ‘Abd Allāh and is the author of a poetry collection called *Ḥadīṭ an-nahr*. In his poems he deals with the subject of the Algerian war for independence against the French, as well as the Palestinian and the Oman revolutions. He also recalls the grand history of the Arabs.¹⁸

“Algerian soil belongs to Algeria
 And has since the days of old, oh you despots!
 This soil is the Arab motherland
 And should be guarded by our faith
 France, leave us
 This soil is the soil of relentless knights”¹⁹

Oh motherland of the brave and source of revolutionaries
 Your hot blood pulsates with freedom.”²⁰

Ṣāliḥ al-Waṣmī supports the revolution that leads to the betterment of people’s living conditions and the welfare of the country. He treats the revolution in Oman as such:

“It is a revolution of a relentless nation
 That stubbornly stands against the despots
 It follows the right way towards progress and life.”²¹

¹⁷ ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, *Ar-Rā’iḥa*, in: *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa-al-mar’a al-’āṣifa*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī, *Ḥadīṭ an-nahr*, Ar-Riyād 2007.

¹⁹ Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī, *Al-Ġazā’ir al-muḡāhida*, in: *ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁰ Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī, *Ša’b al-Ġazā’ir*, in: *ibid.*, p. 36.

²¹ Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī, *Aṭ-Ṭawra fī ‘Umān*, in: *ibid.*, p. 46.

He also does not forget to voice his views on the Palestinian revolution and his fellowmen who were condemned to it. In the poem *Šibl Filasṭīn wa-al-ḥiḡāra* he writes:

“These stones are my strength
With great might I throw them at the Jews
I throw them with all my heart
I have nothing except the stones
They are my weapon and my strength.”²²

However, going back to the literary oeuvre of his son, ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, images of passing away are present in the poem *Buḡūr*, especially in the first part titled *Al-Mayyit*, in which the poet describes the Dead Sea:

“The sea of dead flows nearby
Beautiful bodies
Regaining consciousness
They flirt with death while surprising it
With the whiteness of dead space.”²³

Through the use of metaphors: “the whiteness of the dead space or they flirt with death” and epithets, for example: “beautiful bodies”, the poet paints images of passing in front of our eyes under the pretext of describing the Dead Sea. As an antithesis, he places together “the sea of dead” and the “beauty of bodies”, highlighting the contrast between the beauty of temporality and the inevitability of death. This comparison induces reflections about the “dead space”. The dissonance that has been created introduces a mood of uncertainty and inevitability of the end. It seems that death is a source of constant fear and fascination for the lyrical subject.

Love often leads to feelings of uncertainty and emotional tribulations. On the one hand, man feels the need for love, but often he is not able to satisfy it. This state is described by the poet in the poem titled *An-Nadr* (“Pledge”):

“She was as the nicest rhymes of my qasida
I am still dying on deserted roads.”²⁴

“I have burned within you, my wounds inflicted by love
She said: My wound is like faith.”²⁵

²² Ṣāliḥ Ibn Sulaymān al-Waṣmī, *Šibl Filasṭīn wa al-ḥiḡāra*, in: *ibid.*, p. 87.

²³ ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, *Buḡūrī*, in: *Qāba ḥarfayn yalīhi al-baḥr wa al-mar’a al-’āšifa*, p. 42.

²⁴ ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, *An-Nadrī*, in: *ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Love is a timeless emotion, which gives meaning to human life. True love is able to conquer all obstacles. In the poems *Hulūd* and *Al-Markab* the poet writes as follows:

“Do not ask the poet about his love
For many a time he died a martyr’s death.”²⁶

“Be the rain
Be the moon
Be everything
I am a man
Who journeyed towards love
and burned his boat on the water.”²⁷

Love is also closely connected with suffering. ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī seems to be an incredibly sensitive poet, he devotes entire melancholic passages to the purpose and meaning of love.

The poetry collection *Šifāh al-fitna* includes poems – thoughts and reflections – on many different themes. The fragment of *Ṭabīb nafsī* from the poem *Qabla iktimālikum* deserves special attention. It describes the doubts of an aging man:

“The Psychologist

I am crippled
inside.
Constantly
only pain and longing.
I am crippled
forever.
In the night I was
an old man
a boy
as a story without a narrator
as the grain not knowing the dew
as the people deprived of hope
as wandering thoughts.
I am crippled
up to my very eyes.”²⁸

²⁶ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *Hulūd*, in: *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁷ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *Al-Markab*, in: *ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁸ ‘Abd Allāh al-Wašmī, *Qabla iktimālikum*, in: *Šifāh al-fitna*, Ar-Riyāḍ 2011, pp. 96–97.

The subtitle alone suggests that the poem presents the confessions of a man who decided to entrust his problems to a “doctor of souls,” or, a psychologist. The patient narrates his emotions, describing himself as being “crippled inside.”²⁹ For the speaker it is a permanent state and he suspects that this state of affairs will last forever: “I am crippled/ forever.”³⁰ The lyrical subject speaks about his suffering and his longing. However he does not reveal the reasons behind them. Only by reading the following lines of the poem can one figure out that this man finds it difficult to define his place in life. By using contrasting words placed in close proximity to each other: “In the night I was/ an old man/ a boy,”³¹ the poem subtly conveys the uncertainty of the lyrical subject regarding his age, or his state of mind. Perhaps these stylistic devices serve the purpose of communicating contradictions felt by the lyrical subject, who is a mature man dreaming of a second youth. In subsequent verses the author focuses on a number of things to which the lyrical subject may be comparing himself. The listed phenomena definitely bring about some negative associations; for example “a story without a narrator”³² seems to be something devoid of sense. Perhaps the lyrical subject is aware of the fruitlessness of his existence, as can be interpreted from the following comparison: “people without hope,”³³ for what is life without hope? In the concluding verses the lyrical subject states that his mutilation affects even his eyes: “I am crippled/ up to my very eyes,”³⁴ which can be read as a metaphor of crying – crying caused by helplessness and the lack of prospects for improvement. The situation constantly repeats itself just like his persistently reoccurring thoughts. The continual effect of this state is achieved not only by morphology but also by numerous repetitions present in the poem: “falls apart...”

The entire poem could be interpreted as the cries of a man who has been torn apart by spiritual pain for an extended period of time and, therefore, has lost all hope. He feels helpless and is not able to change his situation. All that remains is crying, and this is why he has decided to ask support from the “doctor of souls”.

In the *Al-Ḥadīqa* series of poems there is a work titled *Al-Banafsiḡ*, an example of love poetry. It opens with vivid parables with which the lyrical subject praises the beauty of a woman, comparing her to a violet – the flower named in the poem’s title – the most beautiful flower in the garden:

“The most beautiful flower in the garden
 More beautiful than fleeting moments
 More beautiful than water for a thirsty man
 Like a shadow
 Violet between the eyes and above the cheeks

²⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 97.

³¹ Ibid., p. 97.

³² Ibid., p. 97.

³³ Ibid., p. 97.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

And underneath that which is not mentioned
A violet bearing the name of Laylā.”³⁵

The lyrical subject suggests that the woman is like a shadow desired on a scorching day. He also mentions her name mentioned – Laylā. He is tempted by her and finds it difficult to remain indifferent in her presence. The poem is one of few that praise women.

The literary oeuvre of ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī is diverse and constitutes only a very small part of his literary and organisational activity. It is a mixture of talent, inspiration, outstanding personality, hard work and poetry. Creativity allows the poet to free himself from everyday life and writing poetry is a gift from God.

³⁵ ‘Abd Allāh al-Waṣmī, *Al-Banafsiḡī*, in *ibid.*, p. 58.