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ALI AHMAD BA KATHIR AND THE
HISTORICAL NOVEL

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Ba Kathir's emigration in 1934 to Egypt, the active centre of modern Arabic culture, provided the necessary impetus, and marked the real starting point of his literary career. In his native country, Hadhramaut, and during his short stay in Hejaz, Ba Kathir drew his inspiration from an exclusively traditional background. Still a youth, he made his literary debut, not as a novelist, but with a number of poems which he used to publish in the local newspapers. But his study of English literature at Cairo University as well as his contact with Egyptian literary circles opened before his eyes the world of Western literature with its new dramatic and narrative art forms, and changed his outlook on literature as a whole. He was attracted to the stage from the very beginning, and it is, indeed, his prolific contribution to this particular field, rather than his comparatively small output in the field of fiction, that has made Ba Kathir's reputation during the last twenty-five years.⁽¹⁾

Whether in drama or fiction, Ba Kathir derives most of his themes from Arabic history and legends. The national feeling and the wish to "display the ideals (found) in our eventful, glorious history"⁽²⁾ may account for his preference for the past. But apart from these ideological motives, he had also some of the artistic kind: "... art, in general, should be founded on symbol and suggestion rather than on specification or delimitation, so that the reality depicted in a work

(1) Ba Kathir, *Fann al-Masrahyyah min Khilaf Tajarubi al-Shakhsiyyah*, pp. 5-9.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 39.

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of art becomes wider than that presented by the material world. By their concentration and detachment, the events of history help the writer to achieve this and more than contemporary ones... In this respect, legends are (even richer than history, wider in horizon and freer from the chains of time and place" (1)

This concept of the symbolic and suggestive function of art is connected with the problem of historical reality : "... In the treatment of a historical theme, (the writer's) task is not to record what has happened in history as it happened, for that is the task of a historian, but to create, within the framework of that piece of history, a new world in which incidents happen, characters behave, problems become entangled and results are obtained, not according to what the records of history have confirmed, but according to the general picture imagined in the light of his knowledge of that age in particular and his experience of human life in general. (The writer) should be guided in all that by the aim he pursues and message he wishes to convey"(2).

Ba Kathir's novels, *Sallamah al-Qass*, *Wa Islamah* and *Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar - Hamdan Qarnat*, embody his artistic ideas and also express the "message" which he seeks to convey. While *Wa Islamah* demonstrates the idea of "jihad" in the sense of a national struggle, *Sallamah al-Qass* and *Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar* display, in the much wider context of humanity, the integrity of Islamic values. Technically speaking, the three novels point to the development of his artistic skill in writing historical fiction.

In his first historical novel *Sallamah al-Qass*, Ba Kathir utilizes the well-known story, derived from *al-Aghani*, of *Abd al-Rahman Ibn Abi 'Ammar al-Qass* and the woman-singer *Sallamah*.(3) During the Umayyad period, the spread of

(1) Ibid., pp. 39—40.

(2) Ibid., p. 35.

(3) Cf. *Al-Aghani*, vol. VIII, pp. 6—13.

While *Sallamah al-Qass* concentrates on the psychological conflict, *Wa Islamah* is a panoramic picture of a historical age and national struggle. Its plot is based on the short account given by al-Maqrizi of the origins of al-Malik al-Muzaffar

fiction. Experiments in drama seem to have influenced his first experiment in the genre of fiction. Given the novel a remarkable unity of construction. Ba Kathir's previous experiments in drama seem to have influenced his first experiment in the genre of fiction. Almost total disappearance of description and the lack of subsidiary scenes, has condensed form of the novel, with its reliance on dialogue and soliloquy. The character seems to have distracted his attention from the historical background. Besides, Ba Kathir's prime concern to present a single human situation in the altruism and self-denial of Ibn Suhail potentialities of a more differentiated character. The other characters are marginally treated, though one can observe in showing the various stages of the psychological conflict in which his hero is engaged. In this novel, Ba Kathir concentrates on psychological analysis. He succeeds

hereafter where no barriers will divide them. In the hope that he will be reunited with his beloved, not in this world, but in the hereafter where no barriers will divide them. His fortunate lover has earned or can ever dream to afford. He is only consoled by sends for *Sallamah* paying a purchase price several times the amount the unforgiveness for life. But all his hopes are utterly shattered when, finally, the Caliph himself of his beloved, to renounce his seclusion, and take part in the everyday struggle for *Sallamah*. He is poor, leads an ascetic life but has, in order to buy the freedom preserve his piety, and religious conduct and to justify, at the same time, his love Ibn Suhail's slave-girl singer *Sallamah*. The conflict springs from his wish to Yes, Ibn Abi 'Ammar's life changes completely when he falls in love with

and cheerful society, a different and, perhaps, exceptional type of youth. *Ibn Abi 'Ammar* is called "al-Qass" (the priest) for he represents, in that gay Due to his piety, righteousness and great religious knowledge, 'Abd al-Rahman youth in Mecca and Medina to indulge in a life of pleasure, love and music. Wealth and slavery, coupled with political despair, led the Hejazi

Qutuz, the third ruler of the Mameluke dynasty in Egypt. Al-Maqrizi states that it is said that Qutuz' real name was Mahmud ibn Mamud and that he was the actual nephew of Jalal al-Din ibn Khwarizm Shah. When the latter was defeated by the Tartars, Qutuz was sold in Damascus and brought to Egypt.⁽¹⁾ On the basis of al-Maqrizi's scanty data, Ba Kathir has built up an imaginary picture of Qutuz' life through which he has presented the political conditions of the historical period.

Accordingly, *Wa Islamah* can be divided into three distinct parts. The first part illustrates the struggle of Jalal al-Din against the Tartar hordes ravaging his provinces in the east of Iraq. The struggle ends in his defeat and the kidnapping of his daughter Jihad and his nephew Mahmud ibn Mamud. The second part of the novel is concerned with the fate of the kidnapped children. Having changed Mahmud's name into Qutuz and Jihad's into Julianar, the slave trader sells them to a kind-hearted dignitary of Damascus. The old man treats them well but, after his death, his cruel son purposely aims at separating the two, who have now become lovers, by selling Julianar to an Egyptian slave trader. The decisive turn in Qutuz' life occurs when he is re-sold to the nationalist freedom fighter Ibn al-Zaim, and becomes acquainted with the courageous, religious leader Sheikh 'Izz al-Din ibn 'Abd al-Salam. Under their influence, Qutuz takes an active part in the political movement which professes the aim of unifying the resistance of the Islamic state against the imminent danger of the Tartars from the East and the Crusaders from the west.

The third and final part of *Wa Islamah* deals with the story of Qutuz in Egypt. In compliance with his own wish, Qutuz is sold to the last Ayubite ruler in Egypt, al-Malik al-Salih, where he becomes, later, one of 'Izz al-Din Aibak's confidants. His long struggle for power culminates in his accession to the throne, and his

(1) Al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Suluk li-marifat Duwal al-Muluk* (Matb. Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, Cairo, 1963), vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 435.

happiness is almost complete when he is reunited with his beautiful cousin Julianar who becomes his wife.

However, power is to Qutuz not an end in itself but a means to enable him to rally the Muslim world against the Tartars who have now destroyed Syria, and are on their way to destroy Egypt as well. Apart from being religious, Qutuz has, since his childhood, been obsessed by the idea of revenge against the Tartars who are responsible for the destruction of his country and the murder of all his relatives. Qutuz realizes this life-long dream in the great, decisive battle of 'Ain Jalut which checks for ever the advance of the barbarous hordes. But he pays a high price for his victory. He loses his wife Julianar who is killed in the battle, and who says to him before she dies: (1)

« لا يقل واجتياها . . . بل . . . اسلاها ! »

"Do not say, oh my love! Say, oh my Islam!" Soon after, he loses his own life when, during his return to Egypt, he is assassinated by some envious Mamelukes.

Ba Kathir handles his historical material with ease and smoothness. Yet, the great mass of events forces him to resort, from time to time, to the direct method of the historian.(2) Also, the vast spaces in which these events occur, and which stretch fran Iran and north India to Syria and Egypt have, despite Ba Kathir's undeniable mastery, weakened the unity of the novel and detracted from its artistic effect. Consequently, in *Sallahah al-Qass* the characters are in the foreground and the historical setting is vague; in *Wa Islamah* the historical setting is in the foreground and the characters are vague.

In his introduction to *Wa Islamah*, Ba Kathir sums up the outstanding qualities of

(1) *Wa Islamah*, (Maktabat Misr, Cairo n. d., first published 1945), p. 199.
(2) *Ibid*, cf. e.g. pp. 13, 40, 54, 105, 206.

his national hero Qutuz: "...By his uprightness, justice, courage, firmness, patience, determination, loyalty, self-denial, political experience, administrative competence and devotion to the service of religion and homeland, he gives a lofty example of the ruler-reformer and the perfect man."⁽¹⁾ This is surely the epic hero, "the perfect man" whose prototype had already appeared in Waraqah ibn Sulaih, the central character of J. Ramzi's *Bab al-Qamar*.⁽²⁾ Qutuz' excellent qualities are innate and his destiny and great victory are foretold by astrologers even before he is born.

The other characters in *Wa Islamah*, such as Julianar, Ibn al-Zatim, Sheikh Izz al-Din ibn 'Abd al-Salam and Rukn al-Din Babars, form part of the composite picture of the age, but they can hardly be considered as distinctly developed individuals. The psychological conflict of the individual observed in *Sallamah al-Qass* is replaced in *Wa Islamah* by the all-embracing general national conflict. Moreover, one finds that, carried away by the surge of national and religious feeling, Ba Kathir occasionally falls into the trap of oratory and propaganda⁽³⁾ in which Ramzi was permanently imprisoned.

In his next novel *Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar*, both the historical setting and the characters are treated with consummate skill. Nowhere does Ba Kathir's art appear deeper and more mature. Here, he provides both a picture of the past, and a number of interesting, lively and complicated characters which are firmly rooted in their historical and social background. In the blurb there is a somewhat peculiar reference of the author to the story as a "conflict between capitalism and communism in Kufa" in the third century A.H. He seems to identify the Qar-matian movement with its professed aims of classless society, equality and "common justice" (madhhab al-'adl al-Shamili), its recourse to rationalism and

(1) *Ibid.*, introd., p. 3.

(2) *Bab al-Qamar* (Matb. al-Nahdah, Cairo, 1936).

(3) *Wa Islamah*, cf. e.g. pp. 135, 137, 167, 210.

The economic and social factors which led to the rise of the Qarmatian movement are presented through their effect on the life and fortune of the poor peasant family of Hamdan Qarmat. The corrupt feudal landlords turn the small holders into mere labourers whose small wages hardly compensate for their sweat and toil. When Hamdan's beautiful sister, 'Aliyah, is kidnapped by the wealthy, idle and pleasure-loving feudal lord Ibn al-Hatim, the bite of poverty is aggravated by disgrace. Despairing of social justice, Hamdan and his cousin 'Abdan, the suitor of the kidnapped girl, are driven to the belief that they must fight "the power of capital" (sultan al-mal), and not particular individuals, Ibn al-Hatim or Ibn al-Haisam. In view of the permanent alliance between capitalism and those in power, including the central government in Baghdad, they are attracted to the "Qaddahiyyin", a secret movement which, working behind a religious

individual character of their own.

these particular places, with their emotional attachment to characters, an almost resulted in artistic compactness and unity of action, and has also helped to give small village of Dur and the town of Muhaimabadh in the plains of Kufa. This Unlike the vast spaces of Wa Isamah, the scene of Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar is the

artistic touch displayed in Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar deserve more detailed attention.

quite compatible with the character of a historical novel, the originality and no doubt diverts the reader's attention from the past to the present, which is not the two systems is surely no less essential. But, apart from this comparison, which and industrialized on the other—and between the motivations and final aims of different types of society—the religious and cultural on the one side and the secular and those of modern communism may seem, the difference between the completely Great as the similarity between the radical principles of the Qarmatian movement to the clash of the two modern political systems, communism and capitalism. ism; and sees in its conflict with contemporary feudalism something comparable radicalism as opposed to religion and inherited tradition, with modern commu-

façade, has proved the refuge of thousands of poor oppressed peasants, artisans and workers. It promises them justice, equality, common ownership of all property and a communist system of government. Hamdan Qarnat becomes the champion and leader of this movement.

After some vicissitudes, Handan succeeds in occupying Muhaimabadh, east of Kufa, making it into a "dar hifah" (an entrenched place of retreat) for his followers. The small Qarnatian kingdom soon swarms with followers from neighboring towns and villages who have come to enjoy this proletarian paradise.

However, corruption and decadence affect also the revolutionary community of Muhaimabadh. Its members realize that the professed principles of equality and justice do not work in practice, and are disgusted with the moral corruption resulting from the application of the new doctrines — the dissolution of family life and the suppression of religion. They long for their former life, particularly when they see that the reformatory programme of their opponents, sponsored by the religious leader Abu al-Baqā' al-Baghdādī and supported by the Caliph al-Mu'tadid which stipulates the application of the just principles of Islam to the relationship between the rich and the poor, is beginning to bear fruit.

Hamdan himself is no less disillusioned. He loses his belief in the new doctrine, and he realizes the corrosive effect of the teachings of the "Qaddahiyyin" whose licence affects his own family. All his hopes for a genuine social reform are completely shattered. He finds that he cannot see eye to eye with the Imam — in whom infallibility he never really believed — dissociates himself from the movement and turns in repentance to God, deeply concerned that the whole of Muhaimabadh should return to the fold.

Ba Kathir's psychological insight is no less impressive than his remarkable picture of the age. The members of Hamdan's family — his two sisters, Aliyah and Rajiyah, and his cousin 'Abdan — the protagonists of this drama, are shown battling not only against their own private ills, but also against the social and

The revival of the old Hamdan is connected, in the narrative, with the return of his missing sister 'Aliyah who, after having been freed, disappears again because she does not want to bring shame upon her family or upon her former fiancé 'Abdan who might accept to marry her out of pity. She is involved in the Qarnatian society of Muhaimabath against her own wish. 'Aliyah is the symbol of Hamdan's past to which he is constantly drawn during those years of rebellion: "... When he saw her, he felt as if a dear portion of his own soul he had lost, had

Yet, there are always two facets to his person. Hamdan the outlaw, the uninhibited revolutionary, is always at odds with Hamdan the simple, honest and religious peasant. All through the different stages of his deviation, he shows signs of inward struggle. He refuses to fight the Caliph; he admires the religious leader, Abu al-Baqā, and his social reforms; he remains sceptical of the infidelity of the Imam, and unhappy about the immoral features of the new doctrine. As he has been attracted only by the social aspect of the movement, the collapse of its social aspirations convinces him finally of its futility. The end of his struggle is characterized by disillusionment, repentance and an acute sense of failure.

Hamdan Qarnat is given pride of place both as the father of the family and the leader of the dissident movement. A good-natured, simple and ignorant peasant, with deep roots in the soil as well as in religion and tradition, he is driven towards rebellion by the realization of the social and economic injustices inherent in feudal society. Seeing that it is impossible to free his abducted sister and avenge his injury by normal legal procedure, he decides to resort to illegal means. Thus he joins, first, the band of the "ayyarin" (vagrants) whose principle it is to rob the rich and give to the poor, and then the much more dangerous, but much more organized movement of the "Qaddahiyyin" which promises him justice and equality and an improvement of the ignoble conditions under which he is forced to live.

economic difficulties of their class and age. The conflict between spiritualism and materialism and its effect on the characters is intense.

returned to him with what it contained of sweet and bitter memories. At the moment of meeting, he forgot everything except that he was the old Hamdan, Aliyah's brother."⁽¹⁾ Pressure is brought to bear upon Hamdan to get rid of his sister Aliyah, who courageously attacks the profanity and corruption of the Qarmatian society, but he refuses to comply. He cannot part with her for she is "the only link that still connects him with his past, his wife Umm al-Ghailh, his mother Aminah and his father al-Ash'ath".⁽²⁾

'Aliyah is well fitted for the symbolic rôle assigned to her. She is depicted, from the very beginning, as more beautiful than her younger sister Rajiyah, more honest and more dignified. She is endowed with strong morality, self-respect and dignity. Even her beauty does not fade during those years of biting poverty. Comparing the two sisters, 'Aliyah who has led a moral life, and Rajiyah whose "new religion" has degraded her almost to the level of prostitution, Ba Kathir even finds a connection between morality and physical beauty. Rajiyah looks at 'Aliyah and it seems to her "as if time increased her beauty to the same extent as it decreased hers".⁽³⁾

'Aliyah's return to her family is, as it were, the return not only of past poverty and past misery, but also of morality, dignity and spiritual values. The reaction of the other characters to this sudden resurrection varies according to their mental attitude and frame of mind. While it brings back, to Hamdan, rich memories of family life and religious conduct, 'Abdan sees only trivial worries to which he never wants to return, and Rajiyah a monstrous memento she always wishes to escape.

'Abdan, originally an ignorant peasant like his cousin, becomes, due to deep

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- (1) Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar-Hamdan Qarnat (Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, Cairo n. d., first published about 1948), p. 211.
(2) Ibid., p. 217.
(3) Ibid., p. 214.

No wonder, therefore, that Rajiyah finds some solace in the principles of "common justice" which absolve her from sin. Al-Husain al-Ahwazi—one of the propagandists of the new movement—assures her: "Do not be depressed; I can see that you believe in the Imam's doctrine, so that you can do as you like."⁽¹⁾ Rajiyah becomes part of the Qarmatian community, so indivisibly that when it collapses in Muvahhabah she goes with its remnants across the border to Syria.

Rajiyah the chance to meet men and yield to the lusts of the flesh. Her to promiscuity. Hamdan's preoccupation with his secret profession gives her a morally inferior. A yearning for the emotional response she fails to find drives the very start, telling lies and trying to attract her sister's fiancé, she is shown intellectual response, but to her mere desire to escape her unpleasant past. From Rajiyah's acceptance of the new ideology, on the other hand, is due, not to

the pressure exerted upon him by the latter. Hamdan and supports the newly appointed leader Dhikrawaih. His cowardice prevents him from resisting the pressure exerted upon him by the latter. "Infallible Imam" (al-imam al-masum) is not genuine, he abandons his benefactor Hamdan and supports the newly appointed leader Dhikrawaih. His cowardice prevents him from resisting the pressure exerted upon him by the latter. "Abdan's weakness is finally demonstrated when, despite his realization that the "Abdan does not show resistance to the lure of sex and unlimited freedom. proclaims that all the sins of his followers will be forgiven. Unlike Hamdan, principles of the "common justice" and in the "infallibility" of the Imam who to enjoy the company of Shahr on condition that he professes his belief in the the exquisite beauty of his so-called sister, Shahr. Al-Karmani allows 'Abdan Karmani's convincing arguments that draw him to the secret movement, but also Hamdan, 'Abdan is not without foibles. For instance, it is not only Ja'far al-Hamdan, perhaps, more susceptible to heresy than the illiterate, simple and religious out of strong conviction. But, apart from his intellectual qualities, which make the new movement. He joins the "common justice" (maddhab al-'adi al-shamii) study of Islamic law and jurisprudence, the intellectual thinker and the jurist of



Ba Kathir's above-discussed historical novels have shown both his specific brand of ideology and his craft at various stages of development. *Sirat Shuja'*, a more recent work which deals with the beginnings of the Ayubite era in Egypt in which the author tries to find parallels with the contemporary 1952 Egyptian revolution, adds nothing to what has been said on his art or to his established principles and national outlook. In fact, it even represents an anti-climax to a very distinct achievement in *Al-Tha'ir al-Ahmar*, for he reveals himself in it as a propagandist rather than an artist. Not only is the historical period of *Sirat Shuja'* reconstructed in modern terms and with an explicitly national aim, but also the plot itself lacks the thrill and suspense his previous novels owe to their intricacies and complications. The basis of the plot of *Sirat Shuja'* is the conflict between the nationalist son (*Shuja'*) and the disloyal and treacherous father (*Shawar*). But *Ba Kathir* is more concerned with the exposition of historical and political aspects of the period than with the evolution of his characters and the development of the basic psychological theme.

الآن فنتميزه نسوي في ظهوره ، وكان حقيقته التي جعلت من روايته كروية التواضع التي جعلت من حياها ،
 لأن فنتميزه نسوي في ظهوره ، وكان حقيقته التي جعلت من روايته كروية التواضع التي جعلت من حياها ،
 « لفتت فيها الأرواح الصغرى بقوة لذة يفيض بالانسان ، فضل الانسان يتعاضد من عتباته وألمه
 وفتها ، لم ما لبثت أن طوى على قلبها فتدفق لم سالن ! » ؛ « وقد عجز الخرج الذي كان يترنم به قلبه ،
 لما بقيت من رستين الامن الذي كثرى بخصمه باصداق من اللبوة والذرة بينهما صدى من اللحن الرقيق ! » (1) .