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**BEYOND COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN NORTH AFRICA**

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**A REVIEW ESSAY : IDENTITY, CULTURAL ENCOUNTER, AND ALIENATION IN THE TRILOGY OF THE LIBYAN WRITER AHMAD IBRAHIM AL-FAQIH .**

**A Review Essay by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida**

**LITERATURE, FILMS, AND ORAL TRADITIONS are important but often neglected resources for the study of social and political life in Middle East studies. These non-conventional resources provide a counter view to official state history(1) . The need for social sources is even more urgent in the case of Libyan studies in the United States, where most of the journalistic and scholarly writings on Libya are characterized by a fixation on a state-centered perspective, especially the persona of Col. Muamar al-Qaddafi and terrorism. Yet no state exists without a society; and, unless one assumes that political leaders-like Qaddafi-are above society, then taking society: seriously is an essential prerequisite for understanding any culture(2) . Extending a study to include Libyan society and analyzing its diverse voices by exploring its literature will shed new light on understanding where Qaddafi originates and how Libyan society has reacted to state policies. As a political scientist deeply involved with literature one of my objectives is to recapture some neglected aspects of Libyan politics and culture. This essay attempts to introduce the magnum opus of the leading Libyan writer Ahmad Ibrahim al-Faqih and to analyze how he interprets questions of identity, cultural encounter, and social alienation in contemporary Libya .**

**The focus of this review is the most recent work of al-Faqih, his trilogy So Ahbiqa Madinatu Ukhra. Hadhihi Tukhum Mamlakati, and Nafaq Tudiuhu Imra Wahida ( I Shall Present You With Another City: I; These Are The Borders of My Kingdom: II; and A Tunnel Lit hy.1 Woman: /If). These three volumes won the award for best novel in**

Beirut's book exhibition of 1991. Al-Faqih narrates the story of his childhood in the village of Mizda and in the city of Tripoli. The narrative reflects his perception of Libyan culture and politics under two regimes: the monarchy from 1951-1969 and the Republic/Jamahiriya after 1969. A review of Libyan literature since the 1960s is important to place al-Faqih's trilogy in the larger social and cultural context.

Al-Faqih is a middle class modernist writer who belongs to what is called in Libya the 1960s generation. This group includes prominent Libyan fiction writers such as Sadiq al-Naihum, Yusif al-Sharif, Ali al-Rgaih, Muhammad al-Shaltami, and Ibrahim al-Kuni. These writers began to publish poetry and short stories in the early 1960s(3) . Recently, al-Faqih and al-Kuni have gained acclaim in the Arab world and some of their works have been translated into other languages, such as Russian, German, Chinese, and English(4) . Al-Faqih received critical acclaim as one of the most talented short story writers inside Libya. In 1965, his first collection of short stories, "Al-Bahr La Ma' Fih" [There Is no Water in the Sea,] appeared in 1965 and won the highest award sponsored by the Royal Commission of Fine Arts in Libya.

Al-Faqih's works reflect themes of tension and conflict between the rural village, patriarchal life and individualistic, urban values. These themes are no surprising because Libyan society had just begun to experience the process of urbanization and social change due to the impact of the new oil economy in the early 1960s(5) . Most Libyan writers of that period focused on the genre of the short story, and only when urban life became more complex in the late 1980s did the novel appear in Libyan literature. If the novel is the product of bourgeois capitalist society, then the emergence of the novel as a new genre in Libyan literature is a clear sign that a bourgeois middle class has developed in Libyan society.

The most prolific writer of his generation, al-Faqih has published eighteen books, ranging from plays and short stories to novels and non-fiction essays(6) . The trilogy under review is not only the culmination of his creative work and productive literary career but has many similarities to the author's life .

In fact, the name of the main protagonist, Khalil al-Imam, resembles the author's name. Khalil is the nickname for Ibrahim, and Imam is a synonym for Faqih in Arabic. Furthermore, Khalil al-Imam, the hero of the trilogy, like the novelist, was born in a Libyan village, moved to Tripoli, and studied theater and literature in Great Britain

Understanding that most readers are not aware of his work, brief biographical notes on al-Faqih are appropriate before analyzing the themes presented in his trilogy. Al-Faqih was born on 28 December 1932, in a small village in western Tripolitania, called Mizda, which is located one hundred miles south of the city of Tripoli. He studied in his village until the age of fifteen when he moved to Tripoli, the capital and largest city in the country. In 1962, he left Libya for Egypt to study journalism in a UNESCO program and then returned to Tripoli to work as a journalist. Between 1962 and 1971, he was offered a scholarship to study theater in London. When he came back to Libya in 1972, he was appointed head of the National Institute of Music and Drama. In 1972, al-Faqih became the editor of the influential Cultural Weekly. After that, he returned to England as a Libyan diplomat and began to study for his doctorate in literature. In 1990, he finished his degree and returned to North Africa where he now divides his time between residences in Cairo and Rabat (7) .

This trilogy, al-Faqih's most ambitious and mature work, presents Khalil al-Imam, a Libyan student who goes to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland to study for his doctorate in literature. His dissertation topic is based on the impact of Arabic myths on English literature, specifically sex and violence in the folk tales of the Arabian Nights. The first book of the trilogy takes place in Scotland where Khalil is thrown into a world of foreigners, especially women, and tries to find a way to deal with the new culture. In the second volume, Khalil goes back to his country, Libya, to teach at Tripoli University. There, as in England, he runs into emotional trouble and becomes severely depressed. With the help of a Muslim healer, he experiences an exciting Sufi spiritual journey to a utopian city of the past. But, because of his unpredictable hubris, he destroys his happiness by opening the forbidden door and hence finds himself back in the city of concrete reality, Tripoli, where he faces the actuality of Libyan society while vainly attempting to find his own identity. This trilogy dramatizes through fantasy the depth of the social and political alienation of some western educated Libyan intellectuals in the postcolonial period (8) . The issue of alienation from the west and their own societies is a commonly expressed problem among many Arab and third world intellectuals.

Al-Faqih begins the three books of his trilogy with the statement, "A time has passed and another time is not coming," and ends the third book with a pessimistic statement, "A time has passed and another time

has not come and will never come." The novelist is dubious about the possibility of a positive change because as long as the existing social and political conditions are reproduced, society, like Khalil, is stalled. The trilogy deals effectively with the social and political causes of such pessimism and the troubles experienced by Khalil al-Imam, between the values of a traditional, patriarchal life in the village and the contemporary individualistic life in the city. At the very beginning of the trilogy, Khalil enters a new city, Edinburgh. As he is looking for a room to rent he comes across a couple, Linda and Donald. He rents a room in their house. One night Linda comes to his room, and they begin a love affair. Donald, who is interested in Eastern philosophies, does not mind sharing Linda with Khalil. To further complicate his personal life, Khalil meets another woman at the university, Sandra, who plays Desdemona to Khalil's Othello in the student theater. One night after rehearsal he and Sandra get drunk and, the next morning, he finds her next to him in his bed. When Linda discovers the affair she decides to end her relationship with Khalil. But Linda becomes pregnant and Khalil realizes that, because Donald is impotent, he, Khalil is the father of the child. Khalil tries to go back to Linda, but she refuses. He becomes torn between the two women. Linda decides to leave the house and go back to her parents with Khalil's child, Adam. In the meantime, Sandra is kidnapped by a gang which brutally rapes her and leaves her near death. Fortunately, she is saved and taken to the hospital. Only then does Khalil discover that Sandra's father is a millionaire who takes his daughter to his home. Khalil finishes his doctorate on sex and violence in *The Arabian Nights*, which echoes the same disturbed emotions of his real life encounters with Linda and Sandra and the tragic rape of the latter. He remembers his family and country and decides to go back to Libya, leaving behind his child, Adam, with Linda. The symbolic meaning of this section of the novel is the creation of a bond between Libyan and British cultures. The name of the child Adam signifies the common origins of mankind, the prophet Adam. Khalil's attempt to pursue love and adopt the values of Western society, however, fails due to his unpredictable cravings and his inability to make up his mind between Linda and Sandra. In the end, he loses both women.

The second book of the trilogy begins, again, with the statement, "A time has passed and another time is not coming." By repeating the same statement, the novelist wants to remind the reader that Khalil is still trapped in a continuous state of hopelessness. Khalil returns to Tripoli

where he becomes a professor at the University of Tripoli. Because of family pressure, he agrees to marry Fatima, a school teacher, to prove his membership in a society which expects young men and women to be married at an early age. However, after three years in this loveless marriage, he becomes very depressed(9) . He tries modern therapy, yet doctors are not able to figure out the cause of his severe psychological illness. Out of desperation, he accepts his brother's advice to go see a Muslim healer, a Sufi faqih, for treatment.

Desperate for a cure, Khalil goes to his childhood neighborhood in the old city of Tripoli to meet Faqih Sadiq Abu al-Khayrat which, literally translated in English, means "Truthful the father of good life." Notice the significance of this name for Khalil. Modern medicine cannot cure Khalil's depression because his illness is not physiological but emotional and spiritual(10) . Only a Muslim healer, whose name and specialty are "Truth and the meaning of good life," can help him. Faqih Abu al -Khayrat burns some frankincense and recites verses....."Necklace of Jewels," reminiscent of a city in "The Arabian Nights" of the Eleventh Century B.C. This fantastic city has no prisons, no taxes, no police, no wages. Life is communal, and production is shared. This is a subtle critique of the Arab state which relies on secret police, as well as the repression of intellectuals and freedom of expression(11) . According to tradition, he marries the princess, "Narjiss of the Hearts," and becomes the prince of the city. Yet, the princess warns him not to enter a secret room in the palace, as the ancestors have warned people about the curse of the room.

Khalil finds happiness and love in the city of dreams. Then, disturbingly, he meets Budur, a beautiful singer. He falls in love with her and as in the case of the first book, is torn between two women. Also, as in the case of Linda, Khalil discovers that Narjiss is pregnant with his child. One has to remember that Linda in the first book, and Narjiss in the second book, both conceived children with Khalil, while his Libyan wife, Fatima cannot bear children. Love seems to be associated with fertility in the novel. And since Khalil does not love his wife, she cannot bear children with him, while in the first two books of the trilogy Linda and Narjiss both become pregnant after loving relationships with Khalil. Worst for him, his reckless desire leads him to open the door of the secretive room. A nasty yellow wind blasts from the room and he suddenly finds himself back again in the present in the city of Tripoli. He realizes he has been in a dream, a beautiful one which he has destroyed. Khalil is unable to commit himself to a normal loving

relationship even when he lives in a dream-like utopian city. Therefore, he returns to brute reality and back to his life in Tripoli.

The third volume of the trilogy takes place in the city of reality, Tripoli. His wife, Fatima, wants a child, but he is not interested. Once again, he becomes depressed and alienated from his wife's family and from his boring job at the university. Before slipping into a deeper depression, however, he meets Sana Amir, a beautiful and intelligent pharmacy graduate student at the University of Tripoli. She becomes the woman who lights up his life as the title of the third book of the trilogy indicates. When Fatima discovers her husband's new love, Khalil insists on a divorce. He is even willing to relinquish their flat because he is so eager to be free from this union.

Khalil becomes a free and happy man in love with Sana. One day he meets his childhood friend, Juma Abu Khatwa, who goes to al-Azhar University but returned to Tripoli to become a singer by the name of Anwar Jalal. Anwar invites Khalil to his night parties where he discovers the fun life of music, dance, sex, and drinking. Despite the fact that alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex are restricted by state laws, Anwar's parties are frequented and protected by state officials who seem to be alienated from the official claims of Islamic purity(12) . Khalil sarcastically chastises the hypocrisy of a society where "People in his city burn trees and replace them with pillars of cement, and where camels are slaughtered and replaced by big iron insects called cars(13) . Through Khalil's character, the novelist expresses his distaste not only for some of the tribal and, Islamic laws, but also the new consumerism of the modern oil economy because; it marginalizes individuals like Khalil who do not fit: in. Khalil is now completely alienated from what he views as the rigid social values of honor and family. He finds the university restrictive and plagued by corruption. One day he drives his car around the city of Tripoli thinking: "My city is no longer a village but not yet a city not Eastern or Western; it does not belong to the past nor to the present, between the desert and the sea, between past time and a time that is not coming(14) . This is a significant statement as it expresses the middle class, cosmopolitan, and modernist views of al-Faqih toward his city, and the fact that Libyan society is dominated by hinterland rural forces. He struggles with his society's historical specificity, the hegemony of the rural and tribal forces of the hinterland over the weak urban centers. This historical specificity in Libya is different from other Eastern Arab societies such as Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon where notables and large landowners in big

urban cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Beirut dominate the countryside. Libya has had two leaders after independence, King Idriss al-Sanusi and Muamar al-Qaddafi. Both came from and were supported by social forces from the hinterland(15) . This historical context is essential to understand the causes of alienation of a western educated intellectual such as Khalil al-Imam, who finds his escape in alcohol, sex, and music. The problem of intellectual displacement from the west and their own societies is not unique to al-Faqih and is shared by many in the third world. The causes of this displacement are cultural encounter and social class Third. world societies have experienced capitalist colonialization by European states and found themselves struggling to discover their identity. But many third world intellectuals have come from a middle- or upper-class background and therefore look down at their own peasant/tribal cultures using the language of modernity and progress.

Plagued by his conflicting desires in the real city, Khalil cannot wait to be happy with Sana, the woman who now lights his passage through life. But, in a wild destructive moment he tries to rape her in his apartment. She leaves him, and he must now face himself and his troubles. Torn between dreams and reality, he can no longer teach, and the university fires him. He becomes a full member of Anwar's group, and the trilogy ends with the statement, "A time has passed, another is not coming and will never come." Although the ending is sad and pessimistic, it is nonetheless realistic. Khalil's life and his society are still full of contradictions, and there can be no change in Khalil's life as long as these contradictions exist.

Many other Arab writers have dealt with these questions, among them the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Haqim and the Sudanese al- Tayib Salih(16) . Like the Sudan, Libya was a colony of Italy from 1911 to 1943; and, from 1943 to 1951 it was occupied by the British and French armies who defeated the German and Italian' forces in the destructive battles of World War II. In 1951, England and the United States engineered the creation of an independent Libyan state in exchange for a political alliance with military bases. Therefore, Khalil al-Imam's trip to Scotland is the result of the colonial and cultural hegemony of Great Britain Over Libya after 1943. Al-Faqih's Trilogy is similar to al-Tayib SaHh's novel, Season of the Migration to the North. Both examine the dislocation and alienation of Arab men and their confrontation with Westernization and modernity in different overtones: Sudanese and Libyan. Nevertheless, there are certainly differences between both

works. Salih's novel deals with the impact of colonial dislocation while al-Faqih's trilogy, two decades later, is Concerned with post-colonial nationalist culture.

The roots of a tom personality such as Khalil's are not found in the traveling of the novel genre(16) . Most Arab novelists focus mainly on East/West encounters, but in the case of al-Faqih's trilogy, the protagonist's fundamental alienation is from his own society . Khalil is moody, unpredictable, and violent, like the topic of his doctoral dissertation .that is why this novel is as complex and multifaceted as al-Tayib Salih's Season of the Migration to the North. Like Mustafa Said, Khalil al-Imam faces violence and uncertainties in Great Britain and at home in northern Sudan and western Libya. Moreover, the Libyan novelist brilliantly adopts the style and narration of The Arabian Nights, especially in the first and second books.

But what are the roots of Khalil's troubles and unpredictability, especially his feelings toward Women? The novelist suggests that the problem of Khalil is of culture and class. Al-Faqih gives the reader a clue from Khalil's childhood in the village. Khalil almost dies because the man who circumcises him Uses an unclean knife which causes an inflammation of the penis. Due to the lack of medical care and rampant poverty in the village, Khalil cannot be treated before migrating with his family to the city of Tripoli. The physical problem of his penis carries with it the patriarchal wounded male identity to which Khalil refers in the trilogy: "This penis which I almost lost due to my circumcision is the only thing that Sana does not have(18) . Khalil uses violence and sex with women to assert his personality and male ego. He elaborates more by stating, "I know that sex is natural, but I pursue it with a psychology that carries with it old wounds of tribal societies that migrated to the cities. I love and hate every woman. I hold them responsible for the feeling of shame I felt after each time I masturbated. These feelings are the ones that destroyed my relationship with Linda and Sana (19) . This is the root of his sexual and social troubles. He becomes aware of it when he travels to Britain and becomes distanced from Libyan culture when he is able to look back at his society. Khalil's Disillusionment is also political since he is alienated from his society, his tribe, his family, the university, and the state .he blames all of them for his emotional, sexual, and political alienation .

The trilogy explodes with all these Contradictions and gives no direct clue as to how they can be resolved. According to the author, there can be no happy ending to this complex novel, not until Libyan

society itself resolves these conflicts. The author does not apologize for these contradictions, nor does he create a happy ending for his novel. Indeed, these are not unique contradictions since other societies experiencing colonialism, economic transformation, and social and cultural dislocation suffer the same challenges. What seems unique to Libyan society is its persisting autonomous kinship and Islamic social organizations, its weak urban centers, and its reluctance to adopt the modern nation-state. Ahmad Ibrahim al-Faqih dramatizes these cultural and social conflicts from a middle class modernist perspective and consequently brings Libyan society into contemporary history.

## NOTES

1. See Catherine Zuckert, "Why Political Scientists want to study Literature," *PC: Political Science and Politics*, XXVIII:2 (June 1995), pp.189-190; and Bradford Burns, "The Novel as History: A Reading Guide," in his book, *Latin America*, New Jersey, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 6th Edition, 1994, pp.355-362.

2. I relied on oral traditions in my study of Libyan social history. See my book *The Making of Modern Libya, State Formation, Colonization And Resistance, 1830-1932*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994 .

3. For an introduction to the modern Arabic novel see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel, An Historical And Critical Introduction*, Syracuse, New York: University of Syracuse press, 1982. On modern Libyan literature see Muhammad Ahmad Atiyya, *Fi al-Adab al-Libi al-Hadith [On Modern Libyan Literature]* Tripoli: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1973; and for a survey of the Libyan novel see Sammar Ruhi al-Faysal, *Dirasat Fi al-Riwaya al Libiyya [Studies in the Libyan Novel]* Tripoli: Al-Munsha al-Ama Li al-Nashir Wa al-Tawzi Wa Ilan, 1983.

4. Ibrahim al-Kuni's focus is the opposite of al-Faqih's. He writes about Libyan society from within. Al-Kuni's novels and short stories are about the Libyan Sahara, its people, animals and legends, not about urban life like al-Faqih's. For a good introduction to Ibrahim al-Kuni's work see Ferial J. Ghazoul, "Al-Riwaya al-Sufiyya Fi al-Adab al-Maghribi," [The Sufi Novel In the Maghrib] *AUF*, I 7(1 1997), pp.28-53.

5. For an analysis of the impact of oil on Libyan society see A.J. Allan, *Libya: The Experience of Oil*, Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1981; and A.J. Allan, ed., *Libya Since Independence*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982. On migration to the city of Tripoli see James Harrison, "Migrants in the City of Tripoli," *Geographical Journal*,

57(J111y 1967), pA15, and Yasin al-Kabir, *AI Muhajirun Fi Trabulus al-Gharb* [Immigrants to the City of Tripoli] Beirut Mahad al-Inma al-Arabi, 1982.

6. For an overview of al-Faqih's publications see Lee Rong Jian, "Mazij Min al-Hulln Wa al-Dhakira," [A Mixture of Memory and Imagination] *AdabWaNaqd*, 1992, pp.110-113.

7. Despite al-Faqih's subtle criticism of Libyan politics, and his disillusionment with Pan-Arab politics, he has served as a Libyan diplomat, and wrote an epilogue to Qaddafi's collection of short stories, *Al-Qariyya alQariyya, al-Ard al-Ard Wa Intihar Raid al-Fada*, [The Village the Village, the Land the Land, and the Suicide of an Astronaut] *Zawiyya: Mataba al-Wahda alArabiyya*, 1993.

8. See al-Faqih's interview in *Al-Wasat*, 815,1995, pp. 60-65.

9. The character of Fatima in the trilogy is represented in a static way. For an alternative female perspective see the work of the Libyan writer Sharifa al-Qayadi, *Min Awraqi al-Khasa*, [From My Private Papers], Tripoli: *AIMunsha al-AmaLi al-Nashir wa Tawzi Wa IIIan*, 1986.

10. On the influence of Sufi Islam on Maghribi literature see Ferial J. Ghazoul, *ibid.*, pp. 28-53.

II. See the interview with al-Faqih in *Al-Wasat*, *ibid.*, p.61, and his essay in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5391, I September 1993.

12. On the politics of Islamic laws in Libya see Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Legislation in Defense of Arabo-Islamic Sexual Mores," *American Journal of Comparative law*, 27, 1979, pp.54 J -559, and her chapter "In Search of Sacred Law: The Meandering Course of Qadhafi's legal policy," in Dirk Vandewalle, ed., *Qadhafi's Libya, 1969-1994*, New York: St. Martin Press, 1995.

13. *Al-Faqih*, trilogy-III, p.256.

14. *Ibid.*, p.235.

15. King Idriss's social base was in the Eastern region, Barqa, while Qaddafi was born in the central region, and went to school in the southern region, Fezzan.

16. For a comparative analysis of this genre see Mary N. Layoun, *Travels of A Genre, The Modern Novel and Ideology*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University press, 1990. On Arab intellectuals views of modernity and identity see the classical critique by Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?*, trans. Diarmid Cammel, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, Issa J. Boulata, "Encounter between East and West: A Theme in

**Contemporary Arabic Novels," Middle East Journal (1976), ppA9-62, and on Tayib Salih's novel see Saree S. Makdisi, "The Empire Renarrated: Season of Migration to the North and the Reinvention of the Present," Critical Inquiry, 18:4, Summer 1992, pp. 804-820. For a female Arab perspective on the western cultural encounter see the Egyptian critic and novelist Radwa Ashour, AI-RiF,la, Yawmiyyat Taliba Masriyya Fi America,[The Trip, Days of an Egyptian Student in America] Beirut: Oar al-Adab, 1983.**

**17. For an overview of the rise of the novel in Third World literature see Mary N. Layoun, ibid., pp.3-20.**

**18. Al-Faqih, trilogy-III, p.195.**

**19. AI-Faqih, trilogy-I,p.150.**