

## **Ahmed Fagih - A Literary Profile**

**The recent publication by Kegan Paul of five books by the leading Libyan writer Ahmed Fagih was marked by a reception at London's Kufa Gallery, a showcase for the arts and culture of the Arab world. Many testimonials were given by speakers who included Dr Salah Niazi, Mr Tahim Salaih and the Sudanese writer Tayib Salih whose novel Bandarshah was also published by Kegan Paul. The following is an excerpt from an address delivered at the reception by Susannah Tarbush.**

**'It is a pleasure to be in at the birth of these five books - should it be a quintet, the Tripoli quintet perhaps? Or a pentad of books? For those of us who have followed the process since Peter Hopkins first announced that Kegan Paul would be publishing the five books it has been a long gestation, but having had the chance to have a preview of the books I can say the wait was worth it.**

**At a recent conference in London on Arabic literary translation, the Director General of the British Council, David Green, said that although Arabic like English is a great Diaspora language that is now spoken in every continent, simple observation in any book shop in London shows that there is far less Arab work on the shelves than there should be. I would guess that these five books will comprise a good fraction of the literature translated from Arabic into English published in London this year.**

**If we look at the Arab map of translated fiction then some countries are much better represented than others. From North Africa, works by many writers from Egypt, Morocco and Algeria (sometimes writing in French) are translated, as are some writers from Tunisia. In the Mashreq, Lebanon has probably been better represented so far than Syria. Unfortunately, little fiction by Iraqi writers seems to be translated into English at the moment. Libya is one of those Arab countries that is as yet poorly represented in translation into English, so these books help fill that gap.**

**Ahmed was a key figure on the Arab cultural scene in London in the 1970's and early 1980's when he was Editor-in-Chief of Azure - a glossy English-language magazine covering all the Arab arts including theatre, heritage, civilization, antiquities, art and literature - and when his play Gazelles was put on at the Shaw Theatre in 1982. Ahmed came to England**

first in 1968. Like so many others of his generation, he had been deeply shocked by the 1967 war, and coming to Britain represented a change of scene. He first went to a tutorial college and then studied drama in London. After the revolution in Libya he held various positions, including being Director of the Institute of Music and Drama and Head of the Department of Arts and Literature at the Ministry of Information and Culture. Some years later he did a doctorate at Edinburgh University on the Libyan short story. Ahmed has been a prolific writer since his teens. He has worn many hats in his time - short story writer, novelist, journalist, academic, diplomat, actor, dramatist, playwright, TV personality.

A few biographical notes. Ahmed was born in Mizda, an oasis village south of Tripoli. This rural background and his knowledge of village life, its rituals, gossip and hardships is an important element in his writing. Many of Ahmed's works also have ecological and environmental components. A recurrent theme is women and the relations between the sexes. Ahmed's stories often start with a premise which is then developed with some kind of logic into a more and more fantastic scenario, and yet the whole exercise is carefully controlled and well crafted. Although Ahmed's stories are engaging and often very comic with a well-developed sense of the absurd, they have disturbingly dark undertones. In the stories there is a world of floating people, often in transit, suffering alienation and isolation. Several of the stories published here tell of journeys, of a man and a woman and of the gulf of understanding between them.

One of the five books published here is a collection of twelve short stories by Libyan writers edited by Ahmed. In the introduction to this volume, Ahmed describes the dire impact of the Italian occupation on Libyan literature and culture, and how after independence in 1949, at which time the United Nations described Libya as the poorest country, a new literary era started. As he writes, 'the short story, a form newly introduced to the literary scene in Libya, provided a suitable and convenient medium to express the anger and grievances of the writers and to convey their strong indignation against a backward and unjust social system'. The advent of large-scale oil revenues in the 1960's brought new issues and social and cultural upheavals, which were reflected in the writing of the time. Then in the 1970's after the revolutions there was state subsidising of publishing and new types of material started to appear and new types of issues emerged, all captured by Libyan writers.

**These five books are a superb introduction to the work of Ahmed Fagih and I hope this brief survey has given you an appetite to read some of these stories, plays and the novel for yourself."**