

WRITING A HISTORY OF LITERATURE IN GREATER SYRIA

Al-Harakah al-Adabiyyah fī Bilād al-Shām: al-Mujallad al-Awwal-Tārikh and Al-Harakah al-Adabiyyah fī Bilād al-Shām: al-Mujallad al-Thānī-Mukhtārāt [The Literary Movement in Greater Syria: Vol. 1—A History and Vol. 2—Selections, both in Arabic]. Eds. Abdul Nabi Isstaif, et al. Damascus: Capital of Arab Culture, 2008.

Students of the literary history of *Bilād al-Shām* or Greater Syria, that is, of the area that today comprises the modern political entities of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as historical Palestine along with the modern Turkish provinces of Alexandretta, Gaziantep and Diyarbakır, face a daunting challenge. They would easily realize that all the scholarly works¹ that have been written on the literature of this important area of the ancient world, viewed by many as the cradle of human civilization, are partial and limited in scope, since they cover only one short period or another in the long history of this literature and confine themselves in most cases to texts produced only in Arabic. Furthermore, these works were carried out by individuals, whose ability to handle such a vast multilingual material is certainly limited, however experienced and skillful they might be.

In light of this situation Abdul Nabi Isstaif, the author of this report and a former Chairman of the Department of Arabic at the University of Damascus as well as the founder of the Syrian General Organization of Books and its first General Director between 2006 and 2008, took the initiative of organizing a group project for writing a history of the literature of *Bilād al-Shām*. This history was intended as a contribution to the various cultural activities of “Damascus: The Capital of Arab Culture,” a celebration that took place in 2008. Establishing an editorial board of five members, Professor Isstaif, together with these four colleagues, drew up a plan for the two-volume encyclopedic work and commissioned a team of some twenty-five scholars from the major Syrian universities to write the individual chapters. The other members of the editorial board consisted of Mahmūd Ribdāwī, an Emeritus Professor of Abbasid literature and criticism at Damascus University and at a number of Arab Universities in Algeria and Saudi Arabia; Wahab Rumiyyah, Professor of Pre-Islamic and Islamic literature at Damascus University and at a number of Arab Universities in Yemen and Kuwait; ‘Alī Abū Zayd, Professor of Pre-Islamic, Mamluk, and Ottoman literatures at Damascus and Kuwait Universities; and Dr. Fawziyyah Zūbārī, a lecturer in Abbasid and modern literature at al-Baath University in Hims, Syria.

The first volume, which provides a concise history of the literature of the region, is meant to recover the unity of a natural geographical space within which various nations, peoples, and ethnicities have lived together over the centuries, producing their own literatures in their own languages and in the language of the prevailing culture at the time. Surveying the literature of the region from the earliest recorded texts, when Cuneiform writing was invented by the Sumerians in the year 2800 BCE, to the end of the twentieth century, the history volume attempts to provide an account both of the “continuity” of this literature and of “the diversity in unity,” which, on the one hand, have always distinguished this literary tradition, and which gave it, on the other, its prominent status within the literatures of the ancient Orient and later within those of the Arab world at large. This volume consists of an introductory chapter, six

sections and a conclusion.

In the introductory chapter, Dr. Isstaif, the editor in chief, discusses in some detail the key-concepts in volume's title, namely "literature" and "*Bilād al-Shām*," referring in particular to the various languages of this literature and stressing the fact that, in emphasizing the unity of the literature produced in the area, the volume is, in fact, implicitly calling for all peoples of the area to replace the political map, imposed by the allied imperial powers after the First World War, with the natural geographical map which has united them throughout history.

The first section of the volume covers, in five chapters, the history of literature in Greater Syria from the ancient times to the end of the Umayyad era (750 CE). In the first chapter, 'Īd Mir'ī, of the Department of History at Damascus University, discusses the various literatures of Ancient Syria, including those of the two Kingdoms of Ebla and Mari, of the Alalch, the Phoenicians, and the Aramaeans as well as the Syriac literature in its different phases. The second chapter, by Shafīq Bītār, considers the poetry and poets of the pre-Islamic era, dealing with both indigenous figures and with immigrants into Greater Syria. In the third chapter, Mahmūd al-Miqdād turns to the literature of the early Islamic period, including the poetry of conquests and political disputes, and the artistic prose of the period; while Fātimah Tajjūr studies, in the fourth chapter, the Umayyad poetry, with attention to its relationships with authority, society, and the individual. The fifth chapter, written by 'Abd al-Rahmān 'Abd al-Rahīm, is devoted to Umayyad prose, that is to say the three sub-genres of al-Khitābah or Oratory, al-Ras'āil or Epistles, and al-Wasāyā or Advisory Recommendations.

The second section, which consists of five chapters, considers in detail the Abbasid period (750-1258), or the Golden Age of the literature of *Bilād al-Shām*. In the first chapter Fawziyyah Zūbārī studies the movements of innovation in this period, covering the renewal in the structure of the Arabic Qasida or Ode, its themes, and meanings. In the second chapter, Mahmūd Ribdāwī considers the so-called 'Tab' (natural talent) and 'San'ah' (craftsmanship) in the poetry of this period, comparing the 'San'ah' of 'Abu Tammām to the 'Tab' of al-Buhturī, and consequently between the Syrian and Iraqi doctrines of poetic composition. Following the same order, Ahmad 'Alī Muhammad discusses, in the third chapter, the artistic prose of the period, referring in particular to the Sufi prose and to the development of scholarship, while Nāsīf Nāsīf considers, in the fourth chapter, the literature of the Fatimid (909-1171) and Ayyubid periods (1171-1341), with a special reference to al-Ma'arrī's *Riāslat al-Ghufārn* or *Epistle of Forgiveness*, which some scholars claim to have influenced Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The fifth and final chapter of this section, written by Ahmad Dihmān, is devoted to the so called Post-Golden Age of the literature of *Bilād al-Shām*, considering the most important literary figures of the period.

The third section of the book, which comprises eight chapters, is devoted to the Mamluk (1250-1517) and Ottoman periods (1517-1918) of the literature of *Bilād al-Shām*. Against the political, social, and intellectual background of this turbulent period, mapped out concisely in the first chapter by Mahmūd Ribdāwī, Mahmūd Sālīm considers, in the second chapter, the poets and poetry in the Mamluk era, discussing both form and content, while Mahmūd Ribdāwī considers the art of prose during the same period, with a special reference to its major figures. The fourth chapter, by Bakrī Shaykh Amīn, complements Ribdāwī's work with a more detailed study of the period's prose, and in the fifth chapter 'Alī Abū Zayd studies its scholarly and ency-

clopedic works. The last three chapters are devoted to the Ottoman Era, with Wafiq Slīfīn discussing the art of poetry, Mahmūd Ribdāwī the art of *Muā'radāt*, and 'Alī Abū Zayd the art of *Badī'īyyāt*. *Muā'radāt* refers to “the imitation or emulation of a literary text, often with the dual purpose of honoring the model and trying to surpass it. In the case of poetry, metre and rhyme of the model—usually a well-known and admired poem—were adopted, as well as the subject matter” (Van Gelder). *Badī'īyyāt* involves “poems in the praise of the Prophet, the aim of which is to illustrate every type of embellishments or rhetorical figures” (Cachai).

The contributors of the fourth section of the volume address the literature of *Bilād al-Shām* in the so called Renaissance Era, or pre-modern time. Abdul Nabi Isstaif details, in the first chapter, the formative factors of this era. Considering the impact of the French invasion of both Egypt and the southern part of greater Syria at the turn of the nineteenth century, he investigates the literary and cultural movements generated by this crucial encounter between Europe and the Arab Orient. In particular, he explores the role played by the various cultural, scholarly, and academic institutions established during this era in stimulating the literary production during the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. These institutions include the Syrian College, which later became the American University of Beirut; the Orthodox Imperial Russian Society of Palestine; and the American University of Cairo. Also included in this group are the Syrian University, which later became the University of Damascus; the Egyptian University, which was later named the University of King Fu'ad I and then, after the Egyptian revolution of 1952, became Cairo University; and the Arabic Scientific Academy, later named the Arabic Academy in Damascus. He also discusses the role of the press and printing houses in facilitating the dissemination of the literature of the period among the masses of Arab readers. In the second and third chapters, 'Umar al-Daqqāq surveys the developments of the various traditional and modern literary genres up to the early decades of the twentieth century, discussing the major figures of the era in both poetry and prose. In the fourth chapter, Lutfiyah Barham considers the literature of *Bilād al-Shām* during the French and British mandate, stressing its close relationship with the nationalist struggle in the various parts of greater Syria, including Palestine, where the establishment of the Jewish State was underway with the help of the Western colonial powers.

The fifth section, which consists of two major chapters, is devoted to the Shāmī or Syrian literature in al-Mahjar or overseas. 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Ashtar details, in the first chapter, the contribution of the first few generations of the Mahjari writers up to the end of the Second World War, namely the émigrés to North and South America such as Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān [Khalil Gibran], Amīn al-Rayhānī, Mikhā'īl Nu'yamah, 'Ilyā Abū Mādi, Nasīb 'Arīdah, the Ma'lūfs, Jūrj Saydah, Zakī Qunsul, and several others. Abdul Nabi Isstaif discusses the term of “New Mahjari literature,” which is written in both Arabic and other European languages and published all over the world; he refers to the difficulties and challenges which confront its students, and presents in some detail the contributions of those writers who lived and are still living in North and South America.

The sixth and final section, with nine chapters, surveys the developments of both the traditional and Western-inspired genres of Arabic literature in *Bilād al-Shām* in the modern era. Lutfiyah Barham studies the Romantic poetry in chapter one, while Ridwān Qudmāni considers in chapter two the Realistic trend in Modern poetry, leav-

ing the Modernist trend to be treated by Sa'd al-Dīn Kulayb in chapter three. Salāh Sālih studies the novel in chapter four, Fu'ād Mir'ī the short story in chapter five, Nidāl al-Sālih biography and autobiography in chapter six, Mahā Fā'iq al-'Attār the essay in chapter seven, Ahmad Ziyād Muhabbik poetic drama in chapter eight, and finally Jān Aliksān prose drama in chapter nine.

The conclusion, by Wahab Rumiyyah, explores the future horizons of this literature, referring in particular to the challenges that face its producers in the current age of globalization and the revolution in communication technology.

The project's second volume is an anthology of the literature of *Bilād al-Shām*, selected, edited, and introduced by the contributors, each of whom is responsible for the texts relevant to the chapter or chapters that he wrote.

Having presented this bird's eye view of the contents of the two volumes of this history, let me briefly turn to the pros and cons of this pioneering work in writing a literary history of Greater Syria. To begin with, it is the first collective history of the literature of Greater Syria ever to be written in Arabic. Although it is confined to a small area of the Arab world, it is, nonetheless, an important step towards writing a more comprehensive history of Arabic literature produced in the Arab world and beyond. However, although it does cover the literatures written in the various ancient languages of the area, it should have given more room for the modern literatures produced by citizens and expatriates of the area, written in other languages such as Kurdish, Armenian, Syriac, French, English, Spanish, German, and Portuguese, and published in the Arab world and beyond.

Although the work is devoted to the literature of Greater Syria, it is not a regionally-oriented history, because it deals with its subject matter from a broader perspective, stemming from a deep-seated belief in the unity of Arabic literature, particularly after the spread of Islam in the entire area, and after Arabic came to dominate as the language of commerce, learning, and literature and as a medium of everyday communication throughout the region and the rest of the Arab world.

Finally, the work is the result of a serious collective effort by a team of Syrian scholars. However, it could have far better had it drawn on the contributions of many able scholars from elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond, and had the editorial board had sufficient time to do so. Nonetheless, the work, as it stands, could pave the way for a more detailed history of the literature of the area, particularly since it has provided a clear map of the literary achievements among the peoples in this most ancient center of civilization, going back to the invention of writing—which is not an easy mission to accomplish.

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Note

- 1 See Bāshā, *Al-'Adab* 1986, which surveys the history of Arabic literature in Greater Syria from the Umayyad Period to the end of Abbasid era. This study was originally intended as the author's contribution to *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. See also Bāshā, *Al-'Adab* 1967, which surveys the history of Arabic literature of Greater Syria in greater detail during the Zangi, Ayyubid, and Mamluk' eras. In addition, see Dayf.

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NOTICES BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES

SUR LES COLLABORATEURS /

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



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