
Libyan Narrative in the New Millennium: Features of Literature on Change

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The so-called “Arab Spring”, which has recently involved some Arab states, has suddenly drawn attention on cultural life in Libya, a country which until now has only been considered for its “sand dunes, oil and terrorism”. This year, for the first time, Libya was the guest of honour at the Cairo International Book Fair, an event that therefore gave visibility to Libyan literature, one of the least known in the world. This article aims at illustrating a part of modern Libyan literature, that mostly represents the voice of the opposition to the Gaddafi regime. It is within this literary production that the warning signs of the uprising in Libya should be detected. This article actually presents a chorus of voices, i.e. works by both authors and authoresses: some of them remained in Libya while many others emigrated, some are very young and others older; some write in Arabic while others use the language of their host country (English or French). However, in spite of differences concerning the style and content of their texts, they have all used the Internet as a tool for advocating social and literary change.

1. Introduction

Through many difficulties and in different ways, the Arab countries affected by the recent set of uprisings, called “the Arab Spring” by the Western media, are trying to move towards a new socio-political identity whose features are still far from being clearly delineated. Among those countries Libya undoubtedly is one of the most unstable regions from a social point of view and today finds itself facing a number of regional divisions and tribal rivalries whose origins are distant in time and prior to the government of Gaddafi (al-Qaddāfi, 1942-2011)¹. Libya therefore

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¹ For an overview on the history of Libya from the Ottoman period to the revolt of 2011, see D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, New York 2012. On the recent uprising in Libya rooted in a failed political system, itself constructed on the scars left by Italian occupation, see E. Chorin, *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution*, Public Affairs, New York, October 2012. See also R. Jawad, *Tripoli Witness*, Gilgamesh, London

occupied space in the Western media and held the attention of public opinion worldwide, almost exclusively for its domestic and international politics. It is only recently that Western and Arab scholars have begun to turn their attention to the cultural life of this country, breaking that cultural embargo to which the country has been subject during the last century.

According to the Libyan writer and diplomat Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh (b. 1942), who has been living in Cairo for many years, it is not surprising that in Libyan society no name has become popular throughout the Arab world in areas such as culture, sport, art or music as during the government of Gaddafi, “the only star that could shine was the former leader himself and therefore every talent in the country that was not aligned with him was considered an oppose”². Of the same opinion is forty-something Benghazi writer Soad el-Rgaig (Su‘ād al-Raqayq), who has been living abroad:

Living under that oppressive regime was suffocating to everyone and everything and made it impossible for talents to flourish. The reason that only few made it internationally, like Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, is because he was appointed as a cultural attaché in Eastern Europe for many years. He managed to translate his work and was able to break through this cultural embargo. During Gaddafi era there were no independent publishing houses as there were in the neighbouring Arab countries; the only publishing house was owned by the government, so not everyone could publish their work. There was no way that the few selected books that were published by the regime could compete with books published in Egypt or Lebanon, for example³.

Even ‘Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī (b. 1926), Libyan writer and historian, among the most distinguished intellectuals of the Arab world, but without espousing controversial political judgments, expressed bitterness over the indifference of Arab scholars towards his country:

The cultural history and the course of literary creation in Libya have been mistreated by some contemporary Arab historians. They have completely ignored this distinguished Arab and Muslim country, writing about every other country and era except Libya, whether that is due to their ignorance and lack of research, or to sheer neglect and indifference⁴.

Yet, in spite of this situation, from a literary perspective, Libya can boast of a rich and varied productivity, one that despite local specificities, nevertheless allows it to find a place within the Arab literary scene in its own right. In this regard Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī (b. 1975), a short story writer and poet of the new Libyan generation that

2011. Based on the popular BBC Tripoli Witness blog, the book collects messages sent secretly during the uprising from the young Lebanese-British radio journalist Rana Jawad, who has been the BBC Radio correspondent in Libya for seven years.

² From an unpublished interview given by Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh to me in August 2012 in Cairo.

³ From an unpublished interview given by Soad el-Rgaig to me in January 2013.

⁴ See M. G. Sciortino, *Al di qua e al di là della colonia: spunti per una riflessione sulla satira e l'opposizione al regime coloniale a partire dalla traduzione di un racconto di 'Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, II, n. 4, novembre-dicembre 2012, p. 57. A further confirmation of this lack of knowledge of Libya consists of soaring sales of *al-Kitāb al-Aḥḍar* (The Green Book) by Gaddafi, during the last Cairo International Book Fair (January 23-February 5, 2013) at which Libya was the guest of honour. This demonstrates how Egyptians, and Arabs in general, have up to that point been completely ignorant regarding “The Book” that played a central role in Libyan life for nearly half a century. See *Mufāḡa’ah: al-Kitāb al-Aḥḍar yuḥaqqiq ‘alā nisbat mabī‘āt fī ma’raḍ al-kitāb*, available on <http://www.alwatanvoice.com>.

emerged in the first decade of the new century, has written in his blog as follows:

Although modern Libyan creative writing has a long history that extends back more than 100 years, and progressed in the same way as other Arabic countries, ignorance dominated, and all that was known about Libya was oil, sands, and terrorism. [...] When I tried to find any information about Libya in English literature, I couldn't find much, two or three translations of Libyan storytellers⁵, and two novels, nothing to compare to other translations from other Arabic countries⁶.

In complete concordance with the impressions created by the above survey, some of the most representative names in the modern history of Libyan literature deserve mention. One can cite, for example, the poetry of resistance created at the time of Italian colonization, a period that saw many poets – some of whom were fervent muġāhidūn (partisans) including Aḥmad al-Šarīf (1864-1956), Sulaymān al-Bārūnī (1873-1940), Aḥmad al-Faqīh Ḥasan (1895-1975), Aḥmad Rafīq al-Mahdawī (1898-1961), Aḥmad Qunābah (1898-1968), Ibrāhīm al-Uṣṭā 'Umar (1907-1950) – unite armed battles to condemnation in verses of the violence perpetrated by the Italian invaders⁷. Added to these names should be pioneers of the short story, a literary genre par excellence in Libya along with poetry, such as Aḥmad Rāsim Qadrī (b. 1981) and Wahbī al-Būrī (1916-2010). Their works contributed to the creation and definition of a narrative consciousness, one that was to achieve full maturity in the sixties and seventies, with short stories by 'Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh, 'Abdallāh al-Quwayrī (1930-1992), Kāmil Ḥasan al-Maqhūr (1935-2002), Bašīr al-Hāšimī (1936-2000), al-Šādiq al-Nayhūm (1937-1994), Ḥalīfah al-Tikbālī (1938-1966), Yūsuf Šarīf (b. 1938), Ḥalīfah Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā (1944-2008), Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī (b. 1948), and Muḥammad al-Missallātī (b. 1949). Many of these writers who represent the generation of the sixties in Libya, a group that needs to be placed alongside the more renowned one of Egypt, made use of the short story to depict and criticise the social and political problems that the country were facing after the long period of European occupation. However, at the same time, other writers produced the so-called *al-adab al-ta'rīḥī* (historical literature), a trend that proposed to present the history of the Italian colonization in Libya in the narrative form of the short story and told for the first time from a Libyan point of view⁸.

Even the novel genre, after its first tentative beginnings, which according to some critics were identifiable already in 1937 with *Mabrūkah* by Ḥusayn Zāfir ibn Mūsā (b. 1952), through to *I'tirāfāt insān* (Confessions of a Man, 1961) by

⁵ The first Libyan short stories translated into English date back to 1977 with the anthology *The King of the Dead and Other Libyan Tales* by Raḍwān Bū Šuwīšah (Redwan Abushwasha, b. 1945), translated by M. Woods, Martin Brian and O'Keefe, London 1977. In the same year a short story of *Nufūs ḥā'irah* (Confused Souls, Maktabat al-Farġānī, Ṭarābulus 1957) by 'Abd al-Qādir Abū Harrūs (1930-1989), considered the first collection of Libyan short stories published to date, was translated in English. The translated story is *Imported goods*, in AA.VV., *Arab Stories, East and West*, translated with an Introduction by R.Y. Ebied and M.J.L. Young, Leeds University Oriental Society, Leeds 1977, pp. 66-76, focused on the process of Westernization of some Arab towns.

⁶ See the author's website <http://www.gheblawi.com/arabic.htm>.

⁷ On the poetry of the Libyan resistance against the Italians, expressed mainly in dialect, see AA.VV., *Dīwān al-adab al-ša'bī*, Ġāmi'at Qār Yūnis, Baṅġāzī 1970; Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaššāt, *Šadā al-ġihād al-lībī fī 'l-adab al-ša'bī*, Dār Lubnān li 'l-Ṭībā'ah wa 'l-Našr, Bayrūt 1970.

⁸ On the Italian representation in Libyan literature, see E. Diana, *L'immagine degli italiani nella letteratura libica dall'epoca coloniale alla caduta di Gheddafi*, Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino, Roma 2011.

Muḥammad Farīd Siyālah (b. 1927), gradually comes to complete fulfilment, in both form and content, in 1970 with *Min Makkah ilà hunā* (From Mecca to Here) by al-Nayhūm. However, the fullest emergence of the novel only occurs from the mid-eighties onwards, when written works of the novel genre were considered worthy enough to compete with the giants of Arab literature, some of which are included in the list of the best 105 Arab novels of the 20th Century selected by the Arab Writers Union: *‘Ayn al-šams* (Eye of the Sun, 1983) by Ḥalīfah Ḥusayn Mušṭafā, *al-Mağūs* (The Animists, 1990) by Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī and *Ḥadā’iq al-layl* (Gardens of the Night, 1991) by Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh⁹.

2. *Adab al-manfā*

From these few incipient remarks it is undeniable that, in its long quest for freedom and democracy in past and present, Libya has never ceased to feed the flame of culture. During the era of Gaddafi’s regime, Libyan writers and poets had two choices before them: to join the circle of *al-adab al-muḥābī* (literature patronage) which sided with the former leader of the country, or else to be part of *adab al-mu’āraḍah* (literature of opposition), one which in turn witnessed the birth of two different currents: *adab al-suġūn* (prison literature)¹⁰ and *adab al-manfā* (exile literature). The climate of censorship imposed by Gaddafi forced many Libyan littérateurs, who were often subjected to torture and imprisonment if found to be political opponents, to leave the country and form the so-called *hiġrat al-‘uqūl* (brain drain), a phenomenon that intensified from the eighties onwards, as a result of a tightening of domestic policies. These scholars, who sought and received political asylum abroad, undertook for many years to denounce the lack of human rights in Libya under Gaddafi. They were facilitated by their ability to write in both Arabic and English and in some cases also in French. In a such context the words of Ibrāhīm Ḥamīdān (b. 1958), a writer and journalist in Tripoli, are very interesting:

The Libyan “brain drain” started in the seventies and eighties when Gaddafi began to reformulate curricula in the schools and to influence the weaker minds among intellectuals and academics, inducing them to praise his thinking and his genius. On the other hand, Libyan intellectuals abroad were able to experiment their talents and to establish their own name in the Arab literary scenario. In fact, some of them are already part of the world cultural heritage, due to their ability to write in a language other than Arabic, especially in English. The novelist Hišām Maṭar and poet and translator Ḥālid Maṭṭāwa‘ come to mind [...]”¹¹.

⁹ For more on the birth and development of the short story and novel in Libya since the start of the last century to the present, see E. Diana, *La letteratura della Libia. Dall’epoca coloniale ai nostri giorni*, Carocci, Roma 2008. The first studies in a European language of Libyan literature are Italian, see E. Panetta, *Forme e soggetti della letteratura popolare libica*, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, Milano 1943 and P. Ferrari, *Preambolo sulla letteratura libica contemporanea*, in S. Bono, *Storiografia e fonti occidentali sulla Libia (1510-1911)*, L’Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 1982, pp. 125-130.

¹⁰ For more on *al-adab al-muḥābī* and *adab al-suġūn* in Libya, see E. Diana, *The exposé novel of the Libyan author Muḥammad al-Aṣfar: Mīlḥ (Salt)*, paper presented in the 10th EURAMAL Conference on “Literature and the Arab Spring – Analyses and Perspectives”, (Inalco) Paris, 9-12 May 2012; R. Allen, *Arabic Fiction and the Quest for freedom*, in “Journal of Arabic Literature”, XXVI, No. 1-2, 1995, pp. 37-49.

¹¹ See Ḥāzim Šāġiyyah, *Taḥiyyah ilà mu’ānāt al-lībiyyīn*, available on the website of the magazine “al-Mu’tamar”, www.almutmar.com.

Ḥālīd Maṭṭāwa‘ (b. 1964) and Hišām Maṭar (b. 1970) are certainly very representative of the Libyan diaspora best known to Western readers. The Benghazi-born Ḥālīd Maṭṭāwa‘ is a poet, essayist and translator who emigrated to the United States in 1979 where he still lives and works. He is considered the heir of the *mahğar* Arabic school, and like his predecessor *muhāğirūn*, he writes both in Arabic and English¹². He has received various acknowledgements as a translator for having translated many verses by Arab poets into English, including the Syrian Adonis (Adūnis), the Iraqi Hātif Ğanābī and the Lebanese Ğumānah Haddād. Hišām Maṭar, the son of Libyan exiles, was born in the USA, where his father worked for the Libyan delegation at the UN. He returned to Libya at the age of three, conducted his first studies in Tripoli and remained there until 1979 when he was forced to emigrate to Egypt with his family because his father was accused of plotting against the Gaddafi government. In 1990, while the writer completed his studies in London, his father was arrested in Cairo, taken back to Libya and incarcerated in the Abū Salīm prison, notorious for the massacre in its confines of more than 1200 prisoners in 1996. Hišām Maṭar now lives in London where he made himself prominently heard via the web during the Libyan uprising. He writes in English and has two novels to his credit that have received several awards: *In the Country of Man* (2006)¹³ and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011)¹⁴. In his books the author deals, in a veiled way, with the circumstances of “missing” prisoners, a condition experienced by many Libyans, including his father.

Kamal Ben Hamed (Kamāl Bin Ḥamādah, b. 1956), a writer from Tripoli, writes in French. In the eighties he left Libya to complete his studies in France and now lives and works in the Netherlands. Novelist and poet, he received the “Alliance Française” Literary Prize in 2012¹⁵. In his latest novel *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* (2011)¹⁶, he presents various female characters of Tripoli in the sixties, consisting of Arab, Berber, African, Italian and Jewish women¹⁷, as seen through the eyes of the young protagonist-narrator Hadachinou. It is a mosaic of female portraits, some subdued and humiliated, while others are rebellious and combative, all of whom operate in a historical background leading up to the present day, with frequent references to the distant days of “Italian Libya”. *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* is a novel of many voices about a multiethnic and multicultural Libya that remained unchanged in the memories of the narrator-author. The plot introduces us to a society oppressed by prohibitions, starting from the separation of the male from the female world and following the strict censorship that characterized

¹² He has four collections of poetry in English: *Tocqueville*, New Issues Press, Michigan 2010; *Amorisco*, Ausable Press, New York 2008; *Zodiac of Echoes*, Ausable Press, New York 2003 and *Ismailia Eclipse*, Sheep Meadow Press, New York 1996. For more see Khaled Mattawa, *Three poems*, in *Arab American Authors*, in “Banipal 38”, Summer 2010, pp. 172-176; Salah D. Hassan, *An Interview with Khaled Mattawa*, in “Melus”, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 135-144.

¹³ Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Man*, Penguin, London 2006.

¹⁴ Hisham Matar, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Penguin, London 2011.

¹⁵ He made his debut as a novelist in 2001 with *La mémoire de l'absent* (L'Harmattan, Paris). He has written several collections of poetry, among which are *Plis de lumière* (2007); *Le saint je* (2003); *La tentation de la lumière* (2002); *Fragments de lettre à un habitant du centre* (2001); *Fragments de lumière* (1999). All these collections are published by Harmattan, Paris.

¹⁶ Kamal Ben Hamed, *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, Editions Elyzad, Tunis 2011.

¹⁷ Also Kāmil Ḥasan al-Maḡhūr was involved in the female condition in Libya in relation to the Libyan, Italian and Jewish women present in the area at the time. See Kāmil Ḥasan al-Maḡhūr, *Mahaṭṭāt, sīrah šibhu dātiyyah*, Dār al-Ruwwād, Ṭarābulus 1995.

the forty years of Gaddafi's regime. The novel's dedication explicitly evokes the massacre of the Abū Salīm prison:

Je dédie ce livre aux femmes et aux mères qui, une fois par semaine, pendant des années, manifestaient à Benghazi en Libye devant la direction générale de la Sécurité pour réclamer le corps de leurs époux, de leurs enfants disparus cette nuit du 28 au 29 juin 1996, ces dames dont la brûlure du manque a ranimé peu à peu, secrètement, les flammes de la dignité¹⁸.

Less well known to Western audiences are the Libyan writers of *adab al-manfā* who write in Arabic. The only exception among them is of course Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, whose books have been translated into almost forty languages and who has been living in Switzerland since 1993. He moved there after many conflicts with Gaddafi's regime in his own country, which gave him strong feelings of insecurity, as he said in various interviews. Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī is the winner of numerous international literary awards and one of his last novels *al-Waram* (The Tumour, 2008) was long-listed in the prestigious 2009 IPAF prize. In this novel the writer proposes a subtle and profound allegory about the relationship between power and the people, between the ruler and the ruled¹⁹.

Writers who similarly write in Arabic are 'Umar al-Kiddī (b. 1959), Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā (b. 1973) and Fāṭimah Maḥmūd. Journalist, poet and short story writer, 'Umar al-Kiddī was born in Ġaryān (Gherian), a city in the north-west of Libya, but since 1999 has lived and worked in the Netherlands. He was co-founder and chief editor of "al-Ġamāhīriyyah" newspaper's literary supplement and has collaborated with the magazine "al-Fuṣūl al-arba'ah" (The Four Seasons), where he was also editor-in-chief. Published on the Arabic literary website (www.kikah.com), the settings of his stories are sometimes divided between Libya and Netherlands, as a testimony of the dual identity of the author: Libyan and Western. An example of this is the story *al-Ḥayāh al-qaṣīrah al-'aġībah li 'l-kalb Ramaḍān* (The Wonderful Short Life of the Dog Ramadan), published in 2010 on the literary magazine "Nizwā" (www.nizwa.com) and translated into English in the monographic number dedicated to *Libyan fiction* of the magazine "Banipal"²⁰. The story begins in the Libyan village of Mārīš, in Ġabal al-Ġarbī, and ends in the Netherlands. It is a satirical re-visitation of the smuggling of migrants between the Libyan and Italian coasts. The writer describes the hardships endured by immigrants and does so in an original way, through the story of the dog Ramaḍān, a stray adopted by a Dutch lady, Yvette de Vries, currently residing in a Libyan village for work. The story is a parody on the absence of democracy in Gaddafi's Libya and the sterility of international relations between those countries in North Africa and those in Europe, where you can perceive policies that aren't yet fully sensitized to the insertion of the *others*, nor legally ready for concrete social inclusion. As a journalist 'Umar al-Kiddī was very active during the months of the Libyan uprising.

¹⁸ See Kamal Ben Hameda, *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, cit., p. 7.

¹⁹ See V. Ciatelli, *Surrealismo e allegoria politica nel romanzo libico al-Waram di Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī*, in "La rivista di Arablit", I, 2, dicembre 2011, pp. 133-135.

²⁰ See Omar el-Kiddī, *The Wonderful Short Life of the Dog Ramadan* (translated by R. Moger), in *Libyan Fiction*, in "Banipal 40", Spring 2011, pp. 49-59. The same magazine published another of his short stories in English. See Omar el-Kiddī, *The World's Longest-Held Prisoner* (translated by G. Hayek), in "Banipal 34", Spring 2009, pp. 83-98.

Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā, a prolific Benghazi-born novelist, is one of the most interesting names in modern Libyan literature and at the same time one of the most embarrassing for Gaddafi's regime²¹. She lives in Holland, a country where she sought refuge in 2008, after charges of apostasy – the *Awqāf* Ministry of Benghazi emitted a condemning *fatwā* against her – for the publication of her first novel *Li 'l-ġū' wuġūh uhrā* (Hunger Has Other Faces, 2006)²². The work focuses on the story of a Libyan Muslim girl who converts to Christianity. Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā has to her credit three other novels, each of which addresses aspects of Libyan society and Arab culture in general, with a deep critical sense and ruthless objectivity. The second novel *Fursān al-su'āl* (Knights of Cough, 2009)²³ focuses on the human tragedy of war, presented through the lives of some Arab fighters who participated in the *ġihād* in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. The plot is divided into four chapters and is set in five countries: Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. It is a hard novel where Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā depicts scenes of blood and ideological and religious fanaticism. Some of these are real and some fantasized, with the intent to condemn all forms of extremism, which led to the killing of many innocent people including the elderly, women, children and foreigners, as evidenced by the pages of the *Fursān al-su'āl*. The novel examines the traditional system of Muslim belief sometimes based on the misinterpretation of religious texts and examines the process of *inḥirāf* (deviance) followed by some Muslim groups who stray from the peace-path of Islam. Her third novel, *Na'atal*, censored in her native country even before being published, is a historical novel about a Jew from Medina in Muḥammad's time. Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā is currently engaged in her fourth novel, which is partly autobiographical, focusing on the experience of refugees in Europe. Some of her short stories are available online (www.kikah.com).

Fāṭimah Maḥmūd, poet, writer and journalist, has the merit of being, along with Marḍiyyah Na'ās (b. 1949) and Fawziyyah Šalābī (b. 1955)²⁴, one of three female Libyan *littérateurs* brought to attention by the Moroccan writer and critic Muḥammad Barrādah (b. 1938) in the essay *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*²⁵. She worked as a journalist in Libya from 1976 to 1987. In the early nineties Fāṭimah Maḥmūd left the country to move to Cyprus, where she founded the Arab women's magazine “Šahrazād al-ġadīdah” (The New Shahrazad). After harshly criticizing the Colonel's regime, she sought and obtained political asy-

²¹ See Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā, *al-Qaddāfi: šaḥsiyyah sikūbātiyyah ma'zūmah*, available on the website <http://hespress.com>.

²² Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā, *Li 'l-ġū' wuġūh uhrā*, in “Maġallat al-Mu'tamar”, Lībiyā 2006. A chapter of this novel has been translated into English. See Wafā' al-Bueissa, *Hunger Has Other Faces* (translated by R. Moger), in *Libyan Fiction*, cit., pp. 92-99.

²³ Wafā' al-Bū 'Īsā, *Fursān al-su'āl*, al-Šarikah al-Tūnisīyyah li 'l-Našr wa Tanmiyat Funūn al-Rasm, Tūnis 2009.

²⁴ On Fawziyyah Šalābī see A. Spina, *L'emancipazione femminile in Libia attraverso le opera di Fawziyyah Šalābī*, in “La rivista di Arablīt”, I, 2, dicembre 2011, pp. 39-50.

²⁵ See AA.VV., *Arab Women Writers. A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*, edited by R. Ashour, F.J. Ghazoul, H. Reda-Mekdashī, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2008, pp. 235-253. For a broader overview of women's literature in Libya see Bū Šuwišah Ibn Ġum'ah, *al-Adab al-nisā'ī al-lībī, rihānāt al-kitābah wa mu'ġam al-kātibāt*, al-Maġāribiyyah li 'l-Ṭībā'ah wa 'l-Išhār, Tūnis 2007; 'Abdallāh Sālim Miliṭān, *Mu'ġam al-kātibāt wa 'l-adībāt al-lībiyyāt*, Dār Midād li 'l-Ṭībā'ah wa 'l-Našr wa 'l-Tawzi' wa 'l-Intāġ al-Fannī, Ṭarābulus 2005; Šarīfah al-Qiyādī, *Rihlat al-qalam al-nisā'ī al-lībī*, Dār al-Ḥikmah, Ṭarābulus 1997.

lum in Germany in 1995 where she presently lives. She wrote a collection of poems titled *Mā lam yatayassar* (What Was Not Conceivable, 1986)²⁶, some of which, including the poem that gives the title to the collection, have been translated into English and Italian²⁷. During the months of the uprising in Libya, Fāṭimah Maḥmūd often expressed her opposition to Gaddafi's regime on the websites, emphasizing the widespread corruption of the entire political system. In this regard, she wrote:

Corruption is like a tree that grows on the graves of the soul, a tree fed by ignorance, poverty and despotism. The revolution in itself cannot curb the corruption that we have ingrained in us. We need time so that the revolution can mature souls and minds²⁸.

Always via the web, the author spares no criticism towards Western countries either, guilty, in her opinion, of entering into agreements with Gaddafi, while conscious of the extent of his madness²⁹.

3. *The web as a tool for social and literary change*

It is the web that allows us the opportunity to remember how from the end of the last century to the beginning of the new millennium, the distance between Libyan writers in exile and those who remained in their homeland is shortened thanks to the spreading of this new means of communication. In this regard Ethan Chorin (b. 1968), one of the first American diplomats posted to Libya after the lifting of international sanctions in 2004, wrote:

In 2004 the independent Internet provider Libya-Online (then run by Moawwiya Maghur, another of Kamel Maghur's children) estimated as many as twenty per cent of the population of Tripoli had occasional access to the Internet. In a country with no independent newspapers and few other publishing outlets, the Internet has become in the last few years a place where Libyans go to find out what's going on, not only in the outside world, but at home. Juliana, Libya Al-Jeel and Libya Al-Youm are names of some of the quasi-underground online venues where one can find Libyans writing about Libya³⁰.

Thus the Internet has contributed, on the one hand, in spreading the demand for social change within the country, and on the other hand, in drawing the international community's attention to the Libyan people. According to Fāṭimah Maḥmūd, the use of the Internet during "the Arab Spring" has also helped in removing stereotypes, which Western countries had towards Arabs:

²⁶ Fāṭimah Maḥmūd, *Mā lam yatayassar*, al-Munša'ah al-Āmmah li 'l-Našr wa 'l-Tawzī' wa 'l-I'lān, Ṭarābulus 1986.

²⁷ See respectively AA.VV., *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond*, edited by T. Chang, N. Handal and R. Shankar, W.W. Norton & Company, London 2008 and AA.VV., *Non ho peccato abbastanza, Antologia di poetesse arabe contemporanee*, a cura di V. Colombo, Mondadori, Milano 2007, pp. 227-234.

²⁸ <http://libyahewar.blogspot> of July 26, 2012.

²⁹ See Hayṭam 'Abd al-'Azīm, *al-Kuttāb al-lībiyyūn fī 'l-ḥārīġ yuḥaššidūna ġuhūdahum li- isqāt nīzām al-Qaddāfi*, February 24, 2011, available on the website <http://www.dw.de/>.

³⁰ See E. Chorin, *Translating Libya. The Modern Libyan Short Story*, SAQI Books-SOAS, London 2008, pp. 24-25.

I noticed that the image of the Arab in the Western media has changed. The ongoing riots that have rocked much of the Arab world have removed the stereotype of the Arab-terrorist and replaced it with the image of a peaceful person oppressed by corruption³¹.

From a literary point of view, the Internet has helped to modify the way “to do literature”. In recent years, many short stories have found space and diffusion online, on the writers’ websites or in many literary magazines on the web. In this regard Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī has written:

The Internet was a crucial tool for the majority of new Libyan writers in developing their skills and styles, as it made it easy for them to connect with the international literary scene, especially in other Arab countries, where Libyan writers were absent expect for a handful of names from earlier generations. The Internet also made it possible for young writers to publish works outside Libya and escape the tight grip of state censorship and control³².

In this way the web gave voice and united writers young and old both inside and outside Libya, creating a link between well-known *littérateurs* and emerging ones. On the web you can enjoy poems on “the Arab Spring” of ‘Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, the short stories of Ḥalīfah Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, Muḥammad al-‘Anayzī (b. 1954), Muḥammad al-Aṣfar (b. 1960), Ṣālīḥ Sanūsī (Saleh Snoussi), together with those of young literary talents. Many of these are skilled bloggers and podcasters who in the months of revolution in Libya, through the Internet, were able to broadcast to the world the suffering of their people and their demands for freedom. One of these is Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī who, together with Muḥammad Miṣrātī (b. 1990), has created the Arabic cultural blog and podcast *Imtidād* (<http://imtidadpodcast.com>). Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī, born in Tripoli, has been living in Britain since 2002 where he divides his time between writing and his work as a surgeon. He has two collections of short stories in Arab: *Ilà matà* (Till When, 2001), published at his own expense, which contains eleven stories written between 1995 and 2000, and *Waḡh lā ya ‘rif al-ḥuzn* (A Face That Knows No Sadness, 2007)³³. The stories of al-Qiblāwī are almost always laden with symbolism and allegories, embodied in contexts that are often mythological. Some of his short stories and poems are available on his blog (www.gheblawi.com) and on the website (www.kikah.com).

Muḥammad Miṣrātī is probably one of the younger writers who emerged in the first decade of the new century. Born into a family of artists – his mother was a pianist and his father a journalist and actor³⁴ –, Muḥammad Miṣrātī left his hometown of Tripoli in 2005 to take refuge with his family in Britain. He now lives in London where he studied Creative Writing and English Literature. He writes in Arabic and publishes his

³¹ See Hayṭam ‘Abd al-‘Azīm, *al-Kuttāb al-lībiyyūn fī ‘l-ḥāriḡ yuḥaṣṣidūna ḡuhūdahum li-isqāt niṣām al-Qaḍḍāfi*, cit.

³² See Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī, *Libyan Literature: The Impact of Revolution*, in “Minerva”, September 15, 2011, available on the website <http://www.minervanett.no/>.

³³ Ġāzī al-Qiblāwī, *Waḡh lā ya ‘rif al-ḥuzn*, al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabiyyah li ‘l-Dirāsāt wa ‘l-Naṣr, Bayrūt 2007.

³⁴ In the mid-eighties, the father of Muḥammad Miṣrātī was arrested because he had staged a play in which the main character, Dracula, according to his indictment, was a parody of Gaddafi. See the interview given by the author to S. Tarbush and available on the website <http://thetanjara.blogspot.it> On the Libyan theatre see ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Ṣādiq al-Ġarāb, *al-Masraḥ al-lībī fī niṣf qarn (1928-1978)*, al-Munṣa‘ah al-‘Āmmah li ‘l-Naṣr wa ‘l-Tawzī‘ wa ‘l-‘lān, Ṭarābulus 1986; Ḥasan al-Amīn, *al-Masraḥ al-lībī bayna al-amsi wa ‘l-yawm*, available on the website www.libya-watanona.com.

stories mainly on his own blog *Maršābīdī* (Sidewalk) (<http://mesrati.blogspot.it/>), but also on other websites such as (www.jeel-libya.net), (www.libya-watanona.com) and (www.kikah.com). Most of the short stories he wrote during the uprising are about Gaddafi and his dictatorship. One of these is entitled *al-Ġirdān fī zanqat al-aḥ al-kabīr* (Rats in the Big Brother's Alley) and was published on (www.kikah.com). Here he writes about Gaddafi's speech held on February 22, 2011³⁵. Always on (www.kikah.com) he published *Ālihah fī qabwⁱⁿ* (Divinity in the cellar), where he describes in the first person the last days of thirty three *muqātilūn* (fighters) before the capture of Gaddafi. In this short-story the author uses an essential language, with a real and direct form like a journalistic report, to depict the courage, but also the fear, of these young Libyans – some of whom underage – making up the *katā'ib* (battalions) that fought against the army officer. Again, on (www.kikah.com) Muḥammad Miṣrātī published a chapter of *Māmā Bītzā* (Mama Pizza)³⁶, his first novel in progress that, with a light-hearted and modern style, addresses the theme of the diaspora of many Libyans forced to leave their homeland during the forty years of Gaddafi's regime. The plot which is certainly autobiographical – starting from the narrator, an eighteen year old Libyan immigrant – is set in the North-West of Britain and revolves around Arab immigrants who work in a fast food restaurant delivering pizza. With a polite and casual language that is probably due also to his young age, the author addresses the issues of *gurbah*, racism and prejudices that the West still has towards Arabs. Advocate of the use of dialect in literature as an opportunity to maintain their cultural identity, in *Māmā Bītzā*, Muḥammad Miṣrātī makes the Arabian characters – Libyan, Algerian and Syrian – speak in their respective dialects. Even in some of his short stories written in classical Arabic, the author sporadically inserts dialect words.

A good percentage of the new generation of Libyan writers who express themselves through the web in and out of Libya are women. However, some of them prefer to sign themselves with male pseudonyms because, as they say, the Libyan society is still far from considering writing as an activity for women. In any case, the web has allowed Libyan women's literature to evolve and empower themselves as much in style as in content, giving birth to works that can rival those of male authors. One example is the writer and journalist Razān Na'īm al-Maġribī (b. 1961), who has established herself in the Arab literary scene through the novel *Nisā' al-rīḥ* (Women of Wind, 2010)³⁷, included in the 2011 IPAF long-list, in which the author introduces us to the world of *ḥārīqūn* or *harrāqah* (arsonists), better known in dialect as *ḥarrāga*³⁸. Even Razān Na'īm al-Maġribī published part of her work on the

³⁵ A short story of Muḥammad Miṣrātī, translated in English by the title *Bayou and Laila*, was included in the anthology *Writing Revolution. The Voices from Tunis to Damascus* (edited by L. al-Zubaidī, M. Cassel and N. Craven Roderick, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London 2013, pp. 66-91), which is a collection of stories and testimonies signed by writers and Arab journalists – such as the Syrian Samar Yazbak and the Yemeni Ġamāl Ġubrān – on the recent Arab uprisings.

³⁶ A chapter of this novel has been translated into English. See Mohammed Mesrati, *Ali Guevara* (translated by Leri Price), in *Libyan Fiction*, cit., pp. 105-110.

³⁷ Razān Na'īm al-Maġribī, *Nisā' al-rīḥ*, al-Dār al-'Arabiyyah li 'l-'Ulūm, Bayrūt 2010. On this novel see G. Renna, *Nisā' al-rīḥ di Razān Na'īm al-Maġribī: disagio, segreti ed emigrazione in una storia di donne*, in "La rivista di Arablit", I, 1, giugno 2011, pp. 71-82.

³⁸ This term, which is read more often in modern Arab literature of Maghreb, indicates illegal immigrants who, from North Africa on dilapidated boats, braving the dangers and hardships of the sea, try to reach the shores of Southern Europe, primarily Italy. The word is well known today thanks to the popularity achieved by *rappers* on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, whose texts, which mix

web, as shown by the collection of writings, *Quṣāṣāt ḥurrah* (Free Fragments), still in the printing phase but available on her blog (<http://moghrabi.maktoobblog.com>).

Author of four short-story collections as well as one collection of poems³⁹, Razān Na‘īm al-Mağribī made her debut as a novelist in 2004 with *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal* (Migration to the Tropic of Capricorn)⁴⁰, a work of romantic and poetic language, the title of which encloses within itself the symbolic value of the entire novel which focuses on migration as a journey in between reality and metaphor, implying a journey towards love. As it turns out the plot is in fact a love story, «but not one of those love stories that we are accustomed to reading in romantic novels or in the realistic ones that always tend towards melodrama [...]»⁴¹. The theatrical venues in *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal* are the cities of Tripoli and Damascus, along with Cairo, Tunis, Milan and Geneva, a multitude of places to express to some critics how strong the emphasis is on the dimension of space in the novel⁴². Large also is the temporal dimension, since the story starts from the time of the Italian colonization through to the beginning of the millennium. It centres around the migration of the grandfather of the protagonist-narrator, Zīnah, who takes refuge in Damascus because of the Italian occupation and marries a Circassian. Among the various historical and political elements that you can pick up in *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal* is the popular resistance against the Italians, with the consequent diaspora that occurred in the first half of the last century, when many Libyan families were forced to migrate to Egypt and Syria to escape the Italian colonization. The daily life of Libyan immigrants abroad is narrated as well as their attachment to the traditions and customs of their own land and how most Libyans that arrived in Damascus chose to live in the district of Muḥyī al-Dīn, transformed into the *Little Libya* of Damascus. The plot continues with the protagonist’s father, who marries a Syrian and returns to Libya after the departure of the Italians. The events narrated continue to have the creation of the RAU as a historical frame, the hopes that accompanied it and the disappointments for its dissolution, right up to the start of the Second Gulf War.

Against the background of all this there is the story of Zīnah, divided by her love for two men: her first passion ‘Umar and her deceased husband Adham, who she married only because she saw in him some of the qualities she loved in her father. Once widowed, however, Zīnah decides to leave Damascus and return to Libya with her daughter Līnā. *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal* is a work in which the real component, represented mainly by memories, merges and blends with fantasy. This combination gives the novel dynamics that are in continuous movement and shift the reader through the past, present and future. In the book the memories mentioned give the idea of a clear autobiographical matrix, supported by the use of the first person as the narrator, and gives the reader the impression of being faced with a fictionalized biog-

local dialect and French, express through song the dramatic crossing of illegal immigrants.

³⁹ The short story collections are *Rağul bayna bayna* (An In-between Man), Mağlis al-Ṭaqāfah al-‘Amm, Ṭarābulus 2009; *Nuṣūṣ ḍā’i ‘ah al-tawqī’* (Texts With a Lost Signature), Mağlis al-Ṭaqāfah al-‘Amm, Ṭarābulus 2006; *al-Ġiyād taltahim al-baḥr* (Horses Devour the Sea), Dār al-Awā’il, Dimašq 2002; *Fī ‘arā’ al-manfā* (In Exile), Dār al-Āfāq, Bayrūt 2001. The collection of poems is *Iṣārāt ḥamrā’* (Red Signs), Dār al-Awā’il, Dimašq 2002.

⁴⁰ Razān Na‘īm al-Mağribī, *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal*, Dār al-Awā’il, Dimašq 2004.

⁴¹ See Muḥammad al-Bārudī, *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal*, in “Ġarīdat al-ṣaḥāfah al-tūnisīyyah”, May 15, 2008 and available on the author’s website.

⁴² See Aḥmad Rağab Ṣaltūt, *al-Hiğrah ‘alà madār al-ḥamal*, available on the author’s website.

raphy⁴³. In this regard, the writer and critic Muḥammad al-Bārūdī wrote:

When we study Arab literature written by women, we note that most of the time Arab writers tend to bring their novels in part, if not all, to an autobiographical dimension. Suffice to remember in this regard the early works of Laylā Ba‘albakī, Gādah al-Sammān, Latīfah al-Zayyāt, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī. I do not think this novel is an exception⁴⁴.

Among the voices that enrich the *parterre* of female writers in Libya, some of whom use the web almost exclusively to publish their writing, we wish to mention Laylā al-Nayhūm (b. 1961), Maryam Salāmah (b. 1965), Lūsī Mas‘ūd al-‘Alwānī (b. 1969), Nağwā Bint Šatwān (b. 1970), Lamyā’ al-Mākkī (b. 1972), Soad el-Rgaig, as well as the younger writers Ḥuḍriyyah al-Šarīf (b. 1980), Radīnah al-Fīlālī (b. 1981), Amāl al-‘Ayyādī (b. 1988). As it would be impossible to include all of them in this paper, we will present three who represent, in our opinion, the new generation of female writers: Laylā al-Nayhūm and Nağwā Bint Šatwān who write in Arabic and Soad el-Rgaig who writes in English. Laylā al-Nayhūm came from an educated family on both sides of her parents and she is also the cousin of the famous writer al-Šādiq al-Nayhūm. She studied English language and Literature at Qāriyūnis (Garyounis) University of Benghazi, and worked for many years as a journalist and literary translator in Libya. Laylā al-Nayhūm was editor of the magazines “al-Bayt” (The House) and “Kull al-funūn” (All the Arts). She created a blog in Arabic dedicated to Libyan literature (<http://naohama.blogspot.com>) – and she is probably one of the first Libyan women to do so – where it is possible to read two of her poems, *Butterflies of Meaning* and *Melting Sun*, translated into English and Italian⁴⁵. Another poem that has also been translated into English on the web is dedicated to the uprising in Libya⁴⁶. In 2005 she was the first Libyan woman to get a literary fellowship from the “International Writers Programme” at Iowa University. She now lives in the USA in a small town near the Sierra Nevada and is completing her first novel saga about the recent war in Libya.

Nağwā Bint Šatwān, writer and journalist, originally from the city of Ağdābiyā (Agedabia) in Cyrenaica, boasts a prolific and respected literary output that has enabled her to achieve various awards. She was awarded in 2009 at “Bayrūt 39”⁴⁷ and in 2003 for *al-Mi‘taf* (The Coat)⁴⁸ which was considered by some critics as the first play written by a female Libyan author. She has written two novels, *Wabar al-aḥṣinah* (Horsehair, 2005)⁴⁹ awarded at the Khartoum Festival in 2005 and

⁴³ Razān Na‘īm al-Mağribī is the daughter of Libyan immigrants who fled to Damascus at the time of Italian colonialism and now lives in Tripoli with her daughter. For autobiography, see N. al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2003; AA.VV., *Writing the Self, Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by R. Ostle, E. de Moor, S. Wild, Saqi Books, London 1998.

⁴⁴ See Muḥammad al-Bārūdī, *al-Hiğrah ‘alā madār al-ḥamal*, cit.

⁴⁵ The Italian translation of these two poems (*Farfalle di significato* and *Sole che si scioglie*) was published in the anthology AA.VV., *Non ho peccato abbastanza. Antologia di poetesse arabe contemporanee*, cit., pp. 237-241.

⁴⁶ See <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/o-my-libya/>.

⁴⁷ On this cultural event, see www.hayfestival.com/beirut39/index.aspx?skinid=6.

⁴⁸ Nağwā Bint Šatwān, *al-Mi‘taf*, Wizārat al-I‘lām wa ‘l-Ṭaqāfah al-Imārātiyyah, al-Šāriqah 2003. A chapter of this work can be found in ‘Abdallāh Sālim Milītān, *Mu‘ğam al-kātībāt wa ‘l-adībāt al-lībiyyāt*, cit., pp. 299-313.

⁴⁹ Nağwā Bint Šatwān, *Wabar al-aḥṣinah*, Dār al-Ḥaḍārah al-‘Arabiyyah, al-Qāhirah 2005.

Maḍmūn burtuqālī (Orange Content, 2007)⁵⁰. Author of three collections of short stories, it is probably in the last collection, *al-Malikah* (The Queen, 2008)⁵¹, that the author shows to have reached full artistic maturity. *al-Malikah* portrays various facets of Libyan society with biting sarcasm, mixing elements that are both real and fantastic through characters that are often detached from any reference to space and time. This collection seems to witness the attempt of new literary experiments on behalf of the writer. This is evident through her choice of using a male voice for the narrator in some of her stories which isn't a very common choice in female Libyan literature. Another literary method used by Naǧwà Bint Šatwān is to frequently leave her stories open ended, allowing the reader to interact with the characters and events of the story and imagine the outcome. Some of her stories are published online on (www.arabicstory.com) and (www.doroob.com), one of which, *Fahāmat al-farāġ* (His Excellency the Eminence of the Void), is available in English⁵².

Even Soad el-Rgaig has created her own blog (www.sereeb.blogspot.com) where she publishes extracts of her short stories. Encouraged to approach the English language and Literature by her father, Soad el-Rgaig left Libya in the early nineties to complete her studies in Britain. Her father who, despite the ban imposed by Gaddafi on reading books in foreign languages, brought his daughter's English texts purchased during his travels abroad. Finding it difficult «to return home during Gaddafi's regime, which looked with suspicion at any Libyan citizen that had been abroad for more than two years»⁵³, Soad el-Rgaig decided to stay in Britain where she still lives and works. Her literary voice is fresh and engaging, yet simple in style, reflecting the decision in her life to be an environmentalist. She has written a collection of short stories, *The Scent of Cloves*, published online and she is currently engaged in her first novel, *Land of Mint*, set in a little town in Eastern Libya (Cyrenaica) in post 1969. Soad el-Rgaig's writing amalgamates the reality of Western countries where she travelled and stayed, with the memories of her native land. Regardless of the social context be it a small village as in the short story *Philosophy*⁵⁴ or a more culturally open context as in *A Handsome Encounter*⁵⁵, one element remains constant in her stories: the female character. Her stories, in fact, speak of sisters, mothers, grandmothers, wives and daughters whose detailed descriptions and introspections portray characters who seem to materialize in front of us with their clothes, their gestures and their mentality through a natural and incisive language.

One of Soad el-Rgaig's most interesting short stories is certainly *Philosophy* where she introduces the reader to a story set in a city of the Cyrenaica, al-Marġ, during 1969, a very delicate moment in Libyan history, which is presented through the eyes of the narrator, Najat⁵⁶, an eleven year old girl studying at al-Najah Primary School:

⁵⁰ Naǧwà Bint Šatwān, *Maḍmūn burtuqālī*, Dār Šarqiyyāt, al-Qāhirah 2007.

⁵¹ Naǧwà Bint Šatwān, *al-Malikah*, Maġlis al-Ṭaqāfah al-Āmm, Ṭarābulus 2008. The other two collections of short stories are *Qiṣaṣ laysat li 'l-riġāl* (The Man Without Stories, 2003) and *Ṭifl al-Wāw* (The Child of Wāw, 2006).

⁵² See Najwa Binshatwan, *His Excellency the Eminence of the Void* (translated by S. Mubayi), in *Libyan Fiction*, cit., pp. 144-149.

⁵³ From an interview given by Soad el-Rgaig, cit.

⁵⁴ This short story was published on her own blog a few years ago and was recently sent to me by the author.

⁵⁵ This story was published in the winter of 2006 on the magazine "Exiled Writers". See the website of the magazine www.exiledwriters.co.uk.

⁵⁶ The names are reported as they appear in the original English edition.

Our school was mixed and that was very unusual for our orthodox society. It was 1969, a year of radical changes in Libya. A much-loved king was in exile and a new socialist government was in power. [...] An-Najah Primary School ran classes from Grade One to Grade Nine. [...] The majority of the students stayed in their villages after they had completed Grade Nine. The boys helped their fathers run their farms or shops or got jobs as clerks in the municipality or as bus drivers. The girls stayed at home cooking and cleaning, waiting for the first suitor to knock at their doors. Just a handful of boys ventured outside their villages and went to Benghazi to obtain a vocational degree or to join the army. Most of the teachers in An-Najah school were Egyptians and Palestinians and lived in trailers situated behind the school. Only three teachers were Libyans⁵⁷.

From the very first pages, the story takes us into what was the reality of the time when Libya, despite having gained independence for nearly two decades, still suffered the consequences left by Italian colonization policies, including the low level of education of the people⁵⁸. This was despite the fact that society had experienced a rapid modernization, due also to the discovery of oil (1959)⁵⁹. The story revolves around a female universe made up of Najat's classmates: Reem «dark-skinned and shapeless, like a stick»⁶⁰ and Wanisa, called Blondie for her badly coloured hair, who is a prosperous fifteen year old who wears high-heeled shoes and shapely women's clothes and who her mother defines «beautiful like an Italian Signorina»⁶¹. Others include Abla Halima, wife of the strict school director Mudeer Bumatari and pregnant with their seventh child; the school janitors and finally Hajja Aisha, mother of Najat, who goes out covered from head to toe with the *farashia* (*farrāšīyyah*), the traditional barracan clothing Libyan women wear⁶². Even the voice you hear on the radio is that of «the only female Libyan radio presenter at that time»⁶³. This is Benghazi Ḥadīġah al-Ġahmī (1921-1996), one of the first activists for women's emancipation in Libya, who in 1965 assisted in the foundation of *al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'ī al-Lībī* (Libyan Women's Union) created by another activist in Benghazi, Ḥamīdah Ṭarḥān better known as Ḥamīdah al-'Anayzī (1892-1982)⁶⁴.

⁵⁷ See Soad el-Rgaig, *Philosophy*, cit., pp. 1-2.

⁵⁸ It should be noted that at the dawn of its independence, Libya was one of the most backward and poorest countries in the world with its already little infrastructure destroyed, trade practically absent, a high level of unemployment, the rate of illiteracy being 94% and a mortality rate of 40%. See D. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, cit., p. 42.

⁵⁹ For a sociological and anthropological study of the process of modernization in Libya, see Mouldi Lahmar, *The Social Roots of the Libyan Modern State. Individuals, Political Groupments and "Za'ama" Production*, CSAU, Beyrouth 2009; O. Pliez, *La nouvelle Libye, sociétés, espace et géopolitique au lendemain de l'embargo*, Karthala, Paris 2004.

⁶⁰ See Soad el-Rgaig, *Philosophy*, cit., p. 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶² The *farrāšīyyah* is a long woolen cloth or fabric that wraps and drapes the body, covering the local or European clothes worn underneath. The abandonment of this garment since the seventies, especially for populations along the coast, was very indicative of the changing social trends in the country.

⁶³ See Soad el-Rgaig, *Philosophy*, cit., p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Māmā Ḥadīġah* or *Umm al-Ġamī'* as the Libyans liked to call Ḥadīġah al-Ġahmī, was a writer, poet and journalist as well as a presenter of dozens of radio programs in the social and cultural background. In 1965 she directed the magazine "al-Mar'ah" (The Woman) and later changed the title to "al-Bayt", the first female publication in Libya born from the will of the then Minister of Information and Culture Ḥalīfah al-Tillīṣī (1930-2010). Her model inspired many female authors, journalists and radio conductors from the seventies onwards, such as Ḥalīmah al-Ḥudrī, Ṭurayyā al-Faqī, Salmā al-Ḥawāt, Ḥamīdah al-Barānī. Before the foundation of *al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'ī al-Lībī* of which Ḥadīġah al-Ġahmī became president in 1972, Ḥamīdah al-'Anayzī had founded *Ġam'īyyat al-Nahḍah al-Nisā'īyyah al-*

In the female world of *Philosophy*, the male character is marginal and where it does appear and act it only brings about harassment and abuse against women. What emerges from *Philosophy*, in fact, is a typical cross-section of those years in Libya and elsewhere, where ignorance of the people and the cultural backwardness transforms a very young girl like Blondie, seduced by an adult like Mudeer Bumatari, into a «bitch» who the family wants to slaughter along with her unborn bastard. Thanks only to the arrival of the police the girl saves her own life, but is sent to the Women's Penitentiary in Benghazi. Upon hearing the news, here is the reaction of Najah's brother, Faraj, before a crying Hajja Aisha:

“What are you crying for?” he licked his lips. “The slut was very lucky not to have her throat slit.”

“What future is awaiting Wanisa in a women's prison? [...] A murderer has more chance of leaving the prison than her. She will be locked up there for the rest of her life with the other unfortunate souls. What about the bastard who made her pregnant?” my mother wiped her tears with the tip of her dress.

“What about him? He is a man and men don't bring shame to their families as girls do. And whoever brings shame on her family deserves to die”⁶⁵.

With an eye always on women, Soad el-Rgaig expresses her desire to contribute to the emancipation of Arab women, particularly Libyan. The recent Arab revolt has given high hopes for a change of the female condition in Libya, although the subsequent developments raise doubts in this regard:

At the beginning of the uprising we were all cheering for it, helping, working, shedding tears of joy and pride, and praying. Women stood side by side with the young men who fought Gaddafi forces with bare chests and simple archaic weapons. They made it and we all gave a sigh of relief and joy. Now, two years later, I am still cheering for the new Libya, I am still hoping, praying and helping but with the rise of the Islamists and the armed terrorist groups who want to implement the *Šari'ah* in Libya, I have doubt and fears. I personally have been postponing going back for a while due to the stories I hear. I still have faith that after relishing the sweet taste of freedom Libyan people will not let anyone rule them like sheep, not even in the name of God. I am fearful but still cling to some glimpses of hope that Libya won't be another Somalia or Afghanistan⁶⁶.

We cannot take our leave of this brief outline of the new Libyan narrative without mentioning that the diffusion of the Internet in Libya had another great merit which was to offer Libyan writers of every generation the chance to experience new literary genres, such as *qiššah qašīrah ġidd^m* (very short story) and *qiššat al-wamḍah* (flash short story). Narrative forms, where for the brevity of which they are characterized,

Hayriyyah (the Association Women's Rebirth Charity) in Benghazi in 1954. The objective of these associations was to combat female illiteracy and to involve women in the socio-cultural journey of the country.

⁶⁵ See Soad el-Rgaig, *Philosophy*, cit., p. 9.

⁶⁶ From an interview given by Soad el-Rgaig, cit. About the female condition in Libya and its evolution after 1969, see M. Djaziri, *État et Société en Libye*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1996, pp. 125-135. See also C. Souriau, *Libye, L'économie des femmes*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1986; AA.VV., *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by S. Kelly e J. Breslin, Freedom House, New York-Washington 2010, pp. 283-310. This book illustrates the contradictions of the process of female emancipation operated under Gaddafi, of which is emphasized, on one hand the increasing role given to working women and the efforts to promote awareness about domestic violence and, on the other hand, the large gap between what was a pro-regime rhetoric of women's rights and social attitudes still too patriarchal and sexist. See also L. Passavanti, *La donna nella legislazione libica*, Nuova Ipsa, Palermo 2011.

found it easy to spread online after the year 2000, while in the rest of the Arab countries it was already widespread for decades⁶⁷. Therefore the web helped Libyan writers to break free from the traditional patterns and to look on to new literary realities which mirrored the changing socio-political conditions of the country and perhaps also a change in the authors' and readers' artistic tastes⁶⁸. One of the first publications of *qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd^{mn}* was *Ṣinā'ah maḥalliyyah* (Local Produce, 2000) by 'Umar Abū al-Qāsim al-Kiklī (b. 1953), followed by numerous other anthologies by Aḥmad Yūsuf 'Aqīlah (b. 1958), 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Rawāf (b. 1960), al-'Awwaḍ al-Ṣā'irī (b. 1964), 'Umar 'Alī Muḥammad 'Abūd (b. 1970). Many very short stories of the abovementioned writers have been published on the website of the magazine "Mağallat ufuq al-taqāfiyyah" (Horizon) (www.ofouq.com) and on (www.kikah.com).

Of course most of the writers of *qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd^{mn}* have also ventured into *qiṣṣah al-wamḍah*, whose production is almost exclusively published on the web⁶⁹. An example of a collection that encompasses both models of very short stories and flash short stories is *Yuhkà an* (It Is Said That) by al-Ṣadiq Bū Dawārah (1963)⁷⁰. Although *qiṣṣah al-wamḍah* is a literary form largely represented by emerging names of the Libyan literary panorama, it has also seen older writers pertaining to the pioneering generation of Libyan literature get involved, as evidenced by *al-Ṭā'ir al-ġarīh* (The Wounded Bird, 1994) of 'Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī⁷¹. It is a collection of a hundred and fifty stories called "Narrative Sketches" (*wamaḍāt qiṣaṣiyyah*), as stated in the subtitle accompanied by the definition of *qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd^{mn} ġidd^{mn} ġidd^{mn}*.

Foreign occupation, cultural embargo, despotic governments and censorship have never put out the flame of Libyan culture. Despite all this, Libyan writers have produced literary works of great depth, although sometimes in a submersed way, that can bear comparison with those of other Arab countries more culturally known. However brief and concise this contribution may be, one can perceive the audacious budding of new talent, that in addition to the more established names, have contributed to the flourishing of a new literature that moves with the times, through the experiment of new styles, genres and literary topics. Most importantly, it is in line with the rest of Arabic literature, which freed from the regional specificities, can rise to the dignity of world literature.

⁶⁷ On the very short story in Arabic literature see Ibrahim Taha, *The Modern Arabic Very Short Story: a Generic Approach*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", XXXI, No. 1, 2000, pp. 59-80.

⁶⁸ See Fāḍil Tāmir, *al-Sard al-qiṣaṣī bayna al-ru'yah al-baṣariyyah wa 'l-ru'yā al-istiḍkārīyyah. Qirā'ah fī tağribat al-qāṣṣ 'Umar Abī al-Qāsim al-Kiklī*, in 'Umar al-Kiklī, *Ṣinā'ah maḥalliyyah*, al-Dār al-Ġamāhīriyyah, Ṭarābulus 2000, p. 75.

⁶⁹ See 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Mālikī, *al-Qiṣṣah al-lībiyyah al-qaṣīrah, anwā'uhā wa ḥiṭābātuhā al-naw'iyyah*, on "al-'Arab al-Ṭaqāfī", June 28, 2007, available on the website www.alarab.co.uk.

⁷⁰ al-Ṣadiq Bū Dawārah, *Yuhkà an*, Mağlis Tanmiyat al-Ibdā', Baṅgāzī 2004.

⁷¹ 'Alī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī, *al-Ṭā'ir al-ġarīh, wamaḍāt qiṣaṣiyyah*, al-Dār al-Ġamāhīriyyah, Ṭarābulus 1994.