

The Very Short Story at the Time of the Revolution: *al-Mihmāz*  
(The Spur) and the Syrian Writer Zakariyyā Tāmir

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*The mass protests that swept through the Middle East in early 2011 underlined the role of modern information-communication technologies (ICT). From a literary point of view, the Arab Spring inevitably marked the birth of a new model of writing, characterised by a more participatory, global and immediate manner of expression that could be defined as Humanism 2.0. In this context, we may insert the experimental writing by the famous Syrian author Zakariyyā Tāmir: on the al-Mihmāz (The Spur) Facebook page the writer begins a literary journey publishing daily posts and explicitly supporting the Syrian revolution. This contribution intends to analyse a few of Tāmir's most significant posts published on Facebook. The time span is 2012, just one year after the beginning of the Syrian revolution: thanks to aphorisms, posts and short stories, a new literary pact with potential readers is inaugurated, within a phenomenon that we can call al-adab al-raqmī (digital literature).*

*Introduction*

*Li-man taktub? (Who Are You Writing For?)*

A friend of mine asked me with curiosity: "Who are you writing for?"

I answered shortly after thinking: "I write what I want for born free readers who don't worship idols".

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August 6, 2012: when the Syrian author Zakariyyā Tāmir (1929)<sup>1</sup> comes into the open to express deep concern for his country's social and political plight, it is an aphorism that conveys his message to readers with just a few words. Nonetheless, his writing is something surprising: without betraying the familiar ironic style typical of his creative vein and commitment to political and social issues, the writer attempts an innovative narrative experiment that finds its expressive medium in digital technology. A new literary pact with potential readers is inaugurated. On the *al-Mihmāz* (The Spur) Facebook page the writer begins a literary journey (with political and cultural dimensions), publishing daily posts and explicitly supporting the Syrian revolution. While many Arab writers have created a personal Facebook page, where they publish photos, news, ideas and excerpts of their work, *al-Mihmāz* is not Tāmir's personal page. By posting ideas, stories and aphorisms, Tāmir wants to incite his people to awake and rebel against tyranny and violence and, at the same time, he intends to exploit Facebook's newly fashioned writing style for fictional purposes. His posts become a literary strategy to advance a new and deconstructed concept of *adab*.

Scholars of the Arab world have since long faced the need to renew this root concept in Arabic literature, for its original meaning indicated good breeding and derived from the habit of inviting someone to share a meal. The act of sharing produced material and intellectual enrichment<sup>2</sup>. Today we can say that the modernising process is making the concept of *adab* more flexible, while still trying to adjust it to the fundamental principles of "belles-lettres", as they are postulated here:

The *Belles-Lettres* may comprise human knowledge without exception, so far as the several branches of this knowledge are susceptible of being presented in an agreeable manner, and embellished with such ornaments, as respectively suit them. [...] Yet in order to be more accurate, we shall confine the *Belles-Lettres* to such branch of knowledge, as are not, properly speaking, sciences, and require no rigorous demonstrations, but on which the human mind may exercise itself freely, and as it were, divert itself, by presenting them under various forms, yet so as to be subjected to some rules, and dependent on theory. It is in the knowledge of these rules, and in the art of applying them, either to the works we read, or to those we compose, that the fluidity of the *Belles-Lettres* chiefly consists<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Born in Damascus in 1929, Tāmir moved to London in 1980 and currently resides in Oxford, where he continues to contribute with articles to the Arabic press and write fiction. His works have been translated into several languages. On his Italian translations see the link <http://www.arablit.it/bibsiria.html>. It is interesting to underline that his collection *Taksīr rukab* (Breaking Knees, 2002) has been recently translated into Sardinian. Cf. Zakarya Tamer, *Segamentu de ancas*, a cura di A. Columbu, Condaghes, Cagliari 2015. An extremely prolific writer, he has been the object of several studies. Among the most recent initiatives that aim to spread and analyse his vast literary production, cf. *The Short Stories of Zakaria Tamer*, in "Banipal 53", Summer 2015.

<sup>2</sup> R. Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, CUP, Cambridge 2000, especially the paragraph *Questions of Definitions: Adab and Belles-lettres*, pp. 134-135. See also S.A. Bonebakker, *Adab and Concept of Belles-lettres*, in J. Ashtiany et al. (eds.), *Abbasid Belles-Lettres (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature)*, CUP, Cambridge 1990, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> J.H.S. Formey, *Elementary Principles of the Belles-Lettres, with Reflections on Public Exhibitions*, translated from the French by S. Forman, F. Newberry, London 1766, pp. 1-2.

The widespread circulation of digital humanities is a way to renovate the rules of contemporary *adab*, endowing texts that are published in unconventional ways, like Internet channels, with literary dignity, in so far as «the human mind may exercise itself freely»<sup>4</sup> and obtain pleasure from diverse art forms, as illustrated before.

Zakariyyā Tāmīr's unusual and most recent literary production belongs to this context. Thanks to the author's ability to compose for the online world, posts have a literary quality, a phenomenon that we can call *al-adab al-raqmī* (digital literature)<sup>5</sup>. Tāmīr writes within a new framework that espouses a new approach to the academic and humanistic branch of knowledge based on sharing open formats.

Digital literature is a phenomenon that incorporates a variety of text types and blurs all traditional literary boundaries:

Digital fiction encompasses the growing range of primarily text-based and narrative-driven literary practices that fall within the wider domain of digital literature (also known as electronic literature). Digital literature would include anything from a poem that uses flash animation software to a novel that uses a hypertext technology, and can also refer to blogs, wikis, or even email, especially when these textual forms are appropriated or subverted for literary ends. [...] While of all digital literature, in the aesthetic understanding of the term, draws on fiction, and much of it contains narrative elements, it is possible to delimit the category of digital fiction, both in synchronic and diachronic fashion<sup>6</sup>.

Despite discarding literary conventions, *al-Mihmāz* does not want to be a blog (*mudawwanah*) among many others in the multi-coloured Arab blogosphere, but a sort of shared platform where literature interacts with society and digital culture: a form of techno-writing. Nonetheless, behind social networking the tragedy of an entire people is perceivable, together with the writer's intent to criticise the tyranny infesting contemporary Syria's political context.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> About *al-adab al-raqmī* see in general Zuhūr Karām, *al-Adab al-raqmī: as'ilah taqāfiyyah wa ta'ammulāt mafāhīmiyyah*, Dār al-Amān, al-Ribāṭ 2009 (second edition 2013, with an introduction by Sa'īd Yuqfīn). Quite significantly, the book was reissued in the period following the so-called Arab Spring, a time in which digital humanities in the Arab world saw their popularity increase for a number of political and social reasons. As Fayṣal Ruṣdī writes: «This book was enthusiastically received in the period between the first and second edition, during which the Arab world underwent major changes, especially at the social and political level. Technological tools have been playing a crucial role in the emancipation of communication media and, at the same time, in the individual's emancipation from traditional media that had circulated ideas and opinions up to that point. [...] A digital literature author should meet the following requirements: invest in contemporary technology/employ multiple forms of support that do not depend on the desire to write in itself or the inspiration that usually accompanies what is imagined in the printed and the oral text. In this way readers interact with the digital text, and authors interact with readers». Cf. Fayṣal Ruṣdī, *Qirā'ah fī kitāb "al-Adab al-raqmī: as'ilah taqāfiyyah wa ta'ammuliyah [sic] mafāhīmiyyah"*. *Dirāsah*, in "Ra'y al-yawm", 8 March 2014, <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=60739>.

<sup>6</sup> D. Cicciorico, *Digital Fiction: Networked Narratives, The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature: Introduction and table of contents*, Edited by J. Bray, A. Gibbons, B. McHale, Routledge, Abingdon and New York 2012, p. 471.

This contribution intends to analyse a few of Tāmir's most significant posts published on Facebook. The time span is 2012, just one year after the start of the Syrian revolution. Although new posts have been uploaded on *al-Mihmāz* afterwards<sup>7</sup>, 2012 was chosen because it marked the beginning of this literary experiment and also in order to give the analysis a stricter contextualisation.

### 1. *Zakariyyā Tāmir and Experimental Writing: the Challenge of al-Mihmāz*

*al-Mihmāz*'s experimental journey is quite emblematic of an artistic itinerary of literature in general, and Arabic literature more specifically in recent years: migration to the Internet, where virtual reality meets globalisation, and the proliferation of unprecedented initiatives that hybridise languages and genres by means of new media<sup>8</sup>. In Tāmir's experiment we can recognise an attempt to problematise the coexistence of authoritarian regimes and new practices of the culture of politics, as has been well shown by Tim Markham who declares:

Talking about both authoritarian regimes and official cultures of politics (in the media, for example) as external forces acting against authentic expressions of democratic fervour, enables a kind of othering that simultaneously denies the generative power of official discourse – constitutive rather than constraining, to use Foucault's (1978) distinction – and allows that which is unofficial, alter or simply populist to be accorded a special teleological status that is defined by its lack of structuredness. The result is an elision of observations of laudable acts of ingeniousness and determination on the part of dissenters and activists, and theorisations of the nature of protest itself that necessitate its efficacy – not in the sense of achieving tangible outcomes, but in opening spaces for political alterity whose eventual forms cannot and should not be predicted, but whose scope for positive transformation is irresistible<sup>9</sup>.

Such observations are relevant to Tāmir's experimental writing, whose novelty surpasses the expressive affordances of mainstream new media to create a kind of otherness that deconstructs the power of official discourse and contributes to its

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that, more recently, the publication of posts has been much less frequent than in the beginning. The blog, nonetheless, has been active for an extended period now, particularly so on the occasion of salient socio-political events in contemporary Syria, such as the anniversary of the revolution of March 14, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> «With the proliferation of Arabic blogging, e-mailing, chatting, text messaging, and other forms of techno-writing, contemporary Arabic literature is undergoing a series of structural and linguistic transformations. [...] A new generation of Arab authors is entering the scene of writing from the world of blogging and scriptwriting, publishing blogs as novels. In addition, many young novelists are appropriating the structure of blogs in their literary production, some veiling their true identity with pen names, other putting it on display by fantasizing narratives of persecution and censorship». Cf. Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> T. Markham, *Social media, protest cultures and political subjectivities of the Arab spring*, in "Media, Culture & Society", Vol. 36 (I), 2014, pp. 89-104, in particular p. 97. This article, that «draws on phenomenological perspectives to present a case against resisting the objectification of cultures of protest and dissent» (p. 89), offers a very exhaustive overview about the literature written on the topic of media and its connection with the Arab Spring, as it is based on a survey of 150 newspaper articles published before the end of 2012. See the bibliography pp. 102-104.

decoding by means of new tools. For these reasons «discourse theory holds that texts do not simply represent reality, but rather create and codify collective knowledge systems, shaping identities, perceptions of the world and repertoires of actions»<sup>10</sup>.

Also, the Facebook page edited by Tāmīr is different for at least two reasons, a sociological one – the generation gap – and a stylistic one. First, techno-writing and the digital inkstand are usually part and parcel of the young novelists' expertise. In Tāmīr's case, contrariwise, we find a writer belonging to an older generation who inserts himself in a field dominated by much younger people and who challenges modernity and younger generations by expressing his own ideas in a direct and sophisticated style. Besides, from a stylistic viewpoint, if it is true that «many young novelists are appropriating the structure of blogs in their literary production»<sup>11</sup>, we see that the older writer also easily adapts his writing to the world of blogs. His style fits in effortlessly – and above all naturally – with what we could call a pre-existing format.

Some research questions should be introduced at this point. How does Zakariyyā Tāmīr express his own ideas? What about the language and the stylistic devices he exploits? What are his favourite images and metaphors? Can we retrace a particular relationship with Syria's political situation in his posts? When is he writing?

## 2. When the Writer Becomes a Digital Aesop: Some Examples

In order to answer these questions satisfactorily, we should first underline that Zakariyyā Tāmīr only writes in Arabic. The usual intersection of the local and global dimensions of many Arab bloggers writing in English is deconstructed in this case. Tāmīr deliberately wants to relate only to Arab readers. This creates a more intense and a deeper relationship with them.

Second, in reading his posts we may divide his writing into several groups: *al-qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah ġidd<sup>mn</sup>* (the very short story), aphorisms or clear attacks on the government (i.e. posts in the strict sense of the word), and tales. In each case, the political value is clear and the style is sadly ironic, evocative, pressing and mordant<sup>12</sup>.

Fairy tale writing is one of the routes often attempted by the writer: in these cases, his stories seem to be shaped like modern fairy tales that are kept simple but refer to wider questions. Generally speaking, we could argue that Tāmīr often

<sup>10</sup> J. Hönke, *Transnational Companies and Security Governance. Hybrid Practices in a Postcolonial World*, Routledge, London 2013, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> The sadly mordant vein in Tāmīr's writing is often remarked upon by Arabic literature scholars, especially whenever it hides strong criticism of the contingent political situation. With regard to this, it is possible to go back in memory, for example to Tāmīr's descriptions of women's raped body as a symbol of the violence suffered by the Syrian nation itself. In reference to his above mentioned collection of short stories, *Taksīr rukab*, published in English in 2008 and banned in Syria, we read: «The violation of women's body [...] becomes a metaphor of the rape and desecrated nation that has been hijacked by a police state and fundamentalist factions. This is a theme that emerges notably in [...] Zakariya Tamer's satirical short stories that address brutality and the larger society's brutality against women». Cf. Rita Sakr, *'Anticipating' the 2011 Arab Uprisings: Revolutionary Literatures and Political Geographies*, Palgrave Pivot, London 2013, p. 5.

looks like a digital Aesop. He constructs his own stories within the typical framework of animal tales, echoing Western tradition, where fairy tales are inextricably linked with Aesop's name. The codification of this genre and its subsequent success on the literary scene is conventionally attributed to this figure, who lived between the VII and the VI century B.C. While epigons experimenting with the "Aesopian" model reworked his sample corpus of texts to teach language or dictate the rudiments of composition, Tāmīr does not discard pedagogic aims, but uses Aesop's tales to criticise the political praxis and human weaknesses that have led to contemporary Syria's plight<sup>13</sup>.

There is an indirect relationship between his posts and Vladimir Propp's folktale morphology<sup>14</sup>, even though the Syrian author's narrative structure is better suited to the analysis proposed in the Aarne-Thompson classification system<sup>15</sup>. When the Syrian author tells stories about animals, he inserts his writing in the Aarne-Thompson taxonomy number 1-299 that includes a large number of examples. The following is one of them.

April 25, 2012. Tāmīr wrote:

*Ġaḍab al-di'b wa riḍāhu* (The Wolf's Anger and His Satisfaction)

A hungry wolf came upon a hen, managed to take it, then he said: "I am angry with you". Then the hen replied: "What is the reason for your anger?"

He answered: "I heard you say I'm a thief and a murderer and I do not obey my parents".

And then the hen: "What would you have done if you had heard that I define you as the most impressive creature on the face of the earth, ready to obey your parents?"

The wolf said with a laugh: "I would eat with appetite and satisfaction. But now I'll eat you angry".

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<sup>13</sup> In actual fact, Tāmīr's writing has been frequently associated with the world of fairy tales: «It is not odd that his reality was close to fables or short myths, that the story became a theatre of fantasy, shadows and faces. In a story called "The Deal", a conversation occurs between a mother and the foetus inside her who refuses to come out before knowing what kind of life is waiting for him. In "The Policeman", the "hero" turns into a peg, then a crow, then a knife, then a wall, as his wife becomes a couch and then a tree. In the famous story "The Tigers on the Tenth Day", the tiger becomes a citizen and the cage a city». Cf. Abdo Wazen, *Hammering a new style into the Arabic short story*, translated by Clayton Clark, in "Banīpāl 53", cit., p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, American Folklore Society and Indiana University Press, Bloomington (first edition) 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Over the years, folklore and oral tradition material have been systematically rearranged, thus allowing scholars to retrace recurrent patterns. With due distinctions it is now possible to categorise single fairy tales, or groups of them, that share some traits with the proposed taxonomies. Scholars usually make reference to the taxonomy compiled by Antti Arne in 1919 and then taken up again by Stith Thompson in 1961 (with a subsequent update in 2004 by Hans-Jörg Uther). It should be noted here that folklore scholars do not categorise their materials according to titles, because traditional tales, for example oral ones, do not have just one title, but several of them that may vary. This is one more reason why the Aarne-Thompson taxonomy comes in handy. See A. Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, translated and enlarged by S. Thompson, second revision, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 1961; H.-J. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography Based on the System by Antti Arne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols., Suomalainen Tiedekatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 2004; D. Haase (ed.), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, 3 vols., Greenwood, Westport 2008.

Tāmir's Tale	A-T System Number	Type's Title
<i>Ġaḍab al-ḍi'b wa riḍāhu</i>	124	<i>Three Little Pigs</i>

This story falls into the number 124 type, the so called *Three Little Pigs*: here the reiterated image of the hungry wolf ready to attack a defenseless animal is replaced by the hen. However, as in each tale, a social meaning lies between the lines<sup>16</sup>. In April 2012, when the author posted this tale, the “Group of Friends of the Syrian People”, an international diplomatic committee of countries and bodies convening periodically to debate the issue of Syria being outside the U.N. Security Council, met for the second time. What is more important for our analysis is that the bombing went on in Hama and Homs, causing many victims among civilians. Could you read the image of Syria's autocratic government in the wolf and of the defenseless people in the hen? The most astonishing thing, nonetheless, i.e. the political-ironic value of the story, is that the wolf laughs when eating the hen: no mercy for the victims.

Tāmir continues to use the fairy tale scheme in other posts: he is still the *Īsūb* (*Aesop*) *al-raqmī* in a tale published on July 20, for example, when he writes the story of a white cat, entitled *al-Qiṭṭ al-mutakallim* (The Speaking Cat). One day, the protagonist becomes able to speak like a human being: he freely expresses his ideas and starts scolding his owners, the butcher and other cats. He reprimands his companions because they spend the whole day in idleness, but they are repelled because he has lost his ability to meow and abandon him. Only at the end of the story, with the vanishing of the magic, is the white cat happy again, as he regains his natural meowing<sup>17</sup>.

Tāmir's Tale	A-T System Number	Title
<i>al-Qiṭṭ al-mutakallim</i>	210	<i>The Travelling Animals and the Wicked Man</i>
	211	<i>The Hog Which Was So Tired of Its Daily Food</i>

<sup>16</sup> The investigation of the social and political context that is indispensable to retrieve the hidden meaning of Tāmir's Facebook posts makes reference to several online newspapers, as well as to studies that analyse Syria's most recent events. See in particular L. Trombetta, *Siria. Dagli ottomani agli Asad. E oltre*, Mondadori Education, Milano 2014; D. Roberts, *The Ba'th and the Creation of Modern Syria (RLE Syria)*, Routledge, London 2013; T. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013; J. Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 2012; Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Arabic literature scholars cannot but detect the reference to a famous short story by Tāmir, entitled *al-Numur fī 'l-yawm al-'āšir* (Tigers on the Tenth Day), published in the 1978 collection with the same title in this story. The story narrates a Tāmir's endeavour to tame a tiger, asking it to follow some orders and then offering it food. The story is an emblem of humans' tyrannical behaviour when they set to subjugate another being in a cage, even subverting nature's rules. One of the actions required of the tiger was to show its submission and thus get food to the point of meowing like a docile cat. See the English version *Tigers on the Tenth Day and Other Stories*, translated by D.J. Davies, Quartet Books, London 1985. The story has also been translated into Italian with the title *Le tigri nel decimo giorno*, in AA.VV., *Narratori arabi del Novecento*, a cura di I. Camera d'Afflitto, 2 voll., Bompiani, Milano 1994, pp. 247-250.

In this case our digital Aesop creates an animal fairy tale that we could put in the Aarne-Thompson taxonomy number 210/211. These two typologies in the taxonomy exhibit a structure in which there is interaction between human beings and animals with the gift of speech. If Aarne and Thompson's taxonomy helps to codify the text, the implied meaning of Tāmīr's writing is perceivable in the inescapable confrontation with contemporary historical events.

July is the month of terrible attacks and clashes. Press and humanitarian agencies record an increase in the number of missing and dead people. Meanwhile the government admits to being in possession of chemical weapons. Tāmīr uses the fairy tale scheme and the image of the speaking cat to represent the isolated individuals who find the courage to criticise the political system, unlike the majority of the defenseless people. However, their attempt is too isolated and they find themselves abandoned by other people. They have to return to normalcy, conform to the majority, and therefore they are condemned to meowing.

### 3. *al-Mihmāz and the Bridging of Different Literary Genres. Zakariyyā Tāmīr As ḥakawātī raqmī*

Evocative, symbolic and unconventional: our writer's narrative ability excels in the fairy tale genre but indeed manifests its power in the composition of short and very short stories endowed with a remarkable power of expression. In a few stories published on *al-Mihmāz* it is possible to identify a thin narrative thread that marks the shift from fairy tales (with animals as characters) to the writing of posts that have the flavour of digital aphorisms<sup>18</sup>. In the construction of his Facebook page, the writer emerges as a veritable *ḥakawātī raqmī*, a digital storyteller. The presence of the fairy tale imagery peopled with animals remains, but it is now adapted to the scheme of the very short story. A few posts mark the shift from one genre to another, almost as a way of leading the reader to the texts that fully realise the short story.

An example can be found in a story posted by Tāmīr on July 24, with the title *I'rif 'aduwwak* (Know your Enemy):

The lamb asked his mother: "Who is our enemy?"

The mother said: "The stories created by humans argue that the enemy is the wolf, so that we ourselves forget that our real enemy is the one who eats our meat every day, roasted and boiled and fried".

The text is a very short story with animals, or better, speaking ones as characters. This confers a magical air to the entire story, only partially masking the symbolic content of the story, or rather enhancing it.

The proposed scheme looks quite different from explanatory taxonomies and closer to a narrative classification of a formalist sort, as in Tzvetan Todorov's

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<sup>18</sup> Another detectable aspect in the 2012 posts – the year of this analysis – and of later ones should be stressed here: there are cases in which the author posts short stories that had already been published in previous collections. On July 18, 2012, for example, he posted a summary of his 2005 long story *al-Qunfud* (The Porcupine). Cf. Zakariyyā Tāmīr, *al-Qunfud*, Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li 'l-Kutub wa 'l-Naṣr, Riyāḍ 2005.

theorisation<sup>19</sup>. In a very short story, everything comes to an end just after a few exchanges: meaning must be immediately grasped, but analysing structure requires more time. The connection between “story” and “discourse” is clear: events mix with those of real life (the “story”), but the “story” is at the same time “discourse” because there is a narrator. Though not immediately evident because we are reading a *qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd<sup>am</sup>*, the narrator is nonetheless behind the lines, maybe another speaking animal. This artifice allows Tāmir to spur the Syrian people: he wants to wake them up and reveal their real enemy. He follows this same scheme in other posts, such as in the tale posted on August 25, where he writes a story entitled: *Limādā yaqtulūn al-atfāl?* (Why do They Kill the Children?):

A child asked his friend the cat: “Why do they kill the children?”.  
He answered: “So the cats remain without friends”.

Here again there is a connection between the animal tale and the very short story. The message is very clear and the writer takes advantage of the power of social networks to voice his support for the Syrian revolution, and, in particular, his sadness for the destiny of innocent Syrian children. The simple image of a friendship between cats and children is cleverly exploited to express melancholy and a deep sense of injustice for the loss of innocent victims in a revolution that has become a war. The “story” is apparent in its narration, which marks the friendship between the human and the animal world; sensitivity and pining, instead, belong to “discourse”, where the writer proves his worth as “The Master of children’s stories”<sup>20</sup>. In this very short story the sense of magic is represented by the presence of a speaking cat which is a well-known and highly recognisable character in fairy tales worldwide, especially in Western tradition dating back to the nineteenth century. Making a comparison with the story quoted above *Limādā yaqtulūn al-atfāl?*, the cat embodies the voice of conscience. It also appears as such in *The Story of Grandmother*, a version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In fact:

Cats appear in a number of well-known animal tales, such as ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ and ‘The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership’, in stories involving helpful animals, and in tales based on the magical bride/bridegroom motif. [...] A cat of indiscernible gender is featured in ‘The Story of Grandmother’, a version of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. Here the cat is the voice of conscience, accusing the girl of eating her granny’s flesh and drinking her blood. [...] In modern fairy tales and fantasy, the cat is widely featured as a magic helper and bearer of magic powers, especially assisting the hero in transportation between the everyday and the magical realm<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> See primarily T. Todorov, *Littérature et signification*, Larousse, Paris 1967; ID., *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Seuil, Paris 1970; ID., *Poétique de la prose*, Seuil, Paris 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Zakariya Tamer, *The Master of (Children’s) Stories*, in “Middle East Revised”, <http://middleeastrevised.com/2014/10/04/zakaria-tamer-the-master-of-childrens-stories/comment-page-1/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nikolajeva provides a series of examples taken from worldwide folklore material in order to illustrate how the presence of the cat in fairy tales has undergone several adjustments and transformations in meaning. She writes that: «Domestic cats appear in the earliest known myths and folktales as representations of the highest deities, such as the Egyptian goddess Bast, the first

If in the above mentioned stories, *Limādā yaqtulūn al-aṭfāl?* e *I'rif 'aduwwak Tāmir* deliberately mixes the schemes of the fairy tale with the very short story, in other works readers immediately sense that they are facing a *qiṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd<sup>am</sup>*.

We find an example in the story entitled *Kull šay' mutawaqqa'* (Everything is Expected) and published on May 14:

In the morning a poor husband asked his wife while he was preparing himself to leave the house: "What do you intend to cook for lunch today?"

The wife replied with a voice full of surprise: "You ask such a thing, forgetting that you have already eaten yesterday".

This is an example of a very short story whose political and social value is very clear, despite the use of a symbolic image: on the basis of Genette's theorisation, the poverty of the characters and of their setting represents the *histoire*, while the literary representation of the story, the *récit*, is the modality through which the story takes place. This text analysis imposes a semiotic methodology like the one suggested by Robert Scholes, among others. This scholar thus illustrates the two concepts:

the distinction between story and discourse on the one hand and that between text and event on the others. [...] the distinction between story and discourse is closely related to another with which it is sometimes confused, and that is the distinction between the *récit* and the *diegesis* of the text. [...] One of the primary qualities of those texts we understand as fiction is that they generate a diegetic order that has an astonishing independence from its text<sup>22</sup>.

The diegetic order mentioned by Scholes is clearly detectable in *Kull šay' mutawaqqa'*: events will follow independently from the text, establishing its full appurtenance to fiction.

The same pattern characterises other stories by *al-Mihmāz*: here as in print his writings, though extremely short, seem ready to be put on stage. For example, the short story posted on August 7 and entitled *Tuffāḥ sūrī* (Syrian Apple) can be quoted here: it tells about a child who is woken up by his mother in the middle of the night because of the soldiers' arrival. The boy runs away and hides in an orchard and from there he observes the extermination of his family and his neighbours. An apple tree protects him and the soldiers cannot find him. When the owner of the orchard goes to the garden, he is surprised because all his trees bear white apples, with the exception of one that produces red apples. Here some taste of magic lingers between the lines. A personified tree protects the child and has

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image of which dates back to 2000 B.C. The cult of Bast was connected with joy and merrymaking, and this role is reflected in later lore of most cultures. [...] Before cats spread to Europe, they often appear as mythical creatures, alongside dragons, unicorns, and basilisks. [...] The practical uses of domestic cats as mousers contributed to their positive reputation, and in this capacity they were carried throughout the world on conquerors' and merchants' vessels. [...] During the Middle Ages in Europe, cats became associated with evil powers. This was based partly on popular beliefs about cats' lewdness and partly on their Christian association with Satan». See the entry *Cat* by M. Nikolajeva, in D. Haase, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, cit., 1<sup>st</sup> vol., pp. 168-170, in particular p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> R. Scholes, *Decoding Papa: "A Very Short Story" As Work and Text*, Edited by J.J. Benson, *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, With an Overview Essay by Paul Smith and a Checklist to the Criticism, 1975-1990, Duke University Press, Durham 1990, pp. 34-35.

mercy upon him (Tāmīr uses the verb *ašfaqa*)<sup>23</sup>. The story is permeated with a sense of tragedy, it combines fiction with truth but the decodification of the narrative text is relatively simple. Narrative analysis leads us back to Seymour Chatman's conclusion that «The story is the what in a narrative, discourse the how»<sup>24</sup>.

In general terms, this is the same distinction used by Genette for the notions of *histoire* and *récit*, though *récit* can also be translated as “narrative”. Here the setting is the truth, the reality of the story, i.e. the actual representation of the military aggression towards civilians: the “story” embodies this truth. Instead the “narrative”, the “discourse”, lies in the ways in which Tāmīr describes this truth through a child's eyes, in order to provide the reader with an innocent point of view about Syrian people's tragedy. Style is linked here to the aesthetic value and literariness of a short story, which is a post published on a social network at the same time. Its originality is evident in its style rather than its theme, while another asset is the quick understanding of the digital reader, who is familiar with the immediacy of texts published on the social networks.

As mentioned, Tāmīr's writing is probably enlivened by the unconscious will to challenge the younger generation through their own writing conventions, i.e. techno-writing. The intersection of local and the global dimensions takes the shape of aphorisms and stories that have the structure of posts, but a short story's structure. The author himself allegedly provides a way to validate this assumption as he always entitles his posts.

Several examples of posts that sound like aphorisms could be quoted: one of them is *Ġahannam wāhidah faqaṭ* (Hell is Only One), of July 26: «Syrians have the right to believe that the present life is hell and they will not be condemned to another hell after death even if they had a mountain of guilt».

The caustic style of the aphorism can be appreciated here. Tāmīr is ready to

<sup>23</sup> Personification is a frequent trope in Tāmīr's works, i.e. the image of the speaking river that is silenced by human presumption. Things seem to be animated by an essence that allow them to relate to humans as equals so that human beings will finally abandon their attitude of superiority in their relationship with the Other. See the English translation of the tale *Why Did the River Shut up!*, in Bahaa-Eddin M. Mazid, *CDA and PDA Made Simple: Language, Ideology and Power in Politics and Media*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2014, pp. 174-175, available in Arabic at <http://www.syrianstory.com/z-tamer.htm#نماذج من أعمال الكاتب>. A more recent version of this text, which is ascribable to children's literature, can be found in “Banipal 53”, cit., pp. 153-155, translated by Clayton Clark with the title *Why Did the River Stop Talking?*. The tale entitles a whole collection of twenty-five children's stories published in 1973. As the translator describes: «The stories are composed of concise and straightforward language, and they tend to have plots of one or two events. The fable is evoked, and often the world is highly imaginary or set in a bygone age of kings and kingdom. A number of themes cycle through the collection, including: injustice, war, the idiot or evil despot, growing up, oppression, the police, [...], violence and occupation of land». *Ibid.*, p. 152. Through personification Tāmīr transforms the often crude reality into a world of fairy tales and myths, a metaphor of the present becoming whose representation is veined with broad and penetrating social criticism. Readers are therefore fascinated by the magic realism of his writing that leads to a deep understanding of contemporary society. Cf. S. Leštarić, *The Wonderful World of Zakaria Tamer*, translated from Serbian by E. Alexander, in *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

<sup>24</sup> S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1978, p. 19 (Italian translation by E. Graziosi, *Storia e discorso. La struttura narrativa nel romanzo e nel film*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2003).

stigmatise the mechanism of tyranny that reigns in his country by using the very impressive image of hell: the reader immediately understands the tragedy of the Syrian people. Along with the recurrent figures of Abel and Cain, images of hell and paradise are present in several other posts, leading us to think that the author is obsessed with the idea of an unexpected death. A strict parallelism is created between present life and hell, while the image of paradise is used as a metaphor for the innocent Syrian people's lost hopes. On July 26, again, for example, he writes an extremely sad post entitled *Ġannah li 'l-sūriyyīn* (A Paradise for Syrians): paradise is a compensating image and a place where everyone can find what they need to go on with their lives. The poor will find a place full of empty houses, the ill a place without hospitals, the Syrians a place without the Assad family.

In these as in other posts Tāmir shows his attempt to create a language and identity that will allow young people to recognise their political and historical role. His language is evocative and full of sarcasm, always focused on social and political issues, both when he writes posts with a realistic style and when he decides to become an *Īsūb raqmī*<sup>25</sup>. He refers to President Bashar al-Assad (Baššār al-Asad) with the appellation of *al-baqar al-muqaddas*, the holy cow; he makes fun of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Qadrī Ġamīl who speaks to his fashionable shoes and worries about his affairs; and, again, he recalls the historical image of 'Antarah in order to spur his people. Even more than allegedly traditional writing, digital writing shows the writer's close engagement with social commitment: sarcasm is one of his most lethal weapons, ready as it is to turn each story into a subtle crime story<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> The sarcastic vein that is typical of some of Tāmir's writings is not easy to forget. When he chooses to express himself on social networks, he shows great ability in deploying a veil of irony even while dealing with tragic issues. The plight of war and violence suffered by his country pushes him not to give up his well-known role of storyteller who mixes tragedy and humour. Several examples could be made of this creative vein and peculiar style. For example, Arabic literature scholars could think of the short story *al-Liḥà* (The Beards) in the 1970 collection *al-Ra'd* (The Thunder), in which Tamerlane's army wages war on a country because its inhabitants have decided to grow their beards, thus ruining barbers who are now jobless. In a sarcastic confrontation between an ambassador who tries to reach an agreement with the army's leader in order to stop the attacks, Tamerlane takes up the barbers' defence. «The head of the delegation spoke: 'We seek peace. Our city is yours without wars. But our city is small and poor. It has neither gold nor petroleum. And our women look like goats. We would be glad to get rid of them'. Tamerlane replied: 'I hate shedding blood, and I seek neither gold nor beautiful women. But I have learned that in your city the barbers are starving because of your custom of growing beards. I condemn this injustice, especially as my life is dedicated to vindicating ill-treated souls and spreading justice throughout the world. [...] My army will leave your city once you have shaved your beards and the barbers' business has begun to prosper. [...] Either shave your beards or die. The choice is yours'». Cf. D. Cohen Mor, *A Matter of Fate. The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK and New York 2001, pp. 126-127.

<sup>26</sup> «It is for this reason that there is no institution which Tamer would not topple, nor any authority, whether secular or religious, to which he would not deliver a smack with one of his mighty fists. Each of his stories is an assassination. And so it is no wonder that Tamer's book are nowhere to be found in bookshops in many Arab countries. His satire's sharp blade slashes our harsh reality in two, revealing the morbid nature of the despotic institutions which exist along the entire length of our social hierarchy». Cf. S. Leštarić, *The Wonderful World of Zakaria Tamer*, cit., p. 80.

## Conclusions

Tāmir's literary experiment fully belongs to the reinvention of the artistic and literary concepts that have invested the Arab world in recent years and represents yet another unexpected glimmer of light on the socio-cultural context that was deeply modified by contemporary political events. Several studies have already analysed the impact of social media on the so-called Arab Spring<sup>27</sup>. The tide of mass protests that swept through the Middle East in early 2011 highlighted the distinct role of modern information-communication technologies (ICT)<sup>28</sup>. From a literary point of view, the Arab Spring inevitably marked the birth of a new model of writing, characterised by a more participatory, global and immediate manner of expression that could be defined as Humanism 2.0. What is especially interesting is that techno-writing presents readers with a revival of the theme of *iltizām* (commitment)<sup>29</sup>: with *al-Mihmāz*, Tāmir intends to speak about his Syria without hesitation. He is literally performing an action of *iḥtirām al-nizām*, infiltrating the system: he is hacking the regime with an unusual literary weapon. The Syrian author's narration attempts to overcome generic boundaries through the composition of posts that resemble very short stories in structure.

In what ways is Tāmir's writing innovative? Mainly thanks to the range of his expressive tools. Though they largely have the familiar taste of his other writing, posts draw new lymph from social media and share a focus on current themes. In particular, the meaning of digital writing becomes evident in the face of short

<sup>27</sup> Several publications investigate the impact of new media on the uprising that took place throughout the Arab world and culminated in the phenomenon of the so-called Arab Spring. With regard to this see the following texts: P.N. Howard, Muzallim M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013; Mohammad Munir Hadi, *The Usage of Social Media in the Arab Spring. The Potential of Media to Change Political Landscapes throughout the Middle East and Africa*, LIT Verlag, Berlin 2013; Saba Bebawi, D. Bossio, *Social Media and the Politics of Reportage: The 'Arab Spring'*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014; Reza Jamali, *Online Arab Spring: Social Media and Fundamental Change*, Chandos Publishing, Oxford 2014; F.M. Corrao, *Le rivoluzioni arabe: transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, Milano 2011; A.M. Di Tolla, E. Francesca (a cura di), *La rivoluzione ai tempi di internet. Il futuro della democrazia nel Maghreb e nel mondo arabo*, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Napoli 2012.

<sup>28</sup> «The Middle East protests that started in December 2010 in Tunisia – known as the Arab Spring – demonstrated the destabilizing power of the World Wide Web. [...] The protests were not only in the streets however; social media such as blogs and Twitter played a significant part in disseminating information and voices to the Arab people and to the rest of the world. The power of these digital forms of communication within the Arab Spring represents some of the most obvious examples of how the World Wide Web enables ordinary people to make their views known, and for the subaltern to write back». Cf. H.K. Rustad, *(In-)between Word, Image and Sound: Cultural Encounter in Pullinger and Joseph's Flight Paths*, in A. Bell, A. Ensslin, H.K. Rustad (eds.), *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 143. The importance of social media in supporting the Arab Spring is demonstrated also by a project spread in Egypt and known as "The Tahrir Data Project", that «was launched to gather empirical evidence on how individuals participating in the Egyptian revolution used media». See the website <https://www.theengineroom.org/projects/tds/>.

<sup>29</sup> Thanks to his unusual literary weapon he manages to avoid the problem of a certain kind of censorship, known for example in Egypt as *istibāh wa ṭahārah*, state suspicion and investigation policies enacted on the streets of Cairo in the form of stop-and-search police practices. About this phenomenon see Salwa Ismail, *Authoritarian Government, Neoliberalism and Everyday Civilities in Egypt*, in "Third World Quarterly", Volume 32, Issue 5, 2011, pp. 845-862.

aphorisms as reflections on daily life, even when titles seem to add some degree of literariness to the chosen topic. In so doing readers “participate” in the experiment of writing. Though posts are shared and discussed, Tāmīr does not interact with his interlocutors but simply opens up an avenue of discussion in which it is the public itself that “converses”, drawing ideas and viewpoints from posts. This way frequent “likes” and sharings mark the success and universal character of the message contained in some of his posts, as is the case of the one entitled *Risālah ilā ṣadīq* (Letter to a Friend) published on 6 November 2012:

What I wrote you yesterday is not instigation to crime, but celebration of a kind of justice that makes an imperative of punishing the killer.

What will you do to those who raped your sister or wife, stole your possessions and killed your son?

Will you hand him a jasmine flower?

Truth must be faced, no matter how bitter.

The difference between you and me is that the killer’s death does not make me sad.

He does not deserve compassion or pain.

We are not angels, we are made up of flesh and blood, love, hate, rage.

The author’s rage manifested in these few words is immediately perceived by his digital readers who can here find an outlet for their own unhealthy leaning to violence, when hatred seems to get out of control. The discussion that arises is further enflamed by new posts and sharings that vouchsafe the immediate “fortune” of the uploaded text, bypassing the conventional trajectory of print publications from critics to common readers. Change thus lies in the fact that the pattern of the tale is discarded and the post is fully enjoyed as it is, i.e. in immediate fruition of its contents. The author tries to deconstruct the foundations of the System, by resorting to caustic tones to attack the hidden “patriarchal”<sup>30</sup> image of the establishment, here as he did previously in print.

In other short texts Tāmīr becomes the commentator of the ongoing revolution. See for example the contribution published on 22 October 2012 with the title *Qāla al-munaḡḡim* (Thus Spoke the Astrologist):

After this extreme confusion, after the leadership of fools I turned to an astrologist and asked him: “Will this revolution grant Syrians the freedom they aspire to?”.

And this is what he answered: “This revolution will save Syrians from tyranny, but they will be granted the freedom they have been deprived of only after new revolutions will save them from impostors, clowns, cheaters and masked lying dwarves”.

The astrologist’s words in this post thinly disguise the writer’s own viewpoint, his adhesion to the original ideals of the Syrian revolution. Thus Tāmīr pays due homage to digital literature, reconciling himself with those media he had bitterly

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<sup>30</sup> The reference here is to the 1970 tale entitled *Alladī aḡraqa ’l-sufun* (The One Who Burnt the Ships). The writer imagines that creation took place in eight days and that on the last day God created inquisitors, dictators and prisons. Because of some affinities with the politics of masculinity, the tale has been quoted in Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2009, p. 94.

criticised in the past<sup>31</sup>. Tāmīr manages to write high quality narrative within this fictional pattern of “fragmented reality”<sup>32</sup> while trying to make his commitment “modern” in the sense of being perpetually new and valid. Zakariyyā Tāmīr thus explains the reasons for the birth of *al-Mihmāz* in this interview:

When the Syrians took to the streets demanding freedom and change, I had no contact with any media outlet, and was never contacted by any newspaper, magazine, radio or television station to inquire about my opinion and stand on what is happening. [...] In short, I found myself deprived of every chance to express my position supporting the Syrian revolution, which I regard as the obvious position, and an extension of my fifty years of writing. Therefore, my only escape was resorting to Facebook, which I took to very quickly. Yet I never used it for chatting or discussion, I used it as a tool to publish my writings whether long or short, as if I am dealing with a newspaper or magazine<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, we can easily imagine Tāmīr who, almost every morning, feels as if he were issuing his own little newspaper, free to publish whatever he wants without any kind of censorship or form of exploitation. Then he admits:

As for the comments on my writings, most of them are still hasty, giving me a sense that I am in a bona fide hospital for lunatics, where it is easy for people to tell you that you are the genius of your era, but it is similarly easy for others to say that you are a traitor who sold his soul for a bunch of dollars<sup>34</sup>.

He is always realistic, caustic, critical towards society, even when he uses a fairy tale scheme for his posts. But the most important thing is that our *al-ḥakawātī al-raqmī* never forgets his own commitment: in the era of *al-adab al-raqmī* he deserves a very important place, writing modern tales where *misk al-ḥitām*<sup>35</sup> is represented by the number of likes.

<sup>31</sup> «Tamer manages in story after story to create allegories of oppression and alienation, as man, the social being, finds himself alone in confronting the callous indifference of authority, be it military or civilian, and on a local, national, or international scale. His story *al-A'dā'* (The Enemies) is a withering criticism of the role played by the media in the Arab world during the June War of 1967; the Arabic language itself is awarded a medal for bravery, for turning a defeat into a victory». Cf. R. Allen, *Introduction*, in D. Johnson-Davies (translated by), *Arabic Short Stories*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994, p. XXVII.

<sup>32</sup> «In a contemporary story tradition in which a fragmented ‘reality’ is reflected in fictional genres, narratives will rarely come to endings; for such would suggest a logic that few writers perceive to exist. Zakariya Tamer finishes the surrealist vision of ‘Small Sun’ with an image that provides the story’s only reference to its title, invoking from the classical Arabic tradition the smile of the coin of money and the golden disk of the sun». *Ibid.*, pp. XXXVI-XXXVII.

<sup>33</sup> Ziyad Majed, *A Dialogue with Zakariya Tamer*, in “Free Syrian Translators”, June 5 2012, <http://freesyriantranslators.net/2012/07/22/a-dialogue-with-zakaria-tamer-2/>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Literally translated as “moss at the end”, this expression indicates instead the stereotypical formula that closes a fairy tale.