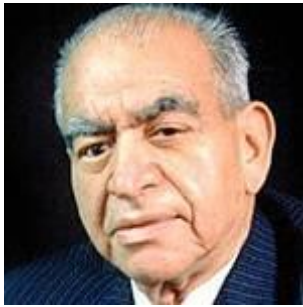


Al-‘Ujaylī, ‘Abd al Salām العجيلي (1918/1919-2006)



<https://chronicle.fanack.com/syria/society-media-culture/culture/modern-literature/>

(the picture is republished in several places on the internet)

SUMMARY

‘Abd al Salām Al-‘Ujaylī was one of the most productive and versatile literary figures in twentieth century Syria. His experiences both as a medical doctor and a politician fed into his fictional output, which is most often characterized as realism. Al-‘Ujaylī is considered one of the earliest writers of fiction in Syria. Among his over forty publications are novels, poetry collections, theatre plays, travelogues, essays and auto-biographies. His preferred genre however remained the short story.

MAIN ENTRY

‘Abd al-Salām Al-‘Ujaylī was born in al-Raqqah at the end of September in 1918 or 1919. He himself preferred the earlier date, though he stated that the latter was probably more likely to be true. Like most of the inhabitants of al-Raqqah at that time, Al-‘Ujaylī’s family was semi-nomadic and spent the spring and summer in the dessert grazing their animals before returning to the city in the autumn. This in-depth knowledge of Nomadic life and the nature of the dessert later became a feature of Al-‘Ujaylī’s fiction. The family was reknowned for its many poets and its well-educated men, and Al-‘Ujaylī was encouraged from an early age to read both Arabic and European literature. He soon began to write his own fiction and poetry, and during his school years he published anonymously. After finishing preparatory school in Aleppo, Al-‘Ujaylī went on to the College of Medicine in Damascus. He graduated in 1945 and became the first medical doctor in al-Raqqah.

During his years as a student in Damascus Al-‘Ujaylī had been involved in politics. Back in al-Raqqah he pursued this interest. In 1947 he was elected the representative of al-Raqqah to the Syrian National Assembly. His political career continued in 1962 with a post as Minister of Culture and later Foreign Minister. After his time in these ministerial posts, a total of six months, Al-‘Ujaylī decided to leave politics and concentrate on his medical work and his writings. Except for his periods in Damascus and his extensive travel over the world, described in his travelogues, Al-‘Ujaylī remained faithful to his hometown throughout his life and he died in al-Raqqah on the fifth of April 2006.

Al-Raqqah and the neighbouring area often formed the backdrop to Al-‘Ujaylī’s fiction, introducing a little known area and its people to readers and critics. A natural storyteller, known to use stories as illustrations in lectures and political speeches, Al-‘Ujaylī produced thirteen collections of short stories. With an almost clinical eye for detail, Al-‘Ujaylī described the everyday life of his characters. Through their stories he tackled topics such as superstition, religion, tradition and the relations

between city and countryside. Many of the stories were informed by his meetings with patients in addition to situations he encountered as a politician. Though often described as a writer of political realism, the genre most of his contemporaries favoured, Al-'Ujaylī's short stories span over several genres, including magical realism and surrealism. His novels, however, always keep close to real events.

The narrative in his first novel, *Smiling Through the Tears* (1958), relates to the political situation in Syria in the 1950's. In *The Flooded* (1979) he discusses the impact the building of the Euphrates dam on the farmers and villagers who were relocated. Al-'Ujaylī also used his personal life as inspiration in his fiction. His most acclaimed novel, *Hearts on Strings* (1974), tells the story of a young man who leaves his small village to live with his uncle in Damascus, a parallel to Al-'Ujaylī's own life. The central narrative forms around the main character's four relationships. But what attracted the attention of critics and readers, and put the novel on the Arab Writers' Union's list of the 100 best Arab novels, was the carefully created atmosphere capturing the lives of ordinary people in Damascus during the union with Egypt. Al-'Ujaylī was also inspired by his travels. Some of his fiction compares aspects of European and Arab culture and tradition, as for example *The Lanterns of Seville* (1956) and *The Prettiest of Them* (2001), Al-'Ujaylī's fiction has been translated into several foreign languages, including English, French, Armenian, Russian, Swedish and German.

Al-'Ujaylī was an important member of the Syrian cultural landscape, despite never giving up his work as a practicing physician. In 1992 he was elected a member of the prestigious Arabic Language Academy.

Selected List of Works

Novels

bāsima bayna al-dumū' باسمه بين الدموع (*Smiling Through the Tears*) 1958

qulūb 'ala al-islāk قلوب على الاسلاك (*Hearts on Strings*) 1974

al-maghmūrūn المغمورون (*The Flooded*) 1979

ajmaluhunna أجملهن (*The Prettiest of Them*) 2001

Short Story Collections

bint al-sāḥira بنت الساحرة (*The Sorceress' Daughter*) 1948

qanādīl ishbilīa قناديل إشبيلية (*The Lanterns of Seville*) 1956

al-khayl wa al-nisā' الخيل والنساء (*The Horse and the Women*) 1965

fāris madinat al-Qanṭara فارس مدينة القنطرة (*The Knight of Qantara City*) 1971

aḥādīth al-ṭabīb أحاديث الطبيب (*The Doctor's Tales*) 1997

ḥubb awwal wa ḥubb akhīr: Su'ād wa Sa'īd حُبْ أَوَّلْ وَحُبْ آخِر: سعاد وسعيد (First and Final Love: Su'ād and Sa'īd) 2003

Poetry Collections

al-layālī wa al-nujūm الليالي والنجوم (Nights and Stars) 1951

Autobiographical Writings

dhikrayāt ayyām al-siyāsa: al-juz' al-thānī ذكريات أيام السياسة: الجزء الثاني (Memories of my Political Days: Volume 2) 2000

dhikrayāt ayyām al-siyāsa: al-juz' al-awwal min kitāb ṣuddira juz'hu al-thānī ذكريات أيام السياسة: الجزء الأول من كتاب صدر جزؤه الثاني (Memories of my Political Days: Volume 1) 2002

Travel Writings

ḥikayāt min al-riḥlāt حكايات من الرحلات (Travel Stories) 1954

da'wa ila al-safar دعوة إلى السفر (An Invitation to Travel) 1963

Further Readings

Sulaymān, N. (2008) *'Abd al-Salām al-'Ujaylī: Ḥakawātī min al-Furāt ('Abd al-Salām al-'Ujaylī: A Storyteller from the Euphrates)*, Damascus: al-Wizāra al-Thaqafiyya.

Young, M.J.L. (1978) 'Abd al Salām al-'Ujaylī and his Maqāmāt, *Middle Eastern Studies* 14 (2): 205-210.

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