

Prison Autobiographies in Libyan Literature: *Siġniyyāt*
(Prison Sketches) by ‘Umar Abū ’l-Qāsim al-Kiklī

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Under Qadhdhafi’s (al-Qaddāfi) regime, literary works committed to freedom and human rights had to be published outside Libya. In fact littérateurs of opposition were subjected to repressive practices, which were not limited to the isolation or the banning of their literary production, but extended to torture and imprisonment or even political assassination. Only after the overthrow of Qadhdhafi, writers started to talk about their experiences in Qadhdhafi’s prisons in their published works at home. This paper will examine Siġniyyāt (Prison Sketches, 2012) by ‘Umar Abū ’l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, a collection in which the very short story (al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah ġidd^{an}) and the flash short story (qīṣṣat al-wamḍah) can be found, and which is considered one of the first testaments of political imprisonment published after Qadhdhafi.

Arabic literature is perhaps one of very few literary traditions that have a distinct literary genre known as the “prison novel”. This is not only because a great majority of writers have themselves lived the experience of arrest, imprisonment, and even torture, but also because the history of the contemporary Arab intellectual is one of constant struggle with the authorities. The colonial authorities and their local cronies were succeeded after independence by national authorities who in many regions of the Arab world have surpassed their predecessors in the various methods of tyranny and oppression¹.

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¹ Sabry Hafez, *Torture, Imprisonment, and Political Assassination in the Arab Novel*, in “al-Jadid Magazine”, Vol. 8, No. 38 (Winter 2002), <http://www.aljadid.com/content/torture-imprisonment-and-political-assassination-arab-novel>.

This is how the scholar Sabry Hafez began one of his articles more than a decade ago, when the Arab Springs were still far away, at least apparently. In many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, after the popular uprisings of 2011, which broke out also as a result of the conditions described by Hafez, the *littérateurs* obtained the freedom to talk about the tyrannical policies of their former national authorities in a straightforward manner, without the risk of being imprisoned. Libya is one of the Arab countries that has experienced this historical turning-point, which is still in progress. It is worth remembering that during Qadhdhafi's (al-Qaḍḍāfi) regime «[t]he repressive practices against opposition writers were not limited to their isolation or the banning of their work. The regime imprisoned, tortured or even killed opposition writers»². So, only after 2011 Libyan writers started to talk about their experiences in Qadhdhafi's prisons in their published works at home for the first time.

In the Arab world, prison has represented a literary theme since the days of classical Arabic literature:

The Qur'ān shows itself familiar with the institution of prison, this is obvious from the story of the imprisoned Prophet Yusūf [*sic*] in the twelfth sūra. However, prison literature began to increase in volume in Abbasid period. [...] In medieval prison literature incarceration is taken in both meanings: someone in prison for political reason would look upon his captivity as a matter of pride or someone held for crimes, would look on his sentence as a dishonour equivalent to death³.

In more recent times, specifically during the period of European colonialism and in the years following independence, prison has become a recurring issue for many Arab writers, both in autobiographical and in fictional writing. According to Sabry Hafez, the modern roots of the “prison fiction” genre can be traced to some nationalistic novels, such as *Fī baytinā raḡul* (A Man in Our House, 1957) by the Egyptian Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990). Its plot, which takes place in the 1940s under the British government, is the story of a nationalist fighter arrested on charges of murdering a British agent. He escapes from the hospital following his brutal torture in prison⁴. In the Seventies, *al-Siġn* (The Prison, 1972) by the Syrian writer Nabīl Sulaymān (1945) and *Rasā'il saġīm siyāsī ilā ḥabībatihi* (Letters from a Political Prisoner to His Beloved, 1977) by the Egyptian Muṣṭafā Ṭībīh are noteworthy works. The list of “prison novel” authors has gradually increased, so it would be impossible to mention all of them, many of whom – such as Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm (1937), Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī (1931), Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt (1923-1996) – have experienced prison first-hand⁵.

² E. Diana, 'Literary Springs' in *Libyan Literature: Contributions of Writers to the Country's Emancipation*, in *The Multiple Narratives of the Libyan Revolution*, in “Middle East Critique”, 23 (4), 2014, p. 444, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19436149.2014.971550>.

³ E. Benigni, *A Travelogue Through Prison Novel and Autobiography: Everyday Life, Memories, Ideals*, p. 11, Paper presented in the Conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, University of California, Los Angeles, 22-27 April 2008 http://www.fsor.it/lasapor/online/vlm/MA_2008/Benigni.pdf. See also E. Benigni, *Il carcere come spazio letterario. Ricognizioni sul genere dell'Adab Al-Suġūn nell'Egitto tra Nasser e Sadat*, Nuova Cultura (collana La Sapienza Orientale), Roma 2009.

⁴ Sabry Hafez, *Torture, Imprisonment, and Political Assassination in the Arab Novel*, cit.

⁵ Most prison books have been published by Egyptian authors. On the relationship between

In Libya we can also find brave writers who have talked about prison under the Colonel, but their works were always published abroad⁶. *Siġniyyāt* (Prison Sketches) by ‘Umar Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Kiklī (1953)⁷ is considered one of the first testaments of political imprisonment under Qadhdhafi published in Libya.

It is a collection of very short stories and flash short stories written between 2001 and 2008, but appeared as a book only in 2012. These literary genres (respectively, *al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah ġidd^{an}* and *qīṣṣat al-wamḍah*), which spread in Libya at the beginning of the new millennium along with the Internet⁸, are well suited to convey quick and immediate images of everyday prison life to the reader, leaving him the freedom to use his imagination in completing the narrative picture. Of course, a thin border line separates the *qīṣṣah qaṣīrah ġidd^{an}* and *qīṣṣat al-wamḍah*, and their interchangeability is akin to the one found in early Arab novels when the difference between the *qīṣṣah ṭawīlah* (long story) and the *riwāyah* (novel) was involved⁹. It is worth mentioning that al-Kiklī was one of the pioneers of *al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah ġidd^{an}* in Libya with the collection *Šinā‘ah maħalliyyah* (Local Production, 2000)¹⁰, with which the writer «gave new force to the Libyan short story renewing it with his own style characterized by brevity of content and synthesis of words»¹¹. Besides *Siġniyyāt*, like the previous collection, is a work which confirms that al-Kiklī’s writing represents an alternative form of expression based on *flashes*, which are reminiscent of «the brush strokes of a modern artist on a white canvas»¹².

al-Kiklī recalls the forty-eight very short stories of *Siġniyyāt*, whose length ranges from two staves to four pages, *muṣūṣ sardiyyah* (detailed pieces). In this regard he writes in the first page of the book:

the *muṭaqqaf* and the Egyptian regime, see G. Gervasio, *Tra repressione e autocensura: intellettuali e politica in Egitto (1952-1967)*, in “Oriente Moderno”, XX, 2-3, 2001, pp. 329-349. For further bibliography, see note 2.

⁶ One of these Libyan writers is Muḥammad al-Aṣfar (1960), who denounced Qadhdhafi’s policies in his novel *Milḥ* (Salt), Dār al-Ḥiwār li ‘l-Ṭibā‘ah wa ‘l-Naṣr wa ‘l-Tawzī‘, al-Lāḍiqiyyah 2010. See E. Diana, *Libyan Exposé Literature: the Novel Milḥ (Salt) by Muḥammad al-Aṣfar*, Proceedings of the 10th EURAMAL Conference on “Literature and the Arab Spring – Analyses and Perspectives”, Paris 9-12 May 2012 (forthcoming).

⁷ ‘Umar Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, Dār al-Farġānī, Ṭarābulus 2012. Born in Tunis, al-Kiklī belongs to a family coming from Kikla, a village on al-Ġabal al-Aḥḍar, that migrated to Tunisia during the Italian colonization in Libya. They came back to Libya when ‘Umar was seven. He received his primary education in Tripoli and completed his studies at the University of Qāryūnis, in Benghazi. He published most of his short stories in local newspapers.

⁸ About the web as a tool for social and literary change in Libya, see E. Diana, *Libyan Narrative in the New Millennium: Features of Literature on Change*, in “La rivista di Arablīt”, III, n. 5, giugno 2013, pp. 32-40, http://www.arablīt.it/rivista_arablīt/Numero5_2013/02_diana.pdf.

⁹ For more on the birth of the Arab novel and the confusion in terminology used to identify it, see I. Camera d’Afflito, *Letteratura araba contemporanea. Dalla naḥḍah a oggi*, Carocci, Roma 2007, pp. 80 ff.

¹⁰ ‘Umar al-Kiklī, *Šinā‘ah maħalliyyah*, al-Dār al-Ġamāhīriyyah, Ṭarābulus 2000.

¹¹ E. Diana, *La letteratura della Libia. Dall’epoca coloniale ai nostri giorni*, Carocci, Roma 2008, p. 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

سجنيات
 نصوص سردية، لحتها جماليات الكتابة القصصية.
 وسداها ذكريات وأخبار، منقلبة ببشاعة الواقع، ومتوقدة،
 في المحنة ذاتها، بارادة مقاومة هذه البشاعة.

Prison Sketches are detailed pieces which I have adapted to the aesthetics of the short story's genre, with the will to resist the atrocities of the immediate reality.

Their plots are memories and pieces of news, made more poignant by the atrocities of this immediate reality, imprinted in their own suffering¹³.

In the postface of this collection, the Libyan poet and critic Muḥammad al-Faqīh Ṣāliḥ (1953)¹⁴, who was a fellow prisoner of the author, wrote:

This is a sensitive book that leaves a mark on the reader. Its plot doesn't come from contents of books or newspapers, but from the heart of real-life experiences, from the depth of noble human pain. His short stories are written, or rather carved – like all the literary works of al-Kiklī – with an acute, sharp and elevated soul which overflows with awareness, talent, culture, and stubbornness.

In these *al-muṣūṣ al-sardiyyah/al-qīṣaṣiyyah al-lāfītah* (attractive stories), al-Kiklī captures simple and marginal moments about himself and other prisoners. Some of which bring a smile to the reader's face, other cause sorrow and sadness, while others leave painful wounds. In any case, those moments include levels of meanings that cause the reader's sense of taste and urge to question what is beyond appearance¹⁵.

al-Kiklī opens the book with the dedication:

إلى الشاعر الشعبي الليبي: رجب حمد أبو حويش المنفي،
 صاحب قصيدة "ما بي مرض. غير دار العقيلة"

To the Libyan popular poet Raḡab Ḥamad Abū Ḥawayṣ al-Minifī,
 author of the *qaṣīdah* "Mā-bī maraḡ, ḡayr dār al-'Aqīlah"¹⁶.

Mā-bī maraḡ, ḡayr dār al-'Aqīlah (I Have no Illness, Except for al-Aghelia Camp) is the title of a famous poem, that dates back to the time of the Italian colonization in Libya. It describes the horror of the concentration camp of Aghelia, one of the saddest pages in the history of the Italian colonization in Libya and in Africa in general. The Italian government instituted this kind of internment camp to house resistance fighters, their relatives and their supporters. Raḡab Ḥamad Abū Ḥawayṣ al-Minifī (1879-1952) was interned in this camp and his epic poem, written in the Libyan dialect of Cirenaica¹⁷, is considered one of the few

¹³ Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siḡniyyāt*, cit., p. 5. Because of the keen sense of this author's introduction, besides its brevity, I have included the Arabic text also. The same goes for the other short quotations mentioned in original language in this paper. Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

¹⁴ Born in Tripoli, he moved to Egypt where he received a degree in Economics and Political Science from Cairo University. After graduating he worked abroad, including in Europe.

¹⁵ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siḡniyyāt*, cit., p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ For a linguistic and structural study of this poem, see the thesis of Safia Aoude, *A literary analysis of Rajab Abuhweish's Libyan poem "My only Illness" in the light of its time*, of May 2014, http://www.academia.edu/7415654/A_literary_analysis_of_Rajab_Abuhweish_s_Libyan_poem_M

documents about colonial camp experience¹⁸. It has inspired many other poems and songs and it is still well known among Libyans, while several Libyan schools and institutions were named in the poet's honour.

After this dedication, the collection continues with some verses from three different compositions: the first one is from *haiku qaṣīdah* (haiku poetry), i.e. Japanese poetry, in which we read:

أيتها الفتيات في حقل الأرز.
ألشيء الوحيد غير الموحل:
أغنياتكن.

Girls in the rice field.
The only things not muddy
Are your songs¹⁹.

The second one contains verses by the Libyan poet Ġīlānī Ṭarībšān (1944-2001)²⁰, taken from his *qaṣīdah Aḥzān Dūn Kīšūt fī maqḥà* (The Sadness of Don Quixote in a Café), not included in any *dīwān*, but published at the beginning of the seventies in a Libyan newspaper:

حزنك يا سيدتي. أت من غضب البحر
ومن صمت الصحراء،
وأنا مذ أبصرتك. أحمل نعشي خلفك،
والملم أطرافك الكفن
صبحا ومساء.

Oh my lady, your sadness comes from the anger of the sea
and the silence of the desert.
Since the day I saw you, I have been carrying my coffin behind you
and holding the edges of my shroud
day and night²¹.

y_Only_Illness_in_the_light_of_its_time. The poem was translated into English by Khaled Mattawa on the website <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1585/rajab-buhwaysh-no-illness-but-this-place>.

¹⁸ Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices: Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya*, Taylor and Francis Group, New York 2005, pp. 46-47. See also D. Gumbiner, D. Abouali, E. Colla, *Now That We Have Tasted Hope: Voices from Arab Spring*, A McSWEENEY'S/BYLINER ORIGINAL, San Francisco 2012.

¹⁹ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 9.

²⁰ He was born in Raġbānī, a town located in al-Ġabal al-Ġarbī, 160 kilometers from the capital. He is considered one of the most important poets of his generation, who represents a bridge between *qaṣīdat al-taḥīlah* (metric poetry) and *al-sī'r al-ḥurr* (free verse). He travelled to Europe, and in particular, to France, Britain and Ireland. Traces of his contact with European culture are visible in his poetry. For his biography and some of his poems, see http://www.almoajam.org/poet_details.php?id=1837. See also 'Abd Allāh Sālim Milīṭān, *Mu'ġam al-ṣu'arā' al-lībiyyīn*, Dār Midād li 'l-Ṭībā'ah wa 'l-Naṣr wa 'l-Tawzī' wa 'l-Intāġ al-Fannī, Ṭarābulus 2001, pp. 88-90.

²¹ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 9.

The third one is a verse by Maḥmūd Darwīš from his collection *Aṭar al-farāšah* (Butterfly Effect)²²:

كل شعر جميل ... مقاومة.

Every beautiful poem... is a resistance²³.

Like in his previous collection *Šinā'ah maḥalliyyah*, in *Siġniyyāt* al-Kiklī makes description an essential literary tool. And it is this very description that represents the difference between this literary work and most other prison memoirs, where the past and the present are often blended through the use of techniques such as the stream of consciousness and interior monologue. In *Siġniyyāt* everything revolves around the description of prison space and its protagonists: cells, jailers, prisoners and their relatives. Also in *Šinā'ah maḥalliyyah* the description was an important literary device, although it focused on nature and its elements: the sea, the moon, the sky and, in particular, women, who held a special position both in the real dimension experienced by the author and in his imagination²⁴.

In *Siġniyyāt* the writer always maintains a dry and detached style, which resembles that of a newspaper reporter. The grammar is kept very simple, with short sentences, while avoiding rhetorical frills at all costs. The writer uses standard Arabic and only rarely resorts to Libyan and Egyptian dialect in his dialogues. Some short stories deal with the relationship between prisoners (*suġanā'*) and jailers (*saġġānūn*), that is, between the regime's opponents and its supporters. Despite their different positions, the writer always describes their shared moments, as if he were a mere observer, who records the surrounding reality in detail, while playing a neutral role. He manages to keep his detachment in spite of his use of the first person narration in all of his descriptions. He often tries to soften the crudeness of prison reality through sarcasm. The short story entitled *al-Risālah* (The Letter) is a case in point. Here there is a dialogue where the roles are inverted: the prisoner becomes *šāhib al-su'āl* (the interrogator) and the jailer becomes *šāhib al-iġābah* (he who answers or is interrogated). The plot revolves around food portions, which, according to the prisoner-interrogator, are being increasingly reduced in size. The jailer replies to this complaint with dry and sarcastic words: «Muhammad's nation has grown up!»²⁵.

In another short story entitled *Imhāl al-karāmah* (Deferred Dignity) the relationship between jailers and prisoners focuses on the transfer of prisoners from one prison to another. The short story opens with the accurate description of the police-van:

²² Maḥmūd Darwīš, *Aṭar al-farāšah*, Dār Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li 'l-Kutub wa 'l-Našr, Bayrūt 2008, p. 225.

²³ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 9.

²⁴ For an analysis of *Šinā'ah maḥalliyyah*, see E. Diana, *La letteratura della Libia. Dall'epoca coloniale ai nostri giorni*, cit., pp. 85-90.

²⁵ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 13.

When we were transferred from the first prison to another about a thousand kilometres away, we were put on a police-van, at dawn. It was divided into small compartments. Each compartment was about two metres high and less than a metre wide, with a bench where we could sit down²⁶.

Despite the sad conditions experienced by the prisoners, at one point the writer highlights the human aspect of the jailers, which brings them closer to the prisoners. Here we read that «in the middle of the police-van there were nine round holes, no wider than a finger, through which the guards passed us cigarettes»²⁷.

A portion of prison memoirs is often dedicated to detailed and realistic descriptions of the physical and psychological suffering imposed on prisoners during the torture process. The gruesome details are aimed at shocking the readers' conscience, especially Arab readers who run the same risk of imprisonment and torture in their countries every day. In this regard, Susan Van Zanten Gallagher has written that «the existence of torture in the modern world raises difficult questions for writers, particular those from South American and African countries»²⁸. In the Arab world, while the “prison novel” represents a recognizable literary genre, as we have just read from Hafez's article, the “torture novel” has not yet acquired its own literary genre, since it is closely linked to “prison literature”. How could one forget *Šarq al-Mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean) by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf (1933-2004), where the hero Raḡab Ismā‘īl, condemned to eleven years of prison, is subjected to the cruelest form of physical and psychological torture? This novel represents «one of the most graphic portraits in Arabic fiction of the methods and effects of imprisonment and torture, not merely on the political prisoners involved but their family and friends as well»²⁹. More recently, one can cite the novels *Tarmī bi-šarar* (Throwing Sparks, 2009)³⁰ by another Saudi writer, ‘Abduh Ḥāl (1962), winner of the IPAF 2010 award, and *Yālū* (Yalo, 2002) by the Lebanese Ilyās Ḥūrī (1948). The former focuses on the life of Ṭāriq Fāḍil, who becomes a punisher (*ḡallād*) in the palace of a rich man, known as the Master (*al-Sayyid*), symbol of abusive political power. Ṭāriq *al-ḡallād* is a professional rapist who punishes the enemies and opponents of the Master by sodomizing them and capturing all of it on video. Here is the blood-curdling incipit of the novel:

I stopped in the torture chamber [*ḡurfat al-ta‘dīb*], reflecting on my naked body stained with traces of its crime. A body specializing in dozens of torture related tasks, some completed with good results, some with bad results; some unsuccessful, others

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ S. Van Zanten Gallagher, *Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee's "Waiting for the Barbarians"*, in “Contemporary Literature”, Vol. 29, No. 2, Summer 1988, p. 277.

²⁹ R. Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1995, p. 90.

³⁰ ‘Abduh Ḥāl, *Tarmī bi-šarar*, Dār al-Ġumal, Bayrūt-Baḡdād 2009. The book is translated into English: Abdo Khal, *Throwing Sparks*, Translated by M. Tabet, M. K. Scott, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, Doha 2013. About the novel, see the review by A.C. Long, *Redemption in Jeddah*, in *Fiction from Kuwait*, in “Banipal 47”, Summer 2013, pp. 178-183.

handled with perfection. I tortured my victims with care and precision, without allowing myself to be moved by the cries or entreaties coming out of their mouths. I performed my task without violating any of the rules prescribed by the Master. While the Master watched me widen the “cracks” of his opponents’ bodies, with great craftsmanship I provide his soul the pleasure of revenge that he longed for. He found my work soothing and exciting at the same time. I let go of the victims only after having broken their bones, while the tears or entreaties continued long after I had stopped³¹.

The latter is the story of Dāniyāl (Daniel), called Yālū, a thirty-year-old man arrested for robberies and rapes. Before trial, he spends two years in prison, where he is brutally tortured by the Lebanese authorities and subjected to unimaginable forms of physical and psychological cruelties. Another novel of this kind is *Mu‘aḏḏibatī* (My Tormentor, 2010) by Binsālim Ḥimmīš (1949)³². Its main character, called Ḥammūdah, is subjected to tortures by both Arabs and foreigners in an undefined American prison, which evokes Abū Ġurayb’s prison in Iraq. His tormentor is a western woman called Māmā al-Ġawlah who speaks in French, and sometimes in English and Arabic also³³. Many other Arabic novels, that deal with political tyranny, arbitrary imprisonment and torture, manage to reproduce this reality so accurately, that the reader easily identifies with the victims and suffers along with them.

al-Kiklī also deals with torture in *Siġniyyāt* but intentionally avoids the use of shocking and cruel descriptions. His aim is not to depict the signs of physical punishment on prisoners’ bodies but to talk about the psychological humiliation and mortification experienced in prison and the deprivation of basic human rights. For example, in the short story entitled *Aġal! Yaḥdu!* (Sure! It Happens!), the writer describes the dignity shown by some prisoners as their only weapon of resistance against bodily torture, even when the *falaqah* was used in the torture process: the *falaqah* is a device used to hold the prisoners’ feet while the guards beat their soles. In this short story, tortures are called *muḏāddāt ma‘nawiyyah* (moral damages) or *ġara‘āt idlāl* (sips of humiliation) «because those torture techniques weren’t aimed at wresting information, but only at breaking down the spirit and inflicting humiliation»³⁴. Because of the brevity of the short story, I have included the entire translation:

There was a character who aroused wonder for his unusual ability to endure physical pain and for the inflexibility of his resolve.

When it was his turn to receive his ration of beatings – which some called *muḏāddāt ma‘nawiyyah* or *ġara‘āt idlāl*, because those torture techniques weren’t aimed at wresting information, but only at breaking down the spirit and inflicting

³¹ ‘Abduh Ḥāl, *Tarmī bi-šarar*, cit., p. 7.

³² Binsālim Ḥimmīš, *Mu‘aḏḏibatī*, Dār al-Šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2010.

³³ For more on this novel, see P. Viviani, *Desolazione e speranza di un giovane prigioniero arabo alla mercé del boia*. Mu‘aḏḏibatī (*La mia aguzzina*) di Binsālim Ḥimmīš, *Dār al-šurūq, al-Qāhirah 2010*, pp. 295, in “La rivista di Arablit”, I, n. 2, dicembre 2011, pp. 119-122, http://www.arablit.it/rivista_arablit/numero2_2011/10_viviani_himmish.pdf.

³⁴ ‘Umar Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 23.

humiliation –³⁵, he refused to be humiliated by stretching his feet – similar to women’s feet, as the guards sometimes said – and by raising them against the *falaqah*. He resisted the violence with anger but he repressed his cries of pain, thus denying his oppressors the satisfaction of taking revenge on him.

Once a prison warden entered the yard while he was walking around with other prisoners. When the warden shouted at him to stop, he stood with dignity, muttering to his companions: “The lions stop for the cats!”³⁶.

Instead, in *al-Taknūqrāṭī* (The Technocrat), al-Kiklī once again emphasizes the human bond between jailers and prisoners even during the torture process. Because it is such a short story, I am able to offer the entire translation:

There was a torturer [*ǧallāḍ*] who, when not assigned to torturing prisoners, worked in the distribution of food and carried the sick to the infirmary.

The amazing part was that some of his victims [*maǧlūdīm*] remembered him with respect and gratitude.

This was because, they said, he performed the punishment with technocratic consciousness [*bi-ḍamīr taknūqrāṭī*!] If he had performed his task without inflicting any kind of moral pain to the victim – the raw material of his work, according to him –, he was applied on his task with care, sincerity and silence, until the material was bent, ripened and ready to be received by another authority who embarked upon the next stage of the torture process³⁷.

Many short stories in this collection are devoted to Libyan poets and writers. Some of them met the author in prison, others were arrested with him in the eighties on charges of belonging to the so-called “journalism group”, that organized a left wing political movement. Regarding this group, the cellmate of the author Aḥmad al-Faytūrī (1955), journalist, playwright, poet and editor-in-chief of “al-Mayādīn” (The Squares), a Benghazi weekly newspaper, recently wrote:

A guard entered the hall at the same time as a voice came over the intercom: “Where is the journalism group?”

It meant my colleagues and me, so named from the case in which we all received death sentences, reduced to life imprisonment, for our affiliation to the Marxist-Leninist party, seeking to overthrow the government. The journalism group comprised twelve: the writers Abdel Salam Shehab [‘Abd al-Salām Šihāb, 1953], Omar al-Kiklī [‘Umar al-Kiklī], Fathi Nassib [Fathī Našīb, 1957], Ġuma Bukleb [Ġum‘ah Abū Kalīb, 1952], Idris al-Mismārī [Idrīs al-Mismārī, 1956], Mohammad al-Maliki [Muḥammad al-Malikī], and Mustafa al-Hashemi [Muṣṭafā al-Hāšimī]; the poets Idris bin al-Tayyeb [Idrīs bin al-Ṭayyib, 1952], Muhammad al-Faqīh Saleh, and Ali al-Rahibi [‘Alī al-Raḥībī]; and the journalist Ramadan al-Farsi [Ramaḍān al-Fārisī] and myself, of course³⁸.

³⁵ The dashes do not appear in the Arabic text, where the author uses many square and round brackets. In this paper the dashes replace the brackets to avoid confusing the reader.

³⁶ ‘Umar Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., pp. 23-24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸ Ahmed Alfaitouri, *The Moment the Cell Door Opened*, in *Prison Writing*, in “Banipal 50”, Summer 2014, p. 116. This “journalism group” was released after about ten years following a pardon granted by Qadhafi himself. For more on the Libyan intellectuals who were imprisoned

Therefore the short story *Raqṣat tağdīd al-hawā'* (Dance to Renew the Air) is devoted to Aḥmad al-Faytūrī and Muḥammad al-‘Adl³⁹, *Waqt al-ḥammām* (Bath Time) is devoted to Ğum‘ah Abū Kalīb⁴⁰, *Mawqū‘ al-niqāš* (Discussion Topic) is devoted to Idrīs bin al-Ṭayyib⁴¹, and *Idārat al-‘ağz* (Disability Management) is devoted to poet and playwright Aḥmad Bilalū (1953)⁴². The short story *Muḥarrib al-nār* (The Fire Smuggler) is devoted to the above-mentioned Libyan poet Ğilānī Ṭarībšān and to his prison experience. The short story starts in this manner:

To the departed poet Ğilānī Ṭarībšān, who experienced endless wandering, forced emigration, indigence and psychological and mental breakdown. Eventually he was interned in a criminal asylum [*siġn al-maṣaḥḥāt*], but in spite of his weakness and the extreme privations to which he was subjected, no one was able to sequester his tobacco and matches⁴³.

This is another case where the writer uses sarcasm to convey the harsh prison reality to the reader. The short story continues with a detailed description of the sound made by the steps of the guards and those of the new-arrivals, in this case of the poet:

Silence fell and some of us pricked up our ears trying to figure out whose guards those steps belonged to and how many new arrivals were involved. In those moments of suspense, there was always one of us who was able to distinguish the footsteps of the guards from those of the new arrivals – the new arrivals walked ahead in civilian shoes, sometimes in sandals or slippers, dragging their feet in resignation. The guards followed them with firm and resolute steps –. We were able to guess what a guard was up to by the way he walked: if he was there for a specific task – his steps were determined, resolute and hurried – or if, on the other hand, he was there on an inspection tour – his steps were slow, lazy and bored –⁴⁴.

The collection *Siġniyyāt* highlights how man misses everything in prison, even the elements of nature that, in freedom, appear ordinary and banal like blades of grass. Instead, behind bars, man learns to respect the blades of grass that grow between the cement blocks in the yard. In this regard, in the three staves of the very short story *Muḥāḍarah* (Wariness), we read:

With the start of spring, most of the prisoners began to walk around the yard, individually, or in small groups of two or three individuals. All were careful not to step on the blades of grass that grew between the narrow slits, that separated the blocks in the pavement⁴⁵.

under Qadhafi's regime, see E. Diana, 'Literary Springs' in *Libyan Literature: Contributions of Writers to the Country's Emancipation*, cit., pp. 443 ff.

³⁹ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 67. For his biography and some of his poems, see 'Abd Allāh Sālim Mīlītān, *Mu'ġam al-šū'arā' al-lībiyyīn*, cit., pp. 41-45. See also his complete name Aḥmad Faṭḥ Allāh Bilalū in <http://www.albahrainprize.org/Encyclopedia/poet/0139.htm>.

⁴³ 'Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

al-Kiklī puts particular emphasis on the lack of family affections, a problem experienced by prisoners the world over. The short story *Waqf al-ziyārah* (Visit Time) deals with visiting hours and the anxious prisoners' waiting. Here we read that:

Visits in military prisons were permitted only on special occasions, such as *'Īd al-ḥajj* [Feast of Breaking the Fast], *'Īd al-aḍḥā* [Feast of the Sacrifice] and, sometimes, on the Prophet's birthday. We wished that God would turn every day into special occasions like these!

Therefore, we prepared with great care for those occasions.

Those of us who owned civilian clothing, cleaned them and then put them between the mattress and the bed panel for a few days, so that they could look ironed.

Even those who only owned a prison uniform, did their best to look presentable.

Those of us who had some experience with scissors, cut our companions' hair.

Of course, on the morning of the visit, everyone shaved and cleaned up.

In addition everyone prepared a detailed list of items that they wanted their family to bring them on the next visit. The list was written in short and clear sentences, to make sure that their requests were easily understood before the visit time ended⁴⁶.

In another story, *Qā'imat ihtiyāgāt* (List of Necessities), we read specifically about the short list of ordinary items that prisoners could receive from their relatives during the first visit:

tobacco – and of course matches or lighter –
sandals
bathroom towel
underwear and socks
pyjamas (at least one) depending on the season
toothpaste and toothbrush
shampoo and soap
brush or comb
nail clippers⁴⁷.

And finally «for safety measure, only for inmates who behaved well, newspapers, magazines, books, pens and notebooks»⁴⁸.

In the entire collection the writer conveys the feelings experienced during the stay in the cell, when the initial fear gives place to desperation and this is followed by the survival instinct which takes over and overrides all other feelings. To survive in the tight and oppressive space of the cell, the prisoners change their perception of the space in which they live and transform the cell walls into the pages of a diary that records their everyday activities. This is what we detect from the short story entitled *Salḥ* (Strip Off):

After I was pushed into the cell, the iron door was slammed in my face. I felt as if its heavy echoing movement had crushed part of my soul.

I tried to overcome my bewilderment and to adapt to the new situation.

I started analyzing the dark walls in front of me, which compressed the tight space,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

trying to find traces of those who had occupied this place before me.

On the walls there were visible traces, written and carved in different styles and with different materials.

Usually a name and a date were written under the carving or writing.

Under one of these writings, a prisoner wrote that he had left his traces after he had been in this cell for fourteen days already.

I felt an overwhelming sense of panic.

I said to myself: Is it possible? Can a human being “live” in this place all this time? Impossible! I can’t do this. I will kill myself, if I don’t die first.

I was stripped [*sulihṭu*] of two full years of my life there⁴⁹.

In one longer story of this collection, *Qatl wiqā’ī* (Precautionary Murder), al-Kiklī talks about how the act of writing represented a tool, which enabled him and his companions to survive the sad prison conditions. The short story starts this way:

During my prison years I wrote many stories. [...] After the period of *taḥqīq* [investigation], which lasted more than three months, the visits on the part of relatives were allowed and lasted a reasonable amount of time, without being subjected to censorship.

For this reason, it was possible for us to get books, magazines, notebooks and pens, and to send out our writings.

During this period – one year and five months – I wrote five stories. I got them out through my family and in this way they were saved. They were eventually published eight years later in Libya and abroad.

They were the first five stories of the collection *Ṣinā’ah maḥalliyyah*⁵⁰.

This confirms that his first collection, *Ṣinā’ah maḥalliyyah*, was also indirectly linked to the prison environment, if not for the contents of its stories, then for the time in which some of its stories were written. We remember that *Ṣinā’ah maḥalliyyah* includes twenty-two very short stories written in different periods: before, during and after the author’s imprisonment⁵¹. From the next portion of the story *Qatl wiqā’ī*, we read:

After this, I wrote other stories, but none of them could be smuggled out.

This was because we were transferred to a military prison, where visits were rare – generally not more than twice a year – and were considered MICRO-visits, subject to intense censorship. Then, in the last four years, visits were completely forbidden⁵².

So we learn that in military prisons under Qadhdhafi, all printed material was prohibited. Only after several petitions, both oral and written, was it permitted but with extensive restrictions. At first, radio too was prohibited but was later allowed. Notebooks and pens were also prohibited, but prisoners were not punished if the guards found them in the cell, nor did the guards enquire about their provenance. The prisoner, in turn, didn’t ask what happened to the confiscated material. As a result of this understanding, it happened that:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁵¹ In fact, some stories belonged to the period from 1979 to 1980, others to the period from 1989 to 1993, while the first five stories, as we have just read, were written in prison.

⁵² ‘Umar Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 42.

Some clever prisoners – I was not one of them – devised a way of getting back the confiscated material through the connivance of some guards.

I wrote nine more stories under the same dire conditions – reminiscent of conditions existing prior to the invention of paper –. Personally I think that at least three of those stories were of great artistic value⁵³.

But then we read that the writer tore or burnt these writings, comparing his action to «the killing of a horse which has no hope of continuing to live»⁵⁴. The great importance of writing in prison is confirmed by the aforementioned Aḥmad al-Faytūrī who, at the moment of his release, wonders whether to bring the books gathered with great difficulty while in prison and the manuscripts written during the long years of captivity with him. In reference to this, he wrote:

We were instructed to bring our belongings with us, and right away there was turmoil and the eruption of anxiety and disquiet. [...]

But that was the moment when al Mismari and I were at a loss regarding our books: we had been carrying them from one prison to another. Should we leave the products of our creative intellect behind? There was *al-Nawāfir* [Fountains] magazine – in which we had published in Abu Salim Prison, and whose issues were written on Satin cigarette papers⁵⁵ – and books published by *al-Nawāfir*. There was *The Debate of the Chain and the Rose*, which is a study of Arabic poetry; *Return of the Citizen*, a book written by a number of the prisoners about the film of the same name, directed by the Egyptian Mohamed Khan, that we watched on Libyan TV; *The Reasonable and the Absurd in the Arab Mind*, also a book to which many of the inmates contributed; a book about desertification in Arab television drama; books about the history of the European Enlightenment translated from Italian by Abdel Hameed al-Beshti; a novel translated from French; and books of poetry, stories, illustrations, as well as others⁵⁶.

From all these stories, we gather that under Qadhdhafi's regime, like under all dictatorships, the “word”, both written and oral, is forbidden. In this regard there is a flash short story of about three staves, entitled *Fī 'l-bad' kāna [man'] al-kalimah* (In the Beginning the Word Was Banned), where we read:

Upon arriving they gave us a taste of the terror awaiting us, then they made us get in line against the wall. One of them said with extreme severity, pointing to the corner of the wall:

“Those of you who have got books or magazines or newspapers or anything else with writing on it, put them there!”⁵⁷.

After 2011, literary testimonies of prison experiences under Qadhdhafi have gradually begun to appear, shedding light on the darkest pages of Qadhdhafi's domestic policies. For example, in the wake of *Siġniyyāt*, in 2012 Rafram Chaddad, an Israeli artist of Tunisian origins, published *Guide Rafram From Libyan Jail* in Hebrew. The book documents the horror and the torture endured in a Libyan prison, when he was captured on charges of spying for Israel. The author

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “al-Nawāfir” magazine was published as a single copy.

⁵⁶ Ahmed Alfaitouri, *The Moment the Cell Door Opened*, cit., pp. 116-117.

⁵⁷ ‘Umar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Kiklī, *Siġniyyāt*, cit., p. 27.

had arrived in Libya in 2010 to document the abandoned synagogues and cemeteries belonging to the country's vanished Jewish community. Instead, he was promptly thrown in prison, where he spent five gruelling months. Rafram Chaddad, like al-Kiklī, tries to lighten up the harsh subject matter. al-Kiklī, as we have seen, does it through sarcasm and moderation, while the Israeli artist does it by appealing to his culinary talents applied to the Libyan cuisine:

While Chaddad remained imprisoned, he paid careful attention to some of the local dishes he was served. And now in his book, alongside his tale of physical abuse and political intrigue, he offers readers a taste of Libya, complete with detailed commentary on what he ate and pictures of the dishes he recreated at home⁵⁸.

We can conclude that *Siġniyyāt* is one of those literary works which, in spite of its modest size – the collection is only 99 pages long – reflects the political and historical turning point experienced by Libya. Hopefully more and more former prisoners will write and eventually publish their experiences. In this way prisons will no longer be seen only as places of the shame and humiliation of its victims, but also as a testimonial of dictatorship's inhumanity.

⁵⁸ D. Cheslow, *A Taste of Libya – in Prison*, of February 26, 2013, <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/125076/a-taste-of-libya-in-prison>. See also Yonatan Raz Portugali, *Israeli Artist's True-to-form Tale of Incarceration in Libya*, of March 2, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/israeli-artist-s-true-to-form-tale-of-incarceration-in-libya-1.506633#>.