

IN A SEA OF PEARLS AND OIL: FOLK HERITAGE AND SOCIAL  
ISSUES IN THE QATARI ARABIC PLAY *UMM IL-ZĒN* (1975) BY  
‘ABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MANNĀ’Ī

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*According to the main studies of the Qatari scholarly literature devoted to theatre (amongst others, Kāfūd 1982, 1988, 1998, 2008; Rašīd 1997, 2004, 2014, 2022), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā’ī (1948) is accounted among the founders of Qatar’s theatre movement. His first work, Umm il-zēn<sup>1</sup>, brought on stage in 1975 and written in Qatari dialect, has marked a milestone in the Qatari history of theatre as it portrays the crisis of traditional cultural values, when the economic boom, following the start of large-scale exploitation of the region’s hydrocarbon resources in the fifties, led to massive social transformations in Gulf societies. Umm il-zēn presents the impact of progress on the tradition as seen through the tormented love story – a metaphor for the dialectical relationship between the old and the new – of Umm il-zēn, the daughter of the village’s captain, and a young man, Ḥamad, who was adopted by the girl’s father, as he and his sister Šarīfah were orphaned at an early age. By the means of the textual analysis of the pièce, the aim of this article is both to show how ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā’ī interweaves folk heritage related to the sea and social criticism in the play and to discuss the reasons why this latter is considered so pioneering in the light of existing critical studies on Qatari theatre.*

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<sup>1</sup> In this article the transliteration of all plays’ titles in Qatari dialect are provided according to its transliteration. To trace the title in Standard Arabic and for a correct reading of the text and other Qatari terms, it should be specified that in Qatari Arabic the definite article is always *il-* instead of *al-* and the diphthongs are *ay* > *ē*, i.e. *layl* > *lēl* “night” and *aw* > *ō*, i.e. *yawm* > *yōm* “day”. The grapheme <چ> could be written as <چ> since it is realised as [j] (i.e. *ġālis* > *yālis* “sitting”); <ق> is mostly realised as [g] (i.e. *waqt* > *wagt* “time”), but also as [q] (i.e. *qalīl* “few”) or as [dʒ] (e.g. *quddām* > *ġiddām* “in front of”), while the grapheme <ك> is used to convert the phoneme [tʃ] instead of [k] (e.g. *tabkī* > *tabcī* “you<sup>m</sup>? cries”). For an in-depth overview of Qatari Arabic phonology, see, amongst others, T.M. Johnstone, *Eastern Arabian Dialects Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York-Toronto 1967, pp. 35-36. It should be noted that the text of *Umm il-zēn* used for the purpose of this study is ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā’ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāġī ’l-wuṣiyyah, al-Maġlis al-Waṭanī li ’l-Taqāfah wa ’l-Funūn wa ’l-Turāt, al-Dawḥah* 2001. All the extracts in Qatari Arabic from *Umm il-zēn* are given in this article exactly as they appear in the original text, including the use of diacritics. All translations from Modern Standard Arabic and Qatari Arabic are mine.

### *Introduction*

Prior to the start of the large-scale exploitation of the Gulf region's oil reserves that started in the fifties –mainly carried out by the British –, the economy of Persian Gulf countries was based on the modest trade of locally produced goods, fishing and pearling, especially in the areas located along the coast. After the oil boom, huge sums of money were invested in the urban and cultural sectors, thus radically transforming the lifestyle of the native communities. In addition, many of these countries witnessed a significant increase in population, due both to immigrants seeking work and fortune, especially from Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and from other Arabic-speaking countries, such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestine.

Due to the socio-economic situation before the oil era, formal schooling and the press arrived in the Gulf much later than in other Arabic-speaking countries, consequently causing a delay in the spreading of literature and of literary criticism, as discussed further in the following sections<sup>2</sup>. Starting from the sixties, the social transformation of the Gulf region has been the main theme of its literature – which initially manifested itself in the early days through short stories and theatrical practices –, including the struggle between past and present, between tradition and modernity, from which other sub-themes, such as the emancipation of women, polygamy and the authority of patriarchal families, branched off<sup>3</sup>. In fact, as observed by Michalak-Pikulska, in the Gulf literature «[c]ontemporariness is characterised by a fierce conflict between riches and the access to luxuries and possibilities of world travel associated with it, and traditional culture, which is constantly the basic factor that causes inhabitants of the Gulf to feel a degree of dissimilarity in relation to other Arab countries»<sup>4</sup>. This socio-cultural situ-

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that there were no forms of literature in the Gulf countries before the discovery of oil. For example, in the Arabian Peninsula the oral poetry called *nabaʿī* was very common. For further readings see, among others, Saad Abdullah Sowayan, *Nabati Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1985.

<sup>3</sup> For further reading see, amongst others, the anthologies of Gulf short stories translated into Italian: I. Camera d'Afflitto (a cura di), *Rose d'Arabia. Racconti di scrittrici dell'Arabia Saudita*, Edizioni e/o, Roma 2001; I. Camera d'Afflitto; M. Avino (a cura di), *Perle degli Emirati*, Jouvence, Roma 2008; Najla Kalach (a cura di), *Rinascita. Racconti dal Qatar*, UNINT University Press, Roma 2023. Claudia Maria Tresso translated a collection of short stories by the Qatari writer Dalāl Ḥalīfah: see, Dalal Khalifa, *Io, gelsomino bianco*, traduzione di C.M. Tresso, Ministry of Culture, Arts & Heritage, Department of Cultural Research & Studies, al-Dawḥah 2013. For an overview of development of Modern Gulf literature, see, for instance, B. Michalak-Pikulska (ed.), *Modern Literature of the Gulf*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt-New York 2016.

<sup>4</sup> B. Michalak-Pikulska (ed.), *Modern Literature of the Gulf*, cit., p. 17.

ation was also mirrored in Qatar, whose theatrical literature is the subject of this study<sup>5</sup>.

The main aim of this article is to show how ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā‘ī (1948) weaves folk heritage, a means to express his social criticism, to the social transformations Qatar went through in the theatrical text of the play that marked the birth of modern theatre in Qatar in the mid-seventies, namely *Umm il-zēn* (The Beautiful, 1975)<sup>6</sup>. The choice of focusing my attention on ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā‘ī is due to several reasons. First and foremost, this author is among the founders of Qatari theatre; secondly, he is among the most productive playwrights. He wrote and directed over 30 plays. Apart from *Umm il-zēn*, other works worth mentioning are: *Bāgī ‘l-wuṣiyyah*<sup>7</sup> (What Remains of the Last Will and Testament, 1976), *Hubēl yā ‘l-māl*<sup>8</sup> (1976), *al-Ġarīmah* (The Crime, 1977), *al-Muġannī wa ‘l-amīrah* (The Singer and the Princess, 1978), *Yā lēl yā lēl* (Oh Night, oh Night, 1979), *Ha ‘l-šikil yā Za‘farān* (That Way oh Za‘farān, 1982), *Maqāmāt bin baḥr* (*Maqāmāt* of a Sailor, 1987), *il-Ĥēmah* (The Tent, 1989), *Ġanāwī ‘l-Šimālī* (al-Šimālī’s Singing, 1999), *Muġram hal il-šōg* (The Lovers of Love, 2001), *Hal il-šarg* (The Easterners, 2005), *Hunāka* (There, 2015), *Wādī ‘l-maġādīr* (The Valley of the Smallpox Infected People, 2018). He also wrote a number of children’s plays such as *al-Ḥidā‘ al-ḡahabī* (The Gold Shoe, 1980), *Man yaḍḥak aḥīr<sup>an</sup>* (He Who Laughs Last, 1982), *al-Muharrīġ* (The Clown, 1989), and *Qariyat al-zuhūr* (The Flowers’ Village, 1994). A final reason for my choice is that Qatari theatre – unlike the theatre of Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates and like Qatari literature in general – has been almost completely ignored in the studies devoted to the Arab theatre published in the major European languages or out-

<sup>5</sup> Although it is evident that the level of official support and popular interest in theatre in the Gulf countries was considerably lower than in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and Morocco, the theatre of Kuwait and Bahrain stood out in that region. Tracing a history of theatre in the Gulf countries is not among the objectives of this study. For further readings see, amongst others, Habib Ghuloom al-Attar, *The Development of Theatrical Activity in the Gulf Region*, Ministry of Culture, Youth & Community Development, Abu Dhabi 2009; M. Ruocco, *Storia del teatro arabo. Dalla nahḍah a oggi*, Carocci, Roma 2010, pp. 62-65, 155-162.

<sup>6</sup> In this article *Umm il-zēn* has not been translated as it is the name of the female protagonist, however it should be made clear that this title could also be interpreted as the one who possesses beauty and thus translated as “The Beauty”. al-Mannā‘ī probably had the dual intention of denoting her name and at the same time he meant the description of her attributes.

<sup>7</sup> In this study, the definite article is always transcribed ‘l- in Qatari Arabic terms when preceded by short or long vowels. In Modern Standard Arabic it is always transcribed *al-*, but when preceded by the prepositions *fī*, *bi* and *li*, and by *wa*, it is ‘l-.

<sup>8</sup> *Hubēl yā ‘l-māl* is a sentence that al-Mannā‘ī has taken from an old folk song, meaning “Come on, o Money!”.

side Arab countries<sup>9</sup>. A poet and playwright, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā’ī was born in the village of al-Ḥidd in Bahrain, but moved to Doha almost immediately, where he grew up. He graduated at the Industry School of Doha in the Electricity Division in 1969 and after this date he continued his studies in the field of electricity with one-year stays in Kuwait (1969) and Lebanon (1973). From 1960 to 1965, he worked at the Shell oil company’s radio and then became assistant director of the Department of Culture and Arts at the Ministry of Information (1979-1983). From 1986 to 2005, he was general director of *Markaz al-Turāṭ al-Ša’bī li-Maḡlis Duwal al-Ḥalīġ* (Folk Heritage Center of the Gulf Cooperation Council) and editor-in-chief of “al-Ma’ṭurat al-Ša’biyyah” (Folk Traditions) magazine. He contributed to establishing a number of theatrical and artistic groups, stimulating theatrical production, and founded the theatrical festival for the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. al-Mannā’ī owes his love for theatre to Jordanian theatre author and director Hānī Šnawbar who, during the seventies, helped him move his first steps in the world of theatre, and who both supervised the text of *Umm il-zēn* and directed its performance.

The Qatari playwright has received several awards and prizes, including the Appreciation Jury Award for the play *Maqāmāt bin baḥr* at the third Carthage Festival in 1978 and the prize for best script award in the theatrical competition for Gulf Cooperation Council youth in Doha in 1989, thanks to his work *Zinzānat al-baḥr* (Cell of the Sea). He also received the Cooperation Council Medal in the literary field at the Muscat Summit of 1989 and an honour as theatrical pioneer at the second Gulf Festival in Doha in 1990. In addition, the Arab Theatre Authority honoured him during the sixth Arab Theatre Festival, which was held in 2019 in Sharjah, and in 2000 he was awarded with Best Integrated Theatre Work for *Ġanāwī ‘l-Šimālī* – a long poem adapted to theatre – at the sixth Gulf Festival in Muscat. Furthermore, al-Mannā’ī received the best director award for the play *Muġram hal il-šōġ* at the seventh Gulf Festival held in Doha in 2002, and the State Appreciation Award in the field of performing arts for the year 2006. Finally, in 2020, he was bestowed on by the Ministry of Culture and Sport at the Doha prize-giving ceremony for playwriting. His plays, among a few others, have been subject to local theatre criticism. Indeed, a further aim of this article is to explore the reasons behind al-Mannā’ī’s being pioneer, on the basis of critical studies devoted to Qatari theatre<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> As far as the Italian language’ studies are concerned, for instance, in her volume M. Ruocco includes an overview of the birth and evolution of theatre in the Gulf, in which she mentions Qatari theatre and *Umm il-zēn* by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā’ī. See M. Ruocco, *Storia del teatro arabo. Dalla naḥḍah a oggi*, cit., pp. 65, 160-161.

<sup>10</sup> The two critics who mostly dealt with theatre in Qatar were Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Kāfūd and Ḥasan Rašīd. That is the reason why most of the critical

*The Qatari Theatre, Development and Criticism*

In the Gulf area, theatre appeared only recently, as being linked to the development of formal education<sup>11</sup>. While debating about the Emirati theatre, Michalak-Pikulska remarked that the first productions showed a society with a specific life purpose and a defined status for every family member. Men were expected to be strong, rich, and holding a high position, whereas women were supposed to show total subservience and carry out all domestic duties as wives and mothers; pretty distinct roles that dramatists were called to instruct society in<sup>12</sup>. The very inception of the rise of theatre forms in Qatar was dated by the critics at the beginning of the fifties, when the massive transformation in the local society began. It is the same period when Qatari intellectuals met those coming from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, who moved in to offer their contribution in building a solid educational and cultural system, following the large investments in various fields. The theatrical activity emerged for the first time thanks to the presence of sports clubs affiliated to foreign oil companies, where the theatre experiments were basically improvisational, both at *Nādī al-Ṭalī‘ah* (the Vanguard Club), which was founded in 1959, and at *Nādī al-Muwazzaḥḥīn al-Kibār* (Senior Employees Club, 1961) – by the Oil Shell Petroleum Company. In the former, *al-Fattāš* (The Firework) and *Bayna al-māḍī wa ‘l-hāḍir* (Between Past and Present) were first performed; in the latter, some other plays were staged in 1961, all written by ‘Aṭīyyah Allāh al-Na‘īmi, such as ‘*Arab Filasṭīn* (Palestine’s Arabs), *Bidāyah wa nihāyah* (Beginning and End), and *Naṣīhat ab* (A Father’s Suggestion). Other clubs, such as *Nādī al-Ġazīrah* (The Peninsula Club), *Nādī al-Naḡāḥ* (The Success Club), and *Nādī al-Waḥdah* (The Unity Club), were primarily sports clubs, and they provided mostly improvisational theatre performances. All these clubs happened to represent, as stated by ‘Abd al-Malik, «the incubators of the development of future artistic talents. However, in the late fifties and early sixties, the presence of theatrical art in Qatar was still a mere ambition»<sup>13</sup>. In fact, the professional theatre was established in 1972<sup>14</sup>.

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studies cited in this article are based on their research, all published in Arabic. The author sincerely thanks the Department of Publications and Translations of the Ministry of Culture State of Qatar and Dr Ḥasan Rašīd for their support in finding books and critical studies about Qatari theatre, which were challenging to obtain.

<sup>11</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *al-Qaḍāyā al-iḡtimā‘īyyah fī ‘l-drāmā al-qaṭariyyah*, Maṭābi‘ Wizārat al-Tarbiyah wa ‘l-Ta‘līm al-‘Ālī, al-Dawḥah 1997, pp. 16-22; M. Ruocco, *Storia del teatro arabo. Dalla nahḍah a oggi*, cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> B. Michalak-Pikulska, *Theatre in the United Arab Emirates*, in “Rocznik Orientalistyczny”, LXV, 2 (2012), pp. 13-20, available at: <https://journals.pan.pl/ro> (last accessed 20 September 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Malik, *al-Malāmiḥ al-ṭaqāfiyyah li ‘l-muḡtama‘ al-qaṭarī*, in Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Malik et al., *al-Masārāt al-ṭaqāfiyyah fī Qaṭar*, Markaz Ibn Ḥaldūn li ‘l-‘Ulūm al-Insāniyyah wa ‘l-Iḡtimā‘īyyah, al-Dawḥah 2022, pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *al-Qaḍāyā al-iḡtimā‘īyyah fī ‘l-drāmā al-qaṭariyyah*, cit., p. 11.

In those decades, schools' theatres played a key role in the development of the local theatrical activity: among them, *Madrasat al-Šinā'ah* (The Industry School) and *al-Madrasah al-Tānawīyyah* (The Secondary School) are worth mentioning. In fact, starting from 1959, some schools began presenting more mature plays: for example, *Dār al-Mu'allimīn* (The Teachers' House) staged in 1963 *Tāğir al-Bašrah* (The Basra's Merchant) by Mušṭafā al-Bandārī, inspired by *The Merchant of Venice* (1596/1598) by William Shakespeare. Beginning from the end of the sixties, new theatre companies were founded, such as *Firqat al-Aḏwā' al-Mūsiqīyyah* (The Musical Lights Band, 1966) directed by 'Abd al-'Azīz Nāšir and *al-Firqaḥ al-Ša'biyyah li 'l-Tamīl* (The Folk Acting Band, 1968) directed by Mūšā 'Abd al-Raḥmān. The latter used to mainly perform folk music and improvised skits during wedding receptions and events – which al-Mannā'ī himself took part in – or comedies, like *il-Imārah il-marbūṭah* (The Tied Building), *il-Tarrār* (The Beggar), *Kandarī 'l-fariğ* (The Neighbourhood Water Carrier) in 1966, written by Ḥasan Ḥusayn<sup>15</sup>. The Qatari theatre in this phase continued to include improvisational and directed works, and the reason for this is due to the novelty of the experience and the haste in presenting the works as a kind of visual reportage of society's real and current situation. However, outstanding plays appeared during this stage of the Qatari theatre development, such as the works of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, Ġānim al-Sulayṭī, and Ḥamad al-Rumayḥī. Other authors, who specialised in this field and had an active role in supporting it, emerged: among them, Ġāsim al-Anšārī and Sa'd Bū Rašīd are worth mentioning<sup>16</sup>.

During the seventies the Qatari theatre reached the expected level of maturity and its art spread all over the Gulf region: in 1972 *al-Masraḥ al-Qaṭarī* (The Qatari Theatre) was founded and so was its theatre group named *Firqat al-Masraḥ al-Qaṭarī* (Qatari Theatre Group), directed by Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh al-Anšārī. Then other theatre companies such as *Firqat al-Sadd* (al-Sadd Group, 1973) and *Firqat Masraḥ al-Aḏwā'* (Theatre of Light Band, 1975) appeared on the scene<sup>17</sup>. *Firqat al-Sadd* presented some works by artists Ġānim al-Sulayṭī, Mušṭafā Aḥmad, Marzūq Bašīr, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, and Sālim Māğid. During this period, Qatari theatre art became successful even

<sup>15</sup> Aḥmad 'Abd al-Malik, *al-Malāmiḥ al-taqāfiyyah li 'l-muğtama' al-qaṭarī*, cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Tamāḏir Ġābir al-Hinzāb, *Ḥarakat al-naqd al-adabī fi Qaṭar. Dirāsah wa taqwīm*, Wizārat al-Ṭaqāfah, al-Dawḥah 2023, pp. 132-133.

<sup>17</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *Riḥlah fi 'awālim al-masraḥ al-qaṭarī wa 'l-ḥalīğī wa 'l-'arabī: maqālāt, dirāsāt, buḥūl*, Dār al-Kutub al-Qaṭariyyah, al-Dawḥah 2014, pp. 119-121; Ahmed Zakaria Al-Shelek; Mustafa Oqail Mahmoud; Yusuf Ibrahim Al-Abdulla, *Qatar's Modern and Contemporary Development. Chapters of Political, Social and Economic Development*, Renoda Modern P. Press, Doha 2015, pp. 319-320.

outside the national borders, taking Qatari plays to international Arab festivals such as in Damascus or Carthage.

The Ministry of Education had great interest in investing in the development of theatre, thus the Department of Theatre Education was established in 1975, with the aim of discovering talented artists – especially Qatari ones – and of encouraging theatre works.

The time between 1965 and 1990 is considered a period in which society witnessed profound transformations at economic, political, social and cultural levels, following the exploitation of oil and natural gas in the region, which prompted the Qatari theatrical movement. The massive economic change in the Gulf region deeply affected the traditional model of life, which was put on stage. According to Kāfūd, the main topics and issues of the Qatari theatrical texts were about the cultural gap, the disparity of positions between the conservative generation of parents and the young generation, who was eager to change and keep pace with modernity, while searching for better life conditions. These texts contributed to showing the reality of the State of Qatar between the inherited norms, values, customs, and traditions, and the imported culture and behaviour. Hence, theatre is considered an important tool in monitoring Qatar's massive changes and its related social and intellectual issues<sup>18</sup>. In fact, most of the works dealt with human suffering, issues of marriage, and high dowries. Among them, to name a few, *Bint il-nūḥaḍah* (The Captain's Daughter, 1971) by Mūsā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Marrah w bass* (Once only, 1974) by 'Alī Mīrzā, *Bayt al-ašbāḥ* (The Haunted Mansion, 1977) by Ġānim al-Sulayṭī, *Bū Daryāh*<sup>19</sup> (Bu Daryah, 1988) by Ḥamad al-Rumayḥī. Qatari theatre criticism developed later, compared with Kuwait and Bahrain: not only because of the delay in the rise of theatre companies, but also because the press, which would affect the flourishing of Qatari literature, was born late. One of the first periodicals was "al-Maš'al" (1961), the oil company's official magazine about the company's news and events, such as employees' weddings and promotions. Since the beginning of the seventies – when Qatar's modern era started after its independence from the British in 1971 –, many periodicals have been published. Some of them are: "Mağallat al-Dawḥah" (Doha Magazine, 1969), "al-'Urūbah" (The Arabism, 1970), "al-'Arab" (The Arabs, 1972), "al-'Ahd" (The Promise, 1974), "al-Rāyah"

<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Kāfūd, *al-Masrah fī Qaṭar. al-Naš'ah wa 'l-tağribah*, al-Fikr al-'arabī, Dimašq 2008, pp. 37-39.

<sup>19</sup> *Bū Daryāh* means "the Father (or the Lord) of the Sea". According to folk tales from Qatar as well as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, Bū Daryāh is a legendary creature from the depths of the sea that attacks the boats of pearl fishermen at night. See K. Pechcin, *A Tale of 'The Lord of the Sea' in Qatari Folklore and Tradition*, in "Romano-Arabica", *Fictional Beings in Middle East Cultures*, XVII (2017), available at: [https://romanoarabica.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/xvii\\_2017\\_fictional\\_beings\\_in\\_middle\\_eas.pdf](https://romanoarabica.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/xvii_2017_fictional_beings_in_middle_eas.pdf) (last accessed 25 September 2023).

(The Flag, 1979), which strongly contributed to the spreading of Qatar's main literature form of that time: the short story<sup>20</sup>. News and articles about regular theatrical seasons, festivals and theatre shows became more and more common, despite the fact that they were initially characterised by subjectivity<sup>21</sup>. In fact, Rašīd identifies two types of criticism in Qatar: the subjective one and the objective one. The latter was based on a scientific approach, aimed at analysing the theatrical text, characters and their connection to time, space and events, dialogues, and all the elements of the play. A subjective critic was more similar to news reports without either analysing the creative impact of the play or discussing the issues raised by the author through it<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, Rašīd claims that those who would write articles about the Qatari theatre were influenced by their own interests towards a certain theatre company or actors, and by the relationship between the periodical they used to write for and a certain theatre company's owner. Apart from Ḥasan Rašīd himself, some other of the few critics in the theatre field worth mentioning are Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Kāfūd, Muḥammad Ġābir al-Anšārī, Sāmī Ḥašabah, Ġānim al-Sulayfī, Marzūq Bašīr, and Aḥmad 'Abd al-Malik. Rašīd also claims that the subjective criticism is the one that prevails in the local press nowadays.

Following the rise of the Qatari theatre in the seventies, the Ministry of Culture and Information started to seriously consider sending local and young intellectuals outside Qatar to study theatre and theatrical criticism, by offering them scholarships. A group of Qataris joined the academic study of theatre at *al-Ma'had al-'Ālī li 'l-Funūn al-Masraḥiyyah* (Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts) in Egypt and in Kuwait. Among those who studied theatre criticism and later contributed to the objective critical movement, we can find the already mentioned Ġānim al-Sulayfī, Marzūq Bašīr, Ḥasan Rašīd, and Ḥamad al-Rumayḥī<sup>23</sup>. Notwithstanding that, Rašīd observes that theatre criticism after the end of the seventies proved to be short-lived, due both to the lack of serious interest in that role in the region and to the fact that some journalists often confused subjective news with objective criticism. In addition to that, some elements made criticism become inactive in Qatar. To mention some, the fact that most literary studies did not even consider the

<sup>20</sup> On the Qatari short story see, amongst others, Māhir Ḥasan Fahmī, *Malāmiḥ al-qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah fī 'l-adab al-qatārī*, in "Ḥawliyyah", 6 (1983), pp. 7-22; Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Salīm, *al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah fī Qaṭar*, in "Mağallat al-Dawḥah", 164 (2021), pp. 39-46.

<sup>21</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *al-Naqd al-masraḥī fī dawlat Qaṭar*, in 'Abd al-Malik et al., *al-Masārāt al-ṭaqāfiyyah fī Qaṭar*, cit., pp. 44-46.

<sup>22</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *Ṭaṭawwur al-naqd al-masraḥī fī duwal al-Ḥalīġ al-'arabī min 'ām 1965 ḥattā 'ām 1990, dir'āsah tāriḥiyyah fanniyyah*, al-Mağlis al-Waṭānī li 'l-Ṭaqāfah wa 'l-Funūn wa 'l-Turāṭ, al-Dawḥah 2004, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> Ḥasan Rašīd, *al-Naqd al-masraḥī fī dawlat Qaṭar*, cit., pp. 43-44.



world of theatre, and that some critics stopped writing critically from the eighties on, like Gānim al-Sulayṭī<sup>24</sup>.

Rašīd also stated that the regression of the theatrical liveliness was mostly due to the spread of commercial works, shows, and seasonal children's plays. These factors led critics and scholars to shy away from covering the presentations. They did not even know where to publish their articles, due to the lack of reliable periodicals willing to publish any criticism which would reveal the fragility of the theatrical performance<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, after all this, theatre activity became stagnant and the role of criticism was marginalised<sup>26</sup>. This pessimistic view is corroborated by critics and writers Marzūq Bašīr<sup>27</sup> and Aḥmad 'Abd al-Malik. The latter writes: «Despite the flexibility of censorship over theatrical works, especially during the modern state era, the trend of many theatre artists towards television drama has negatively affected theatre in Qatar. Most of the works presented during the holidays are based on productions coming from a number of Gulf countries with the only purpose of making commercial profit»<sup>28</sup>. In spite of the lively moments that characterised theatre in Qatar, especially in the seventies, its international impact has remained modest since then, as playwrights have written less, either because of censorship or because they switched to writing for the more lucrative television industry. Currently, regardless of the resources invested and the efforts made by the Ministry of Culture in promoting the art of theatre by including it in the curricula of schools and universities, it remains confined to the local context<sup>29</sup>.

*Umm il-Zēn and the Local Changes: from a Sea of Pearls to a Sea of Oil*

*Umm il-Zēn* is about the tormented love story between Umm il-Zēn, the daughter of the village's captain Bū Rāšīd, and the young man Ḥamad. Ḥamad and his sister Šarīfah were adopted at an early age by Umm il-Zēn's father, who also has a son, Rāšīd. Thus, the four young people grow up together dreaming of the marriages between Ḥamad and Umm il-Zēn and between Rāšīd and Šarīfah. The pièce places itself in the second phase of the

<sup>24</sup> Hasan Rašīd, *Ṭaṭawwur al-naqd al-masraḥī fī duwal al-Ḥalīġ al-'arabī min 'ām 1965 ḥattā 'ām 1990, dirāsah tāriḥiyyah fanniyyah*, cit., pp. 2-5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Hasan Rašīd, *al-Naqd al-masraḥī fī dawlat Qaṭar*, cit., pp. 59-60.

<sup>27</sup> See his interview in "al-Ġarīdah", 3/12/2015, available at: <https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1468421100823237300>.

<sup>28</sup> Aḥmad 'Abd al-Malik, *al-Malāmiḥ al-ṭaqāfiyyah li 'l-muġtama' al-qatarī*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> The most active institution in promoting local theatre is the *Markaz Šu'ūn al-Masraḥ* (Theatre Affairs Centre), founded in 2016 and affiliated to the Ministry of Culture of the State of Qatar, whose goals include developing and educating theatrical talents as well as providing the Qatari theatrical movement with new perspectives.

development of Qatari theatre, just when the professional theatre was founded, thanks to the establishment of the aforementioned *Firqat al-Masraḥ al-Qaṭarī*.

al-Mannā'ī wrote almost all of his works in the Qatari dialect, as his main objective was to shake the consciences of the local audience first, then that of the Gulf's wider audience. In fact, the mission of al-Mannā'ī's works is clear, as emerged from an interview, where he was asked about the intrinsic message in all his works: «Since my theatrical beginnings, I have used heritage as a form of entertainment, but the people's lives have always been the most important point. If my work does not contain them in their various stages, and if the story is not about everybody's issues, then it would be incomplete. That's why I make sure the human aspect is included in all of my works. All recent works try to raise questions about what happens to a person as a result of injustice or tyranny or of his/her big dreams. I do not prefer to address the daily problems that can be solved by a political or economic decision; rather, I talk about real human issues embodied in moral matters such as hope, dreams, and fear»<sup>30</sup>.

This play belongs to the social theatre genre and is divided into three acts written in Qatari Arabic. It takes place in a seaside Arabian Gulf village at the turn of the era when all its inhabitants lived almost exclusively on pearl fishing and trading, during the early years of the economic boom. The play was staged in 1975 at *Masraḥ al-Nağmah* (the Star Theatre) and among the leading actors were Ġānim 'Alī al-Mahandī (Ḥamad), Su'ād 'Abd Allāh (Umm il-zēn), Zīnah 'Alī (Šarīfah)<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, for the first time in the history of Qatari theatre, *Firqat al-Idā'ah al-Mūsīqīyyah* (Musical Radio Group) directed by Taysīr 'Aqīl accompanied the performance with folk poems and *fġērī* songs<sup>32</sup> written by the author<sup>33</sup>. Apart from *Umm il-zēn*, many are the plays by al-Mannā'ī related to the sea and pearl diving, to name a few: *Yā lēl yā lēl*, *Maqāmāt bin baḥr*, *Zinzānat al-baḥr*, *Muğram hal il-šōg*.

To understand *Umm il-zēn* and contextualise the predominant role of folk heritage related to the sea as a means to recover tradition in al-Mannā'ī's

<sup>30</sup> Maḥmūd Sulaymān, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī fī ḥiwār šarīḥ li 'l-Šarq, in "al-Šarq bi-Rāḥah", 10/12/2010, available at: <https://almanai.net/data/pdf/a-rahman-almannai-7.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> The other actors who performed in *Umm il-zēn* are: Muḥammad Būğasūm (Šulṭān), Salwā 'Abd Allāh (Umm Rāšid), 'Alī Mīrzā Maḥmūd (Rāšid), 'Alī Ḥasan (Sālim), Ḥasan Ibrāhīm (Mubārak), 'Abd Allāh Aḥmad (Aḥmad), Muḥammad al-Muslimānī (Bū Rāšid), Sayār al-Kuwārī (Šayḥ al-baḥr), Aḥmad al-Mannā'ī (Sālim al-digil), Muḥammad Ġāsīm (Ġāsīm), Sālim 'Abd Allāh (Ḥālid).

<sup>32</sup> For further reading on *fġērī* musical genre, see Habib Hassan Touma, *The Fidjri, a Major Vocal Form of the Bahrain Pearl-divers*, in "The World of Music", 19, 3-4 (1977), pp. 121-127.

<sup>33</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāġī 'l-wuṣīyyah*, cit., p. 95.

works<sup>34</sup>, it is necessary to consider the role of the sea for the Qatari people and to draw a brief outline of the pearl diving activity (*il-gōṣ*). Firstly, it is worth mentioning what Fromherz commented about the geography of Qatar: «Pumped from below the sea, oil and gas have transformed the geography of Qatar, creating an artificial, human geography and climate. Because of its nearly unbearable climate on land, Qatari society used to be almost completely oriented towards the sea. Unlike the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries with significant inlands populations, oases and settlements, the vast majority of Qataris have always lived along the coast and there are no permanent settlements at all in the interior of the country»<sup>35</sup>. This fact made pearl diving even more relevant to the survival of the local population<sup>36</sup>. In fact, pearl diving was a seasonal activity which constituted the primary economic income in Qatar as well as in other coastal Arabian Gulf countries. Hobbs reported: «Pearls from the Gulf were traded to India, Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and further afield to Europe and North America, where the aristocratic and emerging middle classes regarded pearls as luxury items for use in jewellery and clothing. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the pearl trade in the Gulf had grown to such an extent that it united men of all backgrounds»<sup>37</sup>. Pearl diving was a very hard and dangerous job. As highlighted by Al-Tae, «[t]he mission of pearling involved many risks. Divers endangered their lives during the four month trip in which the only diving gear was a peg placed on the nose»<sup>38</sup>. Many died due to drowning, swordfish and shark attacks, trachoma, anaemia, malnutrition,

<sup>34</sup> The theme of recovering tradition – through the (re)discovery of the Qatari people's own history – also recurs in the historical novel *al-Qurṣān* (The Corsair) by 'Abd al-'Azīz Āl Maḥmūd. See P. Viviani, *History in the Fiction of 'Abd al-'Azīz Āl Maḥmūd*. *al-Qurṣān* (2011), in Sobhi Boustani; Rasheed El-Enany; Monica Ruocco; Patrizia Zanelli (eds.), *Fiction and History: the Rebirth of the Historical Novel in Arabic. Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> EURAMAL Conference, 28 May-1 June 2018 (Naples/Italy)*, Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, Roma 2022, pp. 129-143.

<sup>35</sup> A.J. Fromherz, *Qatar a Modern History*, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London-New York 2012, p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> Concerning Qatari demography, De Bel-Air reported: «When the exploitation of Qatar's oilfields started in 1949, the country had hardly 16,000 inhabitants, down from about 27,000 as recorded half a century earlier in 1908. [...] In 1970, shortly before Qatar gained independence (in 1971), the first census was conducted. It estimated the total population at 111,113, of which 45,039 were Qataris and 66,094 foreigners. This was the first and last time that population estimates for nationals and non-nationals would be disclosed in the country». F. De Bel-Air, *Demography, Migration, and Labour Market in Qatar*, in "Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM)", 3 (2017), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> M. Hobbs, *Divers are a Pearl's Best Friend: Pearl Diving in the Gulf 1840s-1930s*, in "Qatar Digital Library", available at: <https://www.qdl.qa/en/divers-are-pearl%E2%80%99s-best-friend-pearl-diving-gulf-1840s%E2%80%931930s> (last accessed 5 September 2023).

and scurvy. Inside the ship, the hours were long and the food was scarce. Pearls of little value, if operated by an expert, could be transformed into gems of rare beauty, but removing the pearl from its shell also involved risk. Upon their return, the pearl divers faced the stifling negotiation of the merchant who always offered half the price. Negotiations took hours, and being at the mercy of the merchants, divers had no flexibility to market their precious pearls elsewhere. [...] But the main harshness lay in the diving activity itself. Typically, divers were divided into two groups, alternating dives. The diver plunged into the ocean with a basket of rocks to expedite his descent to the bottom, around seventy-two feet down. When he ran out of air, he pulled the rope, signaling the ship's crew to pull him up. Afterwards, the diver would rest briefly before diving again. Typically, divers performed ten sequential dives, separated by nine respites in the blistering sun, only eating solid food in the evening – an agonizing daily ritual until sundown»<sup>39</sup>. This brief description of pearl diving echoes the love-hate relationship that the Qatari people had with the sea, and that is one of the intrinsic features in various of al-Mannāṭī's works.

Analysing the text under analysis, it is evident that the troubled love story between Umm il-Zēn and Ḥamad serves as a metaphor to convey the dialectical relationship between the old (the past) and the new (the future).

The first act is made up of a single scene and opens with a dialogue between Ḥamad and Šarīfah, who confesses to be very scared about her brother's departure to the sea. This act portrays the story of Ḥamad and Šarīfah's adoption as well as Ḥamad's, Rāšid's and Bū Rāšid's preparation for the pearl diving season. The scene ends with a fond farewell between Ḥamad and his beloved Umm il-zēn and his sister Šarīfah, as emerged in the following excerpt from the dialogue between Ḥamad and Umm il-zēn:

حمد: [...] إنتي مُبْ أم الزين اللي يغنون عليها الناس، إنتي في قلبي شي ثاني.  
 أم الزين: حمد والبحر.. البحر بينسبك أم الزين.  
 حمد: لا، ما اظن ولا حتى النوم يقدر ينسيني.  
 أم الزين: قول بترجع يا حمد.

Ḥamad: [...] you are not the Umm il-zēn of the folk songs<sup>40</sup>, in my heart you are more than that.

<sup>38</sup> Pearl divers (*ġawwāṣ*) used to put a clip (*faṭām*) on their nose to prevent water from entering. Sometimes they used to wear finger protectors (*habaṭ*) to prevent injuries caused by sharp rocks and rough oyster shells. For an in-depth description of pearl diving in the Gulf (based on Bahrain) and five texts that provide vivid scenes of life on a pearling boat, see amongst others, C. Holes, *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia. Volume II: Ethnographic texts*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 1-46.

<sup>39</sup> Nasser Al-Tae, 'Enough, Enough, Oh Ocean': *Music of the Pearl Divers in the Arabian Gulf*, in "MESA Bulletin", 39, 1 (2005), p. 21.

Umm il-zēn: Ḥamad, what about the sea? The sea will make you forget about Umm il-zēn.

Ḥamad: No, I don't think so. Not even in my sleep will I be able to forget you.

Umm il-zēn: Ḥamad, tell me you will come back<sup>41</sup>.

Umm Rāšid, the other female character along with Umm il-zēn and Šarīfah, appears in the first act. She plays a secondary role, comforting her adopted son Ḥamad in preparation for his departure, just like Sulṭān, Captain Bū Rāšid's family servant, does. He is a somewhat grumpy but at times ironic figure, who turns out to be a more prominent character in the play later on. Equally relevant is the fleeting appearance of Sālim *il-digil*<sup>42</sup>, a crippled man who lives in a small hut near the sea and who lost an arm in an accident at sea. This character never says a word and his appearance is only described in two captions in the play: in the first act Sālim the crippled comes out of his hut crossing the stage and heading towards the sea, while in the second act he comes out of his hut carrying his belongings<sup>43</sup>.

The second act consists of three scenes: the first scene is set two months after the departure for the pearl-diving seasonal activity. Two men, Sālim and Mubārak, enter the scene from the sea and mention the storm that took place a few days earlier. They express their concern for Bū Rāšid and the other men at sea, but, most importantly, their dialogue witnesses for the first time the radical change that is taking place in the local society:

مبارك: [...] انا صبح سمعت قبل الدشه بيومين ان هناك ناس عُرب يابيين يحفرون الأرض وخذوا ناس معاهم يساعدونهم، لكن ما دريت ان هالدنيا بتتغير في شهرين.  
سالم: [...] ان الناس كلهم يشتغلون ويا العُرب في البر ويحصلون بيزات وايد، وبعد مثل ما تعرف القماش مو مثل الأول قيمته رخصت.

Mubārak: [...] Two days before we left, I learnt that some outsiders came to dig the earth and brought some other people to help them, but I didn't know that this world would change within two months.

Sālim: [...] Everybody is working with these outsiders in the desert, making a lot of money. Moreover, as you know, pearls aren't as valuable as they once were: they have lost their worth<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> The Umm il-zēn in this quotation hints at the protagonist of a Qatari folk song, that is the ideal beauty who inspired the songs of sailors who stayed long at sea. The short song will be taken up by the servant Sulṭān in the second act in 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, Umm il-zēn *wa Bāgī* 'l-wuṣiyyah, cit., pp. 33-34.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> *al-Digil* in Qatari dialect is referring to the mast of a ship.

<sup>43</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, Umm il-zēn *wa Bāgī* 'l-wuṣiyyah, cit., pp. 19, 35.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Sālīm the crippled appears, while Mubārak and Sālīm are talking. Sālīm the crippled comes out of his hut, carrying a bundle full of his stuff, and goes away without saying a word, although the two men try to convince him to stay.

مبارك: وقف يا سالم وين رايح، هالعشه ليش تركتها؟  
سالم: [...] سمع مثل ما سمع غيره وراح حق الدنيا اليبديه يدور له شغل.

Mubārak: Stop, Sālīm! Where are you going? Why are you leaving this hut?  
Sālīm: [...] he learnt what the others also learnt and is leaving to start a new life in search of a job<sup>45</sup>.

al-Mannā'ī adopts Sālīm the crippled as a symbol of the fall of traditional values in the Qatari community. This change in moral principles started around the fifties, during the oil and gas excavations, in the form of a partial loss of traditional values (just like Sālīm losing one arm), and then it inexorably continued over the years until it became a total loss (represented by Sālīm's leaving of his own hut)<sup>46</sup>. The small hut by the sea could symbolise the hope for protecting the traditional values born out of the sea-bound life experience, the typical lifestyle of the Gulf Coast peoples, and is now abandoned by Sālīm the crippled. Still astonished, the two men comment on his decision, when Aḥmad, a man in his forties dressed in trousers and shirt, enters the scene, eliciting laughter by saying that it is necessary to push young people away from the sea and not to remind them of the times when everyone's life depended on it. So, annoyed by Aḥmad's attitude, Mubārak reacts to the change by shifting the focus back to human values:

مبارك: لا يا أحمد هذي أهو الكلام اللي تعلمته، ولا حتى هاللبس اليبديد عليك.. صج إن الدنيا اتغيرت لكن لا، اللي ينسى ماضيه ماله حاضر، زمان البحر بيتم نحازي به اليهال في ليالي الشتاء الطويله.. نص عمرنا يا احمد شلون ننسى؟!  
أحمد: لأنك لازم تنساه، باجر البيزات بتنسيك إياه.. شلي يخليك أتذكر الملح والبحر...

Mubārak: No, Aḥmad, these are not the words you have learned, and nor are these new clothes you are wearing now. It is fine for the world to have changed, but those who forget their past have no present. We will tell the children about the time of the sea during the long winter nights. The first half of our lives, Aḥmad! How can we possibly forget?

Aḥmad: You have to forget it, money will make you forget about it tomorrow. What do the salt and the sea make you think of, instead...<sup>47</sup>?

Then the men return from the sea carrying Rāšid's dead body and offer their condolences to Bū Rāšid. Wrapped in grief, Ḥamad remains alone on stage and angrily addresses to the Sea, which enters the stage as a personified

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Kāfūd; Marzūq Bašīr; Ḥasan Rašīd, *Dirāsāt fī 'l-masraḥ al-qaṭarī*, Maṭābi' Wizārat al-Tarbiyah wa 'l-Ta'līm al-'Ālī, al-Dawḥah 1998, p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāgī 'l-wuṣiyyah*, cit., p. 36-37.

character<sup>48</sup>. It speaks to Ḥamad and warns him about the future. Through this dialogue, al-Mannā'ī re-enacts the indissoluble bond between the man from the Gulf and the sea:

حمد: [...] خلاص عقب اليوم مب محتاجين أن نقدم لك الضحايا والقرايين لقممتنا بتصير أسهل من الأول وألذ من الأول بدون ادموع.. بدون ألم وبدون فراق طويل .. زمانك انتهى ... راح.  
شيخ البحر: لا تفكر يا مسكين ان بس زمانى فيه المصايب. [...] الله ونسيت الفرحة .. نسيتت الخير والسعادة في هالذقيقة .. ما يطرا عليك إلا الموت وراشد، نسيت الخير، لكن معاليه بكره بتشوف.

Ḥamad: [...] Enough, we will no longer need to offer you victims and sacrifices to get a bite from now on. Everything will be easier and better than before, no tears, no pain or long separations. Your time is over, it's gone!

The Sea: Don't you think, poor deluded, that only my era is the one that brings misfortune. [...] Did you forget how joyful, how good and how happy those times were? All you talk about is death and Rāšid, you forgot the good things, but tomorrow you will see<sup>49</sup>.

The scene ends with Šarīfah mourning for Rāšid. She decides to wear a black dress until the day she feels joyful again, that is to say when Ḥamad and Umm il-zēn get married. By now the world has changed a lot, the economy is no longer based on pearls, but on oil and gas. Ḥamad wants to marry Umm il-zēn, but her father, Bū Rāšid, does not agree, because Ḥamad does not have enough money for his daughter's dowry, which has greatly increased because of the spread of prosperity throughout society. Therefore, Umm il-zēn asks Ḥamad to comply with his father's request and go to work (for the oil companies), and Ḥamad decides to leave:

حمد: يا أم الزين انا عارف ان الشغل مب عيب، وانا معزم على الشغل بس قلت الأول اطمن قلبي عليج .. لكن ابوج قالي: اشعندك حق الزواج اللحين، الزواج يكلف واليوم غير إمس. [...] .. وين الحياة الزينة الأولية .. راحت .. الكل يركض وراء المادة.  
أم الزين: [...] روح .. روح .. وانا هنيهه بانتظرك، ولا بد ابوي في النهاية بيرضى [...] .. اليوم تبي تزوح يا حمد، لا، حاول واسمع كلام ابوي .. عيزه يا حمد، ولين يمعت الفلوس ورجعت، بعدين تقدّر توقف في وبيهه.  
حمد: معليه يا أم الزين علشانج ياسوي كل شي، وبارح وباحاول المستحيل وبارجع يا ام الزين وبارجع لا تنسين ..

Ḥamad: Umm il-zēn, I know that working is not something to be ashamed of, and I really want to get a job, but the first thing I care for is you. Your father asked me: «What do you own to afford a wedding? Getting married today is more expensive than it was in the past». [...] Where did the good old life go? Everyone is pursuing material things.

<sup>48</sup> In the play, the Sea enters the scene in the guise of a man wielding a triton, reminiscent of the Greek mythological figure of Poseidon, an attempt by al-Mannā'ī to incorporate masks into his work.

<sup>49</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāgī 'l-wuṣiyyah*, cit., pp. 46-47.

Umm il-zēn: [...] Go, go, I'll wait here for you. Eventually, my father will come to terms with it, of course [...] Leave today, Ḥamad, try to listen to what my father says and once you scrape together some money, come back and face him.

Ḥamad: All right, Umm il-zēn, I would do anything for you. I will leave and try the impossible. But I will come back Umm il-zēn, I promise I will! Don't forget me<sup>50</sup>!

Ḥamad, frightened by the swirling social change, asks Umm il-zēn to wait for him and not to change the way the world is changing. Thus al-Mannā'ī resorts to a simile between Umm il-zēn and the sea. Umm il-zēn is a metaphor for the past suffering under the tyranny of the present:

أم الزين: لا يا حمد، أم الزين بتم مثل هالبحر محله من يوم كنا إصغار نلعب على سيفه، من اول ما فهمنا الدنيا إلى اليوم ما تغير شي، وانت بتروح وبترجع وبتحصل ام الزين إهي إهي ما تغيرت.

Umm il-zēn: No. Ḥamad Umm il-zēn will stay in her place like this sea will, like this beach where we used to play when we were children, nothing has changed since then: now go, and when you come back, you will find Umm il-zēn right here, and you will not find her changed<sup>51</sup>.

A dialogue between Aḥmad (symbolising the new) and Sālim (symbolising the old) opens the third act, and a further reflection is presented on the importance of money, which has changed people's values since the *ḡōṣ*:

أحمد: [...] يوم زمن الغوص، شلون تبينا إنتأسف على الماضي؟!  
سالم: لكن الأول راحة بال ولا نفكر.  
أحمد: لأنه ما عندنا شي، أما الحين عندنا خير لازم نفكر فيه...  
سالم: ايه.. إلا النفوس تغيرت.

Aḥmad: [...] the period of the *ḡōṣ*, how can we feel sorry for the past?!

Sālim: But before we had peace and we weren't concerned.

Aḥmad: Because we had nothing, but now we have things to watch out for.

Sālim: Yeah, even the people's spirits have changed<sup>52</sup>.

It is interesting to underline al-Mannā'ī's choice of including two new secondary characters, Ġāsīm and Ḥālīd: two young men of about sixteen years of age representing the new generation. They discuss the change in society since the time their fathers worked at sea, appreciating that they can now escape the dangers of the sea. This dialogue is interrupted by the arrival of Šarīfah, who is joined by Bū Rāšīd. The two youths thus become spectators to one of the most relevant moments of this work, when Bū Rāšīd informs Šarīfah that he has given Umm il-zēn in marriage to a rich man, whose name

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



al-Mannā'ī never mentions, in order to emphasise that only his wealth matters, not his family or moral values:

بو راشد: [...] وين أم الزين؟  
 شريفة: عمي!.. والله ما دري قالت لي بتروح حق نوره بنت سلطان.  
 بو راشد: لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله، يا ناس الحين الدنيا مو مثل أول كل يوم تطلع، الحين الدنيا تغيرت،  
 الأول تطلعون من بيت لبيت أما الحين لا.  
 شريفة: بس عمي أنت تعرف أم الزين عدل.  
 بو راشد: أنا أعرفها بس المصيبة إنه الناس ما عرفهم، أول كنت أعرفهم، أما الحين كلهم تغيروا.  
 شريفة: تغيروا؟! شلي غيرهم يا عمي؟  
 بو راشد: غيرهم الزمن يا بنتي، الزمن يقبل الدنيا.  
 شريفة: اللي قلبه طيب ما يتغير.  
 بو راشد: [...] الحين اهيه كبرت والناس ما يرحمون حد، وخاصة وإن هي صارت مخطوبة.  
 شريفة: مخطوبه (لحظة ذهول)؟  
 بو راشد: ايه يا شريفة ما دريتي.. ياني ريال كفو من اغنى الناس وعنده فلوس وخطبها.  
 شريفة: عمي.. وحمد يا عمي.  
 بو راشد: حمد ولدي وانا بادور له على بنت اللي على قده.  
 شريفة: وفيه بنات على قده وبنات مب على قده؟ [...]

Bū Rāšid: [...] where is Umm il-zēn?

Šarīfah: I have no idea, she told me she was going to Nūrah, Sultān's daughter.

Bū Rāšid: There is no might and no power except for that of God, the world now is nothing like before, when she used to go out every day. Today the world is different: in the past you could wander from house to house, but now you can't.

Šarīfah: You know well what Umm il-zēn is like.

Bū Rāšid: I know her, but the scariest thing is that I don't know the other people. You used to know the people before, but now they have all changed.

Šarīfah: Changed? And what made them change?

Bū Rāšid: Time has changed them, my daughter, time changes the world.

Šarīfah: Those with a good heart don't change.

Bū Rāšid: She's grown up now, and people spare no one, especially now that she's engaged.

Šarīfah: Engaged?! (moment of amazement).

Bū Rāšid: Yes, Šarīfah, didn't you know? A very rich man with lots of money showed up and I got her engaged.

Šarīfah: But dad, what about Ḥamad?

Bū Rāšid: Ḥamad is my son and I will find him a suitable girl to his level [...].

Šarīfah: Seriously, are there girls who are suitable for him and others who are not<sup>53</sup>?

The paradox lies in Bū Rāšid's vision of this change, as he does not realise that he is literally one of the changed people he refers to in the dialogue. He himself, a captain in the days of pearl fishing, has betrayed the moral values

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

of those who have always lived off the sea, becoming subjugated by wealth. Bū Rāšid undergoes a total metamorphosis that also emerges in the contempt he expresses towards his adopted son, preventing him from marrying his daughter because he does not consider him an equal, of the same social class. Bū Rāšid loses his interest in the community and starts showing interest in individuality instead.

This dialogue ends up focusing on another theme, which al-Mannā'ī pioneered in the theatre: the position of the Gulf woman within society and her emancipation. In this scene, in fact, al-Mannā'ī depicts Šarīfah almost as a feminist heroine, because she confronts Bū Rāšid, instead of accepting her fate without fighting as Umm il-zēn does. She shouts in his face that he has changed and has betrayed the trust of his adopted sons, because he had promised Ḥamad to give him his daughter in marriage once he returned with the money for the dowry<sup>54</sup>. Women's issues such as suffering patriarchal authority, repudiation, and unhappy marriages, are predominant themes in the literature of the Arabian Peninsula, especially in the women's short story between the late seventies and the eighties. In the specific case of Qatar, the theme of the unhappy marriage imposed by the father has been addressed by various female writers including Kaṭam Ġabr al-Kuwārī, Umm Akṭam, Hudā al-Na'imī, but also by a few male authors such as Muḥsin Fahd al-Hāġirī, Aḥmad 'Abd al-Malik<sup>55</sup>. As noted by Muṣṭafā<sup>56</sup>, the female characters in al-Mannā'ī's works generally belong to three types of women: the annihilated one, with zero chances to counterattack, who surrenders to what has been decided for her; the strong one, who rebels against her fate and tries to change it with all means at her disposal; and the evil one, who only cares for achieving her goals without any scruples or moral values. The classification proposed by Muṣṭafā raises another observation: these types of women are very similar to those identifiable in the tradition of popular fairy tales, both Arabic and otherwise. An example might be the story of Cinderella, which closely resembles the popular tale known in the Gulf, especially in the eastern area, entitled *Bint il-sammāč* (The Fisherman's Daughter) where at least two of the above-mentioned types of women are observable: the annihilated female protagonist (the good daughter) is the victim of the evil woman (the stepmother), and this element is consistent with al-Mannā'ī's strong link to folk tradition<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> For further reading, see, Najla Kalach, *Insights of the Marriage in Qatari Literature: A Reading of Three Short Stories*, in "Romano-Arabica", *Arabic Literature. Quo Vadis?*, XXII (2024), pp. 44-55, available at: <https://romanoarabica.wordpress.com/journal-issues/>.

<sup>56</sup> Imām Muṣṭafā, *Šūrat al-mar'ah fī masraḥ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī*, al-Maġlis al-Waṭanī li 'l-Ṭaqāfah wa 'l-Funūn wa 'l-Turāt, al-Dawḥah 2006, pp. 190-191.

The play continues with the departure of Bū Rāšid from the scene. The two young men continue their dialogue, during which al-Mannā'ī, through the 16-year-old Ġāsīm, conveys his message about the importance of education. He refers to the conditions of his country, where the educational opportunities have dramatically increased – such as the founding of Qatar University in 1973 – and emphasises that knowledge must prevail over money because, without it, wealth is of little use.

In the last scene Ḥamad finally returns, on the very night when Umm il-zēn is due to get married. The bad news is entrusted to Sulṭān who, at first, tries to hide it but eventually, while weeping, reveals the bitter truth to him. When Ḥamad is left alone on stage in despair, the Sea reappears and reminds him of what he had told him long before:

شيخ البحر: [...] اهي الدنيا لين تغيرت تغير كل شي فيها، انت افكرت بس البحر اهو اللي بيتغير، بس المراكب .. بس الغوص، بس صرخة النهام اهي اللي يسكتها الزمان.

The Sea: [...] that's the way the world is. If it changes, everything changes. You thought that only the sea would change, that only the boats... the *gōṣ*... only the singing of the *nahhām*<sup>58</sup> would be silenced by time<sup>59</sup>.

شيخ البحر: والخير وياك والفلوس بين يدك.

حمد: الفلوس.

شيخ البحر: إيه الفلوس، هذي اهي بين يدك وايد اكثر مما كنت تتصور.  
حمد: الفلوس.. الفلوس مب إهي الخير.. الفلوس مب هذي الدنيا.

The Sea: Now you have wealth and money.

Hamad: Money...

The Sea: Yes, money. You have money in your pockets, much more than you could ever imagine.

Hamad: Money... Money is not happiness; money is not everything<sup>60</sup>.

The Sea, which, according to critic Ḥasan Rašid, symbolises the voice of the author<sup>61</sup>, declares that Umm il-zēn is not to blame: she is only a victim who has silently suffered the injustice of change<sup>62</sup>, while Šarīfah defines her as «a

<sup>57</sup> Rāmī Abū Šihāb, *Bunyat al-ḥikāyah al-ša'biyyah al-qatariyyah. al-Numūdağ wa 'l-istiqbāl*, Wizārat al-Ṭaqāfah wa 'l-Funūn wa 'l-Turāṭ, al-Dawḥah 2015, pp. 48-59.

<sup>58</sup> *al-Nahhām* is a singer who, in the days of pearl fishing and during its long stays in the sea, used to entertain the crew with popular songs related to the maritime environment.

<sup>59</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāgī 'l-wuṣiyyah*, cit., p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Ḥasan Rašid, *al-Qaḍāyā al-iğtimā'iyyah fī 'l-drāmā al-qatariyyah*, cit., p. 178, cited in Imām Muṣṭafā, *Šūrat al-mar'ah fī masraḥ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>62</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, *Umm il-zēn wa Bāgī 'l-wuṣiyyah*, cit., p. 88.

tear on the cheek of the lapsed time»<sup>63</sup>. Šarīfah rushes to console Ḥamad and decides to take her black dress off and put on a white one, with the hope for a better future along with her brother, as he is all she has left. Ḥamad says that his beloved Umm il-zēn will not be forgotten and neither will the sea.

حمد: [...] أم الزين ما ننساها، أم الزين في كل قلب .. في كل روح ولا حتى البحر ما ننساه ولا كل صرخة نهام ولا كل واحد راح بين أمواجه..

Hamad: [...] We won't forget Umm il-zēn, Umm il-zēn is in every heart and every soul. Nor shall we forget the sea, nor the song of the *nahhām*, nor every single person who has gone among the waves of the sea<sup>64</sup>.

Umm il-zēn was *sold* to the highest bidder just like traditional values were sold to the foreigner for money. Her forced marriage is a metaphor for the forced marriage between a noble past in a sea of pearls and an uncertain present in a sea of oil.

As previously mentioned, in order to convey his critical view of society, al-Mannā'ī favours the use of the Qatari dialect in his theatre production<sup>65</sup>, including *Umm il-zēn*. This choice may have been made because, despite the huge economic investment in education, in the mid-seventies most audiences would have found it difficult to follow works performed entirely in Modern Standard Arabic, as the general level of education was still modest<sup>66</sup>. Moreover, unaware of the success that *Umm il-zēn* would have, al-Mannā'ī had intended to address his critical vision first and foremost to his community, in the most direct linguistic variety known to his audience: therefore, the play reflected the linguistic situation at that time. To give an example, in *Umm il-zēn* there are no educated or intellectual characters, so the author uses

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>65</sup> Investigating the Qatari dialect in al-Mannā'ī's plays deserves in-depth analysis that can be further explored in one of the author's future studies.

<sup>66</sup> In order to have a clearer image of the education system, Brewer et al. write: «Before oil was discovered, there was no formal education system in Qatar. [...] The move toward a broader and more comprehensive form of education began with a school for boys in Doha, opened in 1948, which had classes in Islamic studies, arithmetic, geography, Islamic history, Arabic, and English. Government support of this school began in 1951 and was expanded to three other schools for boys in 1954. The first public school for girls, which opened in 1956, originated from a *kuttab* for girls established in 1938. [...] Many more boys than girls attended school in the 1950s, but by the late 1970s, attendance was nearly equal, with girls outperforming boys academically». See D.J. Brewer et al., *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K–12 Education Reform in Qatar*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica (CA) 2007, p. 20.

dialect for all characters without making sociolinguistic distinction according to their social class. Modern Standard Arabic is relegated to captions<sup>67</sup>.

In his works, al-Mannā'ī makes extensive use of the vocabulary drawn from the semantic field related to the maritime environment, including: terms about pearl fishing, *yōm il-diššah* (the day of sailing to the sea), *il-ġawwāš* (the diver), *il-nūḥaḍah* (the captain), *il-nahhām* (the singer); names of fishes, such as, for instance, *il-yaryūl* (the shark), *il-laḥmah* (the anglerfish), *il-ū'ū* (the starfish); specific parts of the sea environment, i.e. *il-sīf* (the shoreline), *il-ġabīb* (the sea's depths). The author also adapted folk poetry to music by employing the *fġēri* genre, the typical seaman chant, just like the one that Ḥamad dedicates at the end of the play to Umm il-zēn, his beautiful beloved:

إصحي يا وردة الندى ميلل خدودج  
والشمس شقت السما ولفحت عودج  
والزرع استوى يشط البحر  
شب وكبر بذكري ايدودج.

Awake oh rose, the dew bathes your cheeks  
the sun has ripped through the sky burning your figure  
the plants have grown on the seashore  
as it grew and flourished by the good remembrance of your ancestors<sup>68</sup>.

Most of the sea-related terms are entrusted to the character of Sulṭān, the loquacious servant of Bū Rāšid's family, who is also the one who interacts the most with nearly all the other characters, both main and secondary. Sulṭān is often given a register that is somewhat ironic, as in the following example:

الرجل: [...] قبل لا أنسه عمته أم راشد موصيتني لين شفنتك أقولك إنها تبغيك.  
سلطان: ومن اللي قالك اتشوفني .. ليش ما مريت من طريق غير ، هذي طلباتها ما تخلص.

Man: [...] before I forget, Umm Rāšid asked me that if I saw you, I would tell you that she is looking for you.

Sulṭān: And who would have told you to see me? Why didn't you go another way? The demands of that woman never end<sup>69</sup>.

The scholar Kāfūd highly criticised the choice of some Qatari playwrights (including al-Mannā'ī) for offering plays primarily in dialect, as this choice would negatively contribute to confining Qatari theatre within the Gulf boundaries, both artistically and critically. The Qatari dialect was in fact not easily understood by many Arabic speakers outside the Gulf area<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> For further insights into language and identity, see, among others, Y. Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity*, Georgetown University Press, Washington 2003; on the use of language in theatre, see, among others, A.D. Langone, *Etudes sur la question de la langue au théâtre arabe*, Edizioni Q, Roma 2012.

<sup>68</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, Umm il-zēn *wa Bāġi 'l-wuṣiyyah*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

### Concluding Remarks

Local critics have focused on al-Mannā'ī's role in the Qatari theatrical movement, and they agree that he is a true pioneering playwright, as he conveys his critical vision of the local reality in most of his works. In his 1988 study, Kāfūd affirmed that, at that time, the Qatari theatrical experience was still in its nascent stage, and most playwrights did not often go beyond writing only a few texts, lacking a deep and clear vision. No playwright seemed to have a direction denoting a specific path to pursue, with the exception of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī, who already had many plays to his credit in the eighties through which he proposed his critical view of the social reality of his country, still maintaining his essential feature of drawing inspiration from the folk heritage and bringing it into most of his works. In his article *Hubēl yā 'l-māl: Masraḥiyyat mawāhib šā'idah... 'alā ṭarīq masraḥ ḡādd* (A Play by Emerging Talents... Towards a Serious Theatre), al-Anṣārī states that al-Mannā'ī ties characters to the setting through a dialogue characterised by poetry, despite the realistic framework. The playwright does not present a static and photographic image of society<sup>71</sup>; instead, he exposes society through realism, underlying how money serves as the standard of values and behaviour<sup>72</sup>. As for Rašīd, al-Mannā'ī is the most distinguished name in the field of theatre, not only in terms of preparation, writing and directing, but also in terms of scenography, music, lighting, and elements of theatrical performance employing folk heritage. In fact, Rašīd believes that, in *Umm il-zēn*, the playwright «could have exposed a fake reality through the captains, the sailors, and the struggle of both fish and man for a decent meal. Hence, he does not deal with the past through the use of legend: his stories deal with past traditional songs and characters, as it were real life. This is why his characters do not move as puppets within the framework of the recent past, but in a fabric made of flesh and blood, thoughts, culture, and suf-

<sup>70</sup> Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Kāfūd, *Dirāsāt fī 'l-masraḥ al-qatarī. Bayna al-ru'yah al-fikriyyah wa 'l-binā' al-fannī*, in "Ḥawliyyah", 11 (1988), pp. 29-32; Id., *al-Adab al-qatarī al-ḥadīth*, al-Maṭba'ah al-Fanniyyah al-Ḥadīthah, [Miṣr] 1982, p. 144.

<sup>71</sup> In Qatari literature, as far as theatre and the short story are concerned, two main currents have been identified by scholars, namely the romantic and the realist ones. The romantic current is permeated by the idea of nostalgia for the past and feelings of sorrow, a sense of loss and unhappiness related to the man-woman relationship within the family of origin and the marriage. From the mid-seventies, the realist current shows works based on social criticism, mainly related to the conflict between tradition and progress. See Qāḍī 'Abd al-Rāšid al-Nadawī, *al-Ittiḡāhāt al-ḡadīdah fī 'l-ḥarakah al-adabiyyah fī dawlat Qaṭar*, Mu'assasat al-riḥāb al-ḥadīthah, Bayrūt 2007, pp. 63-68.

<sup>72</sup> Muḥammad Ḡābir al-Anṣārī, *Hubēl yā 'l-māl: Masraḥiyyat mawāhib šā'idah .. 'alā ṭarīq masraḥ ḡādd*, in "al-Ḥalīḡ al-Ḡadīd", 10 (1976), cited in Ḥasan Rašīd, *al-Naqd al-masraḥī fī dawlat Qaṭar*, cit., p. 50.

ferings. These characters are presented as human beings with all their struggles and sorrows»<sup>73</sup>.

Within this general framework it is necessary to reiterate that al-Mannā'ī has distinguished himself in the Qatari theatre. By way of example, in his 2008 study, Kāfūd identifies three axes around which the social issues of Qatari theatre revolve: the conflict and contradictions between the prevailing values, customs and traditions, and the tendency to change and renewal, not to mention the emerging values and behaviours; family issues and problems affecting the relationships between individuals, including polygamy, high dowries, forced marriage; intellectual issues, including a high patriotic view and the pursuit of better future<sup>74</sup>. It should be highlighted how al-Mannā'ī managed to include all these themes in one work, *Umm il-zēn*, already in the seventies<sup>75</sup>. The play is permeated by the conflict between tradition and modernity that emerges both in the change of social and cultural values: Bū Rāšid, who gives his daughter in marriage to the rich merchant, or Aḥmad, who, having abandoned his traditional clothes, appears on stage dressed in Western style, causing the laughter of the community he grew up in. A final theme can be added on: that of *Umm il-zēn*'s forced marriage and her consequent discomfort resulting from patriarchal authority, countered only by Šarīfah's rebellious tendencies as a glimmer of female emancipation. Then there is Ḥamad who, in addition to having to cope with the increased dowry for his marriage, suffers from the authority of his adoptive father who refuses to let him marry *Umm il-zēn*, and finally sets off in search of a job that may improve his economic situation and status.

Folk heritage was one of the main sources that Qatari writers drew their themes from, because the values and customs of the Gulf are embedded in the details of the local social life, which prompts the authors to review and criticise them, by expressing their opinions on theatrical performances. As observed by al-Ġayṭ, heritage associated with the pre-oil era is a key aspect in the construction of Qatar's identity (and of other Gulf countries). Therefore «the artistic and literary essence of the works of Qatari writers and playwrights can only be understood by returning to the sources of its popular culture and its symbols from the maritime and desert environments, whose values, stories, songs and proverbs are still deeply rooted in contemporary

<sup>73</sup> Ḥasan Rašid, *Riḥlah fī 'awālim al-masrah al-qatarī wa 'l-ḥalīgī wa 'l-'arabī: maqālāt, dirāsāt, buḥūṭ*, cit., pp. 230-231; Id., *Taṭawwur al-naqd al-masrahī fī duwal al-Ḥalīg al-'arabī min 'ām 1965 ḥatiā 'ām 1990, dirāsah tāriḥiyah fanniyyah*, cit., p. 284.

<sup>74</sup> Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥim Kāfūd, *al-Masrah fī Qaṭar. al-Naš'ah wa 'l-taḡribah*, cit., p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> Given the importance of the play in the history of Qatari theatre, to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the play's release, in 2015 *Umm il-zēn* was revived during *Mahraḡan al-Dawḡah al-Masrahī* (Doha Theatre Festival).

times»<sup>76</sup>. In fact, as stated by al-Mannā'ī himself in the above-mentioned interview: «The most important part of the heritage is the customs, traditions and human practices. This is what made us wear the traditional dress until now and practise some of the things that we used to do in the past. [...] Unfortunately, some people talk about reviving the heritage, and this is an incorrect word, as no one can revive something that has ended, and we have to draw inspiration from it to build on it»<sup>77</sup>.

While the similarity of experience in the Gulf countries was also reflected in the theatre plays, such as a life disrupted by change from the pearl-fishing era to the post-oil era, al-Mannā'ī stood out from his origins, as, Muṣṭafā writes, he «kept sailing, dreaming of being a Qatari with some taste of Gulf waters»<sup>78</sup>. By making himself the guardian of the memory linked to the times of the *ġōṣ*, al-Mannā'ī thus succeeds, from his very first play, in establishing himself as a pioneer of Qatar's theatre, capable of weaving popular tradition into modern social reality during a historical era when the identity of the Qatari community was being challenged by progress. *Umm il-zēn*'s pièce represents the turning point when Qatari theatre was born, as the audience can now observe an integrated representation of the theatrical text in all its elements on stage, including local social criticism through folk heritage.

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<sup>76</sup> Ġāsīm Ḥasan al-Ġayt, *Taġalliyāt rumūz turāṭ al-Ḥalīġ al-'arabī fī 'l-masraḥ al-qaṭarī al-mu'āṣir. Dirāsah fī masraḥiyyat Masā' li 'l-mawt*, in "al-Ansāq", II, 2 (2018), p. 45, available at: <https://qspace.qu.edu.qa/handle/10576/11015> (last accessed 1 October 2023).

<sup>77</sup> Maḥmūd Sulaymān, *'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī fī ḥiwār ṣarīḥ li 'l-Šarq*, cit.

<sup>78</sup> Imām Muṣṭafā, *Šūrat al-mar'ah fī masraḥ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mannā'ī*, cit., p. 71.