

## **Literary Societies That Played an Important Role in the Development of Arabic Mahjar Literature**

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### **Abstract**

*The Arab Mahjar literature was established by Arab writers, who immigrated to the North and South America in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The mahjar writers united around the different literary communities which they created in a short period of time in order to develop their literature, to cover a wider geographical area and to gather more readers. The main objective of these literary societies established both in North and South America was to preserve the Arabic language and literature in the “New World” as well as to create the literature based on released ideas and innovations. The migrant writers operated in more organized way through the literary communities that they had established. These literary societies established both in North and South America played a significant role in the development and promotion of the Arab literature in the West. The literary societies which played a great role in the development of the Arab literature, the history of their establishment, fields of activities as well as scientific and literary magazines were studied thoroughly in the article; moreover, the literary activities of the Arab writers functioning in the framework of these communities was analyzed.*

**Key Words:** Mahjar literature, the Arab literary societies, the “Pen League”, the “Andalusian society”, the Andalusian literature

The Arabic Mahjar literature was established at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century by the Arab writers who emigrated to the North and South America because of socio-political and economic situation in some Arab countries, including Syria and Lebanon. Established in the fifth century, the Arabic literature passed several stages of development and presented valuable works to the treasury of world literature. Without any doubts, the works of Mahjar writers have specific place. That is because these works are examples of rich literary heritage which is surrounded by real life, sincere human feelings, sublime love and the images of beautiful nature. The nomination of Nobel Prize to the famous Mahjar writer Mikhail Nuayma is a vivid proof of the influence of Mahjar literature to the modern world literature [1].

As it was mentioned, at the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century the Arabic writers of Middle East who were deprived of their freedom at their homeland obliged to the “New World” with great hopes. It was not easy at all for Mahjar writers to live among the people who don’t know their language and traditions during the early years of their migration. But after a while the migrant writers coped with all challenges they faced and began the literary activity. These writers, who were familiar with the classic Arabic literature very well, adopted the western civilization and literature of alien lands and brought new spirit and new meaning by their works to the modern Arabic literature.

These works glorified the homesickness, the freedom of human, his inner world, pure love, humanism and the freedom of confession. Going beyond the scope of old forms and traditional themes, they brought innovation and took as a basis the unity of form and the content. Thus, the immigrant writers tried to write books that met the demands of real life.

However the Mahjar writers understood the importance of joint activities in order to develop this literature, to cover a wider geographic area and to gather more readers very soon. Thus, they united around the various literary societies that Mahjar writers established.

Both in North and South America the main objective of these new societies was to preserve the Arabic language and literature in the “New World”, to bring it to the level which meets the requirements of the modern world literature, as well as to bring innovations and create the literature with release ideas.

For this purpose, the first Arabic literary society “Ar-Rabitat-ul Galamiyya” [1] (“The Pen League”) led by the famous representative of Mahjar literature Khalil Jubran was established in 1920 in New York. It was the biggest Arabic literary society which formed the writers who were characterized with a new way of thinking. The first members of society were Mikhail Nuayma, Ilya Abu Madi, Nasib Arida, Rashid Ayyub, Abdulmasih Haddad and Nedrad Haddad. However the famous Mahjar writer Ameen Ar-Reyhani who lived in New York at those times wasn't a member of this society. [2, 256]

For better understanding of the main objectives of the “Pen League” let's take a look at some of the statements written by Mikhail Nuayma:

*“Everything which is written in ink on paper can not be considered as a literary example. As well as not everyone who writes the articles and poems can be a writer. The literature feeds from the land, air and light of life. The real writer is one who is sensitive, attentive, has a clear point of view to all the processes which occur in real life and the ability to express all these in the right way. This “new spirit” which tries to save the literature from backwardness and imitation, is the hope of today and the pillar for tomorrow... However, it would not be right to reject the classic literature completely for the functioning of the new literary spirit. There are the works of such authors which are used today and will be used as a valuable resource in future. The imitation of these works will bring only detriment to our literature. That's why it is necessary to bring new breath and spirit” [3,233-234; 4,170 ].*

The members of the “Pen League” were in a favor of writing not in classic Arabic language, but in modern simplified one. Thus, they tried to clean up the Arabic language from archaic words. The statements of Jubran due to this fact are very interesting:

*“You can take the Arabic language which Sibaveyhi Al-Asvad speaks, but leave me the language that mother speaks with her child, the lover speaks with his beloved [5,93]”.*

The prose dominated the poetry in the works of members of the “Pen League”. The style, which expresses the release and emotional feeling, draws an attention in the prose works of these writers. Aside from the successful prose works, the members of the society created very beautiful examples of poetry.

The “As-Saih” (“The Traveller”) newspaper published in 1912 under the guidance of Abdulmasih Haddad became a press organ of the society. This newspaper delivered important messages to the Arabic world from the American continent and managed to influence lots of writers. All members of the society published their articles and odes in this newspaper.

The “Pen League” disintegrated after the death of Jubran Khalil Jubran and the returning of Rashid Ayyub, Nasib Arida, Mikhail Nuayma to Lebanon in 1932 [6; 7, 208]. One of the famous Mahjar writers Jubran Khalil Jubran being the writer, playwright and artist motivated other writers, artists, musicians. As a result, in 1990 in order to perpetuate the memory of a well-known writer the Memorial Garden of Poetry named after Jubran Khalil was laid out in Washington D.C. by the decree of George Bush [1].

Another literary society in North America was “Rabitat-ul-Minerva” (“Minerva Society”). This literary society was established by Egyptian writer Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi in New York in 1948 [8,106]. There was a great role of Abdulmasih Haddad in the establishment of this society.

By the main priorities of activity the “Minerva Society” was similar to the literary society “Apollo” in Egypt created and led by such famous writers as Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi, Mahmud Hasan Ismayil, Abdullah Bakri and Abdulqadir Ashur. The “Minerva Society” functioned for a short period of time. Thus, the activity of this society was stopped after the death of Abu Shadi. [8,107]

The public and literary activity of Mahjar Arabs living in South America developed slower than those who lived in North America. And this was related to the fact that the first Mahjar Arabs who came to the South America were less educated, the financial situation was more difficult and the activity of these Arabs was non-organized.

However, despite all these difficulties the literary society “Rivaq-ul-Maari” (“Maari society”) was established by Naum Labkin [7,134] in 1900 in the Brazilian city of San Paulo [9,166]. Fariz Najm, Vadi Farah Maaluf, Stefan Galburni and Gaysar Maaluf were among the members of this society. The first selected poems “Tizkar-ul-Muhajir” (“The emigrant’s memories”) were published by this society. After Naum Labki Said Abu Jamra became the chair of the society and doctor Fazl Haydar succeeded him.

Orientalist Aida Imanguliyeva notes that “the foundation of “Rivaq-ul-Maari” became a kind of national club of Arabs. Poetry and reading events and different meetings were held here frequently. And in the free school founded under this club Yafit, Haddad, Labki and other educated Arabs taught the other compatriots [7,135].”

The functioning of “Rivaq-ul-Maari” continued till the beginning of the First World War, i.e. till the returning of Naum Labki to Lebanon in 1908. Even though the literary society was operating for some time after this, it weakened gradually and stopped functioning at all then.

After the “Rivaq-ul-Maari” “Al-Rabitat-us-Suriya” (“The Syrian society”) literary society was founded during the World War I by the editor of cognominal newspaper was Shafiq Ammadi. Even though the society operated for a short period of time it had a great impact on the young Arabs living in Brazil.

In 1922 by the initiative of Naama Yafiti “Rivaq al-Adab” society was established [7,135]. This literary society as well as other societies had important contribution in the development of Mahjar literature. Thus, lots of examples of Arab literature were translated and promoted in Brazil; the financial resources gained from the sale of these books were spent to the education of young Arabs and their material needs.

The society functioned for a long period of time. After Naama Yafit the chair of the society was Rafael Yafit till the 60-s of XX century [9,381]. The poets were preparing and wrote poems for participating on the annual “Mahrajan Sheir Ukazi” (“Ukaz Poetry Festival”) which was held by the initiative of the society.

“Ar-Rabitat-ul-Adabiya” (“The literature society”) literary society which was founded by George Saydah in the capital of Argentina Buenos Aires in 1949, also had an objective to develop the Arabic literature in “New World” [9,169]. The functioning of this society which lasted for two years was stopped by the returning of George Saydah to Lebanon.

As it can be seen, the immigrant writers developed their creative activities by uniting around different societies in order to preserve their native language, customs, and national ideology, to be aware of the political and cultural processes occurring in their homeland. Despite the difficulties of living in alien lands, the main priority for these writers was to immortalize their origins and not to fall apart from the Arab people. The literary societies that they established brought their contribution in realizing this objective.

It is true that, the immigrant Arabs who lived in South America succeeded to establish many societies, but “Al-Usbat-ul Andalusiya” (“The Andalusian society”) one that was created in the Brazilian city of San Paulo in January 1933 was the biggest one. The idea of founding this society was proposed by the famous writer Shukrullah Al-Jurr and Mishel Naama Maaluf (1889-1942) was elected as the first chairman [7,208]. It should be mentioned that Shukrullah Al-Jurr was impressed by the president of the Republic of Turkey Mustafa Kamal Atatürk. In his poems describing Mustafa Kamal as a wise leader and the Turkish people as intelligent nation, he says that Turkey developed due to wise policy of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk:

*Surely the one who is similar to Ataturk and follows his path  
Will never mislead his people.  
If only Islam develops in East in the way that Ataturk has put.  
He is an innovator,  
He came and adjusted the mistakes of the nation,  
Acquired an important position for Turkey,  
Brought the glory to his country.  
Everyone looked with wonder  
The whole world was in wonder [10, 31].*

It was not a coincidence that the society was named “Al-Usbat-ul Andalusia”. As it is seen from the name, this society has the distinction of the literature of Andalusia.

The literature of Andalusia is formed at the junction of East and West and unites the features of East and West. The Arabs called Spain Andalusia.

The settlement of Arabs in the early eighth century in Spain and establishing their literature and culture in the Western country for the first time was a significant event in the history of the Arab literature. It had a great impact on the formatting and future development of the Arab literature.

The first arrival of the Arabs to Spain is associated with the name of Arabic commander Tariq Ibn Ziyad (711 year). Afterwards, when the supremacy of dynasty of Amavy was stopped by the dynasty of Abbasid in the year of 750, one of the Amavy princes Abdurrahman fled to Spain and in the year of 757 restored Amavy government there. The supremacy of Amavy caliphate in Spain lasted till the beginning of the eleventh century. In 1492 the last pillar of Arabs in Spain-Granada collapsed and Arab-Muslim rule in Spain came to an end [11, 150].

There are similar features between the Mahjar writers and the writers who established the Andalusian literature. Thus, the Mahjar writers as well as the writers who migrated to Andalusia couldn't adapt to the new environment, wished to go to the East, looked to their past and it seemed that they didn't notice the processes occurring around them. Homesickness was the main theme in their oeuvre. The writers of both periods despite the fact that fall apart from their homeland because of some reasons they lived with love to homeland and didn't lose their hope to return there one day. The literati who revived the homeland theme in such a beautiful poetic language expressed their longing to homeland, nature and people in their poems.

Abdurrahman Ad-Dakhil, who established the caliphate in Spain was also a poet and touched the theme of “homesickness” in his poetry. Even though he lived in Spain his spirit and soul were in Syria. His poem addressing the horseman who was going to Syria is considered as one of the embittered poetic examples, expressing the longing to homeland:

*The horseman who is on the way to my homeland  
Deliver my greetings to the dear person.  
As you see, my body is at one place  
But my spirit and those who rule it are at another.  
The parting has become a reason why we are aliened  
This parting expelled the sleep from my eyes.  
Allah verdict the parting between us.  
Maybe one day he will verdict to our reunion [11, 154].*

The Mahjar writers as well as the Andalusian ones have always lived with the sense of longing to homeland. However, there are the differences in the expression of this sense between the poems of Andalusian and Mahjar poets. Thus, this theme in Mahjar poetry was expressed more frankly and deeply. They wrote about the living conditions and difficulties that migrant Arab writers faced in remote areas, their love and longing to their families and homeland. In this regard, the following verses by Riad Al-Maaluf are interesting:

*I wonder, if I could return, dear Lebanon  
If the promises are implemented and the time give the deferment  
If we could pull up the different kinds of grapes [12, 43]?*

And Rashid Ayyub writes:

*You shook me, dear snow*

*You reminded me my family in Lebanon* [13,97].

The other Mahjar writers also expressed their longing for their homeland in a sincere manner. George Saydah in many of his odes writes about his sense and feeling to the Damascus. A special place of Damascus in his heart can not be denied. Damascus is mother, son for him.

Shafiq Maluf, Shukrullah Al-Jurr, Rashid Ayyub, George Saydah created the most beautiful examples of poems by expressing their memories in Lebanon. Also, the odes “Khayal-ul Vatan” (“Memories of Homeland”) by Ilyas Farkhad, “Ashvaq” (“The longing”) by George Saydah, “Hal ya tura naudu” (“I wonder if we could return to the homeland”) by Riad al-Maaluf, “Unshudat-ul qarib” (“The song of foreigner”), “Hikayet-ul mugtarib” (“The story of refugees”) by Rashid Salim Al-Khuri, “Jabal-ul ilham” (“The mountain of inspiration”) by Shukrullah Al-Jurr were written with the main theme of homesickness.

The other similar feature of the examples of the Andalusian and Mahjar literature is that the representatives of both literary streams appealed to theme of nature frequently. Mahjar poets as well as the Andalusian poets were nature lovers. Therefore, they glorified the nature with deep feelings. In fact, by appealing to this theme the writers suffering homesickness tried to find solace and give moral support to other compatriots. Ilya Abu Madi in his book “Ash-Shair fis-Sama” (“The poet in the Sky”) describing the beauty of nature expresses his longing to Lebanon in the following way:

*“I miss the valleys, flowers, nice smell, birds, nature, grapefruit, water, light and air of Lebanon*  
[14,126].”

The famous poet Rashid Salim Al-Khuri compares the Sinnin Mountain in Lebanon with the Takuarembu top in Brazil in poem “Min talli Cashembu ila Jabali Sinnin” (From the top of the Tacuarembu to the mountain of the Sinnin) [15,77-78] .

The Mahjar poets Rashid Ayyub, Shafiq Maaluf, Ilyas Farhad who lived in South America also wrote poems about the beauty of nature.

As it was mentioned, the Mahjar literature disseminated the Andalusian literature so much, that Mahjar literature was considered as a continuation of Andalusian literature by many professors. However, one significant difference should be taken into account. Thus, the representatives of Andalusian literature were attentive about the form of the poem. Unlike them, the Mahjar poets managed to show the inner world of person much better. That is why the Mahjar literature has wider range of themes of poems.

In fact, the Mahjar writers who lived in South America also wrote about the similarity between them and those who arrived to Andalusia (Spain) in the VIII century. Thus, as the representatives of Andalusian literature brought differences to the form and contest of poems in the Arabic literature, so did the Mahjar writers. Muvashah and zajal forms of poem were created by the representatives of Andalusian literature and had a big place in Mahjar literature as well.

The Mahjar writers, who made an accent to zajal, published the “Ravzatuz-zajal” and “Ar-Ravza” magazines. Salim Lutfullah was considered to be “the prince of zajal” of Mahjar literature. The contribution of Nemat Qazan, Salim Nadir and the author of “Al-Burj-ul Axdar” (“The green tower”) Yusuf Asad Ganim cannot be denied [6]. “Aganil Andalus” (“The songs of Andalusia”) by Fevzi Al-Maaluf includes the poets in muvashah style. The tokens of Andalusian literature can be seen not only in poems but in prose as well. “Tahiyat-ul Andalus” (“The Greetings to Andalusia”) by Ilyas Farhad and “Al-Andalusia” by Rashid Salim Al-Khuri [15,252-254] were written by impact of Andalusian literature.

There was a big role of the relation with the people of Spanish origin living in the South America to the similarity of Mahjar literature with the Andalusian.

Thus, it is known that the Mahjar writers contacted with Spanish writers such as Fransisko Villiaespesa who reflected the Arabic literature of Andalusian period in his works. This poet wrote the preface to the “Ala bisatir Rih” (“Flying over the carpet”) by Fevzi Al-Maaluf [16,9]. Fevzi Al-Maaluf translated the ode “Qirnata” by Villiaespesa into Arabic.

So as it is stated above, it is clear that the majority of immigrant poets living in South America were influenced by the Arabic representatives of Andalusian literature. Habib Masud explaining the name of community – “The Andalusian society” writes: “This is in token of loyalty to the precious heritage of Arabs in Andalusia... The Arabs entered as conquerors and managed to preserve their language and traditions. Literature and science were developed under the national flag of the Arabs in Andalusia, and the poetry rose and flourished with garlands of their victory. We strive for a piece of bread, and came to the land of Columbus. If we can spread the Arabic literature in this foreign land it will be our great victory and our society will prove the value of its name. It is not heroism to preserve the native language in your own country. The heroism is the fight to preserve your cultural identity in the society where the language and the religion are different from yours [9,382].”

As for the representatives of the community, such great writers and poets as Shukrullah Al-Jurr (1898-1975), Michel Maaluf (1889-1942), Yusuf Ganim (1875-1919), Rashid Salim Al-Khuri (1887-1984), Qeysar Salim Al-Khuri (1891-1977), Ilyas Farhad (1893-1986), Shafik Al-Maaluf (1905-1986), Nemat Qazan, Tofiq Kurban, Tofiq Zaun (1883-1966) were the members of this society. Michel Maaluf has been the head of the community for ten years. After the death of Michel Maaluf the poet Rashid Salim Al-Khuri became the chairman. After the returning of Rashid Salim Al-Khuri to Lebanon in 1950, the brother of Michel Maaluf Shafiq Maaluf led the community [7,138].

The main objective of the “Al-Usba Al-Andalusia” society which was established in the “New World” by arab migrant poets was to spread the Mahjar literature in the Middle East, and the literature of Middle East in the “New World”, to guarantee the freedom of migrant poets while not being involved into politics, to improve the Brazilian literature, to raise the level of the Arabic literature in Brazil, to bring together all the arab writers and to establish the relations between the arabic literary communities [17,45].

There was a great role of "Al-Usba Al-Andalusia" ("The Andalusian society") and "Al-Andalus Al-Jadida" ("New Andalusia") magazines in the sharing of the ideas of the community in the Middle East. Habib Masud had been the editor of the monthly “New Andalusia” till 1941. In the same year the president of Brazil J.Vargas banned the publication of all the newspapers and magazines in foreign language. As a result, the “New Andalusia” stopped to be published. However, in 1947 re-publication of the magazine was launched as a result of the efforts of the brother of the chair the poet Shafiq Maaluf [7.137].

As it was mentioned, one of the goals was not being involved into politics and religion. But, in fact, it was not easy at all because there were members of society who had certain political positions. That is why one of the members of community Ilyas Farhad left it. He writes about it: “Even though there was a demand on avoiding any kind of political and religious positions, some members of the “Andalusian society” were against of the “national soul – arabism”. That is why I left the society without any regret [18,1002].” But George Saydah says that Ilyas Farhad, Nemat Qazan, Tofiq Kurban and the other members left the society because of their personal reasons [9.317].

Even though there are similar features between the “Andalusian society” and the “Pen League” which was established in North America, their general ideas about classical Arab literature didn’t coincide. Thus the members of the “Andalusian society” tried to bring innovations to the arabic literature, and in contrast to the members of the “Pen League” made an accent of importance of using the traditions of classical Arabic literature. Also, another different feature is that there was much poetry and the prose lag behind in the works of the “Andalusian society” members. Even though the “Andalusian society” operated for a long period of time, in the 1960-s many of the members died, and many others returned to the homeland. Orientalist, professor A.Imangulieva noted that the Andalusian Society had been operating by 1965 [7.139].

The researchers of the Arabic literature explained the success of the Arab Mahjar writers in different ways. According to some of them it was related with their close contact with the western literature, according to others the success was accomplished because of the works which were written in a new unique and original way, different from the traditional one. In both cases, describing the different sides of life and the society in a sensitive manner the Mahjar writers created rich heritage through bringing the innovations to the Arab literature. The migrant writers operated more organized with the societies they had created. The literary societies established both in North and South America played a significant role in the development, promotion and a closer recognition of the Arab literature in the West.

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