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Hani al-Raheb and writing in the sands

In a literary career that lasted four decades, Hani Al-Raheb's writings were noted for their themes of protest, rebellion and rejection. He never failed to expose the fundamental weakness, corruption and the absence of social justice in the Arab world. In his collective novels he sought salvation for a whole society. Hani Al-Raheb had hoped to awaken a new consciousness aimed at changing the social, political and cultural reality and transforming predominant aspects in society. In so doing he broke taboos and explored forbidden themes.

Hani al-Raheb was born in 1939 in Mashqitah, a suburb of the Syrian coastal city Latakia, to a religious Moslem family. His father was a mute who could not afford to feed another child. His mother's attempts to abort him failed and against all odds he was born as child number nine to a very poor family. Five of his siblings died at early ages due to the family's poor economic situation.

Mashqitah, was a centre for political activities in the 1940's and 1950's that produced a political generation who mixed politics with literature and history with sociology. The town was eager to create a new state and a new culture. Among this generation were well-known intellectual figures in Syrian political life, such as Ibrahim Makhous and Kamel Hussein.

After completing high school in Lattakiya, Hani al-Raheb moved to Damascus to study in the English Department of Damascus University, where he lived with his brother Hilal, who had become an officer in the Syrian army. In 1961, the author published his first novel, *Al-Mahzumun [The Defeated]*, while still a student. He received a literary award from *Al-Adab* magazine for this work, as well as positive reviews from leading Arab literary critics. The novel deals with the three forbidden themes in Arab society - religion, politics and sex - and it reveals the author's philosophy in his early literary career, namely existentialist mixed with nationalist ideological commitments. The novel, which depicts the characters in a state of alienation and disconnection from their society, portrays their disassociation and disaffection. Receiving such recognition for a first novel was a powerful morale boost and the experience firmly committed him to the field of fiction.

Harsh setback . . . shattered their dreams

In 1971, he went to England for graduate studies in English literature, his first time away from his native Syria. His second novel, *Sharkh fi Tareekh Taweel [A Crack in a Long History]*, 1970, concentrates on the separation of the political union between Syria and Egypt which occurred in 1961, when a separatist group took over the Syrian government and renounced the union. He portrayed his characters as frustrated and torn by this harsh setback and the new political situation that shattered their dreams.

In his third novel, *Alf Layla wa Laylatan [A Thousand and Two Nights]*, 1977, he maintains that Arabs are still living in the age of the Arabian Nights. Characters in this novel who had sought political change come to power. Instead of working for the changes they had propounded, they become obstacles themselves to meaningful change. While the novel focused on the defeat of the Arabs in the June 1967 war, it sharply examines a society full of contradictions. Al-Raheb reproduced the alienation, confusion and the miscalculation of an entire nation by pointing to the enormous gap between the real world and the imaginary world. There are more than fifty characters in this novel, which symbolises the fragmentation of society. The hazy vision in the narrative mirrors the fog and mist in Arab life.

Al-Raheb's fourth novel, *Al-Waba' [The Epidemic]*, 1981,

showcases his artistic development, and is certainly his best work. It is also one of the most important novels in modern Arabic literature - a landmark work, ambitious and heavy, and reminiscent of the great works of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The book covers one hundred years of modern Syrian history, from 1870 through two world wars, spanning three generations, the last of which finds itself in prison. It surveys the tragic history of a beleaguered people, bringing tears to the reader's eyes. The Epidemic is a novel of horror and terror, rich and complex in character relations and events, leaving many questions unanswered. It brings to light the rise of the middle class in the Arab world - proponents of social justice who ultimately focused on their own political gains and abandoned the masses, surrounding themselves with reactionary movements in order to protect themselves and stay in power.

[*The Epidemic*] includes historical characters from the author's village and society. It reviews Syrian social, political, and economic problems through real families and political personalities. Al-Raheb is unlike most Syrian novelists who speak of the past - or about the Turks or the French - in order to avoid directly addressing the present political situation. He writes about the current government, living characters and personalities, even condemning his own friends who had benefited from the political environment at the expense of the principles they once propounded. [*The Epidemic*] was received by political prisoners in Syrian jails as if it were a bible, and the author owned a torn copy of it which was sent to him after having been passed around a prison. The copy had more than one hundred signatures and commentaries on its pages, including notes from the well-known military general Salah Jdeed, who had ruled Syria a few years before Hafez al-Assad took over the government in 1970 and became President.

Hani al-Raheb's novel *Balad Wahed Huwa Al-'Alam* [*One Country is the World*], 1985, tells the story of a political movement that began in all sincerity but then succumbed to corruption and fell into the trap of a superpower. In *Al-Tilaal* [*The Hills*], 1991, he reiterated the themes of his previous novels but added new personalities: the Ba'thists, the conservatives, the communists. These characters used the pronoun "we" to indicate they were speaking in the name of the people, but switched to using the first person pronoun "I" once they took over the government. The author had observed the development of these personalities from students in elementary school to successful political party leaders known in Egypt and Syria as "The Progressive National Front" and in Iraq as "The National Front". In the last chapter there are some fifteen personalities, each telling his own story. One character becomes an elementary teacher while his best friend and comrade in the struggle has become the President of the Republic. The author also inserts a character representing Husni al-Za'eem, the Syrian military general who first carried out the military coup in 1952.

The title of his final novel, [*I Drew a Line in the Sand*], 1999, was derived from President George Bush's words during the Gulf War. Hani al-Raheb returns to the themes of his first novel [*The Defeated*], but Kuwait is now the centre. He criticises the culture of the Arab oil-producing countries, especially Kuwaiti society, where the author himself had lived a miserable life for ten years. He describes human relations in that country as similar to that of wolves. "They are all after money," he writes, including the religious men who continue to justify the dictators' oppression of the people.

Hani al-Raheb, like many other contemporary writers, focussed on the present social, political and cultural reality

of the Arab world, and condemned tyranny and injustice. He also had hoped that Syria and other Arab states would establish research centres modelled after the Palestinian Research Centre, which conducts research on Zionist Literature, mythology and nationality. His doctoral thesis was entitled [*The Israeli Character in English Literature*] which explains his early interest in translating Israeli literature into Arabic. He translated Yael Dayan's novel [*Dust*] into Arabic, and it is often forgotten that this translation was published in 1974 in Damascus by the Syrian Writers' Union.

In 1985, Hani al-Raheb was expelled from Damascus University and from the Syrian Writers' Union. Ironically, Hani al-Raheb himself wrote the constitution for the organisation and worked for an entire year to formulate and edit its general principles and charter. He called on thirty writers to become the founding committee, but he refused to run for its executive council. His expulsion came after he clashed with the first president of the union, Sulaiman al-Khishn. When Hafez al-Jamali became the new president of the Writers' Union, he asked Hani al-Raheb to return to the organisation, but he expelled him again in 1995 after an article al-Raheb wrote, "Limadha nakhsa al-thaqafa al-Israeliyyah" ["Why do we fear Israeli culture?"], appeared in the Kuwaiti *Al-Arabi* magazine.

In the last few months of his life in Damascus, Hani al-Raheb spent his days researching the life of the prophet Muhammad for a new novel. He spent long hours researching the life of the prophet in al-Assad Library at the same time that he was working on another novel, *Khadraa' kal-Qalb* [*Green as the Heart*]. Depressed and frustrated, the author was discouraged and had no friends. In the evenings he went to Al-Rawda Café to play backgammon with the elderly. He spoke of his admiration for the Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghout and the legendary Lebanese singer Fairuz, especially for her more recent songs which he described as "anti-romantic".

Humiliation and embarrassment

Friends and admirers of Hani al-Raheb have said that he did not deserve the amount of anguish he had to deal with in his life. He suffered oppression, injustice, fear, and even hunger at a time when he was removed from his position at Damascus University with a wife and two children to support. He went to Yemen and then to Kuwait, where he was expelled once again, this time from the University of Kuwait. He then worked for a private foundation owned by a member of the royal Kuwaiti family. He lived in Kuwait for ten years: away from his wife, children and homeland. He carried within himself the shame that he had sold himself for the job, saying: "I gave them knowledge and they gave me a salary. So I did not take charity from anyone." These words reveal the humiliation and embarrassment which penetrated to his soul.

In his last novel [*I Drew a Line in the Sand*], he satirised everything, including himself, and wrote: "I felt as if I was changing into a dog and into a pig. In Kuwait, people change into wolves." Hani al-Raheb spent his life in search of an Arab awakening, and an Arab man working to create a new society and a new culture. He was defeated by the same society that he long wished to change. Hani al-Raheb finally gave up his struggle against cancer and on 7 February of this year he died in Damascus, bidding us an unregretful farewell.