

Arab literature on Internet

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CEMAM for the past two decades has been preoccupied with making Arab literature known, not only across Arab borders but also in the West in general. It was in this perspective that the Center published 2 volumes on Contemporary Arab Authors, first in Arabic (1996) and later in English (2003).

In this period of apprehension concerning globalization and its effect on specific cultures, we consider that Arabic literature has little to worry about. Though somewhat neglected on the international level, it is flourishing in the Arab world despite the constraints of censorship and the high rate of illiteracy. For a moment in 1988 the awarding of the Nobel prize for literature to the Egyptian Najib Mafuz alerted the international community to this fact. A fleeting moment perhaps, given the present concern with Islamic radicals.

In the framework of the project CEDRE on SIPO, the present writer chose to look into the use of internet for the propagation of Arab literature. This interest was abetted by the Arab Human Development Report of 2002 which indicated that the latest cultural trend in the information industry is to promote humanities and art – a matter that should be taken into account in developing Arab human resources.¹ The report goes on to say:

¹ Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations (UNDP), p. 71.

“Modern information techniques have underlined the importance of the humanities, a discipline in search of a new methodology that transcends that of natural sciences. Arab scientists have a chance to take part in bringing about this shift in knowledge because the humanities are actually expected to inspire natural sciences in terms of future methodology.”²

While the recommendations of the report entail technological aspects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), they also take into account the more basic function of assuring that ICT does not eliminate linguistic diversity by exploiting the on going cultural and social orientation of the information industry.³

1. The project

Any search for sites on Arab Literature with Google gives astronomical results. Using English or any language there were three million hits. Al-Adab al-‘Arabi (in Arabic) gave 21,700. Copernic gave two million for Arab Literature; 195,000 for Literature arabe; 1,300 for arabischen literature and 60,200 for al-Adab al-‘Arabi.

To construct a workable corpus, it was decided to take the 300 links offered by ArabO as a start and classify the sites still operative.

The following categories were found: Periodicals, On-line journals, Libraries, Personal pages, Literary choices (my favorite love poems, etc., Groups of poets (Gulf, Saudi, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Algeria), Feminine poets, Nabti poetry, Classical poetry, Arab American literature, German Arab literature, Fora or blog type sites, Links.

Personal pages account for a third; on-line journals, groups of poems or poets are less than a third; then books, periodicals, libraries make up the rest.

Incidentally, several sites offer a table of links. As a sample we choose that offered by www.Suri4ever.8k.com which offers a table of 180 links. In April 2006 of the 180 links, 70 were dead, 25 were personal pages and of the other 90 only 10 were of interest for Arab literature.

² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Given the spread and variation of the sites, it was decided to choose three on-line journals for study. Personal home pages, while of interest do not require great effort, but a collaborative project demands sustained work on the part of many. Thus the decision to study in detail three sites to see the content, the frequency of updating of the site, its accessibility, the aims of the project and the identity of the people interacting. We chose:

- Kikah
- Jihat al-Sh'ir
- Maraya (which became al-Dhakira al-thaqafiyya).

Since we began the study some new sites have come to our attention. These will be mentioned, but a more in depth study will be done later.

2. Kikah.com

Kikah.com advertises itself as: The most popular Cultural Online Journal: Free culture and tolerance.

Language sections are Arabic, English and French

Identity: founded by the Iraqi poet Samu'il Sham'un in March 2003. It is closely related to the Journal *Banipal*, presenting Arab literature in English.

Under the title of "Who are we?" Sham'un explains that the site was founded to present new Arab writing and to acquaint Arabs with international literature.

Non-political, he rejects narrow minded thought of all types, religious, political or traditional.

Free, independent and open. To the present it has been financed by the editor himself. He hopes for aid from cultural institutions. Meanwhile he asks those who participate to contribute 30 dollars or 30 Euros per year.

Home Page: The home page is the center of Kikah. A four column presentation with the picture of the author, the date and a brief summary of the article of poem or text which can be had in its entirety by clicking on the title.

On March 15, 2006 the page contained 69 items; on April 27, 2006 it had 82. The contributors are usually identified by country with at

times a second country if they are living outside the Arab world. This identity is revealing:

	March 15	April 27
Iraq	26	29
Lebanon	7	9
Morocco	5	9
Libya	2	4
Syria	5	7
Egypt	5	4
Jordan	2	1
Tunisia	1	2
Palestine	2	6
Oman	1	5
Saudi Arabia	2	3
Yemen	1	0
Qatar	0	1
Sudan	0	2

Clearly, the Iraqi origin and contact of the editor are a factor in attracting the Iraqi contributions. Still these is a good spread throughout the Arab World.

In the March sample, 21 of the 69 were living outside the Arab world. In April it was 23 of the 82 who were displaced.

The contributions for the most part were “special” to Kikah. In April there were 13 of the articles taken from newspapers (*Al-Hayat*, *Al-Safir*, *Al-Nahar*). The content can be poetry, articles on aspects of Arab literature or on foreign authors, interviews, critiques of books, and translations into Arabic.

The sectors available to the browser are: Poetry; Narration and Texts; Interviews; Books and Festivals; Arts; Articles; and Pictures. These sectors serve as an archive for the matter on the main page, and they are kept there for a long period.. In April there were still items from January.

Apart from the plea for contributions in the section “Who are we?” there is no indication for becoming a member or registering as a visitor.

3. Jehat.com

Identity: This on line journal of Arab literature began as the effort of an individual, the Bahraini poet Qasim Haddad in 1998 in conjunction with the al-Nadeem Foundation of Bahrain. In 2004, after five years of experience and feed back from visitors a new format was adopted and the mission of Jehat al-shi'r explained:

“Jihat al-Sh’ir devotes its energies to the voyage of Modern Arabic poetry... Our ambition to introduce this poetry to the widest possible public is motivated by our awareness of the importance of the new means of communication and delivery in the 21st century... Among the forces that sharpen our imagination... are the freedom and beauty the the space of internet generates. After centuries of solidly erected barriers, manifested in various forms, in the face of creative communication and exploration, nothing remains now in this fascinating blueness except that horizon which seduces us to roam high and to adventure...Jihat al-shi’r aspires to build up a vital source of knowledge about Modern Arabic poetry and a rich selection of texts by contemporary Arab poets. One new dimension of the site is the emphasis we are placing on the importance of critical thought in modern culture. In this respect works by leading critics will be published on the Site and material not easily accessible will be made available here.”

Qasim Haddad explained the necessity of putting literature on internet in a meeting in Bahrain in 2003, stating that “there is an essential relation between the new technology and its human role in the development of society in general and of creativity in particular. To think that there is a contradiction is an illusion.”

Home Page

Languages: Eight languages are offered – Arabic, English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch an Persian. So far the German is dormant. The others have some material.

An introductory page gives the choice of language and possibilities to learn about Jehat, sign the guest book, visit the links, etc. We focused only on Arabic. Once the language is chosen the following page centers

a box which features a poet or a writer according to the choice of a side bar with poetic titles: *Sard yab'ath 'an al-dafa'* (Narration looking for warmth) / *Dafter afkar* (Thought dossier) / *Khudh al-kitab bi quwwa* (Book reviews) / *Jihat al-qalb* (Texts sent to Jehat) / *Tashkil* (Art) and *Mahrajanat* (Festivals).

Once a choice is made, a third page appears with the choice centered and on the left a vertical scroll bar with the pictures and titles of Jehat for this week. This is updated regularly. On April 28, 42 of the authors or subjects of articles were identified.

Iraq – 10	Syria – 12	Lebanon – 6	Morocco – 4
Egypt – 4	Palestine – 2	Bahrain – 2	UAE – 1
Yemen – 1.			

The content is a text, a poem, a book review, an exposition of art. Articles are occasionally taken from *Al-Safir* or *Al-Hayat*, rarely from *Al-Nahar*.

The dossier on poets is apparently being ameliorated regularly. Previously a horizontal scroll bar at the bottom of the page offered dossiers on authors. This has been eliminated recently. One still has the choice of “Poets” in each of the languages. The choice appears a bit strange. I checked out the lists of poets for Arabic, English and French.

The Arab list of 50 names contains 29 Arabs and 21 non Arabs.

The French list: 38 Arabs and 47 non Arabs.

The English list: 58 Arabs and 59 non Arabs.

Evidently the language sections are run independently.

Concerning narration, the section “Narration looking for warmth” gives access to several texts from a drop down menu.

The other section on the sidebar which is interesting is that on the third page *Ilaj al-masafah* (Treating distance) which contains a few articles on internet and links to “Houses of poetry,” poets and magazines.

The site has a great deal of material and is attracting collaboration, but the rubrics are a bit complicated and take some time to get familiar with. The mélange of poets and the unevenness in identifying them is a drawback. But the site is kept up to date and is obviously undergoing changes regularly.

The site has a well developed organizational chart with a Board of trustees, an Editorial Board, a Technical Group and a group of 14 Consulting Editors from the Arab world, Europe, and Latin America. Qasim Haddad remains the general overseer.

4. Shabakat al-Dhakira al-thaqafiyya.

Identity: The site began before 2001 as Shabakat al-Maraya. According to ratings put on line by the Middle East Virtual Library, the site was located in al-Maraya, Dubai, UAE. The content was awarded a 3 star rating but clarity, index and links received only 2 stars. These ratings have not been updated since 2001.

In 2003, the URL for maraya automatically brought up Shabakat al-Dhakira al-Thaqafiyya (incorrectly transliterated as al-Thakira). The content did not change despite the change in address and title. Then in 2004, al-Dhakira went off line for an extended period only to come back with a partially new format.

A declaration of the Consulting Board, dated July 2003 states that the desire of the site is to become an open window and to raise the level of cultural taste. The site represents the voice of thought and creativity.

Language: Arabic only.

Home page: The Home page contains a few items of news and a vertical moving band presenting “new” items. There are facilities for registering and indications that there is a registered membership. Limited experience indicates that this is not frequently changed.

The value of the site is its vast and rich content which goes back to the foundation of Maraya. A sidebar indicates the following sections: Poetry, Narration, Thought, Orientalism, Memory, Before publication and after, Arts, Revelations.

The first two sections, poetry and narration, have compiled texts from 777 poets and 407 narrators, grouped by country. When available studies on the poetry or writing of the given country are also incorporated. Sudan and Jordan also contain directories of writers. For poetry, 18 countries are listed; for narration 19.

The main contributions to poetry are from Egypt and Palestine (99 each); there are 82 from Syria, 79 from Egypt, 55 from Yemen and 53

from UAE. In the section on narrative the Egyptians dominate with 165 contributions.

These numbers represent the attraction that the site offered in the beginning. Lebanese for example showed little interest (12 poets and only 1 narrator). For the author there is often a brief biography.

Of the other sections, that of Revelations offers some interesting testimonies of 13 novelists, 10 short story writers, and 11 poets.

The present consultative board is made up of :

Ibrahim Nasrallah, Palestine

Adonis, Syria

Sa'id Yaqtin, Morocco

Abdal-Aziz Maqalih, Yemen

Abdallah Ibrahim, Iraq

Abdallah al-Ghadhami, Saudi Arabia

Ali Ja'far al-'Allaq, Iraq

Kamal Abu Dib. Lebanon

Muhammad Banis, Morocco

Abdallah al-Mazru'i.

Managing such a complex site must be time consuming and expensive. No doubt lack of funds and personnel explains the infrequent updating.

Conclusion

This inspection of three promising sites on Arab literature reveals basic differences. The simplest and most accessible is Kikah for ongoing news and up to date contributions. Its sections are limited in number. It makes no attempt to establish an archive of authors and their works. This does not form part of its vision and could be considered a drawback.

Jehat al-shi'r is broad ranging and ambitious but at the same time it is a mélange of languages and writers. It is continually being developed and apparently has the means to continue the venture. It is intent on becoming an archive of Arab literature.

Shabakat al-dhakira has a broad basic archive but with the problems of changing address and then going off line for a period, it

will need some time to regain its former interest. Its home page needs more polishing; at present it seems amateurish.

An article published in *al-Mashriq* (a Toronto weekly in Arabic)⁴ seemed to indicate that the use of internet is mainly a concern of expatriate Arabs. They do share in it, to be sure, but the contribution of writers in the Arab world by far outweighs the expatriates.

It is clear that the Arabs are very much into the use of internet, not merely for commercial purposes but also for maintaining and encouraging their cultural production.

This survey presents the present activity of Arab literature on internet and demonstrates, I think, that the activity is manifold and quite serious. The difficulties of maintaining a web site and keeping it up to date are clear in the number of sites presented by links which are no longer active. Finance is obviously a key point for maintenance. Yet the project is still in its infancy. More collaboration and integration on the private level appears to be in order.

⁴ January 22, 2006.

Other sites of interest

- *Arab Union for Internet Writers*

This site carries the label “trial emission.” But the Union is serious in its aim:

To spread digital culture among Arab writers and media people as well as in the popular milieu by publishing Arab cultural and literary creations on Internet. The union wants to unify efforts for this publication, encourage the gifted, establish the concept of digital reality literature and set up an electronic publishing house and an Arab electronic library. This will enable cultural exchange world wide.

The conditions of membership are: 18 years of age minimum; 6 months familiarity with digital publishing and experience in creative writing.

The home page features an article on the future of information in the digital age. A side bar gives access to news about the Union as well as the names of the 14 who make up the board of trustees.

- *Awraq.com*

This site presented works and biographical data on 359 poets. Then in May 2006 it indicates that the site is under construction. Undoubtedly it will return with a changed format.

- *Abyat.com*

This site is sponsored by the Royal Net Company, apparently in Kuwait. The somewhat crowded home page gives news of recent publications and access to 541 poets with photo. The list can be accessed alphabetically, by country or by tribe or family.

- *The Encyclopedia of Arabic Poetry (www.arabicpoems.com)*

This site located in Dubai, UAE was founded by Ali Mehilba. It has collected a fund of poetry of various types including Abbasid and Andalusian poetry. One category is childhood poets and another, women poets. The site has been in operation for 5 years and is now making an appeal for members, asking 50 dollars per year. The owner projects limiting the site to members starting in October.

- *Arabic Short Story (www.arabicstory.net)*

This site was founded by the Saudi writer Jubayr Milayhan. It regularly presents contributions and gives a record of readers and

also comments on the short story. Contributions come especially from Egypt, Syria and Iraq as well as Saudi Arabia.

- *Iraqi Short Stories* (www.iraqstory.com)

This site brought to my attention by the article in al-Mashreq presents not only Iraqi writers but also other Arab writers. The site contains short stories of 222 authors and novels of 16 writers as well as translations into Arabic and articles on criticism and film. The site was founded by Jasim Matir who is aided by Adnan and Sair Mubarak.

- Another site which should be mentioned although it does not fall in the class of modern Arab literature is: *al-Warraq* (www.alwarraq.net)

This site is a depository of classical Arab works in literature, history, fiqh, etc. Membership is required to access the library. It posts a list of the “Most read works” which is headed by A Thousand and One Nights.

- *Unions of Writers*

Another genre of site is that of specific unions of writers in given Arab countries such as the Arab Writers Union in Damascus <www.awu-dam.org>. Under this genre two sites are of interest

1. The Emirates Writers Union, and
2. The League of Emirate Woman Writers.

The two are fairly similar in format but that of the women is more developed and opens out beyond the league. It presents a directory of Arab literati which is not limited to women nor to the Emirates. The Home page also gives access to various genres of writing: classical and nabti poetry, novels, short stories and news.

There are some other sites for similar unions, but these two appeared the most interesting.

