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### THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN THE POETRY OF SEIF AR-RAHBI: ARTISTIC AND AXIOLOGICAL ASPECT

### ОБРАЗ ЖІНКИ В ПОЕЗІЇ СЕЙФА АР-РАХБІ: ХУДОЖНІЙ ТА АКсіОЛОГІЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

Zhuravska N.V.,

*orcid.org/0009-0003-9596-1460*

*Postgraduate Student at the Department of Near  
and Middle Eastern Languages and Literatures  
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv*

The article is devoted to the analysis of the image of a woman in the works of Seif ar-Rahbi, one of the brightest representatives of the modern literature of Oman. The article analyses one of the key images of ar-Rahbi's poetry in terms of artistic and axiological paradigms of his work, traces the connection with the national tradition and outlines the vectors of the writer's innovative searches in the context of the dominant strategies of development of modern Arabic literature and the dynamics of the world literary process.

The image of woman is one of the key ones in the works of the contemporary Omani author Seif ar-Rahbi. The writer was born in 1956 in Oman- He studied in Cairo and lived in Europe for a long time. Today, he is the editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine *Nizwa* ([nizwa.om](http://nizwa.om)) and one of the most renowned writers in the Gulf.

The motif of love is one of the eternal themes in world literature, culture and art. Historically, the figure of the woman has been one of the most controversial issues in modern Arabic literature. In addition, the question of the role of women in the Arab world often becomes a stumbling block in the dialogue between Arab artists and the official position of the authorities.

In the poetry of Seif ar-Rahbi, certain transformations and modifications of the image of a woman are noticeable in comparison with the presentation of this image in classical Arabic poetry, where a woman is mostly a passive object. In general, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Arab poets extolled the external beauty of women first and foremost. There was simply no way to get to know her as a person – a man (poet) often could not even talk to her, which was due to the traditions of the society of the time.

Although Islam granted women broad rights, they were not always respected in practice. It was enough for a woman to be beautiful, modest, and a believer. In the work of Seif ar-Rahbi, the figure of a woman is extremely diverse. For him, a woman is a mother, a lover, a friend from childhood, inspiration, lost happiness, and the essence of poetry itself.

**Key words:** image of woman, modern Arabic poetry, Arabic Literature of the Gulf.

Стаття присвячена аналізу образу жінки у творчості Сейфа ар-Рахбі, який є одним з найяскравіших представників сучасної літератури Оману. У статті проаналізовано один з ключових образів поезії ар-Рахбі з точки зору художньої та аксіологічної парадигм його творчості, простежено зв'язок з національною традицією та окреслено вектори інноваційних пошуків письменника в контексті домінуючих стратегій розвитку сучасної арабської літератури й динаміки світового літературного процесу.

Образ жінки є одним із ключових у творчості сучасного оманського автора Сейфа ар-Рахбі. Письменник народився у 1956 р. в Омані, навчався у Каїрі, довгий час жив у Європі. На сьогоднішній день він є головним редактором культурознавчого журналу «Нізуа» ([nizwa.om](http://nizwa.om)) та одним з найбільш реномованих літераторів Перської затоки.

Тема кохання – одна з вічних тем у світовій літературі, культурі й мистецтві. Історично склалось, що постать жінки є чи не найдискусійнішим питанням в сучасній арабській літературі. Ця проблема протягом останніх десятиліть стала чи не найпопулярнішою в новітній арабській літературі. До того ж питання ролі жінки в арабському світі часто стає каменем спотикання в діалозі між арабськими митцями та офіційною позицією влади.

В поезії Сейфа ар-Рахбі помітні певні трансформації та модифікації зображення жінки у порівнянні з висвітленням цього образу в класичній арабській поезії, де жінка є здебільшого пасивним об'єктом. Загалом нічого дивного немає в тому, що арабські поети звеличували передусім зовнішню красу жінки. Пізнати її як особистість просто не було можливості – чоловік (поет) часто не міг навіть порозмовляти з нею, що було зумовлено традиціями тогочасного суспільства.

Хоча іслам наділив жінку широкими правами, на практиці їх дотримувалися далеко не завжди. Вистачало, щоб жінка була красивою, скромною, віруючою. У творчості Сейфа ар-Рахбі постать жінки надзвичайно різнопланова. Для нього жінка – це мати, кохана, друг з далекого дитинства, натхнення, втрачене щастя і власне поезія.

**Ключові слова:** жіночий образ, сучасна арабська поезія, література країн Перської затоки.

The **relevance** of the study is due to the fact that the modern literature of the Gulf countries remains poorly studied in comparison with the literature of Egypt and the Levant. This is partly due to geopolitical factors, as well as to the fact that the literary process in the Gulf countries has emerged relatively recently. According to the Polish scholar B. Michalak-Pikulska, it was impossible to talk about the existence of a literary process in the Gulf before the 1970s [1, p. 11]. This does not mean that nothing was written or published in these countries before the 70s, but these were isolated cases compared to what came after the turning point of the 70s and 80s. For example, the Omani poet Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Tai (1927-1973) did not live to see that time. He was a classicist poet, that is, he followed the traditional *qasidah* form, and was one of the first poets to study abroad.

The **research material** is based on the original texts of Seif ar-Rahbi in Arabic.

The work of Seif ar-Rahbi also lacks a comprehensive scientific understanding. The **scientific novelty** of our work lies in the fact that it introduces the intimate lyrics of one of the most prominent representatives of the literatures of the Persian Gulf countries into the scientific discourse.

The figure of a woman in Seif ar-Rahbi's works is multidimensional and diverse. She is, first of all, a loved one, a friend, a symbol of home. The poet condemns the mundane interpretation of the female gender inherent in conservative societies, including his native Oman. Ar-Rahbi has good reason to do so, as he comes from such an environment and has experienced all its flaws. His liberal views on the role of women were one of the reasons why he was perceived as a «dissident» in his homeland, although he was respected as an outstanding public figure. Due to his progressive beliefs, ar-Rahbi did not become an official «icon» of Omani cultural life. Researcher Paul Starkey notes that control over the literary process by the authorities is one of the biggest problems of its development in Arab countries [3, p. 200]. It can be assumed that this is why many of ar-Rahbi's collections were published in Europe.

Seif ar-Rahbi does not focus on the political aspect of the Arab woman's life. This does not mean that, in the poet's opinion, the problem does not exist. However, in his work, a woman is a friend, a muse, a partner, not an object of political struggle. The portrayal of women's position in the Gulf countries' short fiction is somewhat different, for example, in the works of Leila Usman, Fawzia Rashid, Dalal Khalifa, and others, who raise the issue of women's freedom of choice (in particular, in relation to marriage), etc.

Arabist Gail Ramsay calls the current social situation in the Gulf countries «neo-patriarchy», pointing to the lack of real, deep restructuring of society [2, c. 163]. Though ar-Rahbi does not come up with any politic slogans, the image of woman in his works is presented as a loving partner, friend, source of inspiration, someone to come back to. For instance, in the poem «To Arwa Saleh» («إلى أروى صالح») from the book «The trains to Bulaq», 2007, («قطارات بولاق» «الدكرور») ar-Rahbi writes:

أرتشف جرعة الشاي الأولى  
بخارها ما زال يحلّق كغيمة حميمة  
أنظر إلى الأفق الخالي من المازة والطيور  
أحاول الكتابة عن امرأة قضت في الشوارع المجاورة  
أحاول القول مثلا

I take my first sip of tea  
Its vapour is floating like a soft cloud.  
I look at the horizon, empty of pedestrians and birds.

I try to write about a woman who passed by in the neighbouring streets

I try to say something like:  
[8, c. 156].

Landscape images in the poetic comparison retrieve the native Omani nature and the past in the memory of the lyrical subject. Obviously, his warmest feelings are inextricably linked with the country of his childhood – both are as far away from the crowded city where the poet's fate has brought him.

It should be noted that Arwa Saleh (1951-1997), to whom the poem is dedicated, was a real person, almost the same age as ar-Rahbi, a famous publicist from Egypt. She studied at Cairo University, just like ar-Rahbi. Most of her texts were published posthumously. Saleh was associated with the Communist Party and the student movement of the 1970s in Egypt. In her book «المبتسرون» (can be translated as «immature», «infantile»), published during her lifetime in 1997, as well as her posthumous publication of 1998, «سرطان الروح» («Cancer of the Soul»), she criticises her party comrades and her own idealism [10, 2005]. We do not know the details of Saleh's relationship with ar-Rahbi, but we assume that they shared the same views and interests, as the lines of the poem suggest. Arwa Saleh committed suicide on 7 June 1997.

Referring in his mind to his deceased friend, to whom the poem is dedicated, Seif ar-Rahbi presents the image of a lost (perhaps also loved) person. In the passage quoted, one can trace the influence of the ancient idea that the sky consists of nine levels. In this context, the comparison with a celestial being emphasises the purity and grace of the woman. The feelings she evokes are also pure – in contrast to reli-

gious doctrines that often call the relationship between a man and a woman sinful in principle. The triple metaphor from the same verse is interesting:

الجسد ينزل من الدور التاسع  
خفيفاً مرحاً كأنه في نزهة غرام  
مضيئاً وحشة الليل  
بمغامرته الأخيرة  
الجسد يذهب مع أسرار جماله  
ويتركنا في الحيرة  
...تعصف بنا رياح هوجاء

The body descends from the ninth floor  
Light and playful, as love being set free.  
Illuminating the lonely night  
With its last adventures  
The body goes and takes the secrets of its beauty  
And leaves us bewildered  
We are buffeted by a stormy wind...  
[8, c. 156].

The woman's body is compared to air (human – physical phenomena), passion (human – physical phenomena – abstract concepts), light and wind. In turn, passion is «light» and «illuminates the night». The latter is endowed with the features of a living being, and the body is endowed with the ability to control the phenomena of nature («blows us with violent winds») and subdue abstract concepts («The body goes away, taking away the secrets of its beauty»). It is not about the perfection of the female silhouette – the poet focuses on the impression it makes, on the lyrical experience.

It is worth noting that Seif ar-Rahbi does not glorify the external beauty of women. There are practically no portrait sketches of women in his poems. For example, in the poem «إلى شمس» («To Shams») from the collection «الصيد في الظلام» («Hunting in the Dark», 2004), he focuses on the soft and graceful movements of the soul, which are conveyed by the eyes and facial expression.

وجهك المليء بالنعاس والضجر  
من هذا العالم  
وجهك الذي يشبه توتر طائر  
مأخوذ فوق بحيرة، أطلّ منها  
على هاوية حبي، فأرى  
في عمق الغابة عينيك تضئان  
سني حياتي  
فأبكي

Your face full of sleepiness and boredom  
Of this world.  
Your face that resembles the tension of a bird  
Caught flying over a lake, I turn my eyes from it  
To the abyss of my love, and I see  
In the depths of your eyes which are like a green  
forest

The years of my life  
And I cry.  
[7, c. 10].

The poet compares the intense expression on the woman's face to a bird caught above a lake and trying to free itself (man – animals). The eyes of the beloved are compared to a forest (man – nature), which emphasises not only their colour but also their depth (في عمق الغابة عينيك). The eyes, which reflect the poet's entire life, evoke an explosion of memories and emotions that results in tears.

The theme of separation is intertwined with the theme of love. For example, in the poem «صوتك» («Your Voice») from the same collection, the lovers are separated by distance, and in his memories the lyrical subject returns to the «shores of love», which are covered with purity, sacredness and a sense of eternity. However, the separation of the lovers in reality adds to the sadness: «In search of an eternity that does not exist». Hearing the voice of the beloved «opens the banks of memories» that do not separate, but rather unite the lovers. According to Seyf ar-Rahbi, love is endowed with the ability to transcend time and space. The voice of a beloved woman is endowed with the best features of the fair sex in general: it calms, comforts, and awakens hope. For the poet, its power is a kind of magic; he compares it to a light breeze, a gentle breath of wind from the flapping of bird wings that calms the excited feelings:

أه، لو صوتك، صوتك فقط  
خفقة نسيمه تصلني عبر المسافة  
نسيم البحيرة المسحورة  
التي غرقت فيها أخيراً  
،خفقة الجناح المتعب  
لهدأت عواصفي قرب  
الضفاف

Oh, if only your voice, just your voice  
The whisper of its breeze reaches me across the  
distance.

The breeze of the magic lake  
In which I totally drowned.  
The beat of a tired wing  
Calms the storm of my feelings  
[7, c. 13]

The metaphor «storm of feelings» indicates the stormy elements of love and despair from forced separation. However, the voice of the beloved tames this stormy element, gives a sense of calm and a feeling of lightness from the «beat of a tired wing».

The image of a woman often correlates with the motif of return. In the poem «I'm coming back to you, my dove» the dove is a symbol of perfection, loyalty, and friendship. For the lyrical subject, a woman is a guiding light in life. As noted, in many cultures the

dove was identified with home. Seif ar-Rahbi himself spends a lot of time on the road. In this poem, the image of a dove connects a beloved woman with her home, which is a source of peace, stability, and comfort. It is from this place that the lyrical subject draws strength. He compares the beloved woman to a dove:

أعود إليك أيتها اليمامة  
على حافة النافذة  
أعود إليك من أسفار الكثيرة  
وبداية أخرى أكثر غموضا

I am coming back to you, my dove,  
On the windowsill  
I am turning back to you from numerous voyages  
When the new stage of my life is hidden in the fog  
[8, c. 37].

The images of sand, sea, rocks, forests are mostly used as a poetic amplification of experiences. Although, if we talk about the desert, for example, it is an undeniable key image in the poet's work and is often personified in the image of a woman. For example, in the poem «رمعلا اذه لك» («My entire life») [5, p. 62] from the collection «رفاسملا سار» («The Traveller's Head»):

All my life  
That I have spent between  
the corridors of my  
ancestors  
Is flowing on the shoulders  
of the desert  
[5, c. 62].

كلُّ هذا العمر الذي  
حوَّشْتُهُ مِنْ دَهَالِيزِ الْأَجْدَادِ  
يَفِيضُ الْآنَ عَلَى كَتِفِ  
الصحراءِ

The poet's life rests on the shoulders of the desert. This image shows his breadth and at the same time his connection with his past, his roots. The picture is made more sophisticated by the comparison of the desert with a woman (nature – human being), on whose shoulders the life of the lyrical subject rests. The poet often emphasises the mysteriousness of the image of a woman by animating abstract concepts and nature. Metaphors such as «human being – abstract concepts», «abstract concepts – nature» create a clear and sophisticated image of a woman, revealing her psychological traits more deeply.

In Seif ar-Rahbi's oeuvre, the concept of love is also seen as overcoming distance, i.e. the distance between people and countries, as well as time. Alongside the contemporary reality, a historical background can be traced, as in the poem «ذكرى» («Memory»):

كادت النظرة أن تتجمد  
في فضائها الساكن  
وهي تقول  
«مرَّ زمان بعيد لم نلتق»  
مرت أجيال وحروب

مرت شاحنات في ليل حالك  
مرت صيحة الغراب على رؤوسنا،  
ضحى ذلك اليوم القاسي من شهر آب

It seemed that the sight was about to freeze  
In that silent emptiness,  
And suddenly you said:  
«It's been a long time since we met.»  
Generations and wars have passed,  
The trucks of that pitch black night are gone  
The crows no longer caw over our heads,  
They disappeared in the morning of this merciless  
day of August.

[7, c. 10]

The comparison of the eyes with ice adds expressiveness to the statement. The poet compares the silence to the emptiness that could have been created between the characters during the long time of separation. The motifs of cold (icy gaze), emptiness, darkness (pitch black), and the image-symbol of the crow correlate with the semantics of death, separation. However, it disappears due to the semantics of the morning – meeting, hope. However, the epithet «merciless» in the phrase «merciless day of August» brings a tragic sense of the irreversibility of time. The image of a truck is common in contemporary Arabic literature, as they are mostly used by people escaping from war.

«No more crows are cawing over our heads» means that the war is over. However, its traces remain forever in the mind. That's why the woman interviewed cannot immediately recall it, and at first her gaze is cold. Slowly, the terrible memories of the war fade into the background and the words overcome the silence. The echoes of the war are superimposed on the crushing heat that prevails in August. The poet probably calls the August day merciless for this very reason. It is worth reminding that for Arabs, the sun and summer are not as blessed as for the inhabitants of temperate climates. That is why Arab poets traditionally celebrated summer nights, not days. It is interesting that the poet uses the word «أب» to refer to August. This is the Arabic name for this month in the solar calendar, which once again emphasises the cyclical nature of artistic time and space.

The list of the characters' experiences adds some drama, in which trucks and crows are mentioned alongside generations and wars. The poet uses the verb «مرَّ» in both its literal and figurative meanings. This seemingly imperceptible technique conveys almost the entire Arab reality: from war, which is a companion of modern generations, to its more realistic companions, crows and trucks. The latter disappear in the Arabian way on a hot August day: the circle closes and everything returns to its place. As shown above, the motif of the cycle of war and peace

is one of the leading motifs in ar-Rahbi's work. This cycle intertwines the human destinies of both the author and the lyrical subject he portrays.

Many of Seif ar-Rahbi's poems bear a sense of nostalgia. The incessant search and awareness of one's own powerlessness in attempts to change the inevitable is not a new theme, but each prominent artist gives it a new sound. The drama of expectation is inherent in all people and generations. In the words of Mahmoud Dervish, it is «a rhyme for another poet who will come and wait» (وقافية لشاعر يأتي وينتظر) [9, c. 112].

The motif of searching for lost happiness in the poetry of Seif ar-Rahbi is embodied in the image of a lyrical subject who tries to find a woman, a friend of his distant childhood, whom he fell in love with. Childhood is recalled as a distant fairyland, which is not the case with the present. He argues that in adulthood, the line between friendship and love is too shaky. With the passing of his childhood, his friendship with a woman ended, and now she is lost to the poet forever. As, for example, in the poem «إلى تلك» («To That Woman») from the collection «رجل من الربع الخالي» («The Man from Rub al-Khali»):

ها أنا أيتها المرأة  
في البلاد التي كنا فيها  
قبل أطياف وسنوات  
أفتش عن عنوانك  
في جُروف الأسماء التواريخ  
بالمفكرة المليئة بالقهوة والنبيذ  
ومقهى المحطة القديمة التي يعلوها الدخان  
حيث تتقاطع طرق الشمال والجنوب بكرابية  
والقطارات تسرُح في خيال النائم كالذئب  
بين أناس عُيونهم تجيش مخالِب  
يُدض

Here I am, oh woman,  
In a land where we once were  
Years and ghosts have passed  
I'm looking for your address  
On the steep banks of names and dates  
In a notebook filled with coffee and wine  
In a coffeeshop at the old railway station drawn  
in smoke  
So that the paths to the south and north are merci-  
lessly confused

And trains whistle in my sleeping imagination  
Like a wolf  
Between people whose eyes sharpen their claws  
against me...  
[6, c. 51].

The past years are compared to ghosts (time – fantastic creatures). The tired imagination of the lyrical subject «sleeps like a wolf» (human being – abstract concepts – animals). An expressive metaphor «between people whose eyes sharpen their claws on me» represents the animation of human eyes.

The warmest memories and feelings of the lyrical subject in ar-Rahbi's poetry and prose are inextricably linked to the country of childhood, which is far from the crowded city where fate has brought the poet. The lyrical subject searches for an address in a notebook filled with coffee and wine while sitting in a smoke-filled coffee shop in an old railway station where «the paths to the north and south cross in despair». In everyday, unwelcoming life, the narrator lacks her support when people «sharpen their claws against me».

Thus, we can trace the evolution of the lyrical subject, who appears as an adult who has gone through a certain life path with bitter losses, separation (from childhood, home, parents, beloved, friends, etc.). Life's losses give the lyrical subject new food for memories, but he tries not to go deep into pessimistic reflections, his thoughts and experiences acquire a philosophical depth of sound. Thus, the theme of love acquires a somewhat pessimistic sound in the works of Seif ar-Rahbi: it is a search for lost happiness and a mental return home.

As we can see, the motif of love in ar-Rahbi's works is intertwined with the motif of the journey and return: to his home, the country of his childhood and youth. Traditional images of nature, which the poet creatively reinterprets and weaves into the context of the present, add lyricism to ar-Rahbi's works.

The image of a woman in ar-Rahbi's works appears along with other images of the Arab world, which structure the axiological paradigm of the poet's artistic world. On the other hand, love for women, home, homeland, life and human existence.

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