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# Aspects of Arabic Online Literature in the Gulf

By Nele Lenze

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## Abstract

Literature and poetry in Arab countries developed upon a rich tradition of oral storytelling and are still vital parts of cultural life all over the Gulf. In the age of new media, distribution of literary production has changed and now offers a wide spectrum for story transmission. As a consequence, online literature has emerged as a popular means of communication; short stories posted on blogs, in forums, and online publishing houses generate much commentary. This exchange of thoughts appears to be important for many web-users in the Gulf and triggers stories to “travel” from one virtual location to the other and affects the notions of author and censorship. Generally, it seems that Arabic online literature differs from online literature in other regions of the world. Until now, there exists only limited academic research on this phenomenon. Based on the analysis of a large text corpus of original Arabic online literature and interviews that I have conducted with authors in early 2010, this paper serves as a short overview of the concepts of online literature in the Gulf and discusses its various characteristics.

## Introduction

Stories and poetry have always been vital parts of cultural life all over the Persian Gulf. Today, printed and online literature are part of everyday culture and represent forms of national cultures. Arab countries in the Gulf such as Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain or Kuwait nowadays have an active scene of authors who create online literature.<sup>1</sup> Researcher Gail Ramsay, who works on Arabic literature on the Gulf, emphasizes that the construction of a modern national identity, as well as a national culture, includes an encouragement of local literary production (cf. Ramsay; Torsick). Accordingly, the government of the United Arab Emirates and private foundations support writers through scholarships for printed works (Kwong). Also, online literary texts serve as important connectors between traditional culture and new media. More and more writers combine traditional forms

of story transmission or classical schemes of poetry with youtube videos or pop music on blogs. Thus, online literature finds its way into mainstream media and is discussed in a variety of national newspapers, blogs, on TV, and on the radio, which in turn contributes to a new perception of literary works and seems to increase the production of literature. Consequently, global influence through mass media on the one hand, and local traditions and cultural as well as religious values on the other, merge in online literature in the Gulf. It can be argued that online literary texts are not only a continuation of traditional literary production, but also a form of communication and interaction between a large group of Internet users from the region. In addition, writing online opens possibilities to publish with less intervention from the censors than in print media. Censorship on printed works in the Gulf is strict. In contrast, online publishing enables writers to express themselves without having to worry too much about state censorship.

In this paper, I will outline a variety of forms of online literature in the Gulf. Accordingly, I will discuss the following aspects: Why is online literature popular in the Gulf? What are popular forms of online literary activity? What is specific for online literature in the region? Finally, how important is censorship in online literary activity?

## **1. Popularity of Online Literature in the Gulf**

In the Gulf, many writers use the Internet as a medium to publish texts that would otherwise be difficult to get published in print. This is mainly due to governmental censorship and other restrictions such as social censorship, but also because publishing companies are not widely spread. Thus, if an author wants to publish a novel or an anthology that would not agree with local restrictions, the only opportunity to do so is to distribute it through Lebanese publishing companies. This is because publishing restrictions in Lebanon are much lower than in the Arab Gulf countries.

Furthermore, online media offers additional features to emphasize or express the 'texts' messages. The implementation of multi media elements such as videos or music is common in short stories posted in Gulf forums and blogs. Moreover, a number of blog-authors accentuate their messages and stories with pictures, photographs, and/or music. Poems and stories are usually not coded. This means that in the large majority of Arabic online literary texts, the computer is plainly used as a means for writing literary products. In the Kittlerian sense, the computer is used as an "Aufschreibssystem", and not as a tool to code literature in programmable media. Even though these literary works cannot be defined as digital literature, the

short stories and poems distributed online in many cases differ from regular printed texts in literary style and content.

While online writers usually do not make use of the possibilities offered by coded or hypertext literature, they definitely use the medium's interactive tools, e.g. tools for communication with their audience through comments and in chat rooms. This sort of social interaction through commentaries is of importance and popular amongst authors and their readership. Here, writers get instant feedback about their works and readers are able to react in turn, thus engaging in a dialogue, which seems to be rewarding and inspiring both for writer and readers.<sup>2</sup>

The possibility of reaching a wider audience may be another reason for authors publishing online in the Gulf countries. Even if the writer has limited capacities to influence the number of readers of his literary texts, theoretically, online media can enable a writer to reach a broad audience. However, in contrast to online literature written in English, these texts are not read by a world wide audience, but rather addressed to a regional readership. Statistically, the majority of the readers of literary texts by Gulf authors in online forums are from the Gulf region.<sup>3</sup>

Authors interact not only with their audience, but also with each other. One of the connecting actors is the "Arab Union for Internet Writers", which unites authors from all over the Middle East. Within the Union's online representation, authors are able to create their own profile sites with contact data, pictures, and samples of their works. Not all bloggers and online writers are members of the Arab Union. Since online platforms or writers' unions promote authors, it can be suggested that online literature in the Gulf region also functions as a platform for like-minded people and helps them to communicate. For example, the Arab Union supports communication between authors by hosting meetings, e.g. a conference in spring 2010.<sup>4</sup>

In general, a new generation of media users is emerging in the Gulf; for this audience it is routine not only to get their information, but also entertainment online.<sup>5</sup> The structure of online literature is beneficial for readers, in that the published literary texts online are mostly short, and to the point. This suits its medium, but might also appeal to an audience that does not feel comfortable with reading longer novels online. It is possible, however, that people who would not read printed literature would start reading it online. At a panel entitled "Emirati Fiction: New Voices" as part of the Emirates Airlines Festival of Literature in Dubai 2010, it was assumed that the popularity of online short stories was due to the greater interest of readers in shorter texts.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Forms of Online Literary Activity in the Gulf

Literary platforms appear in a variety of formats. The most common among these are forums and blogs. Usually, there is no information about the owners or hosts of these forums and their goal for running it. Forums cover a wide range of subjects, with short stories and poetry being just a small part of it. Blogs are linked, and in some countries “meta blogs” that gather the most popular blogs of a country, region or field, represent a picture of the most influential writers. Forums target a wider audience than blogs and are accessed by more people (Albabbain 56). These forums are not limited to one field of discussion but many, and gain importance if users actively participate in exchange of thoughts on a variety of subjects that they choose by themselves. Every user can open a new topic of discussion. In comparison, blogs are mostly run by just one author and evolve around a limited amount of subjects that the blogger chooses (Lankshear and Knobel).

According to the Kuwaiti researcher Afraa Ahmad Albabbain, forums are considered “older than blogs” (Albabbain 55). Albabbain claims that a forum is “the most well-known and widespread application in the region” (ibid.). Thematically, these forums offer a wide range of subjects, such as family, politics, cars, religion, and much more.<sup>7</sup> Several thousand people actively participate in a wide range of forums. Usually, each one has a regional focus, which is already noticeable by its name, for example, [alamuae.com](http://alamuae.com) or [gulf-gate.net](http://gulf-gate.net). It is interesting to look at the popularity of the literature section in online forums. The literature branch is split up into two parts: poetry and stories. These sections host various sub-sections for different kinds of literary style, e.g. folk poetry or poetry in classical rhyme and language. Within the forum [alamuae.com](http://alamuae.com), the poetry branch of the website is in the top ten of most popular streams.<sup>8</sup> In October 2010, this branch had 13.000 unique visitors.<sup>9</sup> This is a relatively high number considering that the United Arab Emirates are populated by only four and a half million people,<sup>10</sup> the great majority of whom are expatriates.<sup>11</sup>

The second possibility for online distribution of literary works is blogs. Literary blogs are heavily linked and mostly published on blog hosts such as Yahoo! Maktoob, Blogger, or WindowsLive. Some of the literary bloggers from Oman and Saudi Arabia, for example, first published their works in forums and later started to create their own personal blogs. A number of these authors are also published in newspapers and print literary magazines. In 2009 and 2010, I conducted interviews online and in person with 35 online writers from Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. The number of people might not be representative for the whole literary blogosphere in the Gulf, but nevertheless offers valuable insights. Most of the female writers with whom I conducted interviews were educated young women attending universities and aged between 20 and 25. These women are connected in various networks online. It should be noted that there are also informal

blogger meetings usually organized by the bloggers themselves that take place irregularly offline.

Besides various blogs and forums, there is also another possibility to distribute Arabic literary works online in the Gulf - by publishing at an e-publishing house. Hayat Alyaqout, a Kuwaiti female freelance writer, launched the first online publishing house in the Gulf, [nashiri.net](http://nashiri.net) a non-profit e-publishing house.<sup>12</sup> The website offers different categories of texts, such as articles, poetry, letters on culture, novels, and short stories. The novels published online for the first time usually have not been published in print earlier, but they can be downloaded as PDF files. Additionally, podcasts, as well as video programs that present interviews with writers, are displayed on the website. As a member of the website it is possible to join the forum and comment on the texts.<sup>13</sup> However, while the publishing house offers many features, at [nashiri.net](http://nashiri.net), writers enjoy less freedom in their writing than on their own blogs or in forums. Generally, various requirements are demanded if a writer wants to be published at [nashiri.net](http://nashiri.net). Novels published on the website have to be written in classical Arabic, which means there should be no use of dialect. The content should not harm the publishers' reputation or deal with erotic, pornographic, or not specified obscene subjects. Additionally, it should follow Kuwaiti law and not violate the intellectual property of a third person. These restrictions do not exist online, where authors write freely about the topics they wish.

### **3. Distinctive Features of Online Literature in the Gulf: "Wandering" Stories**

A phenomenon of Arabic online literature in the Gulf is the "travelling" story. This means that users post their favourite stories on a variety of forums. As a result, these stories appear in various places online and circulate at different times in countries all over the Gulf. While texts "wander" from one place to another, the author's intellectual property is not guaranteed. This is comparable to traditional oral stories, as these online stories get transmitted from one (virtual) place to another. An interesting example of a "wandering" story is "Love Story from Riyadh", which was first posted by "al-Qis" in 2006 and soon started to spread without author reference within Saudi Arabia. It became more popular in 2007 and was posted in several forums. It received between five to ten user comments in several forums, but was certainly read by many more people. It was not until 2008 that it moved to forums in other Gulf countries such as Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Today, users share the same story in various forums all over the Gulf.

When it comes to the basic plot of a “wandering” story, it remains the same during its whole “journey”. However, there are some changes in certain elements of the earliest to the latest versions of the posted short stories. For example, the introduction of a story can vary, since some of the people who re-publish a story explicitly say that it was forwarded to them and they feel it is worth sharing. Concerning the language in use, the text's style may change. That means, even though all the versions are written in dialect, some of the texts seem to reflect a common or more generally accepted method of punctuation and spelling. It is also common that authors who re-post these stories add sentences or change its structure.

The phenomenon of “moving” cultural products and a reworking of those products is widely spread in the world of online literature in the Gulf. This is not specific to the topic at hand, but rather is a world wide phenomenon. In 2008, Michael Wesch, an American anthropologist working at Kansas State University, distributed a video on the anthropology of youtube.<sup>14</sup> Besides various distinctive features of cultural production on the video-sharing website, the documentary presented how a song moved once around the virtual world and was remixed by many amateur performers world wide. He made clear that a cultural product spreads from one place to another while keeping its original meaning, but also becomes transformed into something more personal. According to Wesch, new media is a tool to connect people and make them interact. Replicating and spreading stories, like users do with literary works in the Gulf, is therefore a means of this communication. User-generated content and commentary link people beyond time and space (ibid.). However, contrary to the poems and stories written in English, in the case of short stories from the Gulf, language barriers are responsible for limited spreading of the stories to Gulf countries. This means that even if a reader understands Arabic, the same reader might not be able to understand Gulf dialect, since Arabic dialects not only differ in pronunciation, but also in vocabulary and expressions. Even if the stories spread all over the Gulf, they remain in a region that is united by its form of colloquial Arabic. Thus, the texts are rarely circulated in the whole Middle East and usually stay within regional borders, e.g. the Gulf countries.

### **3.1 Communication through Arabic Online Short Stories in Forums**

Users and authors exchange their thoughts on texts in various ways. Bloggers and readers usually comment on each other's texts and link to their blogs. As became clear during the interviews I conducted in 2010, many of them met each other in chat rooms. Bloggers in bigger cities try to meet personally as well, for example at informal blogger meetings. In forums, communication tends to happen via the comment function or on each other's profile sites. These profile sites belong to each individual user and the information that is distributed through them can be adjusted depending on the different preferences of its users.

Christine Boehler, researcher of new and old media, points out that judgement on online texts by a broad audience is increasingly used as a tool to rate the quality of literary production. This is evident in literary texts distributed through online platforms that invite users to vote, rate, or comment on submissions, and points to the fact that criticism is slowly moving away from an expert jury to a majority opinion that is rather spontaneous and less elaborated (Boehler).

### **3.2 Connecting Past and Present**

What is remarkable for Arabic online literature in the Gulf is the connection to cultural traditions in the region. Many of the texts published in online forums remind the reader of traditional oral story telling. Most of the stories have a personal introduction and at the end the audience is invited to comment on what has happened. Additionally, stories are sometimes slightly modified in the process of being "retold" on different platforms. It is also interesting to note that much of the text's language is dialogic and often written in a colloquial voice that is close to spoken Arabic. These are also distinct features of traditional story-telling. However, when I asked whether they see themselves as part of the tradition of story-tellers, the writers disagreed and instead claimed that there is no intentional connection between traditional story-telling at the tea house and what they are doing online (Albabbain). Consequently, writers disregard the reference to the historical form of story-telling and their practice as bloggers. Their claim, however, contradicts the way poetry websites and television shows present their texts. There, the connection to the past is always implied. This becomes clear in the trailer to the television show Prince of Poets, a competition for poets from all over the Middle East (similar to the American television show "American Idol"). The show always starts with men riding horses in the desert. This is a rather traditional and romantic picture of men from the Gulf, compared to the more contemporary and more common cruises through the dunes with off-road cars. From what the introduction suggests, one might think that the show's setting is a traditional tent, but it is in fact set in a contemporary television studio. Here, traditional images known from the past are connected to a contemporary setting. The same holds true for the content of the poems: the poetry presented in the show is usually written in a traditional metric and rhythmic scheme, but the content often links to contemporary topics. Thus, television shows and online literature connect aspects of traditional culture with contemporary characteristics of literary works.



## 4. Institutionalized and Self-Censorship

Exchange and interaction between authors, as well as between audience and authors, might be even more relevant in a region with high state and social censorship. Censorship is not just present through official institutions. Apart from censorship in various aspects of “offline life” such as television, radio, and print, as well as public events and also censorship of the Internet, self-censorship is significant for the message conveyed through literature. In the course of self-censorship, authors edit their own texts, mostly because they fear sanctions that might be forced on them, either by society or official institutions. Various Arab intellectuals, such as Fouad Ajami, Edward Said, and poets such as Nizar Qabbani and Adonis, criticized the acceptance and tolerance of self-censorship (Lynch 31). It has a strong influence on the texts themselves, as well as on the relationship and communication between author and audience. Any and all texts that are distributed in public can backfire on the author's reputation. In order to avoid punishment by official institutions and the social environment, texts are self-censored. For example, chances of getting married could be reduced if unmarried writers would publish literary works that might harm their reputation. This could be due, for example, to the controversial nature and content of the author's literary work. In fact, everything that is published online or in print can affect the author's social standing.

As I will explain below, social censorship is an influential and active supporter of state censorship. In Saudi Arabia or Oman, for example, people can ask the state to block websites. With this option they have the power to increase censorship. In this way, even “normal” people can influence content censorship. Even if this seems to be a strange approach in dealing with the openness of the Internet, the same behavior can be observed offline in order to protect moral values. In the case of Rajaa al-Sanea's best-selling novel “The Girls of Riyadh”, religious people felt offended by the content (Qusti). The novel was not only a best seller in the Middle East, but also in other countries after it had been translated into 18 languages. The author received threatening mail as well as death threats. In addition, two Saudi men asked the Ministry of Information in Saudi Arabia to withdraw the permission to distribute the novel in the country and demanded the author be punished (ibid.). Various critics claimed that the novel misrepresented the lifestyle of young Saudis and that it would give them a bad reputation all over the world. In this particular case, it was not the religious police or the Ministry of Information who worked against the novel. Rather, conservative members of society became involved in order to forcefully promote their own moral standards on society. Marc Lynch, researcher in Middle Eastern Studies, states that there is a general tendency of religious actors imposing censorship on the media, as can be witnessed in the Arab public sphere (Lynch 86).

The pressure exercised on individuals by the society clearly supports state censorship. It also influences the authors and forces them to select their material and decide carefully what should be published under their real names, both online and in print, and what should rather be kept private or distributed anonymously.

## 5. Conclusion

A brief look at different aspects of Arabic online literature in the Gulf makes clear that it is definitely a part of contemporary Arabic culture. It has an impact on society, but is also influenced by that society; for example, the quick societal changes that came with time and oil wealth are clearly influencing the literary texts. Bearing in mind that the Gulf is a rapidly developing region, not only with regard to construction activity and economic expansion, but also in the field of art and literature, online literature can be said to be a veritable mirror of the general development in the region. Writers make an effort to keep traditional values and style present while connecting these with contemporary techniques and embedding their works in media.

In countries where gender segregation and censorship are part of everyday life, interaction online tends to be of higher importance for its society rather than in countries where these problems are less present. All the options for channeling distribution and the great number of people participating in cultural production can therefore be seen as a reflection of a society that is in need of an augmentation of exchange and interaction of thoughts and ideas. This paper shows that online literature has already become a catalyst for communicating thoughts and opinions among like-minded people.

If online literature is a continuation of the previous literary tradition or if it should be regarded as a new type of literature that developed independently from any literary precursors has yet to be examined.

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## Notes

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1. In these countries, Arabic is the official language. While all of these are ruled by a monarch and members of the royal family, their political systems vary from country to country. Usually, however, a parliament or council advises the ruler. During the last sixty years, the countries in the Gulf came to financial wealth thanks to the discovery of oil and gas on their grounds. Ever since a rapid economic development and lately in fine arts has taken place.
2. Online authors shared this data with me during my fieldwork in Oman and the United Arab Emirates in 2009/10.
3. The web-information service Alexa is a website that offers an overview on the data on users from a huge amount of websites, see <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/gulf-gate.net#> and <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/alamuae.com#>

4. More information on the union can be found on the website <http://www.arabewriters.com/>
5. Thoughts on this can be found in Böhler.
6. It was attended by the author Sara Al-Jarawan, the author and journalist Amal Al-Falasi and the author Ibrahim Mubarak as discussants. Especially Amal Al-Falasi was emphasizing the increasing impact of short stories.
7. All forums I looked at were based on the same technical foundation that is provided by vBulletin (which belongs to Jelsoft Enterprises that was founded in Great Britain in 1999). It is a product that can be bought for less than 200 USD but helps many to distribute their opinions, thoughts, and creative works online.
8. As is visible when looking at the numbers published at <http://www.marksweb.com/www/alamuae.com>
9. As is visible when looking at the numbers published at <http://stimator.com/alamuae-com>
10. The number is taken from the World Bank Development Indicators (14.12.2009) [http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp\\_pop\\_totl&idim=country:ARE&dl=en&hl=en&q=population+uae](http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp_pop_totl&idim=country:ARE&dl=en&hl=en&q=population+uae)
11. In 2009 it was almost four million expatriates <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/uae-population-likely-to-cross-5m-1.536014>
12. It was founded in 2003 and published more than 120 e-books of about 100 writers. Hayat Alyaqout won a national prize for her project. Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah Internet Contest Award 2005.
13. At the time this text was written, nashiri.net has more than 4800 members.
14. Michael Wesch, "An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube." June 2008. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4\\_hU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4_hU)