

# Habib Abdulrab Sarori

## SELF-PORTRAIT

Born in Aden on the 15th of August, 1956, into a family enamoured of literature, I developed an early preference for poetry, which I have composed since my youth. When I was fourteen, I published my first poem in *Al-Hikma*, the most important Yemeni literary journal back then, and in this way attained four-fifths of my life's happiness.

Unfortunately, when I was young I also loved mathematics and the sciences. This was in general not negative, but in three particular respects proved problematic:

I advanced quickly enough through my years of study to complete my Thanaweya Amma (General Secondary Education Certificate) before the beginning of the Military Service Law in South Yemen. For this reason, after secondary school I performed my national service as a maths teacher for ninth grade students in the Sheikh Othman Middle School in Aden.

In 1976 I travelled to France to study electrical engineering. But when I arrived there, I switched to applied mathematics, although I was virtually untrained in it, because at that time modern mathematics was not taught in Aden, whereas in France middle and secondary school students were taught nothing else. This was

followed by a specialization in Computer Science.

After defending my doctoral dissertation in 1987 and then my post-doctoral thesis in 1991, I became a university professor in 1992, when I was thirty-six.

At that time I began to organize my time according to my wishes and dedicated some of it, finally, to returning to my deep-rooted passion for literature.

Because I had been preoccupied exclusively with scientific learning and research from 1976 to 1992, I had been forced to leave off the pursuit of literary composition – except for writing the occasional poem. I did not, however, refrain from reading French literature and philosophy from the time I became proficient in French – after arriving in France without knowing a word of French.

Since 1992 I have organized my time according to this Qur'anic



*Clémentine, Ambrine, Natalie and Habib*

verse: "The male has a share comparable to that of two females." The gender of the following terms in Arabic is masculine: 'scientific research', 'teaching', and 'computer' while the Arabic words for the 'novel' and 'writing' are feminine.

For approximately the next five years, until I retire, I also plan to devote two-thirds of my time to scientific endeavours and one third to literary ones. Once I retire, I hope to reverse the phrase, in a laudable way, to read: "The female has a share comparable to two males."

After 1992 I began my literary effort by writing a novel in French: *La reine étripée* ("The Duped Queen" or "al-Malika al-Maghdura"). Professor Ali Muhammad Zayd translated it into Arabic, and its third edition will appear this summer (2016) from Dar Al-Saqi. That was followed by seven novels in Arabic. The first was a trilogy: *Damlan* (Dar Al-Adab), which was shortlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award.

The middle one of these seven volumes is *Taqrir al-Hudhud* (Dar Al-Adab, The Hoopoe's Report). The hero of this novel is Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri. (A translated chapter appears in this issue of *Banipal*.)

The penultimate one is *Ibnat Suslof* (Dar Al-Saqi, longlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize for 2014). It has been translated into French (forthcoming from Actes Sud, translated by Professor Hana Jaber) and into English (forthcoming from Darf Publishers). The most recent is *Hafid Sinbad* (Sinbad's Scion, Dar Al-Saqi), which the publisher nominated for the 2016 IPAF.

In addition to these novels, I have also published a poetry collection, a collection of short stories, and two books of philosophy. The second of these is *La Imama Siwa al-'Aql* (The Intellect is the Only Imam, Riad El-Rayyes Books).

I diligently continue to pursue my literary activities. One of these, since September 2014, has been writing a column for the Culture Supplement of *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*. I have also written several articles for the French papers *Le Monde* and *Libération*.

I have directed a university research team as well as projects in which numerous university teams participate. I have written more than one hundred research articles in journals and for international,

\* Qur'an, Sura al-Nisa' (The Women) 4:11

peer-reviewed, specialist conferences. I have published several scientific books in English and in French.

### Which Authors and Writers Do I Like?

There are some essential books that changed my life, and I have been indebted to them and their authors all my life. For authors who are still alive, I practice a strange, quasi-religious ritual. I rush to buy their books the day they are released – no matter what my work schedule is – even if I know I will not read them for weeks.

Moreover, I am an enthusiastic fan of the theatre. For the last ten years, for example, I have regularly attended the annual Theatre Festival of Avignon for two or three weeks, seeing on average two or three performances a day.

I leave here only a few sample names of the writers and thinkers I was asked to discuss in this self-portrait: Nietzsche, Homer, Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri, Rimbaud, Philippe Sollers, Amin Maalouf, Jean d'Ormesson, Michel Houellebecq, Steven Pinker, Pascal Boyer ...

### What Does Literature Mean to Me?

Literature is our most important offspring and distinguishes our biological species from all the others through its abstract language and art. The habitat where it flourishes and acts is not just reality but also the imagination – which is the master of man's talents.

Unlike the rest of man's intellectual activities, which delve vertically into some specified field like physics, geology, history, psychology, etc., literature is a horizontal journey that probes the depths of each life and of human endeavours.

It can be a means of artistic expression for history, science, political science, and for anything that interests a person – or does not. For this reason, it is the wellspring of man's creativity in its richest dimensions.

Over and beyond this, however, literature – and especially the novel – is the adventure of the human self and expands human life by adding to it sentiments, dreams, sufferings, and new hopes, new passion, rejection, screams, and adventures of traveling through space and time.

In brief, the novel adds new lives – in other words new “Preserved Tablets”!

The novel is thus an imitation of the divine project of writing the “Preserved Tablet” that – according to the religious point of view – God wrote, and that narrated in advance every process of human life, which purposefully realizes and embodies lines from this Tablet – just as a film brings the director’s scenario to the screen!

Thus the novel is divinity squared or cubed, because Man – who is said to have devised the gods according to his nature but with limitless, massive powers that exceed him in all directions – granted to the gods the gift of writing the first novel in the history of existence: the “Preserved Tablet”. Then he granted himself the art of the novel – the gift of writing little preserved tablets, according to the most dominant and brilliant creatures of his amazing imagination!

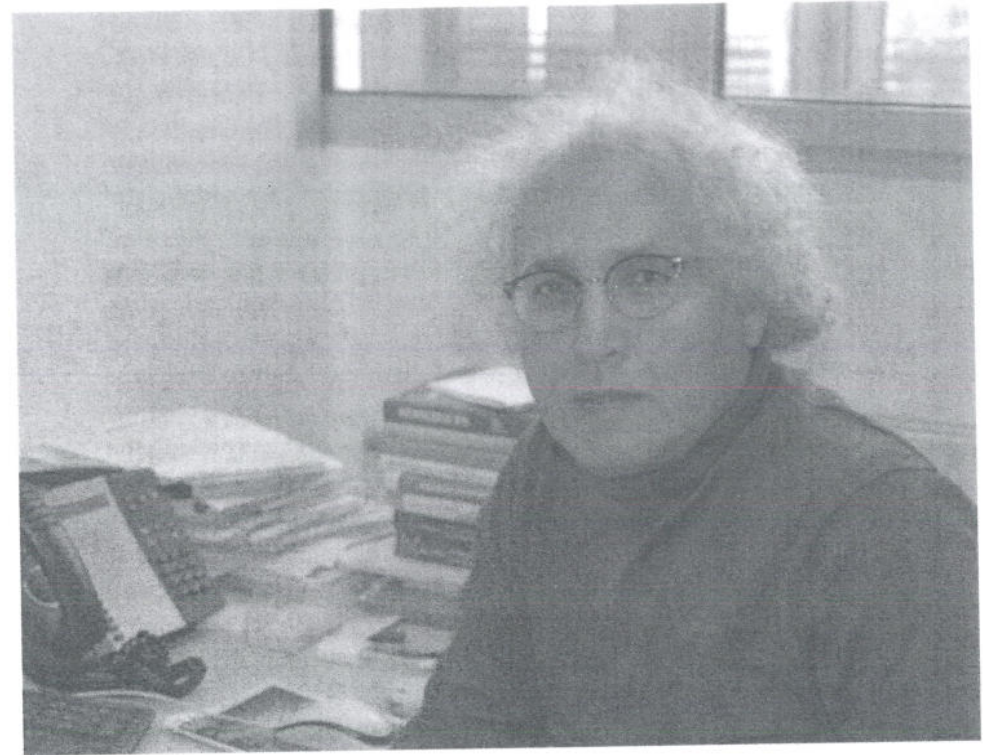
### How Shall I Conclude This Self-Portrait?

With the most important and most wonderful aspect of my life: Natalie, my wife, and our daughters: Clémentine and Ambrine! My wife is a distinguished university professor, who heads a department. She is my eternal, everlasting angel and a torch that lights all of my existence. I met her in the first week of my first university year, and we have never parted. Had it not been for our mutual support and for the music of our life together, I would not have advanced a single step; perhaps she feels the same way.

Our older daughter, who is twenty-five, after finishing her university studies in one of the elite schools (Henri-IV, HEC), is currently working in Vietnam. Our younger daughter is on her way to Colombia as part of her university training in the fine arts.

I have suddenly recalled – I don’t know why – a simple party song that we four sang together in unison in 2004 with juvenile innocence and gaiety. Its echoes still fill the sky of South Africa (one of approximately fifty countries the four of us have visited together) while our automobile was traversing the plains, mountains, and coasts of that vast, enchanting country in every direction: “Live is life, Na Na Na Na Na.”

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM M HUTCHINS



HABIB ABDULRAB SARORI

## Hind and Abu al-‘Ala’ Play Chess

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL *THE HOOPOE’S REPORT*,  
TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM M. HUTCHINS

Hind was the brightest and most beautiful of the pupils of “the philosopher of poets and the poet of philosophers”, Ahmad ibn Abdallah ibn Sulayman al-Tanukhi, who was known as Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri. Of all his pupils she was the one who was most likely to debate with him and the most disputatious. She was certainly also the one most enamoured of him and the student closest to his mother’s heart.

Before making her way to his class, Hind always began by kissing the hand and knee of the mother of Abu al-‘Ala’. Before leaving, she would bid her farewell by kissing her forehead. She would visit from time to time to assist her with daily chores and to exchange confidences, concerns, and gossip.

When accompanied by his mother, Hind was adept at picking the right moment to challenge her teacher, Abu al-‘Ala’, to a game of chess.

The blind poet was renowned for “never having been defeated at chess by a sighted person”. He was also said to be “the only blind person who played chess in the Abbasid era”. All his opponents stumbled with an unnatural speed and were defeated with a disgusting ease, which suited him perfectly.

Hind loved the ritual aspects of her battle on the chessboard with Abu al-‘Ala’. She derived intense pleasure from watching him place a hypothetical chess piece on the table of his mind as he mentally reviewed the moves and positions of the pawns and officials of his army, one by one.

She knew he could not visualize the chess pieces’ appearance any more than he could visualize other objects or most colours. The illness that had afflicted him when he was a boy of almost four had deprived him of his vision. The only colour memory that his brain retained was red. That was the colour of the saffron-dyed shirt he wore while he was ill, before he plunged into the sea of dark shadows.

For each chessman he substituted a word in his mind. He also substituted a word for each square on the chessboard. A match was a dynamic, square poem with words that moved across a ground of words, fighting and falling in a night of words. Perhaps for this reason he demonstrated a special facility, which excited the admiration of his acquaintances for remembering the “text” of all the moves of his matches with Hind or other players – days after a game – move

by move, verse by verse.

Things, all things, were identified with words in the space of his mind, which contained only words. Some words were superimposed on other words – scattering, glittering, and winking at each other like stars.

In the night of his mind, the starless night did not differ from morning, the sun did not differ from the extremely remote star Alcor, and the only difference between meteors and pebbles was the different letters in the words. All the same, the contrast between these paired opposites did not escape him. He recited:

*How amazing it is that many a loser claims merit!*

*What a shame it is that many a meritorious person exhibits a defect.*

*Alcor told the sun: “You’re miniscule!”*

*The starless night told the morning, “Your colour is off!”*

*The earth insolently contended with the sky,*

*And meteors skipped over pebbles and stones.*

*So, death, call on me, since life is nasty.*

*Your era, earnest fellow, is a sick joke!*

These paired opposites were transposed – head over heels – by sighted people, who were confused or blinded by the gleam of reality and its sparkle. Its mirage and snares blinkered them.

Nothing in existence excited him like a word, and the most important word for him was “word”. Next in order of preference came “nightmare”, which in his lexicon meant quite simply “Mother of the Stench” or “Mother of Putrefaction” – in other words: this physical world, this vale of tears.

The most beautiful word in his opinion definitely was “light”!

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Hind contemplated profoundly his smooth, dense beard, tall, slender physique, long, flowing, fluffy, silver hair (which was concealed by a turban from everyone but his mother and Hind, and occasionally his secretary), luminous brow, and features that were endowed with sublimity, sagacity, intelligence, and a nobility befitting his status.

His eyes were completely still; a grey, unshakable sorrow and the shadows of a treacherous, illness long ago had effaced them forever. God knew how much Hind always wanted to kiss them!

She believed at times that if only she could kiss them with extreme gentleness nonstop for an entire year, vision would return to them, since Joseph's shirt had that effect on his father, Jacob, when it was thrown over his eyes. "Then he could see again."<sup>1</sup> Abu al-'Ala' himself shared this belief and wished that the "shirt" of her kisses would adhere to his eyes for much longer than that!

She gazed at him; she gazed at him to the point of dissolution! She was adept at listening to his silence. She would capture, decipher, and gloss each of its inflections. She would imbibe all its expressions and grow dizzy at every witty, sarcastic jest or exquisite remark he uttered.

She adored him as a whole and in each particular detail.

He told her, looking toward her as if he saw her, "Please, if you don't mind, let the black knight move from his place in the third vertical file and the fourth horizontal rank to stand behind the white castle, fully behind her."

A faint gasp of innocent, embarrassed laughter escaped her when she heard him say: "Fully behind her."

She wondered how he pictured her when he looked toward her. Did he like what he saw? Was she also merely a set of words for him? Was she a white castle whose heart he toppled a thousand times a day? Would he only be happy when she disappeared in his embrace? When the tips of his fingers touched her slender waist, which would ignite all his desires? When his lips kissed all the undulations of her spine, one vertebra at a time? When they roamed her entire slender body, slowly, gently, and reverently? When he drank her breaths, when he was fully before her, fully above her, fully below her, fully inside her, and fully behind her?

Like his mother, Hind knew how much he loved beauty and that the only thing that actually appealed to him in life was the embrace of a beautiful woman. She realized that he was fully aware that she was very beautiful, but what did the word "beautiful" mean to a sightless man? By the truth of heaven, what did this word mean? Did he want his girlfriend to be an extremely beautiful young woman who was extremely charming merely to desire what all other men desire, without knowing what the word meant?

For a long time his mother had described Hind to him using colour words, because she knew how responsive he was to the names for colours and how disconsolate he was that red was the

only colour he could remember.

"Hind's complexion is vanilla-white. She has black braids, red lips, honey-coloured eyes, and gleaming white teeth, which are perfectly aligned."

"Mother, describe the colour of honey to me. Spell it out."

The colour of a person's eyes and teeth mattered a lot to him. He missed seeing colours and light, which is the source of colours, more than anything else in life. Life had stabbed him in the back when it deprived him of light. He felt that no one in existence knew as well as he did the value of the word "light."

He felt a certain sense of victory whenever he heard this word uttered in casual conversation. This was nothing compared to his delight in hearing the phrase "light upon light"<sup>2</sup>, repeated in passing, because he had a profound understanding of the meaning of the expression "darkness upon darkness".

As a child he had asked his mother repeatedly about all the different colours and their variants. Her answer had never left his consciousness for a moment; he termed it the Surah of the Colours: "Colours clothe existence, my son. They grant it beauty! If existence were all a single colour, it would be quite mournful and dull – the colour of death!

"Roses and other flowers have their special colours as do a water bubble, the parrot's neck, the peacock's feather, and a dappled beard.

"The butterfly's wing, the fish, coral branches, gleaming crustaceans, dye powders, the horizon at sunset, and the rainbow all have their special colours."

Approximately a quarter century after first revealing the Surah of the Colours, his mother added some new verses to it. Called "Hind", they painted her with magical, glistening colours, and etched them into the cortex of his brain when she said:

"Hind's complexion is vanilla-white. She has black braids, red lips, honey-coloured eyes, and gleaming white teeth, which are perfectly aligned."

Oh, his mother knew full well how references to colours ignited his senses and desires and how invested in them he was.

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