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CAPITAL BUZZ

The return of the storyteller

From *Rags to Reaches* to the *Age of Endurance*, Mohammed Abdul Jalil Al Fahim is back to doing what he does best - weave stories that are an exotic amalgamation of his childhood memories and dollops of imagination

SILVIA RADAN

In an old villa on Khaleej Al Arabi Street, Mohammed Abdul Jalil Al Fahim just finished a business meeting. He sinks into the comfort of an armchair and smiles at the memories my questions start to bring out. An office boy comes in with a tray loaded with glasses containing fruit juice. I pick up a glass and put it on the floor, but soon after a group of people struggle to bring in a far too large coffee table, just for my glass.

"What are you doing? We are here talking about our traditions and you want to bring in this table? We used to sit on the floor in the past," exclaims Al Fahim, sending the large piece of furniture away, but which was still replaced with a much smaller one.

Indeed, we are there to talk about the past, Abu Dhabi's past, made known to the world for the second time by Mohammed Al Fahim.

Back in 1995, he published his first book, *From Rags to Reaches*, a biography of his childhood and teenage years coinciding with the life-changing u-turn the emirate took in its history—

the discovery of oil and the making of a country.

Published in five languages, the book was an eye and a heart-opener for anyone who was not born here, but was eager to understand Arabia. It left all its readers craving for more and now, 10 years later, there is finally a second helping.

Age of Endurance, a history novel of Abu Dhabi emirate from 1928 till 1966 is just out. It is a priceless collection of old stories, the kind that a grandfather would tell his grandchildren at campfire, narrated by Al Fahim (his own or his friends' encounters and adventures), but actually written by Mariam Mehey Addin Malla.

An established author, this being her fourth novel, Mariam has been living in the UAE for the past 23 years. Deeply touched by Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the late President of the UAE, she decided to write this book in his memory, so the 240-odd pages are filled not only with beautiful stories, fishermen songs, Nabati poetry, old maps and photographs of Abu Dhabi, including some rare images of Shaikh Zayed.

"My favourite chapter is the one about the shipwrecked in the storm. The characters were forced to travel back from Ruwais to Abu Dhabi on camels, over the desert," reveals Al Fahim.

"In those days there were no helicopters or coastguards searching for them. News travelled slowly, so they would not get reported as lost for several months. It was hard and lonely and it just

shows how unimportant people's lives were, yet they kept on going, proving their strength of character and faith."

Although the characters in this book are fictional, they are all inspired by real people and events.

"*Age of Endurance* is based on my father, my relatives and my friends' recollection of events. It tells the story of the way of life before the discovery of oil, the difficulties, the hardship, the illiteracy, lack of hospitals and schools, which all ended when Shaikh Zayed took over," explains Al Fahim.

To all this he adds in his own memories, the first of which dates back to 1956.

"I remember, for example, the bombs falling on Buraimi oasis. I was about nine years old then. I was not afraid - they looked like fireworks."

His father was very close to Shaikh Zayed, so young Mohammed spent a lot of time in the Al Ain Palace.

"It was an empty palace. Only a few people around and life was simple. There were no servants or retainers. The wives were involved in the housekeeping and cooking," remembers Al Fahim.

"The first time I met Shaikh Zayed? He had a majlis in our home in Al Ain and he had named all of my brothers and sisters, except for Abbas, who was born in Abu Dhabi. There were no cars or roads, so information travelled very slowly and since Shaikh Zayed was in Al Ain, my father had to choose a name by himself. Still, later on he changed Abbas'

name to Saeed."

"Shaikh Zayed acted like a father or brother to almost everyone. He gave us advice not only on general, everyday life, but on specific problems like medical treatment."

"He saw me growing up in front of him. When I was about 10 years old he took me into the palace to keep company for the now President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who was his only son at that time."

"Today, if I could bring anything back from the past, it would be Shaikh Zayed."

Despite the hardship of the pre-oil days, Mohammed Al Fahim has fond memories of his teenage years. The simplicity of life and the transparency of people is what he misses most.

"We were all one village and acted like one family. We looked after each other. If there was a marriage, everyone assisted financially. When someone came back from a long trip, we would raise the Abu Dhabi flag, which was red with white corners, to celebrate his safe return," he says.

Many of these memories are found throughout the *Age of Endurance*. The stories, meant to describe the life "before", stop when the development of Abu Dhabi emirate starts and the storyteller does not exclude part two, the equally intriguing times and tales of the transforming years.

—silvia@khaleejtimes.com

Mohammed Abdul Jalil Al Fahim's engaging verse has become very popular with his readers

Excerpts from the *Age of Endurance*

We anchored the boat at the foot of the mountain and spotted the tents of Bedouins that were scattered in the desert. We carried what we needed and left the boat. We were exhausted with thirst and hunger.

The rain fell and Abu Ahmad advised us to put our palms together and drink from the rain. Our feet started to sink into the sand as it turned to mud from the rain.

When we reached the tents I felt the warmth and was finally reassured enough to fall asleep. We stayed for ten days in the tents until we regained our strength. We packed some supplies on the back of the camels to return home. We were bound to walk for seven days across the desert to get to our neighbourhood.

We stopped on the fifth day because Musabbih's health was getting worse. He was suffering from pain in his kidneys and we had no medicine. After we set the tents in the desert, I tried to distract him from his misery and asked him to tell us some of his stories and riddles.

Abu Ahmad was able to solve them all.

