

Culture

'A Small Death' by Saudi writer Mohamed Hasan Alwan wins IPAF Prize

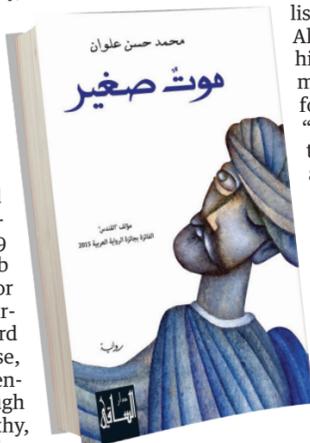
Mohamad al-Hamamsi

Abu Dhabi

The winner of the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) is Saudi writer Mohammed Hasan Alwan for his novel "A Small Death" ("Mawtun Saghir"). The announcement was made at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair.

In addition to having his work translated into English and promoted internationally, Alwan received a prize of \$50,000. Six shortlisted writers each received \$10,000.

Novelist Sahar Khalifeh, who was chairman of the judging panel, said Alwan's novel was selected from among 159 books from 18 Arab countries. Professor Yasir Suleiman, chairman of the IPAF board of trustees, in a release, said the winning entry "captivates through the power of empathy, unadorned love and the crystal clarity of its gaze into the human soul."



Cover of Mohammed Hasan Alwan's novel "A Small Death."

"A Small Death," published by Dar Al Saqi, is a fictional account of the life of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, a Sufi Muslim scholar born in Muslim Spain in the 12th century. The novel follows Ibn Arabi's life through his travels in Azerbaijan, North Africa, the Hijaz in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Turkey and finally to Damascus, where he died. Throughout Ibn Arabi's odyssey he encounters a seemingly endless variety of people and events, through which he comes to deepen and broaden his understanding of the human spirit and the world.

After being short-listed for the prize, Alwan talked about his work in a documentary produced for IPAF. He said: "It might seem odd to choose to write a novel about Ibn Arabi with all those extreme Eastern concepts, while residing in this distant cold corner of the world in Canada. I often think about this. So, at first, I directly linked it to me feeling nostalgic, then I realised that being exposed



Prestigious award. Saudi writer Mohammed Hasan Alwan speaks after receiving the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in Abu Dhabi.

(Kherdine Mabrouk)

to what is seemingly foreign or different is what drives me to reconnect with myself, as well as with my heritage and old culture."

Alwan was born in Riyadh in 1979 and lives in Toronto. Before "A Small Death", Alwan published four other novels: "The Ceiling of Sufficiency" (2002), "Sophia" (2004), "The Collar of Purity" (2007) and "The Beaver" (2011). "The Beaver" ("Al-Qundus") was shortlisted for the IPAF Prize in 2013. The French version of the

novel was awarded in 2015 the Paris Arab Institute prize for best novel translated into French from Arabic.

In 2014, Alwan published a non-fiction book in Arabic, "Migration: Theory and Key Factors." In 2010, he was selected as one of the best 39 Arab authors under the age of 40 and his name was included in the "Beirut 39" anthology.

The six novels shortlisted for the 2017 prize were by Ismail Fahd Ismail from Kuwait, Najwa Binshat-

wan from Libya, Elias Khoury from Lebanon, Saad Mohammed Raheem from Iraq, Mohammed Abdel Nabi from Egypt and Alwan.

The 2017 IPAF Prize judging panel included Khalifeh, Syrian translator Saleh Almani, Egyptian novelist Sahar El Mougy, Libyan academic and critic Fatma Salem Al Haji and British researcher Sophia Vasalou.

Mohamad al-Hamamsi is an Egyptian writer.

Environment takes centre stage at Sharjah Biennial

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

The 13th Sharjah Biennial (SB13), with the theme "Tamawuj", Arabic for "rising and falling waves," is an attempt at deconstructing the concept of the biennial itself. It involves an education programme for "supporting the artistic and cultural landscape of the region," said Hoor al-Qasimi, president of the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), which is organising the event.

Tamawuj, which can also be interpreted as a flowing, swelling, surging or fluctuating and undulating appearance, revolves around the key words of water, crops, earth and culinary, which form the basis of the displayed artwork

by 70 international artists.

As is evident in the conceptual framework of SB13, the themes revolving around environment and strategies of survival take centre stage. Survival also needs resistance methodologies to cope with the overwhelming contemporary uncertainties that societies and cultures worldwide face. These concerns are often accentuated in the Middle East.

SB13 used six SAF venues – Al Mureijah Square, Calligraphy Square, Arts Square, the newly opened Al Hamriyah Studios, the Flying Saucer and Old Sharjah Planetarium.

Act I of SB13 takes place in Sharjah through June 12 while Act II and the closing event will be in the hometown of the event's curator, Beirut-based Christine Tohme, in October.

An extended conversation is

scheduled in Sharjah with artist Kader Attia, curators Lara Khaldi and Zeynep Oz and the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan.

Because of the way the theme has been structured, Tohme said "the artworks, which include 30 new commissions, can be seen to be conversing with each other."

Qasimi notes that the works displayed "offer new possibilities for understanding our role within the context of great uncertainty in the world today."

Taiwanese duo Rain Wu and Eric Chen's impressive site-specific installation "Collectivism 2016," comprising 640 police shields, is displayed in the Art Square. The piece, inspired by the confrontation between students and police in Taiwan, was first displayed at the Taipei Biennial. "It examines what it is to have a mass as well as ordered

resistance," Wu said.

In Sharjah, the structure encloses a small garden and features a wooden platform enabling and inviting the public to walk through it despite the formidable outer core or one can peep through the view holes of the shields into the organic form of the small garden.

South African artist Dineo Seeshee Bopape's mixed media installation, "+/- 1791 (monument to the Haitian revolution 1791)" examines the healing and destructive power of materials and how social change has a personal and spiritual dimension apart from socio-historical processes.

A stunning work comes from Lawrence Abu Hamdan, whose "Saydnaya (the missing 19db)" is a sound installation that is part of a larger acoustic probe into the notorious Syrian prison 25km north of Damascus. This investigation documents the chilling disappearance of voices and the transformation of the prison into a death camp.

Also staged during the opening week at SB13 was Abu Hamdan's "Bird Watching," an acoustic investigation into the Saydnaya prison examining the politics of listening and the importance of the ear witness.

Palestinian architect Khalil Rabah's "Palestine after Palestine: New Sites for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind Departments" explores the relationship between art and institutions. Rabah draws attention to the occupation of the Palestinian territories and to the resilience of sites and symbols that exist in spite of their contested states of being.

Iranian artist Abbas Akhavan, who lives in Toronto, is presenting three interrelated works at SB13 that explore gestures of aerial projec-

tion and perspective. "Envelope" is a decommissioned hot air balloon that is occasionally inflated and is a symbol of the recurring process of rise and fall – a view of civilisation as well as the cycle of breath.

His work "Kids, Cats and 1 Dog" is a text work installed on the Gallery 1 rooftop and a call for rescue of the subjects from destructive developments and from an Earth at tipping point.

■ Tamawuj, Arabic for rising and falling waves, was the theme of the 13th Sharjah Biennial.

Akhavan's "Variations on a Garden" is an expression of another intense human desire to know and to be known by those who exist beyond our immediate surroundings. The large photograph references the plaques carried on NASA's Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft launched in 1972 and 1973, respectively.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's "The Great Silence" is profoundly moving, juxtaposing the Arecibo Observatory in Esperanza, Puerto Rico, and the surrounding Riyo Abajo forest, home to the last wild population of endangered Amazona vittata parrots.

The three-channel, high-definition video's script is written from the parrots' perspective, chronicling humankind's quest to find intelligent life by listening to signals from outer space. It is a tragic-comic viewpoint as the parrot species extends its love and admiration to humankind, which, on the other hand, is oblivious to them, their language and ecosystem, which is facing destruction.



Survival topics. A view of the art works in Gallery 3 at Al Mureijah Square.

(Sharjah Art Foundation)