

Speech by
Prof. Suzanne Stetkevych

I am indeed pleased to be in Riyadh to celebrate the King Faisal Prize awards for the year 2022 and I am honored to accept the Prize in Arabic Language and Literature under the theme “Arabic Literature Studies in English”. I would like on this occasion to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the Chairman of the King Faisal Prize Prince Khaled Al-Faisal and the Secretary General of the Prize, Dr. Abdulaziz AlSebail. I likewise wish to express my gratitude to my Arab colleagues who helped and encouraged me over the years. I would like to single out on this occasion some of the late winners of this prize whom I had the honor to meet and from whom I benefitted much knowledge. I recall from Egypt Prof. Ezz El-Din Ismail, Prof. Mahmoud Ali Makki, and Prof. Hussein Nassar, and from Palestine Prof. Ihsan Abbas. Each of them was not just an iconic figure who established the foundations of Arabic literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century, but each of them was a generous human being who built bridges between generations, between countries, and indeed between civilizations. Each of them sought throughout his life and through his work to contribute to the mission of King Faisal Prize, namely “participating in all aspects of civilization, as well as enrich human knowledge and develop mankind.” A special word of recognition is due, as well, to the late Prof. Jaroslav Stetkevych, my partner in Arabic poetry, as in all things.

Finally, I should like to thank my colleagues in Saudi universities who nominated me for this distinguished prize. This reflects their confidence in my dedication to classical Arabic poetry, and to presenting this rich heritage to the new generation both through study and teaching. I hope that the bridge I seek to build is a twin-way street between the Arab world and the West. I also hope that winning this prize under the theme: “Arabic Literature Studies in English” marks the erasing of boundaries between Arabs and Arabists, between the ‘us’ and the ‘other’.

Classical Arabic poetry is the essence of Arab culture and the breeding ground for the revelation of the Holy Qur’an and the flourishing of Arab-Islamic civilization. However, the modern and contemporary person may find Arabic poetry, with its abstruse lexicon and opaque images, quite strange, or even worse than that, may find it useless in today’s world. In my critical work, I seek to reveal beyond the obscure words, vague images, and stubborn form of ancient poetry the expression of the common human experience: weeping over ruins, travelling across the desert, reaching the safe haven where honesty and generosity reign—all these meanings reflect common human fears and hopes and offer us unforgettable lessons.

We need to acknowledge, and even celebrate, the role of poetry from the pre-Islamic era to the present day in shaping, preserving and developing the Arabic language, and through it Arab culture and Islamic civilization.

Let me quote from Prince Khaled Al-Faisal’s speech about the principles and values of King Faisal Foundation: “The greatness of a nation is not measured by the size of its material possessions, but by its role in the progress of mankind”.

With this in mind, I wish, while I am among you here in Riyadh, to join my voice to that of the poet al-Buhturi to say:

This is how I feel, though this abode is not my home through kinship,
nor is its race my race,
But I find that I admire men of noble character
from every root and nation.

Thank you