

## **The East versus the West: Arabic Culture & Literature**

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**Abstract:** *At long last many Arab countries revolted against oppressive regimes, but with more failures than successes. The main reason for this setback is related to the uneasiness of the Arabs to change radically from within. They are still torn between allegiance to tradition and confronting reality by adapting to the demands of contemporary life. On the one hand, the fundamentalists want to restore the old style of life by adopting a literal approach to religious texts; and they feel threatened by the idea of change and the secular government. On the other hand, the liberals accept Western culture as exemplary, and they attempt to reconcile the past with the present and feel apprehensive of the consequences of a strict Islamic state.*

*Similarly, Arabic literature is dominated by 'preaching', but increasingly tries to assert itself against all sorts of odds by confronting the challenges of modern life. In order to achieve an international status, Arabic literature should confront human nature as it is without fear of any consequences. Above all, it must give ultimate priority to the demands of art by dramatizing all aspects of life convincingly.*

**Keywords:** *culture, Islam, Modernization, Arabic literature, didacticism, Western influence.*

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Generally speaking, the Arab world is ruled by military dictatorial regimes which have been oppressive and corrupt without showing any sign of change. They are strongly related to, and even protected by, certain foreign powers which have so far been mainly concerned with their own interest and they often turned a blind eye on either human rights or the question of corruption. All forms of life have been dominated by this sense of oppression in the political life. The regimes want to preserve the status quo in everything, including the religious, literary, and the whole cultural scene, which is meticulously designed to provide the theoretical cover up for the vicious practices of authorities.

When the Arab spring started it took the world by surprise and most people felt that they were not well prepared internally for this kind of radical change. Therefore, all the countries which have revolted against decades of oppression are still moving in a vicious circle. The fundamentalists who exploited the situation want out rightly to impose some kind of theocratic governments where everything is measured against a strict interpretation of religious texts, ignoring the tide of time and the question of different minorities. By contrast, the liberals want, at least theoretically, to have democratic, liberal and secular governments, where the rights of all citizens, including the right of artists to express themselves freely without any censorship, are fully preserved and protected. They want to change radically all forms of life to match the various developments that have taken place particularly in the West, without providing the necessary requirements for such metamorphosis.

In reality, the pressure of modern life and circumstances necessitates a new approach of reinterpreting religious texts in a flexible way. Individual freedom, interest, inheritance, and the feminist question in general, are some of the pressing issues that have to be tackled anew. Rationalization, based on experiment and modern practical life, should be adopted in view of the nature of language and the ambiguity of many religious texts. More than a thousand years ago Al-Mutazilah courageously stated: "If there is a contradiction between the text and reason we shall adopt reason and interpret the text figuratively." (Al-Bagdadi, 564) On the other hand, educated people in the West have developed a form of Christian deism whereby they concentrate on the individual behavior in a healthy society, rather than on rituals or miracles.

The ultimate question is whether there is a mechanism in Islam to enable scholars to respond positively to modern contexts of life and the soul of texts, rather than to their literal dimension. Is it possible to reconcile the present demands of life with the literal approach of the fundamentalists? Furthermore, should Arabs reject 'modernization' and the idea of the secular government on the basis of its foreignness and stick to their own cultural values, or should they try to find a compromise, especially that many educated people are not quite convinced of the validity of their own tradition? A

strict adherence to heritage is something which the Arabs have had to deal with since the emergence of Islam. Perhaps the only significant exception is that of the 'rationalist' movement of al-Mu'utazileh, which challenged the religious orthodoxy and went so far as to adopt a figurative interpretation of many koranic verses which literally, from their point of view, contradicted reason. They also raised doubts about some of the issues which are now beginning to emerge again. Had al-Mu'utazileh been allowed to continue as a movement, it would probably have adopted a deistic approach to religion, where there is less attention either for rituals or miracles, and where the practical welfare of humans is given top priority, exactly as the West has done with Christianity. In recent times, al-Afagani, Muhammed Abdo, Kasem Amin, Shaltout, Ahmad Amin and many others started a movement of liberation; but again religious orthodoxy prevailed. At the moment, the Arab satellite channels are monitoring religious interpretations and trying by hook or by crook to preach traditional ideals as the only viable approach to Islam. Their attitude to Feminism, interest, and individual freedom in general is quite negative and uncompromising; their outlook is one sided, presenting reality as either right or wrong concerning every aspect of life, including trivial details about one's own personal matters. They sometimes rely on a decontextualized literal interpretation of religious texts and deny any possibility of maneuver, or of adopting a figurative interpretation of some Koranic verses.

The basic issue which the fundamentalists ignore is that religion is there to help humans survive comfortably; and it should have a mechanism to change if circumstances demand, particularly by using analogy. Jesus once said to somebody protesting against not observing the Sabbath, "the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath." (The Bible: Mark 2.27) In other words, humans are the centre and everything else should be devoted to ensure people's happiness on earth. Western culture has actually developed a philosophy of liberal humanism, where the individuals are largely free to do whatever they want, providing of course that no one else is harmed. In Arab cultural ideology, society is the center and individuals are expected to sacrifice themselves to serve their family, country, religion, etc. Perhaps some form of compromise is possible between extreme individualism and those external forces which limit and oppress the individual. In terms of any religious practice, Moslems have to be logically convinced of whatever they are performing rather than the negative assertion, which is sometimes out of context, that this is merely mentioned in the Koran, or supported by Hadith. There is generally intellectual poverty on the part of orthodoxy, which is driving many educated people to the West rather than allowing them to re-evaluate their tradition in the light of new circumstances and then establish their own personal judgments. Some of those pro-Western scholars are further encouraged by modern theories of linguistics and literary criticism, especially Deconstruction, that have thrown doubts on the stability of the text which is often seen as a rich and lively entity between writer and reader. (Bertens 117-147) Accordingly, the possibility of more than one interpretation is always dormant within every text and each generation might find something new and totally different from the original interpretation, especially, as Nietzsche has remarked, language by nature is figurative. (817)

There is an uneven battle at the moment between the fundamentalists who stick to the old interpretation of the Koran and Hadith and some modernists, such as Nasr Abu Zaid, who are trying to raise doubts about the "fixity" and "stability" of religious texts. Probably new voices will emerge to enrich research concerning how to approach the religious text in particular. Despite unfavorable circumstances, it is hoped that some approach which is flexible, pragmatic and tolerant might be adopted, although the conflict between the old and the new, in the words of Taha Hussein, will never be over. (3-58)

That is one reason why the Arab revolutions have not so far succeeded because people from within are not fully equipped to confront the internal and radical changes that are demanded in such situations. Thus, it is not a great surprise if new forms of dictatorships taking different shapes, including the possibility of oppressive theocratic governments, may dominate political life in the future. The idea of a military coup, an odd phenomenon in the West, is still a great threat for these revolutions.

All these problems are actually reflecting themselves in literature, which represents a culture where everything has to be supervised. Many Arab writers are committed to society, nationalism and/or religion; and they try in one way or another to reform the individual. Literature is there to change people and instruct them about how to conduct the best form of behavior. Narrators are usually intrusive, and they particularly appear in authorial mouthpieces that every now and then bombard the

reader with religious and popular slogans such as “murder will out,” or “God's mill grinds slow but sure”, or “lies have short wings”. Under such manipulation, there is not a real sense of suspense and the line of development can easily be predicted. In other words, there are no real shocks or surprises or complexity of situations, and there is usually a sense of finality presented either in marriage, death, reformation or punishment. Rarely do we have an open ending work that is complex enough to puzzle us, and make us speculate about what is going to happen next. Moreover, Arab writers are often openly didactic. Their enthusiasm to deliver a message makes their literature direct, without usually being able to dramatize any theme convincingly. The characters appear at times as puppets, and the resolution is often imposed from above rather than springing from within. There is little or no artistic distance between the writer and his material. Furthermore, the religious culture of the Arabs has made them glorify one form of Arabic, namely, formal, or classical Arabic, which most writers use in all situations, unlike Western fiction, which employs local dialects extensively. Regardless of any consideration, formal Arabic is not suited to be employed all the time in fiction, especially when writers want to convey the actual wording of what goes inside their character's mind, as in the stream of consciousness technique and more specifically in dialogue, simply because it is not used in actual life. If the character that is especially ordinary and uneducated is using formal Arabic, this will undoubtedly reduce its reality. Writers have to choose between formal Arabic in which case their character's reality is partially sacrificed, or using a local dialect that appears realistic but may not be completely understood in certain parts of the Arab World.

Quite recently, there have been many Arab writers who are beginning to move towards Modernism and respond favorably to 'Globalization'. Ghada al-Samman could be cited as an example of a Feminist who is influenced by the West and is enthusiastic to preach equality among the sexes; but the clutches of didacticism are stifling her art. In *Beirut 75* she can not help creating an authorial mouthpiece who has to be a poet in order to convey her own ideology and sensitivity about various aspects of life and existence. The novel is dangerously didactic, bordering on direct statements that are trying to present a case. Many melodramatic events spoil any attempt to prepare the reader psychologically to accept any situation. There is nothing wrong with the Feminist ideas presented by Ghada al-Samman; the real problem is the manner which is imposed on the text. The writer tries desperately to show that her heroine is a victim of patriarchy and that men in the East cannot accept women as they are; they themselves practice promiscuity, but deny women any form of pre-marital sex:

'But I am not a prostitute! I love you! At the beginning of our relationship you were hinting about marriage!'

'Marriage! You're crazy! Do you think that I would marry a woman I slept with before marriage?'

'Why not? Didn't you boast that you advised your father before election that he should tackle women equality with men in his election campaign?'

'He didn't answer, but started to repeat shockingly, 'I marry a woman I slept with before wedding!' (Beirut 75. 45) (Translation mine)

The problem with this kind of writing is not the Feminist ideology that stands behind it, which is quite fine, but the way it is presented. Here the writer imposes an idea rather than dramatizes it convincingly. Instead of concentrating on inner life and internal conflict in addition to showing vividly how such ideas interact together, the writer imposes an obvious case which may be logical as a statement but hardly credible fictionally. The situation is highly artificial and this is made worse by the use of formal Arabic which is not suited either for dialogue or reflection.

One of the main problems that Feminists are obsessed with is their objection to treating the female as a sex object without understanding the human side of her potentiality. Again the objection is quite legitimate and may apply to the majority of men particularly in the East. However, the way it is presented is through direct and non-fictional statements and distorting the image of men to the point of caricature. Making the male admit that he thinks of women only physically through reflective statements helps the writer make the simplistic conclusion of men's blindness towards any form of spirituality without showing or dramatizing the complexity of the situation:

Is it possible that I can love? I love a poor girl! She allowed me to sleep with her before marriage! Love, love, love! That's all she keeps talking about or understands!

Why is this rubbish? I've never thought or wasted my time about women! I just think about them when I am with them. Their body is what attracts me to them. When they are not physically with me I forget about them. Moreover, I have many other things to attend to! (Beirut 75. 65) (Translation mine)

There are many scenes in the novel which disrupt our usual notion of probability; and certainly we have to be extremely tolerant to accept the sudden turn of events, which are sometimes too shocking to be true:

She was glad to see her brother. He was angry. She remembered that she did not pay him for weeks as a price for his dignified honor! He shouted,

'Good you came, I haven't got a penny!'

'Nor me,'

'How? What about Nimr Bey?'

'He'll get married'

'You bloody liar! So you have started business on your own, and now you have more than one lover!'

He attacked her, took her purse, found nothing, got mad, and started to beat her many times. Then he inquired,

'Where is the money, you bitch?'

Blood was all over her face; unconsciously she started to hit back. He became mad shouting, 'you bitch, hitting me too! I'll slaughter you!'

She wanted to say, 'I'll pay tomorrow, there is no need to defend your dignified honor!' But her mouth was full of blood. Before uttering a word, he stabbed her chest. She felt utterly shocked!

After about half an hour, the brother went to the nearest police station carrying a bucket covered with a newspaper. He sat in front of the officer. He took his sister's severed head which was still bleeding and said in a manly manner, 'I've killed my sister in defense of my honor, I want to confess.' The officer looked at him in an admirable manner, but he was frightened and returned the severed head to the bucket and hid it! The brother was confessing, while the officer's assistant was writing with a look of admiration too! (Beirut 75. 80-81) (Translation mine)

In this kind of passage the formal Arabic, which is artificially imposed on the text, the highly melodramatic and most unconvincing successive events, the excessive distortion of the brother, shared automatically and inhumanly by both the officer and his assistant, all add to the unreality of almost everything in the scene in order to preach the cause of the victimized female and preach a lesson. There is no doubt that in traditional societies there is what is known as 'crime of honor' inflicted on 'permissive' women, but a great novelist is usually more involved with the inner psychology and internal conflict than just narrating far-fetched melodramatic events handled clumsily and obtrusively by narration. The three male characters, especially the brother who should show at least some regret, are more like puppets than characters with flesh and blood. These highly melodramatic events need much psychological preparation and dramatic conflict. They may satisfy vulgar readers used to similar action films but hardly satisfy the notion of probability developed in serious fiction.

It may not be quite fair that a bad example was chosen to represent the vast diversity of Arabic fiction, but even a great writer like Najeeb Mahfouz falls into the trap of didacticism in different ways. In *The Thief and the Dogs*, for example, he attempts to represent the stream of consciousness technique of the main character, but he actually uses a language which is a middle way between formal Arabic and spoken Egyptian dialect, which is a kind of compromise between two extremes. That is admirable but hardly reflects the actual way a thief may use in actual life which is the main requirement of this technique. Moreover, he does not allow his thief to think as one, but in different ways intrudes into the narrative to criticize the contradictions within society, etc.

“What a lot of graves there are laid out as far as the eye can see! Their headstones are like hands raised in surrender, though they are beyond being threatened by anything. A city of silence and truth, where success and failure, murderer and victim come together, where thieves and policeman lie side by side in peace for the first and last time.” ( Naguib Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs*, 134)

This organized and sophisticated formulation of criticizing social life is hardly fit for a thief who is supposed to be confused, somehow shallow and uneducated. It is indeed part of Arab culture in all fields of life, including parents, teachers, educationalists, politicians and men of religion, to pose somehow as reformers or guardians of culture trying to change society the direct way. We do not assume that our victims of preaching may turn deaf ears if the style is not effective. Even at a university level, lecturing rather than encouraging free discussions is the main tool of teaching.

If we move to Western literature, we realize that the battle against didacticism is not yet over. Some of the great masters like Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Lawrence, Camus, and many others are sometimes quite didactic. In Dostoevsky's masterpiece *Crime and Punishment* the dramatic change of Raskolnikov and his conversion to Christianity, in addition to the concomitant language, may not sound quite convincing, and are certainly incommensurate with his previous sense of persistent absurdity. In *Ghosts*, Ibsen sometimes cannot be distinguished from his mouthpiece, Mrs Alving, or her son. Birkin and Ursula in *Women in Love* appear at times, in the words of John Bailey, as "bloodless ghosts" (8) enacting as they do the thesis of Lawrence himself. In *The Outsider* by Camus we realize that reality, particularly in the second part of the novel, is presented as one sided; presumably society is trying the protagonist for his 'deviation', but it is actually Mersault who is reversing the picture by directly condemning the legal, religious and social systems when he criticizes them openly. However, these works are great and they certainly tempt readers, at least partially and temporarily, to silence their possible objection to whatever defects they may have. They belong to a democratic culture where everybody is given a chance to express themselves fully. Polyphony, or multiplicity of voices, is well established as an ideal in Western literature, which is moving towards (though it may not fully achieve it) the condition of pure art as particularly manifested in music. Liberal humanism preaches tolerance and accepts humans as they are, despite their so-called deviation. That is one reason why characters are lively and certainly more realistic and far less idealized than in Arabic literature. In fact, at times aberration becomes the norm. All sides of humans are explored especially inner life and unconsciousness. The reader feels at times that writers are equally putting themselves in both the protagonists as well as the antagonists, simply because of this sense of doubt which permeates much Western culture and literature. Svidrigaylov in *Crime and Punishment*, Gerald and Gudrun in *Women in Love*, The Foxes in *Howards End* and many other antagonists are powerfully dramatized, after the tradition well established by Shakespeare, especially from the inside, and given a chance to justify their attitude with the same force of the protagonists. The reader becomes in many cases confused as to the sympathy of the writer. Very often the individuals in many works are lost and disillusioned with almost all social values, and writers appear to be free from any restrictions or constraints to explore the inner resources of their characters and the deep recesses of human nature. There is no real commitment to any outside forces, except one's own personal experience and belief.

It seems that commitment in the Arab sense reduces the writer's attention, which should be focused on the literariness of literature, that is, on the artistic elements which make literature what it is. Once, the well known poet Hassan Ibn Thabet was asked about the reason of the decline of his poetry. His blatant answer was, "it is Islam". (243) That is, persistent commitment to a particular ideology may drive writers away from their art or preclude exploring all aspects of human nature.

Virginia Woolf may be taken as an example of a Western culture where writers are principally committed to their art and personal existential experience. Her characters are fully explored through internalization, which allows them to particularly dramatize their inner life, past and present, with little manipulation on the part of the narrator. She challenges the traditional concept of characterization and chronological plot, and accuses Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells in particular of producing 'skeletons' rather than real people. In *Mrs Dalloway*, inner life is shown to be far more important and real than the superficiality of the ruling class. Authenticity is well established as an ideal to allow the characters to probe into some existential issues. Right and wrong are solipsistic values and decided by personal experience, rather than imposed by an outside force. The idea of conversion is ridiculed through the character of Doris Kilman, who symbolizes imposition, if only too obviously by her type name. Even psychologists who are supposed to provide a balanced view of normality are satirized and shown to be part of the oppressive forces of society that are driving some individuals to be mad and suicidal. There is no definite conclusion; and Clarissa Dalloway has to be accepted as she is, despite, or because of, her unpredictability; and that is part of her charm. The reader has to be contented with the last words of the novel, 'for there she was'. (*Mrs Dalloway*, 168) Western literature may not provide a healthy picture of individuality and may emphasize the

fragmentary existence of a hopeless world “*Waiting for Godot*”, but it is certainly more original and artistic than Arabic literature which is still largely on the survival side, dealing with social and political issues related to perfecting people’s material life. Arab writers do not have to go as far as the sexual hallucinations of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, or the blatant rejection of all conventions by Mersault in *The Outsider* or the distorted human existence of much of the theater of the absurd, but they should at least abandon the idea of showing any sexuality outside marriage as a form of deviation which has to be regretted.

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