



TRACING THE GROWTH OF THE ARABIC NOVEL IN ARABIC LITERARY TRADITION

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Abstract

The Arabic novel began to emerge in the late nineteenth century, particularly around 1867, marking the beginning of a new literary phase in Arabic literature. From its earliest development, the Arabic novel was shaped by two major influences: a deep attachment to the Arab past and a strong attraction toward Western culture and literary traditions. During the early twentieth century, many novelists focused on the social and cultural life of Arab society, especially through historical narratives such as those composed by Jurji Zaydan. Later, the genre witnessed significant growth with the contributions of prominent writers including Gibran Khalil Gibran, Amin Al-Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy, who introduced fresh literary perspectives and themes. A major milestone in the history of the Arabic novel came in 1914 with the publication of *Zainab* by Hussein Haykal, a work widely regarded as a turning point in modern Arabic fiction. Although Western literary models strongly influenced Arabic novels during this period, the genre achieved remarkable artistic and intellectual transformation during the 1960s, when it entered a new stage of maturity and innovation.

Key Words: Arabic novel, Arabic literary Tradition, Growth of novel, Literary genres

1.INTRODUCTION

The novel as a literary form has a much longer history in the Western world, where it has evolved over nearly three centuries, while in Arabic literature its development covers roughly one and a half centuries. From its earliest stage, the novel adopted features from different literary genres and benefited from various narrative traditions. Naguib Mahfouz described the novel as a bridge that connects human attachment to reality with an enduring attraction toward imagination and fantasy.¹

In modern Arabic literature, the novel has emerged as one of the most influential and dynamic literary genres. Within a relatively short period, it succeeded in widening the intellectual outlook of readers and attracting a large audience across the Arab world. The growing popularity of novels gradually surpassed that of poetry, which had long occupied a dominant position in Arabic literary culture. The international recognition received by Naguib Mahfouz through the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded for his novels rather than poetry, clearly reflects the elevated status of the Arabic novel. Furthermore, many Arab novelists distinguished themselves through their creative achievements, and numerous Arabic novels were translated into different world languages, helping the genre gain global attention.

The concept of the novel is generally clear and widely understood, as it is closely related to the ancient tradition of storytelling that has accompanied human civilization since its earliest days. The novel reflects human experiences, emotions, and social realities through artistic narration. It may therefore be viewed as a prose-based literary form that presents characters, events, settings, and themes within an organized plot and a specific time frame. At the same time, the novel possesses the flexibility to express conflicting viewpoints, diverse voices, and the complexities of modern life, making it one of the most suitable genres for representing contemporary society and its rapid transformations.

Even though the subject of the rise and evolution of the Arabic novel has been extensively explored through academic studies, research papers, and critical discussions, revisiting its historical development remains important for readers and scholars interested in Arabic literature. This article aims to provide a concise overview of the emergence and growth of the Arabic novel.



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2.THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARABIC NOVEL

More than a century has passed since the appearance of the modern Arabic novel. Like the European novel, which evolved gradually alongside social and cultural transformations, the Arabic novel also developed through a long historical process rather than within a fixed period. Some literary historians believe that European fiction during the Middle Ages was indirectly influenced by Arabic narrative traditions translated into European languages. They point to similarities between medieval European tales of adventure, fantasy, and chivalry and the narrative style found in classical Arabic stories and fictional prose. The Arabic novel itself emerged from cultural interaction and the exchange of civilizations.

The beginnings of the Arabic novel can be traced to the final decades of the nineteenth century. From its earliest stage, the genre was shaped by two dominant influences: a strong attachment to the Arab past and a fascination with Western literary culture. Critic Mustafa Abdul Ghani explains that the emergence of the Arabic novel was closely connected with the influence of Egypt and Lebanon, alongside the impact of Western literature. He also emphasizes that the rise of the novel was linked to the development of Arab nationalism, which played a major role in shaping the literary movement of the time.²

The novels produced between 1867 and the early twentieth century combined features of traditional Arabic prose with elements borrowed from Western fiction. Many of these works reflected the stylistic influence of Maqamah literature and were filled with exaggerated emotions, fantasy, and unrealistic incidents. Works such as *Majma' ul-Bahrain* (مجمع البحرين) As-Sāq 'alās-Sāq, (الساق علي الساق) and *Al-Huyām fī Jinān al-Shām* (الهيام في جنان الشام) by writers like Al-Yazji, Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq, and Al-Bustani contained rhymed prose, moral discussions, scientific references, adventurous episodes, and imaginative descriptions.³

This literary trend continued until Arab society experienced intellectual awakening and social transformation. Critic Yusuf Idris observed that early novels in Egypt and Lebanon closely imitated the style of classical Maqamah writers such as Al-Hariri and Al-Hamadhani. Authors including Nasif Al-Yazji and Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq adopted similar rhetorical and ornamental prose techniques in their narratives.⁴

The Arabic novel gained greater maturity during the late nineteenth century with the emergence of the bourgeois class and the gradual transition toward capitalism. From the beginning, the Arabic novel served as a means of expressing and preserving national identity against the pressures of Western colonialism. Consequently, early Arabic fiction drew heavily upon traditional narrative forms such as folk tales, heroic legends, historical accounts, and Maqamah. At the same time, these novels also addressed social, political, cultural, and economic concerns.

In his study *Nash'atun Naqd al-Riwā i fīl-Adab al-‘Arabī al-Hadīth*, (نشأة نقد الرواية في الادب العربي الحديث) Dr. Ali Shalish documented nearly 250 Arabic novels written between 1870 and 1914. A close examination of these works reveals that many authors relied on classical Arabic heritage and incorporated narrative methods derived from older literary traditions. This influence can clearly be seen in the writings of Ali Mubarak, Al-Muwaylihi, and Hafiz Ibrahim.

As the genre progressed, novelists increasingly revived famous historical figures and events to inspire readers with values such as courage, heroism, and resistance. Through these narratives, writers sought to remind Arab society of its glorious past and encourage opposition to colonial domination.

Translations also played an important role in shaping the Arabic novel, although many translated works suffered from poor quality. Translators frequently altered the original texts by adding or removing material according to their own preferences or cultural considerations. In some cases, they inserted references from Arabic poetry and culture into the translated works, making these additions appear as natural parts of the original narrative.⁵

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the Arabic novel entered a new stage of development. Numerous novels appeared, some focusing on contemporary social life and others drawing inspiration from history. Writers of this



period were deeply influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution and modern concepts of history, society, and human progress.

The Arabic novel eventually achieved remarkable artistic growth through the contributions of major writers such as Farah Antun, Jurji Zaydan, Khalil Gibran, Amin Al-Rihani, and Mikhail Nu'aymah, whose works expanded the thematic and intellectual horizons of modern Arabic fiction.

3.THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARABIC NOVEL

The publication of Zainab by محمد حسين هيكل (Muhammad Husayn Haykal) in 1914 is generally regarded as a landmark event in the history of the Arabic novel. Critics consider this work a major turning point because it successfully incorporated many important artistic and technical elements of modern fiction. The novel appeared during a period of intense intellectual and literary activity in the Arab world, when writers and scholars showed growing interest in composing original novels, translating foreign works, and exploring new literary forms. Universities and cultural circles became centers of discussion where intellectuals debated literature, society, and modern thought in search of reform and progress. During this era, influential thinkers and writers such as Lutfi as-Sayyid, Ali Abdur-Razzaq, Mansur Fahmi, Taha Hussein, and Tawfiq al-Hakim played significant roles in shaping modern Arabic literary culture.

As the twentieth century progressed, the Arabic novel gradually established itself as an independent and mature literary genre. Novelists overcame many earlier weaknesses related to language, structure, and themes, leading to greater artistic diversity and sophistication. Egypt emerged as a leading force in this development because of its vibrant intellectual atmosphere, active journalism, and expanding literary movement. Egyptian fiction became a model for many Arab writers, who looked to it for inspiration and guidance in their own creative efforts.

The Arabic novel entered a new and more advanced phase with the appearance of Naguib Mahfouz, whose contribution to modern Arabic literature remains unparalleled. Mahfouz initially focused on historical subjects connected with ancient Egypt, but later shifted his attention toward the realities of contemporary social life and the struggles of ordinary people. Through his novels, he introduced significant transformations in Arabic literary expression by expanding the thematic and artistic possibilities of the genre. His writings are distinguished by realistic portrayal, refined language, clear style, and deep psychological insight. Mahfouz skillfully depicted the everyday experiences, sufferings, and aspirations of society, making his novels powerful reflections of the social and cultural environment around him. For this reason, he is widely regarded as one of the principal architects of the modern Arabic novel.

4.THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN ARABIC NOVEL AFTER 1967

The Arabic novel reached a decisive phase of transformation during the 1960s, particularly after the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967. Before this turning point, Naguib Mahfouz had already expanded the artistic possibilities of the Arabic novel and provided a strong foundation for later generations of writers. Through his remarkable contributions, the Arabic novel moved toward a mature and modern literary stage.

A close examination of early Arabic fiction reveals that romanticism was the dominant literary trend during the initial stages of development. Romantic novels generally followed two main directions: social and historical. Social novels drew inspiration from the realities of contemporary society and reflected the experiences, customs, and concerns of everyday life. This tendency can be observed in the works of writers such as Haykal, Al-Mazini, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Mahmoud Taimur, Taha Hussein, and Abbas Al-Aqqad. Historical novels, on the other hand, relied heavily on events, personalities, and themes derived from history. Authors like Jurji Zaydan, Farid Abu Hadid, Ali Bakathir, Ali Al-Jarim, Naguib Mahfouz, and Abdul Hamid became well known for this historical orientation in Arabic fiction.⁶

Over time, the political and social conditions of the Arab world gradually shifted the focus of the Arabic novel from romanticism to realism. This new direction encouraged writers to portray the actual conditions of society and address the



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struggles of ordinary people. During this realist phase, several influential novelists enriched Arabic literature through their creative achievements. Among the most significant figures were Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, Hanna Mina, Tayeb Salih, Abdul Rahman Munif, Abdul Karim Nasif, and Abdul Rahman Al-Sharqawi.

Realism remained the leading literary movement in the Arabic novel from the mid-1940s until the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Following the defeat, Arabic literature witnessed the emergence of politically engaged prose, symbolic narratives, dramatic works, and war-related cinema. Despite the rise of these forms, the novel continued to occupy a central position in modern Arabic literature. In the post-1967 period, the Arabic novel entered a new realist stage that explored contemporary concerns and modernist ideas more deeply. Writers focused on the lives of common people, including workers, farmers, and marginalized communities, while also criticizing false claims of justice, freedom, and human dignity promoted by political and social authorities.

5.CONCLUSION

This brief study demonstrates that the Arabic novel evolved gradually in a traditional manner from its emergence in the final decades of the nineteenth century until it reached a modern stage of literary development. Throughout this journey, leading Arab writers continuously expanded the creative possibilities of the genre by introducing fresh techniques, themes, and artistic innovations, eventually guiding the novel toward the wider domain of new realism. In the contemporary period, the Arabic novel reflects modern intellectual trends and ideological perspectives while focusing on the lives and struggles of ordinary people. It also seeks to guide society toward social awareness by highlighting the problems faced by marginalized and disadvantaged communities, criticizing oppression and injustice, and exposing those who falsely present themselves as defenders of equality, freedom, and human values.

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