When Literature Excels in a Conservative Traditional Society:
Issues in Arab Culture and Ideology

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Abstract

Modernism in the Arab world was clearly crystallised in Arab thought and culture. However, it has not yet succeeded in creating a deep-rooted modernizing shift in Arab structural and objective realities. This is because Modernism in the Arab world was confined to an intellectual elite that failed to have an effective impact on the Arab reality, especially as the modernization of these Arab elites appears to be a mere echo of external western influences separate from the particularity of Arab contexts, cultures, histories, and socio-political and economic conditions. Modernism in the Arab world thus materialises as a leap from traditional notions of society to modern notions of society while skipping the necessary stages and material structures required for this transformation. In other words, Arab elite intellectuals produce Modernism as discourses and practices that are first and foremost dependent on and subordinate to western influences, neither relating to the reality of Arabs living in Arab-majority countries, nor taking into consideration Arab cultural, historical, socio-political, and economic structures. Arab elite intellectuals rather follow western traditions by representing Modernism as an absurd, anxious, confused, or alienated spirit of contemporary times. Modernism in literature, on the other hand, has flourished. Modernist writers rely on the power of creativity to bring about change; they play a revolutionary role by changing language and style; and they destruct and reconstruct to produce an alternative that is cleaner, fairer, and more beautiful. The current study aims to answer the following questions: How do Arab intellectuals perceive their Modernism? Did Arab Modernism fail as a project? What are the obstacles that prevent Modernism

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from becoming actualised in the Arab world? And how is Modernism translated into Arabic literature and creative writing?

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Did Arab Modernism Fail as a Project?

Many changes occurred in the Arab world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in terms of socio-political, economic, and cultural structures which began to exert clear aspects of enlightenment and modernisation – a period famously called the Arab Enlightenment. The Arab Enlightenment period ultimately influenced Arabic literature, creative writing, and art but such influences were still considered by many Arab scholars as "elitist, supremacist, exterior… and scattered… [further] eschewing the deep roots and basic structures of Arab societies."[1] As al-ʿĀlim argues, "our [Arab] social regression still exists till today, and our national fragmentation continues to worsen. Illiteracy is still common among the majority of our population due to our declining ethos, and our economy is still fragile and dependent… [we have become] like an ocean of poverty and underdevelopment." This type of representation of contemporary Arab conditions can be found in many other Arab critical writings on Modernism. For example, Badawī[2] questions the modernisation of Arab countries by saying, "Where are we, the Arabs, from all these things? When had realism, rationality, mass industrialization, or modern technology ever been the dominant feature of our contemporary society?"

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[1] Mahmoud Amin Al-ʿAlim, *Al-fikr al-ʿArabī bayna al-khuṣūṣiyya wa-l-kawniyya* (Cairo: Dar Al-mustaqbal Al-Arabi, 1996), 19.

[2] Mohammad Mustafa Badawi, "Mushkilat al-ḥadātha wa-l-taghyīr al-ḥaḍārī," *Fuṣūl*, vol. 4, Issue 3 (April-May-June 1984), 105.

What these Arab critical thinkers point to is that Modernism in the Arab world cannot be achieved by following the same footpath of western Modernism and making it "the formula that draws new structures, social histories, and movements of thought and creativity in a way that negates and opposes the changes that Modernism is already bringing about."[1] Yet, Arab thinkers and critics still believe that enlightenment notions of Modernism had been shaping since the beginning of the Arab Nahda. Ḥijāzī [2], for instance, believes that Arab Modernism "began at the moment when Sheikh Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār said, 'Our area must change its conditions and renew its knowledge'". al-ʿĀlim[3] , on the other hand, believes that the Arab Nahda began with Rifāʿah al-Ṭahṭāwī who stressed the need to align Modernism with modernization through his famous saying, "A homeland can only be built with freedom, thought, and labour". Nevertheless, the Arab Nahda project appeared to be promising only during its early periods, and this early vision of Arab Modernism and modernization remained unfulfilled. This is because the Arab Nahda project during its early inception was able to preserve its Arab civilizational and cultural particularity and interact with the West from an Arab standpoint based on revolutionary understandings of rationality. However, the project soon lost its capacity and instead began to imitate western notions of Modernism and became subordinate to it.[4]

The Arab Nahda modernising project has thus failed because what emerged from it was merely the introduction of technology and technological tools to Arab

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[1] Mohammad Barrada, "Iʿtibārāt naẓariyya litaḥdīd mafhūm al-ḥadātha," *Fuṣūl*, vol. 4, Issue 3 (April-May-June 1984), 16.

[2] Ahmad Abd al- Mu'ti Hijazi, "Al-ḥadātha lā mā baʿdahā," *Ibdāʿ*, (November 1992), 5.

[3] See: Al-ʿAlim, "'azmat al- ḥadātha," 13.

[4] See: Eid, "Modernism / the complex of snakes," 296; See also: Darraj, "mā baʿd al-ḥadātha fī ʿālam bi-la ḥadātha," 64-65.

societies rather than the long-term process of rationalization assumed in greater understandings of Modernism. This failure of Arab Modernism demands thinking about whether Arab countries were really prepared to incorporate the values of Modernism into their development process after their post-colonial independence, and whether Arab traditional structures (tribes, clans, and ancestry kinship) could really accept such modernising changes without resistance. Indeed, Arab intellectual post-independence thinkers suffered a period of anxiety and search for fulcrums caused by several objective and subjective factors, including the failed attempts of dominant Arab national groups to turn their projects into a reality compatible with the requirements of true development agendas. Arab leftist/socialist groups also did not present a distinguished project that could be achieved in light of the political and social turmoil that afflicted the region. The same can be said about Arab liberal groups who could not realistically justify the great historical difference between the Arab region and Europe and their different understandings of liberalism.

These socio-political projects, whether national, leftist, or liberal, had subjected the Arab region to the domination of the main world powers, and by this eliminating the possibility of "catching up" with the West and integrating into the world system. Most significantly though, the failure of these projects – which was due to their fragility and disintegration – has allowed Arab traditionalist religious projects to become dominant and exert an overwhelming presence among Arab populations. In addition, the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War and the wars that followed it also greatly contributed to the collapse of Arab critical intellectual thought and Arab modernisation projects.[1] The fragility of Arab Modernism and its superficiality, combined with the rise of Arab social

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[1] See: Fahmiyya Sharaf al-deen, *Al-thaqāfa wa-l-ideologya fī al-'ālam al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1993), 193-195.

regression and Arab dependence on western and global influences, have thus led to the failure of Arab Modernism and modernisation. To give a more detailed assessment of the failure of Arab Modernism, the next section discusses the most important factors that have been contributing to this failure.

Factors Contributing to the Failure of Arab Modernism

Political Factors

The characteristics and practices of modern states are not visible in Arab countries, neither are the characteristics and practices of modern societies constitutive of contemporary Arab societies. This is linked to the ruling elites and their perception of power and society which treats the state as private property and power as an inherited monopoly, further making tyranny the guarantee for their ownership and monopoly. The exclusion of the state as the free contract of free individuals through which their interests, sovereignty, and belonging can be secured directly leads to the exclusion of society. Additionally, authority and authoritarian practices in the Arab world simultaneously undermine social public spaces and state institutions; they undermine social spaces by perpetuating oppression and impoverishment and undermine state institutions by unlawfully treating the state as private property.[1]

Economic Factors

Arab regimes treat the economy the same way they treat politics, which explains why authoritarianism prevails in both areas while Modernism is absent. It is indeed paradoxical that Arab ruling elites, through their accumulated wealth, enjoy all the products of advanced capitalism but leave the powerless masses to

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[1] Darraj, "mā baʿd al-ḥadātha," 72-76.

languish in poverty and hunger.[1] Economic dependency is clear in the Arab world, which further leads to the subordination of Arab economies to the global market and the failure of Arab development plans in lessening the extent of poverty and exploitation existing in Arab countries. Economic dependency has also led to a steady rise in debt in Arab countries, which has then led Arab countries to have no choice but to beg western countries to reschedule their debts and request new loans.[2]

Cultural Factors

Arab countries nowadays try hard to find a balance between contemporality and heritage, Modernism and tradition, and science and faith – dualities that are still dominating contemporary Arab thought. Authoritarian Arab regimes reinforce these dualities as a fabricated ideology to escape from their current devastating conditions and erase Arab history from social memory. For instance, science in the Arab world is not understood as a knowledge endeavour related to innovations in scientific research, laboratory experimentations, or overall scientific work and activities but rather as the import of foreign goods and technologies; science is restricted to trade and consumption. Religion too is subjected to the transformations imposed by authoritarian Arab regimes; religious texts cease to be subjected to diverse and open ijtihad (independent religious reasoning and interpretation) and instead become an element of authoritarian ideology. This has led religious texts to lose their autonomy, further turning religion into an element of the Arab authoritarian fabricated ideology.[3] al-ʿĀlim[4] argues that,

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[1] Ibid, 78.

[2] Barrada, "Iʿtibārāt naẓariyya litaḥdīd mafhūm al-ḥadātha," 16/17.

[3] Darraj, "mā baʿd al-ḥadātha fī ʿālam bi-la ḥadātha," 79/80.

[4] Al-ʿAlim, *Al-fikr al-ʿArabī bayna al-khuṣūṣiyya wa-l-kawniyya,* 68.

> The prevailing official ideology common to most Arab countries ranges within an ideological complex, combining shallow religious thought, superficial nationalist thought, positivist modernist thought, and tribal sectarian thought. This ideological complex takes extremely diversified, multifaceted, hidden, and elusive forms which hide behind appearances of Modernism and modernisation, only to obscure regression, intolerance, authoritarianism, stagnation, false utilitarian religiosity, and irrationality.

In other words, authoritarian Arab regimes that exert a monopoly over governance, media, education, and overall knowledge and culture are responsible for declining the quality of Arab thought and increasing the level of crisis in Arab countries.[1] Therefore, to get rid of the dualism and accommodative ideologies imposed by Arab regimes, many Arab thinkers urge putting an end to "shrinking and isolation under the guise of tradition and Modernism and finally closing the door to complete imitation" as necessary means to overcome the regressive false consciousness that prevails in the Arab world.[2] al-ʿArwī[3] justifies this call for a rupture from tradition and imitation by noting how "four centuries ago, Europe set out a standing point in thought and practice and then began to impose it on the world, leaving no option for other [non-European] peoples but to adopt European thought and practice or else perish". al-ʿArwī thus perceives that Arabs are in reality left with no choice but absolute dependence on the West.

On the other hand, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī believes that Modernism does not necessarily mean a rejection of tradition or a rupture with the past as much as it

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[1] Ibid, 69.

[2] Abdullah Laroui, *Contemporary Arab ideology* (Beirut: Dar Al-haqeeqa, 1970), 296.

[3] Abdullah Laroui, *Al-ʿArab wa-l-fikr al-tārīkhī* (Beirut: Dar Al-haqeeqa, 1973), 20.

indicates dealing with tradition and at the same time keeping with the progress made on a global level. That is, as al-Jābirī[1] states,

> When the prevailing culture is still traditional, the discourse of Modernism must first and foremost turn to 'tradition' in order to re-read it and present it with a modern vision. This way, the discourse of Modernism ceases to be the property of academics and intellectuals but will rather reach the general public and thus fulfil its function.

Burhān Ghaliūn[2] also denies that tradition and subjectivity are responsible for the absence of Modernism and modernisation in the Arab World, further asserting that,

> As much as Modernism tries to deny subjectivity and show that progress can only be achieved by eliminating tradition, the Renaissance is proof that civilization can only be acquired by asserting subjectivity ... And if there was a real possibility of actual progress, then the traditionalist must realise the value of Modernism and the modernist must realise the value of tradition.

The reality of Arab crisis is hence linked to a crisis in contemporary Arab thought – a crisis that lies in the ambiguous relationship between the Arab-Islamic "self" and the European "other". As al-ʿĀlim[3] explains,

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[1] Mohammad ʿābid. Al-Jābirī, *Al-turāth wa-l-ḥadātha* (Beirut / Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center, 1991), 17.

[2] Burhan Ghalioun, *Ightiyāl al-ʿaql* (Beirut: Arab Publishing Institution, 6th edition, 1992), 322-323.

[3] Al-ʿAlim, *Al-fikr al-ʿArabī bayna al-khuṣūṣiyya,* 30-31.

> Such ambiguity is not mainly caused by the duality of regression and progress, but rather by a duality that exists in the heart of European otherness itself. That is, the duality between the urbanization that Europe represents with its scientific, economic, and social achievements, on the one hand, and between the aggression and colonialism that Europe practices on its "others". Therefore, the dependency that the Arab world is still experiencing even after achieving political independence is strongly tied to the regression of Arab thought and practice and its dependency on the West… A double crisis emerges from this confusion, a crisis in Arab thought and a crisis in Arab reality… As Arab thought is still unable to answer the questions of Arab reality.

What can be concluded from these discussions is that most Arab intellectuals agree that Arab Modernism does not coincide with western Modernism. For this reason, they consider it necessary for Arabs to propose a different conceptualisation of Modernism based on a double awareness – an awareness of western Modernism, on the one hand, and an awareness of Arab particularity, on the other. Only through this double awareness can Arabs create their own conceptual understanding of Modernism based on a creative reformulation of universal ideas and unpacking them within particular contexts tied to specific historical conditions. This creative reformulation implies the necessity of possessing universal knowledge while simultaneously reflecting on the particular historical constructions of Modernism in specific contexts, on the victories and failures of Modernism, on the need to criticise authority and liberate

people's will, and on the need to base the modernisation project on moral, ethical, and spiritual values.[1]

While the deteriorating Arab conditions prevent the Arab world from achieving Modernism in the European sense, Arab society is still called upon to modernise itself in order to withstand the nihilism of Modernism. That is why the Arab world needs modernization based on notions of progress, reason, and democracy –notions that produced Modernism in the West. These notions are capable of "producing an awareness that could impose a state of organized breakthrough into the traditional structures of Arab society."[2] Such breakthrough usually results from comprehensive national development projects focused on enhancing politics, the economy, sociality, education, culture, knowledge, and values – projects that rationally and critically absorb the Arab-Islamic tradition and place it within a universal critical and intellectual understanding of Modernism.[3]

Modernism in Arabic Literature

Contemporary Arab critical theory focuses on issues of literary renewal and literary Modernism from two angles. The first angle considers that the path to literary renewal is linked to the overall vision of change, which relies on a comprehensive societal analysis wherein literary change is part of that analysis and linked to the overall vision of change. Through this critical practice of particular issues, Modernism reveals the semantics of literary forms and opens the way for change in both literature and society.[4] The second angle considers that Modernism in Arab countries is lacking in fields such as science, economics,

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[1] See: Darraj, "mā baʿd al-ḥadātha," 89.

[2] Eid, "Al-ḥadātha/ ʿuqdat al-ʾafāʿī," 304.

[3] Al-ʿAlim, *Al-fikr al-ʿArabī,* 49-50.

[4] Laroui, *Contemporary Arab ideology,* chap. 4.

social relations, and politics because of the difficulties and obstacles that obstruct achieving complete modernisation. Yet, it still considers that notions of Modernism can be found in contemporary Arabic literature, creative writing, and art because of their ability to change easily and adapt in ways that are neither directly nor inversely related to change in other fields.[1] This second angle views that literary progress and literary decline are not strictly tied to the progress or decline of societal superstructures and infrastructures. As ʾAdunīs[2] asserts, "it is possible for poetry to progress in a society doomed with declining infrastructures, as it is also possible for poetry to decline in a society that thrives in progressive structures".

This understanding distinguishes literary Modernism from other types of Modernism and bets on the power of creativity to overcome the impasse of Modernism and the deadlock of modernization in the Arab world. ʾAdunīs, for instance, further argues that "poems, novels, plays, and paintings do not directly participate in changing history, but they all have the ability to change in other ways. They provide a better picture of the world - that is, they recreate it."[3] Likewise, al-Kharrāṭ[4] says, "[I write] out of rebellion, discovery, self-realization, renewal, and reconsideration, that is, for reformulating the world and striving to change it on the long run towards what is beautiful, just, and better".

This articulation resembles the visions proposed by ʾAdunīs who spent nearly a quarter of a century theorizing Modernism, beginning from his position as one

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[1] Adonis, ʿAli Ahmad Said, *Fātiḥa li-nihāyāt al-qarn* (Beirut: Dar Al-awda, 1980), 321.

[2] Adonis, ʿAli Ahmad Said, *ṣadmat al-ḥadātha* (Beirut: Dar Al-awda, 1978), 244.

[3] Khalida Said, "Al-malāmiḥ al-fikriyya li- al-ḥadātha," *Fuṣūl*, Volume 4 (April-June 1984), 31.

[4] Edward Al-Kharrat, *ʾUnshūda li-al-kathāfa* (Cairo: Dar Al-mustaqbal Al-Arabi, 1995), 36-37.

of the main contributors to Poetry Magazine which was first published in 1957. Since that time, ʾAdunīs's comprehensive and critical vision of Modernism has clearly crystallized (Thāmir 1986: 90-95; Bārūt 1990: 250-271). In his latest book about Modernism, *An Introduction to the End of the Century*, ʾAdunīs tries to define the features and foundations of Modernism and draws attention to some of its delusions which were common among many poets and critics. Modernism, as ʾAdunīs[1] maintains, is a "new vision, and it is, in essence, a vision of questioning and protesting, questioning about what could be possible and protesting against what is already existing – the status quo". In other words,

Modernism cannot arise except through a kind of conflict with the past and a kind of interaction with other people's traditions ... As it is not possible for a group of people to have a culture by itself and for itself in isolation from the cultures of other people… Civilization is comprised of this interaction, provided that this interaction is characterized by both creativity and particularity.[2]

Kamāl Abū Dīb, who is another intellectual, literary critic, and a former participant in Poetry Magazine, looks at Modernism within the same perspective put forward by ʾAdunīs and believes in the role of literature and creative writing to change the status quo. Abū Dīb (1984) asserts that the conceptual change in Arab creative Modernism takes place in a framework that is not necessarily paralleled by an equivalent conceptual change outside of writing. That is, while one can easily notice the great progress in Arab creative activities, this progress is not indicative of Arab economic, social, and cultural structures that appear to be inflicted with instability and regression.

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[1] Adonis, *Fātiḥa li-nihāyāt al-qarn*, 321.

[2] Ibid, 325.

Therefore, if literary Modernism is a cognitive rupture from the past for the sake of the present, then it is also an accelerated impulse that moves away from the present towards the future. This is because the Arab present is a mere representation of authoritarianism in all its forms, and authoritarianism anchors and thrives on the status quo; it moulds the future and feeds on the continuous decline of human freedom and liberty. Modernism is thus the antithesis of authority. This is why Arab Modernism moves in a completely opposite direction to the real conditions of Arab contexts. Alongside this crisis of authoritarianism, Arab Modernism faces yet another crisis that adds to its anxieties, namely the crisis of confronting western 'superiority' and 'otherness'. Western Modernism is placed as a pedestal and a standpoint for global Modernism, and in the case of Arab Modernism, it represents a 'superior' model that the Arab world tries to both emulate and transcend. This tension, ambiguity, and contradiction in Arab Modernism are reflected in Arab literature and creative art, which also become ambiguous with multiple meanings, contradictions, and paradoxes.[1]

Conclusion

While Arab Modernism is distinguished from western Modernism – as a result of its development in different historical contexts and conditions – the former still displays a strong resemblance to the latter when it comes to literature, creative writing, and art. This is since Arab modern intellectuals, critical thinkers, and writers employ many of the techniques and methods used in western modern literature. In both fictional and nonfiction literature, we often find Arab modernist writers – as western modernist writers – using a breakdown of traditional notions of temporality by superimposing verbs in their three tenses,

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[1] See: Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-ḥadātha, al-sulṭa, al-naṣṣ," *Fuṣūl*, Vol. 4, 3 (April-May-June 1984), 35-41.

shifting between monologues and narrations, avoiding realistic descriptions, focusing on intermittent dialogues, surpassing traditional plots, delving into the subconscious of their characters, creating linguistic structures consistent with their introspection, expanding the meaning of reality to include dreams, myths, and poetry, and making the existential disruption of the self a priority. While these Arab writers have indeed benefited from the achievements of modernist western literature in terms of structure, style, and techniques[1], the justification for using these methods remains different as a result of the difference in Arab standpoints and motivations for writing. As Edward al-Kharrāṭ[2] contends,

> In the West, the absurdist trend in storytelling is based on a modernist philosophy, the gist of which is that the world has no meaning. We find another philosophy in Egypt, which contradicts this western current, based on the notion that the meaning of the world has become different, that the world does exist, but it is violated, mostly because justice is lacking, and love has been stolen… and we find this among many other currents.

[1] See: Edward Al-Kharrat, *Al-ḥasāsiyya al-jadīda* (Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1993), 25.

[2] Ibid, 25-26.

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