

## ARABIC LITERATURE – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### Overview:

**Literatures in contact.** As a result of contact with Western institutions of politics, culture, commerce, technology, and education, Arabic literature underwent a profound transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Three new forms of literary work, the play, the short story, and the novel, were imported, adapted, and became an integral part of the literary world in Arab nations throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Poetry, though it had a long and venerable history, was also radically transformed and eventually jettisoned many of its traditional conventions. The novel is in many Arab nations now the prestige literary genre; while poetry is still appreciated and plays a more prevalent role in overall literary culture than it does in the United States or Western Europe, the most famous literati of Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and many other nations are decidedly the novelists, so it comes as no surprise that the Arab world's Nobel laureate for literature is the novelist Naguib Mahfouz (1913-2006) rather than a poet or an author of short stories.

**European presence.** The beginning of this transformation of Arabic literature is often set in 1798, the year Napoleon invaded Egypt. The French occupied Egypt for three years, and brought not only superior military hardware but also scores of scholars in many fields who demonstrated to the Egyptians some of the results of modern science. The shocking realization that the modern Europeans were far more advanced than their Middle Eastern contemporaries had a profound effect on societies throughout the region. After the French left in 1801, Muhammad Ali, the governor of Egypt for the Ottomans (1805-49), set out to modernize Egypt using European technology and methods. He improved transportation, built roads and rail lines, planted cash crops such as cotton, reformed the military, created a newspaper, and sent young men on study missions to France. The religious leader attached to the first mission, Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), left a fascinating account of his experiences in France and his impressions of French society and culture. This and other missions trained students in engineering, military tactics, mineralogy, medicine, and so on, but also forced them to learn French and translate French works into Arabic, an activity that continued and expanded back in Egypt. Also during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere, American and other Protestant missionaries as well as various orders of the Catholic church established schools in which the languages of instruction were English and French, exposing local students to English and French literature and other writings. The level of contact was increased by colonial occupation, which occurred in 1830 in Algeria and 1882 in Egypt, 1898 in Tunisia, and just before or after WWI in most of the remaining Arab lands.

**The Arab Awakening.** Such contact with the colonial powers and the assimilation of European nationalist ideals contributed to the *Nahdah*, the Arab Awakening or Renaissance, an intellectual, cultural, and political movement the main goal of which was to revive the historical greatness of Arabs through modernization and the sloughing off of decadence of all types. One form this took was the rejection of the "decadent" aspects of pre-modern Arabic literature and the attempt to revive the strong, direct, verve of classical Arabic literature. Classics of Arabic literature were published in Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul, and emphasis was placed on introducing the youth to the great tradition of Arabic letters rather than the commentaries and super-commentaries that formed part of the late medieval curriculum designed primarily for the production of specialists in Islamic law.

**Stages of development.** Most accounts of the history of this transformation present it as occurring in three stages: 1) translation, 2) imitation and adaptation, and 3) assimilation, involving the composition of truly original works in the borrowed genres. Authors first translated mainly from French and English, but also from other literatures such as German and Russian, into Arabic. Arabic versions of the plays of Molière were performed on stage in Beirut and Cairo. *Paul et Virginie* was rendered into Arabic, as it was into dozens of colonial languages around the world. Then, authors rewrote western mysteries, adventures, and other novels, changing the personal names, settings, and other incongruous elements to Arab equivalents. Typical of these pioneering works were the historical novels of Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), a Lebanese Christian who edited and published in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. Later, authors began writing more original works following the general literary conventions of the western works but telling an original story with roots in the Arab world. The last stage may be said to begin around the first world war, with the publication of works such as the novel *Zaynab* (1914), by Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888-1956), which followed western models but used entirely Egyptian characters and settings and was focused on describing Egyptian culture and society rather than simply applying Arab names to essentially Western characters. As time went on, the European genres became more fully assimilated.

**Literary experiments.** While this scheme is true in broad terms, it oversimplifies the process by which it occurred and leaves many interesting and fascinating experiments out. A fascinating example is *al-Saq`ala al-saq fima huwa al-Faryaq*, a two-volume rambling, digressive, sometimes autobiographical work by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1805-1887), a Lebanese Christian author, which is an anthology of rambling anecdotes, short belletristic pieces, discussions of burning issues, and dissertations on odd philological points, interspersed with snippets of the author's accounts of his own experiences, something of a cross between Rabelais' *Pantagruel* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Al-Tahtawi's Arabic translation of François Fénelon's (1651-1715) *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, titled, in rhyming prose, *Mawaqif al-aflak fi waqa'i Tilimak* (*The Positions of the Celestial Spheres, on the Adventures of Télémaque*, 1867) is not a straightforward translation but a radical reworking of the text—rendering large parts of it in rhymed prose, among other things—in order to fit it into al-Tahtawi's conception of didactic Arabic literature. In *Hadith Ibn Hisham*, al-Muwaylihi (1868-1930) adapted the form of al-Hamadhani's *Maqamat*—and lifted al-Hamadhani's narrator—in order to compose an original satire of contemporary Egyptian politics and society. Taha Husayn's *al-Ayyam* (*The Days*) is often considered a crucial point in the history of the Arabic novel, but it is a text *sui generis*, an autobiographical work written in the third person, in language showing the influence of both classical Arabic and modern journalistic style, a *Bildungsroman* authored at the cusp of the shift from tradition to modernity. Each of these works is related to pre-modern Arabic literature and to western literature in complex ways that defy simple characterization. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to state that the genres of the novel, the short story, the play, and the modern poem were indeed borrowed and assimilated from Western models, and also that, even though the genres are strongly assimilated in most Arab nations to date, they remain heavily influenced by Western models, especially, now as a century ago, by works in English and French.

In this section of the course, we will read representative works in the main genres of modern Arabic literature, including the play, poetry, the novel, and the short story.

#### Further Reading

Badawi, Muhammad Mustafa. *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Cachia, Pierre. *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.

Hourani, Albert. *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Lowry, Joseph E. and Devin J. Stewart. *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography II: 1350-1850*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.

al-Tahtawi, Rifa`a Rafi`. *An Imam in Paris: al-Tahtawi's Visit to France 1826-1831*. Trans. Daniel L. Newman. London: Saqi Books, 2011.