Contemporary Arab Fiction

Innovation from Rama to Yalu

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PREFACE

This study aims at introducing Western readers to some of the most significant novels written in Arabic since 1979, by Muḥammad Barrāda, Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Ilyās Khūrī and Fuʾād al-Takarlī. Despite their contribution to the development of contemporary Arabic fiction, these writers remain relatively unknown to non-Arab readers. Some of their most innovative works have not been analysed in detail, so that even Western students of Arabic fiction are often oblivious of these writers' literary value. They all represent literary tendencies which are innovative as compared to the novelistic form canonized in the influential early works of Naguib Mahfouz. Mahfouz's death (30 August 2006) should serve as an inspiration for literary critics to investigate the new trends in operation within the Arabic novel, the literary form which Mahfouz, more than anybody else, demonstrated to be the most apt at engaging with the problems of the contemporary world. Although this study does not ignore the socio-political content and context of the literature, it aims principally at a close textual analysis.

The transliteration of Arabic most commonly used in academic publications in the Anglo-Saxon world is adopted here. Titles of Arabic books and names of Arab authors have therefore been transliterated according to the table found following this preface, with the notable exception of Najīb Maḥfūẓ, whose name, transliterated Naguib Mahfouz, is relatively well known even in the West.

TRANSLITERATION OF ARABIC LETTERS

ا	*alif*	*ā*	ق	*qāf*	*q*
ب	*bāʾ*	*b*	ك	*kāf*	*k*
ت	*tāʾ*	*t*	ل	*lām*	*l*
ث	*thāʾ*	*th*	م	*mīm*	*m*
ج	*jīm*	*j*	ن	*nūn*	*n*
ح	*ḥāʾ*	*ḥ*	ه	*hāʾ*	*h*
خ	*khāʾ*	*kh*	و	*wāw*	*w / ū*
د	*dāl*	*d*	ي	*yāʾ*	*y / ī*
ذ	*dhāl*	*dh*	ء	*hamza*	*ʾ*
ر	*rāʾ*	*r*			
ز	*zāʾ/zāy*	*z*			
س	*sīn*	*s*			
ش	*shīn*	*sh*			
ص	*ṣād*	*ṣ*			
ض	*ḍād*	*ḍ*			
ط	*ṭāʾ*	*ṭ*			
ظ	*ẓāʾ*	*ẓ*			
ع	*ᶜayn*	*ᶜ*			
غ	*ghayn*	*gh*			
ف	*fāʾ*	*f*			

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

On literary innovation (part 1)

In 1997, the May/June issue of the prestigious Lebanese literary magazine *al-Ādāb* was dedicated to the topic of experimentation and innovation in the Arabic novel.[1] In his brief introduction, editor-in-chief Samāḥ Idrīs first explains that he wants this special issue to deal with the 'new' and the 'lively' in the Arabic novel through an analysis of specific examples, instead of relying on Western literary theories. He then adds that the impressive response of readers, writers and critics to such topics[2] shows a growing interest in new novelistic styles which, unlike old techniques, keeps abreast with a life which has become unpredictable, quickly changing (Idrīs 1997: 19).

Our approach to the same topic (innovation within the realm of contemporary Arabic fiction) has some features in common with Idrīs's: in particular, we will rely on a close textual analysis of certain novels which present significant innovative features. However, we will also refer to literary theories and draw parallels between the Arabic novels studied and non-Arabic fictional texts.

The focus of this study is a number of novels published in recent decades (the first in 1979, the last in 2002)[3] which were written by Arab authors of different nationalities who, according to most critics (Arab and Western scholars of modern Arabic fiction), have significantly contributed to innovation in the Arabic novel in the period under consideration. The Iraqi novelist Fuʾād al-Takarlī (b. 1927, Baghdad) has received less critical attention than others and the innovative elements in his work (wrongly but maybe inevitably, as will be shown in the following section) have often been overlooked. The other main writers whose work is analysed here are Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (b. 1926, Alexandria), Ilyās Khūrī (b. 1948, Beirut) and Muḥammad Barrāda (b. 1938, Rabat).[4]

This study aims at filling a gap in the field of criticism (in English) of the contemporary Arabic novel. The gap is both quantitative and qualitative. First of all, studies in English focusing on writers of the preceding generations, dominated by Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006), outnumber those on the generation of writers under consideration here. More importantly, it is evident that Arabic fiction is today often read by Western academic and non-academic readers alike for extra-literary reasons. In other words, Arabic novels are usually read (often in translation) and analysed not as *works of art* in their own right but because they

are seen as interesting documents from diverse points of view: anthropological, socio-political, feminist,[5] historical and so on. Of course, all of these approaches are legitimate and all can add something substantial to our understanding of Arab societies, as well as enriching their parent disciplines. Nonetheless, if the literary, artistic and technical elements in these novels are overlooked, then their most crucial aspect is not taken into account. These works all deal with social, political and historical phenomena but they do so quite differently to, say, history books, journalistic articles or academic essays.[6] The difference is the form the author has decided to give them and this form is that of a novel, a work of fiction which we should evaluate by considering how a specific *form* gives life to a specific *content*. In other words, we will consider the *aesthetics* of these works, relying on a close textual analysis of technical aspects such as narrative voice, structure, style, and mood. The present study is therefore divided into chapters dedicated explicitly to formal aspects of the novels read. According to our reading, the most significantly innovative aspects of these texts are

1   narrative fragmentation;
2   polyphony;
3   intertextuality and
4   metafiction.

To each of these literary aspects corresponds a more or less well formulated corpus of critical material (developed mainly in the West) – in some cases a theory of literature, in others only a critical method. We will refer to this material throughout this work. For example, once we acknowledge that a common feature of many texts analysed is the presence of more than one narrative voice, it is impossible for us to ignore what M. M. Bakhtin and other Western critics have written about this literary phenomenon. Nevertheless, our dependence on these works (and the general critical concepts they generate) means neither that we will rigidly apply the critical methods employed by Western scholars engaging with similar formal aspects, nor that we will necessarily reach the same conclusions.[7] We simply found these general and much debated concepts useful as starting points from which to carry out a rigorous formal analysis of the novels and a discussion of their contents. This analysis is obviously our main goal, but we also aim to define as clearly as possible what we mean by these critical concepts, which are often referred to in discussions of Arabic fiction without being properly defined.

Moreover, we have deliberately chosen the general term *content* as opposed to more specific words such as *message* or *meaning* because we believe that the obsessive search for a message in a novel (and more generally in a work of art) can be dangerously misleading: if in a novel the message is not clearly spelled out (and it rarely is), readers can easily find what they wish to find; once this message is found (or once the more sophisticated reader's theory or ideology is confirmed), it is easy to dismiss the other features of the work as insubstantial ornaments – mere

embellishments. We believe that a literary approach, more than any other perhaps, helps the reader of fiction to avoid such mistakes and simplifications. To resist the tyranny of the message does not mean to disregard the content of a novel: none of the novels here considered is an exercise in pure form, devoid of any connection with its non-fictional context. This content, or more accurately the *raison d'être* of a novel, could well be something very different from a straight-forward message (and in the best fiction it usually is). We are thinking here of those authors who deform their fictional texts in order to make political statements. This is not to say that all authors who deal with political issues in their fiction or even explicitly articulate political discourses are doomed to failure. The problem arises when the political element emerges as an alien feature which has been artificially introduced and does not have much to do with the surrounding fictional text.[8] We will discuss this later, giving examples of successful and unsuccessful political arguments made through fictional texts and, in the final chapter of this study, we will draw our conclusions on the argument. Here it will suffice to refer to the ideas of two novelists about literature and art in general. Al-Kharrāṭ writes in an article about commitment in art (referring to his own experience as an Arab writer of fiction) that a truly artistic experience is 'a striving towards knowledge'. According to him, literature should be there to ask questions (as we strive towards knowledge), rather than to provide answers. He then says that literary works should fulfil this questioning task in an artistic fashion: they should not conform to a political cause (Kharrāṭ 2001). The Czech novelist Milan Kundera writes: 'I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a position (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it for an *effort to know*, to understand, to grasp this or that aspect of reality' (Kundera 1993: 91).

'Aspect of reality' is a crucial phrase for our study. As seen earlier, Ṣ. Idrīs too refers to novels which strive to deal with real life: for all their innovative and, at times, radical features, these novels primarily engage with their wider socio-political context (the notable exception is, as we will see, a novel which promotes an inward, self-referential discourse). Again, we read in Kundera that 'apprehending the real world is part of the definition of the novel' (Kundera 1993: 53), but we could have cited many other critics and writers to confirm that the novel, despite its self-referential elements, is mainly concerned with the world in which we live (according to Bakhtin the concern with the present is one of the features which separates the novel from the epic: cf. the essay 'Epic and Novel' in Bakhtin 1975: 3–40). This is certainly the case with the novels we have studied: the metaphor of art as a mirror held up to the world is generally still valid (although it is often questioned), even if at times the mirror which the innovative Arabic novel holds up has two glasses – one reflecting the world and the other itself and its own history, with references to the non-Arabic novel and the Arab literary heritage. The nature of such texts seems to be further enriched (and complicated) by a necessity born out of certain socio-political circumstances typical of the Arab world.

3

We will see how literary innovations and representations of reality are at times paired with a preoccupation with historiography. In her book on the connection between history and fiction in the works of the Egyptian novelists Mahfouz, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī and Ṣunᶜallāh Ibrāhīm, the Egyptian scholar Samia Mehrez writes about the power the state in developing countries exercises over the narratives (both historiographical and literary) of society and reality, and she reflects on the role of the writer of fiction as follows:

> the Arab contemporary writer comes to occupy a larger and more crucial space, despite (or perhaps because of) all the restrictions, limitations, and censorship he or she may encounter. [. . .] The position of the writer as 'underground historian' is indeed what characterizes much of the literary output in the contemporary Arab world.
>
> (Mehrez 1994: 7–8)

This tendency towards some sort of alternative historiography is evident in some of the novels we analyse here (especially the works by Khūrī and Barrāda). Even when in other texts (by al-Takarlī and al-Kharrāṭ for example) this urge to repair the omissions of the official historiography is generally resisted by the author, it is necessary for us to keep it in mind as it is a feature clearly much more relevant in the Arab world than in the West.[9]

The particular socio-political situation of the Arab world has another effect on the writing of fiction, pushing certain authors towards politically aware, if not directly militant, positions. As early as 1975, the Syrian sociologist and novelist Ḥalīm Barakāt articulates this militant attitude clearly when he addresses 'the gap between [. . .] Arab society as it exists in reality, and as it ought to be in order to confront trying challenges':

> A writer could not be part of Arab society and yet not concern himself with change. [. . .] the theory of influence which sees writers as agents of social change, applies more accurately to contemporary Arab novelists than the theory of reflection, which sees writers as objective and detached observers holding a mirror to reality.
>
> (Barakāt 1975: 126–7)

He then concludes his argument, foreseeing the birth of what he defines the Arabic 'novel of revolutionary change', as follows:

> Novels of revolutionary change invalidate the hypothesis that literature reflects reality [. . .] Such novels invalidate also the hypothesis that there is a conflict between art and political commitment. Literature can subordinate politics to creative and reflective thinking, and undertake the task of promoting a new consciousness.
>
> (Barakāt 1975: 137)

Similarly today, a writer like Khūrī, for instance, does not content himself with creating a narrative which reflects on its own nature and at the same time engages with politics and history. He, like others, harbours the ambition that such a narrative will have an impact on the use of language and will contribute to promoting cultural changes:

> Writing in times of transition takes the form of a journey towards what we do not know and towards the shock of writing what we know, which will lead us to discover how writing changes things and does not only reflect them.
>
> (Khūrī 1990: 8)

While this attitude of full commitment might be understood, if not appreciated (considering the situation of general crisis in which the Arab world finds itself today), it is also true that some critics have stigmatized it as paternalistic. For instance, according to Stefan Meyer, Pierre Cachia states that 'most Arab writers look upon themselves as nothing less than cultural and social guides for their contemporaries' (Meyer 2001: 5).[10] Meyer suggests that what Cachia allegedly says about the Arab modernists of the beginning of the last century is relevant today too. This is questionable, despite the fact that the passages quoted from Barakāt may seem to confirm it.[11] An increasing number of Arab writers today (including the novelists discussed in this study) are alienated not only from the centres of political power, but also from their societies (as Meyer rightly points out – Meyer 2001: 6). For this reason and given a series of obvious practical problems (e.g. illiteracy) which contribute to limiting the readership of fiction, these writers are well aware that the impact of their fiction on the general public, to which it is primarily addressed, is not as strong as they might wish.[12] In fact, a cynical commentator could speculate that Arabic novels have a wider readership in the West than in the Arab world. While it is impossible today to establish precise statistics for the readership of contemporary Arabic fiction,[13] there are indications that this fiction has a considerable impact beyond the bounds of its readership: novels are adapted for television, cinema and theatre;[14] writers enjoy a relatively high public profile in the press, media, literary cafes, and so on; both official censors and Islamist protestors have shown great enthusiasm in banning and burning novels, as well as attacking novelists (consider for example, the 1994 stabbing of Mahfouz, the cultural 'war' surrounding the 2000 Egyptian reprint of Ḥaydar Ḥaydar's novel *Walīma li-aᶜshāb al-baḥr* 'Banquet for Seaweed' (1983) and the 2001 action by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in taking off the market three novels considered obscene).[15]

As far as the connection between political power and writers is concerned, however, the case of Egypt will help us to illustrate our point further. Under Nasser, the political elite controlled and at times cracked down on writers and intellectuals but also gave them a certain autonomy and power (basically, employing them) in exchange for their support in articulating the regime's policies

(Jacquemond 2003: 31–7). During the later years of Nasser's rule, writers became increasingly disillusioned with the leadership's strategies. Under Sadat, they were progressively excluded from the centres of power (Jacquemond 2003: 39–42). If we now consider the situation under Mubarak, we can see that (after a first decade which roughly reproduced the conditions existing under Sadat) his leadership has recently shifted to a more inclusive approach but this does not resolve the two major problems (which were already prominent under Nasser): if the patronage offered by those in power defends intellectuals from the attacks of the radical Islamic movement on the ascendancy, it obviously limits their independence and freedom to criticize the government;[16] more importantly perhaps, as Richard Jacquemond points out, the promoters of this policy (promotion of the values of the *nahḍa* – such as patriotism, tolerance, rationalism, freedom, political reform – from above, as it were) do not seem to realize how ineffective it is in reaching its targets (Jacquemond 2003: 45). As a result of this situation, writers like the novelists studied here, who promote secular ideas, social equality, democracy, political and religious tolerance, now find themselves in the middle of a double process of alienation: on the one hand, they have been ostracized by the political authorities, which still exert pressure on them in various ways;[17] on the other hand, they are increasingly alienated from some sections of the general public who, having become disillusioned with secular ideas, seem to embrace a more radical religious discourse. As a result of all these changes, the attitude of the novelists, who are fully aware of their position in society, is much less paternalistic than Meyer seems to imply. The general attitude of Arab writers has changed: rather than envisaging guiding their fellow citizens from above, they are more receptive towards their concerns, while still producing discourses critical of what they feel are dangerous trends (like radical Islamic thought). A writer like Khūrī would embrace as his own what the late Italian novelist Italo Calvino says about politics and literature:

> Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude.
>
> (Calvino quoted in Mehrez 1994: 80)

Such writers are part of that 'small group of Arab secular intellectuals who', along with some religious reformers, according to Waïl Hassan, 'challenge canonical interpretations [of religious texts] embraced unquestioningly by traditional clerics and by fundamentalists [and] advocate reforms in the areas of women's rights, social organization and political institutions. And those progressive intellectuals', Hassan adds, 'also see themselves as actively committed to resisting neo-colonialism as well as political despotism at home' (Hassan 2002: 56). By acting in this way, let us note very clearly (albeit in passing), these authors not only assume a sort of intellectual responsibility in writing about politically dangerous topics but are

also ready to pay personally for their commitment. The imprisonment of Arab writers is well documented and the late ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf once publicly stated that he felt almost ashamed of having spent only a few months in prison, whereas most of his colleagues had paid a much heavier price.[18] The task of literature as expressed earlier by Calvino can hardly involve a paternalistic attitude, and it also leads us, incidentally, to another main concern for Arab writers: the literary language.[19] This concern can range from Khūrī's plan to make the literary language closer to the colloquial and therefore available to a wider public, to al-Kharrāṭ's sophisticated wordplay and interplay between numerous linguistic varieties. There is no doubt that the authors studied here pay much attention to the formal aspect of their work, engaging with questions of literary technique much more than earlier generations. This trend probably has to do with the fact that engaging with form and technique is inherent in any sophisticated literary discourse, even when it deals directly or indirectly with politics.[20] We will return to the connection between political engagement and fiction later in this introduction when we talk about the concept of modernism.

To affirm that these novels are a sort of representation of reality does not mean that they can be ascribed to literary realism – that they try to produce 'the illusion of reality' in the same way as the European nineteenth-century mainstream novel. This effect relies on a kind of writing which represents verisimilar situations and plausible characters. Within modern Arabic literature we can generally relate such an effect to Mahfouz's early novels. Of course, such *realistic* writing is not limited to actual facts but often deals with metaphysical reality: it is not incidental that Henry James, a novelist so concerned with the workings of the mind, was the one to highlight this quality of fiction – the illusion of reality.[21] The Egyptian critic Sabry Hafez has underlined how at the beginning of the twentieth century the Arabic novelistic tradition, which was clearly heavily influenced by, if not entirely imported from the West,

> perceived itself as an equivalent of reality or as its reproduction in verbal form. Its starting point was a belief in the infallibility of mimesis, which was seen as a trustworthy representation of life with its verisimilitude as the ultimate proof of its plausibility and relevance to the reader's experience. The quest for literary excellence involved the exact reproduction of the condition of reality in a manner that convinced the reader that what he was reading had actually happened.
>
> (Hafez 1994: 102)

In the texts under scrutiny here, this traditional representation of reality is subverted, questioned, its limitations exposed. This questioning is sometimes paired with a questioning of the workings of fiction itself, but the reference to the non-fictional, wider context is never completely banished: the mode of representation is different, new, but it is still related to that context.[22] We will see in the next chapter how al-Kharrāṭ and Khūrī, whose writing can hardly be considered *realistic*

(in the manner of the early Mahfouzian or the nineteenth century European novel), implicitly claim that their way of writing is more truly *realistic* (i.e. capable of representing a reality efficiently) than that of their predecessors. Their first response to their sense that the *realistic* mode is no longer adequate to represent their reality is their use of narrative fragmentation, which upsets the main ingredients of traditional Mahfouzian writing: *linear* development, *clear* exposition, *solid* temporal and spatial settings. Further aesthetic choices will be shown to subvert other cardinal elements of the Mahfouzian model: *verisimilar* scenarios and plots, *credible* characters, *reliable* narrative voice (usually only one), and so on.

We have already alluded to the kind of literary innovation these novels display, but it is now necessary to address the issue more directly. In the period we have chosen to survey, a significant number of novelists have experimented with new ways of narrating. These writers, we argue, can be defined as innovative. The comparison is obviously made with the writers of preceding generations, and especially with those who have contributed most to establishing the features of the mainstream Arabic novel, to canonizing it and to shaping its forms. Roger Allen writes in his monograph on the Arabic novel (first published in 1982) about 'transformations in fictional perspectives' which developed after 1967 as follows:

> Such is the quality and quantity of experimentation in the realm of the Arabic novel in recent decades that it is clearly impossible to include here discussion of the multifarious ways in which novelists are making use of contradictions, fractured or cancelled time, and textual pastiche and subversion, to express in fiction a vision of contemporary society and their sense of alienation towards it. [...] it is quite clear that the fictional works of contemporary novelists [...] turn the act of reading into a process of discovery that is often complex.
>
> (Allen 1995: 123–4)

The major aim of the present work is to give an analysis of the most significant examples of this experimental and innovative way of writing fiction. The key feature of our selection of writers is neither the amount of critical recognition they have received, nor their influential legacy, nor their regional provenance, but rather the fact that they represent different ways of departing from the *realistic* writing imposed by the success of Mahfouz's early fiction.[23] Before we move on, let us make it clear that Mahfouz himself had moved away from a *realistic* narration and experimented with new techniques and forms much earlier than 1979. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can outline four main trends originating in Mahfouz's novels which have influenced the Arabic novel in general[24]: his first novels are historical and deal with the history of ancient Egypt; with the so-called Cairo Trilogy (1956–1957), Mahfouz successfully imposes a realistic style which is further explored in his novels of the 1960s (such as *al-Liṣṣ wa-'l-kilāb* [1962; *The Thief and the Dogs*, 1984] and *Mīrāmār* [1967; *Miramar*, 1978]), where the stress is more on the psychological portrayal of the characters. In the later novels,

8

realism is also often transcended by symbolism and formal experimentation. The last significant trend was inaugurated with novels like *Layālī Alf layla* (1982; *Arabian Nights and Days*, 1995) and its overt intertextual use of the Arabic popular heritage, already evident in the title.[25]

We can see 1967, the year of the *naksa*, as a turning point in literary orientation throughout the Arab world, when the prevalent mode of realistic writing starts to seem inadequate to portray a rapidly changing reality and a general identity crisis. Like all such generalizations, this one must be taken as no more than a convention to simplify presentation of a complex historical reality. It is obvious, as we will see in the following paragraphs, that some kind of change in literary sensibility was already in the air well before 1967.[26] There is little doubt, nevertheless, that the *naksa* accelerated those changes. Other historical events also played an important role in destabilizing the writers' worldview and self-perception: it is impossible to ignore the impact (especially on Lebanese authors) of the long Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and the gradual destruction of Beirut, once a vibrant cultural centre for the whole Arab world, and of the many Gulf wars which destabilized Iraq.

To go back to the literary turning point of the 1960s, our analysis will not include a discussion of works published in the 1960s and 1970s, despite their undoubted importance. The so-called 1960s generation, including writers such as Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (b. 1945), Ṣunᶜallāh Ibrāhīm (b. 1937), ᶜAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim (1935–1990) and Bahāʾ Ṭāhir (b. 1935) played and continue to play an important innovative role in Egyptian fiction. There are various reasons for our omission of these writers: the first is that an increasing number of studies (even in English) have appeared treating works of these writers.[27] At the same time, only a small number of studies deal adequately with the early novels of al-Kharrāṭ (himself one of the members of the '1960s generation'), whose importance as innovative texts can hardly be overestimated. For instance, some critics mention his first novel, *Rāma wa-ʾl-tinnīn*, almost in passing as a very innovative work without substantiating these claims through critical argument: in short, the novel is a true turning point which has not attracted the critical attention it deserves.[28] Even more serious is the underestimation of all the works of al-Takarlī. Our analysis is intended as a contribution to the growing number of studies on the post-Mahfouz generation. Another reason for our focusing on Barrāda, al-Kharrāṭ, Khūrī and al-Takarlī, and exclusively on those works which appeared after 1979, is that we witness in them a maturation of the innovative writing which they had initiated earlier.[29] In other words, in the novels we have chosen to discuss, technical innovations are consistent and radical: early innovations are developed to the limit and new ones are introduced. For example, the early novelistic works by al-Kharrāṭ already display a new trend common to the works of many contemporary Arab authors (with the Egyptian al-Ghīṭānī as possibly the most eminent amongst them): the use of the Arab literary heritage as a source of inspiration. A large number of Arab novelists engage in a dialogue not only with the classical Arabic *turāth*, but also with the folk traditions. Even the most innovative of these writers display

an awareness of belonging to a certain cultural heritage. It is curious how a novelist like al-Kharrāṭ can in the same interview easily dismiss the *realistic* novel in the style of early Mahfouz and at the same time state that he hopes he has contributed to the revival of the *Arabian Nights* type of narration (see later). The contribution of the *turāth* to contemporary fiction is one of the most significant features of the Arabic novel as it moves away from the realistic form of the period of its maturity. The reasons behind this trend are many and parallels can be made with the modern South American, African or Indian novel.[30] Whatever role politics have played in promoting it, this trend remains a cultural phenomenon of significance which should not surprise us at all: once Arab writers had adopted the literary genre of the novel (from the West), and brought its realistic form to maturity, they used this most plastic and healthily ill-defined of all literary genres (so fluid that it tends to subsume all other literary genres), as the ideal medium to explore their own literary heritage.[31] This development is suggested by Khūrī himself, who underlines how the first, marginal fictional experiments at the beginning of the *nahḍa* were given a form by Mahfouz employing a European model. After Mahfouz, novelists were more inclined to subvert the Mahfouzian form and relied on a sort of formless fiction which Khūrī relates to classical Arabic literature (Khūrī 1990: 4–5). While the connection between classical and modern Arabic literatures is not always evident and deserves to be studied more extensively, it is nonetheless of some significance that an author who, like Khūrī, is at times defined as postmodernist (and, according to Meyer, places 'no value on the attempt to forge an indigenous Arab literature', Meyer 2001: 117) makes such a statement.

Even when discussing the tendency of Arab writers to refer increasingly to their own cultural traditions, it is difficult to stay away from comparisons between the Arabic and the Western novel (one can think about the Western modernist motto 'make it new!', referring to the Western literary past). As we explained at the beginning of this introductory chapter, this study will occasionally include references and comparisons to the non-Arabic novel, with particular attention to the development of the Western novel. This is because Western literature exercised much influence on Arab writers throughout the twentieth century. Therefore, scholars who have dealt with the Arabic novel of the last few decades have obviously considered the possibility and the usefulness of drawing parallels between the changes in Arabic novelistic writing, and the evolution from social realism to modernism (and postmodernism) in the Western novel. Hassan has described such a comparative exercise as flawed because it does not adequately take into account the colonial context. Referring to Terri DeYoung's work on the Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, he writes:

> In the absence of any consideration of the colonial context, critics have tended hastily and unquestioningly to use Western periodization to describe the development of modern Arabic literature, thus reducing it, in DeYoung's words, to 'an inexorable sequencing not of its own making', as if those phases of modern Arabic literature (romanticism, realism, modernism)