

MODERN LITERATURE IN THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

1850–1970



EDITED BY
ROBIN OSTLE



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Foreword

This volume represents the first attempt that has been made to conduct a detailed comparative survey of the principal modern literatures of the Near and Middle East since 1850, namely Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish. In spite of the fact that there is much common ground between the historical and cultural developments of the different linguistic areas of the Near and Middle East in the modern period, nevertheless much teaching and research remains restricted to the individual language areas, and there is relatively little awareness of what takes place across these linguistic boundaries. The book is designed to make students and teachers more aware of what they share with their counterparts working in other languages, without losing sight of those features which are peculiar to the creative writing of their own areas.

There is always an arbitrary process involved in imposing chronological divisions on literary evolution, and this is even more so when a single chronological scheme is devised for no fewer than four literatures. However, the three divisions proposed seemed to have enough common elements of historical experience to justify the following thematic approach to all four literatures: the age of translation and adaptation from 1850-1914; the decades of enthusiastic romantic nationalism which characterized the period between the two world wars; and the variety and conflicts of ideology that have marked the Near and Middle East since 1950. Inevitably these themes have been more relevant to some literatures than to others, from period to period, and the authors have not been slow to indicate this whenever they felt it necessary. One common assumption that underlies the volume as a whole is that all four of the literatures here surveyed have been profoundly affected by wider processes of political and social change. Virtually all the chapters in the book tend to support this assumption, and indeed each part of the book has an historical and political introduction which sets the context for the literary chapters.

On the whole the three parts of the book conform to a common pattern, with the following exceptions: the abundance of Arabic material since 1950 seemed to call for two separate chapters devoted to the *Mashriq* and the *Maghrib*; sadly, it was not found possible to include a chapter on modern Iranian literature since 1950. In mitigation, one can point out that the chapter on Iran which concludes Part II is one of the most comprehensive in the book, and refers to material which extends well beyond 1950. Taken as a whole, the various chapters provide striking evidence that the Near and Middle East has remained very much a common cultural area since 1850, in spite of the political and linguistic differences between its regions and countries.

The thanks of the editor are due in the first place to the School of Oriental and African Studies whose financial support led to the original symposia from which this volume evolved. The authors of the individual chapters are all international specialists in their own fields who gave most generously of their time and expertise. The greatest debt of gratitude is owed to the staff of the Publications Office of the Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies in SOAS who coped cheerfully with the problems of a difficult manuscript. I should like to mention in particular the editors at SOAS Tony Allan and Diana Gur, April Heywood and Dinah Manisty. They were all unreasonably patient with an editor who was more than usually dilatory.

Robin Ostle

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PART I

THE AGE OF TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION 1850–1914

1 Modernization and literature in the Near and Middle East 1850–1914

Malcolm Yapp

An invitation to an historian to write a chapter on the historical background to a period of literary development implies a belief in the truth of the proposition that there is some relationship between social, economic and political changes, in literary form and content. This truth, of course, except to Marxist writers, is not self-evident; in particular, those who would endeavour to extend the proposition to embrace the quality of literary work stand on treacherous ground indeed. It is not my purpose, however, to debate this interesting proposition here; instead it will be assumed that some relationship does exist, and suggested that in the Near and Middle East during the period under review the relationship may be described in terms of three theses. These are, first, that the most notable characteristic of the Near and Middle East during the period with which we are concerned was that it was passing through a phase of modernization; second, that the form and content of Near and Middle Eastern literature during these years was related to the process of modernization; and third, and more speculatively, that differences in the literary development of the various regions of the Near and Middle East are linked to variations in the extent and character of modernization.

It will be useful to begin with a definition of modernization. The term is used to denote the new process of transition from a traditional to a modern society. To forestall protest, it should be said at once that of course there is no such thing as either a traditional or a modern society: the first term embraces a variety of societies which are not static, and the second merely describes the forms of societies in the second half of the twentieth century, with no suggestion that the process of change has come to a stop. Traditional and modern societies are ideal types compounded of a mix of attributes. These attributes are as follows. Politically, traditional societies are distinguished by what Michael Oakshott termed minimal government, that is to say governments have few functions, being mainly concerned with defence, the administration of some criminal justice, and

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the construction and maintenance of a few public works; for these purposes they take only a small proportion of national income in the form of national revenue. State institutions in traditional societies are correspondingly elementary. By contrast, in modern societies the state has many functions, takes a large proportion of national income and develops elaborate institutions with many employees. The concentration of so much decision-making within the state is a powerful factor inducing its citizens to define or redefine their political loyalties. Economically, traditional societies are largely subsistent or revolve around innumerable local markets. Exchanges of goods are limited by poor communications, the largest proportion of the national income is derived from agriculture, and industry consists principally of handicrafts. Modern societies tend to have good communications, a single market for most goods, derive the larger part of their national income from non-agricultural sources, and employ most of their citizens outside the agricultural sector. Industrial production tends to be organized on a large scale. Socially, traditional societies are commonly composed of many compartments, arranged in no particular fashion, and are responsible for regulating many aspects of the lives of their members including their personal law, education and, often, their economic organization. In a traditional society the great majority of citizens live in rural areas and are illiterate. Modern societies are usually divided into great horizontal bands known as classes, which are arranged hierarchically. A large proportion of their citizens live in cities and are literate. Their law and their education are shared, and usually under the control of the state.¹

Used in this fashion the concepts of traditional and modern societies are surprisingly useful in discussions of change in the Near and Middle East during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because in 1800 Near and Middle Eastern societies conformed closely to the traditional model, whereas in the last years of the twentieth century they approach the modern model. This is not to say that they conform in every respect: politically and socially they have most of the attributes of modern societies but economically they present some different features, most notably the failure to develop any substantial manufacturing industry.

During the period 1850–1914, impelled partly by external but more by internal factors, the Near and Middle East travelled some way along the road of modernization. The pace and pattern of modernization, however, differed from one state to another and from one region to another. Broadly speaking we can identify three different models of state development. These are, first, the Ottoman model in which the leading element was the drive for political modernization inspired by the wish to develop European-style military forces. In this model the political sector led, and economic and social modernization lagged behind and were subordinated

to the needs of political modernization. Second is the Egyptian model in which, as a consequence of the development of the cotton economy, the leading sector was the economic. By contrast, the political sector slipped behind after the collapse of the military modernization programme of Muhammad 'Ali in 1841 and the end of the ambitions of Isma'il in 1879. During most of our period Egypt was under British occupation: this fostered a conservative view of the role of the state, greatly reduced the military forces of Egypt, and held back from support for public educational provision. The third model is provided by Iran where there was neither a political nor an economic nor a social impetus for modernization, or at least any impetus sufficient to overcome the forces which withstood change. In consequence there was very little modernization in Iran during this period; in 1914 as in 1850, Iran had a system of minimal government, a largely subsistence economy and was divided into mainly illiterate social compartments.²

This is not to say that all regions in all states moved at the same pace. Everywhere the changes were most marked in the cities and large parts of the countryside were almost untouched by modernization. Within the Ottoman Empire, Western Anatolia changed much more rapidly than did the east and Syria faster than Iraq, while Arabia hardly changed at all. Lower Egypt altered more quickly than did Upper Egypt, in line with the advance of the cotton economy, and, in Iran, Azerbaijan and Khurasan experienced more modernization than did areas in the south. Some communities were more responsive to the pressures for modernization than were others: government servants more than those outside government, Christians more than Muslims. A link with a community in Europe was often a potent factor influencing the rate of change, a circumstance which applied not only to Christians but also to Turks in the Ottoman Empire, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, who drew on the experiences of Turks in Russia.

It will at once be observed that there are some very broad correspondences between the process of modernization and the literary development of different parts of the Near and Middle East. Judged simply by the crude measures of the timing and volume of publication, it is noticeable that Iran lags behind the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. It is possible to trace a more precise relationship between modernization and literary change but first it is necessary to establish some systematic basis on which to rest the inquiry.

Our inquiry may be summarized as follows: who wrote (read, performed, watched) what, and when, and why? Of this gaggle of questions the only ones which can be answered with any pretensions to confidence are: who wrote or performed what and when. To the others,

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only the most tentative and incomplete answers can be offered. Before those answers can be elaborated it is necessary to collect more information under a variety of categories, including those of literacy levels, outlets, patronage, and motivation. No systematic effort has been made to collect such information for this paper; rather the aim has been to set up the categories and make a crude test of their value.

LITERACY LEVELS

Writers write for markets and what and how they write is influenced by those markets. The market is broadly shaped by the size of the literate population, although it is not determined by that factor as illiterate people may be reached by oral literature; hence the enduring importance of poetry, stories, and sermons. In this context one may express surprise that the theatre was relatively slow to develop in the region. More complex literary forms and more sophisticated concepts may readily be communicated only in written form. Although one must not underestimate the extent to which illiterates gained access to written work by having it read to them by others – a factor of particular importance in relation to the readership of newspapers – there is some rough relationship between the production of literary works and the number of literates. There are some estimates of indifferent quality available for the number of literates in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Iran. In the Ottoman Empire literacy grew from 2 per cent in 1868 to around 15 per cent in 1900, although this latter figure should be regarded with much suspicion. Also, it undoubtedly disguises a much lower rate of literacy among the Muslim population generally and the Turkish population in particular because literacy among the Christian groups was more widespread than literacy among Muslims. In 1927 literacy in the Turkish republic was estimated at 10.6 per cent and it is reasonable to suppose that it was lower than this amongst the Turkish population of the same region in 1900. Literacy in Egypt in 1900 was around 10 per cent and in Iran well below 5 per cent. Literacy figures alone are a crude measure, for many of those classified as literate were certainly either incapable of reading a serious work or were unwilling to attempt the enterprise. Also these figures combine the outputs of both the traditional and the modern educational systems, and for our purpose the output of the modern system is more relevant because of the focus of the following chapters upon change and the influence of Europe.

Another way of approaching the matter is to look at the output of institutions of modern higher education. Such institutions were founded in the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth century and then refounded or revived in the 1820s and 1830s and further developed thereafter: the

Harbiye was founded in 1846, the Teachers' Training College in 1848, the famous civil service college, the *Mülkiye* in 1859, *Galatasaray* in 1868, eighteen additional specialized institutions of higher education under 'Abd ül-Hamid and the Ottoman university in 1900. In Egypt similar institutions date from the 1820s, falter in their development between 1841 and 1860, and then expand rapidly until 1882. From 1882, however, the low level of expenditure on public sector education meant that the private sector became relatively more significant in the output of graduates. In Iran institutions of modern higher education are founded from the 1850s: a language training school, the equivalent of similar institutions founded in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt in the 1830s, was set up only in 1873, and a college of political science (which may be compared with the 1859 Ottoman *Mülkiye*) as late as 1901. No statistics are readily available for Egypt, but it has been calculated that the Ottomans had produced about 5000 graduates from public institutions of higher education by the early twentieth century, to which total should be added an unknown number representing the total of graduates from foreign schools, from schools run by religious communities, from private schools and those who were educated abroad. In the same period Iran produced about 1100 graduates from the *Dar al-Funun*, founded in 1852, to which total some additions should be made on a much smaller scale.

Little can be deduced from these statistics and observations but three general points may be made. First, the number of what may be called 'modern literates' was increasing rapidly in the later nineteenth century; second, the numbers were still small and should be thought of in thousands rather than any larger figure; and third, the output of Iran was decidedly lower than that of either the Ottoman Empire or Egypt, reflecting the smaller and later effort put into education by Iran and the slower rate of modernization. Finally, one general word of caution about the use of the concept of 'modern literates' as an index of readership in Near and Middle Eastern languages should be inserted. The acquisition of a foreign language may actually hinder the process of translation and adaptation because if one can read the works that one wishes to read in a foreign language it is unnecessary to reproduce them in one's own language. This factor may help to explain why certain categories of literature feature less in the development of Arabic, Persian and Turkish writing during this period than might otherwise have been expected to be the case.³

OUTLETS

The second category mentioned above is that of outlets, by which is meant institutions or mechanisms which intervene between the writer and his

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readers, facilitate or hinder his contacts with them, and shape the character of his writing both in form and content. One of these items must be printing. One would not wish to underestimate the capacity of the old manuscript copying system to feed the market; Marsigli (1732:I, 40) estimated in the late seventeenth century that 90,000 men were engaged in copying books in either Istanbul or the Ottoman Empire (the text leaves the matter unclear). Nevertheless, in speed and price the copying system could not compete with the printing press which itself was the beneficiary of major technical advances during the nineteenth century: the replacement of the wooden hand press with the iron press around 1800; the introduction of the cylinder and of steam power at the same time; the advent of the rotary press (of such importance for newspapers) in the middle of the nineteenth century, and then, during the 1880s, the coming of the linotype and monotype systems for casting hot metal type.⁴ Little is known of the extent to which these technical innovations penetrated the Near and Middle East as most writers have been content to date the introduction of the printing press without asking the question: what type of press? It is clear that printing in certain languages was established at an early period: there was a Jewish press in Istanbul from the fifteenth century, an Armenian press from the sixteenth century, and a Greek press from the early seventeenth century, at which period there is reported to have been an effort to establish a press to print Arabic and Turkish material in Istanbul.⁵ The first Ottoman press of which we have good evidence, however, is that which operated in the eighteenth century and which encountered resistance from religious groups.⁶ At times the press was closed but its activities revived at the end of the eighteenth century and by 1842 about 200 works were said to have been produced on it (Emin 1914). By that date the US missionary press in Beirut was also in operation (Tibawi 1966). In Cairo, the Bulaq press was established in 1821 and during the first twenty years of its existence produced 243 works in Turkish, Arabic and Persian (Bianchi 1843). By the time our period commences, therefore, facilities were well established for the printing of books in Arabic, Persian and Turkish within the Ottoman Empire and Egypt as well as in Europe and India. The situation was different in Iran, where printing was slower to develop and where lithography remained the principal method of book production until the end of the nineteenth century. Although lithography offered some advantages for the production of work in Arabic scripts as well as for the reproduction of illustrations, and although there were significant technical advances in litho techniques in Europe during the nineteenth century, the process remained a slower and more expensive mode of production, especially for periodical production, throughout the period. Jellygraph offered a cheap alternative method of newspaper production but was unsuitable for long print runs.

The output of books in the Near and Middle East during the years with which this chapter is concerned is difficult to estimate; those estimates which exist are all dependent upon inadequate information and either underestimate, through counting only works which have survived, or overestimate, through counting works which are mentioned as being contemplated but which were never actually published. It is estimated that between 1835 and 1885 some 3000 works were printed in the Ottoman Empire and a listing for 1890 gives a total of 303 works produced in that year (Shaw 1977: II, 128). A careful examination of the *salnames* would give a more precise figure but the total production during the period under investigation is likely to be of the order of 10,000 to 20,000 works, which would be about the annual output of a major European country at the end of our period. Egyptian publication probably approached that of the Ottomans but the number of publications in Iran was much smaller; Browne's list of works is admittedly incomplete but it amounts to only 162, and even with the most generous additions indicates once more the gap which separates Iran from the other two states during this period (Browne 1914: 157-64; for Egypt see van Dyck 1896).

The output of newspapers and periodicals, another important outlet for literary publication, is also difficult to estimate with any accuracy. In the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt, the first newspapers date from around 1830 but in both states the great age of expansion occurs in the 1860s and 1870s. The newspapers were sold in single copies at around 1 or 2 cents a paper or by subscription at about 10 to 15 dollars a year. Periodicals, which were the more usual outlets for work of a literary character, sold at 5 to 20 cents a copy with subscription rates in proportion. It is interesting to note that these prices did not cover all the production and distribution costs, indicating that periodicals were dependent either upon advertising or upon patronage or both for survival. In particular, the device of subscription enabled wealthy supporters of periodicals to provide a subsidy and also to use the periodicals as a means of distributing views or information which were congenial to themselves. Most newspapers and periodicals were printed on their own small presses. By the beginning of the twentieth century the circulation of some Ottoman newspapers had reached 20,000 copies an issue; Egyptian papers had rather smaller circulations. In Iran, newspapers and periodicals were much slower to become established – the first newspaper dates from the 1850s and the principal journals in Persian were produced outside Iran in Istanbul, Cairo and Calcutta. The major outburst of publication occurred only after the 1906 Revolution. Before that date the largest circulation was less than 1000 and even after 1906 the circulations of individual titles did not rise much above 2000, although *Majlis*, which featured parliamentary debates,