CHAPTER - 2

Modern Arabic Literature: An Overview
Modern Arabic literature: An overview:

Modern Arabic literature is obviously the literature of the modern Arab world, and this is generally assumed to begin with the French campaign in Egypt in 1798. The date is significant, for it marks the dramatic opening of the Arab-world, which was then part of Ottoman Empire to the west, ultimately with momentous consequences for its political, economic, social and cultural development. For various reasons the renaissance of Arabic literature began to make itself felt in Egypt and Syria (which then included Lebanon), from which it spread slowly to the rest of the Arabs.

Modern Arabic literature: modern Arabic literature is but one manifestation of the general Arab awakening for which the stage was set by Bonaparte's dramatic invasion of Egypt in 1798. The decisive in its evolution has been that highly complex phenomenon known as the impact of the west. The two processes of democratization and secularization, the operation of which has set modern Arabic literature apart from its classical parent are part of this phenomenon: the first severed its relationship with the ruling institution; the second relaxed its ties with the religious establishment. Among the instruments of these and process of democratization and secularization, the printing press and the western-style university have played a major role. The printing press has encouraged the translation of foreign works and has facilitated the rise of journals in which (which has been most potent force in the development of straight-forward functional prose) and the cultivation of the modern literary essay; furthermore, it has established a relationship between the writers and the reading public which has affected the writers conception of himself, given him an important social function and relieved him of inconvenience of court patronage. The university as an institution of higher learning has become the centre of organized literary studies, whence new literary traditions and new critical theories are systematically disseminated: consequently the university has succeeded in relieving the religious institutions e.g; al-Azhar in Egypt, of the sole custodian ship of
Arabic, as a result literature has lost much of the Islamic tinge which colored in its classical times, and this tendency towards its secularization has been accelerated by one of the most powerful factors in the making of modern Arabic history, namely, nationalism, perhaps nothing is better illustrative of this tendency than the emergence of the Christian Arabs as active contributors to Arabic literature and the rise of Christian Lebanon as a major literary province whose enterprising emigrants gave impetus to the Egyptian renaissance in the nineteenth century and carried the Arabic literary tradition to its farthest geographical limits in the new world.

In addition to secularization and democratization, the most significant result of the impact has been the opening of the Arab mind to the direct influence of western literary art and literary theory, a chapter long overdue in the history of cultural encounters between the Arabs and the west. A new conception of literature has arisen which emphasize experience. New literary genres have been added to both prose and poetry, while the fruitful dialogue between artist and critic often united in one person, has kept the former conscious of the aesthetic foundations of his literary endeavours. But this modern literature has its problems; e.g. he Arabia itself with the classical associations and the modes of expression of which the poet has to wrestle, while the divorce between he spoken and the written language presents a problem not an insoluble one to the novelist and the dramatists in the composition of dialogue.

For Arabic prose it is the introduction of new literary genres that has been the west's' most valuable gift. The shortstory the novel and the dramas have all found competent practitioners in various parts of the Arab world.

Among the earliest pioneers was a Lebanese immigrant to the United States Khalil Gibran (Jibran Khalil Jibran) (d 1931) whose essays problems and short stories reveal the complex personality of a poet, painter and mystic. He profoundly influenced the literary taste and the fashion of his generation although he wrote his best known work the Prophet, in English. His
contemporary and friend, the prolific Mikhail Naima (Nu'ayma) (b.1889) is the other major figure in this Arab-American school a master essayist, short story writer and critic whose Gibran is the classic of all Arabic biographical literature. It is however in Egypt that prose literature has its foremost authors, where Taha Hussain (b. 1889) the doyen of Arabic letters has dominated the literary sense for the last half century. A versatile genius, blind from early childhood, he has functioned indefatigably as literary a literary a literary critic, a cultural catalyst, a prose stylist and a creative writer.

For Arabic he has fashioned a new prose style possessed of great expressiveness, flexibility and elegance, in which he wrote his autographical masterpiece al-Ayyam. In the field of dramatic literature, the short story and the novel, three other Egyptian writers Tawfiq al Haqim (b. 1898) Mahmud Taimur (b. 1894) and Najib Mahfuj (b. 1912) respectively, have distinguished themselves as masters of these literary genres. Rather to the west, the Arab occident has produced an author, the Tunisian Mahud al Masadi (b.1990) who has attained celebrity for his existentialist dramatic composition al-Sudd.

Modern Arabic poetry too has felt the full impact of the west, it has explored new periodical dimensions in order to emancipate itself from its bondage to rhyme and to constricting metrical system, and it has plumbed the depths of poetic experience in its attempt to win free from the embrace of traditional verbal craftsmanship. This new creature outburst was made possible by school of Revivalist poets who successfully rejuvenated Arabic poetry from within by exploiting its inner resources and drawing on the best elements in its classical tradition. They were headed by the heroic figure of poet. Mahmud Sami-al-Barudi (d. 1904), and it was another Egyptian Ahmad Shawki (d.1932) who incontestably became Revivalism's most brilliant representative and in a sense the greatest Arab poets of modern times, Shawki succeed in adding a new genre to Arabic poetry, although his dramas, e.g. Majnun Layla, are more remarkable for their lyric power than for their dramatic effect. In his diwan, al-Shawkiyyat, poetry often alternates with
verse but the accent of great poetry is always audible. There is nothing better than his best and he is at his best when he remembers contemporary events which has touched his sensibilities or recollects in tranquility the historic past which has moved him as a Muslim an ottoman, an Egyptian or an Arab, e.g. the fall of Adrianople 'Andalusas sister', the extinction of the caliphate the valley of the Nile the Alcazar of Grande and the sunset glory of Moorish Spain. Having performed its restorative and rejuvenating function, the poetry of Revivalist began to recede before the new waves which were breaking upon Arabic poetry from the west. The most powerful was the Romanticism, which in the thirties swept over the whole of the Arab world, both in its traditional centres in the East and in such newly revived and emergent literary provinces as Tunisia and Sudan which produced Abul Qasim al Shabbi (1909-34) and al Tijani al Bashir (1912-37). But it was the representative of symbolism who has been the most strikingly original among the parts of their new literary movements - Lebanon's Said Aql, a consummate literary artist with lustrous poetic style who has cut for the treasury of modern Arabic verse some of its most precious stones. All those poets however composed, composed in the classical idiom of Arabic metrical prosody, it was left to the youngest of the schools, the school of free verse to bring about the most revolutionary change in the history of Arabic poetry since Pre-Islamic times. A new prosodical form has been evolved, not necessarily a substitute for the traditionally measured and monopoly need verse but an alternative or complement which has endowed the automatically constituted Arabic poem with an organic structure and a subtler internal cadence, with the advent of verse, a new dawn may be said to have broken for Arabic poetry, and this has been Iraq's great achievement where a Pleiad whose bright stars included Abd-al Wahab al Bayati (b 1926) and Nazik al Malaika (b 1923) have successfully established Free-verse as a legitimate prosodical idiom and in so doing have probably determined the future course of Arabic poetry.
As a result of two world wars, a new Arab world has risen from the ashes of the old, extending to the Atlantic ocean. New literary provinces have come into existence such as Jordan, the Sudan and Libya while old ones have been resuscitated into new life as Arabia itself, the birthplace of Arabic poetry which has been rather silent since ummayad times when Arabic literature was still the literature of a people. And it is as such that it has re-emerged in the twentieth century, after it had been the literature of multi-racial society in medieval Islamic times.

Three Periods of development of modern Arabic literature:

The history of modern Arabic literature could be divided into three main periods, the first from 1834 to 1914, which may be termed as the age of Translations and Adaptation as well as Neo-classicism, the second is the interwar period, which may be described as the age of Romanticism and Nationalism; the third is from the end of world war II to the present, it embraces a wide variety of schools, approaches and styles, but may conveniently be called the Age of conflicting ideologies.

1) Translations, adaptations and Neo-Classicism:

The year 1834 is an important landmark, because it marks the publication of al- Thatawi's account of his trip to France, Takhlis-al-Ibriz-Ila-Takhlis Bariz. The book contains specimens of al Tahtawi's translation of French verse, perhaps the first to be undertaken in Arabic. Although they are of an indifferent quality and are much more adaptations than translations, nevertheless they are insofar as they signal the very beginning of the process of introduction to and assimilation of western literature. In his account al-Tahtawi tells us that during his mission in Paris he read works by Racine, Voltaire, Rousseau and Motes quieu, amongst other things. It is true that his major literary translation of Fenelon's Telemague was to appear much later (1867); nevertheless it was during his stay in Paris that he studied the art of translation, what he called Fann al-Tayamah, and according to him he translated twelve works (obviously technological and
historical rather than literary). After his return he occupied the position of head of the newly created translation Bureau which produced a large number of distinguished translators of literature. In 1835 the anonymous translation of Robinson Crusoe was published in Malta.

Equally 1914 is an appropriate date to end this first period, for around that date significant works appeared in which Arab authors seemed to go beyond the stage of translation or adaptations, revealing their mastery or near-mastery of the imported literary forms namely Haykal's novel Zaynab and Ibrahim Ramzi's comedy Dakhul al Hamman (Admission to the Baths) and his historical drama Abtal al Mansurah (The Heroes of Mansurah).

The early period witnessed the Arabic printing press, which not made more available the Arabic classics to which authors turned for inspiration in an attempt to assert their identity in the face of external danger, but also produced increasing number of governmental and more importantly for our purpose, nongovernmental periodicals of a general cultural nature in which early translations adaptations and imitation of western fiction were published. They catered for a new type of reader, the product of missionary institutions in Syria or Ismail's new more secular type of school, a reader who was not deeply grounded in the Arabic classics but who sought entertainment in a simpler and more direct Arabic style than that provided a forum for political activist and religious and social reformers, resulting in the birth of development of the modern Essay form the rather crude and informative attempts in official and semi-governmental periodicals made by the pioneer generation of al-Tahtawis, to the more powerful and impassioned work of politically committed Egyptian and Syrian Essayists, mostly the disciples of al-Afghani, who published their articles in for example, al - Ahram, under the influence of Muhammad 'Abduhu they sought to express their views in a less ornate style, a sinewy prose, relatively free from the artificialities of baa. These include Adib Ishaq, Salim al-Naqqash, Abdullah Nadim, Muhammad Uthman Jalal, Muhammad Abduhu himself, Ibrahim al Muwailihi and Abd
al-Rahman Kawakibi. Their work was further developed under British occupation by Ali Yusuf in the conservative al-Muyyad Mustaga Kamil in al-Liwa, the organ of the Nationalist party, and particularly Ahmed Lutfi Al-Sayyid (1872-1963) in al-Jaridah, the mouth piece of ummah party which represented the more liberal Arab intellectuals and stood for intelligent westernization, rationality and scientific attitude in education and social reform. Lutfi al-Sayyid’s thoughtful essays, in which he stated his responsible, enlightened secular, liberal and patriotic position, earned him the little of Ustadh al-Jil (The Master/Mentor of the generation) and through al-Jaridah many of the leading writers and essayists found their way to public; 'Abd al-Rahman Shukri, Abd al- 'Aziz al-Bishri, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad al-Siba-i, 'Abd al-Hamid Hamdi, Muhammad Hussain Haykal, 'Taha Hussain, al-Mazini, al-Aqqad, Mustafa Abd al-Raziq and Salamah Musa as well as woman essayists like Labibah Hashim, Nabawiyyah Musa and Malek Hifni Nasif. In the hands of some of these writers particularly al Mazini and Taha Husayn, it be said that the essay had attained its most elegant form.

During this period a close connection between journalism and serious literature was established to the extent that toward the end of it we find not only Qasidas by major poets and short stories but novels, such as Jurji Zaidan’s appearing (serially) in the papers. In fact this connection was only strengthened in later periods leading novelist and even literary critics (such as Taha Hussayn) first published their works in newspapers. Even today Najib Mahfouz’s novel appear in instalments, in Ahram and the literary page of a newspaper is still regarded as one of it distinguishing feature and valuable asset, no doubt this also due to the fact that it has been extremely difficult for a modern Arab writer to live on the royalties of his books alone hence the need to have another regular job which often levels to be journalism, something that suits newspaper proprietors because having a distinguished author on their staff increases the circulation of their papers. However this close link between literature and journalism proved to be a
mixed blessing, for while on the whole of it helped to raise the standard of journalistic writing, often it contributed to the superficiality of some of the literature published.

2) Romanticism and Nationalism:

It is not surprising that the period between the two world war was the age of Romanticism and Nationalism; the Great War resulted in the dissolution of the ottoman Empire and the placing of its remaining Arab Province under British and French mandate. Egypt already under British occupation was declared a Protectorate in 1914. The sense of nationalist feeling erupted in a series of major revolts first in Egypt (1919), then in Iraq (1920) and Syria (1925) the search for specifically Egyptian literature and for the Egyptian identity was a slogan of many authors in Egypt especially a group of young man associated with what became known as al-Madrat oh al-Hadithah (The New School) such as Mahmud Tahir Lasin, and the Taimur brothers (Muhammad and Mahmud) who later distinguished themselves both in fiction and in drama. Related to this is the call for the use of Egyptian colloquial at least in dialogue, the emphasis on the Pharaonic past of Egypt by writers such as Haykal and al Hakim is paralleled to relate to the Phoenician civilization expressed by said Al Aql in Lebanon

This is the period in which Arab countries tried to shake of foreign domination and attain statehood. In Egypt attempts were made by, for example, Jal al Harb to establish national industry and banking. The desire to achieve progress and modernity (which means westernization) was keenly felt and this was entailed a critical and at times rejectionist stance to traditional values. In the wake of the Caliphate in Istanbul in 1924, two famous debate took place as a result of the publication of two revolutionary books; Ali - Abdul Raziq's al-Islam wa usul al Hukm (Islam and the Principles of the government; 1925) in which he argued that caliphate is not an integral part of Islam, and Taha Hussainis Fil shir al-Jahili (on pre Islamic poetry, 1926) which cast doubt on the authenticity of pre Islamic Poetry and the
historical veracity of certain allusion on the Koran. The former caused its
author to be expelled from the body of ulema while the later cost Taha
Hussain his Job and brought about calls for his trials and imprisonment. In
literary criticism several iconoclastic works appeared such as the Egyptians al
- Aqqad and al-Mazini's al - Diwan (1921) and the Mahjari Mikhail
Nuaymaya's al Ghirabal (1923), and the Tunisian al-Shiabbis al Khayal
al-Shirind al-Arab (The Arab poetic imagination; 1920). Other considerations
apart it, was quite natural for Arab writers particularly poets, to turn for their
inspiration to European Romanticism, which was a literature of revolt. Unlike
classicism which with its stress on polish and good form is an expression of a
fairly stable culture in which here is a common agreement on fundamental
issues. Romanticism is a product of a society which is at odds with itself and
which the individual Questions the relevance of traditional values. As I have
tried to show in my critical introduction to modern Arabic (1975) since the
traditional Arab conception of literature shares many of the fundamental
assumptions of European classicism, it was understandable that when the
desire to break with their past and enter the modern world was genuinely felt,
Arab writers found in European Romanticism, which was professionally
anti-classical, the assumptions and ideals which sums to them to fulfill
adequately their own needs. It must be emphasized however, that the Arab
Romantics, whether in the Arab East or in Americas, were not simply irritating
western posters. The heightened sense of individuality, the ignoring feeling of
social and cultural change; the political malaise the occasional; awareness of
loss of direction and of being strangers in an unfamiliar universe were one of
way or another facts of Arab existence for some time. Nor were the Arab
Romantics were dreamers inhabiting and ivory tower; many were politically
committed nationalist and they were keenly aware of the ills of the society.

The role of Journalism grew more important during the period as a
result of the rise of these political parties in Egypt which tried to enlist the
help of distinguished writers in their partisan daily or weekly newspapers such
as siyasiyah al usueyyah which published Taha Hussain's al-Bishri and Muhammad Hussain Haykal's al Balagh al Usbu in which al Aqqad's articles appeared literary periodicals (long and short lived). Also appeared such as Abu Shadi's Apollo (1932-1934), Ahmad Hasan as Zayyat's al Risala (1933-1952) and Ahmad Amin's al Thaqafa (1939-1952). All of which appeared in Cairo. In Damascus al-Rabnitah -al Adabiyah (1921-1922) was published while Beirut saw al-Amali (1938-1921), al Makthuf (1936-47) and al Adib 1942 among others.

3) **Recoil from Romanticism and rise of conflicting ideologies:**

After the Second World War Arabic literature indeed the whole of the Arab world, entered a new phase. While Romanticism was discredited, political commitment increased and competition grew fierce between closing loyalties and ideologies, against a background of internal and external change.

In the aftermath of the war Britain and France ceased to be the dominant foreign powers in the area, their roles were gradually assumed albeit in a different form, by America and the Soviet Union which unlike Britain and France were not simply two rival super powers with imperialist ambitions, but stood for opposite ideologies. This no doubt contributed to the polarization of the Arab states and intellectuals within the same sate. But what proved to be the most important single external development for the Arab world was obviously the creation of Israel in 1948. And the series of Arab Israeli wars which ensued and which generally ended in frustration and bitter disappointment and helped to draw Arab attitudes to the outside world. The impact of this upon Arabic literature both prose and poetry has been overwhelming.

The Second World War accelerated this process of independence of Arab states, and the League of Arab states were formed in 1945. Some of the energy of resistance against the external enemy was therefore directed at the enemy within war was waged on the privileged communities and feudal
rich who had collaborated with the foreign occupier, or the ruling elites who in opinion of the people were guilty of corruption and mismanagement. The corruption and mismanagement was glaringly evident in the disastrous defeat of the Arab armies in the first Arab Israeli war of 1948, in which some Arab troops were fighting with the defective arms supplied to them by their own government. In Egypt the disillusionment with the short-lived democratic experiment and with the performance of political parties' coincide with the rapid growth of an educated urban middle class suffering from the result of the inflation caused by the war and the inevitable profiteering that ensued. The gap between the rich and poor, particularly the masses of destitute who migrated from the countryside in search of meager living in over crowded cities became wider than ever, thus giving rise to popular movements and mass demonstrations in which students (and workers) figured prominently, with the failure of the liberal democratic experiment, the populace looked for salvation either to the extreme right (Muslim Brotherhood or to the extreme (Left Marxism).

The need for literature to promote socialists values was reiterated by the radical Egyptian thinker Salma Musa (1887-1958), who fell under the influence of Fabian society and who continued the tradition of the early Lebanese secularizers such as shibli Shamayyil. In 1929, he published his progressive review of al-Majallah al-Jadidah, which advocated the adoption of the scientific attitude to life and society and demanded that literature should be written for the people about the problems of the people and in a language that the people could understand Salmah Musa's ideas found response in many distinguished critics and writers such as Luwis Awad and Najib Mahfuz, other leftist magazines appeared in Arab world for example al-Talib (1935) in Damascus and al-Tariq (1941) in Beirut. Marxist ideas were propagated by Umar Fakhuri in Damascus and Raif Khuri (1912-1967) in Lebanon. During the war years young intellectuals from Egypt and other Arab countries became increasingly interested in Marxist philosophy as favourable
information about the soviet regime became the more available in the cultural centers of the Middle East, since Russia was one of the allies. Influenced by Marxist English literary criticism, Luwis Awad (1914-90) published his Marxist interpretation of leading English writers in his articles in Taha Hussayn’s distinguished review al-Katib al-Misri (1945). In 1945 the more influential critic Muhammad Mundur (1907-1965) gave up his academic career and engaged in active leftist politics, and after the 1952 revolution became editor of Arabic soviet cultural periodical al-Sharq, supporting the cause of socialist realism at least in a moderate form. A stream of novels of angry social protest began to pour out in 1944; heavily documented works which describe in great detail the misery and deprivation of Egyptian urban life, adding social injustice and class struggle to national independence as political themes. The pursuit of social realism in fiction was not confined to the younger generation of Adil Kamil and Najib Mahfouz, but can be found in the work of older generation of Yahya Haqqi and Taha Hussayn in Egypt.

The early 1950s witnessed the eruption of noisy debates about commitment in literature, in which leading critics and writers young and old alike, took part. The Arabic word for commitment, Iltizam obviously a translation of Jean-Paul, saree’s engagement used in his articles first published in Les Temps Moderns, later collected in his Que'st ce que la literature (1948) became an essential part of the vocabulary of literary criticism soon after its first appearance on the literary science around 1950. Its meaning was diffuse, to be sure sometimes it means the adoptions of a Marxist stand at other time existentialist position but at all times it denoted at least a certain measure of nationalism, Arab or otherwise. In other words, it emphasized the need for a writer to have a massage. This need was explicitly expressed in the manifesto like editorial note to the first volume of Suhayl-Idris' Beirut monthly periodical al-Adab (January 1953), which more than any other helped to determine the course of modern Arabic literature by publication of both creative work and criticism and evaluation of
contemporary literature.

August 1954 one contributor to the Arab wrote that the idea of committed literature dominates the Arab world now. In the same year a controversy arose in Cairo newspapers about the relation of form and content in literature in which the older generation of Taha Hussayn and al Aqqad were vehemently opposed by the younger Mahmud Amin al-Alim and Abd al-Azim Anis who later published their Marxist contribution Beirut (1955) in an influential book Fil. Tahaqafa al-Misrriyah (on Egyptian culture) with an introduction by the distinguished Lebanese Marxist critic Hussayn Muruwwah the author of Qadaya adabiyyah (Literary issue 1956). In 1955 a celebrated formal debate was held in Beirut between Taha Hussayan and Raif Khuri on the subject Does the writer write for the elite or general public? The debate was really about the issue of commitment and the text was published in full in al-Adib (May 1955).

Against the background the recoil from Romanticism in modern Arabic literature must be seen. The reaction was prompted by growing painful awareness of the harsh political and social realities of the Arab world; and awareness that was later reinforced be subsequent development ranging from, horrors of Arab, Israel war the plight of the Palestinians, oppressive Arab regimes the Iran- Iraq war to inter-Arab strife and the civil war in the Lebanon. The early success of the 1952 army revolution and the rise of Nasserism gave boost to Arab nationalism and created a mood of euphoria and optimism one expression of this nationalistic pride and self confidence was the hectic search for autonomous or indigenous Arab art forms such as the specifically Arab art forms such as the specifically Arab or Egyptian or Moroccan theatre, which swept all over the Arab-countries, optimism, however turned into bitterness when the dream of Arab unity was shattered civil liberties were crushed by totalitarian régimes and Arab suffered the disastrous defeat 1967. Despite the illusioment and setbacks the search continues in some quarters for cultural autonomy, for independent narrative
and dramatic art forms for authentic Arab or more specifically Islamic value. This undertaken even by those who, like Hasan Hanafi, themselves recovered western intellectual or philosophical training and therefore employ western categories in their search and in their rejection of the west a rejection which may in some measure be explained by the generally unsympathetic it not at times downright hostile attitude adopted towards the Arabs in their various conflicts by the western powers, in particular by the united states.

Indeed the limited Arab victory of 1973, revealed in the destruction of the Bar Lev line and the crossing of the Suez Canal may have restored some of the Arab dignity, but it coincided with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which may not be unrelated to this search for total cultural independence by more moderate Arab or Muslim intellectuals. Yet it is a mark of the complexity of the current Arab cultural scence that several Arab intellectuals have at the same time not been immune to the allure of the latest western fashions of structuralism, post structuralism and deconstruction.

Obviously the dates suggested here for the three periods of development of modern Arabic literature do not constitute sharp lines of demarcation, since there is considerable overlap between the periods. Furthermore, although nearly every Arab State at present boasts or more practically identical looking glossy cultural or literary reviews, not all the Arab States have developed at the same rate; for instance the states of North Africa and the Arabian peninsula began to make their distinct literary contribution only sometime after the second world war. However it is to be hoped that these dates are useful pointers. But before the survey of modern Arabic literature begins, it may be helpful.

References: