

# The Theme of Encounter between East and West in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Arabic Literature

(1935-1966)

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Professional Biography

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## Abstract

The present article aims to discuss the theme of encounter between East and West and the issue of cultural confrontation in the works of the outstanding writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1935-1966) Arabic Literature, such as Taha Hussein, Yahya Haqqi, Suhayl Idris and Tayeb Salih.

**Keywords:** *Arabic Literature, Encounter between East and West.*

East and West are considered by culture, literature and philosophy as the two essentially different types of worldviews and social structures. The history of the interest towards the East-west issue counts a few centuries of the polemics among the intellectual. This interest particularly increased during the last few decades. The East-west problematic has been studied by many academic centres during which important social and cultural theories have been formulated.

Against the background of globalization and increased migration the dialogue between civilizations and sharing between cultures as much as their synthesis become more and more significant. A chance for a dialogue, finding a common language between these two radically different eastern and western, Muslim and Christian regions is first of all dictated by political urgency. Yet, it has also moved from social sciences into the Humanities and found a fertile soil in literature. The encounter between East and West, their mutual awareness of each other always enjoyed a special interest on the part of the European as well as eastern thinkers.

The scope of our interest embraces the opposition between the Arabic East and the European West commonly called the clash of civilizations [Huntington, 1997: 1-2]. In the era of colonization, the issues involved in the meeting of the two completely different worlds and their cultural confrontation appear with an extended scope in literary texts. European as well as eastern (Arabic) literary discourse (where the theme of the encounter between East and West is highlighted) is in fact a result of the western colonial politics, which created the whole system of the way Europe looked at the Arab world, how it produced wrong stereotypes, and therefore tried to excuse its imperial policy, to which the eastern side naturally responded adequately, the desire for distinguishing one's own identity also

increased. The East also established certain stereotypes about the western civilization. The self-portrait of the East as a cultural space in modern Arabic literature was shaped against the hostile image. The system of the clearly polarized markers signifying the auto-images and hetero-images of east-west space were shaped within the literary discourse. Moreover, some Arabic literary texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned into a certain kind of revenge weapons in the postcolonial epoch.

The motif of cultural confrontation in most cases is raised by those writers who have experienced themselves the attempt of overcoming the barrier between the two worlds. The Arab intellectuals sent to Europe with different missions dedicated large part of their works to the relationship between East and West. Therefore, they are usually considered as the protagonists of their literary works whether consciously or unconsciously.

Interesting analogies emerge in the novels that focus on the encounter between East and West, which enable the scholars to identify the certain literary universals of the presented Arabic literature. Novels have similar contents: the main character is in the centre of the encounter between East and West. He is raised in a traditional Muslim family. He goes to pursue his studies in Europe, where he goes through a spiritual crisis as a result of cultural shock brought by his encounter with western values. The problem of cultural identity is posed in a rather acute way. He feels split, he transforms and after many years he returns to his home country changed, Yet, after embracing European civilization and its cultural traditions he himself feels alienated and the crisis of his identity increases even further. The main part in the formation of the main character is played by a European woman as well as an Eastern one. The metaphor of a loving relationship is turned into a certain norm in these novels – an eastern man vacillates between the two women, who symbolize the two different cultures. The relationship with a western lady lets him enter her culture, yet, later, when he returns to his homeland, he strives to reintegrate with eastern society by marrying a local woman. Some novels (e.g. *Adib*, or *Season of Migration to the North*) reveal very well the dualism taking place inside the author's mind who cannot see only one way of solving the problem, so he employs a certain artistic method and offers the reader a development of two conceptual lines, one of which is radical, the other one – more moderate. The relationship with the West ends tragically for one character, while the other returns to his homeland without an identity crisis.

The present article discusses the following novels in a chronological order:

1. *Adib* by Taha Hussein (1935)
2. *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* by Yahya Haqqi (1944)
3. *The Latin Quarter* by Suhayl Idris (1953)
4. *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih (1966)

The group of Arabic literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of east-west interaction also includes two other significant texts: *Sparrow from East* By Tawfiq el-Hakim (1938) and *Doctor Ibrahim* by Zu Al-Nun Ayyub (1939). Since our scholarship has already dedicated a

number of academic publications to the latter works, this article will not spend more time on discussing them.<sup>1</sup>

An Egyptian writer and a thinker **Taha Hussein** (1889–1973) is one of the most influential key figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arabic Modernism. He was one of the pioneers of the first decade of the century who acquired his education first at the University in Cairo and then pursued his studies in France that greatly influenced the further formation of his worldview. Taha Hussein was a supporter of cultural openness towards the West that would allow the Egyptians to learn the secrets of progress. Taha Hussein considered Egypt and Europe in one context as the product of the pan-Mediterranean culture. In his opinion, European civilization derives from the Egyptian as well as ancient Greek-based civilisations and Islam, as did Christianity too, and experienced the influence of Greek Philosophy. The reign of Ottomans however, encouraged the progress in Europe, while Egypt stayed isolated. Taha Hussein is against the European hegemony, yet at the same time he speaks of the need for adopting the model of European education. The author inspired young people by teaching them that it is not that they should transform and change into being European but they should find out who they really are. [El-Enany, 2006: 55-56].

*Adib* ("أديب") by Taha Hussein was published in 1935. The author uses an artistic method for dealing with the theme of east-west encounters only in this work. Two main lines develop in this novel, which is mainly narrated in an epistolary form. The main characters – the protagonist and the narrator follow the same path. They both go to Paris from Egypt funded by scholarship. They share their experience with each other in writing. Encounter with the modern European civilization influences the two main characters. Their problem is to define the cultural identity while facing that foreign civilization, which conditioned the formation of their worldview and made them incompatible with the traditional way of life. Different contradictory views emerge in the novel over the protagonist's journey to the West. In one way it is the mother of Adib, the main character who personalizes the old, traditional attitude and she objects to her son's going to Europe; on the other hand, there is Adib himself who longs to go and study in Europe and does not spare anything for achieving his goal. He even divorces his wife without regret in order to find himself in his dream world.

Arab traditional culture is almost always presented by female origin in Arabic novels regarding the theme of east-west encounter. This is a symbol, which Taha Hussein personified by the image of the mother and Egyptian wife in his *Adib*. The same image is repeated later in different variations in almost all the Arabic novels. It is noteworthy that Taha Hussein presents the mother as the one who is against her son's leaving for Europe. It is exactly the mother who does not want to let her son go from his native land to a foreign country. In the mentioned novel, Taha Hussein emphasizes the cultural isolation of Egypt by implying to the stereotypes about the world abroad that were established within the local

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<sup>1</sup> See in greater length: 1. Academic journal of the Faculty of Humanities of Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University *Studies in the Humanities, Annual*, N5, 2016, pp. 233-266.

2. Proceedings of the International Conference *Modern interdisciplinarity and the way of thinking in the Humanities*, Akaki Tsereteli Kutaisi State University, 2015, pp.43–50.

3. TSU, Shota Rustaveli Institute of Literature, Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Symposium *National Literatures and the Process of Cultural Globalization*, Part 2, Tbilisi, 2015, pp. 389-397.

traditional society, which sees the departure of a child abroad as dangerous and undesirable. Adib's demonstrates his attitude to both his own and European cultures in one of his letters, which he sent to the narrator:

“go to the Pyramids... Go down to the depths of the large pyramid... You will feel like you are suffocating, you will be sweating and will think that you carry the weight of this great and glorious building, which is about to squash you. Then go up from the depth of the pyramid and feel some fresh air. Be aware that living in Egypt is like being in the depth of the pyramid, while living in Paris feels like coming out of it”[حسين, 1998:155].

The other main line of the novel, which means the re-adaptation of the main character with his native culture after having lived in the West drops in the case of Adib. The moment arrives when Adib starts feeling alienated in a western environment. In spite of the fact that he adopted European culture, he failed to integrate in it and besides, he also parted with his own roots that eventually led the protagonist to a nervous breakdown. In the case of the narrator though, the crisis of identity is overcome since he does not part with his native roots, tries to adopt virtues from other cultures and thus returns to his own.

Therefore, Taha Hussein develops in his novel the idea that it is not necessary to change and lose one's own identity, to reject things of one's own and blindly follow the others, he is for moderation and modernization with the preservation of identity.

**Yahya Haqqi** (1905-1992) is the famous Egyptian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the founders of the genre of novella in the Egyptian prose. His shorter novel *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* not only a literary presents the traditional tension between East and West but it also stands out by the unique writing technique by which the writer incarnates his vision and constructs the rationale of the work. The writer skilfully presents those images that contradict in terms of East and West, material and spiritual, the lethargic state of people and an irresistible desire for motion and dynamism [Gardavadze, 2007:106-112].

The main character of the novel – Ismail is raised in a traditional Muslim family where religious feasts, superstitions and folk traditions become part of his life. Ismail is sent to study in England. 7 years later he comes back completely changed. After having embraced the European civilization and cultural traditions, the educated and promising ophthalmologist feels alienated in his homeland. For emphasizing Ismail's transformation the writer once again employs the metaphor of loving relationship. The most significant part in describing the main character is played by Mary, the European colleague of Ismail. Mary symbolizes western culture; their relationship is paired up in contrasts. Western civilization here appears as active, initiating, while eastern culture stands as a recipient of action, like someone who obeys and learns. Mary liberates Ismail from traditionalism, sentimentalism, she gives him confidence in himself and in science. As a result, Ismail loses his religious faith that is closely linked with his cultural values. Such a change causes Ismail's spiritual crisis: “His soul would moan and cringe under the blows of her axe. He would feel her words cutting into the living ligaments from which he fed when in contact with those around him. One day he woke up to find that his spirit was in ruins, not a single stone resting on another. Religion became for

him a fable that had been invented in order to keep the masses in control...” [New Translations, 2009:93].

Ismail's second crisis starts after his going back to his homeland. The educated ophthalmologist confronts people's faith and traditions after his return to Egypt. The locals believe that the oil from the lamp of the mosque of Umm Hashim (which is the same as Saida Zeinab) miraculously cures eyesight. When Ismail sees how his mother pours the drops of the oil from the lamp of Umm Hashim into the eyes of Ismail's cousin and his fiancée Phatima Nabavia hoping to cure her eyes, he becomes outraged and breaks the lamp in the mosque. After surviving the rage of the crowd the hero decides to treat his fiancée himself. He tries in vain until he uses the oil in the lamp himself.

Therefore, Ismail fell in spirit when he turned away from his roots, yet, the light of faith rescued him from his confusion in the end: “O light, where have you been all this time? Welcome back! The veil that had descended over my heart and eyes has been lifted” [New Translations, 2009:104]. Ismail will guess that knowledge and science need faith, which in the novel is symbolized by the oil in the lamp. The main character harmonizes eastern and western values. Therefore Yahya Haqqi emphasizes the spiritual side of the confrontation shown in the spiritual crisis of Ismail and ends with the return of the main character to his religious values.

Lebanese writer Suhayl Idris presents the socio-psychological side of cultural clash. His novel *The Latin Quarter* is considered as one of the classical example of presenting cultural clash in Arabic Literature [El-Enany, 2006:82]. Suhayl Idris also employs the traditional metaphor of loving relationship. East is presented by an Arab man, while Europe is symbolized by an European woman. The narrator/protagonist accompanied by two friends is going from Beirut to Paris for his viva in literature. Paris for the protagonist as well as other Arab students living in Paris, is identified with freedom: “As if they got rid of the burden of self-restraint, which overwhelmed them in their own country and felt that they were called to live a life of unrestrained freedom in Paris. They followed this call with the whole of their being and left behind the shackles of the past” [إدریس, 2001:19]. Since the protagonist parts with his cultural environment – the East, his is going through a difficult time. The character is searching his own self after his contact with the West. He is vacillating between the two cultures, is in constant struggle against his inner voice: “Stop gabbling! You forget again that you are in Paris! Tear out your Beirut from your heart, kill it and bury it! Accept Paris the way it is, look at it a bit longer and it will not delay to come inside your heart and settle in there” [إدریس, 2001:22].

The novel shows throughout how the Arab students in Paris are attracted to western women. The protagonist is irritated by this, he wants to run away from all this and find a shelter in the East. He compares the freedom of French ladies to the reserved nature of his eastern beloved Nahida, which both fascinates and restrains him. The protagonist is in an inner conflict with the two incompatible set of moral standards.

After the initial disappointment, the protagonist finds his dream woman – Janine, who plays an important role in the process of his transformation. The author describes his relationship with the French woman as perfect love that permeates his soul and body, yet, even such a

perfect love cannot endure the strain of traditionalism. The mother of the protagonist appears throughout the whole novel as the defender of eastern traditions. It is precisely his mother that becomes the reason for the main character's breaking up with Janine. The mother symbolizes eastern culture, which is so deeply rooted in the consciousness of the protagonist and which he cannot escape. The words of the mother "shook the strings of her son's soul", cultural values made the individual will be governed by the will of the family and society. As a result the protagonist feels polarized. He obeys his mother and writes a letter of rejection to Janine while at the same time he is in an inner conflict with himself.

After going back to Paris, the protagonist liberates from the chains of tradition, he desperately tries to make peace with Janine. He asks her to marry him and he is willing to go to his homeland together with her. Yet, the latter, in spite of her love for him, writes a letter of refusal to her beloved and disappears from his life forever. Janine's letter reveals clearly the end of the main character's searching, he is already transformed and returns to his society with a resumed status:

"I met someone yesterday, who I had never *met before*... I discovered that your world, the one you dream about is broader and greater, in which a person like me can only feel insecure. You are just starting to fight, while I am done ... Yesterday I read in your eyes a great willingness to resist and fight. You are a new person who knows what he wants and goes for it with faith. You found your soul, while I have just lost it... Go ahead, my beloved, do not look back, my love for you will give me strength. This will be enough for me to the end of my life. Leave me on my way and you, my Arab sweetheart, go back to your far east that is expecting you and needs the fighters like you" [إدریس, 2001:281-282].

Suhail Idris does not specify what kind of struggle is expecting the protagonist. Yet, the idea of Arab nationalism, independence and unity dominates in the novel. So does the issue of individualism and the desire of liberation from the influence of tradition. The protagonist discovers that he needs an individual freedom; he goes back to his society and is ready to change social norms. "Everything starts now" – This phrase ends the novel [إدریس, 2001:285].

A Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih presents a political side of cultural clash. He emphasizes more than the others the problem of cultural identity produced as a result of the clash between the eastern and western cultural values. It is obvious that postcolonial epoch is more aggressively charged with politics than it was in the period of colonialism.

Salih belongs to the group of the Arab writers carrying "two cultures". The motif of cultural confrontation is often presented as a gender based conflict. A woman is white and a man is black. The woman is European and the man is of an African origin. There is confrontation between the two world behind these relationships. The problem is dramatized even further in the novel *Season of Migration to the North*, which brought the universal recognition to the author [Grdzeldze, 2009:107-108]. The novel, since the day of its publication (1966) always enjoyed a special interest among the European, as well as eastern critics. The novel shows the results of the British colonial regime in Sudan. This specific historical situation challenged the local intellectuals, who found themselves split between the Afro-Arabic and European cultures [Wielandt, 1981: 487]. The narrator in the novel and Mustafa Sayd are the

main characters of the novel. Here the two almost parallel storylines develop. The narrator goes back to his home village in Sudan after the 7 years he spent in England acquiring his university education. One man among the villagers attracts everybody's attention – he is referred to as “a stranger”, whose name is Mustafa Sayd. In spite of the fact that Mustafa enjoys an enormous respect among the villagers, the narrator starts questioning his personality. Due to the narrator's curiosity the reader gets introduced to his past life in England. One of the key issues of the novel is Mustafa's relationship with English ladies: He tried to seduce them for 30 years and eventually led them to suicides, in the end he spent 7 years in prison for murdering his English wife. Many paragraphs show that the relationship with the English women for Mustafa Sayd is a certain kind of revenge against European violence. Mustafa compares his victim, the British lady to a city that he conquers and takes under his control. It is interesting that the European woman, who symbolizes the West in the novel, is naive and she is a victim, while East is presented by a man, who is a conqueror and a coloniser. Mustafa feels that the voice that seductively invites and entraps the victims is in fact not his, but it is the “disease” of European violence, which Europe gave to Africa earlier or the “poison” injected into the veins of the history by the Europeans. In the end, Mustafa returns to Sudan and marries a local woman, he goes back to his geographic origins, yet, this only increases the gap between his split personality and divides him in two contrasting parts. Mustafa's relationship with the West ends tragically. He failed to find his own self either in the West or in the East, since even in his homeland Mustafa is a stranger to the locals. Eventually he disappears in Nile.

Unlike Mustafa, the narrator is struggling for self-identification. He tries to adopt good things from the other culture while remaining attached to his native roots at the same time. The emotional balance of the narrator breaks throughout this struggle [صالح, 1997: 156-154], as it happened in Mustafa's case. He also gets inside the river, but unlike Mustafa, he leaves the battlefield with victory. The narrator chooses life [Elad-Bouskila, 1998: 77-78]. For him, the process of individualization and “returning to his own cultural roots” ended successfully [Siddiq, 2003: 104].

In spite of the fact that the thematic, structural and stylistic analogies of the two main characters in the novel present Mustafa as the alter-ego of the narrator; the clash of civilizations has totally different impacts on the two. This is partly caused by their different personal attitudes and also by the fact that they represent different generations and therefore, they have different experiences of relating to Great Britain. Mustafa went to Oxford when England exercised full power over Sudan. The narrator completed his studies in England 30 years later, when the British colonialism in Sudan had ended and the attitude to British civilization in his country changed: for the majority of the Sudanese people it turned into a component of their intellectual worldview (Wielandt, 1981:493). Unlike the revenge campaign carried out by Mustafa Sayd, the narrator rejects the principle of violence. It shows from the fact that he did not commit any crime during his stay in England, but also, in the end of the novel he saves the English room in Mustafa's house from burning. This room symbolizes the European side of Mustafa's personality, created by European colonialism.

Burning of the room would symbolically continue the chain of violence of the European colonialists. The narrator however, believes that the chain has to break.

Thus, on the example of the four discussed novels in this article, it is possible to highlight several specific features characteristic to the literary works created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arabic prose on the theme of east-west relationships.

1. Eastern and western cultural spaces are strictly separated in the mentioned novels. The standing of the main character on the verge between these spaces is marked with vacillation, spiritual crisis and the hardships that the characters went through between the two spaces. Eventually, the change of cultural mentality “I” is made more tolerant to “the other” and acquires a certain hybrid identity that harmonizes eastern and western values. In spite of the fact that the presented novels are focused on the open confrontation between eastern (Arab-Islamic) and western (European) cultures and on the basis of the comparison the emphasis is made by the authors on the priority of autochthonic culture, the main characters of all the four novels entrapped in the midst of cultural dialogue still become the bearers of hybridised cultural identity on their difficult and twisted ways of life between the two cultural spaces.

2. The storylines of the literary works are inseparably linked with the past, with the own heritage. The crisis of the main character is not to be overcome while he has broken the links with his native space. In this case a writer employs the strategy of building another storyline, which is more moderate compared with the first one and is inclined towards cultural synthesis.

3. All four authors confirm by their own lives being under the influence of European culture: European education, employment career in Europe, frequent travels between East and West naturally puts them under the cultural influence that is subconsciously reflected in their works. Moreover, an academic critique of such literary works sometimes is attributed to the genre of autobiography.

4. All four novels share the similar scenario – the main character goes to study in Europe that enables him to compare the two completely different cultures. Certain markers can be distinguished that spot the eastern and western spaces: East – traditional, spiritual, passive, surrendered to God, the West: free, materialistic, active, source of science and education. Journey from East to the West is necessarily linked with loving relationship. In this relationship a man personifies the East while the woman stands for the West; love is the language of their dialogue. It is true, that the dialogue and its language remains incomprehensible for both sides, but this relationship leaves an ineradicable trace on their personalities, it changes their identities and turns into that past, which defines the future.

Therefore, the theme of the east-west encounter in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arabic literature poses to be increasingly essential. The discussed texts cover the timeline between 1935-1966 and they raise the issue of the identity of the main character in the light of the encounter of two different cultures. The aim of the main character is to discover his own identity and use his western education for the benefit of his homeland. The main character of the Taha Huseyn’s novel fails to overcome the identity crisis, he breaks his ties with the East and gets “lost” in the West. The second storyline developed in the novel in the case of the narrator is more moderate. Yahya Haqqi in his *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* shows us the hard way of



development that the main character had to pass, which ended with the reconciliation between science and faith. Here the sharp confrontation is shown between eastern and western values and also the spiritual side of it. Suhayl Idris emphasized the socio-psychological aspects of the cultural confrontation. At the end of the hard road between the traditional East and liberated West the main character comes back to his own society transformed and renewed. Tayeb Salih unveils the political side of the cultural confrontation and develops two storylines side by side, from which one is radical and the other, more moderate. In the case of Mustafa, the relationship with Europe is nothing more than the weapon of revenge against the Colonial politics of Europe, but in the case of the narrator – it is the source of education.

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