

Chapter One

Self-colonialism, Originality and Arabic Minimalism

“To have been colonized was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved”. Edward Said

1. A Sense of Self-colonialism

The entire Arab world has constantly been undergoing decisive historical, political and cultural changes since the early 1950s, which have critically affected the development of modern Arabic literature. The explicit and implicit opposition against political authorities in almost all Arab world, demonstrated in many literary works and different kinds of media and which has become much more aggressive since the recent invasion of Iraq, recalls similar resistance to European and Western colonizers reflected in many literary genres all over the Arab world in the first half of the last century.¹ This trend started even before, at the very end of the 19th century, when Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819–1883) and Jūrjī Zaydān (1861–1914) expressed their passion for total detachment from the Ottoman Empire. As nationalists,² they started to “revive” Arab culture, values, mythological motifs, concepts, figures and heroes.³

- 1 For a well-elaborated study of this topic, see Hussein N. Kadhim, *The Poetics of Anti-Colonialism in the Arabic Qaṣīdah* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004): 1–130. “Iraqi literature, especially in its critically-disposed cultural focus, operates and has operated in constituting a consciousness which can be described as dissenting and rebellious; but its rebelliousness is enmeshed in a redemptive suffering that counteracts colonial and authoritarian claims to salvation and redemption [...]. Its deep redemptive suffering acts as an index of the dialectic relationship between culture and power [...]. In this culture and civilization, every action and expression displays a political stand”. Muhsin J. al-Mūsawī, *Reading Iraq Culture and Power in Conflict* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006): 143. al-Mūsawī reached this direct and bold conclusion after a well detailed, documented and comprehensive study of the Iraqi politics-poetics encounter throughout modern history—a conclusion that is certainly relevant to the Arabic minimalist story at large. In this study, al-Mūsawī makes it clear that resistance-suffering dyad of the Iraqi writers was almost the same under the Western colonial regime and Ṣaddām’s. In this sense, al-Mūsawī made no substantial differentiation between these two types of colonialism.
- 2 For details on the linkage between the emergence of nationalist ideologies and the rise of the novel in Egypt and other Arab countries, see Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880–1985* (New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004): 60–90.
- 3 Apart from the anti-colonial standpoint, modern Arab writers take advantage of these mythological motifs and figures “to enrich the artistic arsenal” of their literary works and “to build a bridge from the past to our own day”. Baian Rayhanova concludes her study of this topic: “some writers adapt an old myth or create their own parable, others merely sprinkle ancient elements into their modern narrative text. All of them, however, have a desire not only to enrich the artistic arsenal of modern Arabic prose but also to build a bridge from the past to our own day so that they maybe synthesize and thus expand the spiritual horizons of national life”. Baian Rayhanova, “Myth and Reality in Modern Arabic Prose”, in Barbara Michalka-Pikulski and Andrzej Pikulski, eds., *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam Proceedings of the 22nd Congress of L’union Europeenne Des Arabisants Et Islamisants* (Leuven: Peeters—Department Oosterse Studies, 2006): 201–202. For further details on the

“Governments are normally there in order to solve problems, but governments in most Arab states are themselves our problems. Their license to rule their peoples expired a long time ago!” This way a Palestinian writer has summarized the entire crisis in the Arab world. Adūnīs (‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd) (b. 1930) does not hesitate to put his finger on the heart of the problem. In a paper delivered lately at a conference entitled “Literature and Exile”, March 25–27, 2007 in Doha (Qatar), Adūnīs openly stated his belief that the political authorities in Arab states are much more aggressive and brutal than the former Western colonialists.⁴ “The post-independence state has proved to be more adamant than the colonialist in repression”.⁵ This is why many writers have to search for new narrative strategies by which they can “dupe or evade the censor”.⁶ The new colonialist, so to speak, is a native leader arising from the Arab peoples themselves. Most of these politicians, ruling Arab peoples for a long time by force, are far truer representatives of the Western colonialists than of their own people, as they themselves think of them.⁷

Some scholars, speaking of the post-colonial discourse in modern Arabic literature, implicitly and unconsciously assume a comprehensive termination of the colonial era, but a close look at many pieces of modern Arabic literature reveals a different image. Post-colonialism, as one may learn from the bitterness seeping out of modern Arabic literature, should refer strictly to the conditions and circumstances of the physical departure of the Western colonialist and his military image. As soon as the concept of post-colonialism had been coined in literary study, several related concepts started to appear in political, social, cultural, economic and even philosophical studies. Some of these terms are highly relevant

combination of myths and modern social and political concerns, see also Baian Rayhanova, “Mythological and Folkloric Motifs in Syrian Prose: The Short Stories of Zakariyya Tamir”, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* V (2003–2004): 11. On the “regressiveness to the past as a means of portraying contemporary problems”, see a brief comment in Barbara Michalka-Pikulska and Andrzej Pikulski, eds., *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam: Proceedings of the 22nd Congress of L’union Europeenne Des Arabisants Et Islamisants* (Leuven: Peeters—Department Oosterse Studies, 2006): 181; Rotraud Wielandt, “Mystical and Mythical Journeys in Two Novels by Jamāl alGhīṭānī”, in Angelika Neuwirth et al. eds., *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach* (Beirut Orient-Institut der DMG, 1999): 467–480. “Alongside the expression of personal experiences, since the beginning of the 1960s there has been a tendency among Arabic poets to combine figures and concepts from the Sufi tradition with their own social and political views. By conjoining their views with their mystical outlooks, contemporary poets have succeeded in expressing their ideas in a most innovative and original way. [...] The timing of the appearance of this type of social-mystical world-wide in both poetry and prose is apparently connected with the disappointment felt by Arab intellectuals with leftist world-views in the wake of the Arab political events and the revelation of Stalinist crimes in the mid-1950s”. Reuven Snir, *Religion, Mysticism and Modern Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006): 89–90.

- 4 See Adūnīs, “Makān Ākhar fī mā Warā’ al-Waṭan wal-Manfā” (Another Place beyond Homeland and Exile), *al-Hayāt* April 8 (2007). This is the very reason why many Arab writers “see themselves as actively committed to resisting neo-colonialism as well as political despotism at home”. Wail Hassan, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 33:1, (2002): 56.
- 5 For details on the term repression/suppression (Qam’) in Arabic literature and culture, see Jābir ‘Uṣfūr, *Muwājahat al-Irhāb Qirā’at fī al-Adab al-‘Arabi al-Mu’āṣir* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābi, 2003): 9–33.
- 6 Muḥsin J. al-Mūsawī, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003): 258.
- 7 Nazīh Abū Niḍāl attributes, in some way or another, all Arab crises, the failure to establish democratic states and the lack of allegiance to the state to Arab leaders themselves. For further details, see Nazīh Abū Niḍāl, *Adab al-Sujūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hadātha, 1981): 7–21.

to the study of modern Arabic literature, namely self-colonialism, neocolonialism, co-colonialism, re-colonialism and anti-colonialism⁸. One of the legacies of colonial and post-colonial discourse is a series of interrelated terms and concepts resulting from a strategy of dividing the entire universe into two conflicting poles: the West and the rest. This dichotomy has produced minor contradictory terms such as the self vs. the other, white vs. black, northern vs. southern, producer vs. consumer, rational vs. emotional, or central vs. marginal.⁹

The experience of being colonized therefore signified a great deal to regions and peoples of the world whose experience as dependents, subalterns, and subjects of the West did not end [...] when the last white policeman left and the last European flag came down. To have been colonized was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved. Poverty, dependency, underdevelopment, various pathologies of power and corruption, plus of course notable achievements in war, literacy, economic development: this mix of characteristics designated the colonized people who had freed themselves on one level but who remained victims of their past on another.¹⁰

Following Said's view in this article, the term 'postcolonialism' needs to be heavily revised or at least it should be reworded.¹¹ Barbara Harlow's allusion to the period of postcolonialism as neo-colonialism has, to my mind, great significance in redefining Arab states' conduct after independence.¹²

In colonized era "the first priority was to liberate it [the country] from the colonial forces [...]. When the enemy [the Western colonizer] that united many contradictory social interests

8 See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors", *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 205–225; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In *Other Worlds Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987); *The Post-Colonial Critic Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990); *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999); *The Post-Colonial Critic Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9 Marginalization is a key concept in many studies devoted to post-colonial discourse. See, for instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia", *Humanities in Society* 2:3 (Summer 1979): 201–22.

10 Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors", p. 207.

11 Said in his interesting article does not limit the sense of colonialism to the classic phase of European (Western) colonialism. "Thus the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posted as a categorically antithetical overlord. In other words, the world was still divided into betters and lessers, and if the category of lesser beings had widened to include a lot of new people as well as a new era, then so much the worse for them. Thus to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times". *Ibid.*, 207. Following Anne McClintock and Ella Shohat, Saree Makdisi has powerfully argued against the misleading term 'postcolonialism'. See his article, Saree Makdisi, "Postcolonial literature in a Neo-colonial World: Modern Arabic Culture and the End of Modernity", *Boundary 2*, 22:1 (1995): 112–114. Instead, he obviously adapts the term 'neocolonialism'. See also, Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonialism'", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84–98; Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Postcolonial", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 99–113.

12 Barbara Harlow, "Introduction to Kanafani's 'Thoughts on change and the 'Blind Language'", *Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics* 10 (1990): 135.

disappeared, conflicts between different social classes and visions came to the fore".¹³ The major difference between the classic/common type of colonialism, the kind accompanied by a military force, and neo-colonialism, which may be given various names such re-colonialism, self-colonialism, and the like, relates—as rightly observed by Susanne Enderwitz in an invaluable discussion with her during my stay at the University of Heidelberg—to their different impacts on Arab peoples, hence on their reactions to both types of colonialism. In classic colonialism the Arab peoples were united in their rejection of, and strong opposition to Western colonialism. However, in the neo-colonial phase the Arab peoples are apparently confused in responding to such an unexpected type of colonialism.¹⁴ The confusion stems from the fact that the neo-colonialist is local, from 'our own people'. The political, economic, and strategic cooperation between Arab leaders and the West is commonly perceived by the peoples as a new phase of colonialism in which they feel greatly rejected, and extremely marginalized, restricted, observed, and monitored. The general atmosphere of alienation, estrangement, and sharp dichotomy between the common people, including many writers,¹⁵ and their leaders is inevitably the outcome of the lack of real and practical democracy that enables peoples to elect their rulers freely.¹⁶

In the formative stages of their development, and especially during the struggle for national independence, the political and the literary components of the nationalist discourse in the Middle East coexisted in relative harmony, the situation changed drastically after independence. In the postcolonial era, the state apparatus invariably came under the control of a privileged segment of the population: an elite, a party, a family, etc., which sought to collapse the national narrative with its own ideology in order to justify and perpetuate its political domination and culture supremacy. It is precisely at this crucial juncture that each of the national literatures of the contemporary Middle East has made what may yet emerge as its most significant contribution to its respective culture. Over against the essentializing, totalizing, and monolithic thrust of the ideological 'official' narrative, each one of these literatures developed a host of diverse, pluralistic, multivalent, and anti-hegemonic counter-narratives.¹⁷

Under the classic type of colonialism, writers were united in their strong belief that the Western colonizer should be expelled. In the new phase of colonialism, several diverse options are under

13 Şabry Hāfez, "The transformation of Reality and the Arabic novel's Aesthetic Response", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57:1 (1994): 94.

14 Referring to the old colonialism as a "struggle over territory" and "over historical and social meaning", Edward Said seeks to redefine the concept of colonialism and expand its boundaries. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979): 331

15 For details on the alienation of many Arab writers, see Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001): 6.

16 For details on this atmosphere, see 'Abd al-Rahmān Munīf, *al-Kātib wal-Manfā: Humūm wa-Āfāq al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Jadīd 1992): 363–368.

17 Muḥammad Şiddīq, "The Making of a Counter-Narrative: Two Examples from Contemporary Arabic and Hebrew Fiction", *Michigan Quarterly Review* 31:4 (Fall 1992): 650. For further details on this topic, see his entire article, *Ibid.*, pp. 649–662.

constant consideration and discussion by various ideologists such as Islamists, nationalists, pragmatics, and the like. This confusion strongly affects the writing on the thematic and aesthetic level alike. One consequence of such a case of confusion and fragmentation concerns the role of the author and his/her reference to his/her text. Authors respond rightly and properly to their complicated, blurred and confused reality. This provides solid justification for anyone who may distinguish two chief ways of contradictory responses to reality:

- 1) The symbolic response, which can be achieved by various tools, whereby writers can hide behind an implicit standpoint.¹⁸
- 2) The satiric and sarcastic response, whereby writers aim to combat deformed reality on all fronts, politically, socially, and the like.

The bitterness of the subaltern, colonized, victimized characters and anti-heroes is widely reflected in modern Arabic literature, still experiencing some kind of colonialism. Comparing modern Palestinian literature, which is still concerned with military occupation, the very typical form of classical colonialism, with other national Arab literatures, one might easily conclude that they share a common interests and aims, hence share similar objectives and dreams. Both largely deal with two similar facets of colonialism. Colonialism-oriented motifs have flooded most genres in modern Arabic literature over most of the Arab world, particularly since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The common feeling is that this invasion has paved the path for a new wave of anti-colonialist writing, to be published in the coming few years. The war in Iraq causes Arab people to feel that the old form of colonialism is somewhere around and it is an extremely real and concrete threat.¹⁹ Again, one of the elements most responsible for this mighty sense of identity crisis in Arab peoples, which is gradually worsening, is the elites that lead their countries and their “misgovernance” according to Hilāl Khashān, who repeatedly asserts these views in his recent book.²⁰ One of the meanings attached to this crisis relates to the rapid approach of an era of self-colonialism. Four major phenomena could help us to a profound understanding of the tense interrelations between politicians and peoples represented by writers:²¹

1. Prison literature that most Arabs are familiar with usually has two facets: writers

18 For further details on the use of symbolism as “a matter of strict practicality”, see Roger Allen *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse-New York: Syracuse University Press, 1982): 51. See also Šabry Hāfez, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7:1 (1976): 77; Reuven Snir, *Palestinian Theatre* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2005): 96.

19 Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the tone of resistance to Arab leaders and to some Westerners has become increasingly higher, bolder, more offensive and more aggressive. Khayrī Maṣṣūr in a cutting and representative article entitled “Ghayḍ al-Danimark wa-Fayḍ Siwāhā” highlights the illusion among Arabs of independence and the deep sense of being under ongoing colonialism. See Khayrī Maṣṣūr, “Ghayḍ al-Danimark wa-Fayḍ Siwāhā” *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* February 18 (2006).

20 Hilāl Khashān, *Arabs at the Crossroads: Political Identity and Nationalism* (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 2000). See also his article Hilāl Khashān, “The Arab World’s Travails: History’s Burden”, *The Middle East Quarterly* v:1 (1998).

21 On the rift between politicians and “thinking men” after independence, see Pierre Cachia, *Arabic Literature: an Overview* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002): 142.

describing/reexamining their own experiences in prison, or representing the experiences of others incarcerated.²² Ironically, political authorities in Arab states seem to be among the most motivated sectors in consuming literature. Censors busily monitoring literary activities and prison literature, and exile and expulsion of writers from their homelands are the most obvious outcome of such not so naïve active consumption of literature.²³

2. “Self” or forced emigration of writers: several writers have been compelled to obtain a one-way ticket from their homeland like Zakariyyā Tāmīr (b. 1931), Ḍabya Khamīs (b. 1958) and many others. Two kinds of destination emerge for permanent or at least long-term exile: from one Arab state to another, and from an Arab state to somewhere in the world, usually in the West.
3. Besides aesthetic considerations, the intensive use of symbolic forms and characters is aimed to reflect indirectly an attitude to the political authority, with which some writers do their best to avoid unfair and unbalanced confrontation.²⁴

22 Referring to Arab writers’ freedom, Roger Allen has observed that writers “who cross the line of officially established acceptability may suffer still worse fates: life imprisonment and even death, sometimes announced, sometimes not”. Roger Allen, “Arabic Fiction and the Quest for Freedom”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26:1–2 (1995): 39. “The body of literature to which [Peled refers in his article] deals explicitly with the regimes’ behaviour towards people suspected of resistance to, or disagreement with, the government, who are imprisoned without any standard, legal procedures, and who are coerced to admit their guilt by means of hellish torture”. Mattityahu Peled, “Prison Literature”, in S. Ballas and R. Snir, eds., *Studies in Canonical and Popular Arabic Literature* (Toronto, Ontario: York Press, 1998): 69. Peled observes that the issue of the oppressive behaviour of Arab regimes towards their people has been increasingly canonized and recognized in the Arabic literary system. For more details about “prison literature”, see a detailed study by Roger Allen, “Arabic Fiction and the Quest for Freedom”, pp. 37–49; Mattityahu Peled, “Prison Literature” in S. Ballas and R. Snir, eds., *Studies in Canonical and Popular Arabic Literature*, pp. 69–76. See also Nazīh Abū Nīdāl, *Adab al-Sujūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hadātha, 1981); Marilyn Booth, “Women’s Prison Memories in Egypt and Elsewhere: Prison, Gender, Praxis” *Middle East Report* 149 (November–December 1987): 35–41; Fakhrī Labīb, “al-Ibdā’ wal-Mubdi’ūn fi al-Mu’taqalāt wal-Sujūn”, *Qadāyā Fikriyya* 11–12 (July 1992): Marina Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech, Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt under Nasser and Sadat* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Oriental Studies 14, 1993); 174–190; Samar Rūhī al-Fayṣal, *al-Sijīn al-Siyāsī fi al-Riwāya al-‘Arabiyya* (Lebanon Tripoli: Jarrūs Press, 1994); Isabella Camera d’Afflitto, “Prison Narratives: Autobiography and Fiction”, in Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild, eds. *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1998): 148–156; Fāyiz Abū Shamāla, *al-Sijīn fi al-Shi’r al-Filistīnī 1967–2001* (Ramallah: al-Mu’assasa al-Filistīniyya lil-Irshād al-Qawmī, 2002). Fuṣūl has devoted two entire volumes to investigate this question, see *Fuṣūl* 11:1, 2 (Spring 1992, Summer 1992).

23 For further details on censorship in modern Arabic literature on moral and religious ground, see Reuven Snir, *Religion, Mysticism and Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 41–57. Writing on their own experience with such a type of censorship, professor Samia Mehrez from AUC, the American University in Cairo, makes intensive use of the term “street censorship” (Raḡābat al-Shāri’) to illustrate its deadly impact on the “freedom of thought and expression”. See Samia Mehrez, *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007): 7, 189–207, 210–211, 229–250. On censorship in general see also Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994): 7–21, 26–29. For information on censorship of Najīb Maḥfūz’s literary works, see “Respected Sir”, chapter one in Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*, pp. 17–38. This chapter was originally published in Michael Beard and Adnan Hayder, eds., *Naguīb Maḥfouz: from Regional Fame to Global Recognition* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993): 61–80. For details on the Israeli censorship and its relation to Palestinian theatre in particular and other cultural activities in general, see Reuven Snir, *Palestinian Theatre* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2005): 91–97.

24 For details on the complicated interrelations between writers and the political authority in Egypt, see Richard Jacquemond, “Ba’d Malāmīh al-‘Alāqa Bayn al-Kuttāb wal-Sulṭa fi Miṣr mundhu ‘Ām 1952”, *Fuṣūl* 61 (Winter 2002): 116–137. Inspired by Jacquemond’s studies, Fabio Caiani speaks of “a double process of alienation” in political and religious terms. See Fabio Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007): 6.

4. Direct, strong and aggressive criticism of foreign policy mostly conducted by the politicians in the wrong way. Most of those politicians are accused of representing the colonialists' good and interests.

Many Arab writers still seem to live, in some sense, under conditions of colonialism.

Arab authors are also, of course, much restricted in their ability to discuss politics, national or international, and matters relating to finance, business or the internal ordering of their societies. All these areas are largely controlled by governments and since it is they who directly or otherwise provide the salaries on which writers generally depend, it is obvious that they largely control what is produced. Nothing is easier for a determined and near-absolute ruler, as has been the rule in most Arab countries in recent years, than to deprive authors of their ability to publish.²⁵

In such a case, it is natural thus for Arab writers to consider a variety of ways to resist such conditions of severe control and colonialism. Most of the harsh realities described by Ṣabry Ḥāfez are the outcome of severe crises of political leadership. The absence of democracy rapidly carried Arab people into the depths of deep disappointment, total despair and depression. This is the conclusion widely expressed by writers at various stages.²⁶

To sum up, the end of the old colonialism—from the 1940s to the early 1970s—stimulated euphoric feelings of national independence. But these feelings soon gave way to disappointment and despair, and in some Arab states a sense of self-colonialism, where local leaders shared similar interests with the old colonialist.²⁷ Most Arab rulers have also “vastly increased economic power”: they are industrialists, a magnet for investments, and the largest employer in society.²⁸ This combination of political and economic power makes mutual relations with the opulent West, the former colonialists, much smoother. This is the most threatening force that could ever be aimed against democracy in Arab states. Co-colonialism, the high point of the close cooperation between Arab rulers and Westerners, indicates dichotomous conditions of distrust, a crisis of leadership, and dictatorship, steadily generating the atmosphere of a neocolonialist or self-colonialist era, which ultimately may lead to an inevitable reality of re-colonialism as has recently occurred in Iraq. On the one hand, the vast majority of Arab states conduct several kinds of suppressive and oppressive

25 Trevor J. Le Gassick, “From Naïve Simplicity to Sophisticated Obscurity—Arabic Fiction in a Century of Change”, *Mundus Artium* x:1 (Fall 1977): 80.

26 Yūsuf Ḥiṭṭīnī, *al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra Jiddan bayn al-Naẓariyya wal-Taṭbīq: al-Judhūr, al-Wāqī, al-Āfāq* (Damascus: al-Awā'il, 2004): 87–93; Aḥmad Jāsīm al-Ḥusayn, *al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra Jiddan* (Damascus: al-Awā'il, 2000): 65–72.

27 For more details on ‘co-colonialism’ and ‘colonizability’ coined by the Algerian intellectual Malik bnNabi, see Philip Chiviges Naylor, “The Formative Influence of French Colonialism on the Life and Thought of Malek Bennabi (Malik bnNabi)”, *French Colonial History* 7 (2006): 129–142.

28 Hishām Sharābī, *Neopatriarchy A Theory of Distorted Values in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 60.

acts against all local oppositionists; on the other hand they constantly enter into new alliances with foreigners. In other words, the greater the opposition these states face the greater is their need for new alliances with foreigners. This precisely is why we are witness to a gathering wave of resistance and anti-colonialism in recent modern Arabic fiction.

2. Arabic Short Fiction: Originality and Self-reliance

“The search for the ‘origins’ of certain genres—if one confines oneself to literature in the proper sense—would probably produce no results”.²⁹ The shadow of the impending dichotomy provides only a partial explanation of the rising genres and subgenres of minimalist writing in modern Arabic literature. It is certainly unjustified, invalid and unreliable to treat the emergence and subsequently the development of new genres—whatever, whenever and wherever they may be—in terms of either domestic/local or external measures. This dichotomy, usually resulting from alien considerations, cannot contribute much to a scientific, objective and academic examination. Genres are largely the very outcome of dynamic process of multi-facets and interrelated considerations, as will be elaborated in the upcoming chapter. The terms interculturality, interaction, intertextuality, globality, simultaneity, universality and hybridity are widely exploited in Stephan Guth’s study to “show that placing phenomena in Western and Middle Eastern literatures directly next to one another is not entirely groundless, indeed, it probably makes extremely good sense. While this positioning is certainly not claiming complete identity between these phenomena, it is trying to view them as belonging in the final instance to the same ‘global’ processes”.³⁰

Reuven Snir concludes his article on the complicated interrelations between modern Arabic literature and the West: “To sum up, modern Arabic literature since the 19th century has been influenced by Western literary models and concepts, but that influence has not changed Arab readers’ awareness that their literary creation is a direct extension of the ancient literary production. Not a few Arab critics and scholars regard even those genres considered to be a direct result of Western influence (such as the novel, short story and the theatre) as stemming from the ancient Arab literary tradition”.³¹ Not surprisingly, one can explain Arab readers’ insistence on drawing a straight and bold line connecting their heritage and the development of their modern literature, including narrative fiction, on the basis of neocolonialist discourse. This constant linkage, several Arab writers and scholars repeatedly affirm, is one of the facets

29 Christian Szyska and Friederike Pannewick, eds., *Crossings and Passages in Genre and Culture* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2003): 3.

30 Stephan Guth, “The Simultaneity of the Non-Simultaneous. The Global Dimensions of Middle Eastern literature (esp. in the 19th century), in Christian Szyska and Friederike Pannewick, eds., *Crossings and Passages in Genre and Culture*, p. 133.

31 Reuven Snir, “Modern Arabic Literature and the West: Self-Image, Interference, and Reception”, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 48 (2000): 65.

of the new wave of Arab intellectuals aspiring for a new definition of their national identity, hence their cultural independence. This new wave started to emerge in the last several decades due to a deep feeling of being physically, culturally and lately religiously threatened, as will be illustrated by several texts of minimalist fiction in the following chapters.

Heading toward a kind of blurred future, writers have no option but to go back to their past, their golden age, when Arabs actively participated in the production of global culture, if they were not the key partners in it. The past can provide them with recognition of their major contribution that they desperately need to feel extremely safe and secure. For those writers not to be accused of some kind of romantic and naive way of thinking, they strongly affirm their need for a promising product to pass on to future generations, through which they can become reattached to their roots and reunited with their heritage. "Language always stands at crossroads of (social) time, linking the past with the present, and linking these two with the future".³² It is not an expression of defeat, as some writers make every endeavour explain and clarify, but a reconstructive counteraction to a pervasive sense of total deconstruction. Adopting forms, styles, themes, figures and heroes from their past, writers aspire to revive their stimulating and inspiring heritage. The attempt to revive the past is a decisive measure of resisting the colonialists, "local" or foreign, and searching for self-definition. Sasson Somekh, who has evinced much interest in the usage of language in literature, underlines the fact that some Arab writers' employment of medieval stylistic features, like Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī and Emīle Ḥabībī, assists those writers "presumably to assert and vitalize the national heritage".³³ It means that language plays a significant role in asserting the interrelated concepts culture-nationalism.³⁴ It is a remarkable tool by which writers try to confront the serious threat of the outsiders. It simultaneously functions as a defensive and an offensive action taken by many Arab writers, in a hostile world. This is the exact explanation for many Arab writers' and scholars' insistence on believing in their heritage as solid ground for the development of modern Arabic literature. Hilary Kilpatrick attributes a great importance to the employment of heritage in modern Arabic literature, especially in investigating the way this literature develops.³⁵

Arab writers, scholars and readers may be divided into two unequal categories. One is adoption of the Western discourse, recognition that the West is the only, or at least the key

32 Yāsir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 7.

33 Sasson Somekh, *Genre and Language in Modern Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991): 34.

34 Like literature, which is considered a key factor in establishing/re-establishing and forming/reforming national identity, language, according to Yāsir Suleiman, plays a similar role in the collective identity of all Arab peoples. See Yāsir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and national Identity: A Study in Ideology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 12. For further details on nationalism in the Arabic novel, see Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ghānī, *al-Ittijāh al-Qawmī fi al-Riwāya* (Kuwait: 'Ālam al-Ma'rifa, 1994).

35 For more details, see Hilary Kilpatrick, "The Arabic Novel: a Single Tradition?", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5:1 (1974): 93–107; Hilary Kilpatrick, "Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The Atlat in Modern Arabic Fiction", in Kamāl Abdel-Malek and Wāel Hallāq, eds., *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature* (Leiden, Boston-Köln: Brill, 2000): 44.

producer of culture for the time being, whose culture Arabs are strongly advised to import. The other is confrontation with the colonialists in two phases:

- 1) Defensive: the passion to search for original culture arising from the Arabs' golden ages. The defensive phase is explained through its association with one of the most dominant terms in the anti-colonialist movement, namely *originality*. This, according to the strong believers in the Arab cultural legacy, is the proper answer to all kinds of Western passion for neocolonialism and re-colonialism in due course. *Originality* means the search for new styles, techniques, values and forms across the wide-ranging tradition of the Arabs. It does not mean conservativeness, but paradoxically modernity. One of the key significances associated with modernity is post-modern philosophy based on the ongoing search for newness and difference, even if such new and different things come from the past. It is closely associated with another widespread concept, *self-reliance*, which Arabs have recently begun to call for, particularly on the economic level.³⁶
- 2) Offensive: employment of various types of explicit and implicit offensive means against Western ideologies, beliefs and culture. This phase evinces a generous portion of anger, bitterness, black humor, satire, the grotesque, slogans, irony, transparent allegory and the like. Believers in this strategy exploit every measure in opposition to colonialism. Objectives mostly justify means: this seems to be their slogan.

Writing against colonialism, neocolonialism, co-colonialism, re-colonialism and self-colonialism in modern Arabic literature generally aims at all kinds of authority:

- 1) Political authority, which includes all official junior and senior politicians, domestic and foreign policy makers. As noted earlier, a Palestinian writer recently summed up the entire crisis in the Arab world thus: "Governments are normally there to solve problems, but governments in most Arab states are themselves our problem. Their license to rule their peoples expired a long time ago!" In Ḥalīm Barakāt's words:

"Instead of the state serving the people, the people have to serve the state; the state begins to be perceived as needing citizens to govern, rather than as needed by citizens to regulate their affairs. Instead of being protected by the state, citizens are called upon to protect it and have to be protected from it. The subjects become objects, and the objects of governing become subjects. The human quality of thought is attributed to bureaucracy, which is given the task of thinking on behalf of the citizens; in this process, it dominates their lives, exercises power over them, and interferes in their private affairs, while proclaiming its own dependant existence. Consequently, the people stop

³⁶ Incidentally, the same concept is well-known in the feminist, or rather lesbian discourse, whereby lesbian scholars and writers seek to express the total irrelevancy of men. In modern Arabic feminist literature the term is meant to indicate—besides the uselessness of men in sexual relationships, as described in some works by the Kuwaiti writer Laylā al-'Uthmān and the Lebanese writer Ḥanān al-Shaykh—the irrelevance of the institution of marriage, as repeatedly emphasized in some works by the Egyptian writer Munā Ḥilmī (the daughter of Nawāl al-Sa'd āwī).

recognizing the state as their own, and political activity becomes a matter of refraining from political activity. The power of the people becomes the power of the state, thus rendering them powerless. The state exercises this power because it is controlled by a class whose interests are antagonistic to the interests of the mass of people".³⁷

- 2) Social authority, as represented by the dominating order of the traditional family from top to bottom, from parents to daughters and sons.
- 3) Patriarchal authority, which embodies for feminist activists and writers some kind of colonialism directed exclusively against women. Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi believes that "feminist poetics and politics fit well into postcolonial theory", namely "the fight against oppression, exploitation, backwardness and dormancy".³⁸ This kind of resistance has led some feminist writers to oppose and challenge the validity and necessity of the institution of marriage, in which men/husbands mostly engage in colonizing activity against their wives.³⁹
- 4) Generic colonial authority. The tendency to write experimentally is writers exploring new styles, forms and techniques that symbolize deep aspiration for free writing. This provides writers some independence from the strict conventions and roles genres are apparently associated with. Some writers believe genres are colonial frames that they feel forced into. Minimalist writing challenges these frames on two levels: quantity and quality, as will be described in later chapters.

All these repudiations and violations of the previous four authorial/colonial frameworks are mainly exhibited in Arabic minimalist fiction as will be described in the following chapters.

3. The Contemporary Minimalist Story: A Historical Survey

Arabs have been closely familiar with various types of narratives since early Islam and perhaps before. Various forms of long and short narratives are particularly well known in the Abbasid period (132–656/750–1258). There were long Maqamas and biographies, as well as very short anecdotes and tales.⁴⁰ Needless to say, these forms of minimalist narratives

37 Ḥalīm Barakāt, *The Arab World Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1993): 151.

38 Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, *The postcolonial Arabic Novel Debating Ambivalence*, p. 221.

39 See a very short story by the Kuwaiti writer Laylā al-'Uthmān "Suicide". See also two stories by the Egyptian writer Munā Ḥilmī: "I'ḷān Zawāj", a minimalist story, and "Faṣīlat al-Dam al-Ukhrā", a short story. Munā Ḥilmī's mother, the Egyptian writer Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī, herself changed her middle name to Nawāl *Zaynab* Sa'dāwī. Instead of being "attached" to her father's name, as is usual for offspring almost everywhere in the world, she attaches her first name to her mother's name. This courageous act symbolizes the passion to release herself from any kind of dependency on the patriarchal system or authority. Munā Ḥilmī did the same thing when she decided to change her middle name to Munā *Nawāl* Sa'dāwī.

40 For a conclusive study of these forms of minimal narratives, see Ibrahim Geris, "Khabar wa-Nādīra: Dirāsa fī al-Wasā'il al-Fanniyya wal-Uslūbiyya al-Jāhiziyya fī Ṣiyāghat al-Nawādir", *al-Karmil Studies in Arabic*