The Four Literatures of the Middle East

The literature of the Middle East is written predominantly in four languages: Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Hebrew. Although other languages are used in the region, such as Berber and French in North Africa and Kurdish in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, the main literary languages are those listed above. Just as the historical experiences of states within the Middle East have been different, so have these four literatures taken different paths, although often with considerable similarities. The one exception is Hebrew, which is closely tied to the development of European literature. A distinction should also be made between Arabic and the other three languages which are national literatures, i.e. tied to the development of individual nations. Arabic literature has manifested itself in all of the Arabic speaking nations from Morocco to Iraq, and is, therefore, transnational.

These four literatures have in common a complex relationship between ancient forms of indigenous literature and modern (western) influences. Often it is the case that modern writers can draw from a vast gene-pool of ancient literary forbears, and this can lead to rich and dynamic writing. The era of colonialism and the penetration of European culture into the region had a massive impact on all these literatures; the very forms of the novel and short story can be seen as a European invention which was appropriated (or exported) world-wide.

In the past, the majority of Middle East authors were men, but within the last decade or so there is a sharp increase in the number of women writing and being published. This dramatic increase of women authors and the often concentrated attention on women's issues has been a relatively new phenomena. In general it can be said that the growing concern for social equality and the bringing to light of gross injustices, political, social and cultural has been part and parcel of the growing women's movement but it is also independent in many ways.

Finally, a word should be said about the French language often used by North African writers. Many North Africans use French as much as they do Arabic or Berber, and a majority of North African writers who, before independence, were educated under the widespread French education system, write in French. Thus while French may not be indigenous in a deeply historical sense, it is one of the main languages of the Maghreb (the regional name for the four westernmost countries of North Africa) and as such should be included in the category of Middle Eastern literature.
Modern Arabic Literature

Beginnings

While Arabic literature has a very long and textured history, what has come to be considered modern Arabic literature dates from the colonial encounter with Europe. With the advent of colonialism in the nineteenth century, and all the attendant cultural and technological changes, literary production increased many-fold in the Middle East, partly because the colonial era gave rise to a multitude of issues to do with identity, nationhood, and power. Since the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798, Arab intellectuals became increasingly concerned with European culture and what was thought of among Arabs and Europeans alike as European "superiority". This superiority was based primarily on the raw fact of military power; the newly colonized peoples strove to understand what constituted the power of the West, in the hope that doing so would enable them to 'progress' similarly, but it was also seen in terms of the respect given to writers and intellectuals in the West.

In the nineteenth century Arab world there was no established fictive-narrative genre that was comparable to the western novel or short story. There were narratives which had been extant in the Arab-Islamic world for centuries, but they either did not meet the criteria for what is expected today in a novel, character development, plot, themes, etc. or they were not recognized as "high" art forms in their own societies. The obvious example of such a narrative is the Thousand and One Nights, which because of its popular folkish style, was never accepted by the aesthetic standards of the day, or admitted into the canon of literature.

The one form which was revived in the nineteenth century as a possible response to the threatening imposition of European literary production was the maqama. It is often referred to as the precursor of the Arabic short story and it has elements which make it qualify for this title. Generally written in rhyming prose, it had a formulaic structure and standard themes portraying a villain/rogue who tricks his adversary to some (small) advantage for himself. But the maqama does not exhibit the thematic diversity nor the range or depth of character which distinguish the Western short story.

In the early nineteenth century there was a widespread movement in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world to translate European works. While this began with technical and scientific material under the modernization policies of Muhammad 'Ali, it soon grew to encompass cultural and literary areas. Everything from Moliere and La Fontaine to the English philosopher Spencer found its way into Arabic translations, as well as numerous romances and thrillers which catered to more popular tastes. Along with the explosion in translation there was also rapid growth in the printing industry. Together, these two factors accounted for the growth in popularity of European-style fiction.

Development of Arabic Prose

Considering the short period of time since its inception, Arabic prose-fiction has demonstrated an incredibly swift evolution. The early attempt at short stories and novels, dating from the first decade of this century, generally exhibit a lack of sophistication and a tendency to bow to ideology and overstatement. Mahmud Taymur (1894-1973) is known as the writer who established the genre of the short story in Egypt. His stories were often elaborate character sketches or vignettes of Egyptian life. This excerpt is from *The Enemy* (1965), a story about identity and paranoia:

> He had heard a lot about incurable addiction. Was her picture the drug to which he was enslaved? He could not allow himself to be made a fool of, nor could he submit to the humiliation that was imposed on him. He watched them burning...saw Sulwan - his wife— as flesh and blood being eaten by the fire; he smelt the smoke that came from her burning body and grew intoxicated with the odor, as a worshipper with the fragrance of incense. He spent a black night in tearful repenting.

Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), a Christian Syrian, was the first author to achieve a measure of success with the genre of the novel. He produced a total of twenty-one historical romances, mostly drawing on episodes from
Arab-Islamic history. Critical opinion on the literary merit of his work differs; he was the first to admit that he saw literature as a way of teaching history, and as such, he doubted his own literary achievements. In 1913 a novel was published which is arguably the first novel of literary merit in Arabic. Zaynab, a somewhat sentimental story about an Egyptian peasant-girl, was written by Muhammad Husayn Heikal (1888-1956) while he was studying law in Europe. This novel was also notable for its use of colloquial Egyptian in dialogue, a departure from the rigid adherence to literary Arabic throughout all writing. There is a considerable difference between literary, Arabic and the Arabic which is spoken on the street and is not usually written. Every country has a different dialect and these regional languages are usually quite different from the Arabic which is used in newspapers, broadcasts and formal occasions and which is standardized throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

However, it was not until the nineteen-forties that fiction-writing became well-established. Since the end of the second world war fiction has been an integral part of the search for national and cultural identity, often influenced by Arab nationalism and socialism. Perhaps the most prevalent trend in Arabic fiction has been towards "commitment" or engagement with society. The overwhelming concern for politics that must strike even the most casual reader of Arabic literature attests to this concern. As is the case with most non-Western literature there has been, in the attitudes of authors as well as in the minds of critics, a perception of a vital link between the writer and the needs of society. This perception manifested itself most strongly in the concern with Social Realism throughout the 1950's and 1960's, especially in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, which developed alongside the ideologies of Socialism, Nationalism and Communism in the post-World War II period. The writings of the late Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani (The Little Cake Vendor) are a good example of this, although within Palestinian writing the issue is even more critical. The loss of their homes and their land, and their dispersal throughout the world as refugees and exiles, provided a clear focus for literary activities by Palestinian writers. We can also see this political conscience in Yussuf Idri's work (The Shame) as well as Hanna Mina (Fragments of Memory).

Owing perhaps to the deep impact of Arab nationalism, there is a considerable thematic unity among the Arab writers, at least up through the eighties. The commitment to politics meant that many events such as the setback, Nakba, of 1967 (the defeat of Egypt and other Arab nations by Israel), and the continuing Palestinian-Israeli struggle have loomed large in the work of many authors. Other themes have included the relationship with the West, well illustrated by Tayyeb Salih's novel Season of Migration to the North and the ubiquitous problems of national development in the wake of colonialism. In this excerpt from Season of Migration to the North the protagonist has recently returned to the Sudan from England where he obtained a doctorate:

"A doctorate -- that's really something." Putting on an act of humility, I told him that the matter entailed no more than spending three years delving into the life of an obscure English poet. I was furious -- I won't disguise the fact from you -- when the man laughed unashamedly and said: "We have no need of poetry here. It would have been better if you'd studied agriculture, engineering or medicine." Look at the way he says "we" and does not include me, though he knows that this is my village and that it is he -- not I -- who is the stranger.

In terms of genres, the Arab literature has included almost every known genre since the turn of the century; classicism, romanticism, social realism, symbolism, and a range of avant-garde experimentalism. The expression of all of these trends can be traced throughout the career of the Arab world's most famous novelist, Najib Mahfouz (b. 1911), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988 who has done so much to present to the world the kaleidoscopic scenes of life in Egypt throughout the latter half of this century. Mahfouz is known for his keen eye for descriptive detail and his acute psychological insights, fusing the objective/outer world with the subjective/inner ones of his characters, in a style that has often been compared to Dickens.
or Zola. Although he has used most narrative techniques, from omniscient, third person narrator in *The Beginning and the End* to the first-person, stream-of-consciousness Respected Sir he has always remained committed to facing the issues that he sees as vital to contemporary life in Egypt. In this passage from *Midaq Alley*, Umm Hamida, the local marriage-broker receives a purposeful house-call from her landlady, Mrs. Afify:

"Wouldn’t it be wrong for me to get married now, after this long period of being unmarried?"

Umm Hamida said to herself: "Then why, woman, did you come to talk to me?" But out loud she said: "Why should it be wrong to do something both lawful and right? You are a respectable and sensible person, as everyone knows. Why, my dear, 'Marriage is one half of religion.' Our Lord, in his wisdom, made it lawful and it was prescribed by the prophet, peace and blessings be upon him!"

Mrs. Afify echoed piously:
"Peace and blessings upon him!"
"Why not my dear? Both God and the Arab Prophet love the faithful!"
Mrs. Afify’s face had grown red beneath its covering of rouge and her heart was filled with delight. She took out two cigarettes from her case and said:
"Whoever would want to marry me?"
Umm Hamida bent her forefinger and drew it to her forehead in a gesture of disbelief, saying: "A thousand and one men!"

Other genres of the post-war period include existentialism, particularly in Lebanon, and a kind of surrealist abstract mode that can be seen in authors all over the Arab world. The Syrian author, Zakariyya Tamir (b.1931) is renowned for his pioneering of experimental literature in the sixties.

A final word should be said about the position of Egypt within the literary constellation of the Arab world. Many anthologies of Arabic writing have a predominance of Egyptian authors. While this may have reflected the realities of literary production for much of the present century, it is increasingly unrepresentative.

Writers from other Arab countries, particularly from North Africa are becoming more prolific, and more widely translated into English. Egypt’s position in the Arab world as a political as well as a cultural nexus has meant that it held a predominant position for many years, but it would be misleading to take Egypt’s cultural production as representative of the Arab world in general; the writings of other countries often deal with very different issues and concerns, and in different ways.

**Turkish Literature**

**Introduction**

When Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk) proclaimed the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the idea of "modernity", conceived along western lines, was fully embraced by his government. Ataturk was determined to bring Turkey into the modern world and realize its potential as a European, secular state. The move towards Westernization had begun, however, under the Ottomans; in 1839 the Tanzimat (Reforms) period had begun to introduce legal, administrative, technological and educational changes which were all aimed at “keeping up” with Europe’s lead.

Needless to say, such reforms also included changes in cultural and literary production. New forms of writing appeared: fiction, drama, journalism, essays, all influenced by French, and to a lesser extent, English literature. The earliest example of a western-style narrative may be seen as far back as the latter half of the eighteenth century when Giritli Ali Aziz (d.1798) published his *Muhayyelat* (Imaginary Tales), a collection of quasi-traditional tales which included vivid characters, and sketches of life in contemporary Istanbul in colloquial language. This work was a forerunner of the literary reformist movement pioneered by the likes of Ibrahim Sinasi (1826-71), Nakim kemal (1840-88) and Ziya Pasa (1825-80), collectively known as Tanzimatci (Men of the Tanzimat). This movement introduced new concepts from the West and produced the first play, published the first newspaper and adapted many new genres of writing including the novel and the short story.
Literature and the Turkish Republic

Developing in a context of massive social and political change, the emergent literature of the Turkish Republic became an important tool in the westernization of Mustapha Kemal's "Republic of Culture". In line with the influential intellectual, Abdullah Cevdet's 1913 statement: "There is no other civilization: Civilization means European civilization, and it must be imported with its roses and thorns", huge efforts were made to dismantle the Islamic hold over institutions: secular education replaced Qur'anic education, nationalism was announced as the official governmental ideology and religious affiliations were declared obstacles to progress; Islamic law was replaced by a variety of European legal systems, and, perhaps most significant for literature, the Arabic script, considered sacrosanct because of its attachment to the Qur'an, was replaced by the Latin alphabet in 1928.

The concerns of literature before and after the creation of the Republic bear distinct characteristics. Fahir Iz in his Anthology of Modern Turkish Short Stories, explores these concerns by looking at the writers of the two time-periods. The pre-Republic writers (1860-1930) were almost exclusively from among the upper-echelons of society, from Istanbul, except in cases of banishment or exile, they were usually educated in the elite schools of the capitol, were familiar with at least one Western language and wrote in a rhetorical, bombastic style with a limited thematic scope. The writers of the post-Republican period (1930's -70's) came from more provincial, often middle-class origins, did not have an elite education, often made livings as school teachers or such like, and were not as familiar with Western languages. Their areas of concern were much broader and tended to take in the poorer strata of society and discuss social and economic problems. Another broad schematization can be made in terms of their literary movements: the pre-Republican literature is more given to romanticism, with strains of nationalism. Themes of national identity can be found throughout the modern period, but the post-Republican literature has a Marxist flavor and is more overtly concerned with the man and woman on the street than with the romantic conception of nationalism as expressed in works such as Namik Kemal's Vat an (Fatherland). The difference can, perhaps, be reduced to the idea of "art for art's sake" or art for the sake of social betterment, or social realism. Ataturk himself saw literature as a vital and central part of the national struggle for advancement, and, in 1921, encouraged one of the nation's most famous poets, Nazim Hikmet, to write "poems with a purpose".

One of the main concerns of the realists was the peasantry. In accordance with the Socialist and Communist sentiments which were prevalent, especially after World War II, the lower strata of society were being given a voice, even if it was the voice of their middle-class leadership. Two books in particular were instrumental in revealing the unenviable conditions of the rural peasantry, both published in 1950: Bizim Koy, by Mahmut Makal, and Toprak Ana by Fazil Husnu Daglarca. The first is a series of vignettes about peasant life, exposing the conditions of abject poverty which characterize their Anatolian existence. Makal was himself a villager from Anatolia:

Quite apart from the trouble of earning the wretched stuff, it's difficult even to make bread here in any edible form. The women rise at night, knead the dough, and while their husbands are still in bed - that is to say, before dawn - they bake enough for the day. If they get up a bit late, they get no end of a beating from their husbands, and everyone calls them "Slatterns"... If you want to know what the torments of Hell are like, I'd say it's baking bread in this village.

The second work is a book of poems expressing similar themes of deprivation and injustice. Both of these works caused a great stir when they first came out because of their revealing of such harsh conditions.

Part of this concern for the lower strata of society produced a distinct genre which appeared in the 1950's known as the "village novel", epitomized by Yeshar Kemal's (b.1922) Ince Memed (Memed, My Hawk). The genre deals with the exclusive concerns of rural peasants as experienced through natural disasters, petty officialdom, poverty, economic and psychological deprivation, blood feuds, tyranny and exploitation. Kemal is probably the most famous Turkish novelist
both at home and abroad and has been a strong candidate for the Nobel Prize. In this passage a boy is running away from an abusive situation in his home village and finds himself relying on the hospitality of strangers in a neighboring one:

Memed's hands stopped. "Uncle Suleyman," he said, "wait, and I'll tell you everything. My father's dead. There's just my mother. No one else at all. I plowed Abdi Agha's fields." At this point his eyes filled with tears and a lump seemed to form in his throat. But he checked himself. Otherwise it would all pour out. "For two years I've plowed his fields. The thistles devour me. They bite me. Those thistles tear at your legs like a mad dog. That's the sort of field I plowed. Every day Abdi Agha beat me, beat me to death. He beat me again yesterday morning until I ached all over. So I ran away to your village.

Apart from the large body of social realism that can be found in Turkish literature, other genres have also flourished and many styles have been experimented with: Furuzun (b.1935) one of the most prominent names among short-story writers as well as one of the most important women writers in the Republic, uses stream-of-consciousness effectively in her stories, and Aziz Nesin, best known for his scathing satirical stories, is one of the most prolific of Turkish writers. Nesin's work relies on traditional forms to the extent that he often uses folk archetypes, representing different types of personality rather than three-dimensional characters. His work is full of the absurdities and injustices of life, coupled with an acceptance of them, as this passage from Don't You Have Any Donkeys in Your Country? * illustrates.

"Come on, play fair! How can you try to sell a donkey that you paid five liras for for ten thousand liras?"

"Son I'm not trying to sell it, its you who are trying to buy. I said it was old and the man said that was all right. I said that it had the mange, and he accepted that. I said that it wasn't a female and he still wanted it. I said it wouldn't live another day and he still said 'good'. Oh, I almost forgot...the donkey is lame. Its right leg limps."

"It doesn't matter."

"You see, there's something valuable, something marvellous about this donkey that I don't understand. Otherwise why would this American infidel try to buy a mangy, old jackass and lame too? Isn't that right? Ten thousand, I won't take any less for it!"

**Persian Literature**

Much of what has been said about the development of modern Arabic and Turkish literature also holds true for Persian literature: modern Persian prose developed out of specific historical and social conditions which had to do with westernization, European influence and "modernization". Until the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, Persian prose was widely considered a poor cousin of Persian poetry. Suitable areas for literary endeavor included religious meditations, metaphysical musings, and such subjects as were considered suitably "high-brow". For these fields of interest, rhetorical, often obscure language was used which drew from a rich and ancient tradition, but was not immediately accessible to everyone.

Many of the ideas and forms which have characterized Persian literature in the twentieth century have their political parallels in the philosophy of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 which grew out of liberal nationalist tendencies within the intelligentsia and was based on the idea of a representative government (Majlis) in which all sectors of the society would have a say. The movement was the culmination of an increasing interactivity between Iran and the West, and represented the voice of a population which was becoming ever-more politically aware and active. Despite widespread popular support the government eventually rejected the idea of a consultative body and constitution. However, the idea of constitutional government remained a strong inspiration for many years for the Iranian people.

In terms of the institutional factors which affected the production of literature and its acceptance among the population, mention should be made of a number of points: a college (Dar al-Funun) was founded in Tehran.
in 1852 with a modern curriculum and both Iranian and European teachers. Growing numbers of students were being sent abroad and the translations from Western languages increased dramatically, largely as a response to developments in secular education. The creation of printing presses meant that a huge amount of material was being produced and journalistic writing was becoming ever more popular.

The concerns of the early writers of prose (late nineteenth century) were primarily social and political, and had to do with the relative "backwardness" of the country. These often included such issues as the exploitation of Iran by foreign interests and the anachronistic and rigid character of the state and debates about authority.

In 1921 M.A. Jamalzadeh (b.1892) the grandfather of the Persian short story, published his collection *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud*, roughly equivalent to "Once Upon a Time". Published in Berlin, this collection was in large part a critique of the social and political institutions of Iran. With the Constitutional Revolution, there had been a flourishing of newspapers and much of this journalistic writing was critical of the government. Such criticism, therefore, was not uncommon, but what was captivating about Jamalzadeh's work, illustrated below, was that he set his criticisms within stories with charming plots and realistic characters. This new genre of the short story was very welcomed by the people.

Iranians are generally of average height and have wheat colored complexions. They like to talk a lot, but do little. While they are very droll and love to laugh, they also cry a great deal. They have the kind of tongue that can talk a snake out of its hole. The children are bald; the men shave their heads and let their beards grow. But one strange thing about this country is that, apparently, there are absolutely no women in it. You see little girls, four or five years old, in the alleyways, but never any women. I had heard that a "city of women" existed somewhere in the world where there were no men, but I've never heard of a "city of men."

Jamalzadeh's style though was still wedded to the more traditional language. His vocabulary and rhetoric echoed an ancient tradition in which the borders of the "high" literary Persian language were more tightly patrolled. The writer who first crafted the short story into a more recognizably modern and hence more accessible form was Sadeq Hedayat (1903-51). He was deeply influenced by many of the European modernists such as Kafka and Joyce and to his name are at least four volumes of short stories, a novel and a novelette. His work mingled a passion for ancient Persia with a concern for the modern state, and a despair at its circumstances and the future of its people. *Buf-i Kur* (The Blind Owl) is an example of a work which blends the imagery of classical, popular and folk Persian literature to achieve its effects.

One of the most enduring novelists to emerge from the forties was Sadeq Chubaq (b.1916). His first two collections of short stories, *Khaymeh-shab-bazi* (The Puppet Show, 1945) and *Antari ke lutiyash bud* (the Baboon Whose Buffoon Was Dead, 1949), both proved his naturalistic powers of description and his keen insight. His concerns lay with the down-trodden members of society who had so far escaped the attention of fiction-writers. His first novel, *Tangsir* is a dramatic retelling of an allegedly true story about a young man who takes it upon himself to seek vengeance on the five men who have cheated him out of his life-savings. He kills them all and escapes with his wife and child. The writing combines a fast-moving linear narrative with forays into the consciousness of the protagonist.

In the post World-War II period, following the Allied occupation, Iran was experiencing serious social and economic upheaval. It was under these conditions of crisis that the nationalist movement, led by Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq came to power promising to nationalize the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), a company which had come to symbolize foreign influence and interference. During this regime writers were, to a considerable extent, free to speak their minds and level criticism at the government. In 1953 Mosaddeq and his National Front government were overthrown in a coup aided by the C.I.A. Muhammad Reza Shah was
restored to his throne. Under the Shah this freedom of expression came to an end. In the ensuing period (1953-78) creative expression was either limited to “neutral” subjects or forced to disguise its real thrust with symbolism, metaphor and allegory. Jalal Al-i Ahmad’s (1932-69) *The School Principle*, for example, used the school to represent the weaknesses of society as a whole:

Before experiencing all of this, I had read reams of nonsense about the basic elements of child-training and education — about certain fundamentals like having a good teacher, clean toilets, blackboards, erasers, and a thousand other things... But here, very simply, the fundamental, primary element was shoes and shoes alone.

Al-i Ahmad was central to the growth of Persian prose in the post-war period. He published four volumes of short stories between 1946 and 1952 and he also wrote four novels. He used historical allegory in his 1961 novel *Nun va'l qalam* (by the Pen) to explore the relationship between government and religion in Iran and the role of the intellectual elite. Al-i Ahmad’s terse prose and his keen insights into the problems faced by the country led him to be termed “the wide-awake conscience of the nation”.

In more contemporary literature, women have been increasingly prolific, or, at least more published. Simin Daneshvar (b.1921) is the first outstanding woman novelist from Iran, publishing her first book of short stories, *Atash-e Khamush* (The Quenched Fire) in 1948. Her novel *Savashun* (1969) is an extremely popular political novel depicting the conditions of a family from the Shiraz during the Second World War. It explores many of the issues of importance for Iranians in the decades before the revolution of 1979, and in so doing helps to set the scene for that event. In this passage, from the beginning of the novel, the oddly-matched characters are being introduced:

Zari couldn’t believe it, until she saw it with her own eyes. The present Sergeant Zinger was none other than the former “Mr. Zinger”, the Singer sewing machine salesman. He had come to Shiraz at least seventeen years ago, and still did not speak good Persian. With every sewing machine he sold, this giant corpulent man gave ten free sewing lessons. Maneuvering his weight behind the sewing machine, he would teach young girls the fine points of embroidery, eyelets, and double pleats. Curiously enough he never once chuckled at the figure he cut. But the girls learned well, Zari too. When the war began, Zari heard that Mr. Zinger had overnight donned the braids and stars of an officer’s uniform. Now she saw that his sergeant’s uniform suited him well.

Since the fall of the Shah in 1979, many authors have left Iran and written from exile. These authors have produced a wide variety of material, and with the added dimension that geographical distance provides as well as the increasing cosmopolitanism of the life of exiles, this literature has broadened the scope of Iranian literature (although many of them write in European languages, German, French and English). However, there is still a considerable body of work being produced inside Iran, often under circumstances in which they do not have total freedom to write what they like.

**Hebrew Literature**

**Introduction**

Modern Hebrew literature is somewhat the odd-one-out among Middle Eastern literatures. Unlike Arabic, Persian and Turkish, it was not grounded in any one locus and the Hebrew language was not the vernacular of the Jewish people. For more than two thousand years Hebrew was used almost exclusively in liturgy, prayer and religious study. Jews spoke either the language of the country in which they lived or a colloquial language, written in Hebrew script, which was a compound of Hebrew and the local language. Yiddish, used by the Jews of Eastern Europe, was the richest of these languages and Yiddish literature flourished in the 19th century. While Yiddish literature and Hebrew literature had separate traditions, each with its own history and authors, there are considerable links between them. Both Yiddish and Hebrew authors utilized traditional sources of sacred and secular Jewish writings, in particular the *Aggadah* of the Talmud and the folklore rabinic tales of the Hasidim.

The Talmud, written in Hebrew and Aramaic,
and compiled between the 3rd and 6th centuries, is a compilation of Jewish laws and practices derived from the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic commentaries on these works. *Halakhah* or legal writings make up the major part of the Talmud but the non-legal writings or the *Aggadah* has influenced Hebrew literature to this day. *Aggadah* contains history, folklore, legends, philosophy, stories of the rabbis, geography and politics. "The *Halakhah* is the prose of the Talmud, the *Aggadah* is its poetry."

The founder of the Hasidic movement was Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer (1700-1760) more familiarly known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, or Master of the Good Name. Rabbi Ben Eliezer emphasized the need for spiritual concentration in prayer and every daily activity and would teach his disciples by telling stories. These charming and imaginative tales became a literature of more than 3000 texts; two of the most popular collections are Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* and Meyer Levin's *Classical Hasidic Tales*. Years later his grandson Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav continued the tradition conveying his teachings in complex and mysterious allegorical fairy tales of unhappy kings, lost princesses and loyal ministers. (see Martin Buber's *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*).

These aggadic and Hasidic tales have been a rich literary mine for Hebrew and Yiddish writers. Louis Ginzberg, who grew up amidst *agadah* and rabbinic folklore, in his native Lithuania, published a seven volume *Legends of the Bible* in 1909. This story about the monotheist Abraham whose father Terah sold wooden idols comes from the anthology.

*When Abraham attained the age of twenty years, his father Terah fell ill. He spoke as follows to his sons Haran and Abraham, "I adjure you by your lives, my sons, sell these two idols for me, for I have not enough money to meet our expenses." Haran executed the will of his father, but if one accosted Abraham, to buy an idol from him, and asked him the price, he would answer, "Three manehs", and then question in turn, "How old art thou?" "Thirty years", the reply would be. "Thou art thirty years of age, and yet you wouldst worship this idol which I made but today?" he man would depart and go his way...*

Another link between the two literatures is that several major Hebrew writers came to fame through their Yiddish fiction and poetry. Sholem Aleichem (Fiddler on the Roof) and I. L. Peretz, two formative figures of the modern Yiddish literary tradition utilized this folklore in their stories which were widely circulated in Yiddish newspapers around the world. Another major Hebrew author, S. Y. Agnon, whose exquisite use of Hebrew in abstract and surreal stories won him the Nobel Prize in 1966, was renowned for his earlier Yiddish work.

Thus, Hebrew literature has a different relationship to European literature than the other literatures with which we are concerned. While the latter all had a separateness from European culture and were, hence, able to be influenced, to greater or lesser degrees, Hebrew literature developed along with European literature, as part of it. While contemporary Israeli literature does exhibit a broad thematic interest in the state of Israel and the meaning of Israeli identity, it has an origin which antedates the founding of the state of Israel.

**Modern Hebrew literature**

Today, Hebrew literature is almost totally synonymous with Israeli literature, and therefore functions to explore different social and political ideas. It does, however, maintain a strong link with its developing years, and the "rebirth" of Hebrew as a national literature has not meant the reducing of its breadth of scope and concern.

In the 1850's the Jewish enlightenment movement (Haskalah) developed. This can also be considered the beginning of modern Hebrew literature. The publication of the Hebrew weekly, *Kohelet* which was loosely fashioned on the *London Tatler* was the cornerstone of the cultural movement of the Haskalah. The movement spread quickly throughout Eastern Europe and there was a considerable growth in significant literary production, for example, the poetry of J.L. Gordon (d. 1892) and A.D. Lebenson (d. 1878).

The first Hebrew novel is considered to be A. P Mapu's 1853 work, *The Love of Zion*, As is evident from the title, it dealt with the contemporary concerns of diaspora Jews in the embryonic stages of Zionist awareness. The
novel contained Biblical themes and many lyrical, descriptive passages about the land of Zion (which Mapu had never seen). In the later work of Y. Abramovitch (pen name of Mendele Mokher Sefarim, Mokher the bookseller, 1836-1917), romantic tendencies were less in evidence. Mokher is renowned in two literatures, modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish, both of which he used to portray the life of Jewish masses in the Pale, the Russian province in which they were permitted to settle.

By the twentieth century modern Hebrew literature was experimenting with all the genres of modern literature in general, and was thoroughly European in form and conception. Its concerns spoke to the problems of Jewish life, and the breakdown of traditional society, culture and the restlessness which was so much a part of "modernity".

The development of Hebrew literature in Israel/Palestine corresponds closely to the successive waves of emigration (aliyah) of Jews to Palestine. The first Aliyah (1882-1903) consisted of middle class Jews fleeing persecution and pogroms in Russia. These first pioneers established the ideological ties between the idea of Jewish nationalism (Zionism) and the return to the land of Israel. Eliezer Ben Yehuda was one of these immigrants. He compiled the first modern Hebrew dictionary and almost single-handedly revived Hebrew as a spoken language, coining thousands of new words for the modern language. The literature of this period was insignificant and somewhat naive. A novel by Ben Yehuda's wife The Farm of the Sons of Rechab evinced a romantic belief in a common Semitic origin and sought to draw connections between the ancient and modern inhabitants of the land, which enhanced the desire of these early settlers to be a part of the East.

The second Aliyah (1904-1914) brought a different group of pioneers, steeped in the revolutionary fervor of the failed Russian Revolution of 1905; idealistic, strongly Socialist and Zionist they came to "build the land". Some, like David Ben Gurion, were to become the founding fathers of the state of Israel. They looked down on the earlier farmers who wanted more for their children than manual labor in the fields. They also disagreed vehemently on employing Arab labor, with the second group insisting that only by plowing the earth themselves would they belong to the land. There were far better writers in this period, including S. Y. Agnon who wrote with disdain about the earlier pioneers. The later settlers were zealous, dedicated and self-sacrificing pioneers and this image was reflected in the literature of the period. It was more complex and more subtle, full of sophisticated social and political concepts, and idealizing of work and the worker to heroic proportions, in line with the ideas of Tolstoyan Socialism. The stories of Meyer Vilkanski (1882-1949) are representative of this era. In his story Bahar young people are tested in their hardness, in their resolve to rebuild their lives in a new land:

We are doing the same work that Abraham did, that Isaac did. We enrich our beloved land with water. Another well, another well... And chapters of the Bible hover about you as if they could be distinctly seen: Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Fihal, Philistines...And hands that had never held a tool are swung up and down with strong stubborn movements. The bodies bend; ecstasy, enthusiasm is growing...

The immigration and settlement occurring in the aftermath of the First World War is considered the third Aliyah; its writing exhibits many changes in both form and content, constituting a shift towards a harsher less escapist realism. Joseph Chaim Brenner (1881-1921) wrote in this period, although his stories have become almost a part of Israeli folklore and as such transcend this periodization. Brenner's voice is one of responsible individualism and his work exhibits a high moral tone which abhorred compromise in matters of conscience. This passage was written shortly before he was murdered by a politically-motivated Arab group:

Whether you are my kin or not, I have a responsibility towards you...No politics...but one soul should be in touch with another soul...from now on, for generations to come, with no ulterior motive at all, with only the intention to be brother and friend.
Israel gained statehood in 1948 and immediately went to war against the attacking Arab armies who had for years been violently opposed to what they saw as appropriation of Arab lands by a non-Arab people. The first generation of Israeli writers matured during this period of conflict and war. They were indelibly shaped by the two experiences of statehood and the War for Independence. They had grown up in a collective society, actively involved in a youth movement which fostered deep bonds to the land of Israel and the Hebrew language. They had fought the British during the Mandate, they had helped illegal immigrants to enter Palestine, they were taught to put the good of the whole people before that of the self and now in war they had to take responsibility for their own actions and to think about the "I" rather than the "we". Protagonists in the stories of these writers often faced issues of personal morality, as in S. Yitzar’s The Prisoner which recounts the dilemma of a young Israeli soldier who, after capturing an Arab shepherd, questions his own relations to his enemy.

But the circle of that unexpected thought grows larger and larger: this man here at your feet, his life, his well being, his home, three souls, the whole fabric of life, have somehow found their way into the hollow of your hand, as though you were a little god sitting in the jeep. The abducted man, the stolen sheep, those souls in the mountain village - single, living strands that can be joined together inextricably - suddenly, you are the master of their fate. You have only to will it, to stop the jeep and let him go, and the verdict will be changed. But wait...wait...

Israeli writers of the 1960s and 1970s belong to the first generation which did not grow up under the influence of this collective, pioneering spirit. They are influenced by the existential writers of Europe. The 1967 Arab/Israeli war and the subsequent occupation of the territories on the West Bank of the Jordan and in the Gaza Strip heavily influence their thinking and their writing. The reversal of roles in which the image of the victim and the oppressor are suddenly reversed, the Arab has become the victim and they the oppressor, is reflected in the literature of this period. The issues of Arab/Jewish relationships and self-identity as an Israeli Jew are the motifs of numerous novels and stories by some of Israel’s best writers including Amos Oz, David Grossman and A. B. Yehoshua. Their works are multifaceted, often allegorical (Yehoshua’s Facing the Forest) and show the complexities of Israeli culture and the ongoing conflict between Arab and Jew. This passage from A.B. Yehoshua’s The Lover has a young Arab Israeli boy, staying over night in his Jewish boss’ home, describing a conversation with the wife:

She asked me so many questions you’d think she was working for the Secret Service. What does my father do and what does my mother do...and what did we learn in school, how many hours of Arabic, how many hours of Hebrew, how many hours of math, how many hours of history and what kind of history. How long has my family lived in this country, for how many generations that is, ...And what do I know about the Jews, have I heard of Zionism and what do I think it means. All the time she’s so serious and friendly like it’s really important to her. Looks like this is the first time she’s spoken to an Arab about things like this because till now she’s talked only to Arabs bringing her things from the supermarket or cleaning the steps.

While these three famed writers are still actively engaged in producing good literature, new authors of recent Israeli literature are more concerned with the art of fiction rather than an ideological message. These contemporary writers are publishing books and short stories in all genres; mysteries, romances, detective stories, historical novels. So while still drawing upon the rich lore of earlier Jews, and inevitably, being influenced by the present social and political realities of their country, writers in Israel find the freedom of creativity to experiment with any and all forms of expression and themes, and through excellent and rapid translations this literature is available to the English speaking world.

by Adrian Cole and Carol Johnson Shedd
Teaching Supplement

Questions for Discussion

1. What is meant by “national” and “transnational” literature?

2. What effect did colonialism have on modern Arabic literature?

3. Who was responsible for changes in literary production in Turkey in the 1920s? Explain why and what the effect was.

4. How did Turkish literature differ before the creation of the republic and after it?

5. Before the twentieth century what literature was considered worthwhile in Iran (Persia)?

6. What was unique about the stories of the Iranian M.A. Jamalzadeh? What is he criticizing in the excerpt on page 2?

7. Why is Hebrew literature the “odd man out” among Middle Eastern literatures?

8. Hebrew literature tends to fall within categories according to the period of aliyot in which the authors grew up. What are the characteristics of these different periods and how do they affect the literature?

9. Read the excerpt on page 11 from Yehoshua’s The Lover. What do you think it is saying about the relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel?

Student Activities

1. Egyptian writer Mahmud Tamur wrote character sketches or vignettes of Egyptian life. Look at the excerpt from his work on page 2. What does this small piece tell you about the person described? Look for similar vignettes in a book you have read, or write one of your own about a real or fictional character.

2. Research the history of Algeria and Morocco as to why so many North African authors write in French.

3. Maqama is a genre of Arabic literature which has as its theme a roguish trickster. Can you think of any characters similar to this in literature that you are familiar with? Illustrate, in comic strip form, an anecdote from one of their tales.

4. What was the controversy about the use of colloquial Arabic in literature? Research similar controversies in America over Huckleberry Finn and young adult books written in “Black English”.

5. The February 1994 issue of Middle East Resources includes the very enjoyable story Don’t You Have Any Donkeys in Your Country? by one of Turkey’s most popular authors, Aziz Nesin. It includes many interesting student activities. If your teacher does not have a copy, call the Teaching Resource Center at 617-495-4078 and we will send you one.
6. Look up the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 in Iran and prepare a brief report for your class, relating it to the changes in Persian literature.

7. Read the excerpt on page 7 by M. A. Jamalzedeh. Bring in three cartoons or comic strips that perform the function of political criticism and explain them to your class.

8. Aggadot are an important source, not only of Jewish literature, but of Muslim and Christian as well.

Read the story of Joseph in the Quran and in the Hebrew Bible. Then look up the stories about him in Ginzberg’s Legends of the Bible. Compare the different versions.

Choose a favorite aggadah and look up the biblical passage on which it is based. Write your own aggadah for the same passage.

9. Choose three stories from one of the anthologies of Hasidic tales and write a brief paragraph on their meanings. Tell the tales to your class and ask them to give their interpretation of the stories.
TRC Announcements

Study Groups

Literature of the Middle East  March 6, 13, 20, 27  4:00 - 5:30
Four week study group. Lectures on poetry, memoirs & autobiographies, novels and short stories, will be followed by guided discussion on assigned reading.

Islam Through Readings and Video  April 2, 9, 16, 23  4:00 - 5:30
Four week study group. Video showing followed by discussion of video and assigned readings.

Middle East Film Festival

Documentaries and Feature Films  April 30, May 7, 14, 21  6:00 - 8:00
Selected documentaries and feature films (not previously shown on television) focusing on four different themes: women, art & music, religion, and conflict. Introduction to video and discussion after showing.

Designing a Multidisciplinary Curriculum on the Middle East

Summer Workshop  June 24 - June 27  9:45 - 3:00
This 20 hour, intensive workshop is open to secondary teachers who are committed to teaching a semester course (or longer) on the Middle East during the 1995-1996 school year. The history of the Middle East will be studied through the issues, experiences and cultural traditions of the people. Space is limited and teachers will be expected to attend a follow up session in early spring 1996.

Please register me for the following programs:

Literature of the Middle East  (registration fee $15.00)
Islam Through Readings and Video  (registration fee $15.00)
Middle East Film Festival  (registration fee $15.00)
Designing a ME Curriculum  (registration fee $50.00)

Registration fee includes all material; for the summer workshop, lunch is included. Professional development points will be given. Make check payable to Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

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Are You Listening? Voices From the Middle East
An Anthology of Middle Eastern Literature in Translation for Secondary Schools

The Teaching Resource Center of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University is pleased to announce the publication of "Growing Pains" the first unit of Are You Listening? Voices From the Middle East an anthology, in translation, of short stories and excerpts from memoirs and novels written by indigenous authors. In the multicultural environment of contemporary America there is an increasing demand for a deeper understanding of other regions and cultures; our collection was prepared to meet this educational need. We believe that using stories in the classroom is a means of stimulating the students' interest in the people of the Middle East and foster an identification with a protagonist who, through literature, ceases to be 'different'.

"Growing Pains" includes five stories from Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Algeria, selected for their cultural richness and their appeal to young adults, with a brief biography of the author. The teaching supplement consists of a separate curriculum unit for each story, as well as a comparative unit which draws together themes and issues from different stories in the section. The curriculum units provide questions for discussion and student activities, as well as extensive background notes, a glossary and a comprehensive bibliography for further reference for teachers and students.

To receive your copy of the first unit Growing Pains send a check for $20.00 (includes postage and handling) made out to The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University to the address below.

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New Videos at the Teaching Resource Center

Videos may be borrowed at no charge for one week. We will send them to schools outside the greater Boston/Cambridge area, but they must be returned promptly by insured mail.

Crusades 4 parts 50 minutes BBC-TV Production, 1995.
Filmed on location throughout Europe and the Middle East this irreverent, witty account of the Crusades was produced in consultation with historians and theologians. Using innovative and creative techniques it presents the epic adventure from a non-western as well as western viewpoint.

The film was distributed by the Islamic Republic of Iran's permanent mission to the UN. It is an attractive video with a "musical beat" presenting a government overview of the history, culture and religion of Iran.

Produced in 1935 to showcase Jewish Palestine to the world, the film is a spectacular visual record of the Yishuv, the early Jewish community in Palestine.

Living Islam 6 parts 45 minutes BBC-TV Production, 1993.
This series, Living Islam, focuses on what it means to be Muslim in today's world; living with the great traditions of a world religion and the tradition of local, regional and village culture.

Open Sesame 120 minutes Pyramid Video
Sesame Street in Arabic is a useful and enjoyable video to introduce young children to a culturally different, yet similar way of life.

We Are God's Soldiers 52 minutes Arab Film Distrib., 1993
A documentary chronicling the Hamas organization in the occupied territories of Palestine. It will be controversial, but the director Hanna Musleh allows Hamas and the Palestinians to speak for themselves.