

# Modernism as a Movement in Arabic Literature

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## ABSTRACT

*This research aims to explain modernism as one of the genres in Arabic literature, which has been more often understood in the framework of periodization than as a literary genre. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a literature study approach. Data was obtained from various written sources in the form of books and scientific articles that discuss literary genres, modernism, and the development of modern Arabic literature. The results of the study show that modernism is a literary school that was born in response to social, political, and intellectual changes, especially after World War I, which was marked by a humanitarian crisis and a shift in traditional values. In the context of Arabic literature, modernism developed along with the revival (nahḍah), the intensity of contact with the West, the advancement of education, and the role of the press in spreading new ideas. Modernism in Arabic literature is characterized by characteristics such as individualism, experimentation with form, absurdity, symbolism, and formalism. Thus, modernism reflects not only the renewal of literary forms and styles, but also the change in the way Arab writers view the function of literature in modern society.*

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan modernisme sebagai salah satu aliran dalam sastra Arab, yang selama ini lebih sering dipahami dalam kerangka periodisasi dibandingkan sebagai aliran sastra. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka. Data diperoleh dari berbagai sumber tertulis berupa buku dan artikel ilmiah yang membahas aliran sastra, modernisme, serta perkembangan sastra Arab modern. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa modernisme merupakan aliran sastra yang lahir sebagai respons terhadap perubahan sosial, politik, dan intelektual, khususnya pasca Perang Dunia I, yang ditandai oleh krisis kemanusiaan dan pergeseran nilai-nilai tradisional. Dalam konteks sastra Arab, modernisme berkembang seiring dengan kebangkitan (nahḍah), intensitas kontak dengan Barat, kemajuan pendidikan, dan peran pers dalam menyebarkan gagasan-gagasan baru. Modernisme dalam sastra Arab ditandai oleh karakteristik seperti individualisme, eksperimen bentuk, absurditas, simbolisme, dan formalisme. Dengan demikian, modernisme tidak hanya mencerminkan pembaruan bentuk dan gaya sastra, tetapi juga perubahan cara pandang sastrawan Arab terhadap fungsi sastra dalam masyarakat modern.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the product of human creation that is constantly changing and developing along with the dynamics of time, social, and culture. These changes are not only seen in the form and style of literary works, but are also reflected in the emergence of various literary schools that color the author's creative process (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022). Literary schools basically refer to certain traditions of thinking, aesthetic views, or theories that are embraced and developed by authors in creating literary works (Somani, 2020). In this context, literary schools can take the form of certain styles, genres, or understandings that are followed by individuals or groups of authors, and function as an ideological and artistic foundation in the process of creating literary works (Sihotang et al., 2024).

Literary streams are not always rigidly bound to a specific period of time. A school can evolve beyond temporal boundaries and remain relevant even though the social and cultural context has changed. This can be seen, for example, in the school of romanticism that emphasizes emotions, imagination, and the human relationship with nature. Although romanticism first appeared in the late 18th century, its elements can still be found in contemporary literary works that prioritize subjective expression and the beauty of nature. (Perdana & Tasnimah, 2022). Similarly, the school of realism focuses on the objective depiction of everyday life. This school developed in the 19th century, but its principles are still used by modern writers in representing the social, political, and humanitarian realities of their time (Hidayatullah, 2024).

In literary studies, the understanding of the concept of "modern" is often limited to the aspect of periodization, not to the modern as a literary genre. Periodization refers to a specific division of time in literary history characterized by distinctive cultural, social, and political characteristics (Septiari et al., 2023). For example, the modern period in literature is generally associated with works born in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Meanwhile, modernism as a literary school refers to the aesthetic and artistic approach adopted by authors in creating literary works, which are not always limited to one specific period of time. Thus, modernism as a school has the potential to transcend the boundaries of periodization and continue to emerge in a variety of different historical contexts.

The literary genres in the treasures of Arabic literature are very diverse. One of the classifications that is quite comprehensive is put forward by Dr. Nabil Raghīb in his work *Al-Madzāhib al-Adabiyyah min al-Klāsīkiyyah ilā al-'Abbāsiyyah*. He divides the literary school into nineteen schools, among them *classiciyyah*, *rumansiyyah*, *wāqī'iyyah*, *mitsāliyyah*, *shūfiyyah*, *insāniyyah*, *fan li al-fan*, *ramziyyah*, *thabi'iyyah*, *ta'bīriyyah*, *intibā'iyyah*, *wujūdiyyah*, *'adamiyyah*, *mītāfisiqiyyah*, *'aqlā'iyyah*, *qaumiyyah*, *tajrīdiyyah*, *siryāliyyah*, and *'abbāsiyyah* (Raghīb, 1982). However, from this division there is no clear explanation of the modernism school as a stand-alone literary school. In addition, studies in the form of books and scientific articles that specifically discuss modernism as a genre in Arabic literature are still relatively limited.

Some previous studies have highlighted certain literary schools more partially, such as Firstiyana Romadlon Ash Shidiqiyah's research on Arabic modernization in relation to classical schools (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022), Muhammad Rizki's writings entitled *Social Realism in Hafiz Ibrahim's Poetry* (Hidayatullah, 2024), as well as Dyah and Tatik's research focusing on the Romanticism school (Perdana & Tasnimah, 2022) and Abd's research. Aziz who emphasizes intrinsic and extrinsic approaches in the assessment of modern literary works (Aziz & Yahya, 2019). However, these studies have not addressed modernism theoretically as a literary genre in Arabic literature.

Based on this background, this research is important to study and explain modernism as a genre in Arabic literature, including its definition, history of emergence, and characteristics. In addition, this article also seeks to clarify the difference between modern concepts in the context of periodization and modern as a literary genre, so that it is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of the study of Arabic literary genres, especially modernism.

## 1. METHOD

This research is a qualitative research with a descriptive approach that aims to describe and explain the concept of modernism as a genre in Arabic literature systematically and comprehensively. The qualitative approach is used because this research focuses on the meaning, interpretation, and analysis of theoretical concepts related to literary genres, especially modernism, without involving numerical measurements or experiments. The descriptive method is applied to present the data and analysis results as they are according to the characteristics of the data being studied.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data is in the form of books and scientific articles that directly discuss the literary genre, modernism, and the development of modern Arabic literature. Meanwhile, secondary data includes supporting writings in the form of journal articles, proceedings, and other literature sources that are relevant to the discussion of modernism in literature, both from the perspective of Arabic literature and literary theory in general. All data sources are obtained through library research by selecting references that are directly related to the research topic.

The data collection technique is carried out by reading critically and noting important parts of relevant literature sources, especially those containing definitions, history, characteristics, and the views of experts on modernism as a literary genre. The data that has been collected is then classified based on the themes

of discussion, such as the concept of literary genres, the understanding of modernism, and the position of modernism in Arabic literature.

Data analysis is carried out through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. At the data reduction stage, the researcher selects and focuses data that is relevant to the research objectives. Furthermore, the data is presented in a descriptive-analytical manner by relating various theoretical views found in the literature. The final stage in the form of drawing conclusions was carried out to formulate the characteristics of modernism as a school in Arabic literature and distinguish it from modern concepts in the framework of literary periodization.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### a. Definition of Modernism

Modernism is a movement that wants renewal and breaks away from classical norms. The term comes from the word "modern" which refers to the present. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), modernism is a distinctive use, mode of expression and stylistic peculiarities of the modern era (Oxford English Dictionary, 1857). Other terms that refer to the word "modern" are modernity and modernity. Modernization can be defined as a state or process of changing times that relies more on rationality (Hasanah et al., 2023). While modernity refers to subjective or existential experiences of the atmosphere and its impact on human culture, institutions and politics (Berman, 1983). An understanding of the two different concepts of modernism can shape contemporary social and cultural dynamics.

Modern man's disbelief in God and the rejection of tradition according to T.S. Elliot are one of the reasons behind the criticism of modern human humanity. Modern humans are those who live in the 20th century with a direct awareness of the present and are aware of the past (Nasradeen & Barzinji, 2013). Eliade stated that the main purpose of human beings is to know something sacred, which was seen as radically secular by the people of his time because it was considered irreligious and self-reliant. According to Parkinson, the term modern was first used by modern American poets by claiming that modern people are problematic people and this statement contradicts Conan's opinion that modern humanity is quite right with the problems faced after the world war (Nasradeen & Barzinji, 2013).

### a. History of Modernism

Modernism as a literary movement developed along with the major changes in human life in the early 20th century. Virginia Woolf stated that "around December 1910, human nature underwent a change," a statement that is often used as a symbolic marker of the birth of modernism in literature (Milne, 2009). According to Salma in Badawi, the period of modernism lasted from around 1910 to 1930, marked by the emergence of literary works that rejected traditional narrative and aesthetic forms (Badawi, 1992).

There are different views about the beginning of the emergence of modernism. Some scholars argue that modernism originated in America and Britain, especially through the works of T.S. Eliot in the 1920s. Tratner mentions that modernism came to a significant extent in 1936 in America with Emerson as one of its pioneers. On the other hand, Nicholls argues that modernism actually began in France with figures such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Symons, and Mallarmé (Nasradeen & Barzinji, 2013). This difference of views shows that modernism is a cross-cultural phenomenon that is not born single-handedly in one particular region.

World War I became one of the main factors that accelerated the birth of modernism. The destruction, fragmentation, and trauma of war reinforced the modernist view of the absurdity of life and the crisis of humanity. Disillusionment with religion, disdain for science and rationality, and the development of nihilism have all shaped the framework of modern human thought. The industrialization of war, such as the use of machine guns, chemical warfare, and fighter aircraft, exacerbated the sense of loss of meaning in life that was later expressed in modernist literary works (Fussell, 1974).

### b. The Development of Modernism in Literature

The development of modern Arabic literature cannot be separated from the process of intellectual and cultural revival known as *nahḍah*. The movement began in Egypt and Syria, then spread to Lebanon and other Arab regions. Intensive contact with the West since the end of the 18th century, especially after the French campaign in Egypt in 1798 (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022), became an important point of entry of modern ideas into the Arab world. This process encourages the birth of reforms in various fields, including literature, through modern education, translation activities, and the development of the press as a medium for the dissemination of ideas (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015).

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and the emergence of a relatively autonomous ruling dynasty made Egypt the center of the revival of modern Arabic literature. This condition opened up a wider space of intellectual freedom and thus attracted many writers from Syria and Lebanon to migrate to Egypt (Badawī, 1992). This migration accelerated the exchange of ideas and enriched the dynamics of modern Arabic literature. It was also during this phase that new literary genres such as novels and dramas began to develop significantly, especially under the influence of European literary works translated into Arabic (Hasanah et al., 2023).

In addition, the development of the press and the modernization of education played a strategic role in disseminating the idea of modernism. Print media makes literary works not only an artistic expression, but also a means of social communication and a source of livelihood for writers (Aziz & Yahya, 2019). This encourages a shift from classical literary forms to a language style that is simpler, communicative, and relevant to the realities of modern society. Thus, modernism in Arabic literature represents not only an aesthetic renewal, but also a change in the social function of literature in response to the dynamics of the times (Taghrobi & Zarei, 2016).

#### c. Characteristics of Modernism

As a literary genre, modernism has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from previous genres. These characteristics include individualism, experimentation, absurdity, symbolism, and formalism. Individualism is reflected in the modernist author's tendency to place the subjective experiences and consciousness of the individual at the center of the storytelling, rather than making historical events or collective social changes the main focus. Thus, modernist literary works emphasize more on the inner world of the character, such as his thoughts, memories, and existential struggles (Kumar, 2025).

Experimentation is another prominent feature of modernism, namely the author's attempt to represent the way of thinking of characters through unconventional narrative techniques, such as nonlinear plots and fragmented language styles. Absurdity arises as a reflection of the view that the modern world is absurd, especially as a result of the two World Wars, the rise of capitalism, and globalization that weakens faith in human values. Symbolism is an important element in modernism, where the author uses symbols in a complex way and is open to various possibilities of interpretation. Formalism emphasizes the search for radical new forms of expression as a manifestation of artistic freedom and creativity, thus opening the cradle of aesthetic innovation in modern literature (Prakasam, 2024).

#### d. Characters and Works

Most of the important figures of modernism were born between 1880 and 1900 and reached the peak of their productivity in the first half of the 20th century (Milne, 2009). Among the influential Western figures were Virginia Woolf with *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), James Joyce with *Ulysses* (1922), T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ezra Pound, Franz Kafka, and Ernest Hemingway, whose works represented the experimental spirit and existential crisis of modernism.

In the context of the Arab world and the Middle East, modernism also gave birth to important figures such as Nima Yooshij who revolutionized Persian poetry through *she'r-e no*, as well as Sadegh Hidayat in Persian modernist prose. In Arabic literature, modern poetry was pioneered by Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Malaikah, while Adonis is known as a modernist poet who expanded the aesthetic boundaries of Arabic poetry. Najib Mahfuz was instrumental in the development of modern Arabic novels, while Taufiq al-Hakim contributed to the drama genre. Mahmoud Darwish, as a Palestinian poet, presented modernism combined with national consciousness and humanity (Taghrobi & Zarei, 2016).

### D. CONCLUSION

There is no exact time to determine when the modernism school was born as written in the Badawi and Literary Movement. The existence of this school in Arabic literature is influenced by several factors as described earlier. Modernism in Arabic literature emerged as a response to disillusionment with religious traditions and classical norms. This school prioritized renewal and rationality, and was influenced by contact with the West, especially after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Modernism in Arabic literature is characterized by several key characteristics such as individualism, experimentation, impossibility, symbolism, and formalism. Important figures of this school, both from the West and Arabia, have played an important role in developing and spreading modernism. The influence of World Wars I and II, as well as social and political changes in the Middle East, also played a major role in the evolution of this school.

This article aims to provide a deeper understanding of modernism in Arabic literature, given the lack of previous research on this topic.

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