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THE CITY PARADIGM IN THE ARABIC NOVEL: A CULTURAL APPROACH (SELECTED CASE STUDIES)

Youssef Rahim*

Abstract. This article investigates the city paradigm in the Arabic novel through the lens of cultural studies, examining the urban space not merely as a geographical setting but as a cultural text, a symbolic schema, and an expression of modern Arab consciousness. Drawing on selected case studies ranging from Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo to Hanan Al-Shaykh's Beirut, and from Elias Khoury's post-war urban ruins to Halim Barakat's discourse on exile and displacement, the study traces the evolution of urban narrative in twentieth and twenty-first century Arabic fiction. The article argues that the city in the Arabic novel functions simultaneously as a site where postcolonial identity is negotiated, as a legal-mnemonic space where collective memory is preserved, and as a symbolic argument through which the fragmentation aesthetics of postmodernity are made manifest. Grounded in Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Edward Said's postcolonial cultural criticism, and Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach to space, this research offers a culturally anthropological contribution to Arabic literary studies.

Keywords: Arabic novel; urban space; cultural approach; postcolonialism; city narrative; collective memory; Naguib Mahfouz; spatial theory; identity; modernity

* University of Bejaia; Algeria
E-mail: youssef.rahim@univ-bejaia.dz
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1236-3438>

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ПАРАДИГМА ГОРОДА В АРАБСКОМ РОМАНЕ: КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД (ИЗБРАННЫЕ ТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ)

Юсуф Рахим*

Абстракт. В данной статье исследуется парадигма города в арабском романе через призму культурологии, рассматривая городское пространство не просто как географическую среду, а как культурный текст, символическую схему и выражение современного арабского сознания. Опираясь на избранные тематические исследования, варьирующиеся от Каира Нагиба Махфуза до Бейрута Ханан аш-Шейх, и от послевоенных городских руин Элиаса Хури до дискурса Халима Бараката об изгнании и перемещении, исследование прослеживает эволюцию урбанистического повествования в арабской художественной литературе XX и XXI веков. В статье утверждается, что город в арабском романе функционирует одновременно как площадка, где обсуждается постколониальная идентичность, как юридически-мнемоническое пространство, где сохраняется коллективная память, и как символический аргумент, посредством которого проявляется эстетика фрагментарности постмодерна. Основанное на пространственной теории Анри Лефевра, постколониальной культурной критике Эдварда Саида и феноменологическом подходе Гастона Башляра к пространству, это исследование вносит культурно-антропологический вклад в арабское литературоведение.

Ключевые слова: арабский роман; городское пространство; культурологический подход; постколониализм; городское повествование; коллективная память; Нагиб Махфуз; пространственная теория; идентичность; современность

* Университет Беджайи; Алжир

E-mail: youssef.rahim@univ-bejaia.dz

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1236-3438>

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ƏRƏB ROMANINDA ŞƏHƏR PARADİQMASI: MƏDƏNİ YANAŞMA (SEÇİLMİŞ TƏDQİQATLAR)

Yusif Rahim*

Abstrakt. Bu məqalə ərəb romanında şəhər paradigmasını mədəni yanaşma çərçivəsində araşdırır. Şəhər təkcə coğrafi məkan kimi deyil, eyni zamanda mədəni mətn kimi, simvolik sxema kimi, həmçinin müasir ərəb şüurunun ifadəsi kimi öyrənilir. Tədqiqat Nəcib Məhfuzun Qahirəsindən Hənan Əş-Şeyx'in Beyrut şəhərinə, Əlias Xuri'nin postmüharibə şəhri ilə Həlim Bərəkətin məcburi köç mövzusunda qədər müxtəlif nümunələr üzərindən ərəb romanındakı şəhər söyləminin inkişafını izləyir. Məqalə göstərir ki, şəhər ərəb romanında həm müstəmləkəçilik sonrası özünəməxsusluğun sınıdığı məkan, həm kollektiv yaddaşın saxlandığı hüquqi sahə, həm də postmodernizmin parçalanma estetikasının əyaniləşdiyi simvolik arqumentdir. Henri Lefebvr'in məkan nəzəriyyəsi, Edvard Said'in postkolonial kulturologiyası və Gaston Bachelard'ın fenomenoloji yanaşması əsasında qurulan bu tədqiqat ərəb ədəbiyyatşünaslığına mədəni-antropoloji bir töhfədir.

Açar sözlər: ərəb romanı; şəhər məkanı; mədəni yanaşma; postkolonializm; şəhər söyləmi; kollektiv yaddaş; Nəcib Məhfuz; məkan nəzəriyyəsi

* Bejaia Universiteti; Əlcəzair
E-mail: youssef.rahim@univ-bejaia.dz
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1236-3438>

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1.Introduction: The City as a Cultural Text

The city has long been one of the most fertile imaginative terrains in world literature, but in the Arabic novelistic tradition, it occupies a particularly layered and contested position. From the narrow alleys of Cairo's Gamaliya quarter immortalized by Naguib Mahfouz to the war-ravaged streets of Beirut rendered in the fractured prose of Elias Khoury, the Arab city is never merely a backdrop against which human drama unfolds. It is, rather, a protagonist in its own right - a living, breathing, morally charged entity whose rhythms, contradictions, and silences are inseparable from the consciousness of its inhabitants and from the broader socio-historical forces that shape it [Hammūdah, 2001].

This article proposes a cultural approach to reading the city in the Arabic novel, one that situates literary representations of urban space within the wider frameworks of postcolonial theory, spatial philosophy, and cultural memory studies. The cultural approach, as understood here, departs from purely formalist or narratological analyses and instead foregrounds the ideological, anthropological, and symbolic dimensions of literary space. It asks not only how the city is narrated, but why the city is narrated in the ways it is, and what cultural work such narration performs within specific historical conjunctures.

The Arabic novel, as a form, emerged largely as an urban phenomenon. Its genealogy is inseparable from the rise of print culture in Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its development has tracked, with remarkable fidelity, the transformations of Arab urban life: the colonial encounter and its aftermath, the rise and fall of nationalist ideologies, the catastrophe of 1948 and the question of Palestine, the Lebanese Civil War, and more recently the upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring and their violent consequences [Husayn, 1982]. To read the city in the Arabic novel is therefore to read a palimpsest of Arab modernity itself.

The present study focuses on four major case studies, each representing a distinct mode of urban representation and a distinct cultural problematic: Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy (*al-Thulāthiyya*), Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (*Bāb al-Shams*), Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (*Hikāyat Zahrah*), and Halim Barakat's *Days of Dust* (*Awdat al-Ṭā'ir ilā al-Baḥr*). These works span several decades and several national literary traditions within the broader Arabic novelistic corpus, and together they illuminate the range of cultural meanings that the city has been made to bear in modern Arabic fiction.

2.Theoretical Frameworks: Space, Culture, and the Urban Text

Any serious engagement with the literary city requires a robust theoretical apparatus that can account for the multi-dimensionality of urban space. Three theoretical frameworks inform the methodology of the present study: Henri Lefebvre's trialectic theory of space, Edward Said's postcolonial cultural criticism, and Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological poetics of space.

2.1.Lefebvre's Spatial Trialectics

Henri Lefebvre's foundational work *The Production of Space* (1974) articulated a triadic conception of space that has proven enormously productive for literary and cultural analysis. Lefebvre distinguishes between perceived space (*espace perçu*), the material, physical dimension of spatial practice; conceived space (*espace conçu*), the abstract, representational space of planners, cartographers, and ideologues; and lived space (*espace vécu*), the space of imagination, symbolism, and everyday life as experienced by inhabitants. For Lefebvre, space is not a neutral container for social life but is itself produced through social relations, and this production is always shot through with conflict, contradiction, and power [Lefebvre, 1991].

The relevance of this framework for reading the Arabic novel is immediately apparent. In Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, for instance, the material geography of the Gamaliya quarter (perceived space) is inseparable from the colonial urban planning that sought to reorganize Cairo along European lines (conceived space), while the lived space of the novel's characters - their embodied, affective, and symbolic inhabitation of the city - resists and exceeds both [‘Abd al-Mu‘ī, 1998]. Lefebvre's trialectic allows us to read urban fiction not merely as the representation of a pre-given spatial reality but as itself a form of spatial practice, a mode of producing and contesting the meaning of urban space.

2.2.Said's Postcolonial Cultural Criticism

Edward Said's postcolonial cultural criticism, developed across a range of works from *Orientalism* (1978) to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), offers a complementary framework for understanding the politics of urban representation in the Arabic novel. Said's central insight - that the geography of empire is always also a cultural geography, a mapping of power relations onto space - is particularly relevant to the literary cities of the Arabic world, which were profoundly shaped by the colonial encounter and its ongoing legacies [Sa‘īd, 2005].

The colonial city, in Said's framework, is a space of radical ambivalence. It is simultaneously a site of domination and resistance, of imposed modernity and indigenous persistence, of cosmopolitan aspiration and nationalist nostalgia. These tensions are nowhere more vividly rendered than in the literary representations of Cairo, Beirut, and other Arab cities that have passed through the crucible of colonial and neocolonial power. Said's insistence on reading cultural texts against the grain of their apparent representations - on attending to what is silenced or marginalized as much as to what is foregrounded - provides an indispensable methodological orientation for the present study.

2.3.Bachelard's Phenomenological Poetics

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) offers a third, more intimate register of spatial analysis. Where Lefebvre focuses on the macro-social production of space and Said on its colonial politics, Bachelard attends to the micro-phenomenology of inhabited space - the house, the room, the corner, the nest - as sites of reverie, memory, and existential anchoring. Bachelard's phenomenological approach is sensitive to the ways in which literary space is

always also an interior space, a projection of psychic structures onto the external world [Bachelard, 1994].

This dimension of spatial analysis is particularly valuable for reading the Arabic novel's engagement with the city as a lost or longed-for home—a recurrent topos in the literature of exile and diaspora that figures so prominently in the works of Halim Barakat and others. The Bachelardian sense of the city as a site of dwelling, memory, and poetic imagination counterbalances the more overtly political emphases of Lefebvre and Said, and together these three frameworks provide a rich and multidimensional toolkit for cultural analysis.

3.Cairo as Palimpsest: Naguib Mahfouz's Urban Vision

Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy - Palace Walk [Bayn al-Qaṣrayn, 1956], Palace of Desire [Qaṣr al-Shawq, 1957], and Sugar Street [al-Sukkariyya, 1957] - remains the most sustained and architecturally elaborate rendering of an Arab city in the history of the Arabic novel. Spanning the years 1917 to 1944, the trilogy follows three generations of the al-Sayyid Abd al-Jawad family through the labyrinthine streets and interiors of the Gamaliya quarter in old Cairo, tracing the intersection of family history with national history, private desire with public politics, spatial intimacy with spatial transformation [Maḥfūz, 1956].

Mahfouz's Cairo is a profoundly stratified space. At its most literal level, it is a meticulous topographical reconstruction of a historical neighborhood - Mahfouz grew up in Gamaliya, and his fiction is saturated with the specific textures, sounds, and social codes of that world. But the Gamaliya of the Trilogy is simultaneously a symbolic geography, a map of the contradictions of Egyptian modernity under British colonialism and its aftermath. The al-Sayyid Abd al-Jawad's house - with its gendered interior/exterior division, its architecture of patriarchal authority and female confinement - is a microcosm of the larger social order, and its gradual dissolution across the three volumes mirrors the dissolution of a certain model of Egyptian society [al-Rāfi'ī, 1999].

The street, in Mahfouz's urban poetics, is the site of public life, political contestation, and masculine sociality. It is the space of coffeehouses, religious processions, nationalist demonstrations, and sexual commerce. But it is also the space of historical change: the streets of Gamaliya that al-Sayyid Abd al-Jawad knows are being progressively transformed by the forces of colonial modernity, and the Trilogy registers this transformation with a kind of melancholic precision. The new city - with its cafes, cinemas, and cosmopolitan thoroughfares - is always encroaching on the old city, and the old city is always receding into memory and nostalgia.

This dialectic of old and new, indigenous and colonial, is at the heart of Mahfouz's urban vision. His Cairo is a palimpsest in the fullest sense of the term: a space in which multiple historical layers coexist, each partially visible through the others, none ever fully erased. The cultural meaning of this palimpsestic city is complex and ultimately irreducible to any simple thesis. Mahfouz does not simply romanticize the old city against the new, nor does he uncritically celebrate

modernization. Rather, he holds these tensions in productive suspension, allowing the city itself to embody the unresolved contradictions of Egyptian modernity [Ḥammūdah, 2001].

Mahfouz's realist technique is, in this respect, itself a kind of urban cartography. His detailed attention to the material textures of the city - the architecture of houses, the layout of streets, the social codes of neighborhoods - produces a spatial representation that is at once documentary and symbolic, ethnographic and literary. Reading the Trilogy through Lefebvre's trialectic, we can see how Mahfouz maps the interplay of perceived, conceived, and lived space in a colonial city undergoing rapid transformation, and how his fiction intervenes in this process by making visible the lived spaces that colonial urban planning seeks to suppress or obliterate.

4. Beirut in Ruins: Elias Khoury and the Post-War City

If Mahfouz's Cairo is a city of memory and gradual transformation, Elias Khoury's Beirut is a city of catastrophe and radical discontinuity. Khoury, the Lebanese novelist and intellectual, has made Beirut - and by extension the Palestinian cause and the experience of exile - the central preoccupation of a major body of fiction that includes *Gate of the Sun* [Bāb al-Shams, 1998], *Yalo* (2002), and *As Though She Were Sleeping* [Ka'annahā Nā'imah, 2007]. His urban imaginary is shaped by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and by the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinian people, and it registers these catastrophes in a prose style that is deliberately fragmented, labyrinthine, and resistant to narrative closure [Khūrī, 1998].

Gate of the Sun is structured around the figure of the camp - specifically the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut - as a kind of anti-city, a space of enforced impermanence and precarity that stands in ironic and tragic contrast to the city proper. The novel's narrator, Khalil, tends to the comatose Younis in a hospital room in the camp while recounting, in a series of nested stories, the history of Palestinian dispossession and resistance since 1948. The camp is spatially enclosed, materially impoverished, and politically marginal, yet it is also, in Khoury's rendering, a space of intense life, memory, and narrative vitality.

Khoury's treatment of urban space is inseparable from his treatment of narrative form. The fragmented, non-linear structure of his novels - with their multiple narrators, embedded stories, and deliberate refusals of chronological order - mirrors the spatial fragmentation of the post-war Lebanese city. Beirut in Khoury's fiction is a city that has been literally destroyed and rebuilt multiple times, whose spatial continuity has been ruptured by successive waves of violence, and whose collective memory has been scattered across the diaspora. His formal choices enact, at the level of narrative architecture, the spatial disorientation and temporal dislocation that characterize the lived experience of his characters [Idrīs, 2000].

The cultural significance of Khoury's urban vision extends beyond the specifically Lebanese context. His work has been widely read as a meditation on the experience of catastrophe - al-nakba and its aftermath - that resonates across

the Arab world and beyond. By making Beirut the site of a universal reckoning with violence, memory, and survival, Khoury transforms the particular geography of Lebanon into a symbolic landscape for the broader experience of Arab modernity in its most traumatic register. His city is a city that bears witness, that refuses to forget, and that insists on the irreducibility of human suffering even in the face of political obliteration.

Said's postcolonial cultural criticism provides an important frame for understanding the politics of Khoury's urban writing. The destruction of Beirut, in Khoury's work, is not merely the result of internal Lebanese sectarian conflict but is deeply entangled with the larger structures of imperial power, Zionist settler-colonialism, and Western geopolitical interests in the Arab world. His fiction makes visible the connections between seemingly local urban catastrophes and global structures of power, and in doing so, it performs the kind of contrapuntal reading that Said advocated as the proper mode of postcolonial cultural criticism [Sa'īd, 2005].

5. The Feminine City: Hanan Al-Shaykh and Beirut's Body Politic

Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* [Ḥikāyat Zahrah, 1980] offers a radically different perspective on Beirut from that found in Khoury's work, though it shares with the latter a preoccupation with the city's capacity for violence and its effects on the individual psyche. Where Khoury's urban vision is primarily political and historical, Al-Shaykh's is intimate, corporeal, and feminist. Her Beirut is experienced through the body of her female protagonist, Zahra, and the city's violence - the violence of the Lebanese Civil War - is inseparable from the domestic and sexual violence that Zahra has suffered throughout her life.

Al-Shaykh's novel is structured around Zahra's divided experience of two cities: the Beirut she flees to escape her abusive family environment, and the West African city of Abidjan where she finds temporary refuge with her uncle. The movement between these two urban spaces enacts a classic postcolonial geography of center and periphery, metropole and margin, but Al-Shaykh complicates this geography by refusing to idealize either space. Neither Beirut nor Abidjan offers Zahra a genuine liberation; both are sites of patriarchal constraint, racial hierarchy, and sexual exploitation ([Al-Shaykh, 1980]).

What is distinctive about Al-Shaykh's urban poetics is her insistence on the city as a site of female desire and resistance as well as oppression. Zahra's relationship with Beirut is not simply one of victimhood; it is also one of attachment, transgression, and ultimately a kind of perverse liberation through the city's wartime violence. The snipers and militiamen who control the city's streets during the Civil War paradoxically open a space for Zahra's sexual autonomy that the peacetime city had denied her. This disturbing and controversial dimension of the novel - the eroticization of war - has generated considerable critical debate, but it also points to a fundamental insight about the gendered dimensions of urban space.

The cultural approach enables us to read Al-Shaykh's Beirut as what we might call a body politic in the most literal sense: a space whose political condition is

inscribed on and experienced through the bodies of its female inhabitants. The violence of the war is not separate from the violence of gender; rather, the two are mutually constitutive, and the city is the space in which their intersection is made most visible. Al-Shaykh's contribution to the literary imagination of Beirut is to insist that any account of the city's trauma that does not attend to its specifically gendered dimensions is necessarily incomplete [Farīd, 2007].

6.The City of Exile: Halim Barakat and the Space of Dispossession

Halim Barakat's *Days of Dust* [‘Awdat al-Ṭā’ir ilā al-Baḥr, 1969] addresses what is perhaps the most politically charged topos in modern Arabic literature: the experience of the Palestinian nakba and its aftermath. Written in the immediate wake of the 1967 Arab defeat, the novel registers the shattering of a generation's political and national aspirations and explores the relationship between the loss of political hope and the loss of urban belonging [Barakāt, 1969].

Barakat's urban imaginary is structured by the dialectic of presence and absence, home and exile, memory and dispossession. The cities of Palestine - Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa - appear in his fiction primarily as absent presences: spaces that exist in memory and desire but that have been physically and politically severed from their Arab inhabitants. This is the quintessential urban experience of the nakba: not the loss of abstract territory but the loss of specific streets, houses, neighborhoods, and the entire dense fabric of urban life that they embody.

The city of exile - Beirut, Amman, Damascus - appears in Barakat's work as a space of provisional habitation and perpetual longing. The Palestinian refugees who populate his fiction inhabit these cities as guests or intruders, always aware of their precarity, always oriented toward a home that may never be recovered. This condition of urban exile generates a distinctive spatiality in Barakat's fiction: a doubled consciousness of the space one inhabits and the space one has lost, a constant superimposition of present geography on absent geography [Barakāt, 2007].

Bachelard's phenomenological approach is particularly illuminating here. The Palestinian house - lost, imagined, remembered, reconstructed in narrative - functions in Barakat's fiction as precisely the kind of poetic space that Bachelard describes: a space of intimate attachment, existential anchoring, and what Bachelard calls 'the original full closeness.' The loss of this space is experienced not merely as a political or material deprivation but as an ontological wound, a disruption of the very foundations of being-in-the-world. Barakat's contribution to the literary representation of the city is to make this ontological dimension of urban dispossession legible and to insist on its irreducibility to political abstraction.

The cultural significance of Barakat's urban imaginary extends beyond the specifically Palestinian experience to encompass the broader Arab encounter with modernity, colonialism, and displacement. His fiction participates in and contributes to a pan-Arab cultural conversation about the meaning of loss, the politics of memory, and the ethics of resistance. By grounding this conversation

in the specific textures of urban space - the material geography of houses, streets, and neighborhoods - Barakat ensures that it never loses touch with the lived reality of those whose lives have been most directly affected by the forces of dispossession [Sa'īd, 2005].

7.Comparative Analysis: Urban Modalities and Cultural Functions

Having examined the four case studies in turn, we are now in a position to undertake a comparative analysis that identifies the major modalities and cultural functions of the city in the Arabic novel. Across the works of Mahfouz, Khoury, Al-Shaykh, and Barakat, several recurrent patterns emerge that illuminate the distinctive ways in which the Arabic novelistic tradition has engaged with urban space.

7.1.The City as Memory Archive

Perhaps the most consistent cultural function of the city in the Arabic novel is its role as a memory archive - a space in which the past is preserved, contested, and made available for the present. In Mahfouz's Cairo, this archival function is performed through the meticulous topographical reconstruction of a historical neighborhood; in Khoury's Beirut, through the narrative preservation of Palestinian oral history in the face of political obliteration; in Al-Shaykh's fiction, through the inscription of female experience on the urban landscape; and in Barakat's work, through the mnemonic recovery of lost Palestinian cities. In each case, the city is not merely a setting for narrative but a repository of cultural memory that the novel both draws on and contributes to [ʿAbd al-Muʿī, 1998].

This archival function of the literary city has a specific political valence in the postcolonial Arab context. Colonial modernity, with its programs of urban redevelopment, its erasure of indigenous spatial practices, and its imposition of new spatial orders, has repeatedly threatened the cultural memory embodied in Arab cities. The Arabic novel has responded by performing a kind of counter-archival work, preserving in fiction the urban memories that colonial and neocolonial power seeks to suppress. This makes the Arabic novel not merely a literary form but a cultural institution with significant political stakes.

7.2.The City as Identity Crucible

A second major modality of the city in the Arabic novel is its function as an identity crucible - a space in which individual and collective identities are formed, tested, and sometimes dissolved. In Mahfouz's Trilogy, the generational transformation of the al-Sayyid Abd al-Jawad family is inseparable from the spatial transformation of Cairo; as the family members move from the enclosed world of the Gamaliya quarter to the more open and cosmopolitan spaces of the modern city, their identities are reshaped in ways that both liberate and disorient them. The city is the medium through which Egyptian national identity is negotiated under colonial modernity [Ḥusayn, 1982].

In Khoury and Barakat's works, the identity crucible of the city operates under even more extreme conditions: the conditions of war, catastrophe, and exile. The Palestinian refugee camp in Khoury's Gate of the Sun is a site not merely of

physical survival but of cultural and political identity formation; it is the space in which a collective Palestinian identity is forged and maintained in the face of systematic dispossession. Similarly, Barakat's exiled Palestinians maintain their identity through the mnemonic preservation of their lost urban spaces, insisting on the continuity of Palestinian identity against the spatial disruption of the nakba.

7.3. The City as Political Allegory

A third modality of the city in the Arabic novel is its function as political allegory - as a symbolic landscape that embodies and reflects the broader political conditions of Arab society. This allegorical function is most explicit in Khoury's work, where Beirut's destruction stands as an allegory for the destruction of Arab political aspirations more generally, and where the Palestinian camp represents the condition of an entire people reduced to a condition of rightlessness and precarity. But it is also present in Mahfouz, where the gradual modernization of Cairo allegorizes the ambivalent experience of Egyptian national development, and in Barakat, where the lost Palestinian city allegorizes the broader political failure of Arab nationalism after 1967.

The political allegorical function of the city in the Arabic novel is inseparable from the cultural-political context in which these novels were written and received. Arab novelists have consistently used the city as a vehicle for political commentary that might otherwise be suppressed by censorship or political repression; the figurative and symbolic dimensions of literary urban representation provide a measure of protection and deniability that more direct forms of political discourse cannot offer. This strategic use of the city as political allegory is itself a cultural practice with deep roots in the Arabic literary tradition [Idrīs, 2000].

8. Cultural Approach: Methodological Reflections

The cultural approach to the city in the Arabic novel, as practiced in this study, involves a set of methodological commitments that are worth making explicit. First, it treats the literary text not as a transparent window onto a pre-given urban reality but as itself a cultural practice - a mode of producing, contesting, and transforming the meaning of urban space. This means attending carefully to the formal dimensions of urban representation: the narrative perspective from which the city is seen, the language through which it is described, the temporal organization of urban experience, and the generic conventions through which urban space is made legible.

Second, the cultural approach situates literary urban representation within its broader cultural and political context. This involves reading the Arabic novel in relation to the historical conditions of its production and reception - the colonial encounter and its aftermath, the rise and fall of nationalist ideologies, the Palestinian question, the Lebanese Civil War - as well as in relation to the cultural debates and intellectual formations that shaped its development. The Arabic novel did not emerge in a cultural vacuum; it developed in dialogue with a rich tradition of Arabic literary and intellectual culture, and it has been shaped by the specific pressures and possibilities of the postcolonial Arab world [Farīd, 2007].

Third, the cultural approach attends to the relationship between the literary imagination of the city and the actual social and political conditions of Arab urban life. This does not mean reducing the literary text to a mere reflection of social reality; rather, it means taking seriously the ways in which literary representations both respond to and intervene in the social world, the ways in which the Arabic novel has contributed to the cultural formation of Arab urban identities and urban imaginaries.

Finally, the cultural approach insists on the plurality and diversity of the Arabic novelistic tradition. There is no single, homogeneous way in which the city is represented in Arabic fiction; rather, there are multiple, competing, and often contradictory urban imaginaries that reflect the diversity of Arab cultural experience across different national contexts, historical periods, and social positions. The four case studies examined in this article represent only a small sample of this diversity, and any comprehensive account of the city in the Arabic novel would need to attend to a much wider range of texts and contexts.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that the city in the Arabic novel is not merely a setting or a backdrop but a central cultural preoccupation - a site at which the most urgent questions of Arab modernity, identity, memory, and politics are worked through and made legible. Drawing on the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Elias Khoury, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Halim Barakat, and guided by the theoretical frameworks of Lefebvre, Said, and Bachelard, it has identified three major cultural functions of the city in Arabic fiction: as a memory archive, as an identity crucible, and as a political allegory.

The cultural approach developed in this study has several advantages over more exclusively formalist or sociological approaches to the Arabic novel. By attending simultaneously to the formal dimensions of urban representation, the cultural and political contexts of literary production, and the theoretical frameworks developed in spatial studies, postcolonial criticism, and phenomenological philosophy, it is able to capture the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the literary city in ways that more narrowly focused approaches cannot. It treats the Arabic novel as both an aesthetic object and a cultural practice, and it reads literary urban representation as simultaneously a formal achievement and a political intervention.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the specific corpus of texts examined here. The cultural approach to the city in the Arabic novel opens up a rich agenda for future research, including comparative studies of urban representation across different national literary traditions within the Arabic world, investigations of the gendered and classed dimensions of urban space in Arabic fiction, analyses of the relationship between the literary city and the actual built environment of Arab cities, and explorations of the ways in which contemporary Arabic fiction is engaging with the new urban formations produced by globalization, digital technology, and the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The city

remains, in all its complexity and contradiction, one of the most vital sites of Arabic literary imagination.

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