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## **TAHA HUSSEIN AND NAGUIB MAHFOUZ: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF 20TH-CENTURY ARABIC NOVEL**

### **Abstract:**

In his article “The Modern Renaissance of Arabic Literature” published in 1955, Taha Hussein (b. 1889-d. 1973)—the reputable “Dean of Arabic Literature”—wrote that the “ancient Arab world never wanted to give literary freedom to narrative, whether it be short story, novelette, or novel, although these existed without name among the common classes” (253). Hussein ventures on a general—and perhaps generalized—periodization of Arabic literature, in which the genre of “the narrative,” as conceived in the West, assumes a pivotal role. After laying out his appraisal of “the narrative,” Hussein proceeds to weigh in on a very specific genre, the novel. He underscores that after “World War II, the novel has become the most important literary product of Egypt as well as of all the other Arabic countries” (253). With these remarks in mind, I would like to turn to a fascinating statement by the Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz made in 1980: “As for us, the writers belonging to the developing or under-developed world, we used to think at the time that realising our real literary identity coincided with the annihilation of our own self-identity. What I mean to say is that the European novel was sacred, and departure from this form was sacrilege. . . . Now, my theory has changed. The correct form is that which comes from an inner music.” (qtd. in Omri 244) Against the backdrop of these remarks by Hussein and Mahfouz, I would like to examine the reception of the novel genre in the Arab world, with a focus on the Arab East. It is quite fascinating to juxtapose Hussein’s and Mahfouz’s statements above. One cannot but notice a disconnect—a contradiction even—between Hussein’s highly positive, celebratory comments and Mahfouz’s revisionist—almost mournful—confessions on the problematic of form, with the question of the novel genre assuming a central position. In a way, Mahfouz’s 1980 remarks on the novel do challenge, in a most pronounced manner, Hussein’s views, which were made some twenty-five years prior. With the problematic of authenticity in mind, I would like to shed more light on Hussein’s “exuberant” remarks and Mahfouz’s “mournful” ones, this being part of, first, my critical assessment of the literary history of the novel genre in the Arab world and, second, my investigation of the local and foreign components of this art form.

### **Keywords:**

Taha Hussein, Naguib Mahfouz, narrative, Arabic novel, modernity