

# A Comparative Analysis of the Great American and Arab Novel



# A Comparative Analysis of the Great American and Arab Novel:

*A Study of the USA  
and Cairo Trilogies*

By

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Opposites show themselves most clearly by being placed next to each other.  
—Søren Kierkegaard



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## PREFACE

This work represents the first comparative study of what is popularly known as the Great American Novel, and the Great Arabic Novel, to date. In the more than sixty years since the publication of these works, i.e. works that best fit this description, there has been no effort made at a comparative or contrastive reading of them, at any level, which is especially remarkable considering the status of these works in the literary canon, as well as the cultural and political relations between these two political systems in recent times.

This work belongs in the field of cross-cultural literary studies. Its aim is to establish a framework for the interpretation of methods in literary works which belong to different cultural systems, which display certain formal and thematic characteristics, and which deal with some kind of social or political commentary. The theoretical framework within which these procedures will be examined is Systems Theory, in particular the theory of Open and Closed Systems. We will show how the cultural and political system in which the authors wrote influenced their choice of rhetorical and literary methods as well as the treatment of theme, but also how the literary text serves as a document of a particular type of social system. The main thesis of this work is that an open system conditions the use of innovative, experimental methods in the Great American Novel, in particular intermittent narration, multiple protagonists, montage, intertextuality and various forms of linguistic experimentation. On the other hand, the closed system in which the Great Arabic Novel was written determined the selection of traditional literary procedures: chronologically uniform narration, a single protagonist, allegory, symbolism, and linguistic uniformity. Through the analysis of the political commentary in these works we will show how literary techniques are related to, and determined by, the broader social and political space, and how the literary text acts as a kind of social document of a particular type of political and cultural system.

Since the authors we are examining belong to different traditions, it is important to situate them in the proper literary context and show what influences, if any, they worked under. In the case of Dos Passos, we will situate his social chronicles in the context of a tradition of critical realism that started with writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Jack London and Frank

Norris in the 1890s. In the case of Naguib Mahfouz, the literary context is somewhat different, because the novel as a genre is virtually unknown in Egypt until the early twentieth century. Mahfouz therefore occupies a unique place in the history of Arabic literature, being at once the originator and still the preeminent writer of the genre of social realism in novel form.

In the case of both writers, it will be shown that their unique place in their national literatures is reaffirmed by the fact that no writers after them continued the genres or literary practices which they employed. Dos Passos's experimental narration still stands unique in the history of American literature, while new generations of Egyptian writers have a deeply problematic relationship with Mahfouz, whom they consider a pioneer in many ways, but against whom they also rebel and choose to write in new genres. By most critical and popular accounts, these two literary works can arguably carry the title of the Great American and Arabic Novel, a position, I will argue, reinforced by their perfect contrast as defined within intercultural literary studies, and deserving of serious scholarly and popular attention.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main problems in cross-cultural literary studies is identifying a multifunctional research method for literary phenomena which differ based on national, cultural or geographical conditions, while sharing thematic, formal or structural characteristics. The literature of modernism makes this task easier to a certain extent, since we are dealing with a period in which, regardless of the national, cultural or political systems, the works themselves share clearly recognizable structural features, methods and procedures on a transcultural level. Such procedures include the use of different intertextual methods designed to formally shape the political, social or economic complexity, create a fluctuation of discourse or linguistic independence in a space which the author seeks to liberate from traditional narrative limitations. The discourse analyses published in the second half of the twentieth century are therefore mostly preoccupied with the dialogic nature of socially engaged literature of late modernism, but especially with those aspects which strongly reflect social reality, in other words, with works whose narrative is directly related to a situational context or real space, while also analyzing genre classifications of the social novel, documentary fiction and social chronicles. The relation of these works with objective reality therefore affects the choice of narrative techniques, particularly the experimental ones, which are used to portray social and political conditions. The works of social realism by individual authors like Dos Passos therefore abandon traditional literary methods in favor of a modernist approach – symbolism, interior monologue, allusion, intertext – but since they also contain a component of social critique, we may justifiably refer to them collectively as critical realism.

On the other hand, authors who use traditional narrative methods, particularly late modernist writers (of the 1940s and 50s), such as Naguib Mahfouz, in whose work there is a strong conception of national identity, as a rule have a very complex and problematic relationship with the past and inherited political systems. Consequently they seldom use experimental modernist methods used by writers like Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Dos Passos and Kafka. This is precisely why such works are most responsive to approaches that study social themes and motifs. This includes the critique of different ideologies, the social class or institutional affiliation of characters, formation of identity on the basis of socio-economic conditions, as well as

relations within the family, or relations of family and the wider community. From a political perspective, the object of study becomes the concrete realization or implementation of a system of social values represented in the literary work, but also the relation between the author's political orientation and the dominant ideology represented in the work, as well as the transformations on an individual level which arise due to political, economic or social changes. The scientific study of these procedures is directed towards establishing and resolving specific problems related to structure, form and methodology of socially engaged works, and which as a rule easily achieve the requirements of formalization and quantification demanded by such studies.<sup>1</sup> Sociological research of the early twentieth century literature is so rewarding precisely because of the rich and complex economic and political conditions of that period, the turbulent economic changes and significant political commitment of many writers. Some of the main focuses of such scientific research includes the studies of continuity of individual modernist techniques, but recently we are seeing an increase in structural readings which apply new paradigms, such as systems theory, to modernist texts.<sup>2</sup> Despite all the problems encountered by these new interpretations, especially in relation to reconciling and applying new paradigms to older texts, as well as problems related to arguing historical relevance, they always open up new areas of research and new perspectives.

The studies of social themes in literature face numerous obstacles when it comes to the study of authors from different national traditions. Beside the problems with defining and unifying methods and approach, there usually arise difficulties with studying inherently heterogeneous, culturally conditioned themes, and the significant dearth of the research which theoretically addresses these issues creates additional difficulties. Scholars who define a theoretical approach to transcultural literary studies are as a rule engaged with questions of nationhood, cultural formation, identity, national corpus, etc. The results of such research typically show that, despite being rooted in two different literary traditions, similar literary, cultural, mythological and political paradigms can develop. Such studies provide valuable insights into the development of literary processes within broader cultural entities, such as national mythologies and ideological-sociological formations.

On that basis, the studies of the presence of ideology and social theme in a literary work as a rule focus on one, if not all, of the following aspects:

- 1) the relationship between characters with regard to their affiliation with a particular social unit or class

- 2) the ways in which such affiliation forms the individual's social identity
- 3) relations within the family and their connection with the community
- 4) the conditions according to which characters embody social values (structuralist readings are most profitable in such cases, as they employ specifically developed terminology, such as actant, narrative paradigm, narrative function)
- 5) the transformations that occur in the lives of the characters as a consequence of wider social changes, such as changes in dominant social ideologies or political systems.

The purpose of this book is, among other things, to offer conclusive proof of the existence of two different social systems by using two representative literary texts (representative in the sense that they reflect the key characteristics of those systems), and to investigate them in terms of a unified, established theory which provides comprehensive and detailed accounts of their political, economic and social characteristics. Needless to say, any proof in literary studies will depend on the reader's willingness to accept a particular interpretative model, as well as on the familiarity with the works that are being examined. I am confident that any reader who is familiar with these two canonical works of fiction will be able to recognize the aptness or value in this particular interpretation, but also its effect on understanding the societies in which they were written. In the first place, we shall examine global trends and perspectives indicated by similar work done in literary studies, especially in the framework of cultural studies, cross-cultural literary studies and a new field that has recently emerged called comparative cultural studies. Then we will define a theoretical framework, in this case, the theory of open and closed systems, as well as the original conceptualization of systems theory in the work of Niklas Luhmann, within which we can then study individual literary phenomena and connect them to specific aspects of the theory itself. This will be followed by an introductory chapter on Dos Passos, which will situate his work in the tradition of American critical realism, beginning around 1880, and examine it in terms of that tradition thematically, formally, and establish the motifs his work shares with the writers of that tradition. This will be followed by content analysis, two chapters on the *USA Trilogy*, followed by the examination of Mahfouz's work in the context of colonial and postcolonial Arabic literature in Egypt, ending with the analysis of the content of the *Cairo Trilogy*. Finally, as part of research findings, we will see how specific literary methods, procedures and techniques are connected

to this particular theoretical model, and examine the possible sociological and political value of such studies within humanities.

## CHAPTER ONE

### GLOBAL LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

In the context of today's multicultural, globalized and technologically advanced society, the question of organizing or redefining social relations, as well as changing the traditional understanding of identity, becomes increasingly important. Showing these new types of relationships in different national literary traditions opens up possibilities for studying new paradigms of individual literary trends, but also of new forms of behavior in a transcultural context. Cross-cultural projects are a relatively new occurrence within literary and social studies and require methodologies and interpretive perspectives to be reexamined in view of a globalised framework. The term “cross-cultural”, as opposed to “intercultural”, includes the study of phenomena which belong to autonomous cultural systems, which means that one system is not defined in terms of the other, as far as this is possible in a globalized context.<sup>1</sup> While the term *intercultural* is used in Slavic studies to denote a certain limbic space occupied by writers who can not easily be categorized in individual national literatures, in the English-speaking area it also denotes a relation or dialogue between different cultures. We must acknowledge the fact that globalist perspectives of cultural studies emphasize precisely this intercultural aspect, because there is no strict autonomy in the new globalized world, but in fact within a large cultural space individual cultural or literary subsystems are studied. From such a perspective, the future of the “cross-cultural” concept is not promising, as in the near future most perspectives could be exclusively intercultural.<sup>2</sup> We should also take into account that such an interest has existed in the Arab world for several decades. In his review of the major events of Arabic comparative studies, Ken Seigneurie introduces the main perspectives of such intercultural studies. For example, on the work of the Lebanese scholar Ramin Tahan he makes the following observation: “Tahan sees comparative literature, like other Arab scholars, as a mission to address intercultural conflict by concentrating on the “common atmosphere” of humanity and recognizing links among peoples via the traffic in “literary material”.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, perhaps the most important contemporary Arab comparatist, Magdi

Youseff, emphasizes the need for contrastive approaches in cross-cultural literary studies: "We must...accentuate real differences that carry with them the diverse value systems that exist among diverse nations and cultures. Then and only then, these differences will be enriching for all concerned and we'll understand the relativity of diverse cultural, intellectual, scientific, and artistic visions and programs.<sup>4</sup> Old-fashioned tendencies—in the north as well as the south—block this understanding that, in my opinion, alone can offer a veritable vision of a universalist humanist culture".<sup>5</sup> In such a context, he engages mainly in studying the mechanisms of socio-cultural relations between different social formations. But we should also mention that there are comparative studies departments in the Arab world that oppose any kind of intercultural study based on the belief that they relativize the unique place of Arabic literature by acting as a "device of imperial penetration" (Seigneurie, "Comparative Literature in Lebanon," 392.) However, such an objection can almost exclusively be directed at so-called "studies of influence", in which one culture is seen as an active or passive recipient of influences, and can not meaningfully apply to formally and objectively conceived studies of two cultural systems which examine their differences on the same theoretical and practical level. Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural studies, such as the work done in sociology of knowledge, provide insights into the organization of social relations which are not available through the study of isolated paradigms. The influence which these new relations have on the conception of identity in recent times is now becoming clearer. Given the fact that these two trilogies provide an extremely fertile ground for exploring different types of social relations, institutional divisions and ideological formations, it becomes evident how an analysis of these practices can become the basis for cross-cultural study, but also for promoting intercultural dialogue. In the next few pages I will examine the advantages and disadvantages of several major models of cross-cultural approaches, in particular those types based on the study of cultural products, and indicate why I consider a certain model is relevant or applicable. In the case of cross-cultural literary studies, especially given the known unpredictability of literary production, any theory must be defined on a certain level of general applicability and potentially use at least one of these approaches.

The topics in international conferences on intercultural dialogue in the last twenty years have revolved around globalization and its relation to cultural identity, the issues of cultural relativism and universalism, translation, multiculturalism and imagology as the study of literary representations of national identities. At most conferences a certain perspective will be dominant. As already mentioned, the global perspective



maintains that literary studies which deal with the same questions of exegesis, canon definition or theoretical approaches on different methodologies have to take a back seat to the studies that promote cultural interaction on a global scale and intercultural dialogue. Among such approaches that may encourage dialogue is the study of the ways in which a certain narrative is situated in a specific historical period and the examination of those elements and techniques (here this refers to the examination of Mahfouz's parallelisms and Dos Passos's literary biographies) which give it the authenticity of a historical document. More specifically, the studies of modernist texts which are classified as works of social realism should primarily examine the relations of major cultural and political institutions in the first half of the twentieth century and find thereby a common starting point for any further analysis. The field which was founded on studying primarily such relations is known as cultural studies, and its insights have widened the context of discussions of the relation of art and social institutions in the second half of the twentieth century. This especially refers to such works as *The Politics of Modernism* by Raymond Williams or *Modernism and the Ideology of History – Literature, Politics and the Past* by Louise Blakeney Williams. Williams's work defines the relation between literature and social currents in the beginning of the century, taking special notice of the rising avant-garde trends and Marxist interpretations of literature, while the work of Louise Blakeney Williams deals with strict political problems and questions of history within literature. From the perspective of comparative studies, any examination of two authors who belong to different national traditions will bring out the question of the feasibility of an intercultural approach, its theoretical basis, methods and possible heuristic significance. If we take into account the studies of social, political, economic and religious issues in literature which have become popular in the last thirty years, we are forced to formulate an interdisciplinary concept of comparative studies which would incorporate these different trends and consolidate the methodology of research.

One such area of study of cultural phenomena in a global, intercultural context is comparative cultural studies. They represent a contextual approach which unifies the principles of comparative literature and cultural studies in order to examine the cultural production of individual nations with respect to the particular civilizational system of that nation. It is characterized by a wide range of methods and approaches, as well as interdisciplinarity in developing a theoretical framework. On a concrete level, these approaches encourage systematic and empirical analysis of texts so that a particular literary phenomenon may be situated in a broader cultural and political context. One of its main characteristics is the

communicative aspect, which outlines the framework for dialogue between cultures, languages and literary traditions. Such an intercultural dialogue is required to overcome the well-known Eurocentric tendencies and develop a basis for equal exchange. On such a foundation, opening the space for dialogue with the oriental Other within comparative cultural studies creates possibilities for resolving old problems in new ways. For example, if the Other is viewed as a politically determined subject, it can be more closely analyzed in its immediate context, rather than observed as a foreign entity which it is impossible to understand. Comparative cultural studies bring precisely such a new perspective of the Other, and as opposed to the phenomenologically determined foreign entity or construct, they emphasize the perspective of the near political subject who is faced with similar or identical problems. Therefore research done in this manner should preferably be content-oriented, which will ensure thematic consistency and empirical immediacy. Such conditions will significantly contribute to the preservation of the discipline itself, and spur the interest of new generations of comparative studies students, which will not be possible by subjecting them to interminable discussions on methodologies, but by raising important questions about national culture, identity, politics and the methods of treating these subjects empirically in a literary work.

I would also like to address some common theoretical issues in comparative studies. One of the initial suppositions of comparative literature is that its goal is to “elucidate the quiddity, the autonomous core of historical and present “sense of the world” in the language and to clarify, so far as is possible, the conditions, the strategies, the limits of reciprocal understanding and misunderstanding as between languages.”<sup>6</sup> This naturally begs the question of the study of a culture whose essence is not based on language, but primarily on a certain kind of identity, such as religious. It is therefore necessary to reexamine this question of understanding the essence of a foreign culture, especially one that is primarily based in a different type of identity, such as religious, or on a framework in which this identity occupies a far more important place than in the culture from which it is observed. In terms of the issues raised by identity politics, numerous questions thus arise as to the possibility of understanding a foreign civilizational system in order to satisfy the basic requirements of intercultural dialogue. The second traditional requirement of comparative studies builds on the first and relates to translation. George Steiner thus writes about the “primacy of the matter of translation in comparative literature”<sup>7</sup> on which he builds his argument about the “ideal comparatist,” i.e. that he must know several foreign languages and act as a kind of a translator. Although such a qualification is acceptable in principle,

as we said, a particular cultural configuration may define identity from a completely different perspective. Therefore, we must conclude that the primacy of language should not be taken as a basic requirement for the study of societies in which this position is occupied by political or religious identity. The third requirement is that “thematic studies form a third centre of gravity in comparative literature.” (ibid). Although this argument can be accepted in general, it is based on the principle of thematic universality, i.e. the view that the universal nature of certain themes is the basis of comparative studies. Within such a framework one can then examine the treatment of particular topics and connect them with broader cultural trends. One objection to such a view is that it gives too narrow a definition of comparative studies, which can equally well be based on the study of formal or structural elements, such as modernist techniques.

All of these interpretative models are strengthened by the possible formal connection between the novel as a genre and cultural studies as a discipline. If cultural studies are founded on the insight that culture is a common, ubiquitous phenomenon which forms every aspect of everyday life,<sup>8</sup> the relevance of certain literary genres in formally expressing or embodying such an approach becomes apparent. As the following analysis will demonstrate, the permeation of everyday life with culture, politics, religion and ideology, the connectedness of the private and public sphere, the political and social significance of their relations, as well as the economic conditions they live in, all make up the fullness of normal, everyday life of the characters which the writer, typically of the political or social realism novel, makes the subject of his study. And from this it generally follows that if the everyday political life can be observed within the framework of cultural studies, or at least at the crossroads of cultural studies and sociology, on the basis of such empirical observations we can arrive at valuable insights about general political trends. In the case of writers, for instance, of the Arabic cultural system, we can use observations of change in public or private attitudes and political trends to arrive at insights into the evolution of that society, as well as the processes involving its modernization. Thus conceived, the political novel, as observed through the lens of cultural studies, can become an indispensable subject of research within cross-cultural literary scholarship.

It is worth mentioning two additional theoretical provisions of comparative studies. The first is what Tötösy de Zepetnek calls an “ideology of inclusion” as one of the prominent features of comparative literature.<sup>9</sup> This characteristic may be acceptable on the level of theoretical abstraction, particularly in the case of cultures whose relations are problematic, but the claim that inclusiveness can be applied on the level of

textual or empirical analysis is really to use it as a strategic approach, rather than a methodological provision. Zepetnek considers inclusiveness as any encompassing of the Other (presumably with any scientific method as well) which is actually a failed attempt to “universalize” the idea of humanity, as found in a literary text, and thereby contain the Other from a “Eurocentric locus.” It is evident that such a view ignores or completely devalues the idea of neutrality or objectivity of the scientific method, which does not in any way clash with the anthropological principle according to which the observer affects and changes the object under observation. The objection of “containing” the Other on the basis of one's own distorted perspective therefore becomes irrelevant in the case of objectively conceived scientific method or theoretical framework applied at a certain level of generalization, or when it comes to highly formalized, technical study of material. It eventually becomes an instance of systemic self-blame which only inhibits further research. Finally, every project of reading, interpreting, evaluating or discussing represents a systematic and empirical study of culture which also aims, as Zepetnek points out, to solve the problems of hermeneutics.

The second provision relates to the idea of comparative literature as a discipline for comparing national traditions on the basis of value judgments. Although this approach is now obsolete, the project of comparing can and should be directed at specific objectives, the study of method, genre or theme, while taking into account the latest developments in cultural studies, linguistics, feminism and ethnology, thereby broadening the range of interpretation possibilities. But whether this or that theoretical approach is considered, one should always take into account what is, according to Zepetnek, the salient characteristic in comparative studies, namely “theory approximation”, which he considers the standard of comparative research: when considering the use of a particular theoretical framework, one should pay attention to similar or analogous frameworks in different languages or cultures.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional emphasis within comparative studies has been on method, in other words, on the manner of studying an artistic item or product, rather than on the object of study itself. One could make the argument that methodology became of primary importance through some historical misapplication of the disciplinary ethos, but in reality it firmly reflects the necessities of a rigorous developmental process of a still nascent scientific discipline. Still, the current position of methodological emphasis is something I feel should be reconsidered, and I will try to argue how comparative studies based on analyzing the political novel as a genre, justifies in itself each of these perspectives and methodologies, making the exclusive focus on method redundant. Through its communicative and

dialogic potential, it opens up a space and a set of tools for the exploration of two different social models, and ensures the consistent interpretation of social and economic phenomena. If we put aside the question of methodology selection, we can begin to understand more fully the social significance of studies dealing with the interaction of the Middle East and West. In the words of Xiaoyi Zhou, they “transcend the content of the research itself” and in principle provide a broader understanding of the relation between different cultures.<sup>11</sup> But they are even more productive within the domain of the political novel: the insights one arrives at are a result of the investigation of a complex network of political actors, trends, authors and society, politics and economy, political institutions and its ideologies. There are several reasons why the political novel, unlike other artistic forms, is an outstanding research subject within comparative cultural studies:

- 1) It unifies ideological diversity. The political novel acts as a space for collecting ideological trends and provides their resolution (we will see how Dos Passos combats the ideologies of the political administration in the public sphere and how Mahfouz resolves ideological conflicts in the private sphere).
- 2) The political novel enters into an active dialogue with public policies. This satisfies not only Bakhtin's dialogic aspect of fiction, but makes possible the examination and critique of existing political systems.
- 3) With the exception of one-sided presentations of facts, a good political writer will generally show every aspect of a particular political trend. The political novel can act as an instrument of critique of any public information, such as the interventions through journalistic genres in Dos Passos's case, essentially a didactic tool, but it can also show the impact of policy decisions on private lives through consistent characterization.
- 4) The political novel uses the concepts of *regime* and *reform* in one form or another. This connects it to current or historical national interests to a greater extent than is the case of realist or sociological novels in which these concepts do not occupy such a position.
- 5) The political novel can be seen as not only a starting point for different interpretations, but as empirical evidence of the general condition of a particular society, making that genre a diagnostic tool for analyzing a certain state of affairs. The very fact that the writer chooses certain topics speaks to their relevance in a specific social context. Research which is based on evidence and empirical analysis

opens itself up to multiple approaches which ultimately yield more complex results.

### **1.1. Dominant perspectives of East and West**

Every new study of the literature of the Eastern and Western cultural space is confronted with certain long-standing problems. On the one hand, there is the burden of Orientalism, Eurocentrism and the onerous legacy of thinkers who were preoccupied with warning of the dangers of comparing or applying western models to eastern systems or societies. However, if the distinction between East and West is made beforehand, there is the danger of establishing a point of discrimination which should generally be absent from comparative studies. Informed by previous scholarly work, we can therefore define certain precepts which should be adopted by each new comparative project, in order to ensure methodological uniformity and a consistent application of a cross-cultural approach.

Even though there is an ample history of contact and dialogue between these two cultural spaces, comparative literature, as an academic discipline, has for some reason, especially in the last fifty years, not viewed them as important actors in intercultural studies, and we can go even so far as to conclude that they are at the very periphery of cross-cultural research, at least in the form in which it is practiced today. There are several reasons for such a state of affairs. In the first place, modern Arabic literature is considered to be insufficiently developed to enter into a productive dialogue with western traditions. We already mentioned the dominance of European and American models with regard to Modernism. The initial development of the Arabic novel, for example, was slow, but with the opening toward western influences and the process of modernization, new literary tendencies began emerging, paving the way for an original and authentic expression. Secondly, the unpopularity of the political novel as a genre, due to a certain kind of learned suspicion of politics in general, has caused new generations of comparative literature students to shy away from political topics. Thirdly, individual authors have engaged in open conflict with national policies or political factions, subsequently becoming victims of institutional neglect. Presumably, public policies affect the formation of institutional curricula, and consequently information about certain periods and writers may be suppressed or stifled, discouraging further research into those areas. Finally, open political conflicts that exist between these two cultures are said to discourage intercultural dialogue.

Any treatment of the literary traditions of the Middle East must confront the problems related to Orientalism and its legacy.<sup>12</sup> I will examine some of

the main insights on these issues arrived at by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* which are particularly relevant for present cultural and comparative studies. In the first pages of his work Said makes the following observation:

*My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Said, Orientalism, 3).*

In addition to the types of discourses that can be analyzed, and which include political, sociological, military, ideological and scientific texts, we have to add literary texts, specifically, the political novel as a chronicle of all of these processes. As will be shown, within the space of the novel Mahfouz gives a detailed depiction of the daily life of Egypt during the transition from colonial to postcolonial period, as well as of the consequences of the modernization process on traditional institutions, and then concretizes these processes as dramatic incidents in the lives of his characters. These changes are then connected with past or present national policies to reveal complex processes of transition on the national level, mainly by establishing alternate narrative lines which show the development of the nation on the road to modernity, but independently of the primary narrative line. We will see how the isolation of the family unit in relation to “the framework of history”<sup>13</sup> emphasizes this parallel progress of two narratives, the personal and the national. Furthermore, Mahfouz will show the ideological influences at work in the character of Kamal. The formative influence of European culture on Mahfouz himself becomes an autobiographical element in Kamal's personality, and his development from a traditional, religious outlook of the early years to the skeptical, progressive tendencies in later years becomes an image of the process of national political democratization.

Considering the fact that cross-cultural studies may have direct political consequences (for example, they can influence the formation of foreign policy, as well as international relations) the history of political relations of any two nations and their material interests affect the nature of the emerging intercultural dialogue, as well as their future relations in general. Certain characteristics of the societies we are considering, which are displayed in the space of the political novel, are a reflection of the circumstances in which any particular society enters international politics. As Said observes,

*Now because Britain, France, and recently the United States are imperial powers, their political societies impart to their civil societies a sense of urgency, a direct political infusion as it were, where and when-ever matters pertaining to their imperial interests abroad are concerned. (Said, Orientalism, 11).*

This motif of urgency transferred from political to civil societies through “direct political infusion” is vividly demonstrated in Dos Passos's work. We will see how his characters react to public announcements expressing American imperial interests, how political developments affect private lives, but also observe the direct consequences of particular foreign policies. The problematic of American imperialism is thus introduced, which further complicates intercultural exchange. This can be studied within Marxist theory, according to which imperialism is the final stage of capitalism, and in which the capitalist economy turns into a monopoly and enters into competition with other capitalist states. However, Dos Passos examines this state of affairs in terms of military imperialism, especially under the auspices of the aggressive Wilson administration. On the other hand, Mahfouz deals with a pre-capitalist British imperialism as part of the colonialist occupation, and shows its influence on the birth of the modern nation. The effects of these two types of imperialism may provide some basis for intercultural understanding and dialogue, as in each case we are dealing with writers who are addressing the same issue but from a different perspective.

When it comes to motivation and support for individual cross-cultural projects, they may come in the form of a historical argument, in other words, the foundation for such projects can be based on common knowledge of culture, history or civilization:

*We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know the civilization of any other country. We know it further back; we know it more intimately; we know more about it. It goes far beyond the petty span of the history of our race, which is lost in the prehistoric period at a time when the Egyptian civilization had already passed its prime.<sup>14</sup>*

This perspective allows us to take into account the difference between diplomatic relations, which are based on narrow interests of current politics, and the informed, complex historical perspectives that prevail in cross-cultural studies. Said therefore advocates a reexamination of learned, fixed attitudes and behaviors, but also allows any treatment of the Orient to be formed by carefully acquired, objective knowledge. These historical perspectives inform the general outlook of cross-cultural projects, and allow



for the correction of specific preconceptions, prejudices and opinions within literary scholarship:

*...we are told that "Arab society is and always has been based on a system of client-patron relationships"); that Arabs can function only in conflict situations; that prestige is based solely on the ability to dominate others; that a shame culture—and therefore Islam itself—makes a virtue of revenge (Said, Orientalism, 48).*

Such generalized preconceptions usually depend on limited experience, the acceptance of a particular social model whose few characteristics are exaggerated, coupled with a willingness to make superficial contrasts. One could, of course, make the easy point that it is more difficult to arrive at such simple generalities after being exposed to the variety of types and experiences found in a literary work, but I want to suggest also that the diagnostic and corrective function of the literary text is largely unappreciated. By dramatizing everyday relations and events in the space of the novel, the writer reveals the functioning of Arabic society in a manner not accessible to other genres or to specific literary discourse types, allowing thereby for the correction of common prejudices formed on an inadequate knowledge of its culture and customs. It is well established that various discursive forms represent the Orient in different, often contradictory ways, and many of them with underlying ideological assumptions and prejudices. It is a common theme in Said's warnings:

*...so much so that as one surveys Orientalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the overriding impression is of Orientalism's insensitive schematization of the entire Orient. (ibid., 68).*

In view of such schematically superficial characterizations, what becomes essential is the novel's potential as a genre to address these issues in more subtle and complex ways. Through psychological exploration, through detailed and methodological analysis of character motivation, as well as through probing the relation of personal and public spaces, examination of everyday practices, customs, desires, hopes and disappointments of its characters, the novel avoids "insensitive schematization" and establishes a ground for profound social description and analysis. Mahfouz's project of documenting social changes on the level of personal experience is accompanied by profound and comprehensive change on every level, and particularly in relation to the spheres of religion and politics, a process described by Hamilton Gibb in the following manner:

*...Until recently, the ordinary Muslim citizen and cultivator had no political interests or functions, and no literature of easy access except religious literature, had no festivals and no communal life except in connection with religion, saw little or nothing of the outside world except through religious glasses. To him, in consequence, religion meant everything. Now, however, more in all the advanced countries, his interests have expanded and his activities are no longer bounded by religion. He has political questions thrust on his notice; he reads, or has read to him, a mass of articles on subjects of all kinds which have nothing to do with religion, and in which the religious point of view may not be discussed at all and the verdict held to lie with some quite different principles. (ibid., 279).*

While the main characters of Mahfouz's trilogy cannot be described as particularly religious or isolated from society due to religiosity, we can recognize in them certain characteristics given above. The main female character is socially isolated, not because of exceptional religious feeling, but owing to the inherited patriarchal attitude of the head of the family, an attitude which is in sharp contrast with that of other members, and which defines the function and scope of each character according to gender. Although the father of the family is not religious in any meaningful sense, he maintains certain norms and inherited standards of behavior which for him have a function of preserving the family unit from external intrusion and corruption, effectively making the family sphere a type of a functionally closed system. The author uses this family microcosm to delineate allegorically the slow development and opening of the nation to modern influences, as well as the rejection of unexamined, ossified elements of tradition.<sup>15</sup> Some of these processes affect the family unit itself, in which we notice a gradual loosening of strict rules and an increase in personal freedoms in accordance with Western traditions. The verisimilitude and sustainability of Mahfouz's depictions of family life acquire historicist dimension and appear to belie the later, modern developments in that sphere, but since they are also defined in accordance with religious principles, they testify to its continuity. Said points to this aspect in the following remark:

Almost without exception, every con-temporary work of Orientalist scholarship (especially in the social sciences) has a great deal to say about the family, its male-dominated structure, its all-pervasive influence in the society.... A silent paradox immediately presents itself, for if the family is an institution for whose general failures the only remedy is the placebo of "modernization," we must acknowledge that the family continues to produce itself, is fertile, and is the source of Arab existence in the world, such as it is (ibid., 311).

An additional advantage of Mahfouz's novelistic method is that some characters are defined and followed at a certain basic, detached, non-ideological level which emphasizes their humanity rather than affiliation, so that we observe, for example, radically different characters that cannot be identified with geographical area (the case of Amina's conquest of new spaces represents such an attack on geographical and ideological homogenization) or defined on the basis of "some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space" (ibid., 322).

But the most interesting areas of research of the Orient, according to Said, are not implemented within broadly defined fields, such as Orientalism, which try to define the East "canonically, imperially or geographically" (ibid., 326), but within an intellectually strictly defined discipline which will produce consistent insights into social problems and conditions. An example of such work is provided by Clifford Geertz, whose interest in Islam is sufficiently discrete, specific and scholarly to be motivated by concrete societies and the problems he studies, rather than "rituals, preconceptions and doctrines of Orientalism". In accordance with such principles, the goal of anthropological work is not to establish pseudo-scientific laws,<sup>16</sup> but to "gain access to a conceptual world that initially appears opaquely foreign" (Macey, *Critical Theory*, 155). The argument could be made that literature in general, and the novel specifically, facilitates access to such a conceptual framework and provides a direct insight into the functioning of a society. One could go a step further and say that the novel as a textual record provides those elements of "thick description" which try to capture the "stratified structure of meaningful structures, or the accumulated structures of inference and implication that the anthropologist encounters in the field" (ibid., 380). The novel is thus composed of "multiple and complex conceptual structures and stories which are always superimposed upon deeper structures." The complex methods of allegory, symbolism, narrative uniformity and development of main and alternative narrative lines, are examples of such structures. This anthropological interpretation of a literary work avoids any functionalist, reductive analysis of phenomena as mechanisms for "defining social relations, sustaining social roles or reinforcing social values", so we can legitimately conclude that the novel "materializes a way of experiencing the world" (ibid., 155).

If Orientalism is based on the ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West, it is not difficult to foresee the kind of attitudes, theories, social descriptions, conceptualizations, and ultimately relations, are fostered by such a polarization<sup>17</sup> and how the consequent

political thinking can be harmful for intercultural exchange. Newer theorists therefore consider it necessary to replace this polarization with a more inclusive approach in the context of which they examine in detail the interconnectedness, interdependence or relatedness of different cultural systems.<sup>18</sup> For example, Wendy Laura Belcher, a specialist in African literature, advocates a *reciprocal enculturation model*, a paradigm within which she examines, for example, Africans who actively consume content and affect intercultural exchange, with parallel developments in literary studies: “they are not simply influenced but influence. A parallel move is happening in literary studies, as some scholars study how non-Western thought has shaped some Western texts. If the social science reciprocal enculturation model imagines both sides of an unequal encounter as impacting the other, a literary studies reciprocal intertextuality model imagines the same for texts—that they can be enculturated by the other.” This approach is especially applicable in cross-cultural literary studies in the study of the novel, because it is supported by the universal insight that reading a novel allows a direct immersion into an alien culture, overcoming epistemological and cultural barriers.<sup>19</sup>

The theoretical paradigms of postcolonial and intercultural relations in the last thirty years have moved significantly away from the simple orientalism as presented by Said. One of the most influential perspectives is advocated by the British anthropologist Talal Asad, who mainly engages with the problems of religion in the modern intercultural context, the interdependence of ideological and political systems of East and West, and the relations of secular and religious spheres.<sup>20</sup> His main methodological approach, which relies on Foucault, is to engage the genealogy of the concepts *religious* and *secular* and explore the ways in which ordinary people are faced with power and authority in changing political times (Asad, 2015). In some of his earlier works, such as *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), Asad poses some key questions about Orientalism<sup>21</sup> and connects some of its methodological errors with those of functional anthropology: “I have been trying to argue that both functional anthropology and orientalism, by selecting certain phenomena, by not asking certain questions, by approaching history in a certain way, by taking the problem of social order as their basic theoretical concern, tended to project characteristic images of the political structure of the non-European societies they studied” (ibid., 114). The idea of social order which such studies use as a major premise certainly affects the contextualization of observed social phenomena, but due to the type of project he engages in, Asad does not elaborate on the problematics of crisis in observing social systems, nor the status of the author as dissident in such a system. Both of

these circumstances, for example, impede or prevent a purely functional reading, since crisis and dissent are not a part of the system, but its negation. The same applies to the use of simplified distinctions in descriptions of oriental societies, especially ones based on the idea of freedom:

*(...) that the Islamic tradition is rooted in a more restrictive system of ethics, that it does not allow the freedom (especially the freedom of speech) provided and defended by liberal society. Although there is something to this, the simple notion of liberty that is either present or absent seems to me unsatisfactory here... It is true that Islamic religious regulation restricts the individual's right to behave as he or she wishes through public prohibition, so that the line between morality and manners (a crucial distinction for the worldly critic) is obscured and the space of choice narrowed... The uninvited intrusion into domestic space, the breaching of "private" domains, is disallowed in Islamic law, although conformity in "public" behavior may be much stricter. Thus, the limits of freedom are differently articulated in relation to spaces that may roughly be described as "private" and "public". (Asad, *Is Critique Secular*, 36-7)*

These spatial restrictions are implemented in the framework of what he previously addressed as "natural systems". Unlike Said, who examined preconceptions and prejudices and their ideological background, which is primarily done today within the field known as cultural studies, and more specifically imagology, Asad specifically explores the ways in which systematicity is understood and represented in the modern world: "I am concerned with how systematicity (including the kind that is essential to what is called capitalism) is apprehended, represented, and used in the contemporary world... But it is a kind of systematicity (and, therefore, of power) that is not easily grasped through what is typified as anthropological fieldwork. For although it represents people and their activities at ground level, it does not mirror them." (Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, 7) Such a representation of systematicity should be sought in works of art capable of structurally supporting it, in particular, representative political novels,<sup>22</sup> and the issues of relations of power in capitalism situated in an intercultural context in which the problems of international politics, economy and culture can be examined.<sup>23</sup>

We will also examine some of the main approaches used in comparative literature studies with regard to the social systems of the Middle East and West. Strategies of the study of literary phenomena can be developed on two levels:

1) The civilizational level. The distinction between different systems is based on a cultural and historical distinction, taking into account the trends in global politics in the post-Cold War period. Its most significant theorist,

Samuel P. Huntington, opposes the classic division of independent states with eight civilizational systems, which enter into potential conflict after the Cold War: Western, Latin American, Islamic, Chinese, Indian, Orthodox, Japanese and African. This kind of geopolitical organization has its advantages and disadvantages. It recognizes the irreconcilable aspects of different religious and political systems and the tensions which develop through their opposition. According to Huntington, the main lines of conflict will be led on the basis of cultural and religious identity. Recent events confirm his hypothesis, but the problem encountered by those who advocate this approach lies in the fact that recognizing an initial conflict (indeed, the theory itself was formulated as a tool to analyze potential conflicts) defines in advance their approach to intercultural and political dialogue to the extent that the purpose of such dialogue is left unrecognized or discouraged. On the other hand, taking into account the elementary aspects of distrust existing between individuals and communities, such an approach can potentially exacerbate and encourage further conflict. Furthermore, if the basis of dialogue is a cultural artifact like the novel, whose composition gathers all the details of political, economic and social systems into one place, a “civilizational” approach by definition can miss those details (Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, 231). Considering there are different approaches that are often combined in a single study in comparative literature, Zepetnek emphasizes the cumulative nature of such projects (Tötösy de Zepetnek, “From Comparative Literature Today,” 4), which becomes a principle with potential for innovation, since comparative cultural studies are not practiced in an originally developed framework, but represent a set of rules that define a certain approach. The advantage of intercultural exchange that may develop on such a foundation is that it accepts differences of religious and civilizational systems and does not try to reconcile them. The formation of identity in literary works is explained then in terms of a historical and cultural framework in which the questions of national politics are not of primary importance.

While traditional comparative models use the concept of the nation as a subject or frame of comparison, a better model would also take into account cultural and regional settings.<sup>24</sup> This is especially the case in comparative studies that include Arab societies, which differ among themselves on the basis of individual national characteristics, but when observed in a regional context, display common economic, political and religious characteristics. This is why concepts like Region, Culture or Civilization are more suitable for the study of those national literary traditions (as will be shown in the case of Egypt, there are numerous supra-national influences involved in the