

Book Review Guidelines **20th Century Middle East**

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to allow students to examine the novel (or novella) as a mode of expression for Middle Eastern intellectuals. Since the 19th century Middle Eastern authors have borrowed and adapted Western styles of expression. Ironically, the novel, a Western genre, has been one of the most effective ways for intellectuals to recount autobiographical conditions, express hopes and dreams for the future, and to criticize government/elites for failure to deal with the issues most concerning the masses.

Although most historians and literary critics hail Haykal's *Zaynab* (1914) as the first significant Arabic novel, many writers had already expressed themselves in new ways, often through stories that were serialized in newspapers and magazines [e.g. Muwaylihi]. The historical novel developed as a popular mode of expression in the early 20th century throughout the region. The interwar period was a time when writers expressed themselves through realistic novels, short stories, and plays. Two important themes up through the 1960s were nationalism/nationalist aspirations and the predicament of the intellectual who is both attracted to and repulsed by Western culture and values. After the 1967 war, the novel took new directions with themes of self-criticism, alienation, and isolation. Women writers became more prominent in the last three decades of the 20th century, addressing many of the same themes as male writers, but also gender-specific issues related to honor/shame, marriage, divorce, and women's health.

Paper Specifications: The paper should be 6-7 pages in length, typed/word-processed, double-spaced. Address the following items in your review:

1. Why did you choose the book or why did you find the subject appealing?
2. Who is the author and what is his/her relationship to the context of the story? Try to look into the author's background, upbringing, and education. Why might (s)he choose to write on this particular subject? Does the author, due to his/her background, have some sort of axe (politically or socially) to grind? What other books has the author written? If applicable, to what extent is the book autobiographical?
3. What is the author's purpose in writing the book? While you may need to explain some of the plot, avoid the pitfall of summary.
4. Your own evaluation about the utility of this work—did it meet up to your expectations? What value did it have? Did it elucidate (or contradict) anything that we have read or discussed in class? What does it tell you about the 20th century Middle East? Would you recommend it to others?
5. How is the book organized? Discuss the salient aspects of the mechanics and presentation of the book. Here you could discuss style, organization, method, documentation, illustration, or other aspects of the structure of the work.
6. On the title page, provide a full citation of the work—author, publisher, place of publication, year of publication. If you utilize any quotations or paraphrase

extensively from the work, you need only put page numbers in parenthesis at the end of the sentence. If you consult other sources, you must provide footnotes.

7. You might find it useful to consult book reviews (many of which are posted online), but bear in mind that these reviews are often written with an eye toward literary criticism, whereas we are concerned about the historical context of the novel. In looking at reviews, you should also be careful not to plagiarize what you read. Should you have any questions regarding what constitutes plagiarism, consult the following site: <http://web.mit.edu/writing/Special/plagiarism.html>

MIT's academic honesty policy can be found at the following link:

<http://web.mit.edu/policies/10.0.html>

The primary instructor's Petty and not-so-Petty Rules of Writing—Apply to all written assignments:

1. Do not write in the passive voice.
2. Read your paper aloud—if it sounds awkward and confusing, then it probably is. Avoid long, run-on sentences.
3. Avoid beginning a sentence with a coordinating conjunction—and, but, for, or, nor, yet.
4. Avoid the word “very”—you could probably find a better word.
5. Do not use the word “this” without specifying this what.
6. Vary your vocabulary and syntax—don’t use the same words and sentence constructions repeatedly.
7. Use your spellcheck, but remember that it will not catch all errors.
8. Proofread your work carefully—if you don’t care enough to read your own work, then why should I?
9. If you cite a quotation that is more than two or three lines, you should use block quotation format—single-spaced and indented left and right.
10. If you have any questions about formal writing, consult Kate Turabian’s *Manual of Style*. It is a handy guide for writing formal papers.
11. Do not use contractions (e.g. can’t instead of cannot) and do not use the word “you,” unless you are quoting from the text.

Choices for Book Review #1:

You should take a number of factors in consideration when choosing which novel to review: your personal interests, your schedule, etc. Below I have included a short blurb on each novel to assist you in making this decision.

Muwaylihi’s *A Period of Time*: This story was originally serialized in *misbah al-sharq* between 1898 and 1900. In 1907 the author compiled and revised the chapters to form a single work, and he undertook further revisions in later editions. What we are reading in class are the portions of the story which take place in Egypt (there is also a trip to Paris), and our translator/editor notes variations between the different versions in his footnotes. The author, Muwaylihi, describes his work as “fact in the garb of fiction.” The basic premise of the story is that a writer stumbles upon a man arisen from the dead. Copy Tech lost the first page of the story two years ago—so I just start you in a random spot toward the beginning of the story. The interaction between the two characters allows the

author to critique the many changes that took place in Egypt during the second half of the 19th century. The style of the work combines elements of the traditional *maqama*, travel accounts, satire, and the emerging genre of the Arabic novel. This work will interest students of literature, those interested in the Middle Eastern critique of Western values, or anyone who wants to get their first paper done early.

Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*: More a novella than a novel, *Returning to Haifa* was written and takes place in the post-1967 era; however, through flashback it covers events of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The Palestinian protagonists are allowed to return to Haifa for the first time in nearly 20 years and must face numerous challenges, including a son who was left behind. Students choosing this work may want to read 3-5 of the short stories included in this volume to better understand Kanafani. Anyone interested in the Palestinian question will enjoy this work.

Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*: Nobel laureate Neguib Mahfouz (b. 1911) is most famous for his realistic glimpses into Egyptian urban life. Written and set in the 1940s, *Midaq Alley* portrays life in a neighborhood close (in form and proximity) to that of Mahfouz's early childhood. The novel is a frank portrayal of love, sex, ambition, and hope set against the backdrop of the British occupation (of a supposedly independent Egypt) during WWII. Students interested in Egypt, gender, or just good reading should enjoy this work.

Choices for Book Review #2

Daneshvar's *Savishun*: The novel takes place during the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran sometime between 1941 and 1945. While most of the action centers around the household of the central character Zari, readers are taken into the world of politics, corruption, and competing ideologies that characterized the era. Students interested in female authors and/or Iran will enjoy this work.

Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns*: This novel, first published in 1976, portrays life in the Israeli-occupied West Bank before the 1973 War. Usama, the main character, returns home after working in the Gulf for several years. He is shocked at life under occupation and joins the resistance movement. Meanwhile, his cousin Adil is more focused on the day to day struggle of trying to support his family. The aims of the two cousins are in direct conflict with one another. I personally have never been all that wild about this book, but students always enjoy it and tell me that it has changed their perspective on the plight of the Palestinians.

Ibrahim's *The Committee*: This Kafka-esque novel, first published in 1981, introduces us to the workings of an ominous committee before which the protagonist must defend himself against a series of unspecified charges. Bizarre, surreal, and absurd are all adjectives that could be used to describe this work. Students interested in literature, Egypt, and recent history should enjoy this work.

Some other considerations: You may want to think about how you pair your book reviews—e.g. *Returning to Haifa* and *Wild Thorns* both deal with the Palestine issue, comparing early 20th century Egyptian writers—Muwaylihi or Mahfouz with a later one, Ibrahim, or comparing two authors that deal with a country under occupation during

WWII—Mahfouz and Daneshvar. This type of strategic pairing could potentially help you on your second review or with rewrites.