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Cultural Revivals: Indian Symbols, Historical Figures, and Literary Mythology in Modern Arabic Poetry

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Raseena M.K

Arabic literature has been influenced by Indian culture since ancient times. Pre-Islamic Arabic literature had many references to Indian mythological and symbolic elements reflecting the profound influence of classical culture. Throughout the ages, Arabic literature has consistently reflected this influence. Modern Arabic literature similarly exhibits a fascination with Indian culture and its symbolic elements, including Taj Mahal, Khajuraho temples, and Gandhi, as metaphors for love, spirituality, and social justice. This article explores the representation of Indian symbols in modern Arabic poetry, highlighting the rich cultural exchange between India and the Arab world. The study aims to shed light on the influences of Indian culture on modern Arabic poetry and how Arab poets incorporate symbols of Indian heritage into their works. By a critical analysis of various poetic works, it analyzes how contemporary Arab poets have drawn inspiration from Indian epics, philosophy, religious symbols, and prominent historical figures. Ultimately, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of cultures and the evolving landscape of modern Arabic poetry.

Keywords: Cultural revivals, Indian symbols, Arabic literature, Modern Arabic poetry, Cultural exchange

Introduction

India is one of the greatest cradles of human culture. The Arabs have historically shown a respectful and admiring interest in India, ranking Indian civilization alongside Greek, Persian, and Egyptian civilizations. The civilizations like Mesopotamian Civilization, Indus/Harappan Civilization, Nile River etc., consisting of a cluster of societies, spanning over large swaths of land, acted as an umbrella civilization for these societies which subsequently disintegrated over a period of time (Chopra, 1983). The Indian subcontinent, the cradle of Indus Valley Civilization, has had historical ties with the Arab world-extending up to the Iraq and Egypt (Ahmad, 2021). Arabs were attracted by the Indian culture, since the ancient period, particularly when the sailors established the commercial ties between the regions.

By the impact of these relationships the Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry had many references to the Indian symbolic elements. This is evident in the works of great classical Arab poets like Imru' al Qais, Tarfa bin al-Abd and Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, among others. The existing cultural and trade exchanges between India and Arabia were strengthened and expanded after the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. The Abbasid Caliphate era marked the peak of these cultural interactions, which lasted for several centuries. During this period, many Indian works were translated into Arabic language as part of the enrichment of knowledge during the Abbasid period. Notable examples include the *Artha Shastra*, *Sidhandha Charaka Samhitha*, and *Panchathandra*. Additionally, many Arab travelers visited India and drawn significant observations about Indian culture, literature, traditions, philosophy and related areas during this period. Al Biruni, 11th-century traveller, was known to be a scholar of Sanskrit, Indian art, literature and science. He even translated several Sanskrit books. His famous *Kitab Ta'rikh al-Hind* (Book of Indian History, popularly known as Alberuni's India), introduced Arabs to India's scholarly traditions. He identified the similarity between famous Arab stories of *Kalila wa Dimna* in Indian work *Panchtantra*. These are not just mere examples but a long history of cultural fusion. (Kumar & Montgomery, 2017)

However, after the Abbasid period, these literary interactions were declined. It was resumed only after the cultural renaissance known as An-Nahda, in Egypt in the late 19th and early 20th century. This movement reignited the translation of Arabic works into Indian languages and vice versa. By the influence of An-Nahda the classical heritage was enthusiastically studied and new attitudes were getting shaped towards culture in the 20th century; Indian literature and religious-philosophical views aroused a striking interest again in this period. Furthermore, well-known writers of Arab immigration literature welcomed the Indian literary contributions in their works such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy. While both Christian writers adroitly took advantage of religious elements in Islam, Christianity, Sufism philosophical teachings, Eastern and Western literature and philosophy schools, they worked up original themes, transformed ideas, created up-to-date motives based on ancient Indian literature and religious-philosophical thoughts (Azizaliyeva, 2017).

In recent times, cultural and literary exchanges between India and Arab world have expanded, particularly after the massive movement of people from India to the Arab world in the form of pilgrimage and labour migration. The innovations in print and visual media play a big role here. It paved the way to the exchange of Indian culture, heritage, myths and religious symbols to the Arabs. Since the late 19th century, numerous Arab travelers have visited India and written travelogues and articles related to the Indian culture. The influence of Indian cultural elements is vividly visible in modern Arabic literature, especially in poetry. This study aims to shed light on the influence of Indian culture on modern Arabic poetry and how Arab poets incorporate symbols of Indian heritage into their works. There are many Indian references in the modern Arabic poetry, reflecting the deep admiration and esteem that Arab poets have for Indian classics and tales. India is the subject of admiration and esteem for them. India continues to be a source of inspiration for its myths, epics, religious symbols, and prominent historical figures.

Research methodology

This study applies descriptive method and relies on content analysis of several literary texts. By a critical analysis of various Arabic

poetic works, it analyzes how contemporary Arab poets have drawn inspiration from Indian epics, philosophy, religious symbols, and prominent historical figures. It has been tried to shed light on some references to the symbols of Indian culture and heritage by Arab writers. This study tries to answer these questions: what has been the reason for Arabs' attention in representing India? How modern Arabic poets have been influenced by it and how they depicted it in their works?

Bridging Cultures: Indian Historical Figures in Modern Arabic Poetic Discourse

Arab writers have been influenced by Indian philosophers and legends such as Buddha, Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, Iqbal, Azad and many others. The Iraqi poet Saadi Yousef alsafar wrote a book titled *Dharma Patha* which introduced the wisdom and teachings of Buddha. Another work that includes Indian heritage through Buddha's philosophy is *The Story of Buddha*, written by Mohammed Abdul Aziz Zaki. The famous Egyptian writer Mustafa Sadiq Al Rafi titled one of his essays *Shaytani wa Shaytan Taghor*, showing his engagement with Rabindranath Tagore's ideas. Additionally, Al- Manar magazine published a series of articles on Gandhi's naturopathy (Kabeer, 2014). The Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi (1931–2021) also recorded her encounters with Indian figures like Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Das in her book *Rihlatt Hawla al-Alam* (My Journey around the World).

Modern Arabic poetry reflects admiration for great Indian personalities, and many Arab poets have been influenced by them. This poetry highlights a new horizon that celebrates the memory of these Indian figures, often paying tribute to the leaders of the Indian independence movement. According to Mohammed Abdul Aziz Zaki, the philosophical thoughts of the renowned modern Arab poet Abul Ala Alma'ri show a clear reflection of Buddha's thoughts (Jamaludheen, 2013).

In 1945, after World War II, the Egyptian poet Ahmad Mukhaymar published a long poem titled *Buddha's desires*, which spans 300 pages. This poem conveys the horrors and tragedies of

World War. When the poet reflected on the mysticism in Islam, the image of Buddha emerged before him as a symbol of a man who had renounced all worldly desires. The poem is divided into chapters, such as the peaks, the city at the edge, the temple. It begins by depicting Buddha's life of seclusion in the mountains and his deep meditative reflections. Similarly, Buddha and his philosophy are vividly portrayed in the poems of great Omani poet Saif al-Rahbi (Kabeer, 2014).

Many Arab intellectuals and leaders, such as Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, Ahmad shawqi were influenced by the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. The Arab literary world has been enriched by works about Tagore's life and personality. Some notable examples include '*Master pieces of Tagore*' written by Badi Haqqi, and '*Poetic translation of Tagore*' by Kalifa Tillisi. The Iraqi poet Abd al- Wahhab Al-Bayati wrote a long poem titled '*I set up a tent for you in the Gardens of Tagore*'. The celebrated poet Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi recited a stirring poem at a major event held in honour of Tagore in Baghdad in 1932. Additionally, the poet Mohammad Tahir Al-Jablawi composed a poem in memory of Tagore, addressing him with the following lines;

Oh Tagore...
Your memory won't fade...
In my heart, you live on,
whenever I recreate you,
you fill me with satisfaction

Mahatma Gandhi is also a symbol of patience and tolerance in modern Arabic poetry. More than ten Arab poets have written about Gandhi's virtues, including Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi, Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan, Lebanese poets Mikhail Naimy, Rashid Salim al-Khuri, Halim Dammus and Ilyas Farhat among others. Ahmad shawqi was the first person who gave an expression of the Arab sentiments and the extent of the admiration for the great leader of India. He composed a long ode of thirty nine verses in his honour which immortalized his name and image in Arabic literature. In this poem Shawqi highlighted Gandhi's honour which immortalized his name and image in Arabic literature. He praised also his piety, patience and moderation as well as his moral and spiritual values.

Ahmed Shawqi (1868–1932) composed a poem about the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi titled *Gandhi is the hero of India*, which contains 39 stanzas expressing admiration for Gandhi. Shawqi welcomed Gandhi with this poem when Gandhi passed through Egypt on his way to England to participate in the Round Table Conference. In this poem, Shawqi expresses his appreciation for Gandhi's stature and his remarkable role in defending the truth and humanity, even referring to him as a prophet and a messenger (Salim, 2024).

The Yemeni poet, Muhammad Abdo Ghanem, wrote a poem titled *Leaning on Gandhi's Crutch*, which covers major moments in Gandhi's life. The poem explores several key moments in the life of Mahatma Gandhi, beginning with the tragic Amritsar Massacre and his response of nonviolent resistance. It highlights Gandhi's historic Salt March (Dandi March), where he led thousands of followers on a long journey to the sea, defying a colonial law that controlled salt production. The poem also touches on Gandhi's call for Indians to reject British-made cloth, urging a return to traditional handloom weaving as a form of economic resistance against British rule. Additionally, it discusses his imprisonment and his fast aimed at halting the violence between Hindus and Muslims during communal clashes. Finally, the poem reflects on his assassination by a fanatic, marking the end of his life but not his enduring legacy.

The Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan also expressed admiration for Mahatma Gandhi in his poetry, especially for his role in promoting peace, non-violence, and independence. One of the most notable poems where Tuqan pays tribute to Gandhi is his *It would be nice if a leader among us fasted*. In this poem, Tuqan reflects on Gandhi's dedication to the struggle for justice and his peaceful methods of resistance. When the newspapers published that the leader of India, Gandhi, had warned England to fast for life unless it changed its political plan in India, Ibrahim began to wink and compare a leader here in Palestine with a leader there. The poet was always warning of the gloomy end of his country and was looking hopelessly and despairingly for a skillful leader like Gandhi. Tuqan's verses praise Gandhi as a figure of great moral strength who championed non-violence in the face of oppression.

He describes Gandhi's impact on the world, his dedication to the principles of truth and justice. When Mahatma Gandhi died, most Arab poets praised him with their stanzas, including Egyptian poets Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, Gamila El Alaily and Bayram al-Tunisi, the Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Lebanon poet Ilyas Farhat and others.

The first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru is also among the celebrated Indian figures by Modern Arabic poetry. His famous books *The discovery of India; Glimpses of world history* have been translated into Arabic language. Among the poets who eulogized Nehru were Syrian poets Shawqi Baghdadi and Omar Abu Risha. The great Indian poet and Islamic philosopher Muhammad Iqbal was warmly received by Arab writers. Iqbal played a crucial role in bridging the gap between Arabic and Urdu literatures. When Iqbal visited Egypt in 1931, the Egyptian poet Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hassan wrote a poem titled *To the great poet of India*, which was published in Al-Ahram newspaper. In the poem, the Poet describes Iqbal as the Indian flame and a symbol of India's glory. Another Indian leader who was given the status of love and appreciation in the hearts of the Arabs is Maulana Muhammad Ali. When he died in 1931 Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi wrote a tribute to him. In this tribute, Shawqi praised Muhammad Ali for his leadership, patriotism, and the sacrifices he made for the cause of Indian Muslims. In the poem, the poet indicates that Moulana Muhammad Ali was buried in Jerusalem according to his will before his death. The poet addresses Jerusalem and asks it to embrace this great leader in its embrace and honor his resting place because he is the "sword of India" and the "sword of God." The poem reflects Shawqi's deep admiration for Maulana Muhammad Ali, focusing on his moral character and his dedication to the freedom of his country.

The Indian Legacy in Modern Arabic Poetry: Myth, Epics and Religious symbols

Modern Arab poets are greatly attracted to Indian epics and philosophy also. Epics like the Mahabharata have influenced them, particularly due to its adventurous narrative technique, which provides

a fascinating and magical experience. The philosophical and religious teachings of the Bhagavad Gita have had an impactful role in Mikhail Naimy's writings as an Arabic immigration writer. Mikhail Naimy, a poet, writer and a literary critic, was one of the prominent representatives of the early 21st century Arab-American immigrant literature. When conveying the idea of wholeness and unity between an individual soul and God in his work, *The Book of Mirdad*, the author used different religious and philosophical sources including the ancient Indian scripture Bhagavat-Gita (Azizaliyeva, 2017).

Modern Arab poets were drawn to India's rich historical and architectural heritage. They described Indian historical places in their poetry, such as the Red Fort, Jama Masjid and Taj Mahal. Additionally, they expressed admiration for the architectural style of Indian temples, particularly the beauty of Khajuraho. The Khajuraho temples, a group of Hindu and Jain temples in Madhya Pradesh, are very famous for their architectural symbolism and erotic sculptures. Arabic literature of Abbasid period has so many references to the Khajuraho temples. They were mentioned by the Arab historian Al-Biruni in his book *Hind*. Additionally, the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta wrote about his experiences in India. The celebrated modern Arab poet Omar Abu Risha (1910-1990) had written a poem titled *Khajuraho* in 1957 after visiting the temples. He was deeply inspired by the stunning beauty of Indian art and portrayed it through the eyes of a poet rather than a tourist. In this poem, the poet explores the various aspects of culture, thought, and conscience, rather than focusing solely on the tangible things he can observe. The poem transcends the material realm, exploring something deeper and more meaningful. The poem consists of eighty-one lines and can be divided into three sections: the narration of the art's triumph through the ages, a portrayal of art scenes, and the lessons learned from the temple visit

In addition to the Khajuraho, Omar Abu Risha composed a poem about Taj Mahal after his visit to it, titled as *Love of the Earth*. He described the Taj Mahal as a prominent cultural and civilizational symbol in India's history with precision and insight. The beauty and magnificence of the Taj Mahal left a lasting impression on the hearts and minds of Arab poets. Among the Arab poets who wrote about the

Taj Mahal are the Egyptian poet Mahmoud Khalifa Ghanem and the Saudi poet Ali Abu Al-Alaa. Mahmoud Khalifa Ghanem, in his poem India also praised the beauty of Taj Mahal and the Red Fort. He described Taj Mahal as a blend of dream and reality, representing love and passion. The poem *Love and Marble* is a 39-line poem by Muhammad Abdo Ghanem that tells the story of Shah Jahan commemorating his love for Mumtaz Mahal with the magnificent marble building, the Taj Mahal. Muhammad Abdo Ghanem wrote another poem about the beauty of Kashmir. The poem *On the Banks of Dal* consists of thirty lines. In it, the poet remembers the loss of his youth in front of the beauty. In the poem, he often links beauty and youth, and when he visited Kashmir, he was over seventy years old.

The Yemeni poet, Muhammad Abdo Ghanem, wrote hundreds of poems published in his seven collections, but his poems that have a direct relationship to India are only four. The first is his poem *The Sources of Glory*, which was published in his second collection of poems, *Waves and Rocks*, the second is his poem *Leaning on Gandhi's Crutch*, the third is *On the Banks of Dal*, and the fourth is *Love and Marble*. These last three poems are published in his sixth collection of poems, *The Sixth Wave*. (Ghanem, 2016)

Conclusion

While going through Modern Arabic Poetry, it is experienced that Indian Symbols have a prominent space in modern time compared to ancient time. Through vivid portrayals of India's natural beauty, iconic landmarks, and revered figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, modern Arab poets have embraced and celebrated Indian culture, heritage, and philosophy. These representations transcend national boundaries, illustrating the universal relevance of India's contributions to humanity. The integration of Indian imagery and themes in global poetry underscores the enduring influence of Indian culture, resonating not just within India but across the world, including the Arab world and beyond.

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