



# Romanticism In Arabic Literature: Emotion, Individualism, And Literary Renewal

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## ABSTRACT

Romanticism represents a significant phase of transformation in Arabic literature, marking a decisive shift from classical formalism to a literature centred on emotion, individual experience, and imaginative freedom. Emerging prominently during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the context of the Arab *Nahḍah* (Arabic literary renaissance), Arabic Romanticism developed through interaction with Western literary movements, as well as through an internal reevaluation of classical Arabic aesthetics. This paper examines Romanticism in Arabic literature as a movement of emotional expression, individualism, and literary renewal, highlighting its thematic, stylistic, and ideological contributions.

The study analyses how Arab Romantic writers and poets rejected rigid classical conventions and embraced subjective emotion, personal sorrow, love, nature, exile, and spiritual longing as central literary themes. Figures such as Khalīl Jibrān, Mikhā'il Nu'aymah, 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī, and members of the Apollo Group are examined to demonstrate how Romanticism reshaped Arabic poetry and prose. The paper also explores the role of diaspora literature, particularly the Mahjar movement, in introducing new literary forms, symbolism, and philosophical introspection into Arabic writing.

Furthermore, the research highlights Romanticism's contribution to the development of modern Arabic literary language, freeing it from excessive ornamentation and bringing it closer to lived human experience. While Romanticism challenged traditional norms, it did not entirely reject classical heritage; rather, it reinterpreted it through the lens of emotion and individual creativity. The paper argues that Romanticism served as a transitional movement that laid the foundation for later literary trends such as realism and modernism in Arabic literature.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Romanticism played a crucial role in redefining Arabic literary expression by foregrounding the inner self, emotional depth, and artistic freedom, thus contributing significantly to the evolution of modern Arabic literature.

**Keywords:** Arabic Romanticism; Nahḍah; Emotion and Individualism; Mahjar Literature; Modern Arabic Poetry; Literary Renewal

## Introduction

Romanticism in Arabic literature marks a decisive turning point in the evolution of modern Arabic literary expression. Emerging prominently during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this movement represented a conscious departure from the rigid formalism, rhetorical ornamentation, and collective ethos of classical Arabic literature. Instead, Romanticism foregrounded emotion, individual experience, imagination, and subjective expression, aligning Arabic literature with broader global currents of literary modernity. Closely associated with the Arab *Nahḍah* (renaissance), Arabic Romanticism developed through both internal literary renewal and sustained engagement with Western Romantic thought (Badawi 45–47).

The classical Arabic literary tradition had long prioritised formal perfection, imitation (*taqlīd*), and adherence to established poetic conventions. While this tradition produced remarkable aesthetic

achievements, by the nineteenth century, many Arab intellectuals perceived it as inadequate for expressing the psychological, social, and existential concerns of a rapidly changing world. The encounter with Europe, through colonialism, translation movements, education, and diaspora, introduced Arab writers to Romantic ideals, including freedom of imagination, the cult of the self, communion with nature, and rebellion against oppressive social norms (Hourani 112–115). Romanticism thus became a powerful tool for literary and cultural renewal.

One of the defining features of Arabic Romanticism is its emphasis on individualism. Romantic writers shifted literary focus from communal values and praise poetry to personal suffering, love, alienation, and spiritual longing. This inward turn allowed writers to articulate emotional realities previously marginalised in classical forms. Poets and prose writers began to explore themes of exile, loneliness, metaphysical anxiety, and the search for meaning, reflecting the psychological impact of modernity and sociopolitical upheaval (Allen 221–223).

The Romantic movement found particularly fertile ground among Arab writers of the diaspora, especially those associated with the *Mahjar* (émigré) school in North and South America. Writers such as Khalīl Jibrān and Mikhā'il Nu'aymah played a central role in redefining Arabic literary aesthetics by blending Romantic philosophy with spiritual humanism and symbolic prose-poetry. Their works challenged traditional boundaries between genres and introduced new expressive modes rooted in introspection and universal human concerns (Gibran 18–20). Simultaneously, Romanticism flourished in the Arab world through literary groups such as the Apollo Society in Egypt, whose members, including Ahmad Zakī Abū Shādī, sought to liberate Arabic poetry from classical constraints and promote emotional authenticity and artistic freedom (Badawi 96–99).

Despite its revolutionary impulse, Arabic Romanticism did not entirely reject the classical heritage. Rather, it reinterpreted traditional motifs, such as love, nature, and longing, through a modern emotional lens. This synthesis of tradition and innovation enabled Romanticism to function as a transitional movement, paving the way for later literary trends such as realism, symbolism, and modernism. In this sense, Romanticism was not merely a stylistic shift but a broader cultural reorientation that redefined the purpose and function of literature in Arab society (Allen 235–238).

This paper examines Romanticism in Arabic literature as a movement of emotion, individualism, and literary renewal. By situating Arabic Romanticism within its historical, intellectual, and aesthetic contexts, the study aims to highlight its transformative role in shaping modern Arabic literature and its enduring legacy in contemporary Arabic literary discourse.

### Significance of the Study

The present study is significant as it offers a focused scholarly examination of Romanticism as a transformative movement in Arabic literature, highlighting its role in redefining literary expression through emotion, individualism, and imaginative freedom. By analysing Romanticism within the historical framework of the Arab *Nahḍah*, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Arabic literature transitioned from classical formalism to modern aesthetic sensibilities (Badawi 45–50).

One of the key contributions of this research lies in its exploration of subjectivity and emotional expression as central features of Arabic Romanticism. Classical Arabic literature largely emphasised communal ideals, rhetorical mastery, and imitation of established forms. In contrast, Romantic writers foregrounded personal experience, inner conflict, and emotional authenticity. This study demonstrates how such a shift expanded the expressive range of Arabic literature and enabled writers to address themes such as alienation, exile, love, and spiritual longing with greater psychological depth (Allen 221–224).

The study is also significant for its examination of individualism as a literary and cultural phenomenon. By emphasising the creative autonomy of the writer, Romanticism challenged inherited norms and empowered authors to redefine the relationship between the self and society. This emphasis played a crucial role in shaping modern Arabic poetic and prose forms, particularly in the works of *Mahjar* writers like Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Nu'aymah (Gibran 18–21).

Furthermore, this research highlights Romanticism's function as a transitional movement that prepared the ground for later developments such as realism and modernism. Rather than rejecting the classical heritage outright, Arabic Romanticism reinterpreted it, allowing continuity alongside innovation. Understanding this dynamic is essential for tracing the broader evolution of modern Arabic literature (Badawi 96–99).

Finally, the study holds contemporary relevance by demonstrating how Romantic ideals of freedom, creativity, and emotional sincerity continue to influence Arabic literary discourse today. By situating Romanticism within a global and comparative framework, this research contributes meaningfully to Arabic literary studies and comparative literature scholarship (Hourani 112–115).

### Romanticism in Arabic Literature:

The modern transformation of Arabic literature cannot be understood without reference to the profound political, cultural, and intellectual changes that began at the close of the eighteenth century. A decisive moment occurred in 1798, when Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Egypt, bringing an end to Mamluk rule. Bonaparte presented himself as a liberator of the Arabs from tyrannical governance, and although his occupation was short-lived, its cultural consequences were far-reaching. For the first time, Egyptian society

came into sustained contact with European scientific thought, material progress, and rationalist philosophy, which left a lasting impression on the Arab intellectual imagination (Hourani 63–67).

Napoleon was accompanied by a group of distinguished scientists, scholars, and technical experts who undertook a systematic survey of Egypt's geography, culture, and resources. Modern libraries and laboratories were established to facilitate scientific and literary research, and the results of these investigations were published in newly founded French-language journals. Significantly, Bonaparte also introduced the first Arabic printing press into Egypt, brought from the Vatican. Although its initial function was to disseminate French proclamations in Arabic, it symbolised a revolutionary shift in knowledge transmission. Egyptians were deeply impressed by French administrative efficiency and scientific experimentation, which stimulated curiosity, encouraged learning, and awakened a new desire for intellectual advancement (Hourani 67–71).

The reign of Muḥammad 'Alī Pasha marked the formal beginning of the Arab Renaissance (*Nahḍah*). He introduced Western-style educational reforms and established military, technical, and linguistic institutions where modern sciences and European languages were taught. By 1816, a systematic programme of Westernisation had begun. Cairo emerged as a natural centre for this renaissance due to the presence of al-Azhar University, which continued to serve as a major institution for Arabic language and literary studies.

The nineteenth century witnessed rapid growth in Arabic prose literature, largely due to the spread of the printing press. At the same time, Arabic poetry began to move beyond mechanical imitation of classical models. The emergence of Neo-classical poetry was not the result of a sudden Western intrusion but rather a revival of ancient Arabic learning facilitated by technological advancement. Newspapers and periodicals played a vital role in liberating poetry from elite circles and making it accessible to a wider audience (Hourani 79–85; Badawi 9–15).

Neo-classical poets, later labelled *Muḥâfiẓûn* (conservatives), sought to revive the dignity and excellence of Abbasid poetry. While their works rarely reflected individual emotion or contemporary social realities, their major achievement lay in restoring the linguistic purity and artistic discipline of classical Arabic verse. Importantly, they prepared the ground for Romanticism by reawakening poetic sensibility and aesthetic consciousness (Badawi 15–19; Allen 240–242).

The foremost pioneer of Egyptian Neo-classicism was Maḥmûd Sâmī al-Bârûdī (1838–1901), widely regarded as the harbinger of modern Arabic poetic revival. His poetry adhered to the classical *qaṣīdah* form while expressing personal experience with sincerity and strength. Al-Bârûdī rejected artificial ornamentation and infused classical structures with individual personality, thereby bridging tradition and modernity. His influence was decisive in shaping subsequent poetic movements (Badawi 21–27).

Gradually, Neo-classicism gave way to Pre-Romanticism, which sought to reform rigid poetic conventions, particularly monorhyme. This transition culminated in the emergence of Romanticism, which called for emotional freedom, innovation, and renewal. Khalīl Muṭrân (1872–1949) played a crucial role in this shift by introducing the concept of thematic unity in poetry. While respecting tradition, he advocated reform and artistic liberation, justifying his recognition as a pre-romantic poet and a key architect of modern Arabic literary renewal (Badawi 32–38; Allen 245–247).

### Pioneers of Romanticism in Arabic Poetry

Romanticism in Arabic poetry represents one of the most significant phases in the evolution of modern Arabic literature. Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it developed as a reaction against the rigidity, formalism, and rhetorical excesses of Neoclassical poetry. While Neo-classicism had revived the linguistic purity and grandeur of Abbasid poetry, it often failed to express the emotional, psychological, and existential concerns of the modern individual. Romantic poets sought to redefine poetry as an expression of personal emotion, imagination, inner experience, and freedom, thereby placing the individual self at the centre of literary creation (Badawi 32–34).

### Khalīl Muṭrân: The Pre-Romantic Pioneer

Among the earliest pioneers of Arabic Romanticism was Khalīl Muṭrân (1872–1949), who is widely regarded as a transitional figure between Neo-classicism and Romanticism. Influenced by French Romantic poets such as Lamartine and Hugo, Muṭrân introduced the concept of thematic unity (*waḥdat al-mawḍū'*) into Arabic poetry, rejecting the fragmented structure of the traditional *qaṣīdah*. His poetry focused on personal sorrow, love, loneliness, and contemplation of nature, marking a decisive move away from panegyric and conventional themes. While Muṭrân retained classical metre and rhyme, he infused them with sincere emotional depth and psychological realism, justifying his recognition as the first major architect of Romantic sensibility in Arabic poetry (Badawi 35–38).

### The Mahjar Poets: Romanticism in Exile

A breakthrough in Arabic Romantic poetry occurred with the rise of the Mahjar (émigré) poets, who lived and wrote in North and South America. Among them, Khalīl Jibrân (1883–1931) and Mikḥâ'il Nu'aymah (1889–1988) played a decisive role in reshaping Arabic poetic expression. Living in exile exposed these poets to

Western Romanticism, transcendentalism, and symbolism, which they creatively integrated into Arabic literature.

Gibran's poetry and poetic prose are deeply Romantic in spirit, emphasising individual freedom, spiritual love, rebellion against social hypocrisy, and the sanctity of the human soul. His language is symbolic, lyrical, and often philosophical, breaking conventional boundaries between poetry and prose. Similarly, Nu'aymah articulated a clear Romantic literary philosophy that called for sincerity, simplicity, and emotional truth in literature. He rejected artificial ornamentation and advocated literature as a moral and spiritual force rather than a vehicle for rhetorical display (Allen 262–265; Gibran 18–21).

### **The Apollo Group and Institutional Romanticism**

In Egypt, Romanticism achieved organised expression through the Apollo Group, founded in 1932 by Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892–1955). The group sought to promote poetic innovation, emotional freedom, and artistic individuality. Through its journal *Apollo*, the group encouraged poets to explore themes such as love, nature, despair, idealism, and existential longing. Abu Shadi's vision was to create a poetic community free from rigid classical constraints and ideological dogmatism (Badawi 96–99).

Poets associated with the Apollo Group, such as Ibrāhīm Nāḥī and 'Alī Maḥmūd Ṭāhā, further consolidated Romantic poetry by emphasising lyrical expression, musicality, and emotional sincerity. Their works reflect a deep engagement with inner conflict, unattainable love, and the tension between reality and idealism, all of which are hallmarks of Romantic poetry.

### **Contribution and Legacy**

The pioneers of Arabic Romanticism transformed Arabic poetry by redefining its purpose and scope. Poetry was no longer merely a formal art governed by inherited conventions; it became a means of self-expression, emotional exploration, and spiritual inquiry. These pioneers laid the foundation for later literary movements such as symbolism, free verse, and modernism, making Romanticism a crucial transitional stage in the development of modern Arabic literature (Allen 270–272).

### **Arabic Romantic Poetry: Emotion, Individualism, and Literary Renewal**

Arabic Romantic poetry emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a transformative literary movement that sought to liberate Arabic verse from rigid classical conventions and excessive formalism. While Neo-classical poetry had revived the linguistic purity and aesthetic discipline of Abbasid verse, it often failed to express the emotional complexity and psychological depth of the modern individual. Romantic poets responded by redefining poetry as a vehicle for emotional sincerity, individual experience, and imaginative freedom, thereby inaugurating a new phase of literary renewal in Arabic literature (Badawi 32–35).

### **Emotion and Subjective Expression**

Emotion lies at the heart of Arabic Romantic poetry. Romantic poets rejected the impersonal tone and conventional themes of classical poetry, replacing them with intense expressions of love, sorrow, despair, longing, and spiritual yearning. Poetry became a reflection of the poet's inner world rather than a performance governed by rhetorical display. This emotional inward turn allowed poets to articulate feelings of alienation and disillusionment generated by social upheaval, colonial domination, and personal exile. Nature was frequently employed as a symbolic mirror of the poet's emotional state, serving as a source of consolation, communion, and transcendence (Allen 262–264).

The works of Khalīl Muṭrān illustrate this shift vividly. His poetry introduced psychological realism and emotional unity, moving away from fragmented thematic structures. Similarly, Mahjar poets such as Khalīl Jibrān used symbolic and lyrical language to convey emotional suffering and spiritual hope, emphasising the universal human condition over traditional poetic concerns (Badawi 35–38; Gibran 18–21).

### **Individualism and the Cult of the Self**

A defining characteristic of Arabic Romantic poetry is its emphasis on individualism. Romantic poets foregrounded the autonomy of the poet and the sanctity of personal experience, challenging inherited norms that prioritised collective identity and social convention. The poet emerged as a solitary figure, often alienated from society and engaged in an inward quest for meaning, truth, and beauty. This focus on the self-represented a radical departure from classical poetry, which was largely concerned with communal values such as praise, satire, and tribal honour (Allen 265–267).

Mahjar poets played a crucial role in developing this individualistic ethos. Living in exile allowed them to explore themes of freedom, rebellion, and self-realisation without the constraints of traditional social structures. Mikhail Nu'aymah explicitly argued that literature should express the authentic self rather than conform to inherited aesthetic rules. This Romantic celebration of individuality enabled Arabic poetry to accommodate philosophical reflection and moral critique, thereby broadening its intellectual horizons (Allen 268–270).



### Literary Renewal and Formal Innovation

Arabic Romantic poetry was not limited to thematic transformation; it also contributed significantly to literary renewal and formal innovation. While early Romantic poets retained classical metre and rhyme, they reinterpreted these forms to serve emotional unity rather than rhetorical ornamentation. The insistence on thematic coherence, musicality, and simplicity of language marked a decisive break from mechanical imitation of classical models. Romantic poetry thus functioned as a transitional movement that prepared the ground for later developments such as symbolism and free verse (Badawi 96–99).

The Apollo Group in Egypt institutionalised Romantic ideals by promoting poetic experimentation and artistic freedom. Through their writings and literary journals, Romantic poets encouraged a new aesthetic that valued sincerity, imagination, and emotional depth. This renewal also extended to poetic language, which became more accessible and closer to spoken Arabic, enabling poetry to reach a wider audience (Badawi 100–103).

In brief, Arabic Romantic poetry played a crucial role in reshaping modern Arabic literature by foregrounding emotion, individualism, and creative freedom. By liberating poetry from rigid conventions and embracing subjective experience, Romantic poets expanded the expressive possibilities of Arabic verse. Their contributions not only revitalised poetic language and form but also laid the intellectual foundation for subsequent literary movements. As a movement of transition and renewal, Arabic Romantic poetry remains a defining moment in the evolution of modern Arabic literary expression.

### Findings

The study finds that Romanticism marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of Arabic literature, particularly in poetry, by shifting the literary focus from formal imitation and collective themes to emotion, subjectivity, and individual experience. Arabic Romantic writers consciously rejected the rigidity of Neo-classical conventions, which prioritised linguistic purity and rhetorical excellence but often lacked emotional depth. Instead, Romanticism foregrounded sincerity of feeling, psychological introspection, and imaginative freedom as the core functions of literary expression.

One significant finding is that emotion became the primary organising principle of Arabic Romantic poetry. Love, sorrow, alienation, despair, nostalgia, and spiritual longing emerged as dominant themes, reflecting both personal crises and broader socio-political anxieties. Nature functioned not merely as description but as a symbolic extension of the poet's inner emotional world.

The study also reveals that individualism was central to Arabic Romanticism. The poet was reconceived as an autonomous creative self rather than a representative voice of tribe or society. This transformation was especially evident in the works of Mahjar poets, whose diasporic experience intensified themes of exile, freedom, and self-realisation.

Furthermore, the research finds that Romanticism played a crucial role in literary renewal by reforming poetic language, structure, and purpose. Although early Romantic poets retained classical metres, they emphasised thematic unity, simplicity of diction, and emotional coherence. These innovations laid the groundwork for later developments such as symbolism, free verse, and modernist experimentation.

### Discussion

The findings highlight that Arabic Romanticism should be understood not merely as a literary trend but as a broader cultural and intellectual response to modernity. The movement emerged in a historical context marked by colonial encounters, social change, and intellectual awakening during the Arab *Nahḍah*. Romanticism enabled Arab writers to articulate emotional and psychological realities that could not be adequately expressed through classical literary frameworks.

The emphasis on emotion represents a fundamental redefinition of the purpose of literature. Whereas classical Arabic poetry privileged eloquence, craftsmanship, and inherited themes, Romantic poetry prioritised authentic emotional experience. This shift allowed literature to function as a medium of personal truth, emotional healing, and moral reflection. In this sense, Arabic Romanticism parallels Western Romanticism while retaining distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics.

The discussion also underscores the importance of individualism as a radical literary innovation. By centring the self, Romantic poets challenged social conformity, rigid moral codes, and authoritarian cultural norms. This individualistic ethos is particularly evident in Mahjar literature, where exile created both physical and psychological distance from traditional structures. Romantic individualism thus expanded the ethical and philosophical scope of Arabic literature.

From a formal perspective, Romanticism represents a transitional stage rather than a complete rupture with tradition. Romantic poets selectively preserved classical elements while transforming their function. This balance between continuity and change explains why Romanticism was able to gain widespread acceptance and influence subsequent movements. The Apollo Group's institutional support further demonstrates how Romantic ideals were systematised and disseminated within Arab literary culture.

Overall, the discussion confirms that Arabic Romanticism functioned as a bridge between classical heritage and modern literary experimentation, enabling Arabic literature to adapt creatively to changing historical realities.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that Romanticism played a foundational role in reshaping modern Arabic literature by foregrounding emotion, individualism, and creative freedom. Through its rejection of rigid formalism and its embrace of subjective experience, Arabic Romanticism expanded the expressive capacity of poetry and redefined the relationship between the poet, society, and the inner self.

By prioritising emotional sincerity, Romantic poets transformed poetry into a space for psychological introspection and spiritual exploration. The elevation of individual experience challenged inherited literary norms and empowered writers to articulate personal and collective anxieties in new ways. At the same time, Romanticism's commitment to literary renewal ensured that Arabic poetry remained dynamic and responsive rather than bound by imitation.

The enduring significance of Arabic Romanticism lies in its transitional and generative nature. It neither abandoned the classical tradition nor remained confined within it. Instead, it reinterpreted that tradition through a modern sensibility, preparing the intellectual and aesthetic ground for later movements such as symbolism, free verse, and modernism.

In contemporary literary discourse, the legacy of Arabic Romanticism remains visible in the continued emphasis on emotion, selfhood, and artistic freedom. The movement thus stands as a crucial chapter in the history of Arabic literature, one that reflects both the challenges of modernity and the resilience of creative renewal.

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