

# Literary resistance in the Near East: A comparative analysis of national identity in Arab and Turkish traditions

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**Abstract:** Resistance literature (Arabic: *al-adab al-muqawim*) serves as a profound manifestation of a nation's struggle against occupation, cultural assimilation, and socio-political hegemony. This article provides a comparative analysis of resistance narratives within the Arab and Turkish literary traditions, examining how both cultures utilized the written word to preserve national identity and cultural sovereignty. While Arabic resistance literature, particularly in the Palestinian context, emphasizes themes of land loss and the Nakba, Turkish literary movements—from the Tanzimat era to the National Literature period—reflect similar patterns of defiance against imperial decline and external pressures. Drawing on postcolonial theory and the frameworks of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, this study explores the ideological, cultural, and psychological dimensions of resistance. By bridging the Arab Nahda and the Turkish Milli Edebiyat movements, the research highlights the shared aesthetic strategies used to reclaim cultural narratives and advocate for universal values of freedom, justice, and human dignity.

**Keywords:** Arab resistance literature, Turkish literary traditions, national identity, Near East, cultural preservation, postcolonialism

## Introduction

Literary resistance in the Near East has historically developed as a synchronized response to foreign occupation, colonial domination, and the threat of cultural erasure. In both Arab and Turkish contexts, literature has served not only as a record of historical events but also as a powerful tool for cultural defiance. The genesis of this resistance can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—a pivotal era marked by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nationalist awakenings. This period witnessed the emergence of the

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Arab *nahda* (revival) and the Turkish *tanzimat* and *milli edebiyat* (national literature) movements. While Arab enlighteners focused on protecting their linguistic and spiritual heritage from European influence, their Turkish counterparts, such as Namık Kemal and Mehmet Akif Ersoy, were formulating a literary discourse centered on *vatan* (homeland) and *hürriyet* (liberty).

This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of resistance narratives within these two interconnected traditions, examining how writers utilized the written word to preserve national identity. Drawing on postcolonial theory and the frameworks of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, the research explores the ideological, cultural, and psychological dimensions of resistance. The methodology employed is a comparative literary analysis, focusing on selected prose and poetry that exemplify the aesthetics of preservation. By bridging the Arab and Turkish experiences, this article highlights the shared strategies used to reclaim cultural narratives in the face of external and internal hegemonies.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a multidisciplinary approach, utilizing a comparative literary framework and postcolonial theory to examine Arab and Turkish resistance narratives. In the first stage, fundamental data on the development of the Arab Nahda and the Turkish Tanzimat and Milli Edebiyat movements are collected through a method of historical excursion. In the second step, the data are summarized using a systematic method to classify the transition from intellectual enlightenment to active literary mobilization. In the third stage, the final results are analyzed using a comparative research method, focusing on shared aesthetic strategies and the “uncompromising stay” motif in the works of key authors. The aim of the work is to systematically explain how literature serves as an intellectual fortress for national identity against cultural erasure and socio-political hegemony. By employing a phenomenological approach to texts, the study determines the role of writers in forging a national consciousness and preserving human dignity within the Near Eastern context.

### **Foundations of resistance: Enlightenment and the intellectual awakening in the Near East**

Arab resistance literature has historically developed in close connection with struggles against occupation, colonial domination, and

cultural hegemony. Colonialism and socio-political challenges in Arab countries have significantly influenced both the content and form of literary expression. Resistance (*al-muqawama*) in this context means steadfastness and the defense of cultural life. Resistance poets and writers seek to raise awareness of forgotten rights and motivate the oppressed to reclaim their dignity. During the period of European influence in the Arab East, these concepts were reflected through poetry and prose, utilizing a language drawn from the nation's collective suffering.

The history of this literary defiance dates back to the end of Ottoman rule, flourishing particularly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This era, known as the *nahda* (revival), was shaped by the spread of education, the development of the press, and pivotal events such as the Urabi Revolution and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919. Cultural awakening made the masses ready for intellectual and physical resistance (Said 1993, 246).

Parallel to the Arab *nahda*, the Turkish literary landscape was undergoing a similar transformation through the Tanzimat (Reorganization) and later the Milli Edebiyat (National Literature) movements. While Arab enlighteners focused on protecting their culture from Western colonial encroachment, Turkish intellectuals like Namık Kemal were pioneering the concepts of *vatan* (homeland) and *hürriyet* (liberty). For both traditions, the press became a primary forum for discussion on secular education, philosophy, and political sovereignty.

The intellectual contributions of figures such as Khalil Beydas (1875-1948), facilitated through his prominent journal *An-Nafais al-asriyya*, represent the pinnacle of this period in Palestine. Alongside Beydas, multifaceted enlighteners like Abdullah Mukhlis, Iskander al-Khuri al-Beytjali, Issaf al-Nashashibi, and Khalil al-Sakakini played a decisive role in establishing secular schools and progressive press organs. These platforms became forums for intense polemics on domestic policy, secular education, and philosophy, effectively reviving journalism as a scientific and educational tool. Beydas, in particular, utilized this platform to advocate for social justice, viewing its attainment as rooted in the perfection of human nature. This perspective directly resonates with the Turkish enlightenment tradition, where writers such as Namık Kemal asserted that literature must function as a vehicle for moral education and socio-political reform (Mardin 1962, 134). As Prof. Dr. İnci Enginün emphasizes, in the late

Ottoman and early Republican periods, journals and newspapers functioned as “intellectual schools” where authors not only mastered new literary techniques but also forged a national consciousness (Enginün 2007, 42).

Furthermore, as Şerif Mardin (1962, 10-80) elucidates in his analysis of the ‘Young Ottomans,’ the emergence of private journalism provided a fertile ground for the birth of ‘public opinion’ (*halk efkârı*). Figures like İbrahim Şinasi and Namık Kemal transformed the written word into what Mardin calls ‘operative ideals’—concepts that sustain a political and social entity. This transition from abstract poetry to socially engaged prose and journalism mirrored the Palestinian experience, where literature ceased to be a mere aesthetic endeavor and evolved into a systematic entry of modern thought aimed at national preservation. This era also witnessed a unique expansion of translation work. Rather than strictly adhering to the original texts, Palestinian translators adapted Western works by localizing character names, geographical settings, and cultural realities to resonate with the local population. This method, which Enginün (2007, 35) also identifies in early Turkish Tanzimat adaptations, served as a vital “creative school” for mastering modern literary forms (Harlow 1987, 4). Consequently, by reshaping foreign narratives to fit indigenous cultural frameworks, both Arab and Turkish intellectuals transformed translation and journalism into potent instruments of cultural self-defense, laying the socio-political foundations for the more direct resistance literature of the following decades.

### **The colonial crisis and the literature of mobilization**

In the aftermath of World War I, the geopolitical landscape of the Near East underwent a radical transformation as Arab territories fell under the mandates of Britain and France. This period marked a transition from intellectual enlightenment to a more urgent, liberationist literary production. As scholars have noted, Arab writers began to utilize literature as a primary tool for social mobilization, emphasizing themes of sovereignty and national dignity in the face of colonial fragmentation (Suleiman 2003, 41).

The resulting social upheaval created the necessary conditions for the development of a robust patriotic press. Newspapers such as *Palestine* (1911), *Al-Akhbar* (1911), and *Ad-Dustur* (1913), alongside journals like *Al-Asma'a* and *Az-Zuhur*, became the primary forums for national identity. While prose was dominated by journalistic polemics,

artistic expression found its strongest outlet in poetry. Poets like Muhammad Ala al-Salih, Abd al-Karim al-Karmi, and Ibrahim Tuqan sought to address modern national themes while maintaining the formal canons of classical Arabic verse. This shift towards a literature of commitment (*iltizam*) was not unique to the Arab world. Simultaneously, the Turkish literary scene was dominated by the Milli Mücadele (National Struggle) spirit. While Palestinian and Syrian intellectuals were reacting to the Sykes-Picot realities and the British Mandate, Turkish authors like Halide Edip Adıvar and Mehmet Akif Ersoy were galvanizing the Anatolian resistance through prose and poetry. In both geographies, the writer's role evolved from a "teacher of the enlightenment" to a "voice of the revolution." Literature ceased to be a reflection of Western models and became a defensive mechanism designed to protect the collective memory of the masses.

Even early fiction, such as the collection *Songs of the Night* (1922), reflected this transitional phase. Although the characters often remained rooted in romanticism and sentimentalism, they represented the first steps toward a literature of direct engagement. Just as Palestinian writers utilized translation—exemplified by Jamil al-Bukhari and Anwar Arafat—to master new creative methods, Turkish intellectuals of the same era were adapting similar Western genres to voice their national grievances (Enginün 2007, 342). Consequently, by transforming the written word into a functional tool of resistance, both Arab and Turkish literary traditions moved beyond mere aestheticism, establishing the socio-political foundations for the uncompromising resistance aesthetics that would define the mid-20th century.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Palestine remained a predominantly agrarian society grappling with the economic constraints of British colonial interests. However, the rising national consciousness manifested in significant protest movements in 1929, 1933, and the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. During these decades, the press functioned as the nervous system of the resistance. New influential outlets such as *Ad-Difa* (*Defense*, 1934) and *Al-Liva* (*The Flag*, 1936) emerged, while figures like Emil al-Guri and Mahmoud Seif al-Din al-Irani utilized journals like *Al-Fajr* (*Dawn*) to warn against the escalating British threat. Even when local authorities closed these organs, forcing founders like al-Guri into temporary exile, the Palestinian intellectual diaspora continued their advocacy from Damascus, Cairo, and Beirut. This sustained journalistic pressure provided the ideological scaffolding for a generation of poets—most

notably Ibrahim Tuqan and later Mahmud Darwish—to transform local grievances into a universal literature of resistance.

### **From individual psychologism to collective resistance: The impact of the Nakba on poetry and prose**

In the early 1940s, Palestinian prose was characterized by an intensive search for form, yet it remained caught between didacticism and emerging psychological exploration. Writers such as Ishaq al-Husseini and Najati Sidqi emphasized the necessity of modern short stories, but their works often functioned as journalistic social essays. As seen in Al-Husseini's *Memories of a Chicken* and Shukri Shaasha's *Memories*, the primary objective was still to provide moral and political lessons rather than pure aesthetic innovation. On the eve of 1948, a shift toward subjective-psychological genres appeared in the works of Muhammad al-Adna and Aref al-Aref. These authors focused on internal experiences—such as the psychological state of a sick person or the inner world of a blind child—often isolating their narratives from the urgent socio-political crises of the era. This detachment from the “people's life” marked the final, contemplative phase of a literary period that was soon to be shattered by historical tragedy.

The historical events of 1948, known as the Nakba (Catastrophe), created a deep socio-cultural crisis that changed the direction of Palestinian literature. This period of displacement and shared trauma led to a new movement called Resistance Poetry. In this phase, the personal and private themes of earlier writers were replaced by a collective effort for cultural survival. Key poets like Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, and Taha Muhammad Ali used their works to protect and preserve national identity. Darwish famously argued that poetry must “carry the lamp from house to house,” meaning that literature should serve a humanitarian and cultural purpose. During this time, poetry was no longer just about beauty; it became a vital tool for keeping national memory alive. Similar to the Turkish poets of the National Struggle who gave voice to their nation's spirit, Palestinian literature became a global symbol of human dignity. This ensured that the idea of the homeland remained a permanent and powerful theme in modern literature.

However, the impact of these events was not limited to poetry. In the 1950s and 1960s, Palestinian prose also underwent a major transformation, following two main paths: the psychological struggle of the displaced intellectual and the direct resistance of the peasantry.

A central figure in this era was Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919–1994), who combined Western modernism with the experience of exile. His novel *The Cry in the Long Night* (1955) focuses on Amin, a journalist whose internal monologues reveal deep feelings of loneliness and lack of purpose. Through Amin's life in the cafes of Baghdad, Jabra explores complex themes like the role of civilization and the changing status of women. While the writer aimed to create an interesting image of the intellectual, his stories remained deeply focused on the inner conflicts caused by his reality (Nassar 2006, 150).

Simultaneously, a more grounded, realistic “school” of storytelling emerged, often influenced by the social realism of Maxim Gorky. This is evident in Jabra's *Sweat and Other Stories* (1956), where characters like master Hanna and the teenager Jacob are depicted through a lens of objective “routine.” This realistic trend was further sharpened into a direct critique of regional authoritarianism and colonial encroachment. For instance, Sonallah Ibrahim's *That Smell* (1966) and Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* series exposed the absurdity of life under censorship and the socio-cultural upheavals brought by the oil boom.

A foundational motif in this period is the visceral attachment to the land, most poignantly captured in the works of Muhammed Naffan and Taufik Zayyad. Naffan's stories, such as “Skull No. 14” and “Because We Love the Land,” transform the events of 1948 into a timeless struggle for territorial presence. By depicting young men who choose to die in a well rather than abandon their village, Naffan underscores the “uncompromising stay” on the land. Similarly, Taufik Zayyad, in his prose collection *World Affairs* (1970), particularly in the story “The Eye of a Dead Cow,” utilizes folklore and humor to depict the struggle of the common *fellah* (peasant). In Zayyad's world, the common man's wisdom—often pitted against the greed of rich sheikhs—becomes the ultimate shield. His depiction of villagers lying down in front of tractors and bulldozers to save their homes serves as a powerful symbol of non-violent, yet absolute, resistance. Through these diverse prose narratives, from Jabra's intellectual salons to Zayyad's rural landscapes, the Palestinian pen continued to document the multi-layered reality of a nation refusing to be erased.

### **Social realism, land attachment, and the aesthetics of sacrifice**

Beyond the immediate struggle for sovereignty, resistance literature evolved into a potent platform for scrutinizing internal authoritarianism and the socio-economic transformations of the Middle

East. This transition is exemplified by Sonallah Ibrahim's *That Smell* (1966) and his later work *Zaat* (1992), alongside Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, which analyzed the seismic cultural shifts triggered by the petroleum industry. This vein of social critique closely parallels the "Political Novel" in Turkish literature. As noted by Bernat Moran (2004), the Turkish novel of the 1970s, represented by authors like Adalet Ağaoğlu, became a primary site for interrogating the intersection of state power and individual liberty, mirroring the internal dissent found in Arab modernist prose.

In the Palestinian context, this socio-political engagement found its most visceral expression in the "School of Land," represented by Muhammed Naffan and Taufik Zayyad. Naffan's stories, such as "Skull No. 14", reinforce the "uncompromising stay"—the refusal to abandon the ancestral soil. This thematic preoccupation with the sanctity of the village reflects a shared aesthetic with the Turkish "Village Literature" (*Köy Edebiyatı*). According to Fethi Naci (2007), Turkish village novels, particularly the works of Yaşar Kemal, transformed the Anatolian peasant from a passive subject into a revolutionary figure fighting against oppression, echoing the agrarian resistance found in Zayyad's "The Eye of a Dead Cow" (1970).

As this prose matured, it began to depict the struggle as a total existential commitment involving sacrifice and symbolic endurance. In Taufik Zayyad's *Mahmud Does Not Retreat*, the blacksmith's son becomes an archetype of the indomitable national spirit. His ability to hammer iron with "extraordinary ease" functions as a metaphor for the ideological forging of the people, resonating with the Turkish socialist realism of Orhan Kemal, where the dignity of labor is the cornerstone of national awakening (Bezirci 1984).

The transition to collective sacrifice is further explored in Ali Hussein Khalaf's collection, *Take Me to Bisana* (1977). Through narratives such as *A Seed of an Orange* and *A Fish and a Handful of Soil*, Khalaf illustrates the visceral attachment to the soil. The tragic irony of a boy killed for taking oranges from his father's garden highlights the dispossession of Palestinian space. The image of the fisherman clutching a "handful of soil" wrapped in a scarf serves as the ultimate symbol of the portable homeland—a motif that echoes the Turkish folk tradition of carrying a piece of one's native earth (*vatantoprağı*) into exile.

Furthermore, Toufic Fayyad's *Yellow Street* collection elevates these themes to a metaphysical level. The character Amin Assad, who

remains unbroken by torture, embodies the principle of *Sumud* (steadfastness). As noted by Albert Memmi (1965), the colonizer often attempts to fracture the identity of the oppressed, yet Fayyad's heroes find strength in their absolute refusal to leave. This commitment is rendered in the symbolic story *Umm al-Khair*, where the protagonist's sacrifice gives life to her surroundings, functioning as an allegory for national rebirth. The recurring image of the "snake" that destroys everything in its path serves as a potent symbol of colonial encroachment, much like the predatory figures in Turkish village prose. By blending psychological depth with landscape sketches that contrast the "beauty of the dawn" with the "dark deeds" of the ruler, these writers transform Palestinian literature into an eternal testament of dignity and resistance.

While these symbols highlight the physical struggle, the narrative strategies of resistance also found expression through the integration of folklore and biting satire, most notably in the works of Emil Habibi. In his collection *Six Times Six Days*, Habibi transforms traditional processions and local legends into acts of political protest. The depiction of the Jerusalem residents' march, which erupts into a collective cry of "my son!" as mothers claim the arrested youth, illustrates the communal bonds of the struggle. Habibi's use of folklore—as seen in the fairy-tale structures of *The Happy Meeting of Massoud*—is not an escape from reality, but a tool for preserving national identity against cultural erasure (Aliyeva 2024, 55; Nassar 2006, 150). This strategic use of the "folkloric subtext" to deliver social critique mirrors the Turkish literary tradition of satire, exemplified by Haldun Taner, where traditional motifs are repurposed to satirize contemporary political absurdities through a technique often described as "epic detachment" (Moran 1994, 112).

The psychological and symbolic depth of this resistance is further expanded by the voices of women writers who, since the 1970s and 1980s, have reshaped the literary framework to include critiques of patriarchy and socio-cultural constraints alongside nationalist themes. As Miriam Cooke argues, the intersection of nationalism and feminism became a new frontier for Arab literature (Cooke 1996, 269). Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* portray prison and domestic life as dual sites of captivity and resistance. This gendered perspective finds a strong parallel in Turkish literature of the same era, where writers like Leyla Erbil and Adalet Ağaoğlu challenged both state authoritarianism and patriarchal

structures, often utilizing internal monologues to reflect the fragmented consciousness of the modern woman (Moran 1994, 235). Whether through the satirical legends of Habibi or the emancipatory prose of Khalifeh and Saadawi, these narratives demonstrate that the Palestinian and Turkish pens are not only fighting against external occupation but also for internal liberation and the right to “live as a nation”.

### **Digital transformation and contemporary narratives of resistance**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought a paradigm shift to resistance literature through technological advancements. Digital platforms have allowed writers to bypass traditional censorship, giving rise to social media poetry and microfiction. During the Arab Spring (2010–2012), this digital evolution was led by figures like Egyptian poet Tamim al-Barghouti and Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, who bridged the gap between literary art and political activism. This era introduced new emotional dimensions to the literary discourse—ranging from revolutionary romanticism to political realism—where literature did not merely celebrate uprisings but critically examined their complexities. Modern Arab resistance literature has thus evolved into a multidimensional platform, addressing political, ideological, and gender-based struggles while utilizing globalization and social media to amplify its reach beyond the Arab world.

In this contemporary landscape, writers do not only preserve tradition but also reinterpret it to reflect changing social and political realities (Aliyeva 2024, 305). This is evident in the works of Khaled Khalifa, who depicts societal devastation in Syria, and Ahmed Saadawi, whose *Frankenstein in Baghdad* uses gothic symbolism to portray the fragmentation of the modern city. Saadawi’s creation of a “creature” made from the body parts of explosion victims serves as a powerful metaphor for the collective trauma of war—a narrative technique that mirrors the “dark realism” found in contemporary Turkish literature, where authors deal with the ghosts of past political upheavals. These narratives integrate the ideals of social justice and truth as essential components of national identity, presenting literature as a manifestation of collective will and moral resistance (Musawi 2006, 74).

Whether through the psychological study of refugees in Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise*—which highlights the personal struggle to maintain identity amidst dehumanizing conditions (El Akkad 2021, 12)—or the moral turmoil of political violence in

Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*, contemporary prose continues to document the human cost of displacement. This focus on the "displaced subject" finds a strong parallel in the works of modern Turkish writers who explore the themes of internal migration and the loss of cultural roots in the face of rapid urbanization.

The pinnacle of this modern epic tradition remains Elias Khoury's *Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun)*. Spanning history from the 1936 revolt to the 1990s, Khoury constructs a "mosaic of memory" that captures the harsh reality of refugee camps and the resilience of the Palestinian spirit. By utilizing the stream of consciousness and a vast archive of oral testimonies, Khoury transforms personal stories into a permanent historical record. The novel's structure, which refuses a linear timeline, reflects the fragmented nature of the Palestinian experience itself. Ultimately, the evolution of this literature suggests that resistance is no longer just a reaction to external occupation; it is a profound intellectual and aesthetic commitment to justice. By weaving together folklore, digital activism, and existential exploration, contemporary Arab and Turkish writers ensure that the narrative of their people is not merely a chronicle of suffering, but an enduring testament to the dignity of the human spirit in an ever-changing global context.

## **Conclusion**

Resistance literature, as demonstrated throughout this study, is not merely a documentation of conflict but a vital aesthetic and intellectual fortress for national identity in the Near East. By comparing Arab and Turkish traditions, it becomes clear that resistance through the word functions as a shared cultural mechanism. In both contexts, literature has evolved from a tool for "reporting" struggle to a sophisticated medium for "reconstructing" the nation. Whether through the Turkish poets of the Milli Mücadele or the Palestinian voices of the Nakba, the literary pen has consistently transformed individual suffering into a collective strategy for survival. The findings of this research highlight that Palestinian resistance literature, in particular, has moved beyond simple pessimism or mourning. It has brought the "ordinary person"—with their daily worries and quiet resilience—to the forefront of the narrative. The love for the land is not depicted as an abstract sentiment, but as a lived reality of protest against arbitrariness and violence. This transformation is mirrored in the Turkish "Village Literature" (*Köy Edebiyatı*) and social realism, where the peasant and the laborer are elevated from passive subjects to conscious agents of change. The

“national hero” in both traditions is no longer an idealized figure from the past, but a contemporary individual who understands that daily existence on their ancestral soil is, in itself, an act of resistance. Furthermore, the transition from exile-based narratives to prose produced within occupied or contested territories marks a new phase in Middle Eastern modernism. While exile literature often focuses on the psychological awakening of the individual, the literature produced on the ground—from the “School of Land” to the digital activism of the Arab Spring—emphasizes the necessity of an “uncompromising stay.” Contemporary writers like Elias Khoury and Ahmed Saadawi, much like their Turkish counterparts, have shown that the modern epic is built on the preservation of historical memory against cultural erasure.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis reveals that resistance literature in the Near East is a multidimensional platform. It addresses external territorial challenges while simultaneously fighting for internal liberation and social justice. By bridging folklore, modernism, and digital innovation, Arab and Turkish writers have ensured that the spirit of the people remains unbroken. Their works serve as an eternal testament to human dignity, proving that, even under the most dehumanizing conditions, the literary word remains the ultimate shield for the sanctity of the homeland and the right to live as a nation.

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