

Introduction

Understanding People in Context

The Arab region is currently the scene of tremendous political upheaval, as well as some of the most rapid and dramatic social change in the entire world. It has been the focus of the news media and international diplomacy since the spread of radical Islam and the ensuing war on terror. The birth and subsequent demise of the Arab Spring have generated an outpouring of journalistic and scholarly writing about Arab societies, trying to shed light on how they work—or fail to work—and speculating about their future directions of development. Although advances in information technology have opened windows on the lives of people from other cultures, the Arab world remains a mystery to us. The political and armed conflicts of the Middle East affect the entire world every day, yet our knowledge of Arab culture is too limited, oversimplified, or filled with stereotypes. The need for Westerners to understand how Arabs live, what value system underlies their behavior, and why they view the West critically has never been more urgent. This book seeks to address this need.

My objective is to provide as much information as can be reasonably done in a relatively short volume. I treat the Arab world—its people and culture—in light of what I feel to be the best available sources: works of literature written by leading authors from across the Arab region. I present more than fifty texts, all from within the culture, of men, women, and children, who depict their daily experiences, problems, and solutions from their own perspectives and in their own terms, not those of Western scholars or journalists. In this sense, this book uses a “documentary” approach toward Arab culture and society, rather than essays by third persons who offer their observations about life in the region. A documentary approach treats works of literature

not only as objects of art to be appreciated but also as social documents. A documentary approach humanizes the subject under discussion. This dazzling collection of literary texts, featuring poems, essays, stories, novels, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, and life histories, represents people from a wide range of settings, viewpoints, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The texts speak of their conditions, aspirations, struggles, and achievements living in complex societies marked by tensions arising from the persistence of older traditions and the impact of modernity. They paint a vivid and intimate portrait of what life is like in the Middle East today. Most importantly, they enable us to *understand people in context*.

Understanding people in context has been gaining increasing recognition as a crucial approach in many disciplines, among them psychology, anthropology, sociology, communication studies, political science, international relations, international business, and the global economy. Understanding people in context entails recognizing the dimensions of cultural difference. It is predicated on taking into account all the factors—social, economic, political, historical, religious, ecological, and others—that make up a given culture’s worldview, define its members’ individual roles, and motivate their actions and reactions.

Naturally, the goal of understanding people in context calls for a clarification of the terms *culture* and *Arab world*. The meaning of culture has been widely debated and there is no unanimous answer that applies to all disciplines. The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired as a member of society.”¹ But cultural psychologists Uichol Kim and colleagues argue that this definition focuses on *products* of culture and does not address the complexity and dynamics of culture.² For cultural anthropologists Lynne S. Robins and colleagues, “culture is a set of learned beliefs and behaviors that shapes the way its participants view and experience the world.”³ Shared among groups, culture includes thoughts, styles of communicating, ways of interacting, views on roles and relationships, values, attitudes, practices, and customs.⁴ A novel definition of culture is offered by clinical psychologist Hope Landrine: “Culture is the unwritten social and psychiatric dictionary that we have each memorized and then repressed.”⁵ To increase our understanding of other cultural groups, says Landrine, we need to bring our own dictionary to the level of full conscious awareness, and memorize the dictionaries of others.⁶ The cultural psychologist Alana Conner Snibbe emphasizes the mutual influence between people and culture: “As people engage with a culture’s practices, artifacts, and institutions, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors come to

reflect the culture's values and beliefs." But this is only half the story: "People are active cultural agents, rather than passive recipients of cultural influences. They create, apply, reproduce, transform, and transmit their cultural routines in their daily social interactions."⁷

A reciprocal relationship exists between literature, culture, and society. While literature is influenced by the conditions of the society in which it is produced, it also exerts its own influence on society.⁸ A work of literature both *reflects* and *shapes* reality at the same time. "Literature is both a central cultural production and a participant in the creation of culture," observes Magda al-Nowaihi.⁹ Highlighting the intimate link between literary texts and the existential actualities of human life, Edward Said argues that "the realities of power and authority—as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies—are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics."¹⁰ He criticizes the tendency among Western social scientists to exclude literature from studies of the Middle East, emphasizing that "a literary text speaks more or less directly of a living reality."¹¹ A similar view of Arabic literature is expressed by literary scholar Trevor Le Gassick, who calls contemporary Arabic fiction "the most revealing window into the closest workings of a society's values and orientations."¹² For Syrian novelist and sociologist Halim Barakat, who sees literature as a way of exploring human behavior like science and philosophy, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz "portray Egyptian life and society more comprehensively and accurately than the work of all the social scientists put together."¹³ Echoing this view, British novelist John Fowles, in his introduction to Mahfouz's novel *Miramar*, writes that because Mahfouz "knows his country's complex problems, and complex soul, profoundly," his work "allows us the rare privilege of entering a national psychology, in a way that a thousand journalistic articles or television documentaries could not achieve."¹⁴ Given the "view from within" that works of literature offer, and the fact that most Arab societies are not readily accessible through other means of investigation, these works can be an invaluable aid in cross-cultural research, of which this volume is a part.

The terms *Arab region*, *Arab world*, and *Arab Middle East* are used interchangeably in this book. (Turkey and Iran are non-Arab countries and therefore are not included in this book.) The Arab region covers the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. In such a vast geographical area that comprises twenty-two countries, three distinct ways of life (Bedouin, rural, and urban), various Christian minorities (e.g., Copts, Maronites, Greek Orthodox), various ethnic groups (e.g., Berbers, Kurds, Nubians), and different historical legacies (countries colonized by the French, such as Syria, Algeria,

and Tunisia, versus countries colonized by the British, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine, versus noncolonized countries, such as Saudi Arabia), to mention but a few variables, it is impossible to speak of the “oneness” of Arab culture. Similarly, in a region where rapid social change is currently underway, it is impossible to speak of the “constancy” of Arab culture. It is possible, however, to speak of a core set of values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and institutions that are shared by all Arab societies, irrespective of their individual differences. The Arabic language, the religion of Islam (which is followed by the overwhelming majority of Arabs), and patriarchal values are, for example, characteristic features of Arab culture.

Learning about Arab culture, then, necessitates discarding the notion of complete uniformity. “Like other societies,” says Halim Barakat, “the Arabs have their own *dominant* culture (that is, what is most common and diffused among Arabs), its *subcultures* (those peculiar to some communities and classes), and its *countercultures* (those of alienated and radicalized segments of society).”¹⁵ He identifies a number of conflicting value orientations in contemporary Arab society: fatalism versus free will, shame versus guilt, conformity versus creativity, past versus future orientations, culture of the heart versus culture of the mind, form versus content, collectivity versus individuality, open- versus closed-mindedness, obedience versus rebellion, charity versus justice, and vertical versus horizontal values. Elaborating on each of these dichotomies, he argues that they represent tensions between hegemonic and countercultural values within contemporary Arab society. A short explanation of each of these dichotomies is called for.

Fatalism versus free will: This dichotomy refers to attitudes to life. A fatalistic attitude sees one’s actions and destiny as preordained by God, a notion that promotes passivity, resignation, and refusal to take personal responsibility. By contrast, the concept of free will emphasizes agency, activity, and individual accountability. Fatalism is widely viewed as a characteristic feature of Arab culture.

Shame versus guilt: This dichotomy refers to patterns of socialization. An individual who is shame-oriented is driven to behave honorably through fear of public censure (“What would people say?”), whereas an individual who is guilt-oriented is driven to behave honorably through his/her own sense of self-criticism. Arab culture is generally characterized as shame-oriented.

Conformity versus creativity: This dichotomy refers to the constant struggle between old and new, tradition and modernity, which manifests itself in most areas of Arab life and most aspects of Arab culture.

Past versus future orientations: This dichotomy refers to the differences between those who call for the revival of early Islamic values (e.g., Islamist

movements) and those who call for a new cultural model based on the present reality and shaped by aspirations for the future (e.g., modernizing movements).

Culture of the heart versus culture of the mind: This dualistic view of culture draws contrasts between emotional and rational cultures, spiritual and materialist cultures, civilization of faith versus civilization of science. Arab culture is often characterized as a culture of the heart and Western culture as a culture of the mind.

Form versus content: This dichotomy refers to styles of writing and the attitude to language. Arab culture is often characterized as emphasizing form or word at the expense of content and meaning. The Arab cultural renaissance (*nahda*) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to modernize Arabic prose and poetry by adopting a new set of literary concepts that underscore content, meaning, and a simple style.

Collectivity versus individuality: This dichotomy refers to the entity that constitutes the basic unit of society. For Arabs, the family (i.e., the group, collectivity) is the basic unit of society rather than the individual (individuality). Hence, instead of asserting their separateness and privacy as independent individuals, people engage in unlimited commitments to the family, whose needs take priority over personal needs and interests, and whose expectations of loyalty and solidarity supersede those of any other affiliation.

Open- versus closed-mindedness: This dichotomy refers to Arab responses to the encounter with Western civilization in the modern age. One mental response has been the emulation of the advanced culture of conquerors (open-mindedness). An opposite mental response has been to reject the invading culture and seek refuge in a revival of the past (closed-mindedness). In between these two alternatives there have been some processes of acculturation and transformation stemming from new realities and changing needs.

Obedience versus rebellion: This dichotomy refers to the nature of the relationships of Arabs to their institutions and organizations (social, educational, economic, religious, and political), which are regulated by obedience and respect for authority rather than by rebellion and individual freedom. Parents, teachers, employers, religious leaders, and political rulers are treated with reverence and elicit compliance, though this may be given grudgingly or forced by external pressures. While incidents of personal and national rebellion occur, they are infrequent and far between.

Charity versus justice: This dichotomy refers to ways of dealing with class inequalities. Charity, which is promoted as a religious virtue, minimizes the effects of class inequalities rather than providing an effective solution, whereas an emphasis on justice seeks to secure the well-being of all members of society and eliminate the class system. An emphasis on justice has gradually

developed alongside the traditional emphasis on charity in Arab culture since the early twentieth century.

Vertical versus horizontal values: This dichotomy refers to the nature of human relations. Vertical values regulate human relations on the basis of status differences, which engender discrimination (based on gender, age, tribe, sect, etc.), subordination, and authoritarianism, whereas horizontal relations relate individuals and groups to one another on the basis of egalitarian principles. Horizontal values are mostly lacking in contemporary Arab society, hence the struggle for equal rights and civil liberties.¹⁶

As the preceding overview shows, there is a tendency among scholars, both Western and Arab, to characterize Arab culture by the first value in these dichotomies and Western culture by the second value. Taking issue with this characterization, Barakat argues that these conflicting value orientations represent different aspects of the ongoing struggle of Arabs to transcend their present reality. “The dominant culture, on one hand,” he writes, “tends to put greater emphasis under certain conditions on fatalism, conformity, shame, obedience, charity, collectivity, form, vertical values, and so forth. On the other hand, the counterculture is more inclined to attach greater influence to free will, creativity, guilt, open-mindedness, rebellion, justice, and horizontal values. In the midst of this struggle, subcultures may insist on their distinctiveness but in the last analysis they can hardly be neutral and will have to emphasize one set of values or the other.”¹⁷ While acknowledging that traditional values continue to prevail, he maintains that what most distinctly characterizes Arab culture at present is its transitional state, given that an intense internal struggle of becoming is underway.¹⁸

The present selections from modern Arabic writing illustrate various aspects of culture specific to the Arab region. They depict not only widespread traditional values and norms but also the great array of individual reactions to them—enforcing them, violating them, sneaking around them, criticizing them, defying them, and so forth. The readings come from different periods, as early as 1929 (Taha Hussein) and as recent as 2015 (Adel Abdel Ghafar), thus reflecting historical change; from different countries and different locales within countries (desert, village, city), thus showing regional variations; and from different social classes, generations, and religious affiliations. These readings reveal a plurality of cultures—Bedouin, rural, urban, traditional, and modern. Official Islam, popular Islam, and radical Islam are represented in them. Youth cultures are mirrored in them. All in all, these readings convey a sense of the cultural diversity as well as of the cultural battles and contradictions within Arab societies.

The anthology features texts written in a wide variety of literary genres, both fiction and nonfiction. Drawn from the rich realm of modern Arabic

literature, the texts include poems, essays, stories, novellas, novels, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, and life histories by both male and female authors from across the Arab world. The book's underlying approach is that literature provides a window into the soul and consciousness of a nation and reveals the inner workings of the society in which it is produced. Told through the eyes of insiders, these insightful texts show not only how people's thoughts and behaviors are shaped by cultural processes, but also how pivotal the relationship between culture and human psychology is to social reform and individual growth.

The texts are organized thematically in fifteen sections that deal with the fabric of Arab culture and key issues in it. These thematic sections comprise self and identity, rites of passage, codes of masculinity, honor versus shame, private versus public, sexual mores, gender relations, marriage and children, family dynamics, religion—official versus popular, fate and God's will versus freedom of choice, forms of violence, the ruler and the ruled, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and perceptions of the West. Each of these themes is explored in several different genres, both fiction and nonfiction, and framed by a wealth of contextual information that places the selected texts within the historical, political, cultural, and social background of the region. The multiplicity of texts in each section helps to uncover similarities as well as differences in mind, self, emotion, and morality across and within Arab societies.

In selecting the literary texts for this anthology, my main concern was to ensure a wide range of subject matter. The texts had to reflect the current interests and concerns of Arab men and women. Besides sociocultural content, the texts had to possess heuristic value, namely, to show various points of view and ways of solving problems and confronting challenging situations in everyday life. I also strove to introduce writers from different generations and from different parts of the Arab world. Egypt, which is the most populous Arab country and the center of Arab cultural life, is therefore more largely represented. The literary merit or artistic quality of the text was also an important consideration. I made a great effort to include a variety of genres and styles of writing, early publications as well as more recent ones, and works by leading authors of both genders, whether living or deceased. An additional feature of this anthology is the inclusion of more than one text by the same author, thus affording a deeper glimpse into his or her creative work.

The selected texts portray a wide range of emotions, perceptions, motivations, relationships, practices, and institutions within the context of Arab culture. While the texts under each rubric have the same central theme, their interpretive potential is rich and may well suggest or overlap with themes of other texts placed under different rubrics. Additionally, many texts contain more than one theme and thus can fall under more than one rubric. In such

instances, I have placed the text in the thematic section where I believe its most intriguing cultural aspect is highlighted. As can be expected, there are common threads running through all the texts. The present organization, then, is fluid and meant to provide an easy frame of reference rather than a rigid set of categories.

Many of the literary texts are straightforward, such as Naguib Mahfouz's "An Old Picture," Samira Azzam's "Tears for Sale," and Muhammad Zafzaf's "Sardines and Oranges." Some texts contain symbols or surrealistic images that require explanation, such as the poem "Bread, Hashish and Moon" by Nizar Qabbani, or the short story "The Chair Carrier" by Yusuf Idris. And still other texts require background information to understand them, such as Dunya Mikhail's poem "America" and Yusuf Idris's short story "Innocence." The necessary explanation and contextual information are provided in the individual introduction to the thematic section in which the texts appear. Cultural references that occur in the texts, such as Arabic or Islamic terms, historical figures or events, folkloric items, or place names, are explained in endnotes.

Several thematic sections contain texts that illustrate the tensions between hegemonic and countercultural values within contemporary Arab society. For example, under the rubric "Fate and God's Will versus Freedom of Choice," Mahmud Tahir Lashin's short story "The Village Tale" depicts the struggle between the traditional fatalistic value orientation, represented by the village sheikh, and the modern notion of free will, represented by the educated visitor from the city. Nizar Qabbani's poem "Bread, Hashish and Moon," which denounces the belief in fate, calling it "a drug" of the people, and Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's poem "Life's Will," which celebrates the power of free choice, represent the counterculture. The texts under the rubric "Religion—Official versus Popular" illustrate the dominant culture and its subcultures. The excerpt from Sayyid Qutb's memoir *A Child from the Village*, which describes the religious practices of his family, represents official Islam, whereas Mohamed al-Mahdi Bushra's short story "The Dome with the Crescent: A Trilogy" and the excerpt from Yahya Haqqi's novella *The Saint's Lamp* represent popular Islam. Yasir Abdel Baqi's short story "Bus #99" (placed under the rubric "Forms of Violence") represents radical Islam. It is worth noting that Naguib Mahfouz's *Trilogy* (discussed in the introduction to "Family Dynamics") and Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubiyan Building* (discussed in the introduction to "The Ruler and the Ruled") contain striking portrayals of the variants of dominant, sub- and countercultures in Egyptian society.

Furthermore, in many thematic sections the texts depict a given norm, practice, or institution from both the *male* and *female* perspectives.

For example, under the rubrics “Rites of Passage,” “Sexual Mores,” “Gender Relations,” “Marriage and Children,” and “Family Dynamics,” the texts portray the experiences and attitudes of men as well as women in these areas of life. Viewed in their totality, the various texts reflect the *evolving nature* of many aspects of Arab culture, including male-female relations, family dynamics, and sexual mores. For example, in Salwa Bakr’s short story “International Women’s Day” the pattern of superior-subordinate in the workplace shows a reversal of roles: the woman is the boss, serving as a primary school principal, and the man is the subordinate, serving as a teacher under her supervision. In Hanan al-Shaykh’s short story “The Funfair” the protagonist chooses to break her engagement and remain single rather than join her fiancé’s family and live under the yoke of a tyrannical mother-in-law, a choice that indicates a shift in lifestyle among young emancipated urban women. Rashid al-Daif’s provocative novel *Who’s Afraid of Meryl Streep?*, which is excerpted here, deals with the sensitive issues of virginity and premarital sex in Arab culture, exposing men’s increasing anxiety and insecurity in the face of women’s liberation, which affords them hymen reparation, abortion, and the right to divorce. As these diverse texts demonstrate, the gains made by Arab women and the degree of freedom accorded to them differ from one Arab country to another, as well as from urban to rural areas, with Beirut being the most liberal, and Saudi Arabia the most conservative.

Finally, cross-references between the different thematic sections provide additional information on various cultural aspects. For example, Rabia Raihané’s short story “A Red Spot,” placed under the rubric “Sexual Mores,” shows how the belief in fate and God’s will serves as a mechanism of adjustment, helping the father of a daughter who is involved in a sexual scandal to accept her disgrace and refrain from committing a crime of honor. Yusuf Idris’s short story “Innocence,” placed under the rubric “The Arab-Israeli Conflict,” also sheds light on the ruler-ruled paradigm. This intriguing narrative, which has a dreamlike quality, depicts the relationship of the Egyptian people (represented by the son) with their ruler (represented by the visitor/father) as analogous to the relationship between father and son. This culture-specific analogy carries with it all the mutual expectations, obligations, feelings, and attitudes that characterize the father-son relationship in Arab culture.¹⁹

Understanding people in context is as challenging as it is endlessly fascinating. When reading through the mosaic of voices and narratives assembled here, it is important to keep in mind that the cultural context is experienced differently by different individuals, including members of the same community. In this book, I sought to illuminate the cultural landscape of the Arab world and demonstrate the ways that “person and context” live

together and make each other up.²⁰ Rather than engage in lengthy analyses and interpretation, I let these compelling texts speak for themselves. While no single volume, however extensive, can exhaust the topic under discussion, I hope that this modest contribution will help to demystify Arab culture and impart a better understanding of the Arab world.