



Arabic Literature on Social Media as a Cultural Materialist Practice

Dr. Reham Hosni Saleem Aboud

Lecturer of Literary Criticism

Department of English

Faculty of Arts - Minia University

DOI: 10.21608/qarts.2025.389823.2233

مجلة كلية الآداب بقنا - جامعة جنوب الوادي - المجلد (34) العدد (68) يوليو 2025

الترقيم الدولي الموحد للنسخة المطبوعة ISSN: 1110-614X

الترقيم الدولي الموحد للنسخة الإلكترونية ISSN: 1110-709X

<https://qarts.journals.ekb.eg>

موقع المجلة الإلكتروني:

Arabic Literature on Social Media as a Cultural Materialist Practice

Abstract

This study develops a critical framework for analyzing Arabic literature on social media through the lens of Raymond Williams's theory of culture, particularly the *structure of feeling* and *cultural materialism*. It explores how Arabic literary expression in digital environments—especially on Instagram and mobile applications—reflects and reshapes the socio-political realities of contemporary Arab societies. By tracing a historical continuum from pre-Islamic poetic traditions to modern digital platforms, the study situates Arabic e-literature within broader material and emotional contexts. Two case studies are examined to exemplify how digital technologies foster remix culture and immersive reading. The analysis demonstrates that Arabic literary production on social media functions as a dynamic cultural process that transcends traditional literary analysis by capturing the lived, affective dimensions of its historical moment. By integrating Raymond Williams's concepts of cultural materialism and structure of feeling, the research offers a dual lens: one that situates digital literature within broader socio-economic and historical contexts, and another that attends to the emotional textures and collective consciousness shaping cultural expression in the digital age. This integrated framework allows for a deeper understanding of how digital platforms mediate the interplay between technological affordances, artistic creativity, and political struggle. It can also inform the analysis of digital cultural production in other regions undergoing political contestation and technological transformation.

Keywords: Social media literature, Cultural materialism, Structure of feeling, Instapoetry, Augmented reality literature

1. Introduction: Cultural Theory and Arabic Literature on Social Media

Cultural Theory provides invaluable tools for critically engaging with how cultural processes shape and reflect power dynamics and societal structures. Leveraging Raymond Williams's theory of culture, particularly the *structure of feeling* and *cultural materialism*, to analyze Arabic literature on social media provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the intricate relationship between cultural production, collective consciousness, and socio-political realities. Williams is one of the most profound cultural theorists and "the first to see the essential interconnectedness of economic, political, social and cultural developments" (Scannell 2007, 111).

According to Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, cultural materialism is "a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism" (1977, 5). This perspective highlights the significance of examining the distinct characteristics and conditions under which cultural and literary works are created. Rather than treating culture as a homogeneous or abstract entity, Williams emphasizes its diverse and concrete manifestations. By situating cultural production within the framework of historical materialism, Williams connects cultural and literary works to the broader socio-economic structures and historical contexts. This approach highlights how cultural forms are influenced by and, in turn, influence material conditions and social relations.

This definition of cultural materialism is extended and elaborated on in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*: "I would now claim to have reached...a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of 'arts', as

social uses of material means of production (from language as material ‘practical consciousness’ to the specific technologies of writing and forms of writing, through to mechanical and electronic communications systems)” (Williams 1980, 243).

Williams broadens the scope of cultural analysis by defining culture itself as a productive process that is both social and material. This perspective emphasizes that cultural production is not merely an abstract or intellectual activity but one that involves concrete, material means and social practices. Williams identifies the arts as specific social practices that utilize these material means of production, encompassing everything from the use of language, which he describes as “material ‘practical consciousness,’” to the various technologies involved in writing and communication.

By highlighting the range of material means from language to electronic communications systems, Williams illustrates the diverse ways cultural production is embedded in material and technological contexts. Language itself is conceptualized as a material form of consciousness, and the development of writing and communication technologies represents an extension of this materiality. This comprehensive view underscores the interconnectedness of cultural practices and material conditions, reinforcing the idea that cultural production is deeply rooted in and influenced by the socio-economic and technological contexts of its time.

With this perspective in mind, using Williams’ framework would help examine how digital platforms (as material means of production) influence the creation and dissemination of literary works. In particular, this would help consider how social media technologies shape the form and content of literary expressions,

reflecting the socio-economic conditions and collective experiences of Arab societies in the digital age.

Williams's approach is characterized by a detailed focus on the empirical details of artworks and their interaction with the socio-cultural contexts of their creation and reception. This methodological focus highlights the concept of "structures of feeling" as a crucial tool for critically analyzing how specific artistic practices and artworks are sociologically connected to broader social processes (Filmer 2003, 201). Williams's concept of the structure of feeling underscores the necessity of perceiving cultural works as intricate, holistic experiences that mirror the lived realities of their era. The structure of feeling, "as a matter of cultural theory," is perceived by Williams as

A way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced. (1977, 133).

Williams' concept of structure of feeling clarifies that forms and conventions in art and literature are not just isolated aesthetic practices but are integral to the broader social processes. These artistic forms and conventions are deeply embedded in and inseparable from the societal context in which they are created and consumed, providing a unique and dynamic articulation of collective feelings often not captured by other social structures. He

argues that these artistic conventions should not be understood merely as reflections or derivatives of other established social structures (like economic systems, political institutions, etc.). Instead, art and literature themselves constitute a unique type of social formation. They are not just secondary effects but primary expressions that contribute to and shape the social reality.

By emphasizing this, Williams highlights the role of literature and art in shaping and expressing their time's emotional and social realities, offering deeper insights into the complex interplay between culture and society. For example, a novel like Naguib Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy* can be seen not merely as a reflection of mid-20th-century Egyptian society but as an active participant in expressing the structures of feeling of that era. The characters, themes, and narrative structure embody collective emotions and social dynamics of Egyptian life, providing a deep, nuanced articulation of the lived experiences and societal changes occurring at the time.

The concept of structures of feeling is significant in understanding the fluid, emergent aspects of social life that precede and shape more fixed social formations. "For structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available" (Williams 1977, 133–4). By distinguishing between these dynamic social experiences and established social structures, Williams offers a nuanced approach to cultural analysis that captures the lived and affective dimensions of historical change.

The idea of the structure of feeling represents "Williams's most significant attempt so far to preserve and yet to go beyond the Marxist arguments concerning literary and cultural reproduction"

(Higgins 2013, 42). It acknowledges that while economic and material conditions profoundly shape cultural production, there is an additional layer of emotional and experiential reality that must be considered to fully understand the impact and significance of a cultural work. In this, Williams diverges from the Marxist concept of culture as “dependent, secondary, ‘superstructural’: a realm of ‘mere’ ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history” (Williams 1977, 19). Rather, Williams believes that a “culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work; it is also and essentially a whole way of life” (1958, 344), a “whole social process” (1977, 108).

With this concept of culture in mind, this study aims to transcend the traditional analytical dissection of literary works—such as analyzing characters, plots, themes, and historical references—by understanding these works as complex and holistic experiences that reflect the lived realities of their time. By doing so, it seeks to grasp the complete, lived experience and the elusive essence that characterize a specific historical era, thus elucidating the nuanced interplay between literature and socio-political contexts in the digital milieu. This approach is particularly relevant for comprehending the collective consciousness and lived realities of the digital age through its cultural production and experiences.

Therefore, the integration of cultural materialism and the structure of feeling offers a comprehensive and nuanced framework for analyzing social media Arabic literature, where the rapid evolution of digital platforms and the immediacy of audience interaction create complex layers of meaning and experience. Cultural materialism provides a macro-level analysis by situating literary works within their socio-historical and economic contexts, examining how material conditions influence the production, distribution, and reception of cultural artifacts. This approach

allows for an understanding of the external factors that shape literary creation and the broader social processes at play. On the other hand, the structure of feeling offers a micro-level understanding of the emotional and subjective dimensions of cultural experience. It captures the lived experiences, collective moods, and emotional currents that characterize a specific historical moment, revealing individuals' and communities' internal, affective responses to their social realities. By integrating these two approaches, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how social media Arabic literature reflects and shapes the collective consciousness and material realities of contemporary Arab societies, offering deeper insights into the dynamic relationship between culture, emotion, and socio-political change in the digital environment.

This theoretical integration sets the stage for a deeper exploration of Arabic literature's cultural practices, both past and present. By applying Raymond Williams's cultural materialist framework, we can trace how historical modes of cultural expression, particularly poetry, embody the interplay between material conditions and collective emotions. Before exploring social media Arabic literature and its cultural materialist aspects, the following section delves into Arabic poetry's pre-Islamic roots, examining its role as a foundational cultural practice that mediated the social, political, and emotional realities of its time. This historical perspective provides a significant background for understanding contemporary Arabic literature on social media, as it echoes and reinterprets these long-standing cultural dynamics in a digital context.

2. Poetry as a Cultural Materialist Practice in Arabic Heritage

Arabic poetry, long regarded as *Diwan al-‘Arab* [The Register of the Arabs], stands as a foundational element of the Arab cultural and social fabric. Beyond its artistic value, poetry has historically served as a vital medium for articulating collective experiences and shaping social realities. Through the lens of Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism, particularly his concepts of the structure of feeling and cultural materialism, Arabic poetry in *al-Jahilyyah* [pre-Islam period] can be understood as a cultural force that reflects and actively constructs the material and social conditions of its time.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the tribal system functioned much like a hypertextual network, with each tribe operating as an autonomous yet interconnected entity. Within this network, the poet emerged as a key cultural producer, weaving narratives that not only celebrated tribal identity but also reinforced its values. Tarafa ibn al-Abd’s evocative descriptions of his camel or the prideful verses of Amr ibn Kulthum and El-Harith ibn Hilzza extolling their tribes’ achievements illustrate how poetry served as a medium for expressing collective consciousness. This aligns with Williams’s structure of feeling, wherein cultural practices embody the emotional and social essence of a particular historical moment.

The social significance of poetry in this era extended beyond its aesthetic qualities. As documented by A.J. Arberry (1957), Ibn Rashiq of Kairouan (d. 1064) remarked that the birth of a poet was a momentous occasion among Arab tribes, warranting celebration (14). Poets were more than artists; they were defenders of honor and architects of reputation, immortalizing their tribes’ deeds through verse. Babak Elahi (2019) draws a compelling parallel, likening pre-Islamic poets to modern social media creators who

engage audiences through public performances and foster communal interaction (5-6). This analogy highlights the enduring relevance of poetic practices in mediating social engagement across historical and digital contexts.

The annual *Suk 'Ukaz* ['Ukaz Fair] epitomized the socio-political and cultural centrality of poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia. This event was more than a marketplace; it was a space where poets competed, tribes negotiated disputes, and reputations were forged. The fair highlights that culture serves as a site of negotiation, where power dynamics and social realities are actively shaped through cultural practices.

At the apex of this cultural tradition stood the *Mu 'allaqat al-Sab'* [the Seven Odes], iconic poems celebrated for their eloquence and aesthetic mastery. Initially displayed on the walls of *al-Ka 'bah al-Musharrafah* [the Honored Ka 'bah] in Mecca, these odes were emblematic of communal recognition and cultural preservation. According to Elahi, their public display fostered a "ritual communicative function," transforming poetry into a shared cultural experience that united audiences around a common message (2). This dynamic interplay between text, audience, and material space exemplifies Williams's notion of cultural artifacts as active agents in shaping collective identity.

As depending on "temporal and spatial contexts," N. Katherine Hayles (2006) believes that the digital text is a "process," at the heart of it is "the time of performance," which the digital text takes to unfold in time, and the space, which is distributed among the work's components: The data files, programs, hardware, etc. This "processual nature" of digital texts creates a social context that rests on spatiotemporal features controlling the processes of creating, disseminating, and performing digital texts (182-8). This spatiotemporal social context is evident in *al-Mu 'allaqat al-Sab'*,

where a process of selecting distinguished poems resulted in choosing these seven poems to be representative of Arabic poetic creativity.

The selection process of *al-Mu‘allaqat al-Sab‘* was a social public “event,” held at a certain place (the Suk ‘Ukaz), attended by a public audience, and conducted by highbrow and trusted figures/critics to judge the recited poems. After selection, these poems were suspended on the walls of al-Ka‘bah al-Musharrafah as a kind of acknowledgement of the beauty and great value of these poems. The “event” of suspending these poems at that holy place created another social context, where various kinds of the audience through time (the pre-Islamic era) used to gather around these suspended poems and start a social interaction involving reciting these poems silently or aloud, discussing their eloquence and poetic creativity, and maybe complementing, imitating, or even criticizing them. It can be imagined that such a context might have initiated a number of sociopolitical disputes among tribes when each tribe’s members might have paid tribute to and elevated their poet’s poem over the other poems by competitive tribes. All these practices created a literary and sociopolitical ambiance similar to the current one on social media. Additionally, the oral literary aspects that accompanied the processes of reciting, selecting, and suspending *al-Mu‘allaqat al-Sab‘* brought them close to contemporary Arabic electronic literature with its salient oral modality.

Understanding Arabic poetry through this cultural materialist framework reveals its dual role as both a reflection of and a catalyst for socio-political realities. From the tribal hypertextuality of *al-Jahilyyah* to the performative spaces of *Suk ‘Ukaz*, poetry has historically mediated the intersection of culture, power, and identity. This historical grounding is important for exploring contemporary Arabic literature on social media. Just as pre-Islamic

poetry operated within specific material and cultural conditions, modern Arabic electronic literature (e-lit) engages with social media platforms as sites of cultural negotiation. The following sections of this study examine how social media platforms like Instagram and mobile applications serve as modern counterparts to the *Suk 'Ukaz*, enabling literary expression that reflects and reshapes the socio-political landscape of the Arab world. By tracing the evolution from ancient poetic practices to contemporary digital poetics, this study argues for the enduring significance of cultural materialism in understanding the dynamics of Arabic literary expression.

3. Remixing Pains and Mashing up Activism in Instapoetry

The phenomenon of Instapoetry exemplifies the integration of the material realities and social practices in cultural production, rooted in the historical and economic conditions of its time. Instapoetry or Instagram poetry, defined by Jeneen Naji (2018) as “poetry that is produced for distribution through the social media platform Instagram and most usually incorporates creative typography with bite size verses” (1-2), reflects contemporary modes of cultural production. Instagram, a platform originally designed for sharing images, has evolved into a space where visual and textual elements coexist, creating new opportunities for poetic expression. This evolution aligns with Williams’s idea that culture is a productive process influenced by the material means available to its producers (1980, 243).

Instapoetry, as a form of Arabic e-lit, embodies Raymond Williams’s concept of structure of feeling by reflecting the collective emotional and social currents of contemporary Arab youth. Through hashtags, comments, and likes, Instagram posts serve as digital markers of communal sentiments, creating an

interactive space where readers and creators negotiate shared experiences. For example, hashtags such as #Freedom or #Revolution, frequently accompanying Arabic Instapoems, allow these works to circulate within specific socio-political discourses, amplifying collective emotions tied to political resistance or social change. The immediacy of audience interaction—manifested in real-time comments or responses—further highlights how these works capture the lived realities and collective consciousness of their time. Beyond text, the multimedia affordances of Instagram, including visuals and soundscapes, enhance this emotional resonance, making Instapoetry a dynamic cultural artifact that articulates the structure of feeling within digital spaces.

Instagram's dual nature as a commercial enterprise and a cultural platform deeply shapes the production and reception of Instapoetry in the Arab world. As a site of resistance, it offers writers a space to articulate socio-political realities, connect with diverse audiences, and challenge hegemonic narratives. However, this empowerment is mediated by the platform's material conditions, including algorithmic curation, data commodification, and monetization mechanisms. For example, Instagram's algorithms prioritize visibility based on user engagement, incentivizing poets to adapt their content to meet aesthetic and interactive demands dictated by the platform. This creates a tension where literary expression must navigate between artistic integrity and digital marketability. From a cultural materialist perspective, this interplay highlights how the material structures of Instagram simultaneously constrain and enable new forms of literary production, embedding literary practices within broader systems of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). This tension, while fostering creativity and resistance, also raises questions about the

sustainability and authenticity of literary voices within such a commodified digital ecosystem.

For the purposes of this study, I will investigate one post/Instapoem that appears on *@ma3bs*, an Instagram account by مَحْمود عَبَّاس | Mahmoud Abbas, who describes himself as an artist and editorial cartoonist. The Instapoem under consideration, to which I will assign its first verse line as a title, “Wa Yarsimu Tiflan” [And He Draws a Child], is a drawing of Handala, an iconic character that represents a 10-year-old refugee child. Handala was born on Naksa Day on June 5, 1967, on the papers of the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Seyassah* [The Politics]. Handala is always depicted clasping his hands behind his back, which is turned to the viewer all the time as a sign of protest against the occupation of Palestine. He is identified as an Arab person without a specific nationality.

In “Wa Yarsimu Tiflan,” the little boy Handala is held by his creator, the Palestinian political cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, who was killed in London in 1987 because of his bitter criticism of the Arab Regimes and the Israeli occupation. A blue, thick circle goes around the drawing of Handala and Al-Ali in a representation of the world around them. Different layers of text are scattered around the drawing. In the foreground, two lines of verse by Tamim Al-Barghouti are presented: “And he draws a child, whom he calls Handala, clasping his palms behind his back. And the boy with his palms behind him continue to be a body for intimidation.” (Al-Barghouti 2009). In the background, various conversations by Al-Ali are scattered in light font around the drawing, directed in large part to Fatima; another iconic character created by Al-Ali to represent Palestine with its beauty and sadness. Together, these characters embody the lived realities and forms of resistance of Palestinians, reflecting the material conditions of their socio-political context.

In transforming these elements into a digital format, Abbas engages in a process of cultural materialism. The affordances and constraints of the digital medium shape how the poem is produced, distributed, and received. Using Instagram allows for incorporating visual art, textual layers, and audience interaction, creating a multimodal experience that enhances the poem's emotional and political impact. This transformation illustrates Williams's concept that cultural works are forms of social practice utilizing material means of production.

Moreover, including audience comments and interactions in "Wa Yarsimu Tiflan" exemplifies Williams's structures of feeling as the shared values, emotions, and experiences that characterize a particular social group at a given time. Various hashtags are embedded within these comments, and one comment quotes Al-Ali's reply when asked when the audience will be able to see Handala's face: "When the Arabic dignity becomes unthreatened and when the Arab human restores their feeling of freedom and humanity." Comments are full of various emoticons and symbols such as love, sad, broken heart, victory, and most importantly, the Palestinian flag. The comments, likes, and hashtags associated with the Instapoem reflect the collective emotional and political state of the audience, creating a dynamic, participatory cultural artifact. This interaction not only amplifies the poem's reach, but also embeds it within the broader sociopolitical discourse, reinforcing its relevance and resonance. The ability to comment and share introduces new dynamics of cultural production and reception, reflecting Williams's idea of culture as a social process.

"Wa Yarsimu Tiflan" has peculiar features that display its sociopolitical context. This poem quotes poetry by the renowned Arab poet Tamim Al-Barghouti. It is a common feature of Instapoetry to reuse or repurpose verse lines by well-known poets.

This feature is elaborated by Naji in her discussion of Instapoetry as “a networked art practice that is anthropophagic in nature in the sense that it is continuously remixing and reusing content” (2018, 1). Rather than “anthropophagic in nature,” Instapoetry could be better understood as a literary network that helps beget social associations and remixes among artistic and literary texts to expand their poetic references and put them in continuously renewing social contexts.

Abbas’s recombination and reproduction of existing media texts - poetic and conversational texts and visual art produced in different media forms - reflect the growing online mashup and remix culture as a structure of feeling of the digital age. A mashup is defined as “a complex intertextual object that brings into relationship two or more previously separate texts. In a mashup, when these two or more previously separate systems of meaning come into contact or juxtaposition, a new, third meaning emerges and the resultant text can and should be read dialectically” (Edwards and Tryon 2009 cited in Edwards 20212, 30). The “collective creativity” presented in this piece advances a new political narrative extending the original parts’ significance and creating new production and reception conditions.

The name of Tamim Al-Barghouti, the author of the two verse lines, appears as one of two signatures on this Instapoem. The mention of this poet’s name recalls the account that he narrated in an interview about his meeting with the cartoonist Al-Ali when he was a child fascinated with the character of Handala. The child Tamim asked Al-Ali to draw Handala for him, but with new, not ragged clothes and his face to the audience. Al-Ali responded that “this will be possible only when Palestine is freed from the Israeli occupation, but for now, you need to accept Handala as he is” (Al-Barghouti 2009). Al-Ali designed a cartoon specifically for Tamim

including the usual Handala with a rose in one hand, saying “Good morning Tamim” (Al-Ali 2019). The entangled relations recalled and revisited by this signature confirm the important sociopolitical aspect of social media literature.

The second signature is by cartoonist Mahmoud Abbas, who orchestrates the repurposing and remixing of these components to forge social connections among them. Five characters appear in this artwork: Handala, Al-Ali, Fatima, Al-Barghouti, and Abbas. Additionally, various characters of the audience are shown on the opposite side of the piece, where each character adds something to the general significance of the Instapoem, that is why I consider the audience’s comments and characters a significant part of the Instapoem “Wa Yarsimu Tiflan.” The 1,114 likes gathered by this Instapoem, as of the date of writing this study, add to its acceptability among the audience. This number of likes refers to the fact that over a thousand people engaged with this piece and decided to create social and emotional relations with it by clicking the like button. The various hashtags embedded in the comments section relate this post/Instapoem to other posts and environments to create new social relations and contexts. One of these hashtags, [#ناجي_العلي](#) [#Naji_AlAli], posted by Abbas himself, emphasizes the social continuity of the creative process in the digital age by linking “Wa Yarsimu Tiflan” to the broader paradigm of Al-Ali’s creative works. This connectivity exemplifies the networked nature of digital cultural production, where meaning is constructed through the interplay of text, image, and social interaction.

Edward Said’s concept of “structures of attitude and reference” from *Culture and Imperialism* complements Williams’s ideas by focusing on how cultural works are embedded in the geographical and imperial contexts of their time. Said argues that major metropolitan cultures like England, France, and the United

States have distinctive cultural topographies shaped by their imperial histories. These structures of attitude and reference manifest in the cultural languages of literature, history, and ethnography, often reflecting the imperialist mindset (Said 1994, 52). Drawing upon Said's concept, it could be argued that resistance culture also has its own structures of attitude and reference. In "Wa Yarsimu Tiflan," the structures of attitude and reference are evident in the way the poem and its electronic incarnation engage with the Palestinian struggle and its broader geopolitical implications. This piece, while deeply rooted in the Palestinian experience, resonates with universal themes of resistance and identity, reflecting a broader anti-imperialist sentiment. This electronic literature work by Abbas extends this resonance by incorporating modern technological means, thus engaging with contemporary global audiences and their varied structures of attitude and reference.

"Wa Yarsimu Tiflan" by Mahmoud Abbas illustrates how contemporary cultural production is deeply embedded in material and social contexts. In light of Williams's cultural theory, we gain a nuanced understanding of how social media reshapes poetry's production, distribution, and reception. This analysis underscores the importance of considering both the material and social aspects of cultural production in the digital age, highlighting the complex interplay between technology, culture, and politics.

4. Empowering the Disempowered through Mobile Applications

The second example of Arabic literature on social media platforms is the *AlBarrah* mobile application—an augmented reality (AR) tool designed to unfold the aesthetics of a paper book. The entire literary project, titled *Al-Barrah* [The Announcer] (2019, 2021),

was created by Reham Hosny and Mohamed A. Nasef as an AI-based novel and received an Honorable Mention for the Robert Coover Award in 2022. *AlBarrah* app is a gateway for the reader to be immersed in a new reading experience and to develop a social relationship with the authors, other readers, the surrounding environment, and the literary work itself. Using the app begins by downloading the *AlBarrah* application onto a smart digital device. While reading the printed book, the user scans various images embedded in its pages. This scanning action transforms the reading experience from the physical page to a virtual space, where digital content appears on the device's screen. Some of this content—such as videos, 3D models, and audio recordings—appears directly within the app, while in other cases, the user is directed through the application to the work's website to access additional materials.

Ten narrative threads are embedded within *Al-Barrah*'s website to create a peculiar relationship between the reader and innovative forms of literary creativity. The chief objective is to incorporate readers in the creative process and to enable them to be active agents in the authorship and reading processes. The same idea of empowering the reader can be noticed in other Arabic social media works such as the Facebook novel *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāhid Faqat [Only One Millimeter Away]* (2013) by the Moroccan novelist Abdel-Wahid Stitu, “where digital infrastructures enable an interplay between human creativity and technological affordances, allowing readers to act not just as passive consumers but as active contributors in shaping the novel's development.” (Hosny 2025, 26). This is an indication of the Arab digital authors' preoccupation with shaking the patriarchal hegemony that dominates their lives and societies and making great use of their age's digital tools to introduce a new sociopolitical paradigm.

Al-Barrah's first thread takes readers into an intimate experience by asking them to go back to their box of memories to look for a photo of themselves inside a university class, where they went through similar experiences to those the novel's protagonists are experiencing on paper. The reader's endeavor doesn't stop at finding this personal photo, but it is extended to uploading it on the novel's website to share it with a larger audience and create a social digital relationship with them. This action by one participant naturally encourages others to do the same, fostering an ongoing social and creative engagement. Sociality is further expanded through another thread that reflects on the phenomenon of migration to the West—whether legal or illegal—which has become increasingly common among Arab youth. In the last decades, the death boats of illegal migration and the drowning of a large number of persons during their attempt to illegally migrate to a European country have been recurrent pieces of news in various Arab media outlets. Readers are asked to share their immigration experiences on the work's website if they have passed through these experiences before.

Empowering the reader is enhanced by the threads that request drawing an image, singing a song, or writing a poem, inspired by the novel's incidents and uploading all these creative components in their custom places on the website. The authors of *Al-Barrah* go further by leaving their authorial site, which has been protected and fortified throughout the history of literary writing, for the reader. This role-play process entails cutting off the narrative flow at a certain point and asking the reader directly to complete this narrative line: "Imagine what might have happened with him and finish writing this part" (Hosny and Nasef, *AlMusharkaat/Nihayah* [Participations/An End]). Encouraging the reader to seize the doer's seat, which is reserved all the time for

other agents, to take the lead in completing the narrative is a significant action of pushing the interactor outside the comfort sociopolitical zone s/he used to live in. It is time for them to speak out about the realities they are experiencing, to take action, and to pursue their demands for a better life—dreams that were shattered by the various setbacks that have plagued the Arab Spring revolutions.

The reader's creative engagement with *Al-Barrah* and with other readers develops to take broader political aspects by asking the reader, in another thread, a direct question: "Do you have memories of the revolution that happened in your country? Share your memories with us!" (Hosny and Nasef *AlMusharkaat/AlThawrah* [Participations/ The Revolution]). This question reflects on the various revolutions that happened and are still happening in the Arab World, starting in 2010. Invoking interactors to speak about their roles in and memories of an important political action such as the revolutions that have spread in most of the Arab World's countries is a call for readers to reconsider the current political and social situation they are living in and to define whether they achieved their sociopolitical stability they aspire to or not. It is a creative ambience intended to help Arab readers confront the miserable reality they are experiencing as well as renew their hope and aspiration for a more inclusive and better future.

The artificial intelligence capabilities of the *AlBarrah* application create a social and political safe area for both authors and interactors to communicate and collaborate creatively, as well as avoid the sociopolitical monitoring norms imposed on them by the state and society. Social and political taboo subjects such as rape, detention, corruption, state abuse of power, etc. are proven to cause trouble to anyone who dares to explore them in countries

controlled by totalitarian regimes. The AR affordances help authors mask the sociopolitical critical messages in the liminal area between the paper book and the digital application. While exploring the work, readers silently discover the authors' intentions. The unspoken agreement between the authors and the interactors creates a creative and social consent or contract among them. Both engage in a mutual creative process away from all sorts of monitoring thanks to the digital medium's capabilities.

The state and societal censorship hinder conveying critical, urgent messages, otherwise risking the author's life as well as the lives of all involved parties, as was the case with Naji Al-Ali, as discussed above. His overt criticism of the state, Palestinian leaders, and the Israeli colonization led to his killing. Digital technology has come to take this procedure many steps further to ensure achieving societal and political transition and, at the same time, protecting lives.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has illustrated the transformative impact of social media platforms on contemporary Arabic literary production through the lens of Raymond Williams's cultural theory. By incorporating Williams's concepts of the structure of feeling and the materiality of culture, this paper has revealed how digital media not only reflects, but actively shapes the socio-political realities of the Arab world. These insights build upon the foundational analysis of pre-Islamic poetry earlier in this study, which contextualized Arabic literary production within a historical framework of cultural materialism. The section on pre-Islamic poetry demonstrated how cultural practices, like the *Mu'allaqat*, mediated collective consciousness and socio-political realities,

offering a rich historical perspective on the relationship between literature and its material conditions.

The Arabic e-lit pieces examined—from Instagram poems to immersive mobile app. novels—show how digital technologies enable new forms of literary expression that are intimately tied to the social, economic, and political conditions of their time. This continuity from historical to digital contexts underscores the enduring relevance of cultural materialism in understanding Arabic literature.

These digital platforms not only expand creative possibilities, but also serve as powerful tools for socio-political commentary, providing marginalized voices with new avenues for expression and resistance. The works analyzed demonstrate that these social media platforms are more than just venues for literary experimentation; they are dynamic spaces where collective consciousness, political struggles, and cultural identities are actively negotiated and reshaped. This convergence of technology, literature, and activism offers a rich field for both artistic innovation and critical engagement with the power structures that shape contemporary Arab societies.

The analysis of Instagram and mobile applications through the lens of cultural materialism highlights the diverse yet interconnected ways digital media platforms foster Arabic social media literature as a cultural materialist practice. Instagram's visually-driven format supports the rise of Instapoetry, emphasizing brevity, aesthetics, and emotional resonance, while mobile application and AI affordances facilitate immersive narratives and collective authorship, creating digital spaces for socio-political engagement. Despite their differing mechanisms, the two platforms of Instagram and mobile applications reflect

shared cultural materialist themes, serving as digital arenas where socio-political realities and collective struggles find articulation. These platforms respond to the constraints and opportunities of digital capitalism, leveraging their structures to amplify marginalized voices while also mirroring the inequalities inherent to these systems, such as algorithmic bias and accessibility barriers. By examining these platforms in tandem, this study underscores their complementary roles in extending the cultural materialist tradition, revealing how contemporary Arabic social media literature engages with and reshapes the material conditions of its creation and reception.

To wrap up, this study finds that Arabic literature on social media reflects a distinct digital structure of feeling shaped by the lived socio-political realities of the Arab world. It reveals that digital platforms have enabled new literary forms—such as Instapoetry and augmented reality novels—that foster participatory creativity and collective authorship. At the same time, these works navigate and resist the constraints of platform capitalism and political censorship through innovative uses of multimodal aesthetics and digital technologies, positioning Arabic e-literature as both a product of and response to its complex digital and political environment. The conceptual and analytical framework provided by the present study has the potential to be applied to electronic literature in other languages, where social and political conditions are in turmoil and lead to various forms of contestation under authoritarianism. Additionally, this framework is applicable to electronic literature on several types of social media further than the platforms discussed in the present study, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and BlueSky.

References

- Abbas, Mahmoud. (2022). "Wa Yarsimu Tiflan" [And He Draws a Child]. @ma3bs [Instagram Account], Jan. 24, https://www.instagram.com/p/CZHJThN_m0/
- Al-Ali, Naji (2019). "Naji Al-Ali Facebook Page." *Facebook*, May 3, <https://www.facebook.com/najialalihandala/photos/a.132887626892828/1162133770634870/?type=3>
- Al-Barghouti, Tamim. (2009). "Naji Al-Ali." *SetMeAsViewer* [YouTube video, 3:58], Aug. 17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBU8vhkk7u0&ab_c_hannel=SetMeAsViewer
- Arberry, A.J. (1957). *The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Edwards, Richard L. (2012). "Flip the Script: Political Mashups as Transgressive Texts." In Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel, eds. *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, pp. 26-41.
- Edwards, Richard L. and Chuck Tryon. (2009). "Political Video Mashups as Allegories of Citizen Empowerment." *First Monday: Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2617/2305>.
- Elahi, Babak. (2019). "Suspended Poetics: Echoes of The Seven Odes in Arabic E-Literature." *Electronic Book Review*, January 6, <https://doi.org/10.7273/dr5z-bv63>.

- Filmer, Paul. (2003). "Structures of Feeling and Socio-Cultural Formations: The Significance of Literature and Experience to Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture." *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2: pp. 199-219.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. (2006). "The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event." *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp:181-209.
- Higgins, John. (2013). *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*. Routledge.
- Hosny, Reham. (2025). "Shifting Paradigms of Cultural Expression: Toward a Critical Framework for Arab Digital Cultural Studies." *Faculty of Arts Journal– Suez University*.
- Hosny, Reham and Mohamed A. Nasef. *Al-Barrah* [The Announcer]. Leeds: ETC, 2019, 2021, <https://albarrahnovel.com/>, accessed on August 5, 2022.
- . "AlMusharkaat/Nihayah [Participations/An End]." *Al-Barrah*. Leeds: ETC, 2019, 2021, <https://albarrahnovel.com/albarrah/forum/%d9%86%d9%87%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%a9/>, accessed on August 9, 2022.
- . "AlMusharkaat/AlThawrah [Participations/ The Revolution]." *Al-Barrah*. Leeds: ETC, 2019, 2021, <https://albarrahnovel.com/albarrah/forum/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ab%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a9/> accessed on August 5, 2022.

- Naji, Jeneen. (2018). "The Posthuman Poetics of Instagram Poetry." *Proceedings of EVA Copenhagen 2018*. DOI:10.14236/ewic/EVAC18.1
- Said, Edward W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.
- Scannell, Paddy. (2007). *Media and Communication*. London: Sage.
- Stitu, Abdel-Wahid. (2013). "‘Alā Bu‘d Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat” [Only One Millimeter Away]. [Facebook page], https://www.facebook.com/rewayaonline/?_mref=message
- Williams, Raymond. (1958). *Culture & Society, 1780–1950*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- Williams, Raymond. (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond. (1980). *Problems In Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.
- .

الأدب العربي على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بوصفه ممارسة ثقافية مادية

الملخص:

تُطوّر هذه الدراسة إطاراً نقدياً لتحليل الأدب العربي على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي من خلال الاستفادة من نظرية الثقافة عند ريموند ويليامز، لا سيما مفهومي "بنية الشعور" و"المادية الثقافية". وتستكشف كيف تُعبّر أشكال التعبير الأدبي العربي في البيئات الرقمية—وخاصة على منصّتي إنستغرام وتطبيقات الهاتف المحمول—عن الواقع الاجتماعي السياسي للمجتمعات العربية المعاصرة وتُعيد تشكيله. ومن خلال إلقاء نظرة تاريخية على التقاليد الشعرية ما قبل الإسلام وصولاً إلى المنصّات الرقمية الحديثة، تُقدّم الدراسة تموضعاً للأدب الإلكتروني العربي ضمن سياقات مادية وعاطفية أوسع. وتتناول عملان أدبيان بالدراسة لتوضيح كيف تُعزّز التكنولوجيا الرقمية ثقافة إعادة التوليف وتجارب القراءة بالغمر. تُظهر التحليلات أن الإنتاج الأدبي العربي على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي يشكّل عملية ثقافية ديناميكية تتجاوز النماذج التقليدية في التحليل الأدبي، إذ تلتقط الأبعاد الشعورية والمعيشية للحظة التاريخية. ومن خلال دمج مفهومي ويليامز، تقدم الدراسة منظوراً مزدوجاً: أحدهما يربط الأدب الرقمي بالسياقات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والتاريخية الأوسع، والآخر يركّز على الأنسجة الشعورية والوعي الجمعي التي تُشكّل التعبير الثقافي في العصر الرقمي. يُتيح هذا الإطار المدمج فهماً أعمق لكيفية توسّط المنصّات الرقمية بين الإمكانيات التكنولوجية، والإبداع الفني، والصراعات السياسية. كما يمكن تطبيقه في تحليل الإنتاج الثقافي الرقمي في مناطق أخرى تمرّ بتحوّلات سياسية وتكنولوجية مماثلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، المادية الثقافية، بنية الشعور، شعر الإنستغرام، أدب الواقع المعزز.