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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor,  
Department of Turkish Language  
& Literature, Faculty of  
Humanities and Languages,  
Jamila Millia Islamia University,  
New Delhi, India  
E-mail: mali@jmi.ac.in

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Muhammad Ali and Modernization of Egypt: Historical-Cultural Perspectives

Mohsin Ali<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Egypt's direct political contact with France during Napoleon's rule over it produced new circumstances which led to the emergence of new patterns and horizons of relationship. It heralded into a new era of cultural encounter with the West via France which inaugurated the process of modernization in Egypt. The process of modernization started earlier during the period of Napoleon's rule, however it was fully re-appropriated later on by Muhammad Ali, the architect of modern Egypt. This development brought about the following salient features of modernization in Egypt. First, it was no more externally imposed in character. Second, the Egyptian rulers independently presided over the process as well as the outcomes of the modernization project. Third, it instilled a new sense of national identity and the idea of modern nation which culminated into the emergence of the idea of Egyptian nation and nationalism, and finally it transformed Egypt into a land of renaissance in the entire Arab world and thus helped Egypt in becoming center of regional power and power politics. Though this paper is about the role of Muhammad Ali in introducing modernization process in Egypt and its consequences but it also takes the wider views of the subject under consideration.

**Keywords:** Egypt; Muhammad Ali; French; Modernization Drive; Education; Literature and Nationalism.

## Introduction

Cultural renaissance, like other socio political developments of the society in Egypt, has its direct link to the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. It opened multiple direct ways for the Easterners to the West, through which they could make their intellectual, educational and cultural exchanges. The encounter of Egypt with the West via France initiated new processes and developments back at the home front. This inaugurated a new era of relationship with the outside world through the process of comprehensive cooperation and change. This resulted in the emergence of new cultural interface which injected new cultural cosmological reality in Arab Egyptian thinking and life. Modern Egypt owes too much to the developments which took place during Muhammad Ali reign and kept continuing subsequently for a fairly longer period.

But it does not mean that before 1798 there was no history of culture and exchange. There was literature and literary activities of many kinds including prose and poetry writings in Arabic which did not only produce the best treasury of literature in the world but also reflected the characteristics of the age in perfect

manner. It means it was full with traditional approach to life. The collective consciousness of the Egyptian nation was grounded in traditional world views which lacked scientific temperament and vitality for change. But before renaissance, the literature was characterized by the virtual absence of originality and loss of vigor. Literary works of that period generally lacked seriousness. The writers and poets were busy in artificial type of style known as *badi* in which more attention was given to the manner than to the matter. The best example of that kind of literature was *Maqma* (short narrative pieces written in a highly ornate mixture of rhyming prose). Though there were few who cared for the content of their writings such as historians but they tended to employ an undistinguished prose which did not possess much literary merits. Here puts a marking point, the very famous literary historian M M Badawi regarding the Arabic literature of Ottoman era “the imagery poets used was stock in trade and the language cliché ridden: in short, he points out that it was a literature of an exhausted,

inward-looking culture, albeit complacent and perfectly self-satisfied” (Badavi, 1993:2).

The central question here is what renaissance did? How it influenced the cultural terrains and affected the collective cultural consciousness of common Egyptians. It is widely assumed that the process of change accelerated with the establishment of the new connection awakened the Egyptian society in particular and Arabs in general. The new process of awakening not only continued during Muhammad Ali rule and gradually acquired immense vigor and influenced the entire gamut of Egyptian life and brought about perceptible change and advancements into the every aspect of collective life of the people.

Though initially Muhammad Ali focused on the modernization of military only but this process itself modernized the whole education system of Egypt. In this regard the efforts made by both Muhammad Ali and his grandson khedive Ismail kept the process of change and modernization which introduced a new tradition called the literary renaissance of Arabs.

### **Muhammad Ali and Modernization of Egypt**

After Napoleon left the country, Muhammad Ali (1805-1848) an Albanian commander, who came to Egypt along with Anglo Ottoman contingent to fight French troops, managed to be the ruler of Egypt. Muhammad Ali first consolidated himself by putting an end to the mischievous *Mumluks* who were creating problem in the country (McGregor, 2006: 53-73). As a progressive step he concentrated on the expansion of agriculture for export and then he moved towards industrialization (Masayoshi & Samir, 2017: 29). These steps generated the need to develop military skills to protect the country from external threats. The French experts were called to train the military and schools were opened. To achieve this goal, teachers from France were invited to teach along with the Egyptian intellectuals. After one decade Egypt became a strong threat to the Ottoman Empire itself. Though the Ottomans used Muhammad Ali's forces to crush the rebellions in different part of the empire time and again but they felt threatened by him. Egypt needed the economic support to maintain the huge forces comprising of Egyptian fellahin and others institutions.

These forces were needed by Muhammad Ali to fulfill his dreams for consolidating power (Fahmy, 2002:79). And it was established on the suggestions of French experts who served him as military assistants and convinced him that the Napoleon used the same method when he felt short of estimated troops. So the desire to modernize the army compelled Muhammad Ali to enhance the linguistic schools and educational system (Heyworth, 1938:104). In the process the delegates were sent to France and various French scholars were brought to Egypt to train the literary figures as well as army men through various exchange programs. Lutfi Al Sayyid says:

“The effort of the government was put not only to modernize the army but also it armed them with sophisticated weapons. Modernizing the army inevitably led to developing and expanding a program of education in terms of staff collage, engineering corps, medical surgeons and veterinary surgeons. Schools were opened and educational missions were sent to abroad to learn technology not only in the field of military science but in other fields as well. Thus army became the impetus for a

wider program of education of a new, secular nature” (Afaifi, 1985: 54-55).

Thus the major developments during the period of Muhammad Ali’s rule can be summarized in the following terms: the army was modernized, industrialization effort was made and the modern scientific education was propagated and implemented. With all these tremendous developments, Muhammad Ali succeeded in creating a state out of Ottoman province. In the process one major political development took place. That is the Egyptianization of the society by including native Egyptians into all walks of socio political and cultural life. This happened after a long historical gap which instilled a new sense of being and identity among Egyptians. Here Lutfi Al Sayyid again pointed out:

“In most countries feeling of kinship among the population creates the need for state, in Egypt it was the other way round the state first came into existence then roused among population the feeling of kinship and belonging, Muhammad Ali created a state out of a former Ottoman province, and gave Egyptians a sense of identity and stake in the

state by dragging them into the government” (Ibid, 60).

Egypt witnessed its renaissance during the period of 1805-1882 with structural change and enormous socio-political and economic development. Egyptian society became enlightened with all its educational progress which brought about new consciousness and new ideas of life. Of course, this happened with major development at the attitudinal level of common Egyptians. The economic progress made them aware of different types of sources. And the political development awakened their consciousness to fight with world ideologically. This introduced new terrains of politics and new sense of political identity. It instilled a new idea of Egyptianess which fundamentally altered the subsequent myriad movements including the political movements (Hobbs, 2007:38-9).

These movements resulted into the creation of elites in the society to counter any upcoming irregularity to them which paved the way for the society’s transformation into a modern national group (Daly, 2008: 198). Though the Urabi movement also took place in the name

of nation but basically it was against the autocratic and despotic rulers. Now with the coming of the country into direct occupation of foreigners, the politics of the country moved one step forward. They wanted to get rid of this occupation at any cost. For that purpose they united, they formed the national groups and societies; they mobilized the whole masses of Egypt. All these things were done in the name of nationalism only. Now in Egyptian case it is the nation which is getting priority over every other aspects of the society, which include religion, race and ethnicity. At this juncture it is very much clear that Egyptianess got an unprecedented importance. This Egyptianess gave them a very unique and different identical force for which they were ready to fight, to kill or to be killed, but at any cost they wanted to preserve their new found old identity, their sense of historical and cultural beings (Kedourie. and Haim, 1981: 42).

### **Muhammad Ali and Modernization of Education**

The easy victory achieved by the French forces over *Mamluk* army brought the sense of enormous superiority, efficiency and military

might of the west to the Egyptian population. Napoleon brought with him a team of French experts, scientists, and scholars who undertook a painstaking thorough survey of Egypt and its recourses. They conducted scientific experiments in the 'Institute of the Egypt' founded for that purpose (Marsot, 2007:59). He also brought with him from the Vatican an Arabic language press, the very first Arabic printing press to enter Egypt, for the publication of French proclamations in Arabic (Heyworth, 1938: 98-102). So in the process of these developments the Egyptians witnessed the efficiency and organization of the French, they admired it. Though the French occupation lasted only for a brief period but it changed the discourse of Arabic literature too along with many other socio-political reforms. Muhammad Ali not only maintained the continuity of the process started by the French ruler but he expedited it too, in a well-planned manner. It marked a point of departure when Muhammad Ali with the help of his educated men like al Jabarati, Hasan al Attar and Rifa Rafai al Tahtawi launched a comprehensive program of military and educational reform. These learned figures were not only impressed

by French library but also fascinated by some of the scientific experiments shown to them time and again. They were in fact convinced with the methods and ways of progress proposed by the French (Kedourie. and Haim, 1981: 42-56). Though the main focus of Muhammad Ali was military development along the lines of superior and well organized Western armies, but he could not do that without a change in educational system. Therefore he imported not only the Western technician and military advisors, but also Western forms of education.

He sent local Arabs on educational missions to the West (particularly France) to learn the secrets of European ascendancy. In 1816 he started superimposing upon the country a Western type of educational system which had very little in common with traditional Azhar system. He set up a number of technological and military schools in which modern sciences and European languages were taught. Muhammad Ali took many bold and decisive steps to modernize the society which put an enormous impact on the society (Brugman, 1984: 1-18).

The modernization process undertaken by Muhammad Ali revolutionized the Egyptian thought. It provided the intellectuals with an opportunity to look at two broadly different cultures. First one was old and traditional way of thinking while second was new and modern scientific approach. Here the traditional way of thinking was subjected to a severe test of the time. It has been witnessed that the exercise brought the development of modern-secular education which proved be different from the already existing religious education system. In this way the dichotomy between religious and traditional education system and modern scientific education system took place in the society. As a result of this division between religious and modern-secular education system introduced by Muhammad Ali the role of education was reoriented. Here each system served a different perspective and created a different clientele. The impact of this dichotomy has been very aptly noted down by Mahmud A.Faksh

The religious schools continued to provide a rudimentary education for the masses in the form of the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), while the modern government

schools provided a secular, European-style education for the existing and aspiring elite. The split in the education of the nation created a dichotomized and chaotic culture that has persisted to the present (Kedourie. and Haim, 1981: 42).

### **Muhammad Ali's Contribution to Literature**

Since, the literature proved to be a most important tool for not only Egyptians but also for the whole Arab and Islamic society to wage many ideological, political and cultural wars with West in the days to come. Therefore a brief account of those developments made by Muhammad Ali and his successors particularly Khedive Ismail will be noted down here who both channelized a stagnant society and mobilized masses and created a society of new fashion and style. As mentioned earlier, Muhammad Ali Pasha's main motive was the modernization of Military. To achieve this superior goal Muhammad Ali needed books and manuals for his modern schools and the army. He ordered one Arabic printing press, which was latter known as government press. It played an important role by printing translations of European works including

scientific, technological, literary as well as Arabic classics (Ibid). It resulted into the expansion of reader's number and strength in the comparison of those days when the readers were dependent on the manuscripts copied out by hand. Thus the press marked a historical date of 1828 by publishing its first Arabic periodical *Al waqai al Misriyya* (Brugman, 1984: 13-15). This inaugurated the birth of journalism in Egypt and became a potent factor in the development of not only modern Arab thought, society, and politics but also a modern Arabic literature. With the help of the translation of scientific and literary works, journalism helped gradually to change the style of Arabic prose, freeing it of excessive rhetorical devices, making it a simpler and fitter vehicle for conveying ideas as well as for sustained new narratives.

As a part of the modification of the educational system, Muhammad Ali sent his first students batch to France in 1826 appointing Rifa Rafai al Tahtawi as its Imam (Kedourie. and Haim, 1981: 1). When he returned after spending 5 years in Paris where he learnt French and various aspects of French culture, he published observations,

impressions of his trip in a book named *Takhliis al Ibriz ila Talkhis al Bariz*. The book proved to be a land marking experiment in the history of Arabic literature. The book showed the Arabs what the role literature should play or what a true literature mean. In his next move towards that end Muhammad Ali founded the Cairo School of Languages for the teaching of foreign languages including Italian, French and English (Heyworth, 1938: 98-104). Beside that a translation bureau was set up in 1841. All of these works produced a number of distinguished translators and writers, marking the beginning of the significant translation movement. Though at first was limited to technological and military books, but in the course of time included literary and historical workings (Ibid).

Continuing his grandfather's journey, the outstanding development was made in the field of literature in the period of Khedive Ismail (1863-79) through various cultural and educational steps as a part of his Westernization program. Who unlike his grandfather Muhammad Ali did not focus only in the technological part to improve his country's military excellence but emphasized

the system of education in his priority (Ibid). Thus with the help of his able minister 'Ali Mubarak, he opened various schools including girl schools. Further, he allowed Christian missions to establish schools where many Egyptian girls and boys received their education in European languages, mainly in French. In 1872 he founded *Dar al uloom* a teachers training collage which aimed at combining traditional Arabic Islamic culture with Western learning. In 1870 he established *Dar ul Kutub* a national library. Ismail founded the Opera house in Cairo, many learned societies, a museum, an observatory, and patronized exploration, scholarly research and the arts (Zaif, 1957: 15). His attachment towards Arabic language and literature and his firm decision to modernize it can be seen in the context of his generosity which he showed time and again. For instance he granted financial aids to Syrian literary societies including his well-known aid to Batrus al Bustani to enable him to work on his Arabic encyclopedia. As a part of his encouragement of this cause he conferred the title of Egyptian Moliere to the dramatist Yaqub Sannu. He took many such steps to develop the modern knowledge system

by concentrating on Arabian society and its native language and literature which he considered essential for the development of a new culture and society.

### Conclusion

With the efforts of these Egyptian rulers particularly Muhammad Ali and his grandson khedive Ismail, by the end of the nineteenth century Egypt underwent structural transformation in every aspect of society including language and literature with new meanings and sense of identity. Language itself acquired new identity and orientation. It was no more repositories of archaic values and simply a means of communication of stagnant ideas devoid of vitality for change and for bringing better future. Language was simply a communicating vehicle and for preserving the traditional and ancient values which were grounded in a socio-political and cultural structure which had witnessed any impulse for mutation and change. The system was functioning in an environment completely immune from the outside world. This stagnant cultural structure got a big jolt with the policy

of modernization initiated by Muhammad Ali and his successors.

The medieval view which had dominated until well into the nineteenth century, which regarded writing as either morally or spiritually edifying or else entertaining through mastery of language and verbal skill, gradually gave way to the attitude that literature should reflect the social reality. It started participating in the wars and peace. It became a tool to fight ideological battles which were spreading throughout the Arab world. Therefore we find all new forms of the Arabic literature of first half of the 20th century including short story, drama and novel mirroring the society truly. It was the time

when society was fighting a war with the West at all fronts. Ideologically it encountered the modernity and its wings. Politically it was struggling to achieve the independence. Socially it was standing on the cross roads of confusion and bewilderment. And economically the global recession was taking their lives in most dangerous manner. In the situation like this the new Arabic literature started playing new roles in making society compatible with the requirements of developments by becoming the language of politics, development, ideology...etc. The modern Arabic language became a powerful bridge between the past and present and a prism for future.

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<sup>۱</sup> استادیار گروه زبان و ادبیات ترکی،  
دانشکده علوم انسانی و زبان، دانشگاه  
جامعه ملیه اسلامی، دهلی نو، هند  
E-mail: mali@jmi.ac.in

## محمدعلی و نوسازی مصر: دیدگاه‌های تاریخی-فرهنگی

محسن علی<sup>۱</sup>

**چکیده:** تماس مستقیم سیاسی مصر با فرانسه در دوران حکومت ناپلئون بر این کشور شرایط جدیدی را ایجاد کرد که منجر به ظهور الگوها و افق‌های جدیدی از روابط شد. این دوره جدید از رویارویی فرهنگی با غرب از طریق فرانسه آغاز شد که روند مدرنیزاسیون در مصر را آغاز کرد. روند مدرنیزاسیون زودتر در دوره حکومت ناپلئون آغاز شد، اما بعدها توسط محمدعلی، معمار مصر مدرن، به طور کامل مجدداً تصاحب شد. این توسعه ویژگی‌های برجسته زیر را در مدرنیزاسیون در مصر به همراه داشت. اولاً، از نظر شخصیتی دیگر از بیرون تحمیل نشده بود. دوم، حاکمان مصر به طور مستقل بر روند و همچنین نتایج پروژه مدرنیزاسیون ریاست داشتند. سوم، حس جدیدی از هویت ملی و ایده ملت مدرن را القا کرد که با ظهور ایده ملت مصر و ناسیونالیسم به اوج خود رسید و در نهایت مصر را به سرزمین رنسانس در کل جهان عرب تبدیل کرد و در نتیجه به مصر کمک کرد. تبدیل شدن به مرکز قدرت منطقه ای و قدرت سیاسی. اگرچه این مقاله به نقش محمدعلی در معرفی فرآیند مدرنیزاسیون مصر و پیامدهای آن می‌پردازد، دیدگاه‌های گسترده‌تری را نیز در مورد موضوع مورد بررسی دارد.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** مصر؛ محمد علی؛ درایو مدرنیزاسیون؛ ناسیونالیسم.

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