

Between European Rationality and Eastern Spirituality: A Deconstruction of Identity and Modernity in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's Novel *'Uṣfūr Min Al-Sharq*

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Abstract: This article examines *'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* by Tawfiq al-Hakim as a dialectical exploration of European rationality and Eastern spirituality within the discourse of modernity. Modernity is frequently framed in binary terms: the West as rational, material, and technologically advanced, and the East as spiritual and tradition-bound. Such dichotomies, however, often overlook how identity is constructed and negotiated in modern Arabic literature. While previous scholarship has read the novel through the lens of civilizational conflict, it has seldom undertaken a deconstructive analysis of how East-West identities are destabilized and reconfigured through the characters' existential struggles. This study addresses two questions: (1) how are European rationality and Eastern spirituality narratively constructed in the novel, and (2) how are identity and modernity dismantled through the characters' inner conflicts and relationships? Employing qualitative interpretive literary analysis informed by Derridean deconstruction and postcolonial theory, the article traces the text's ambivalent and paradoxical structures of meaning. The findings show that the protagonist Muhsin's dialogues with the Russian intellectual Ivan expose the existential emptiness of a Western rationality that excludes the transcendent from its account of the world, while Muhsin's admission of a faith as fragile and wavering as a flower in the wind reveals Eastern spirituality to be equally unstable once subjected to modern rationalization. Through the Opera scene where Muhsin's aesthetic and emotional response is set against Ivan's disillusioned critique of Europe, the novel reframes modernity not as a fixed Western achievement but as a hybrid third space of identity negotiation. The study contributes a deconstructive rereading that moves beyond the civilizational-conflict paradigm, demonstrating how al-Hakim's narrative unsettles the very binary it appears to stage.

Keywords: Tawfiq al-Hakim; European rationality; Eastern spirituality; deconstruction; postcolonialism; modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Written in 1938, Tawfiq al-Hakim's novel *'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* (A Bird from the East) emerged at a formative moment in modern Arabic literature, when Arab writers were confronting European modernity directly through the figure of the student abroad. The novel narrates the life of Muhsin, an Egyptian student in Paris, and his encounter with Western modernity, in a narrative widely read as semi-autobiographical, since Muhsin's persona closely resembles al-Hakim himself during his years in Paris in the 1920s. Composed against the backdrop of the interwar period, the novel stages al-Hakim's well-known dichotomy between the heart and the mind, dramatizing the confrontation

between what it presents as the spiritual richness of the East and the material rationalism of the West. Though written nearly a century ago, the questions it raises about the relationship between scientific rationality and spiritual meaning remain strikingly relevant to the present.

These questions resonate with a broader phenomenon in contemporary global society, where the tension between modern rationality and human spiritual needs has become increasingly pronounced (Nachev, 2024). Globalization, technological acceleration, and the dominance of science have fostered a paradigm that privileges efficiency, productivity, and rational calculation, yet this has been accompanied by symptoms of alienation, a perceived emptiness of meaning, and a renewed search for spiritual values in response to a modernity often regarded as excessively materialistic—a dynamic visible not only in the West but also across an Eastern world undergoing intensive modernization (Handoko et al., 2023). Read in this light, *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* is not merely a historical document of the interwar encounter between civilizations but a text whose central preoccupations anticipate debates that continue to shape global discussions of identity, modernity, and cultural belonging today.

Theoretically, modernity is often understood through Max Weber's concept of rationalization—the dominance of instrumental rationality that displaces the sacred dimension of life (the disenchantment of the world). This rationality produced bureaucratic, scientific, and technological progress, yet it also drew criticism for reducing human beings to economic creatures (Weber, 2007). In al-Hakim's novel, these symptoms surface through a Europe that is materially advanced but spiritually depleted.

In postcolonial studies, the encounter between East and West is understood not as a unidirectional relation of domination but as a dynamic space in which identities are continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity holds that cultural identity is not fixed or essentialist; instead, it emerges through ambivalence, interaction, and the blending of cultural influences (Bhabha, 2004). Within this framework, postcolonial subjects are active agents who reinterpret, appropriate, and at times resist external values, while experiencing a simultaneous attraction to Western modernity and attachment to Eastern tradition. Rather than signaling mere instability, such ambivalence becomes a productive force enabling the emergence of new, hybrid identities that transcend rigid binary oppositions (Ashcroft et al., 2003).

In this study, Bhabha's hybridity is operationalized through the notion of the "third space"—a discursive zone where identities are produced through interaction rather than inherited as fixed essences. Concretely, the analysis focuses on narrative moments—internal monologues, dialogues, and symbolic settings—in which the protagonist aligns fully with neither Western rationality nor Eastern spirituality, tracing how his identity is formed through mimicry, resistance, and reinterpretation. The complementary concept of ambivalence then reads his contradictory attitudes as a structural feature of postcolonial subjectivity rather than psychological inconsistency: his admiration for Western progress coexists with spiritual alienation, while his attachment to Eastern spirituality is shadowed by doubt about its adequacy in a modern context (Wulandari et al., 2025).

Although various studies have examined al-Hakim's works through structuralism, literary sociology, and moral values, studies that specifically link the rationality–spirituality dialectic with identity deconstruction and the critique of modernity remain limited. Most emphasize intrinsic textual elements or social criticism without dissecting the epistemological constructs underlying the East–West contradiction. Building on this gap, the present research analyzes how *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* represents the deconstruction of the opposition between European rationality and Eastern spirituality while negotiating identity in the context of modernity, contributing to the study of modern Arabic literature by enriching the interdisciplinary discourse on modernity, postcolonialism, and identity.

Existing scholarship on *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* has approached the East–West theme largely descriptively, mapping the opposition as a stable structure or thematically, without interrogating how the novel destabilizes the very categories it appears to oppose. The novel has consistently

been read as a pivotal work that interrogates the tension between European modernity and Eastern spirituality, reflecting the intellectual anxiety of Arab thinkers confronting the promises and contradictions of modernity. Within this scholarship, Europe is typically depicted as a site of scientific advancement and intellectual freedom that is nonetheless spiritually hollow and morally ambiguous, a dual representation echoing broader accounts of Arabic travel narratives that portray the West as materially advanced but spiritually deficient (El-Enany, 2006; Sellman, 2018; Sukiman et al., 2011).

Two recent studies frame the present article's positioning most directly. Apriyono (2020), drawing on Carl Thompson's travel-literature framework, examines the novel as a representation of the Other, analyzing how the superior West and the inferior East are produced as a recurring inequality, while arguing that al-Hakim ultimately proposes a value of equality between the two (Primadani & Latifi, 2024). Employing Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism, map the binary opposition between characters and their surrounding world as a fixed structural pattern expressing the author's worldview. Both approaches, while valuable, treat the East–West opposition as a stable structure to be described—whether as representational hierarchy or as structural binary—and stop short of asking how the text dismantles that opposition from within.

This is precisely the gap the present study addresses. Differing from Apriyono (2020), who reads the novel through the representation of the Other, and from Primadani and Latifi (2024), who emphasize a structural binary, this study proposes a deconstructive reading that does not merely identify the opposition between European rationality and Eastern spirituality but demonstrates how the text itself dismantles it—revealing the West's privileged rationality as spiritually hollow and the East's spirituality as equally vulnerable. A second contribution lies in integrating postcolonial hybridity with existential subjectivity: rather than treating Muhsin as a symbolic representative of the East, the study foregrounds his inner conflicts as a locus of identity deconstruction, reading his oscillation between admiration for European modernity and longing for Eastern spirituality as the "in-between space" of postcolonial subjectivity. Finally, the article reconceptualizes modernity as a hybrid and dialogical construct rather than a unilinear Western project, reframing it as an unfinished, contested process of synthesis and thereby contributing to broader debates in literary and cultural studies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in the tradition of literary close reading, in which the novel itself functions as the primary site of inquiry. The object of study is the Arabic literary text *‘Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* by Tawfiq al-Hakim (Al-Hakim, 2023). The primary data source is the original Arabic text of the novel, while secondary sources comprise scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles relevant to the conceptual axes of European rationality, Eastern spirituality, identity, and modernity, which serve as the theoretical apparatus for interpretation rather than as methodological justification.

The analysis proceeds through close reading, understood here not merely as careful reading but as a systematic interpretive procedure in which the text is read repeatedly to identify, isolate, and interrogate passages that stage the opposition between rationality and spirituality. In practice, this was carried out in three stages. First, the entire novel was read to map its narrative structure and locate the episodes in which the East–West encounter is dramatized, particularly the extended dialogues between the protagonist Muhsin and the Russian intellectual Ivan. Second, these episodes were re-read intensively at the level of individual utterances, with attention to word choice, imagery, metaphor, and rhetorical structure, to surface the internal tensions and contradictions within each passage. Third, the selected passages were analyzed through the chosen theoretical lenses, tracing how the text constructs, destabilizes, and reverses the hierarchical opposition between the two paradigms.

The unit of analysis is the textual segment, operationalized at three levels: (1) inter-character dialogue, especially the ideological exchanges between Muhsin and Ivan that articulate competing visions of civilization; (2) the protagonist's interior monologue, which registers his

ambivalence, self-doubt, and the destabilization of his spiritual certainty; and (3) narratorial description and figurative language, including allegory and simile (for example, the personification of "Europe" and the image of faith "trembling as a rose in the wind"), through which the novel encodes its civilizational critique.

The selected segments were then categorized according to the conceptual function they perform within the deconstructive argument. Four analytical categories were established: (a) passages depicting Western rationality as scientifically powerful yet spiritually hollow; (b) passages depicting instrumental rationality as a force of dehumanization and disenchantment; (c) passages revealing the West as an internally contradictory and ambivalent construct; and (d) passages destabilizing Eastern spirituality as an incomplete or vulnerable alternative. This categorization provides the structure for the Results section and ensures that each interpretive claim is anchored to specific, verifiable textual evidence. The interpretation is framed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Jacques Derrida's deconstruction (Derrida & Spivak, 1997), which guides the reading of binary collapse and hierarchical reversal; Homi K. Bhabha's (Bhabha, 2004) concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and the third space, which inform the analysis of identity; and Max Weber's (Weber, 2005) theory of rationalization and disenchantment, which contextualizes the critique of modernity.

RESULTS

This study identifies four key textual findings that demonstrate how *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* deconstructs the binary opposition between European rationality and Eastern spirituality. Each finding is presented through the structure of claim, textual evidence, and theoretical analysis. The dialogues between the protagonist Muhsin, an Eastern student in Paris, and Ivan (Ivanovitch), a Russian worker-intellectual, constitute the novel's central epistemological debate and provide the primary evidentiary basis for the analysis.

European rationality is portrayed as scientifically powerful yet spiritually hollow.

The novel stages the West's mastery of the material world as inseparable from its loss of transcendental meaning. Ivan first concedes the West's scientific greatness, only to subordinate it to what the East has discovered:

"إني أعرف أن (الغرب) اليوم موضع تقدير وإكبار لعلمه واستكشافاته، وإنتاجه واختراعاته! ... لكن ما قيمة هذا إلى جانب ذلك الاستكشاف الأعظم الذي ظهر في الشرق؟! ... إن الغرب يستكشف الأرض، والشرق يستكشف السماء! ... إن الذي استطاع أن يغمر البشرية كلها في حلم يدوم الأحقاب ... إن الذي استطاع أن يصنع مثل هذا (الحلم)؛ هو حقيقة فوق مستوى البشر ... إنما نجد ذلك الذي أوجد للإنسانية وأسكن الإنسانية (قارة جديدة) ... لكننا لا نرى مجد ذلك الذي أصعد الإنسانية، وأسكن الإنسانية: (السماء)". (Al-Hakim, 2023: 65)

"I know that 'the West' today is an object of esteem and admiration for its science, its discoveries, its production, and its inventions! ... But what is the value of this beside that greater discovery which appeared in the East?! ... The West discovers the earth, while the East discovers heaven! ... He who was able to immerse all of humanity in a dream that endures for ages ... is truly above the level of mankind ... We glorify the one who created and settled humanity in a 'new continent' ... yet we do not see the glory of the one who raised humanity and settled it in: 'heaven.'"

Read through Jacques Derrida's deconstruction (Derrida & Spivak, 1997); this passage does not simply praise the East; it exposes the West's scientific achievement as an incomplete term that depends on what it has excluded. Ivan openly grants the West's empirical mastery ("its

science ... its inventions"), yet immediately reveals this privilege to be hollow when measured against "that greater discovery," the metaphysical realm. In Derridean terms, the opposition "the West discovers the earth, the East discovers heaven" privileges the empirical pole only in appearance; the narrative logic inverts the hierarchy, showing that the discarded supplement, "heaven" or transcendental meaning, is precisely what gives human existence its value. The contrast between settling humanity in a "new continent" (material discovery) and raising it to "heaven" (spiritual discovery) dramatizes how Western rationality cannot signify wholeness on its own. It remains haunted by the very spiritual dimension it claims to have surpassed.

Western instrumental rationality reduces life to efficiency and calculability.

The hollowness identified in Finding 1 is given concrete socioeconomic form when Ivan describes modern industrial labour and the fragmentation of the worker:

معنى هذا أن العامل لم تبق له حتى تلك اللذة الفنية القديمة، التي كان يحسها ويرتاح إليها، وهو يصنع بيديه حذاءً كاملاً في حانوته الصغير ... نعم! ... حتى متعة الخلق الكامل، التي كانت تشعره بأدميته قد ذهبت؛ وأصبح الآن شأنه شأن المخرطة أو المطرقة أو المنشار؛ يخرط، أو يطرُق، أو ينشر، جزءاً صغيراً معيناً بالذات من هذا الدبوس أو ذاك الحذاء، وهو يكرر هذه العملية التافهة كل حياته! ... (Al-Hakim, 2023: 109)

"This means that the worker is left without even that old artistic pleasure he used to feel and find comfort in, when he made a complete shoe with his own hands in his small workshop ... Yes! ... even the joy of complete creation, which used to make him feel his humanity, is gone; and he has now become like the lathe, the hammer, or the saw — turning, hammering, or sawing one particular small part of this pin or that shoe, repeating this trivial operation his entire life! ..."

This passage exemplifies Max Weber's concept of rationalization and the disenchantment of the world (Entzauberung) (Weber, 2005). The division of labour, invoked through the implicit reference to Adam Smith and the pin factory, renders the human being a calculable fragment of a productive process, reduced to the level of the very machines he operates ("like the lathe, the hammer, or the saw"). Modernity's efficiency is purchased at the cost of meaning: the worker's "humanity" (ādamiyya) and his "joy of complete creation" (mut'at al-khalq al-kāmil) are precisely what instrumental reason cannot quantify and therefore strips away, leaving only the endless repetition of a "trivial operation." The novel thus diagnoses Western rationality not as liberation but as a structure that erodes the qualitative, creative, and transcendental dimensions of human existence.

"Europe" is depicted as an internally contradictory and ambivalent civilizational subject

Crucially, the novel does not present the West as a stable essence. Ivan allegorizes Europe as the beautiful but selfish child born of Asia and Africa:

"هذه الفتاة الشقراء — التي تسمى (أوروبا) — جميلة رشيقة ذكية؛ لكنها خفيفة أنانية، لا يعينها إلا نفسها، واستعباد غيرها..." (Al-Hakim, 2023: 107)

"This blonde girl — who is called 'Europe' — is beautiful, graceful, and intelligent; yet she is shallow and selfish, caring for nothing but herself and the enslavement of others ..."

Through Homi K. Bhabha's framework of hybridity (Bhabha, 2004), this image reveals Europe itself as a hybrid and ambivalent construct rather than a pure origin. In the surrounding narrative, "Europe" is genealogically derived from the East, born of "her parents, Africa and Asia," even as she "denies and imprisons" them. This destabilizes the colonial hierarchy in which the West functions as the self-sufficient norm: the allegory locates the West's identity in a relation of disavowed dependence on the East. The binary West/East therefore collapses from within the Western term itself, since "Europe" cannot define itself without the parental civilizations it represses, an ambivalence that the protagonist registers but cannot fully resolve.

Eastern spirituality is itself destabilized and shown to be vulnerable, not a complete alternative

The novel's deconstruction is symmetrical: it refuses to install Eastern spirituality as the final solution. This is most acute in Muhsin's reflective monologue, in which he recognizes that faith cannot be manufactured and admits that modern teachings have shaken his own:

"وتأمل محسن مليًا قول الروسي وهو ينظر إلى وجهه المعذب الغاضب ... إنه يريد بحجته القوية أن يخلق إيمانًا للمحبة ... ثم لم يلبث أن راح في تأملاته وهو يقول في نفسه: إن الإيمان لا يُصنع، فهو قد يكون عند الإنسان، وقد لا يكون، وحينما نفقده لا يعود ثانية، أو قد يعود على صورته الأولى. وأنا أيضا - تحت تأثير التعاليم الحديثة - أحس أن إيماني يضطرب كما تضطرب الورد في مهب الريح." (Al-Hakim, 2023: 65)

"Muhsin pondered the Russian's words at length, looking at his tormented, angry face ... He wants, through his powerful argument, to create a faith of love ... Then he soon drifted into his reflections, saying to himself: Faith cannot be manufactured; it may exist in a person, or it may not, and when we lose it, it does not return — or it may return only in its original form. And I too — under the influence of modern teachings — feel my faith trembling as a rose trembles in the path of the wind."

Analyzed through Derrida and Weber together, this monologue completes the deconstruction. Eastern spirituality is not a stable presence to which one can simply return: Muhsin's own assertion that "faith cannot be manufactured" (al-īmān lā yuṣnaʿ) denies it the status of a recoverable foundation, while his confession that it trembles "under the influence of modern teachings" (taḥt taʾthīr al-taʾālim al-ḥadītha) demonstrates its vulnerability to Weberian disenchantment once exposed to the rationalizing force of modernity. The protagonist thus embodies what Bhabha terms a double estrangement: belonging fully neither to Europe nor to the East. He inhabits a "third space" of ambivalence in which both rational critique and spiritual faith have become unstable. Consequently, the hierarchy between the two paradigms collapses in both directions: rationality is shown to require ethical and metaphysical grounding, while spirituality is shown to require critical rational articulation to remain historically relevant.

Taken together, the four findings demonstrate that *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* does not resolve the East–West opposition but exposes both poles as mutually dependent and internally incomplete. Western rationality is depicted as scientifically powerful yet spiritually hollow and as an instrumental force that reduces human life to calculability; Eastern spirituality, in turn, is shown to be ethically rich yet historically vulnerable and incapable of serving as an untouched alternative. The protagonist's hybrid, ambivalent consciousness becomes the site where this deconstruction unfolds, positioning modernity not as a fixed Western achievement but as a contested discourse shaped by tension, contradiction, and the continuous search for existential balance.

DISCUSSION

EUROPEAN RATIONALITY VERSUS EASTERN SPIRITUALITY

The first dimension of the novel's deconstruction concerns the binary opposition between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality. The novel *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* (Al-Hakim, 2023) presents the intellectual journey of an Eastern youth within the space of European modernity, producing not merely a record of cultural experience but a sustained discourse on the contradiction between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality (Apriyono, 2020). Conceptually, European rationality here corresponds to instrumental rationality—a mode of thought that privileges efficiency, calculation, and material progress. This aligns with Max Weber's notion of rationalization and the disenchantment of the world (Weber, 2007), the process by which reality comes to be understood through the logic of science, economics, and bureaucracy, such that the sacred dimension is progressively eroded.

This abstract diagnosis becomes concrete in the dialogue in which Ivan denounces modern economics for having severed humanity from the transcendent. Reflecting on this critique, the text states:

"لقد ألقى قنبلة (المادية والبغضاء واللهفة والعجلة) بين الناس، يوم أفهم الناس أن ليس هنالك غير (الأرض)، يوم أخرج (السماء) من الحساب؛ لأن علم الاقتصاد الحديث لا يعرف السماء!..."

(Al-Hakim, 2023: 35)

"It cast the bomb of 'materialism, hatred, craving, and haste' among people the day it made them understand that there is nothing but 'the earth'—the day it removed 'heaven' from the reckoning; for the science of modern economics does not know heaven!"

Read through Weber; this passage gives the disenchantment thesis its sharpest literary form. The phrase "it removed heaven from the reckoning" (*akhraja al-samā' min al-ḥisāb*) names precisely the operation Weber describes: a rationalized worldview in which only what can be calculated ("the earth," *al-arḍ*) is granted reality, while the metaphysical ("heaven," *al-samā'*) is expelled as economically meaningless. The result, in the novel's diagnosis, is not neutral progress but a moral catastrophe—"materialism, hatred, craving, and haste." Europe is thus portrayed as a symbol of intellectual advancement that is simultaneously cold in emotional and spiritual terms. Yet, read deconstructively through Derrida, this very portrayal destabilizes the hierarchy it appears to assert: the rationality that claims self-sufficiency is shown to be founded on an exclusion—the repression of "heaven"—and therefore remains haunted by, and dependent upon, the spiritual term it has cast out.

From the perspective of Derrida's deconstruction, the opposition between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality does not operate as a fixed or hierarchical structure; both paradigms are mutually dependent and internally unstable. Western rationality, celebrated as the foundation of modern progress, ultimately produces dehumanization and existential disenchantment, while Eastern spirituality appears insufficient when trapped within nostalgia and unable to engage fully with the complexities of modern life. The protagonist's identity therefore develops within an ambivalent space shaped by simultaneous admiration for the West and attachment to Eastern values—a hybrid identity neither entirely Western nor purely Eastern, but continuously negotiated.

The deconstructive mechanism becomes visible at the level of the text itself, where the meaning of "rationality" can never be self-contained but continually defers to the "spirituality" it lacks—and vice versa. This is dramatized in Ivan's anguished reflection on the European mind's inability to believe:

"لست أريد الإعجاب الناشئ عن آلاتنا المفكرة، وما فيها من بضاعة ثقافية مكتسبة أو موروثية؛ إنما أريد الإيمان؛ إيمان القلب، الإيمان الأعمى ... إن أوروبا كلها الآن ليست إلا رجلاً مفكراً قلقاً حائراً.... انتهت أوروبا ولا شيء من داخلها يستطيع إنقاذها؛ لأن كل شيء يصل إلى عقليتها هذه، تحوله إلى أدب وأسلوب وزيف وكذب! ... إنما الإنقاذ من الخارج، إنما النجاة من الفضاء. إلى هناك ... إلى الشرق ... قم معي ... إلى الشرق! ... " (Al-Hakim, 2023: 112)

"I do not want the admiration that arises from our thinking machines, with their acquired or inherited cultural merchandise; rather, I want faith—the faith of the heart, blind faith ... All of Europe now is nothing but an anxious, bewildered thinking man ... Europe is finished, and nothing within it can save it; because everything that reaches this 'mind' of hers, it turns into literature, style, falsehood, and lies! ... Salvation can only come from the outside, deliverance only from the open space. There ... to the East ... rise with me ... to the East!"

This passage demonstrates *différance* at work. The term "rationality"—figured here as Europe's "thinking machines" (*ālātunā al-mufakkira*) and her "mind" (*‘aqliyya*)—does not generate a positive meaning of its own; it signifies only through what it cannot produce, namely "the faith of the heart" (*īmān al-qalb*). Western reason can approach spirituality only by converting it into "literature, style, falsehood," that is, by deferring the very faith it gestures toward. Conversely, "spirituality" in the novel is never available as a stable presence either: it is defined negatively, as precisely that which rationality has lost and can no longer reach, and it is displaced onto an ever-receding "elsewhere"—"to the East"—that the speaker can invoke but never actually inhabit. Each term thus depends on the trace of the other for its meaning, and neither attains the self-sufficient plenitude the binary hierarchy presupposes. The opposition between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality does not resolve into the dominance of one pole; instead, meaning circulates endlessly between them—deferred, relational, and never fully present—exactly as Derrida's concept of *différance* predicts.

The deconstruction does not stop at criticism of the West. Eastern spirituality is not positioned as the final solution; when the protagonist returns to his spiritual identity, he still grapples with uncertainty. The text inverts the assumption that the East is a stable center of meaning, questioning spirituality's effectiveness in confronting the complexity of global modernity. Rationality without spirituality breeds emptiness, while spirituality without rationality risks the romanticism of the past. The text thus builds a fluid space for identity negotiation rather than a dichotomy (Bhabha, 2004), and can be read as an epistemological critique of hegemonic modernity in which East–West identity emerges as a renegotiable historical construct—opening modernity to a dialogical reading between rationality and spirituality rather than offering a final synthesis.

HYBRIDITY OF IDENTITY AND CRITICISM OF MODERNITY

‘Uṣfūr min al-Sharq (Al-Hakim, 2023) represents the protagonist's identity crisis as a reflection of the intellectual struggle between East and West in the space of modernity. Muhsin experiences not only a fascination with European progress but also an existential alienation that shakes his spiritual foundations, showing that identity is not fixed but formed through a complex process of cultural negotiation. (Deres, 2025; Hamzah, 2024; Lufdhi et al., 2025)

Conceptually, Bhabha's hybridity theory explains that the meeting of two cultures does not produce a single dominance but a third space generating a new identity (Bhabha, 2004). Hybridity is not simply a mixture of cultures but an ambivalent condition in which the subject stands between mimicry and resistance. In this novel, Muhsin represents a colonial-intellectual subject who admires Western rationality while maintaining an Eastern spiritual consciousness,

oscillating between modern rationality and longing for metaphysical values—becoming neither completely Western nor entirely Eastern. Identity thus becomes a dynamic encounter space rather than static opposition, and the novel presents modernity as an arena of ongoing identity negotiation.

A sharper reading reveals that hybridity in the novel is not abstract but concretely manifested through mimicry, selective appropriation, and epistemic dissonance—most legibly in the Paris Opera episode, where Muhsin physically enters the space of Western high culture and experiences its splendour from within:

... ! وصعد محسن سلم الأوبرا المشهور، وهو يتصبَّب خجلاً بين الصاعدين من أصحاب الفراء الثمين، والقبة العالية، والقمص المنشي الحقيقي، والسيدات الأنقيات في أثواب الليل البراقة، والحلي المتألقة؛ كأنهن الشموس في عالم الماس ... وخيّل محسن إلى أنه قد دخل بين هؤلاء القوم بالغش والتدليس، وأن هذا السلم الشهير يأنف من حملة وقد مرت عليه السنون، وهو يحمل الجاه والمال في العالم قاطبة. (Al-Hakim, 2023: 19)

"Muhsin climbed the famous staircase of the Opera, dripping with embarrassment among those ascending in their expensive 'furs,' their tall hats, their 'genuine' starched shirts, and the elegant ladies in glittering evening gowns and sparkling jewels, as though they were suns in a world of diamonds ... and it seemed to Muhsin that he had entered among these people through deception and fraud, and that this famous staircase—over which the years had passed as it bore the rank and wealth of the entire world—disdained to carry him."

Read through Bhabha's concept of mimicry (Bhabha, 2004), this passage shows that the protagonist's engagement with European modernity is never complete assimilation but a partial, anxious imitation. Muhsin ascends the same staircase as the Western elite and outwardly participates in their cultural ritual, yet his self-perception as an intruder who has entered "through deception and fraud" (bi-l-ghishsh wa-l-tadlīs) marks the gap mimicry can never close. He is, in Bhabha's terms, "almost the same, but not quite": a presence that imitates the dominant culture while remaining visibly other to it. The personification of the staircase that "disdains to carry him" externalizes this exclusion, transforming the architecture of Western civilization into a silent judge of his foreignness. The same scene registers his epistemic dissonance, for in beholding the grandeur of Western civilization he simultaneously recoils from its extravagance—his admiration and repulsion not sequential but simultaneous, producing the fractured subjectivity that defines his hybridity.

This evidence sharpens the broader argument: hybridity in the novel is not a harmonious blending but a performative, unstable condition in which borrowed rational and aesthetic frameworks fail to integrate with the protagonist's inherited metaphysical worldview. Ambivalence emerges through affective contradictions and oscillating value judgments rather than simple indecision: Muhsin is intellectually stimulated by Europe's progress yet emotionally alienated by its lack of spiritual depth, while idealizing the East as a source of meaning that he also recognizes as insufficient for modern realities (Wulandari et al., 2025). Hybridity here operates through a double estrangement—a stranger in Europe through cultural dislocation, and estranged from the East upon symbolic return because his consciousness has already been transformed by modernity. Identity is not negotiated toward resolution but suspended in continuous tension, echoing the logic of *différance* in which meaning is perpetually deferred.

To deepen the critique of modernity, the analysis draws on Weber's concept of rationalization, specifically the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung*) (Seidman, 1983; Weber, 2007). In the novel, Europe is technologically and socially advanced but loses the depth of spiritual meaning; Muhsin's alienation is not merely psychological but rooted in the broader

process by which instrumental rationality strips life of transcendental meaning. The novel resists positioning spirituality as a simple antidote, however, exposing a paradox: spirituality provides existential grounding yet lacks the structural capacity to engage modern complexity. This generates a critical hybridity in which the subject selectively affirms and rejects elements from both traditions without fully reconciling them. It is precisely this unresolved tension that constitutes the novel's most profound critique of modernity—revealing it not as a completed project but as an ongoing, unstable dialogue between rational progress and the human search for meaning.

DIALECTICS OF CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW MODERNITY

Beyond deconstructing the binary opposition between Eastern spirituality and Western rationality, the novel opens a broader horizon toward civilizational dialogue. Once the tension between these epistemological traditions is dismantled, the narrative implicitly positions them as complementary rather than antagonistic. The protagonist's intellectual journey becomes a symbolic representation of the modern human condition: living between multiple cultural frameworks while searching for a meaningful synthesis of knowledge, ethics, and spirituality. (Abed al-Jabri, 2011)

At the same time, the novel avoids romanticizing the East as an untouched spiritual sanctuary; the Eastern worldview is depicted as metaphysically rich but vulnerable to stagnation when detached from critical reasoning and social transformation. This balanced critique reveals internal limitations in both paradigms and frames their encounter as a transformative intellectual dialogue. The result is what may be described as a "new modernity"—a modern consciousness that does not reject rationality but situates it within a broader ethical and spiritual horizon. In this sense, Muhsin's hybrid identity is not merely a personal struggle but a metaphor for the future trajectory of global civilization, in which modernity becomes an evolving process shaped by intercultural interaction rather than a monolithic Western project.

The dialectic between rationality and spirituality can also be read as a critique of the epistemological foundations of modern civilization. Modern Western rationality, prioritizing scientific objectivity and instrumental reasoning, often neglects the existential and metaphysical dimensions of human life; in the novel, this surfaces in the protagonist's confrontation with the paradox that material progress does not necessarily yield existential fulfilment. The narrative subtly locates the crisis of modern civilization not in technological domination alone but in the imbalance between rational knowledge and spiritual meaning. The East and the West appear not as mutually exclusive entities but as relational constructs that continuously redefine each other—a perspective resonant with postcolonial thought, in which cultural identities are constantly reconstructed through interaction and translation across civilizational boundaries (Bhabha, 2004; Said, 2013).

Ultimately, the synthesis implied in the narrative does not reconcile the two poles into rigid harmony but highlights the productive tension between them. By presenting modernity as a contested and evolving process, the novel invites readers to reconsider the possibility of a more balanced civilizational paradigm—one integrating the analytical strength of rational thought with the ethical and existential depth of spiritual traditions. Through the fragmented experiences of the protagonist, al-Hakim questions the universality of a modern rationality that historically emerged from European intellectual traditions, anticipating contemporary debates on the need to pluralize modernity and recognize multiple pathways of knowledge (Eisenstadt, 2000). Rather than rejecting modernity altogether, the text encourages a critical reconfiguration of modern rationality so that it remains open to the ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions long marginalized within dominant modern discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *‘Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* does not stage a clash between a rational West and a spiritual East so much as it dismantles that very opposition from within. Reading the

novel's central dialogues deconstructively reveals that each pole is constituted by the absence of the other: Western rationality, figured as Europe's "thinking machines," can reach faith only by converting it into "literature and falsehood," while Eastern spirituality proves unable to remain a stable refuge once the protagonist's own faith begins to "tremble" under modern teachings. Neither term attains the self-sufficiency the binary presupposes; meaning circulates between them, deferred and relational.

Read alongside Bhabha's hybridity and Weber's rationalization, this instability is not a flaw in the protagonist but the structure of his condition. Muhsin is a hybrid subject of the third space—neither fully assimilated to Europe, as the Opera scene's "deception and fraud" makes plain, nor able to return to an untouched East. The novel's contribution is therefore to recast modernity itself: not as a Western possession to be accepted or refused, but as an unfinished negotiation in which rationality and spirituality remain mutually dependent. In this specific and limited sense—grounded in the textual readings above rather than asserted in general—a literary work such as *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* functions as a site where the assumptions of modern civilizational discourse can be examined and contested.

Several directions may extend this analysis. First, comparative studies could read *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* against other modern Arabic novels of the East–West encounter—such as Naguib Mahfouz's treatment of tradition and modernity or Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's diasporic intellectuals, and the canonical counterpoint of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*—to identify broader patterns of hybridity and disenchantment. Second, interdisciplinary work joining literary studies, postcolonial theory, and the sociology of religion could deepen the analysis of how faith is narrated under conditions of rationalization. Such directions would further situate modern Arabic literary studies within wider debates on identity, modernity, and intercivilizational dialogue.

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