**Al-Adab (1953 – 2013)**

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Cover of *al-Adab* (Jean Paul Sartre)

SUMMARY

The literary journal *Al-Adab* was established in Beirut in 1953. This avant-garde journal was open to all forms of literary experimentation and to all views on poetry, fiction and drama. *Al-Adab* advocated for a combination of existential and pan-Arab ideas and was dedicated to the concept of ‘commitment literature’ (*al-adab al-multazim*) or literary commitment (*iltizam al-*adab). It was heavily influenced by Jean Paul Sartre and existentialism.

The magazine promoted Arab nationalism, committed literature, free verse, avant-garde criticism and neo-realism. It demanded that writers and poets take social responsibility and professed that literature must play an emancipatory role in nation building. *Al-Adab* played a pioneering role in molding opinion and encouraged the exploration of new forms of literary invention. More than any other publication, it transformed literary criticism into a creative mode in itself. Before *al-Adab*, this type of criticism had not existed in the Arab world.

**Al-Adab (1953 – 2013)**



Founder: Suhayl Idris (1923-2008)

The Lebanese novelist and short story writer, Suhayl Idrīs founded *al-Adab* in Beirut in 1953. In 1956, Idrīs established his own publishing house, **Dar al-Adab**, which, became one of the most important publishing houses in its field. It is now run by his son Samah and daughter Rana and is one of the major fiction publishers in the Arab world.

Idris began the monthly literary journal *al-Adab* as a commitment to creative work, criticism and the evaluation of contemporary literature. Its first issue advocated for a combination of existential and pan-Arab ideas within the concept of ‘commitment literature’ (*al-adab al-multazim*) or literary commitment (iltizam al-adab). It was heavily influenced by Jean Paul Sartre. It demanded that writers and poets take responsibility within their society and profess that literature must play a liberating role in nation building.

The name *al-Adab* comes from the term *adab*, for a genre which simplistically defined here, encompassed writings concerned with politeness or good conduct. However, within the context of the Arab renaissance or awakening (*al-nahda* in the late 19th through the early 20th century) it corresponds to literature in English or the French ‘litterature.’

**Avant-garde Role** / **Special Place**

Arab nationalism and Nasser’s coup d’etat in Egypt ushered in messages of unity and calls for pan-Arabism. In Lebanon, the political, social and cultural freedom of the post-World War II era made it a haven for Arab poets and writers. This intellectual environment allowed Arab writers throughout the Arab world to have a voice. Beirut surpassed Cairo as the center of Arab intellectualism. Many of the most important contemporary Arab authors published their first efforts in *al-Adab*. Idris enlisted young Arab writers and promoted progressive nationalist thought.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s an existentialist spirit influenced discussions concerning humanism, the freedom of the intellectual, political engagement, and, commitment literature. Fierce debates rages between *al-Adab* and *Shiʿr* (1957), the literary journal founded by Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917–87). *Shi’r* encouraged modernity in Arabic poetry, and together both *al-Adab* and *Shiʿr* constituted an innovative and important chapter in the history of contemporary Arabic literature, expressing political struggles, expanding modes of artistic expression, and promoting literary theory.

Unlike *Shi’r* that was dedicated to poetry, a*l-Adab* was open to all genres of literature and to all views on poetry, fiction and drama. The magazine pioneered the promotion of avant-garde criticism, neo-realism, and all forms of literary experimentation and molded opinion. The review contributed to the development of a new critical language and, more than any other periodical, transformed literary criticism into a creative mode in itself, a concept of criticism that had not existed in so explicit a form before the advent of *al-Adab*.

**Forum for Literary Debate**

*Al-Adab* was dedicated to Arab unity and solidarity in its struggle for freedom and

innovation. Its issues often concentrated on one form or topic and its forum section was focused on discussions, debates, and criticism of works presented in the previous issues. This format in the 1950’s was popular and stimulated much discussion and debate.

The magazine crusaded to stimulate and popularize literature as opposed to maintaining a standard for creativity and as a result, it was more intent on being a public popular platform. Salma Jayyusi states that the January 1955 issue on modern poetry is perhaps the best collection of articles on the history of modern Arabic poetry in most of the Arab countries ever published in one volume.

The Arab defeat in 1967 and the subsequent Civil War (1975-1990) touched the

deepest fibers of the Lebanese society. The Palestinian question and the Lebanese civil war forced *al-Adab* to address the sense of crisis and alienation experienced by Arab intellectuals and to elaborate a ‘criticism of defeat.’ Nationalistic literary criticism was transformed into a form of criticism based on revolutionary sentiment. Suhayl Idrīs encouraged the development of the combative writer within the cultural and literary scene. The war was omnipresent in everything that was written, from political novels, prophetic novels or the surrealistic stories of the political activist writers.

**Al-Adabunder Samah Idris**

Suhayl Idrīs remained the chief editor of *al-Adab* until 1991 when his son Samah Idrīs replaced him. Samah is an author of two books on literary criticism, and fourteen books for children and young adults. He is an activist and was dedicated to *al-Adab*’s mission.

After sixty years, *al-Adab* ended publication in 2012 due to financial difficulties Samah, writing the magazine’s last editorial, retained its revolutionary stance. He asked whether an ‘independent, activist, free, contentious and angry’ publication could go unpunished into ‘the kingdoms of oppression and the republics of killing.’

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**Last edition of *al-Adab***

[**http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/18/0/69453/Books/0/After--years,-AlAdaab-cultural-magazine-ceases-pub.aspx**](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/18/0/69453/Books/0/After--years,-AlAdaab-cultural-magazine-ceases-pub.aspx) **(accessed 07/12/2015)**

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