



# Reviving Arabic Prose: The Translation Mastery of Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî Al-Manfalûṭî

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the influential contributions of Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî Al-Manfalûṭî to Arabic prose, focusing on his translation efforts. As a prominent Egyptian writer, Al-Manfalûṭî revitalized classical Arabic prose by adapting Western literary works, notably French, with a distinct blend of eloquence and cultural sensitivity. His translations were more than simple linguistic conversions; they were creative reinterpretations that aligned with Arab values while introducing new literary ideas. Notable works include *Al-'Abarât* (The Tears), a collection of moral stories, and translated novels such as *Majdûlîn*, *Al-Shâ'ir* (Cyrano de Bergerac), *Al-Faḍîla*, and *Fî Sabîl Al-Tâj*. These works, infused with tragedy and moral lessons, highlight Al-Manfalûṭî's ability to bridge Eastern and Western traditions. His translations contributed significantly to modern Arabic literature, making it more accessible to contemporary readers while preserving its classical heritage. Through an analysis of his major works, this study highlights Al-Manfalûṭî's legacy in enriching Arabic literature and inspiring future generations of Arab writers.

**Keywords:** Al-Manfalûṭî, Arabic prose, Translation, Western literature, Cultural adaptation, Moral values, etc.

## Introduction:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî Al-Manfalûṭî stands as one of the most influential figures in the modern revival of Arabic prose literature. Born in Egypt in the late 19th century, Al-Manfalûṭî's contributions as a writer, translator, and intellectual left an indelible mark on Arabic literary culture. His works, particularly his translations of Western literature into Arabic, played a pivotal role in shaping modern Arabic prose. What set Al-Manfalûṭî apart from other translators of his time was not just his linguistic ability but his unique approach to translation—he was not merely transferring words from one language to another but creatively reimagining the stories, infusing them with his distinctive style and sensitivity to Arab culture.

Al-Manfalûṭî's literary career began in the early 20th century, a time of great intellectual and cultural transformation in the Arab world. This period saw increased contact with Western ideas and literature, leading many Arab writers to explore ways to modernize their literary traditions. Al-Manfalûṭî's contribution to this movement came through his ability to adapt Western literary works while preserving the elegance and values of classical Arabic prose. His translations were instrumental in bridging the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions, making Western stories accessible to Arab readers without compromising their cultural relevance.

One of the key features of Al-Manfalûṭî's translations is his ability to maintain the emotional depth and moral undertones of the original works while recontextualizing them within an Arab cultural framework. His 1915 publication *Al-'Abarât* (The Tears) is a prime example. *Al-'Abarât* is a collection of stories, some original and others adapted from French literature, unified by their focus on moral lessons and emotional depth. The stories are imbued with themes of sadness, loss, and ethical reflection, resonating deeply with Arab readers and gaining immense popularity. The stories were reprinted multiple times, a testament to their enduring appeal. In *Al-'Abarât*, Al-Manfalûṭî's sensitivity to cultural values is evident, as he manages to convey universal human emotions while grounding them in an Arab ethical and moral perspective.

Al-Manfalûṭî's translation of the French novel "Sous les Tilleuls" by Alphonse Karr, which he adapted as "Majdûlîn", is another notable example of his contribution to Arabic literature. "Majdûlîn" is a romantic

tragedy that demonstrates the power of love to destroy lives. The plot revolves around a young woman, "Majdûlîn", who leaves her lover, Stephen, to marry his wealthier friend, Edward. When Edward loses his fortune, "Majdûlîn", filled with regret, tries to return to Stephen, but his pride prevents a reconciliation, despite his love for her. Eventually, both characters commit suicide, consumed by their unfulfilled love. Al-Manfalûṭî's adaptation of this story not only brings the romantic tragedy of the original to Arab readers but also imbues it with a depth of moral reflection on pride, regret, and the consequences of life choices.

Al-Manfalûṭî also translated "Cyrano de Bergerac", the famous French play by Edmond Rostand, which he titled "Al-Shâ'ir" (The Poet). In this translation, Al-Manfalûṭî's eloquence and style are at their peak. His ability to capture the tragic grandeur of the original while making it accessible and emotionally resonant to Arab readers is one of his greatest achievements. This and other works, such as "Al-Faḍîla" (Virtue) and "Fî Sabîl Al-Tâj" (For the Sake of the Crown), demonstrate Al-Manfalûṭî's deep commitment to translating not just words but the spirit and moral essence of the stories he adapted.

"Al-Faḍîla" is particularly notable for its exploration of virtues and moral values. It tells the story of two families whose children, Paul and Virginie, grow up together and fall in love, only to face tragic consequences. Virginie drowns, choosing death over compromising her chastity, while Paul dies of sorrow. Al-Manfalûṭî's portrayal of these characters highlights his concern with moral integrity and the ethical lessons that mothers should teach their children, a recurring theme in his works.

In *Fî Sabîl Al-Tâj*, Al-Manfalûṭî translates a story set in the Balkans, centered on a young man named Constantine, who is torn between loyalty to his family and love for his homeland. In this morally complex tale, Constantine ultimately sacrifices his father to save his country and then sacrifices himself to protect the honor of his family. Al-Manfalûṭî's handling of this story underscores his preoccupation with themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and honor, making it another powerful example of how his translations contributed to enriching modern Arabic prose.

Through these works and others, Al-Manfalûṭî's legacy as both a writer and translator is firmly established. His ability to adapt Western literature with such eloquence and sensitivity has made his translations some of the most influential in modern Arabic literature. By bridging the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions, he helped make Arabic prose more dynamic and accessible to contemporary readers while ensuring that its classical heritage remained intact.

### Description:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî (1876 - 1924) was an Egyptian poet and writer renowned for the elegance and refinement of his literary works. Although he did not have a command of the French language, al-Manfalûṭî distinguished himself in the fields of composition and literature. He is particularly noted for his translations of several renowned French novels, which he rendered into Arabic with a unique and sophisticated literary flair. Through his translations, he managed to infuse these works with a distinctive style that resonated with Arabic readers, thereby enriching Arabic literature and bridging cultural gaps.<sup>1</sup>

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî is widely recognized as a luminary in Egyptian literature, renowned for his exceptional prowess in both composition and literary artistry. His distinctive literary style is celebrated for its exquisite use of the Arabic language, which is marked by a unique beauty and brilliance that shines through all his writings. Al-Manfalûṭî's mastery extends to the realm of poetry, where he demonstrates a rare combination of delicacy and sweetness in his verses, captivating readers with his lyrical finesse.

The profound impact of his two seminal works, *Al-Nazarât* and *Al-'Abarât* cannot be overstated. These books are widely regarded by critics as some of the most eloquent pieces of writing in the Arabic language during the modern era. They not only reflect al-Manfalûṭî's literary genius but also serve as a testament to the richness and sophistication of Arabic literature. *Al-Nazarât* and *Al-'Abarât* stand as monumental achievements that showcase his ability to convey profound emotions and complex ideas with unparalleled elegance and clarity.

In essence, Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî's contributions to literature transcend the ordinary, leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape of Egypt. His ability to weave words with finesse and his poetic sensibility elevate him to a position of eminence among the literary figures of his time. Al-Manfalûṭî's works continue to underscore the enduring significance of his contributions to the Arabic literary canon, ensuring that his legacy remains influential and inspiring for generations to come.<sup>2</sup>

### His Birth:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî, born in the year 1293 AH (1876 AD), hailed from the city of Manfalûṭ in the Asyut Governorate of Egypt. His family was distinguished and well-regarded, known for its deep piety and significant contributions to scholarship and literature. Among his relatives were several esteemed judges and notable literary figures, reflecting a rich legacy of intellectual and moral excellence that undoubtedly influenced his development as a writer and poet. The environment in which al-Manfalûṭî was raised valued education and literary pursuits, fostering his early passion for literature and his eventual rise to prominence in the Arabic literary world.<sup>3</sup>

In the final days of December 1876, in the Egyptian region of Minya, specifically in the town of Manfalût, a boy named Muṣṭafâ Muhammad Hassan Muhammad Luṭfi was born. This town, nestled in the Asyut Governorate, was home to a family of distinguished lineage and prestige. Muṣṭafâ, later known as “Al-Manfalûṭi” after his birthplace, belonged to one of the most esteemed families in Manfalût.

His father, Muhammad Hassan Luṭfi, boasted a noble heritage, tracing his ancestry back to Sayyiduna Al-Husayn bin ‘Ali, may Allah be pleased with them. The Luṭfi family had a longstanding tradition of leadership and judicial roles within the nobility, a legacy they upheld for two centuries leading up to Muṣṭafâ’s birth. His mother, Mrs. Hanem Husayn Al-Shorbaji, was of Turkish descent, further enriching the cultural tapestry of his lineage.

Al-Manfalûṭi’s childhood unfolded against the backdrop of Egypt’s struggle under British occupation. This era was marked by the imposition of dual control and the establishment of a joint ministry, reflecting the deep entrenchment of foreign influence in Egyptian affairs. Growing up during such a turbulent period, Al-Manfalûṭi was immersed in an environment charged with resentment and a fervent desire for liberation from colonial rule. This atmosphere of resistance and the aspiration for freedom significantly influenced his formative years, shaping the perspectives and ideals that he would later express through his literary works.

The sociopolitical climate of his upbringing, combined with the rich cultural heritage of his family, played a crucial role in developing Al-Manfalûṭi’s identity. His experiences during this era of oppression and his family’s noble legacy imbued him with a profound sense of justice and a commitment to articulating the struggles and aspirations of his people. This unique blend of personal and historical influences would ultimately manifest in Al-Manfalûṭi’s distinguished contributions to Arabic literature.<sup>4</sup>

### His Education:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfi embarked on his educational journey by joining the local scholars in his village. Demonstrating remarkable intellectual prowess from a young age, he successfully memorized the entire Qur’ân by the age of nine. Recognizing his son’s exceptional talent and potential, Muṣṭafâ’s father decided to further his education by sending him to Al-Azhar University in Cairo. This prestigious institution was known for its rigorous academic environment and its rich history as a center of Islamic learning.

In Cairo, Muṣṭafâ was placed under the care of companions from his hometown, ensuring he had the support and guidance needed for his studies. Over ten years, he immersed himself in the comprehensive curriculum of Al-Azhar, which included traditional Islamic sciences such as jurisprudence, theology, and Arabic language. However, Muṣṭafâ’s literary inclination soon became evident. Alongside his formal education, he passionately explored heritage books, diving into classical Arabic literature and absorbing the rich legacy of past scholars and writers.

During his time at Al-Azhar, Muṣṭafâ Luṭfi had the fortune of meeting Imam Muhammad Abduh, a towering figure in Islamic thought and reform at the turn of the 19th century. Abduh was renowned for his profound and progressive understanding of Islam, advocating for modernization within an Islamic framework. Muṣṭafâ became one of his attentive students, regularly attending Abduh’s sessions at Al-Azhar. These sessions were not merely academic lectures; they were transformative experiences that broadened Muṣṭafâ’s horizons.

Under Imam Abduh’s mentorship, Muṣṭafâ absorbed a wealth of knowledge across various disciplines. He delved deep into religious studies, gaining a nuanced understanding of Islamic theology and ethics. Simultaneously, he explored the realms of literature, where he honed his writing skills and developed a distinctive literary style. Abduh’s sessions also covered political theory and philosophy, providing Muṣṭafâ with a comprehensive view of the world and the intellectual tools to critically engage with contemporary issues.

This period of intense learning and intellectual development was crucial in shaping Muṣṭafâ Luṭfi’s future contributions to literature and thought. The blend of traditional Islamic education, classical Arabic literature, and modern intellectual currents equipped him with a unique perspective that he would later bring to his writings. His exposure to Imam Abduh’s teachings instilled in him a commitment to reform and a dedication to using his literary talents to address the social and political challenges of his time.<sup>5</sup>

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfi al-Manfalûṭi was nurtured in the warm embrace of his esteemed family. His early education began under the tutelage of Shaykh Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûṭi. He studied at the office managed by the respected scholar Ahmad Riḍwân, who was renowned for his role in educating many scholars in Assiut. Riḍwân’s office served as an important center of learning, and under his guidance, young Muṣṭafâ received a solid foundation in traditional Islamic education.

Additionally, Muṣṭafâ frequently visited the home of Professor Abdullah Hashim, a close friend of his father. Hashim had a profound interest in literature and poetry, and his home was a sanctuary for intellectual and literary discussions. These visits played a crucial role in nurturing Muṣṭafâ’s budding love for poetry and literature. Hashim’s influence was significant, as it provided Muṣṭafâ with early exposure to the rich world of Arabic literary arts, fostering a deep and lasting connection with poetry.

Remarkably, from an early age, Muṣṭafâ began the arduous task of memorizing the Holy Qur’ân. Unlike many children of his time, who typically had to go through the memorization process multiple times for the sacred text to become firmly established in their minds, Muṣṭafâ’s extraordinary talent allowed him to memorize the

Qur'ân on his first attempt. This exceptional feat was highly unusual for his era and set him apart from his peers, highlighting his remarkable intellectual capabilities and his dedication to his studies.

Through these formative experiences, both at the office of Ahmad Riḍwân and in the literary environment of Abdullah Hashim's home, Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî developed a robust foundation in both religious and literary education. This unique combination of influences significantly shaped his future path, enabling him to become a distinguished figure in the world of Arabic literature and Islamic scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

At the tender age of eleven, Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî's father decided it was time for him to pursue a more formal education in Islamic knowledge. Thus, young Muṣṭafâ was sent to Al-Azhar Sharif, one of the most prestigious centers of Islamic learning. Over the next ten years, he immersed himself in the study of language and Sharia sciences, laying the groundwork for his future intellectual pursuits.

Despite the comprehensive education he received at Al-Azhar, Muṣṭafâ found himself at odds with the teaching methods employed there. The rigid and traditional approach to education did not align with his burgeoning literary tastes and preferences. He yearned for a more nuanced and aesthetically pleasing form of learning, one that resonated with his developing literary sensibilities.

To satiate his literary appetite, Muṣṭafâ often turned to various literary books, even though his appreciation for literature was still in its nascent stages. He seized every available opportunity to delve into these books, seeking out poetry and stories that spoke to his soul. This behavior, however, did not sit well with his teachers at Al-Azhar. They believed that such readings were distractions from the serious study of Islamic sciences and often reprimanded him when they discovered these books in his possession. Muṣṭafâ faced scolding and punishment, but these measures did little to dampen his enthusiasm for literature.

Despite the disapproval and the punitive actions of his mentors, Muṣṭafâ continued his studies at Al-Azhar. He was particularly wary of a relative, Al-Sayyid Al-Zâhrî, who also attended Al-Azhar and kept a close watch on him. To avoid unnecessary confrontations, Muṣṭafâ would discreetly bring a book of poetry or a story with him to his classes. Whenever he could, he sought solace in nature or found refuge in the seclusion of his home, away from the watchful eyes of his family and mentors.

These solitary moments provided him with the peace and freedom to indulge in his literary interests without fear of reprimand. The natural surroundings and the quietude of his private space became his sanctuary, allowing him to escape the pressures imposed by his educational environment and familial expectations. Through these experiences, Muṣṭafâ's love for literature continued to flourish, setting the stage for his future contributions to Arabic literary culture.<sup>7</sup>

### His Translation Mastery:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî, a renowned Egyptian writer, made significant contributions to Arabic literature through his translations, despite his lack of direct knowledge of the French language. He relied on intermediary translations or paraphrased summaries, yet still captured the essence of these works in eloquent Arabic prose. Among his notable translations, *In Pursuit of the Crown* by François Coppée was rendered into Arabic under the title "Fî Sabîl al-Tâj". He also translated "Paul and Virginie", a romantic novel by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, which he titled "Al-Faḍîla". Al-Manfalûṭî adapted Edmond Rostand's classic play "Cyrano de Bergerac" into Arabic, naming it "The Poet", presenting the hero's emotional and artistic struggles in his unique style.

Additionally, al-Manfalûṭî translated *Majdûlîn*, originally "Sous les Tilleuls" (Under the Shadows of the Ziziphus) by Alexandre Dumas, highlighting themes of love, loss, and tragedy. He also adapted Dumas fils' "La Dame aux Camélias" ("Camille") as "Ghâda al-Kâmîliyâ", bringing the poignant tale of love and sacrifice to Arab readers.

Besides these translations, al-Manfalûṭî also published original works that had a lasting impact on Arabic literature. His collection "Lectures of al-Manfalûṭî" compiled various pieces of Arabic prose and poetry, serving as a valuable educational resource for students. In "Al-Tarâḥum", he explored the virtue of mercy, emphasizing it as a fundamental attribute of God and a key principle in moral behavior, reflecting his deep engagement with themes of ethics and compassion.

Al-Manfalûṭî's ability to breathe life into these translated works, alongside his original writings, has left an enduring legacy in modern Arabic literature.<sup>8</sup>

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî al-Manfalûṭî was shaped by a variety of intellectual and literary influences, spanning both classical Arabic traditions and contemporary movements of his time. His style and ideas were molded by notable figures and ideologies from the Arab world as well as Western literature.

In 1915, he released a series of stories titled *Al-'Abarât*, which comprised purposeful and educational stories, some of which were original while others were adapted from French sources. These stories were characterized by a prevailing sense of sorrow and were reprinted multiple times.

It is worth noting that Al-Manfalûṭî played a significant role in modernizing Arabic prose writing while preserving traditional ideas and style. Here is a brief overview of Al-Manfalûṭî's creative works during his literary journey.<sup>9</sup>

His collection of stories *Al-'Abarât* comprise eight or nine stories, among which the following five stories are adapted through translation works; they are namely *Al-Shuhadâ'*, *Al-Dhikrâ*, *Al-Jazâ'*, *Al-Ḍaḥiya*, and *Al-*



*Intiqâm*. One story is adapted from an American story called “The Cry of the Graves,” and Al-Manfalûṭî crafted it in his unique style, naming it *Al-‘Iqâb*. All these stories revolve around the tragedies of life, encompassing suffering, pain, and hardship. What unifies them is that each story imparts a lesson, moral value, or social insight. Al-Manfalûṭî aims to address societal issues prevalent in his era, such as issues related to the veil and addiction. This book was first published in 1916.<sup>10</sup>

Here an attempt has been made to quote some important expressions in English from the book *Al-‘Abarât*; they are as follows:

- a) “Every plant sown in soil other than its own, or at a time other than its designated time, will either be rejected by the earth or spat out, or it will take root and corrupt it.”
- b) “We reckon, my friend, that in this life, the misfortune brought by fate is enough for us. We should not add to it a new misfortune that we bring upon ourselves.”
- c) “The doctor seeks someone whose life prevails over death. I will die in the spring of my life, and my memory will die at the hour I die, as if I had never lived a single day in life.”
- d) “Laughter of joy comes from a weeping heart, and the songs of happiness arise from a burning soul.”
- e) “Educate your men before you educate your women, for if you fail in educating men, you will fail in educating women. If you are weak in dealing with men, you will be even weaker in dealing with women.”
- f) “Joy is the daylight of life, and sorrow is its night. The bright day is not long before it is followed by the night.”<sup>11</sup>

### Discussion:

Al-Manfalûṭî is celebrated as a pioneering figure in the modernization of Arabic prose. Born in Manfalûṭ, Egypt, he grew up in a family steeped in scholarship and piety, which influenced his intellectual development. Al-Manfalûṭî’s literary career blossomed during a time of significant cultural transformation in the Arab world, where contact with Western ideas and literature was becoming more prominent. His unique contribution was in translating and adapting Western works into Arabic, infusing them with his elegant style and preserving the values of classical Arabic prose.

Despite not knowing French directly, Al-Manfalûṭî translated French literary works through intermediaries, transforming them into masterpieces that resonated deeply with Arab readers. His approach to translation was not simply about conveying words but reimagining the stories to suit Arab sensibilities and cultural frameworks. This gave his translations a distinct emotional and moral depth, a quality that made them popular and influential.

One of his most famous works is *Al-‘Abarât* (The Tears), a collection of stories published in 1915. These stories, some original and others adapted from French literature, focus on themes of loss, sadness, and moral reflection. They highlight Al-Manfalûṭî’s sensitivity to both universal human emotions and Arab cultural values. The enduring popularity of *Al-‘Abarât* is a testament to its emotional resonance with readers.

Al-Manfalûṭî also translated Alphonse Karr’s novel “*Sous les Tilleuls*” (Under the Lindens), which he adapted as *Majdûlîn*. This romantic tragedy tells the story of *Majdûlîn* and her lover, Stephen, and explores themes of love, pride, and regret. The moral and emotional depth Al-Manfalûṭî brought to this adaptation made it a beloved work among Arabic readers.

Another significant translation was Edmond Rostand’s play “*Cyrano de Bergerac*”, which Al-Manfalûṭî titled *Al-Shâ’ir* (The Poet). His translation of this work successfully captured the tragic heroism of the original while making it accessible to an Arab audience. Through works like *Al-Faḍîla* (Virtue) and *Fî Sabîl Al-Tâj* (For the Sake of the Crown), Al-Manfalûṭî explored themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and moral integrity, further showcasing his ability to adapt Western stories to fit Arab ethical and social concerns.

Al-Manfalûṭî’s literary legacy lies in his ability to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions, making Western stories accessible to Arab readers while preserving their cultural relevance. His unique approach to translation, characterized by emotional depth and moral reflection, played a pivotal role in the modern revival of Arabic prose. Through his works, Al-Manfalûṭî not only modernized Arabic literature but also ensured that its classical heritage remained intact, making him one of the most influential literary figures of his time.

### Conclusion:

Muṣṭafâ Luṭfî Al-Manfalûṭî stands as a pivotal figure in the modernization of Arabic prose, bridging the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions. His skill in adapting and translating French works into Arabic, despite his lack of direct knowledge of the language, demonstrated his creative brilliance. Rather than offering literal translations, Al-Manfalûṭî reimagined these stories, infusing them with emotional depth and moral reflections that resonated with Arab readers.

His most notable works exemplify his unique style, blending universal themes of love, loss, and human integrity with Arab cultural values. Through the adaptations of literary translation, he successfully introduced Western literary forms while preserving the classical beauty of Arabic prose.

Al-Manfalûṭî's approach to literature was rooted in a deep moral consciousness, emphasizing loyalty, sacrifice, and virtue. This not only made his works emotionally compelling but also relevant to the ethical concerns of his audience. His legacy lies not only in the stories he told but also in how he preserved and modernized Arabic literature, ensuring that it evolved while remaining true to its cultural and linguistic heritage.

Al-Manfalûṭî's contribution to Arabic literature is both innovative and enduring. His works continue to be celebrated for their eloquent prose, moral depth, and ability to engage readers with timeless themes. As a key figure in the Arabic literary renaissance, Al-Manfalûṭî's influence remains a cornerstone of modern Arabic literature.

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