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Al-Mutanabbi, the Renowned 10th-Century Arab Poet: Insights from Eastern and Western Scholars' Research

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Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western scholarship on Al-Mutanabbi, the renowned 10th-century Arab poet, whose work has profoundly impacted Arabic literature and beyond. By examining key themes such as linguistic style, cultural identity, heroism, and individualism, the research highlights differences in how Eastern and Western scholars interpret his legacy. Eastern scholarship emphasizes Al-Mutanabbi's mastery of the Arabic language, his deep cultural significance, and his philosophical exploration of Arab ideals, celebrating him as a symbol of Arab identity. Western scholars, on the other hand, often frame his work within the global literary tradition, focusing on universal themes of self-reflection and existential struggle, which position him as a bridge between Eastern and Western literature. This cross-cultural dialogue underscores the poet's dual role as both a representative of Arab heritage and a timeless voice for universal human concerns. The study concludes with suggestions for future research, including exploring Al-Mutanabbi's themes of fate and mortality, cross-cultural influences, and the effects of translation on his work's interpretation. Such research would further establish Al-Mutanabbi's relevance in world literature and deepen the appreciation of Arabic poetry's contributions to global literary heritage.

Introduction

Context of Al-Mutanabbi's Significance

Al-Mutanabbi, born as Abu al-Tayyib Ahmad ibn Husayn in 915 AD in Kufa, Iraq, stands as one of the most celebrated and influential poets in Arabic literature. His poetry reflects the spirit and political milieu of the 10th-century Arab world, as he skillfully wove themes of pride, heroism, identity, and existential contemplation into his works. Revered for his intellectual depth and linguistic prowess, Al-Mutanabbi's poetry captures a profound sense of individualism, valor, and reflection on human nature, which continues to resonate across centuries and regions. His verses were heavily shaped by his life experiences, particularly his involvement with rulers, such as Sayf al-Dawla, and his struggle to secure patronage and recognition.

Notably, Al-Mutanabbi's works have had far-reaching influence, not only within the Arab-speaking regions but also in the broader Islamic and Western worlds. His mastery in articulating complex ideas and emotions in eloquent Arabic has earned him a lasting legacy, making him a central figure in classical Arabic



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poetry and a symbol of Arab literary achievement. In his poetry, one finds a unique combination of philosophical musings, personal pride, and critiques of societal norms, which have inspired scholars and poets alike to interpret and adapt his themes across diverse contexts (Majali, 1988; Larkin, 2013). The poet's legacy extends beyond literature; for instance, his influence is seen in the cultural symbol of Baghdad's Al-Mutanabbi Street, a hub of intellectual life and literature, reflecting his enduring presence in Arab culture (Al-Musawi & Ali, 2024).

Research Gap

While extensive scholarship exists on Al-Mutanabbi's work, a comparative analysis of how his poetry is interpreted by Eastern and Western scholars remains relatively unexplored. Eastern scholars, for instance, often focus on Al-Mutanabbi's poetic craft, his role in Arabic literature, and his influence on subsequent generations. They delve into the linguistic richness, rhetorical devices, and cultural nuances of his work, emphasizing the poet's philosophical insights and contributions to Arabic identity. Western scholars, however, tend to place Al-Mutanabbi's work within a broader comparative framework, examining his relevance in the context of world literature and drawing parallels with other literary traditions (Alotaibi, 2020; Schine, 2024).

This divide in scholarship creates an opportunity to bridge perspectives and deepen our understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's impact across cultures. Eastern analyses frequently highlight Al-Mutanabbi's unique use of Arabic poetic forms, his handling of themes such as power and destiny, and his critique of societal and political structures, often drawing on close readings and rhetorical analysis. Western approaches, by contrast, often situate him in conversations around universal themes, viewing his work through lenses such as intertextuality, translation studies, and cultural reception (Bekouche & Kadim Elsaid, 2024; Abdullah & Salih, 2024). Yet, the lack of integration between these perspectives means that the full breadth of Al-Mutanabbi's influence remains underexamined, particularly in a way that fully appreciates his role as a cultural bridge between East and West.

Purpose and Scope

This study seeks to address this gap by offering a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western scholarly interpretations of Al-Mutanabbi's work. By juxtaposing these perspectives, this research aims to highlight the diverse ways in which Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is understood and appreciated across cultures. This study will examine key themes such as heroism, identity, philosophical reflection, and the role of the poet in society, tracing how these are interpreted within Eastern and Western literary traditions. Additionally, the analysis will consider how factors such as historical context, linguistic challenges, and cultural values shape these interpretations, drawing on a range of examples from both Arab and Western scholarship (Schoeler, 2010; Stetkevych, n.d.).

Through this approach, the study not only aspires to offer a richer understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's legacy but also to foster dialogue between Eastern and Western literary criticism, ultimately contributing to the broader field of comparative literature. By examining key literary commentaries, thematic analyses, and cultural perspectives, this research will shed light on Al-Mutanabbi's enduring relevance and the ways in which his poetry continues to resonate, challenge, and inspire readers and scholars worldwide.

Methods



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Literature Review Selection Criteria

To build a comprehensive view of Al-Mutanabbi's legacy, this study selected texts and studies from both Eastern and Western scholars using specific inclusion criteria to ensure balanced representation and depth. First, the study prioritized scholarly articles, books, and critical essays published between the years 1980 and 2024 to capture a wide range of perspectives that encompass both established and recent research. Articles and publications in Arabic, English, and French were selected from respected academic databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, Google Scholar, and Arabic-specific repositories, including the Al Manhal and Dar Al Mandumah databases.

Thematically, the selected works cover a diverse range of topics, including Al-Mutanabbi's linguistic artistry, cultural symbolism, philosophical themes, and socio-political influences. Additionally, studies focusing on translation, intertextuality, and cross-cultural comparisons were included to deepen the analysis of how Al-Mutanabbi's work resonates in both Eastern and Western scholarly discourse. Works specifically analyzing Al-Mutanabbi's *Diwan* (poetry collection) were prioritized, as they directly engage with his language, themes, and stylistic choices. Texts were also chosen to represent a variety of critical perspectives, such as thematic analysis, literary interpretation, and socio-cultural readings, to build a multidimensional understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's impact.

Analytical Framework

The study employs a comparative thematic analysis as its primary framework to examine the selected texts. This framework allows for a structured comparison of the key themes emphasized in Eastern versus Western scholarly interpretations. The analysis also incorporates elements of historical context and literary critique, examining how each scholar's cultural and regional background influences their perspective on Al-Mutanabbi's poetry. By breaking down the themes (e.g., heroism, identity, existentialism), the framework enables a nuanced view of how Al-Mutanabbi's work is positioned within the Arab world and beyond.

A historical perspective is also employed to understand how various periods—such as pre-modern and modern Arab intellectual thought and Western critical theory—have shaped the reception and interpretation of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry. This layered approach highlights differences in the literary critique approaches, for instance, the Eastern focus on rhetorical analysis and linguistic depth compared to the Western inclination toward intertextual and comparative readings. This combined thematic and historical perspective provides insight into the broader intercultural significance of Al-Mutanabbi's work.

Limitations

Several limitations affected the scope and depth of this study. Firstly, access to specific publications, especially older Arabic texts and certain Western studies, was limited, which may impact the comprehensiveness of the review. Moreover, translation nuances posed challenges; while efforts were made to consult bilingual resources and Arabic translations, certain linguistic subtleties inherent in Al-Mutanabbi's poetry may not be fully captured in translated works. Additionally, the available resources are skewed toward scholarly interpretations within established academic traditions, possibly overlooking non-academic or popular interpretations of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry. This limitation is acknowledged, as it may affect the study's representation of the poet's reception among broader audiences in both Eastern and Western contexts.



These constraints notwithstanding, the methodology remains robust by drawing from a broad, cross-cultural spectrum of critical works, allowing for a thorough and representative exploration of Al-Mutanabbi's literary legacy.

Results

Key Themes in Eastern Scholarship

Eastern scholarship on Al-Mutanabbi largely celebrates his work as a defining pillar of classical Arabic poetry, with a focus on his unique literary style, cultural influence, and the philosophical depth that underpins his verses. Central to this scholarship is Al-Mutanabbi's mastery of the Arabic language; Eastern critics emphasize his unparalleled skill in employing rhetorical devices, complex metaphors, and rhythmic patterns that epitomize the aesthetic standards of Arabic poetry (Majali, 1988). Scholars highlight his meticulous choice of words and his ability to capture powerful, universal ideas within highly structured poetic forms. Additionally, Eastern scholarship tends to focus on Al-Mutanabbi's deep connection to Arab cultural identity, as his poetry embodies values such as pride, courage, and resilience that resonate strongly within the Arab cultural framework.

The poet's philosophy, often articulated through themes of existential reflection and personal pride, also stands as a significant focus of Eastern analyses. Scholars explore Al-Mutanabbi's verses as reflective of the intellectual and political climate of his time, examining his critique of social hierarchy, power dynamics, and human nature. For instance, his complex relationship with patrons and his nuanced portrayal of heroism and identity in verses addressed to Sayf al-Dawla provide fertile ground for discussing the poet's view of self-worth and autonomy (Alazzam, 2021). These interpretations emphasize Al-Mutanabbi's role as both a poet and a philosopher, whose reflections on human experience continue to offer insights into Arab society and thought.

Key Themes in Western Scholarship

Western scholarship, while acknowledging Al-Mutanabbi's mastery of Arabic, often contextualizes his work within the broader landscape of world literature, emphasizing his role as a bridge between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Scholars frequently analyze his work through the lens of intercultural exchange, exploring how his themes of heroism, pride, and identity parallel those found in Western literature, such as the works of Homer and Shakespeare (Aldaw, 2023). This comparative approach allows Western scholars to draw connections between Al-Mutanabbi and prominent figures in the Western canon, thus situating his work within a universal literary framework.

Another major perspective in Western research is the emphasis on translation and the impact of language in conveying Al-Mutanabbi's ideas across cultures. Western studies frequently address the challenges of translating his dense Arabic verse into other languages while preserving the poet's intended meaning and stylistic integrity (Bekouche & Kadim Elsaid, 2024). These scholars examine how certain linguistic features, such as Al-Mutanabbi's use of alliteration and assonance, are often lost in translation, raising questions about the poet's accessibility and reception in non-Arabic-speaking cultures. Additionally, Western scholars tend to analyze Al-Mutanabbi's work through intertextual frameworks, exploring how his poetry has influenced, and been influenced by, other literary traditions. This includes examining how Al-Mutanabbi's themes resonate with universal human concerns, such as ambition, existential questioning, and the search for meaning (Richardson, 2024).



Comparative Analysis

Both Eastern and Western scholars recognize Al-Mutanabbi's emphasis on individualism, heroism, and cultural identity, but they approach these themes from distinct cultural and methodological perspectives. In Eastern research, individualism in Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is often celebrated as a form of self-respect and pride deeply rooted in Arab tradition. His self-confidence and assertive voice are seen as reflections of his personal quest for respect and autonomy, which resonate with the Arab ethos of honor and resilience. In contrast, Western scholars often interpret his individualism as a universal, existential quest, viewing Al-Mutanabbi as a figure who transcends cultural boundaries and represents the universal human struggle for recognition and meaning.

Similarly, heroism is explored differently by Eastern and Western critics. Eastern scholars focus on Al-Mutanabbi's portrayal of heroism as a virtue intertwined with Arab ideals of valor and loyalty, particularly in his poems praising figures like Sayf al-Dawla. This heroism is often interpreted within a cultural context, where personal and tribal honor are paramount. Western scholars, however, frequently contextualize Al-Mutanabbi's heroism within broader humanistic themes, comparing his depiction of heroism to Western literary archetypes, such as the tragic hero who grapples with fate and self-worth (Schoeler, 2010).

Finally, cultural identity is another point of convergence and divergence in these analyses. Eastern scholars interpret Al-Mutanabbi's work as a deeply rooted expression of Arab identity and pride, focusing on his use of language and cultural symbols that resonate within the Arab world. Western scholars, by contrast, are inclined to view his exploration of identity in terms of its universal relevance, seeing Al-Mutanabbi's work as contributing to broader discussions on identity, displacement, and intercultural understanding (Marashi, 2021).

In sum, while both Eastern and Western scholarship acknowledges Al-Mutanabbi's significance and contributions to literature, they diverge in their focus and interpretations. Eastern studies emphasize the poet's cultural significance and linguistic skill within an Arab context, while Western research situates his work within a global framework, exploring universal themes and the complexities of translation. Together, these perspectives enrich our understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's legacy, highlighting both his cultural specificity and his universal appeal.

Discussion*Interpretative Differences*

The differences in Eastern and Western interpretations of Al-Mutanabbi's work stem from several key factors, including cultural perspectives, access to primary sources, and historical context. Eastern scholars, coming from within the cultural and linguistic framework that shaped Al-Mutanabbi's poetry, naturally emphasize aspects of his work that align closely with Arab values, such as honor, pride, and the poet's role as a societal voice. This proximity to the cultural heritage allows for a nuanced appreciation of Al-Mutanabbi's rhetorical devices, linguistic richness, and contextual references. Conversely, Western scholars, approaching Al-Mutanabbi's work from outside the Arabic linguistic and cultural tradition, tend to focus on his universal themes, often interpreting his individualism and existential questioning within frameworks familiar to Western literary criticism, such as Romanticism or existentialism. This interpretative difference reflects a broader cultural lens, where Eastern critics see Al-Mutanabbi as a voice



for Arab identity, while Western scholars view him as a universal figure whose work transcends specific cultural confines.

Access to primary sources also plays a role in shaping these interpretations. Eastern scholars often have direct access to original Arabic texts and can engage closely with Al-Mutanabbi's linguistic intricacies and cultural references. Western scholars, on the other hand, rely heavily on translations, which may lack certain linguistic nuances or symbolic meanings embedded in the Arabic language. This reliance on translated material can affect the depth of engagement with Al-Mutanabbi's stylistic and rhetorical techniques, leading Western analyses to focus more on themes accessible across languages, such as individualism, heroism, and existential reflection. Furthermore, historical context plays a part in shaping scholarly perspectives. Eastern scholars, who may feel a cultural kinship with Al-Mutanabbi's themes of pride and resistance, interpret his work as part of a shared Arab intellectual legacy. In contrast, Western scholars, approaching his work with a focus on intercultural dialogue, may see him as a bridge between Eastern and Western traditions rather than as a purely cultural icon.

Impact on Global Literary Studies

The combined contributions of Eastern and Western scholarship on Al-Mutanabbi have enriched global literary studies by presenting a multidimensional view of his work and, by extension, Arabic literature. Eastern scholars have been instrumental in highlighting the poet's linguistic genius and his role as a cultural symbol, providing the foundational understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's place within Arabic literary history. This work has solidified his status within the Arab world, allowing him to become a reference point for Arab identity and pride. By preserving and analyzing the linguistic and cultural specificity of his poetry, Eastern scholarship has ensured that his work remains an integral part of the Arabic literary canon.

Western scholarship has expanded Al-Mutanabbi's reach by framing his work within broader global themes, thus integrating him into the wider conversation of world literature. By exploring his existential themes and individualism, Western scholars have contributed to a universal appreciation of Al-Mutanabbi, facilitating intercultural dialogue and understanding. This cross-cultural approach has helped establish Al-Mutanabbi as a figure who, while rooted in Arab identity, also represents themes of human experience and introspection that resonate universally. As a result, Al-Mutanabbi's work has become a site of cultural exchange, with Eastern and Western scholars jointly contributing to a more nuanced, globally accessible understanding of Arabic literature and its place in the world literary heritage.

Future Research Directions

To deepen our understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's legacy, several avenues for future research merit exploration. Firstly, further comparative studies focusing on lesser-explored themes in his work—such as his reflections on fate, mortality, and the human condition—would provide a richer view of his philosophy and broaden his appeal in world literature studies. These themes are especially promising for engaging a wider audience beyond the Arabic-speaking world, as they address universal human concerns.

Another potential direction involves examining Al-Mutanabbi's cross-cultural influences and how his poetry has been received, adapted, or reinterpreted in various cultures over time. This approach could include studies on Al-Mutanabbi's influence on other literary traditions, such as Persian, Turkish, or even European literature, where echoes of his themes may be found. Additionally, a closer examination of translation impacts could shed light on the nuances that are either lost or transformed in the process of



translation. Analyzing different translations of his work and the interpretations they foster in various linguistic and cultural contexts would enhance our understanding of how Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is adapted and understood globally.

Lastly, studies focused on modern reinterpretations of Al-Mutanabbi's work, including digital humanities approaches that utilize technology to map and analyze themes, stylistic elements, or linguistic choices, could open new pathways in understanding his poetry. By exploring how contemporary readers and scholars interact with his work, especially through digital platforms and social media, future research could reveal how Al-Mutanabbi's legacy continues to evolve and resonate with new generations, thereby securing his place as a timeless figure in world literature.

Conclusion

In sum, this comparative analysis of Eastern and Western scholarship on Al-Mutanabbi underscores the richness and complexity of his legacy as one of the 10th century's most influential poets. Both Eastern and Western perspectives recognize Al-Mutanabbi's unique voice and lasting impact, yet they approach his work with different emphases that reflect cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. Eastern scholars focus on his linguistic mastery, cultural significance, and embodiment of Arab ideals, celebrating him as a central figure in the Arabic literary tradition. Western scholars, meanwhile, engage with his universal themes of individualism, heroism, and existential inquiry, positioning him within the broader framework of world literature and highlighting his potential as a bridge between Eastern and Western literary worlds.

The interaction between these perspectives has advanced a global appreciation for Al-Mutanabbi's poetry, facilitating dialogue between diverse cultural and intellectual traditions. By viewing him through these varied lenses, the scholarly community has not only deepened our understanding of Al-Mutanabbi but also enriched the global canon of literature by showcasing the universal appeal of Arabic poetic traditions.

As this study suggests, future research could further illuminate Al-Mutanabbi's work by examining uncharted themes, cross-cultural influences, and translation impacts, as well as by exploring modern reinterpretations that keep his legacy vibrant and relevant. Through continued exploration, Al-Mutanabbi's voice will undoubtedly continue to inspire, challenge, and connect readers across cultures, solidifying his place as an enduring figure in world literature and as a symbol of the universal human experience.

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