

## Spiritual Beliefs in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Arab Culture Amidst a Pandemic: Taha Hussein's *Al-Ayyam*

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### ABSTRACT

*Spirituality often emerges as a source of resilience and identity formation for marginalised communities, particularly during times of crisis such as pandemics. Yet, the cultural dimensions of spiritual responses in literature remain underexplored, especially in narratives shaped by historical, social, and religious complexities. This study examines al-Ayyam, the autobiographical novel by Taha Hussein, as a literary lens to understand how spiritual practices and beliefs function as coping mechanisms in the face of adversity. Set in early 20th-century Egypt, the novel reflects the lived experiences of a socially and physically marginalised individual navigating a society marked by tradition, inequality, and upheaval. Using a qualitative content analysis guided by the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF), this research explores the novel's portrayal of spiritual resilience, communal identity, and cultural continuity during a pandemic. The findings reveal how spiritual elements rituals, beliefs, and inner faith are intricately woven into the narrative to underscore both personal survival and collective endurance. By highlighting the intersection of marginalisation and spirituality in al-Ayyam, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in literary and cultural studies on how literature gives voice to the silenced and sustains cultural memory in times of crisis.*

*Keywords: al-Ayyam; Arab culture; pandemic; spiritual beliefs; Taha Hussein*

### INTRODUCTION

Taha Hussein in *al-Ayyam* takes the reader to a world full of experiences, emotions, and reflections about life. *Al-Ayyam* by Taha Hussein, first published in 1929 by Dar al-Ma'arif, is an autobiographical novel which appears in three volumes, chronicling the author's life from childhood to his academic achievements. The first volume focuses on his early years in rural Egypt, detailing traditional Islamic education and the community's response to pandemics, centralising insights on social distancing and religious practices. Volume two highlights his experiences at al-Azhar University, rebellion against rigid traditions, and emotional struggles. The final volume narrates his academic journey in France, where he earned a doctorate and returned to Egypt as a prominent scholar (Hussein, 1967, 1985). *Al-Ayyam* often holds a special place in the hearts of scholars. However, studies regarding this novel have not been extensively explored

in the context of the pandemic. The pandemic discussed in this study refers to a contagious disease spread in the region of Egypt. This pandemic not only resulted in high mortality rates in Egypt but also altered its social, economic, and cultural fabric (Hussein, 1929).

Literature provides profound insights into the human experience, emotions, thoughts, and societal responses to critical situations such as pandemics (Basumatary, 2018). Historical Islamic literary works have documented the spiritual aspects of pandemics, including the Black Death and the Spanish flu, with particular emphasis on the suffering of victims, especially the emotional struggles of Hajj pilgrims and the role of quarantine systems. This can be seen in the works of scholars such as Wolfe (2015) in *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage*, Fortenberry (2009) in *Death and Disorder in Muhammad Sadiq's Star of the Hajj: Steamships, Quarantine, and their impact on the Muslim Body in Saddling the Dogs: Journeys through Egypt and the Near East*, and Stolz (2017) in *The Voyage of the Samannud: Pilgrimage, Cholera, and Empire on an Ottoman-Egyptian Steamship Journey in 1865-66*. These scholars explored the physical and emotional challenges faced by pilgrims but largely overlooked the role of spiritual beliefs during pandemics (Tresso, 2022).

Tresso, C. M. (2021) addressed this gap by highlighting fasting as a spiritual response observed by various communities during the Black Death, as discussed in her study on *Ibn Battuta's Prayer of Damascus*. Despite these contributions, research specifically exploring spiritual beliefs and practices during pandemics, particularly within the Arab community, remains limited. Most previous research has focused on emotional reflections, leaving a significant gap in the literary analysis of spiritual approaches concerning coping with pandemics in Islamic literature. When describing the pandemic, Taha Hussein portrays Arab civilisation in al-Ayyam as having deep spiritual values. They engage in spiritual practices such as committing to prayer, reading the Quran, giving charity, emphasising patience, and practising resilience when facing the pandemic. These spiritual practices are carried out with close family members, and they serve as a form of solace during the pandemic. The depictions concerning these beliefs, practices, and traditions form the cultural identity of Arabs when facing the pandemic. Taha Hussein, thus, portrays that Arab culture places spiritual values at the forefront when confronting pandemic challenges (Mahfuz, 2019).

According to Taylor, E. B. (2010) in *Primitive Culture*, culture encompasses the entirety of life patterns practised by a society, including knowledge, arts, beliefs, laws, and customs. Lubis (2023a) emphasises the notion that cultural spirituality plays an important role in promoting community harmony and understanding different religious perspectives, which is not widely explored in current research. As Roselind et al. (2012) argue, a more dynamic understanding of spirituality might better be advocated, signifying the importance of cultural contexts in shaping spiritual experiences and beliefs (Swati, 2013). Exploring spiritual beliefs within Arab culture, therefore, might just be essential for understanding the diverse spiritual activities during the pandemic. By focusing on cultural spirituality, narratives that promote openness to other religions and stories that foster unity among diverse racial backgrounds can be presented.

Spirituality and spiritual care are fundamental components of Arab culture, closely linked to traditional practices in the region (Laher, 2021). The profound relationship between religion and culture within Arab identity significantly influences the expression of religious values, which in turn affects overall well-being (Oliver, 2018). Spiritual beliefs in Arab culture play a significant role in shaping how individuals cope with life's challenges, particularly in the context of a pandemic. In Arab societies, religion, especially Islam, serves as a foundational aspect of daily life, influencing thought processes, behaviour, and decision-making (Zohkarnain & Lubis, 2023).

In this context, Firuz Akhtar Lubis's research on interfaith dialogue in travel novels with a particular focus on religious tolerance might enhance our understanding of how spiritual and cultural beliefs contribute to resilience and coping mechanisms. Lubis's work illustrates how varying religious perspectives within challenging situations, such as captivity, create a space where faith and spirituality may provide strength and foster mutual respect, offering valuable insights into how Arab religious and cultural frameworks help individuals navigate life's difficulties.

Similarly, the concept of eco-mysticism in Pablo Neruda's poetry, which explores the spiritual connection between humanity and nature, offers a perspective that aligns with the portrayal of spirituality in Arab culture through Taha Hussein's *Al-Ayyam*. Both emphasise the role of spiritual beliefs in fostering resilience and providing strength during challenging times (Khosravi et al., 2022). This study is predicated on the notion that values are vital for the psychological health of the Arab population. As Sortheix and Schwartz (2018) argue, Arab individuals, particularly Arab Muslims, often perceive life's challenges as tests of faith in God, leading them to interpret these difficulties as either tests or punishments for their actions. Additionally, they may regard these trials as manifestations of God's mercy (Aloud & Rathur, 2009).

Arab society boasts a rich cultural heritage of values and beliefs that prioritise spirituality, with religion being the most prominent and defining characteristic of Arab culture. While Islam predominates, there exists a diversity of religious practices across various Arab nations (Basurrah et al., 2022). Ultimately, Arab culture encompasses a range of ethnic, social, and religious groups, each with its unique traditions. In this context, culture is multifaceted and shaped by numerous factors, including the values, conventions, and traditions of a society. This study, therefore, explores Taha Hussein's perspective in *al-Ayyam*, specifically focusing on the depictions of Arab culture during the pandemic through the lens of the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF). Taha Hussein's portrayal in *al-Ayyam* highlights symbolic spiritual acts such as committing to prayers, verbalising Quranic recitation, doing charity, and cultivating patience and resilience. These practices are deeply rooted in Arab culture and traditions, demonstrating their reliance on religious beliefs when faced with challenging circumstances in life (Mohd Yusoffi et al., 2020).

Overall, Taha Hussein's portrayal of Arab spiritual activities in *al-Ayyam* could be largely explained by the cultural framework and conventions of Arab society, as well as how these practices are understood and practised. As religions play a significant role in Arab society, compliance with religious traditions and religious obligations is expected (Mulyadi, 2016). Therefore, Arab community involvement in spiritual practices during the pandemic is not solely determined by individual preferences, but it is also shaped by Arab cultural norms emphasising the importance of faith when facing critical situations and hardships in life. Thus, this study further discusses how Arab culture and traditions, especially in the context of spiritual beliefs, provide insight into their strength and resilience when facing the pandemic.

## THE SYMBIOTIC CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

The Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF) in this study is formed through the merging of two theories, namely the theory of Cultural Relativism by Franz Boas and the theory of Symbolic Interactionism by Blumer. The integration of two cultural theories, Cultural Relativism Theory (CR) by Boas and Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SI) by Blumer, is important for understanding

the cultural experiences of Arab society from the perspective of their cultural background and history in early 20th-century Egypt when facing the pandemic. The integration of these two cultural theories can also help to examine the cultural experiences of Arab spiritual beliefs portrayed by Taha Hussein more clearly and appreciate other cultures better. The behaviour of Arab society practising spiritual values symbolises their cultural identity and their cultural response to the pandemic.

The Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the cultural nuances and dynamics of Arab society during the pandemic. Cultural Relativism Theory emphasises understanding cultural practices within their cultural context, without imposing external judgments. Symbolic Interactionism Theory focuses on how individuals give meaning to symbols and engage in social interactions based on these meanings. Together, these theories shed light on how Arab society's cultural beliefs and practices influence their responses to the pandemic, and how individuals interpret and enact these beliefs in their daily lives.

According to Boas (1940), one cannot use the values of one culture to measure individuals from another culture. This is because the measurement of such values only holds within a specific culture and may not necessarily be the same in another culture. Boas believed that the concept of relativism applied to each cultural value, having its significance based on the cultural history and experiences of each society (Lesser, 2004).

In general, the concept of Cultural Relativism (CR) in al-Ayyam by Taha Hussein is woven through the importance of respecting cultural diversity and understanding the various interpretations of spiritual practices adopted by the people of early 20th-century Egypt during the pandemic. The Arab community's response to this pandemic situation is largely within the context of family. Therefore, these spiritual practices are shaped by the background of Arab family cultural traditions and societal norms in Egypt during the pandemic. The concept of Cultural Relativism (CR) provides an insight into how Arab family culture enriches the understanding of spiritual practices that shape responses to the pandemic.

Cultural Relativism (CR) is a theoretical framework that emphasises the importance of understanding cultural practices within their original cultural context without external judgment. In the context of this study, Cultural Relativism (CR) enables a deeper exploration of the spiritual beliefs and practices of Arab society during the pandemic, such as prayer, Quranic recitation, charity, and the application of patience and resilience, considering the values and norms that shape their own culture. The Cultural Relativism (CR) approach by Boas can be seen through the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices in Arab society during the pandemic. Boas emphasises the importance of understanding a society's culture from an internal perspective without external judgment (Hahn, 2023; Jacknis, 1996).

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological theory that offers a perspective on how individuals interact with their surroundings, society, and the environment (Cooley, 1902). In essence, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory is founded on the idea that symbols emerge from human interactions within social contexts (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1978). In general, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory, pioneered by Blumer, refers to the process by which humans give meaning to events and actions in everyday life. It emphasises the importance of individual perception and interpretation in shaping social interactions (Blumer, H., 1969).

In the context of this study, the spiritual practices portrayed by Taha Hussein in al-Ayyam are prayer, Quranic recitation, charity, and the application of patience and resilience during the pandemic. As stated earlier, the concept of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) can help us understand how spiritual beliefs and practices such as prayer, charity, Quranic recitation, and the application

of patience and resilience are not only physical actions but also hold deep symbolic meanings for Arab society (Al-Jauziyah, 2006). These symbolic spiritual beliefs stem from their culture, values, and experiences within their social environment.

For example, in *al-Ayyam*, Taha Hussein portrays the situation of Arab society practising spiritual rituals such as prayer, Quranic recitation, charity, and the application of patience and resilience during the pandemic. These practices reflect the spiritual relationship between individuals and God, as well as the social bond among congregants gathering to worship together. For instance, prayer and Quranic recitation become symbols depicting the faith, hope, and resilience of Arab society in facing the pandemic. Thus, through the act of prayer, Arab society can shape its religious and cultural identity while seeking spiritual strength in confronting the challenges of the pandemic.

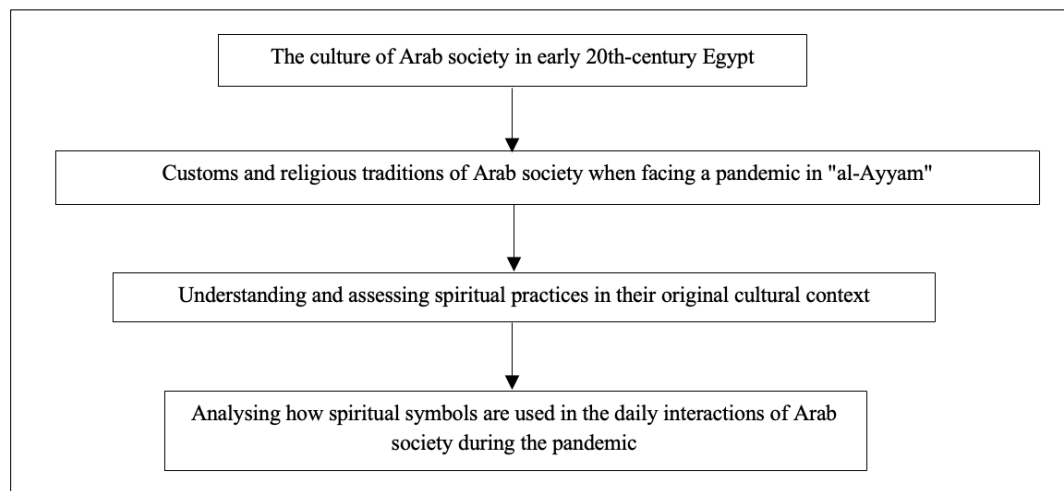


FIGURE 1. The Symbiotic Cultural Framework

Figure 1 shows the Symbiotic Cultural Framework. The main emphasis lies in the values and spiritual practices of Arab society in early 20th-century Egypt, being interpreted and understood within the context of the local culture, without judging them based on external cultural perspectives. This implies that there are no superior or inferior cultural values, and everything needs to be evaluated within the original cultural context, which is the culture in Egypt. The role of symbols and symbolic interactions in shaping social meanings is also seen as the result of interaction processes among individuals through symbols used in communication. Social meanings in this context refer to how society assigns meaning to symbols, actions, and objects in their lives (Blumer, 1969).

This study provides an opportunity to analyse how the spiritual symbols depicted by Taha Hussein in his novel *"al-Ayyam,"* such as reading the Quran, charity, prayer, patience, and endurance, can shape the social reality of Arab society. Overall, the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF) results in a holistic and thorough approach to examining and interpreting Arab culture during the pandemic. This framework provides a good balance in highlighting the uniqueness of Arab culture and also offers a holistic view of how Arab culture responds to the pandemic through spiritual practices. In other words, this framework forms a holistic approach to understanding the complexity of spiritual and cultural practices of Arab society in early 20th-century Egypt in the context of the pandemic.



## DISCUSSION

### SPIRITUALITY IN ARAB CULTURE AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

In this section, the exploration of Arab cultural spiritual concepts during the pandemic in the novel "al-Ayyam" is examined through the lens of the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF). The cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Arab community discussed in this study include the religious rituals and traditions of Arab society in Egypt during the pandemic, as represented by Taha Hussein in his novel "al-Ayyam".

The discussion of this study traverses the spiritual practices observed by the Arab community, which primarily include family-oriented practices such as Quran recitation, charitable giving, prayer, and the application of patience and endurance during the pandemic.

Typically, Arab society considers the family as the cornerstone of its life. The family is viewed as the primary source of support in overcoming life's challenges. In the context of Arab culture, the family not only functions as a social entity but is also regarded as a form of spiritual balance. This is because the family, as depicted in Arab culture in Egypt, as illustrated by Taha Hussein in his novel, often serves as the place where spiritual values and religious practices are instilled.

Arab communities with strong spiritual beliefs tend to align their customs and culture with spiritual values within their family environment. Practices such as prayer, charitable giving, Quran recitation, patience, and endurance are not merely religious routines in Egyptian culture but also serve as bonds of family relationships. This reflects how religious customs and traditions, especially in the context of family, serve as the place where religious values are passed down from generation to generation.

In other words, it is a cultural norm in Arab society that the family plays a role as a defence fortress, providing emotional and spiritual support when facing life's challenges. This includes the cultural practices of the Arab community depicted by Taha Hussein in "al-Ayyam", who also adheres to spiritual values such as prayer, charitable giving, Quran recitation, and the application of patience and endurance during the pandemic. Therefore, this study further discusses how religious customs and traditions, especially in the family context, provide profound insights into their inner strength and resilience when facing the pandemic in Taha Hussein's novel "al-Ayyam".

### SPIRITUAL FUNDAMENTALS IN ARAB CULTURE AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

The discussion of spiritual fundamentals in this study includes 'the values of patience and perseverance' and 'giving charity internally' during the pandemic. Initially, this study will examine the spiritual fundamentals of internal charity as practised in Arab culture during a pandemic. The practice of charity is described in the passage (1) as follows:

Excerpt (1):

"How often all night long he would think only of his brother or repeat the Surah Al-Ikhlās a thousand times, then bestow it all upon his brother."

(Taha Hussein, 1929)

Excerpt (1) illustrates the importance of love and compassion in familial connections, especially during the loss of family members due to the pandemic. It illustrates an extraordinary act of inner compassion in which the protagonist, who is grieving for his deceased brother, devotes countless hours to thoughts and prayers for his sibling's afterlife.

This observation resonates particularly closely in light of the pandemic, which has caused tremendous sorrow and loss for families all around the world. The pandemic has torn families apart, with many loved ones dying unexpectedly and without the chance for traditional farewells. In such difficult circumstances, acts of inner charity, such as those shown in Excerpt (1), are critical for dealing with grief and finding peace in the face of loss.

Surah Al-Ikhlās, a Quranic chapter about God's unity, is repeated to symbolise the protagonist's spiritual devotion and desire to assure his brother's tranquillity and salvation in the afterlife (Oktarina, 2020). The circumstance exemplifies the importance of spirituality and faith in Arab family culture, where grief is minimised and the memory of the deceased is honoured via religious rites and prayers.

Furthermore, the remark about thinking about his brother "all night long" exemplifies the enduring quality of brotherly attachment as well as the devastating impact of loss on family relationships. Despite the passage of time and the weight of loss, his unwavering dedication to his brother's well-being exemplifies the strength and resilience of familial relationships, even in the most terrible of circumstances.

Through the portrayal by Taha Hussein in Excerpt (1) above, the act of reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās serves as a form of spiritual charity, specifically the charity of the reward of reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās for his deceased brother. The level of charity practised by Taha Hussein focuses on his spiritual and inner self. The act of inward charity, as depicted by Taha Hussein previously, aims to highlight to the readers the importance of spiritual charity.

This is because inward charity can make a person more serene with a collection of remembrances and the recitation of common surahs that serve as guidance. Engaging in charity in this manner strengthens an individual more than physical charity. Safe and Mohd Nor (2016), in "Stress Management According to the Quran and Hadith", state that inward charity significantly helps in controlling a person's emotions. In Taha Hussein's view, inward charity through reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās for his deceased brother reflects the religious and cultural values in Arab society.

From the perspective of the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF), this action is understood as an important aspect of cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation (Lewis, 2001). As this previous statement explains, reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās is not only a spiritual act but also a symbolic act that enriches social meaning through symbolic interaction in society. Thus, this inward charity is not only a religious practice but also acts as a significant symbol in connecting individuals with the community and forming emotional and spiritual bonds, especially during a pandemic.

The act of reciting Surah Al-Ikhlās for the soul of his deceased brother shows a strong emotional bond within the brotherhood. Moreover, Surah Al-Ikhlās is one of the chapters in the Quran that expresses belief in the unity of Allah SWT (Raja Jamilah & Mohd Yusoff, 2004). By reciting this chapter for his brother's soul, Taha Hussein shows love, affection, and respect that still exist even though his brother has passed away. This reflects the strong emotional bond among individuals in Arab families, where they continue to remember and honour deceased family members.

Overall, this depiction of the practice portrays the fundamental spirituality that has been practised from generation to generation in Arab culture and demonstrates the importance of honouring and remembering deceased family members. By engaging in this practice, Taha Hussein has preserved the traditions and values of Arab culture that have been passed down through generations. But what about Taha Hussein's parents? Do they both adhere to the same spiritual principles as Taha Hussein? All these questions will be addressed in the second part of this study.

Next, in the second part, this study will examine the practice of applying the values of patience and perseverance by both Taha Hussein's parents when facing the situation of the death of their son due to the pandemic, as follows:

#### Excerpt (2):

"It turned out that the young man was the one who had become a victim. Thus, the epidemic had infiltrated the house. Now his mother knew that her children were experiencing a disaster. What was even more surprising that night was his father. He was calm and patient. Even though he was full of worry, he could control himself. His voice indicated a heart that was subdued. Despite this, he remained steadfast, ready to accept all trials."

(Taha Hussein, 1929)

The Excerpt above discusses the spread of the pandemic, which had already infected Taha Hussein's family members. Despite facing the anxiety caused by the spread, it appears that Taha Hussein's father remained patient and steadfast. Excerpt (2) above focuses on the patience and fortitude of Taha Hussein's father. He managed to control the emotions of his family members well. Moreover, Taha Hussein's father was also an admirable father for his calm and steadfast nature, even knowing that his son would breathe his last due to the pandemic.

It is different from the point of view of applying the values of patience and perseverance of a mother. This description is expressed in the Excerpt (3) below:

#### Excerpt (3):

In her worries, the mother remained steadfast, full of faith, and caring for her child. When his vomiting stopped, she went out to the front room, raised her hands and face to the sky, and was lost in prayer. But when she heard the vomiting again, she quickly returned to her son's side. She leaned the child against her chest, placing his head between her hands, with her tongue still praying and supplicating.

(Taha Hussein, 1929)

The Excerpt (3) above refers to the patience and perseverance of a mother towards her son who is on the verge of death. Taha Hussein's mother remained patient and steadfast, earnestly praying to Allah SWT for help so that her son could be cured of the disease. Overall, the patience and perseverance depicted by Taha Hussein's mother during her son's death represent a type of patience and spiritual resilience, which involves refraining from negative emotions such as sadness and distress due to the calamity and trials that befall oneself. This type of patience and spiritual resilience is classified as follows:



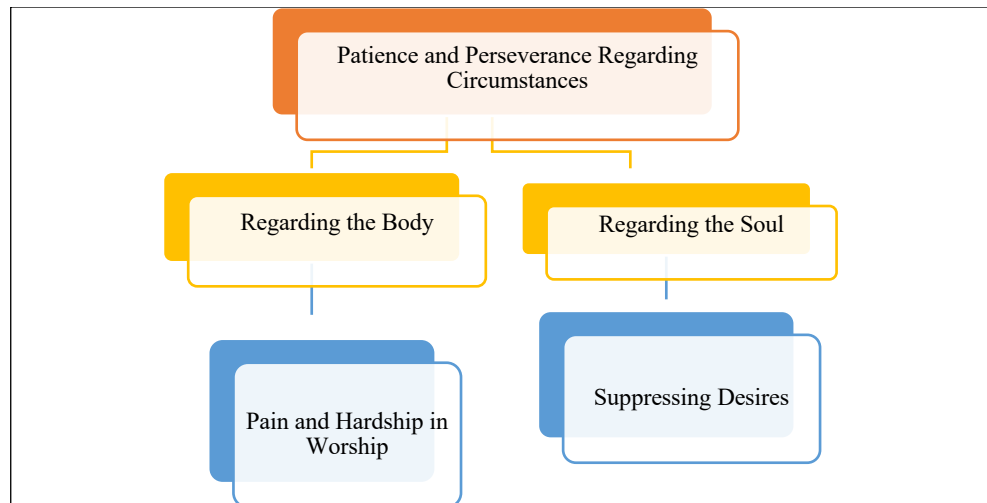


FIGURE 2. Types of Patience and Perseverance According to Imam al-Ghazali

Figure 2 above explains the two types of 'patience and perseverance regarding circumstances' according to Imam al-Ghazali. Imam al-Ghazali was a prominent figure in philosophy. In his research, he stated that the heart is the centre of all feelings. If one has a good heart, then all actions will also be good. This aligns with the portrayal of values performed by the mother of Taha Hussein, who remained patient and perseverant despite losing her son forever due to the pandemic. This patience and perseverance arise from a pure soul that always imbues life with spiritual values.

The excerpts (2) and (3) above provide a captivating depiction of a family struggling with the devastating effects of the pandemic on their lives. The unexpected spread of the pandemic inside their home brings fear and anguish as they confront the horrible reality of a loved one succumbing to the sickness.

During this disaster, the parents' reactions reveal much about the perseverance and strength of family relationships. Despite his intense worry and anxiety, the father remains remarkably calm and in charge, demonstrating a resolute desire to confront whatever problems come their way. His capacity to keep control in the face of hardship inspires and stabilises the family, providing a feeling of order during chaos.

Similarly, the mother's unwavering faith and drive are evident in her acts. Despite her doubts and misgivings, she remains faithful in her love for her son, providing comfort and respite during his pain. Her prayer, both alone and with her son, illustrates how faith can bring courage and tenacity in tough times.

The narratives in excerpts (2) and (3) mirror the common experiences of families dealing with the pandemic. It emphasises the crisis's tremendous impact on family dynamics, as well as the resilience and solidarity that arise in the face of adversity. In uncertainty and fear, families turn to their bonds and shared faith for solace and hope as the pandemic wreaks havoc.

This is in line with the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF), which encourages understanding of culture through the values of patience and perseverance as applied in the Arab society in Egypt in the early 20th century when facing the pandemic.

From the perspective of the (SCF), patience and perseverance are viewed as symbolic spiritual actions. These qualities are not only seen as essential personal attributes but also as symbols that manifest through social interactions and individual experiences. This is in line with

excerpts (2) and (3), which highlight the experiences of Taha Hussein's parents during the loss of their child due to the pandemic. The attitudes of patience and perseverance depicted in these excerpts are interpreted as forms of inner strength in confronting life's trials.

Based on the (SCF), the symbolic concept of patience and perseverance in Taha Hussein's portrayal represents the type of "patience and perseverance related to circumstances," which refers to the ability to remain patient and perseverant in the face of life's challenges. This spiritual symbolism aligns with the teachings of the Islamic philosopher Imam al-Ghazali. According to al-Ghazali, patience and perseverance in the face of adverse circumstances represent the highest degree of these virtues. This is because humans generally find it easier to refrain from sinful acts than to sincerely accept and endure the trials and tribulations that life presents (Abd Rahman, 2019).

However, it has become an Arab cultural practice to always be patient and perseverant when facing trials because it is a condition for success. Therefore, in times of difficulty, patience and perseverance are essential virtues to cultivate, as they have been proven effective in helping individuals manage their emotions effectively.

Through the application of the (SCF), we can observe how Taha Hussein's parents embody the values of patience and perseverance when losing their child during the pandemic. Their attitudes of patience and perseverance can be interpreted as a respect for the religious and cultural values embedded in Arab society in Egypt in the early 20th century.

Overall, the (SCF) allows us to appreciate the diversity of ways and cultural values of Arab society portrayed by Taha Hussein. Meanwhile, we can observe how the symbolic value of patience and perseverance within the family is cultivated through daily interactions, conversations, and shared experiences. This is exemplified by Taha Hussein's parents as they faced the challenges of the pandemic.

#### SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN ARAB CULTURE AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

The previous discussion focused on the fundamental spirituality practised by Taha Hussein and his family during the pandemic. However, in this section, the study examines the physical and spiritual practices that Taha Hussein consistently performed during the pandemic. The discussion of spiritual practices in this study includes the practices of Quran recitation, charitable giving and prayer during the pandemic. This study will first discuss the spiritual practices of Quran recitation, charitable giving, and prayer as follows.

The debate on the practice of reciting the Qur'an, giving charity and prayer is analysed through an excerpt in the novel *al-Ayyam* by Taha Hussein. Taha Hussein describes the practice of reciting the Qur'an, giving charity and prayer as in the following Excerpt (4):

Excerpt (4):

"Since that day, the child underwent a remarkable spiritual transformation. Indeed, he came to know God. He endeavoured to draw closer to Him in every way, sometimes through charity, sometimes through prayer, and at times by reading the Quran for the third time. Only God bore witness to how he became truly God-fearing, no longer desiring only worldly life."

(Taha Hussein, 1929)

Excerpt (4) conveys a powerful emotional picture of spiritual advancement, especially in light of the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic's uncertainties and struggles, people have turned to spirituality for comfort and meaning, just like the child indicated in the Excerpt above. The

inclusion of charity, prayer, and Quranic reading emphasises the significance of faith and spirituality in providing strength and resilience during tough circumstances (Junohi & Mat Jusoh, 2018). These spiritual disciplines offer not just consolation and guidance, but also a sense of purpose and connection to something larger than oneself (Malik Bennabi, 1983).

Furthermore, the child's shift in priorities, from worldly desires to a deeper respect for God, indicates a worldwide need for spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment during pandemic-related upheaval. It emphasises spirituality's transforming power in assisting people to negotiate life's challenges and find meaning and purpose in adversity.

In essence, the remark serves as an emotional reminder of the enduring need for faith and spirituality, especially during times of crisis like the pandemic. It urges us to consider the role of spirituality in overcoming hardship, finding hope in despair, and fostering a sense of solidarity and resilience.

Through the Symbiotic Cultural Framework (SCF), the depiction of these spiritual practices stimulates thinking about the diversity of meanings and interpretations in the lives of Arab communities during a pandemic situation. The spiritual practices described by Taha Hussein represent a direct relationship between a servant and God and also act as a source of spiritual strength.

From the perspective of the (SCF), these spiritual practices are ingrained in the culture of Arab communities practising Islam in Egypt. As depicted by Taha Hussein during the pandemic, these spiritual practices are not only religious obligations but also a source of spiritual strength and a unifying factor among Arab communities.

In the concept of SCF, the need to respect the uniqueness of other cultures, including the spiritual practices, is depicted by Taha Hussein in the Excerpt (4) mentioned above. This is because every culture in society has its spiritual practices with unique understandings that are consistent with its values and culture. Specifically, the importance of respecting cultural differences and acknowledging that each individual can derive unique meanings from religious practices demonstrates stable alignments with their personal experiences and culture. As depicted by Taha Hussein in al-Ayyam, spiritual practices during the pandemic not only become religious obligations but also a source of spiritual strength. The spiritual practices described by Taha Hussein in Excerpt (4) become symbolic actions that shape the culture of Arab society. In al-Ayyam, the three spiritual symbols (charity, prayer, and Quranic reading) are considered as 'symbols of unity' and 'spiritual strength'.

In Arab culture, practices like 'prayer' are direct forms of connection with God, serving as a source of spiritual strength. Each component of prayer is seen as laden with meaning and has a deep spiritual connection. Each movement in prayer holds profound symbolic meanings. For example, the act of 'ruku' (bowing) signifies humility and absolute dependence on God. Furthermore, a comprehensive study in religious psychology has shown that prayer has a profound impact on people's mental and emotional well-being. Upenieks (2023), for instance, discovered that frequent prayer practices are linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as higher levels of subjective well-being and life satisfaction. This empirical research emphasises prayer's transformative potential in creating psychological resilience, enhancing general spiritual health, and reinforcing its significance as a source of spiritual strength in Arab culture.

The practice of 'reading the Quran', as stated in Excerpt (4), can act as a shield against impurities of the heart, enabling one to prevent and detest evil and falsehood. The symbolic act of Quranic reading is interpreted in the Arab culture as a way to seek guidance in life and find inner peace. During the pandemic, Quranic reading has become not only a religious activity but also a

symbol reflecting the values, hopes, and resilience of Arab society (Madjid, 1945). Several studies have found that regular exposure to religious texts such as the Quran can provide considerable psychological and emotional benefits. Scholars such as Zaki Hasan et al. (2021) discovered that regular Quranic reading is associated with decreased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as higher levels of serenity, satisfaction, and spiritual well-being. This empirical study supports the theory that Quranic reading is one of the many excellent methods for increasing mental and emotional resilience, particularly during challenging times such as the pandemic.

Lastly, the symbolic act of 'charity' in Arab society during the pandemic is not only considered a humanitarian action, but it also symbolises care within the community. Taha Hussein employs the symbolism of 'charity' to emphasise the need for unity and support among one another during the pandemic. Furthermore, numerous empirical studies have revealed that selfless acts performed during times of crisis might lead to considerable psychological and societal benefits. Geng et al. (2022) discovered that completing charitable acts not only promotes feelings of empathy, compassion, and connectedness among communities, but they also create a sense of purpose and meaning in people's lives. This empirical research underscores the importance of charitable behaviour as a powerful tool for increasing social cohesion, resilience, and collective well-being, particularly in the face of disasters such as the pandemic.

Overall, SCF forms a holistic approach to understanding the complexity of spiritual practices in the context of a pandemic by highlighting the differences in societies and the symbols that shape the social and cultural reality of Arab society. Thus, through the integration of cultural theories, we can see how spiritual practices performed by Arab communities during the pandemic not only become part of their culture but also form the foundation of their identity as a community, complying with religious values in facing the test of the pandemic.

Drawing upon insights from systematic literature reviews on pandemics in Islamic literature (Zohkarnain & Lubis, 2023), this study seeks to expand the discussion through the analysis of *Al-Ayyam* by Taha Hussein. It examines how spiritual beliefs within Arab culture shape both individual and communal experiences during pandemics, highlighting Islamic literature's significance as a framework for understanding sociological and philosophical perspectives on crises. The study focuses on how spiritual beliefs in Arab culture influence individual and communal experiences during pandemics, highlighting the central role of Islamic literature as a source of sociological and philosophical understanding.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study opens up an alternative understanding of how Arab society in early 20th-century Egypt responded to the pandemic through spiritual practices. Taha Hussein's depiction of the pandemic's impact on Arab families emphasises cultural resilience and familial bonds. These beliefs reflect Arab culture's deeply established values of faith, solidarity, and endurance. In Arab culture, the family is typically depicted as the cornerstone of society, highlighting the importance of a tight-knit family during times of distress. The analysis above demonstrates Arab families' persistence in the face of tragedy, as they rely on cultural traditions for strength and solidarity. In the middle of the pandemic, Arab families show their devotion to their traditions via shared experiences and a strong faith.

By synthesising SCF, this study centralises the importance of spiritual practices such as committing prayers, reading the Quran, emphasising charity, practising patience, and relying on perseverance when facing pandemic challenges. SCF guides one to understand the unique cultural

heritage and diverse interpretations of cultural customs and traditions (spiritual) of Arab culture. Meanwhile, reveals how symbolic spiritual meanings continue to evolve through daily interactions and experiences among Arab communities. In Taha Hussein's situation, these spiritual practices become strong cultural responses and symbols of spiritual resilience in facing pandemic challenges. Overall, miscellaneous society members can appreciate how religions and cultures are the main drivers of spiritual resilience and unity in Arab society, offering deep meanings to spiritual practices applied when facing pandemic challenges. Therefore, this understanding can sow the values that form the foundation of cultural strength in Arab society through the spiritual practices they undertake when faced with any form of adversity. This study emphasises that these spiritual practices will continue to evolve through experiences and interactions within a society.

The findings of this study highlight the extensive role of religion and culture in shaping the experiences of society during the pandemic. Prospective investigations might better explore similar themes in literary works across different cultural contexts, enriching the understanding of beliefs, spirituality, and behaviour of society, especially in situations such as pandemics.

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