

Critiquing Modernity in Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* and Abdelwahab Elmessiri's *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir (The Princess and the Poet)*

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Abstract

This article disrupts the materialistic paradigm disseminated by modern Western civilization through introducing samples of its subversion as represented in literature addressed to the young audience. The researcher limits herself to the analysis of two children's stories: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1957) by Dr. Seuss (1904-1991) and *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir (The Princess and the Poet)* (2004) by Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008), both stories stand against the notions of consumerism, materialism, and culture industry. Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri employ children's narratives as a medium to critique modernity, a socio-cultural shift that displaces the sacred transcendental realm with an unwavering focus on scientific rationality in which materialism and consumerism are regarded as the sources of happiness. The paper adopts a comparative approach through which the similarities and differences between Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri's narratives, with reference to Alain Touraine and George Simmel's critiques of modernity, along with a consideration of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of critique. Through the characters of the Grinch and the princess, Dr. Seuss, and Elmessiri, respectively, advocate for a return to the spiritual dimensions of human existence beyond the confines of material possessions. Dr. Seuss focuses his critique on the commercialization of holidays and the adverse consequences of materialism, while emphasizing the redemptive potential of compassion and community as well as the significance of human connections, whereas Elmessiri questions the prevalence of scientific reason over the spiritual dimensions of human existence, delving into the paradigms of immanence and transcendence.

Keywords: Critique, Modernity, Dr. Seuss, Abdelwahab Elmessiri, Children's Literature, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir (The Princess and the Poet)*

**Critiquing Modernity in Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* and
Abdelwahab Elmessiri's *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* (The Princess and the
Poet)**

The *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* defines modernity as the set of social, cultural, and intellectual circumstances unique to Western society, often interchangeable with concepts like capitalism, industrialization, rationalization, secularization, media, and communication society (1199). Thus, modernity is perceived as an inclination for the governance of human affairs by rationality grounded in science rather than faith or revelation (Outram 3). The critique of modernity in this study challenges the values and outcomes of modernist ideology, leading to liquid modernity, which rejects the presence of any center, resulting in a decentered culture, and a dehumanized social life marked by the rationalization of culture. This study questions the materialistic paradigm disseminated by modern Western civilization through examining two children's stories: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1957) by Dr. Seuss (1904-1991) and *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* (*The Princess and the Poet*) (2004) by Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008). In both stories, the authors criticize modernity arguing that it destroys the sacred transcendental world in favor of science and reason; they counter the modern claim that materialism and consumerism are utilized as sources of joy and pursuits in lieu of spiritual power. The consumerist paradigm employed by modernity aims to internalize the notion that the pursuit of happiness can only be realized through consumption until the consumer identifies completely with the commodity and disregards the spiritual dimensions of the human experience. This commodification not only restricts individuality but also perpetuates a cycle of materialistic desires, fostering a constant need for consumption. Consequently, consumers become trapped in a never-ending quest for material possessions, impeding their capacity to delve into deeper facets of life and discover genuine fulfillment.

The paper adopts a comparative approach through which the similarities and differences between the two children's stories by Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri are examined with reference to Alain Touraine and George Simmel's critique of modernity, along with a consideration of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of critique. Through the selected stories, Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri challenge the modern Western civilization with its dominant hegemonies that aim to recreate

individuals who are mere consumers thrust by “economic,” and “materialistic motives” (*The Intellectual* 478). Both the Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* and the princess in *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* come to realize that genuine happiness and fulfillment cannot be achieved solely through material possessions or the world of immanence, but rather through the spiritual dimensions of human experience. The selected narratives serve as vehicles for deconstructing stereotypes and master narratives associated with modernity, hegemony, and culture industry.¹ Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri shed light on how culture has been influenced by consumerism and materialism, which have gradually eroded the distinctiveness and multifaceted nature of the human experience. Whereas Dr. Seuss through his children's story provides a counter-narrative to modernity by embracing the paradigm of transcendence and humanity, Elmessiri offers a critique of the universal law and the nature-matter paradigm which give rise to the consumerist ideology. Moreover, Dr. Seuss's story is universal and features neutral, imaginary characters, on the contrary, Elmessiri's story is uniquely influenced by the Arabic Islamic culture, evident in the distinct and authentic identities of his protagonists, supporting the author's message to preserve the child's authentic identity and roots in opposition to modernity. Firstly, the paper starts by surveying the key concepts such as master narrative, counter-narrative, critique, and the critique of modernity. Secondly, backgrounds of both authors are presented, followed by an analysis of Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* then Elmessiri's *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* (*The Princess and the Poet*).

Challenging Master Narratives: Counter-Narratives and the Empowering Potential of Critique

Master narrative, often referred to as “grand narrative” or “metanarrative,” is “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (Stephens and McCallum 3). It legitimizes knowledge and power structures by providing comprehensive accounts of history, experiences, and sociocultural phenomena based on universal truths and values, thus maintaining, and naturalizing established power structures (Lyotard 35). This universal knowledge which is regarded as “true knowledge” in this sense is “indirect” knowledge integrated within the master narratives to validate them (35). Master narratives serve to maintain and naturalize power structures by privileging certain ways of looking at and understanding the world, thus, marginalizing other experiences and views and suppressing any alternative perspectives.

In response to the dominance of established master narratives, counter-narratives have emerged as powerful tools of critique which strive to “subvert” and “confront” these prevailing narratives, presenting alternative interpretations and narratives that challenge the status quo (Gabriel 208). In opposition to the claimed truths propagated by the master narratives, counter-narratives provide “intertextual knowledge” by following “the same line of factual statements, though most likely constructing events and happenings differently in terms of their relevance to the unfolding storyline” (Bamberg and Wipff 73). Michael Bamberg and Zachary Wipff add that counter-narratives focus on the need for change and do not settle for the “established” knowledge to promote a change or offer any alternatives (73).

Master narratives function as instruments of authority, utilized to silence, discredit, or neutralize counter-narratives, while counter-narratives emerge as essential tools for defying the hegemony of master narratives. Counter-narratives, thus, “challenge the uncontested hegemony of master narratives” by exposing the flaws and contradictions in such narratives and proposing alternative ones (Gabriel 208). The interplay between the master narratives and the counter-narratives is dialectical in nature, as they mutually define and derive meaning from one another (209). Michael Foucault argues that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (*History* 95). Thus, the relation between counter-narratives and master narratives is in flux since counter-narratives tend to resist the power relations embodied in the master narratives.

Critique serves as a powerful means to challenge the dominant master narratives of modernity, actively engaging with the power dynamics inherent within various systems and institutions.ⁱⁱ Foucault, in his explanation of critique, argues that it is “a means for a future truth” as it challenges the power dynamics inherent in the systems and institutions that are “incapable of laying down the law” (“What is Critique?” 383).ⁱⁱⁱ It is the process through which “the subject gives itself the right to question truth” and “to question power about its discourses of truth” (386). Foucault's conception of critique suggests that it should be a tool of empowerment, questioning the established truths and the power structures from which these claimed truths have been derived and exposing their illegitimacy. Critiquing both truth and power destabilizes the boundaries between the two and allows for new interpretations of reality.

Navigating Modernity: Materialism, Rationalization, and the Quest for Humanism

Modernity is intertwined with Enlightenment principles, embracing ideals such as rationality, faith in progress, and empirical science in the name of critical thinking, empirical knowledge, and humanism (Swingewood 138).^{iv} According to Georg Simmel, modernity results in a decentered culture and a dehumanized social life in which culture becomes increasingly rationalized, and money becomes the basis of all value, destroying “fixed values other than money itself” (*The Philosophy* xxii). Thus, quantitative values replace qualitative ones, whereas the social world is dominated by economic relationships, turning the creative subject into a passive object, reifying human culture's products, and effectively eliminating purposeful human action (249). Such a process of rationalization leads to a world that is structured through a culture that loses its capacity to serve as a unifying force for society (Swingewood 145).

In the *Critique of Modernity*, Alain Touraine critiques modernity, emphasizing the adverse consequences of this deconstructive ideology. Touraine's critique of modernity is based on the rejection of the laws of reason, materialism, market dominance, and mass culture (2). Modernity, as Touraine suggests, “destroys the sacred world, which was at once natural and divine,” where science and reason replace any spiritual power, becoming not only a means of salvation but also “an instrument of individual interests and pleasure” (10). The modernist ideology advocates “the construction of a rationalist image of the world which integrates man into nature, the microcosm into the macrocosm,” rejecting all forms of dualism such as “soul and body, the human world and transcendence” (29).^v Therefore, modern Western society eliminates any humanistic aspect in favor of capitalism, production, consumption, immanence, materialism, and social utility (30).^{vi}

The rejection of transcendental and moral values within modernist society creates a void, subsequently filled with the concept of “society” or, more precisely, “social utility” (Touraine 30). This modernist society is “rationalist, secularized and production-oriented” with human freedom guaranteed through reason and the destruction of beliefs (42). Individualism, in this society, is reduced to “passive consumption and manipulation,” whereas identity formation is linked to the discourse of social dominance (155).^{vii} Consequently, social identities are reduced to consumer roles through the process of objectification,

which involves “the impositions of images and identities and their internalization” (Rojo 33). This objectification process not only devalues individuals by reducing them to mere consumers, but it also perpetuates a culture of materialism and consumption in society.

The materialistic philosophy, with its rejection of transcendence and central values, fundamentally undermines human identity and agency (Elmessiri, *Materialistic* 21). Materialistic rationality redefines human reality based on a nature-matter paradigm (Elmessiri, *The Intellectual* 368).^{viii} Such paradigm requires the “elimination of all complex and mysterious elements in order to reduce reality to a simple thing and Man to a functional one-dimensional creature,” so that “human and physical reality can be efficiently manipulated and exploited” (Elmessiri, *The Intellectual* 368). Materialistic rationality not only dismisses metaphysical considerations but also undermines purpose and reason, resulting in a transformation into materialistic irrationality which has no fixed point of reference (*Materialistic* 35). Instead of upholding reason and mind as a fixed point of reference, as advocated by materialistic rationality, materialistic irrationality emerges, disregarding both the spiritual dimension and the faculty of reasoning, without any point of reference. It is within this context that modernity arises, propelled by the consequences of such materialistic irrationality (35).

The emergence of materialistic irrationality gives rise to “value-free modernity,” which negates the concept of human values or a shared sense of humanity, representing a highly reductionist, self-referential, and self-contained system that often lacks external reference points (Elmessiri, “From Humanism” 12). This concept is grounded in the metaphysics of immanence “where the self-referential element, be it the mind of man, nature-matter, eros, the idea of progress, or the economic factor, becomes the centre of immanence, an explanatory category,” that can be reduced to itself and cannot be reduced to anything external to itself (14). Therefore, under the metaphysics of immanence, anything beyond the self-contained system, such as human values or a shared sense of humanity, is rendered nonexistent since it reintroduces a logocentric universe, where a man can achieve transcendence (15).^{ix} As a result, man became encapsulated in his narrow self with no ultimate point of reference leading to a high level of immanence and dehumanization.

Modern rationalism, driven by the materialistic paradigm, has reduced modern society to a market-centric structure. This transformation has given rise

to a society where “social utility” becomes the “criterion of good” whereas individuals, including children, are encouraged to prioritize consumption and production over other values (Touraine 254). This has created a “consumer society” in which the “idea of modernity is now associated with the liberation of desires and the satisfaction of needs, rather than with the reign of reason” (257). To achieve such satisfaction and happiness, “money becomes that absolute goal which it is possible in principle to strive for at any moment” (Simmel 251). Touraine’s explanation of the consumer society and Simmel’s clarification of the significance of money are represented in the selected children’s stories, reflecting fundamental characteristics of modernity; yet, they are rejected by both authors, as will be revealed.

Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri: Diverse Backgrounds, Unique Narratives:

Theodor Seuss Geisel, known as Dr. Seuss, is an American author who has written more than sixty children’s books, illustrated successful advertising campaigns, and illustrated hundreds of political cartoons. Geisel received his higher education at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, United States, where he adopted the pen name “Seuss” in honor of his mother’s maiden name. Geisel became famous after his advertising campaigns in the 1930s during World War II. He started to draw political cartoons for *PM*, New York’s home-front activist magazine. In 1943, Geisel joined the United States Army’s Information and Education division and became head of the animation department. During his service, Geisel received Academy Awards for his short films *Hitler Lives?* (1946), *Design for Death* (1947), and *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1951). After being discharged from the army, Geisel resumed writing for children. The publishing of *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) signifies a trend of books that mirror Dr. Seuss’ earlier writings in rhythm and style within political and moral messages.

Seuss’ stories are characterized by their playful humor, characters, and powerful calls to action. He sold more than 500 million copies of his books globally by 2008, and they had been translated into fifteen other languages. According to Merry Renn Vaughan, Seuss’s books “have much to say about the nature of the political debate and thus prompt children as well as adults to become engaged in the social and political questions that continue to impact their lives” (22). Through his powerful words, mingled with expressive illustrations, his children’s books foster an atmosphere where people of all ages rediscover their beliefs and values and are thrust to have discussions about how these ideas

shape the world. Vaughan adds that Seuss's books "will not only help us to discern the keen cultural critic and social activist behind the creator of children's fiction but may also compel us to critically reflect on the idyllic" (22).

Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) is a renowned Egyptian intellectual and scholar. He was a professor emeritus of English and comparative literature at Ain Shams University. Elmessiri's major areas of research include but are not limited to, Jews, Judaism and Zionism, secularism and prejudice, Western culture and contemporaneity, modernism and postmodernism, literary theory, and comparative literature. He is well-known for his famous encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism (1999). In the 1960s, he wrote, for his daughter, a collection of children's Arabic stories entitled *Tales of our Time* in which he presents a fictitious world that is influenced by the Arab Islamic culture and humanity at large refuting the biased cognitive paradigm underlying children's Western stories. Elmessiri believes that children's literature should not "destroy innocence;" it should represent a complex world that is not devoid of problems, yet it is "grounded in everything that is great and noble in man" (*The Intellectual* 476).

Being aware of the materialistic and destructive symbols of Western toys, Elmessiri decided to write "stories that could transmit more humane and civilized paradigms" to his children, "an independent space: a world in which they could move and breathe away from the rigid structures of American Darwinian consumerism" (479). In doing so, he offers an alternative humane world that challenges the materialistic paradigm that destroys the child's identity with its specificities, as elaborated by Jehan Farouk Fouad (294). Through his stories, Elmessiri manages to forge an authentic sense of identity in young readers and counters the dominant hegemonies embedded in modern Western civilization.^x

Critiquing Modernity in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

In *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* Seuss critiques the negative consequences of modernity; the narrative, which is addressed to young readers, highlights the detrimental effects of modernity, wherein the sacred transcendental world is displaced by science and reason. To read the story within Touraine's perception, materialism and consumerism are utilized as sources of joy and pursuits in lieu of spiritual power (10). Through the character of the Grinch, which appears in a catchy and unfamiliar, maybe odd illustration, Seuss exposes the commercialization of Christmas and critiques the materialistic values that

have overshadowed the true meaning of human relations and spirituality. The noun “grinch” identifies “a person who does not like other people celebrating or enjoying themselves, especially a person who does not like Christmas” (“Grinch”). This definition provides insight into the character of the Grinch, who strongly dislikes any form of celebration or festivity. The Grinch, who lives alone on the outskirts of Whoville, represents the marginalized individual in modern civilization. Modern civilization, as explained by Simmel, creates a certain distance between people, fostering an alienating objectivity that results in impersonality and social isolation (Simmel 154). Simmel’s explanation underscores the importance of seeking meaningful connections in order to counteract the alienation inherent in modern society. As clear in fig. 1, the Grinch is not only alone and away but also high on a hill, which, in addition to emphasizing the estrangement, indicates the difference in perception, being higher satirically denotes the Grinch’s belief that he understands everything.

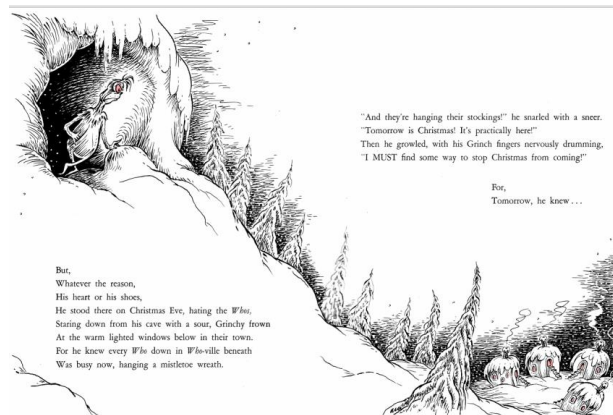


Fig.1: Seuss, Dr. *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!*. New York: Random House, 1957.

The Grinch's estrangement from the Whos, the inhabitants of the village who are also represented as neutral undefined creatures, is a representation of his alienation. A sense of alienation is revealed early in the story through the name of the people, “the Whos,” which is the plural of the question word “who” that asks for the person or the subject, this uncovers their unknown, or rather insignificant, identities, and, therefore, mirrors their feeble relationship with the Grinch. In addition to the physical detachment, represented by his presence lonely far away from the others, an emotional detachment is exemplified by his undersized heart, described in the text: “his heart was two sizes too small” (*How the Grinch*). His small heart acts as a metaphor for the Grinch's inability to

empathize and connect with the others. As a result, he isolates himself from the Whos and becomes consumed by bitterness and resentment towards their joyous celebrations. Such bitterness led him to steal the gifts, decorations, and food of the celebration in an attempt to hinder their joyous celebration.

As depicted in fig. 1, Seuss endeavors to depict the juxtaposition and separation between the Grinch and the residents of Whoville. The Grinch dwells solitarily in a chilly cave, wearing a frown, whereas the village inhabitants occupy their lively warm homes, engaged in Christmas preparations. However, as the story progresses, the Grinch's heart grows “three sizes larger,” symbolizing his newfound understanding and appreciation for intangible values of love, compassion, and community, ultimately leading to his redemption and integration into Whoville society. The transformation of the Grinch, according to Anthony Cunningham's commentary on the story, “must be the birth or the rekindling of feeling, an affective reaction rather than an intellectual one” (155). Cunningham's insight implies that the Grinch's change is not a result of his intellectual comprehension of truth but rather a profound shift in his emotional disposition, which privileges emotions over reason. The story offers hope for bridging these gaps and overcoming social isolation. In an indication of his assimilation into the Whoville, the Grinch takes part in the Christmas celebration where he himself carves the roast beast for the celebration and returns all the presents and decorations that he has previously stolen, as depicted in fig.2. In contrast to the story's title, the Grinch, by the end of the story, has not succeeded in stealing Christmas. Instead, he found himself immersed in the festivities of Whoville, ultimately joining and paradoxically enjoying the celebration.

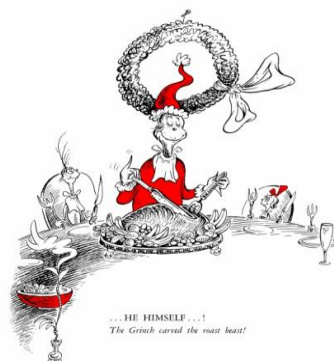


Fig.2: Seuss, Dr. *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!*. New York: Random House, 1957.

Interpreting the story through Touraine's lens, the Grinch, being a product of “the consumer society,” believes that confiscating the materialistic symbols entwined with Christmas from the Whos will effectively curtail their ability to celebrate Christmas (221). For the Grinch, Christmas revolves around the exchange of gifts, decorations, culinary delights, and the singing of carols. According to Simmel, the Grinch is a passive consumer of cultural products, overlooking the humanistic dimension of Christmas and instead being preoccupied with the predominance of materialistic products (“The Philosophy” 249). Moreover, being a “one-dimensional creature,” the Grinch fails to grasp the true meaning of Christmas, to borrow Elmessiri’s words (*The Intellectual* 368). The Grinch, at the beginning of the story, appears to be influenced by the “nature-matter paradigm,” proposed by Elmessiri, that excludes any transcendent values in favor of the materialistic world (17).

The moment of realization that the essence of Christmas transcends the realm of mere possessions, encompassing ideals of warmth, compassion, and unity illustrated in the following quote: “The Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: 'How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags!’” (*How The Grinch*). This moment, which could be regarded as a master scene, is the turning point in the perception of the character since he questions surprisingly the real essence of Christmas; his puzzling status results in rediscovering the meaning inherited in the occasion. The image of the “ice-cold” feet does not only fit into the setting of Christmas, but it is also a synecdoche of his cold body which symbolizes the lack of emotional warmth and implies feelings of sadness, isolation, and insecurity. The antithesis between the coldness where he dwells and the “warm lighted windows” through which the Whos appear accentuates the paradoxical lives and emotions. The enlightenment moment, in this specific scene, could be regarded as the rebirth of the Grinch, which is paralleled with the birth of a new year attached to the Christmas celebrations. The scene as a whole represents a glimpse of hope.

In contrast to the Grinch's materialistic perspective which prevailed before the transitional phase, the Whos serve as representatives of Elmessiri’s “value-oriented humanistic modernity” which develops as a counter-narrative to the dehumanization of the individual to reclaim the organic unity of human life (“From Humanism” 23). They challenge the utilitarian society, which has discarded values as surplus baggage. In the Whos' culture, human connections,

compassion, and sensitivity, which are often neglected in a utilitarian society, are emphasized. Seuss employs the Whos to critique modern Western society which eliminates any humanistic aspect in favor of materialism and consumption (30). The Grinch's misguided attempt to steal Christmas is ultimately unsuccessful as the Whos come together in a heartwarming display of love and communal unity, as illustrated in fig.3, demonstrating that the true spirit of Christmas cannot be taken away by material possessions aligning with Touraine's critique of the "image of the market" and the importance of social relations (261).

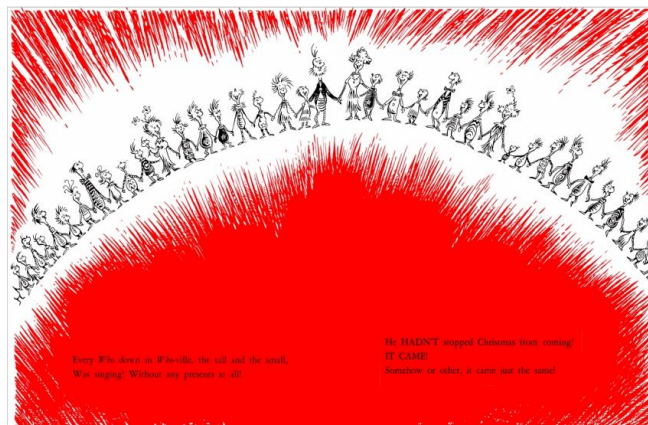


Fig.3: Seuss, Dr. *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!*. New York: Random House, 1957.

In *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* Seuss critiques the culture industry and mass culture which serve as an embodiment of capitalist ideals, as explained by Touraine (2). The culture industry operates by assimilating culture into a mechanism that perpetuates the expansion of consumer markets, while the previously spiritual world is gradually supplanted by a utilitarian tool for pursuing individual "interests and pleasure" (Touraine 10). Rather than placing emphasis on the spiritual and religious aspects of Christmas, the celebration from the Grinch's view revolves around food, clothing, decorations, and gifts. Seuss's criticism of the cultural industry represents his conviction that capitalism has tainted culture's true essence by treating it like a product in order to make money. He contends that the commercialization of culture has produced a society in which consumerism reigns and people are urged to purchase an increasing number of goods in pursuit of contentment. The disappearance of the material possessions associated with Christmas does not prevent the Whos from continuing their celebration to the point of singing and enjoying each other's company. The Whos provide a counter-narrative to the consumerist ideology emphasizing the intangible values of love, empathy, and human connection

refuting the master narratives that coerce individuals into becoming mere tools for production or consumption (Touraine 210). Seuss in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* aims to deconstruct the stereotypes of the materialistic paradigm that have been thrust upon individuals and have become internalized through the dominant narratives of modernity and hegemony.

Critiquing Modernity in *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* (The Princess and the Poet) by Abdelwahab Elmessiri

In *Al-Amira wa al-Sha'ir* (*The Princess and the Poet*), Elmessiri critiques the “nature-matter paradigm” and presents a counter-narrative to materialism and the dominance of science. He highlights the importance of spiritual and humanistic values in bringing happiness and satisfaction. Throughout the story, a melancholic princess, as represented in fig.4, is depicted crying incessantly, driven by her desire to communicate with and receive responses from natural elements such as the moon, stars, trees, animals, and the sun. Despite her sustained attempts, these elements remain unresponsive, prompting the princess's contemplation of their silence. Elmessiri employs this narrative to critique the “nature-matter paradigm” that has emerged from modernity, wherein humanity is expected to harmonize with nature and becomes an inseparable facet of it. In this view, humanity's essence is reduced to a mere component of material existence, a theme that Elmessiri further explores (“The Dance” 2). This also coincides with Touraine's critique of the modernist ideology which integrates man into nature and rejects all forms of dualism (29). Fouad further clarifies that Elmessiri intends to provide the child with a paradigm that transcends the material world and highlights the distance between man and nature (294).



Fig.4: Elmessiri, Abdelwahab. *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir (The Princess and the Poet)*. Dar El Shorouk, 2004.

The king's trials to cheer up his daughter by bringing her jewelry, food, and expensive presents prove futile in bringing her happiness. According to Fouad Saeed's analysis, the princess remains discontent despite the king's earnest efforts, mainly due to her profound sense of loneliness and isolation, which stems from her quest for purpose (207). It becomes evident to the king that materialistic products, whether expensive or imported, cannot heal his daughter and provide the solace she seeks. From Touraine's perspective, the king is influenced by the materialistic ideology adopting the notion that satisfaction and happiness have been reduced to "the price of commodities and services" (135). As a result of the objectification process, the king internalizes the consumer role promoted by the "market-centric" society whereas his efforts to support his daughter primarily revolve around consumption and materialistic products. After his failure, the king calls for the most skillful doctors to see his daughter, but again in vain. The king finds himself confined within the boundaries of the materialistic world, struggling to grasp his daughter's inquiry about communicating with and receiving responses from natural elements. The king's viewpoint aligns with Simmel's perspective that modernity leads to a culture devoid of a central focus and a social life stripped of its human essence. In such culture, money, and services are the ultimate determinants of value, thereby eroding spiritual and humanistic values beyond the realm of consumption ("The Philosophy" xxii).

The character of the king also aligns with Touraine's notion of stereotypical characters within the consumer society who are subsumed in the instant gratification of consumption (221). The King's belief and actions revolve around the idea that satisfaction can be achieved through consumption and the acquisition of material possessions, with little or no consideration for any metaphysical or spiritual dimensions. The character of the king represents modern Western civilization and the consumerist paradigm, which tends to prioritize science and materialistic products while neglecting the significance of humanistic values in the pursuit of happiness (Elmessiri, *The Intellectual* 180). This becomes evident when he imagines that presents and food would help his daughter overcome her melancholic mood.

The princess's encounter with the poet comes as a turning point in the narrative; it provides her with a profound sense of solace and joy. The poet here

symbolizes the realm of culture that surpasses the materialistic constructs of modern Western civilization being represented as a character that refutes the notion of “value-free non-teleological modernity” which prioritizes consumption while disregarding the transcendental aspect, as inspired by Elmessiri (“From Humanism” 23). According to Thomas Carlyle, the poet and the prophet share a common understanding of “the sacred mystery” of the universe and it is part of their message to convey such understanding to people (“The Hero” 188). Hence, Elmessiri utilizes the role of the poet to challenge and reject the prevailing paradigm of immanence that denies the space between man and nature where natural laws apply to both humans and nature. In the story, the poet stands as the only figure who upholds faith in the realm of transcendental sacredness and underscores the separation between the realm of nature and that of humans. Through his poem to the princess, he explains that man cannot be reduced to the world of nature/matter. Instead, both man and nature have distinct worlds with different languages, laws, and specificities.

Elmessiri accentuates this perspective through the illustration of the poet's house which is constructed in accordance with Arabic traditions (fig.5). He argues that through the fantastical world of the story, he could activate the child's sense of cultural identity and specificity (*The Intellectual* 479). This is further exemplified by a suspended sign at the poet's house bearing the inscription “Enter safe and secure” (*The Princess* 26). The sign not only serves as a physical representation of safety and security but also symbolizes the preservation of cultural heritage and values. It invites the readers to explore the fantastical world together with fostering cultural authenticity, a sense of belonging, and pride in one's cultural identity. The poet's house emphasizes his alignment with a sacred understanding, highlighting the reconciliation between the two realms of human and nature and the assurance of safety. The harmony that exists between human beings and the natural world is exemplified in the building being surrounded by the tree and the dove's nest. This harmony, as exemplified by the poet and his surroundings, symbolizes the concept of the “value-oriented humanistic modernity,” which aims to enrich common humanity and maintain balance with nature (Elmessiri, “From Humanism” 23). Both realms coexist in a balanced manner refuting the modernist ideology that rejects any forms of dualities or the integration of man into nature (Touraine 29).

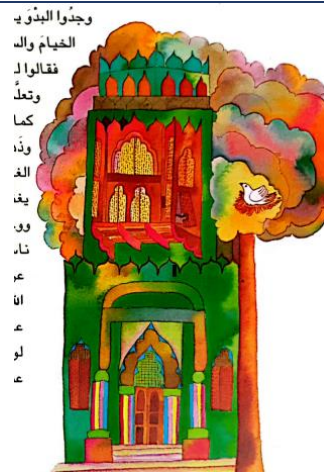


Fig.5: Elmessiri, Abdelwahab. *Al-Amira wa Al-Sha'ir* (*The Princess and the Poet*). Dar El Shorouk, 2004.

Elmessiri's critique is focused on the dehumanizing consequences stemming from the materialistic paradigm transcending the constraints of universal laws. He calls for a renewed emphasis on the concept of transcendence, wherein humanity maintains a relationship with nature without being an organic part of it (“The Dance” 1). According to Touraine's viewpoint, Elmessiri provides a counter-narrative to the paradigm of immanence that utilizes instrumental reason to forge a seamless unity between humanity and the natural world (15). Moreover, Elmessiri employs the princess's inquiry and the poet's perspective to offer a critique of the natural laws which reduce man completely to nature becoming an organic part of it. He challenges the idea that the prevailing narratives have all the answers and that they represent the only legitimate way of understanding the world. The poet symbolizes the domain of culture that transcends the materialistic constructs of modern Western civilization. The role of the poet in the story aligns with Carlyle's interpretation of the poet's role, which involves conveying higher knowledge to people (188). In contrast, the king represents the modernist ideology which embraces materialism and consumerism and connects happiness and satisfaction to them.

Conclusion

Both Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri provide counter-narratives to the master narratives of modern Western civilization. Their works undermine the nature-matter paradigm, stemming from modernity and which ultimately gives rise to the materialistic paradigm. Such materialism has led to the erasure of human values which are dismissed due to their transcendental nature that extends beyond

the boundaries of the world of immanence. The Grinch and the King in both stories are influenced by the modernist ideology which propagates the notion that satisfaction and happiness can be achieved through consumption and material possessions.

In both narratives, characters such as the Whos village inhabitants and the poet symbolize a paradigm of transcendence, embodying the principles of “value-oriented humanistic modernity” in contrast to the prevalent “value-free non-teleological modernity” that centers around continuous consumption as its purpose or objective. They reject the consumer society and social utility in favor of the world of transcendence. Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri offer narratives that disrupt the materialistic paradigm of modernity by introducing counter-narratives firmly grounded in the principles of transcendence and humanism. Their narratives encourage reflection on the deeper aspects of life beyond material possessions, critiquing a culture that often prioritizes consumerism over human connection and shared values.

Despite agreeing on critiquing materialism in favor of humanity, Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri have not sent identical messages to their young recipients. Whereas Dr. Seuss's narrative is universal, Elmessiri's has been blended with a unique Arabic taste. This is especially clear in the characterization. Dr. Seuss's characters are neutral figures rooted in the imaginary world; they are neither humans nor animals. He presents characters that are catchy for children who are usually interested in fairy tales; yet, being without specific names or familiar shapes, they are identity-less. Elmessiri's protagonists, on the contrary, maintain authentic and distinct identities. Even though they remain unnamed, the child could easily comprehend the roles of the princess, king, or poet. Placing them within an Arabic traditional setting, the author asserts their roots, and hence their identities. The triumph of the poet's approach, by the end of the story, supports the author's call against modernity with an implied message to preserve one's authentic identity and retain original roots.

By examining the works of Dr. Seuss and Elmessiri in light of Touraine's and Simmel's critique of modernity, the similarities and the differences have been highlighted shedding light on the ways in which these authors challenge and subvert traditional notions of modernity. Critique functions as a powerful tool to challenge the dominant ideologies and expose the underlying power structures within modernity. This process of questioning and contestation not only opens up

space for alternative perspectives but also encourages a deeper understanding of reality that surpasses the superficial narratives imposed by those in power.

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Notes:

ⁱ Hegemony, as defined in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is the “power exercised by creating the belief in the majority of people in a society that power is the prerogative of a group or class as a ‘natural’ or otherwise justified right.” Whereas culture industry, according to Terry Eagleton, reflects the late capitalist system's colonial aspirations more than the value of culture; it is “capitalism with a cultural face” (152).

ⁱⁱ Critique as explained by Roy Ben-Shai is not just a particular way of thinking but also a way of being in the world (6).

ⁱⁱⁱ According to *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, critique is “a literature about literature” employed to reveal the ideology within a work of art and to “question the prevailing distribution of political power.”

^{iv} For further explanation of modernity, see Manishita Dass's “Modernity.”

^v Transcendence, according to Elmessiri, is “going beyond what is given to our ordinary experience and beyond that which falls within the grasp of scientific explanation” (“The Dance” 3).

^{vi} Immanence, originating from the Latin word “in manare,” refers to the quality of an action that starts and concludes within the agent. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, immanence implies that the action is initiated and completed within the interior of the same being, which can be seen as a self-contained or closed system.

vii Kevin Reilly raises questions about the authenticity of such individuality dominated by commercial and corporate interests (334).

viii Elmessiri identifies the "nature-matter paradigm" as the fundamental framework of Western modernity. Within Western modernity, nature is seen as self-referential and self-existing, encompassing everything without gaps, dualities, discontinuities, or irreducible entities. Consequently, the laws of nature are believed to apply universally to humanity and the natural world, where all natural phenomena, solid or fluid, are in flux. In this paradigm, humanity is expected to align with nature and become an integrated part of it, ultimately being reduced to a mere attribute of matter ("The Dance" 2). For further explanation of the nature-matter paradigm, see Haggag Ali's "Modernity in the Discourse of Abdelwahab Elmessiri."

ix See "Logocentrism" in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*.

x Amin Maalouf also emphasizes the importance of differentiating between the perceived identity disseminated by the hegemonizing power and the genuine authentic identity; "it is necessary at this point in time to draw attention to the gulf that exists between what we are and what we think we are" (86)