

EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEME OF IBN SINA IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article explores the representation of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in English literature, tracing the emergence and evolution of his image from early Orientalist works to modern historical fiction and academic interpretations. It analyzes how English authors have portrayed Ibn Sina as a symbol of wisdom, a bridge between East and West, and a figure of intellectual fascination. The article highlights shifts in thematic focus, narrative purpose, and cultural perception across different literary periods.

Ibn Sina, known in the Western world as Avicenna, stands among the most influential thinkers of the Islamic Golden Age. Born in 980 CE in what is now Uzbekistan, he made remarkable contributions to various fields, including medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and metaphysics. His most renowned works – The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb) and The Book of Healing (Kitab al-Shifa) – were foundational texts in both the Islamic world and Europe for centuries. While his scientific legacy is well-documented, the literary reflection of his persona in English literature has received relatively less critical attention.

The incorporation of Ibn Sina into English literature reflects a broader historical and cultural engagement between the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. His entrance into English literary discourse can be traced back to Orientalist literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, when European authors sought to explore and romanticize the East. In these early depictions, Ibn Sina was often portrayed as a mystical or exotic figure – a symbol of ancient Eastern wisdom. However, this representation evolved significantly over time, particularly with the rise of historical fiction and renewed academic interest in Islamic philosophy during the 20th and 21st centuries. This article explores how Ibn Sina has been portrayed in English literature from early Orientalist references to more nuanced and respectful portrayals in contemporary works.

The earliest mentions of Ibn Sina in English literature must be understood within the broader framework of Orientalism, a term popularized by Edward Said to describe how Western writers constructed an exoticized image of the East. During the 18th and 19th centuries, English literature – particularly travel narratives, encyclopedic texts, and poetic works – increasingly turned to the Islamic world for inspiration. Within this literary context, Ibn Sina often appeared as a symbol of the ancient and enigmatic wisdom of the Orient, albeit filtered through a European gaze.

In early travel writings and encyclopedias, Ibn Sina was referenced primarily for his contributions to medicine and philosophy. He was typically placed alongside other legendary Islamic thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali. These references were not often literary in a strict sense but were nonetheless significant in shaping how English readers began to perceive Islamic intellectual heritage. For example, 18th-century translations and summaries of his

Canon of Medicine introduced him to educated European audiences, who were impressed by the breadth and sophistication of his medical knowledge.

The 20th century marked a turning point in the literary and academic engagement with Ibn Sina in English-language texts. Moving beyond the simplistic exoticism of earlier Orientalist portrayals, this era witnessed more nuanced, humanized, and respectful representations of Ibn Sina in both historical fiction and academic literature. Writers and scholars began to situate him not only as a towering intellectual figure of the Islamic Golden Age but also as a man shaped by historical, cultural, and philosophical currents of his time.

One of the most notable literary representations of Ibn Sina in the 20th century is Noah Gordon's bestselling novel *The Physician* (1986). Although Ibn Sina is not the central character, he plays a pivotal role in the novel as a wise and compassionate teacher of medicine. Set in the 11th century, the novel follows a young English Christian boy, Rob Cole, who disguises himself as a Jew to study at the medical school in Isfahan under Ibn Sina. Gordon's depiction of Ibn Sina is multifaceted – he is shown as a brilliant physician, a philosopher with a sharp intellect, a teacher with a humane approach to science, and a moral authority who defends rationalism against dogma. Unlike the vague and romanticized references of the 19th century, Gordon offers a portrayal rooted in research and historical context.

Parallel to such literary portrayals, academic engagement with Ibn Sina's legacy deepened in the 20th century. Scholars such as Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Dimitri Gutas produced influential studies on Avicennian philosophy and its relationship to both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. These works challenged the reductive interpretations of earlier Orientalists and underscored Ibn Sina's lasting impact on fields ranging from metaphysics and logic to medicine and theology. For example, Dimitri Gutas's *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (2001) examines how Ibn Sina not only preserved but innovatively reinterpreted the works of Aristotle, thereby creating a unique philosophical system that influenced both the Islamic world and Latin Christendom. Gutas provides evidence of how Ibn Sina's ideas shaped scholastic thought, particularly through figures such as Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. Such scholarly works highlight Ibn Sina's role not as a passive transmitter of Greek knowledge but as an original thinker whose influence transcended cultural and religious boundaries.

Conclusion. The enduring presence of Ibn Sina in English literature and intellectual discourse is a testament to the breadth of his influence and the universality of his ideas. From romanticized references in 19th-century poetry to deeply researched portrayals in 20th-century historical fiction, and finally to interdisciplinary and digital reinterpretations in the 21st century, Ibn Sina has evolved into a powerful literary and philosophical symbol – one that bridges past and present, East and West, science and spirituality. Throughout this trajectory, Ibn Sina has been more than just a historical figure. He has come to represent a range of ideals: the pursuit of knowledge, the harmony between reason and faith, the integration of science and ethics, and the possibility of intellectual cooperation across civilizations. These qualities have made him an enduring subject of English-language narratives – especially in an era when the search for intercultural understanding has become not only valuable but essential.

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