The International Journal of
Critical Cultural Studies

Crisis Poetry and the Crisis of Arabic Criticism

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Abstract: This article provides a meta-critical investigation of the limitations of Egyptian criticism, which has not been able to categorize modernist poetry and, therefore, has become increasingly hostile toward it. I argue that the crisis Arab critics often reference does not refer to a literature in crisis, but to criticism’s failure to theorize about a literature whose main concern has shifted into addressing the crises of the postcolonial state. It is a crisis of a criticism that maintains rigid connections to the theories in which it grounds itself and establishes impermeable boundaries among literature, criticism, and non-literary disciplines. It is a crisis generated by the absence or short supply of meta-critical and theoretical writings that evaluate, critique, and revise the dominant critical discourses.

Key Words: Arabic Criticism, Arabic Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Crisis Poetry, Modernist Arabic Poetry

“Arabic criticism is a distinct but not an independent discipline. The two terms are different. We should not be proud of the vast disjunction between Arabic criticism and Arab culture at large.”
(Nasif 2000, 10)

“Thriving in difference, disenchantment, and a search for justice, [Arabic] poetry grows in dissent, and it gains more popularity for being so. In Arab modernism, conformity is not a poetic track.”
(Al-Musawi 2006, 28)

Introduction

The era of late 1800s and early 1900s was dubbed ‘Asr al-Nahda, the Era of [Arab] Awakening. The label reflects a realization that Arabs have been lagging behind in all areas of human activity, and that they had to immediately jump on the modernity bandwagon. In the years that followed, most Arab countries were turned into European colonies. After formal independence was gained, authoritarian monarchies or military dictatorships (installed, empowered, and controlled by former colonizers or new superpowers) replaced European colonization. The conditions that al-Nahda sought to eradicate have continued or escalated, culminating in the 1967 humiliating defeat of five Arab armies against Israel, a traumatic event the Arabs refer to as “al-Nakba,” the catastrophe. Al-Nakba destroyed the dignity of the Arabs and augmented their awareness of the many crises they were facing. The modernization impulse has been urgently felt since ‘Asr al-Nahda. It still lingers today, and it stems from “the post-colonial lament of being caught in the reactive position of belatedness” (Friedman 2006, 432).

The Arabs’ attempts at modernization have been contextualized within a tradition-modernity conflict: “Catching up [with the developed world] while preserving authenticity” (Hamarneh 1999, xi). This tradition-modernity nexus has been characterized by paradoxes and dilemmas. Tradition is at once the bearer of national identity and a hegemonic force that endorses conformity and resists change. In the fighting of neo-colonial hegemony, identity preservation is central; the Self must distinguish itself from its neo-colonial Other. However, many of the problems the Arabs have been facing, like intellectual stagnation, poverty, political oppression, patriarchy, among others, have been produced by or blamed on their hegemonic tradition. Thus, tradition had to be simultaneously preserved and interrogated.

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2 All translations of Arabic sources in the article are my own. The International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration system is adopted in the paper, excepting the under dotted characters. However, in the case of authors whose names have known anglicized spellings (e.g., Hamarneh and Khouri), the anglicized spellings are used instead.
The Arabs’ intense awareness of their position of “belatedness” has been felt vis-à-vis the West, whose economic, technological, and military might have sharply contrasted the Arabs’ state of overall cultural stagnation. Western modernity, like indigenous tradition, was equally problematic; it was at once a model to learn from and a source and a symbol of neo-colonial hegemony that must be resisted. This has been the dilemma in a nutshell—the former colonizer and current hegemon cannot simply be learned from without reservations, and indigenous tradition can neither be fully embraced nor fully rejected.\(^3\)

The cultural dilemma of Arab modernity has been intensely echoed in the domains of literature and criticism. Modernist Arabic literature, the expressive mode of Arab modernity, and its criticism have a confusing relationship with each other, and with both traditionalist Arabic poetics, exemplified in the *gasida* [classical ode] form of poetry, on the one hand, and Western modernism on the other. This article provides a meta-critical investigation of the limitations of Arabic and Egyptian criticism of modernist Arabic poetry. Criticism’s failure to define, label, or categorize modernist poetry has triggered rejection of or hostility toward it. Critics have often alluded to a “crisis” of poetry or a “crisis” of literature, referring to what they consider to be a decline in the form, language, and quality of poetry. This article argues that this so-called crisis is manufactured, and that it has arisen from criticism’s inability to theorize about a literature whose main concern has shifted into the articulation of the many crises of the postcolonial state, instead of an obsession with the purity of poetry’s own form and the soundness of its language. The article charts criticism’s relationship with poetry from pre-Islamic to modern time. The first section of the article briefly discusses how the emerging field of criticism in the ninth century organically responded to the poetry of its ancients (pre-Islamic Master Poets) and contemporaries. The second section discusses in more detail the so-called crisis of modernist Arabic poetry and criticism’s response to it. As the relationship between poetry and criticism is charted in both sections, the works of several critics will be discussed and evaluated, the reasons for the hostility between the two will be explained, and the culturally grounded works of such critics as Jayyusi, al-Musawi, ‘Id, Abbas, Nasif, and al-Ghadhhdharni will be emphasized. Finally, some conclusions and recommendations will be offered.

**Arabic Poetry’s Relation to Criticism in the Medieval Period**

It would have been inconceivable for Pre-Islamic poets to imagine that their poetry, or what has reached us as theirs, would become a hegemonic model, shaping the careers of poets in times and locations stretching far beyond their own. Arab poets have been defining their careers in relation to their predecessors: Should traditional poetry be preserved, destroyed, incorporated, ignored, or transcended? These have been questions contemporary poets have grappled with as they carved careers for themselves against a backdrop of (neo)colonialism. Pre-Islamic poets, on the other hand, organically responded to and interacted with the material conditions of their nomadic lifestyle and their tribal loyalties. They described the ruins of the encampment sites of their beloveds, the plants, animals, mountains, and stars around them. They yearned for the rain, defended the honor of their tribe, recorded its history and the jewels of wisdom of its people, fueled the feuds against its enemies, and preached peace whenever it was called for. The pre-Islamic poet was the memory-keeper and the mouthpiece of the tribe, and pre-Islamic poetry eventually became the center of Arab culture, the only glorified area of an otherwise stigmatized “era of ignorance.”*\(^4\)

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\(^3\) For a fuller discussion of this dilemma, see my article entitled “Theorizing the Postcolonial Self: Arabo-Islamic Modernities, Modernisms, and Modernizations.” See full bibliographical information in the “References” section.

\(^4\) The Arabic word for the Pre-Islamic era is “al-Jahiliyya” or “The Age of Ignorance.” However, after the advent of Islam, Pre-Islamic poetry was spared from the harsh judgment of its age, because it provided invaluable materials for the linguistic analysis of Arabic, the language of the Quran.
The ancients also defined themselves in relation to their own ancients. A “matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, [and] psychological” (Bloom 1997, xxii) which puts poets in a position of anxiety in relation to their precursors is at play in the poetry of ancient Arab poets. The earliest record of Arab poets’ fixation with originality goes back to ‘Antara and Zohayr, two of the most renowned pre-Islamic Master Poets. Each lamented in his “Suspended Poem” the fact that poets have been repeating what their predecessors said and that there was nothing new for the then modern poet to say. In the opening line of his “Suspended Poem” ‘Antara said: “Have the poets left a single spot for a patch to be sewn?” (Arberry 1957, 179), and in his “Suspended Poem” Zohayr said, “I see that all we say [our poetry] is merely borrowed, repeated, or redundant.” (quoted in Makhlu 1965, 168).

Modernist ancient Arab poets broke aesthetic and moral taboos by creating poetry that breached tribal codes, subverting grammar and meter in favor of euphony, and using foreign lexicon. Imru’ al-Qays, the renowned pre-Islamic poet, wrote a line that has been considered to be the most indecent verse in Classical Arabic poetry and frequently used Persian works. The word for literature in Arabic is adab. It connotes propriety, education, and refinement of manners. When Imru’ al-Qays described making love to a woman while she was nursing her baby, his poetry challenged the very definition of adab. Pre-Islamic modernism had a straightforward, temporal-aesthetic dimension—the (Arab) Self’s need for creating new meanings and techniques unknown to its precursors. It was seldom animated by racial or power dynamics. However, the repetition of the same meanings articulated by the ancients did not strip the moderns of their authenticity:

Ironically, Antara, who thought himself to have appeared after everything had already been said, managed to compose a poem so original— says the critic Ibn Rashiq—that it surpasses the works of the ancients and the moderns alike. Even while imitating, Antara made his own singular voice resound amid the voices of the ancients. Certainly, his voice echoes and reflects theirs, but it has a timbre of its own; it liberates itself by the very gesture of signaling its dependence, and answers its own question—“Have the poets left anywhere in need of patching?”—in the affirmative. (Kilito 2001, 12)

When Muslims conquered lands beyond the Arabian Peninsula, the modernist impulse became more complex. Non-Arab poets from lands conquered by Arabs—now proficient in the Arabic language but resentful of Arab racial supremacy promoted by the Umayyads, or striving for self-assertion under the Abbasids and in Andalusia—pioneered a systematic modernization of the pre-Islamic qasida [Ode] (Hijab 1961). Al-Shu’ubiyyah, a medieval literary movement under whose banner Arab and non-Arab poets and authors engaged in racial, religious, and ideological disputes, is an important milestone. The animating force of the Shu’ubite brand of modernism is not simply temporal; the non-Arab (Muslim) Self encounters the Arab (Muslim) Other. Modernism was no longer equated with novelty but, precisely, with novelty that was not Arab. In other words, the Self was affirmed by negating the resemblance of the Other. This affirmation manifested itself aesthetically by writing otherwise, composing poetry in ways unknown to or disapproved of by traditionalists.

The Shu’ubites introduced new themes; such as wine, mystical, and philosophical poetry; new meanings unencumbered by the familiar articulations of pre-Islamic poets; and new meters, rhyme schemes, and figures of speech. Some poets simply reversed the order of the metrical units, taf’ilat, of a traditional meter, while others invented new meters and forms. Hispano-Arabic poets and Arabic poets of Persian origin developed non-classical meters, such as

[5] The seven (or ten) Mu’allaqat, “Suspended Poems” are masterpieces of Arabic poetry, composed by renowned pre-Islamic poets in the form of qasida [Ode]. The poems, along with a body of pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry, have constituted a poetic ideal Arab poets have followed or challenged throughout the centuries. These poems were so valued that copies of them were “suspended” on the walls of the famous Ka’ba Shrine in Mecca (Hussayn n.d.).
muwashshahah, zaij, dabayt, silsilah, among others (Hijab 1961). Some Shu’ubites demanded equality with the Arabs, and others maintained that Arabs were inferior to the non-Arab races they conquered. Al-Shu’ubiyya was at times fueled by race alone or by both race and class. Its adherents accepted or rejected the teachings of Islam to varying degrees, which explains why some ardent opponents of this anti-Arab movement, like Ibn Qutaybah, were not of Arab stock. The non-Arab adherents of Al-Shu’ubiyyah “prided [themselves] in the [their] mastery of the Arabic tongue, which [they] then used against the Arabs” (Monroe 1970, 12), a strategy Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial authors would also adopt centuries later. Bashshar (born CE 714), Abu Nuas (born CE 762), Ibn al-Rumi (born CE 896), Ibn Garcia (died CE 1084), and many others are among the renowned poets and authors whose works came into being as a result of this quarrel. Shu’ubite poets are still relevant to any discussion of Arabic modernism today, whether they are hailed as modernists by critics like Adonis or condemned as racist, heretical, and dissident by others.6

Medieval Arabic criticism responded swiftly to the evolution of the poetry it studied. It pinned down and articulated the crucial issues arising from the emergence of new trends in poetry. It went beyond documentation, explication, and taxonomy, and refrained from simply dismissing the moderns as inauthentic or irrelevant. At the onset of the emergence of Arabic criticism in the ninth century, “literary critics were also philologists who looked at the poetry of the pre-Islamic poets as a basis for their philological studies of the language in which the Quran was revealed. They often confused, however, the issues of linguistic reliability and literary merit” (Cowell 1982, 67). Poets who strictly followed the gasida form and metric system wrote in sound Arabic language, and created ingenious figures of speech were considered fihul [Master poets], even if their themes were monotonous, tribal, misogynistic, or hypocritical. Later medieval critics chose traditionalism as the organizing principle, the main category of analysis, for their critical treatises.7 They theorized about what constituted good poetry and “whether a poet living after the close of the pre-Islamic Age could in any way attain the heights of the pre-Islamic poets” (Cowell 1982, 68). The proponents of the ancients were usually supporters of preserving the purity of the Arabic language, the centrality of Arab culture, and the indispensability of the caliphal institution.

By the eleventh century, critics had clearly identified a host of issues deserving of critical attention, such as “al-tab` wa al-san`ah” [spontaneity versus craft], “ibtida` al-ma`ani” [invention of novel meanings], “al-la`fz wa al-ma`na” [utterance versus meaning], “al-qadim wa al-hadith” [traditionalism versus modernism], and “al-sariqat al-adabiyyah” [plagiarism].8 Their work reflected the depth of their understanding of poetry and criticism as much as it did their ideological inclinations and political loyalties. At the culmination of the literary careers of prominent poets, equally prominent critical treatises, critiquing every aspect of their poetry, were written. Ishaq al-Musili (born CE 767), Ibn Qutaybah (born CE 828), Ibn `Abd Rabbin (born CE 860), Ibn al-Mu`tazz (born CE 861), al- Sahib bin `Ihad (born CE 938), Qudamah Ibn Ja`far (born CE 873), al-Tha`alibi (born CE 961), Ibn Rashiq (born CE 1000), al-Jurjani (born CE 1009), and al-Amidi (born CE 980) are among the critics whose critical works have been as important as the works of the poets they commented on. Medieval modernist poetry was initially resisted, but it was eventually acknowledged by critics. Modernist poets, like Abu Nuas, ultimately became an important part of the canon.

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6 For example, see Muhammad Nabih Hijab’s Mazahir al-shu’ubiyyah fi al-adab al-arabii hatta nihayat al-qarn al-thalith al-hijri [Aspects of al-shu’ubiyyah in Arabic literature till the End of the Third Hijri Century].

7 The term “modernism” is used in this article not as a period or a number of aesthetic traits but as a rupture from established traditions. This is why I am using it to describe such medieval Arabic literary movements as al-Shu’ubiyyah and even such pre-Islamic poets as Imru’ al-Qays.

8 See Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani’s Al- `Umda fi ma’asir al-shi’r wa adabihi wa naqdihi [The Fundamental in Poetry and Criticism]. See bibliographical entry for complete citation.
A Crisis of Poetry or a Criticism in Crisis?

Arabic criticism and traditionalist poetry (written in Standard Arabic in the pre-Islamic Ode form) went dormant in the period following the disintegration and the fall of the Abbasid Dynasty between the tenth and thirteenth centuries (Mandur n.d.). This period is often referred to as “asr al-inhiatat al-adabi” [the age of literary decline]. Criticism and traditionalist poetry were “revived” in the age of al-Nahda, Arab Renaissance/Arab Revival, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Khafaji1992, 37). During and after this so-called revival period, however, Arabic criticism continued to recycle the critical formulations articulated by the prominent medieval critics, a trend that has persisted among some critics in modern times (e.g., Mandur, Haykal, Dayf, Al-Sharif, Haddarah, and Khouri). Periodization occupied a central place, accompanied by hermeneutic and stylistic elucidations of poems. The task of critics was to identify and introduce the era to which a given poem belonged, interpret its meaning to the best of their ability, determine its adherence to or divergence from traditionalist poetics, and, finally, pass a favorable or unfavorable value judgment for or against it. Literary periods corresponded to political eras. Six periods were typically identified: The Pre-Islamic Period (450–610 CE), the Islamic Period, covering the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad and the four Rightly Guided caliphs, the Umayyad Period until 750 CE, the Abbasid Period until the fall of Baghdad in 1258 CE, a period of “regional powers” extending from 1213 CE until the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt (1798–1801), and the Modern Period from 1801 till present (Haddarah 1981).

Periods conveniently exhibited distinctive features critics have comfortably been able to identify and label. The “Modern Period,” however, has resisted this necessary yet insufficient approach. Critics started asking whether “modern poetry represents a specific, clearly defined school” (Al-Sharif 1976, 38). The answer was in the negative. Critics responded to this problem by further dividing the Modern Period into schools, groups, or movements [madaris], which group together poets sharing the same aesthetic views and trends (Mandur n.d.; Khafaji 1992). This classification was no longer able to continue to generalize about Arabic poetry at large, only about regional poetry. The Egyptian case has been the most discussed, and, at times, it is used to categorize all of Arabic poetry. Many Egyptian poets were also critics, like al-Áqqad and al-Mazni, which resulted in their naming of their own movements and creating their own labels (Khafaji 1992). Besides Al-Majjar, or poetry by Arab poets in exile, most critics identified four schools of Egyptian poetry. “Al-Ba’th wa al-Ihya,” championed by Al-Barudi, Shawqi, Hafiz and Isma’il Sabri, also known as the Neo-Classical School, resurrected traditionalist poetics and preserved the qasida [the pre-Islamic Ode] in its purest form (Mandur n.d.; Khafaji 1992). “Jama’at al-Diwan,” championed by Shukri, al-Mazni, and al-Áqqad, cautiously started shaking off some traditionalist elements and introducing some elements of Romanticism into Egyptian poetry. “Jama’at Apollo,” championed by A.Z. Abu Shadi, ‘Ali Mahmud Taha, Mahmud Hasan Isma’il, and others, was more daring in its breaking away from tradition and unapologetic in its borrowing from European models. Finally, the “Free Verse Movement” was pioneered by Iraqi, Syrian, and Palestinian poets, and then embraced by such Egyptian poets as Salah Abul-Sabur and Ahmad ‘Abd al-Mu’ti Hijazi. These poets eliminated rhyme schemes and replaced traditional meter, consisting of a

9 It must be noted that the period between the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries is considered to be an age of decline “only if we have a rather narrow and limited definition of what “good culture” is…” [The nahda actually had begun earlier than is generally acknowledged, due to internal as well as external reasons” (Al-Nowaihi 2000, 286). Imad Nsiri also resisted the “age of decline” label: “The term has been used by some literary historians and critics to refer to the period based, principally, on a comparison between it and the preceding Abbasid period,…commonly designated “the golden age” of Arabic Islamic civilization” (Nsiri 2019, xi).

10 Ahmad Haykal rejected the names of these three movements (Al-Ba’th wa al-Ihya, Al-Diwan, and Apollo), but he did not reject this classification. Instead, he gave the same movements different names: Conservative, Intellectual Modernist, and Emotional Innovation (Haykal 1994).
prescribed number of metric feet, with the use of a single, repetitive metric foot. Their borrowing from English, French, and other European poets is too wide-ranging to summarize here.

Categories seemed to be a convenient approach to analyzing Arabic and Egyptian poetry. Every time a category was no longer able to exclusively represent a given era or movement, new categories were introduced. However, categories did not seem to have explanations for some “anomalies.” For example, it was not possible to account for the reasons why Shawqi, one of the champions of the “Neo-Classical” movement, was also a founder of “Jamaat Apollo,” which had an agenda entirely incongruent with the former. Moreover, this approach could not successfully find a single category that could group together some contemporaries of Hijazi and ‘Abd al-Sabur and most of the poets who came after them.

A number of critics have attempted to transcend categories by replacing them with “organizing principles” that keep their research more sharply focused. Organizing principles are modes of analysis heavily influenced by Western theory of criticism, such as Marxism, structuralism, semiotics, or psychoanalysis, or the inspirations of aesthetic notions introduced by medieval Arabic critics, such as “al-tab’wa al-san’ah” [spontaneity vs. craft] or “al-qadim wa al-Jadid” [traditionalism vs. modernism]. The prominent critic, Muhammad Mandur (1907–1965), for example, was “one of the spokesmen for socialist involvement in literary criticism” (Brugman 1984, 402), who supported “the application of Western literary notions and theories to modern Arabic literature” (Brugman 1984, 406). He supported innovation, rejected art-for-art’s sake, and passionately defended the Free Verse Movement and vernacular poets. Salah Fadl was one of several representatives of structuralism and semiotics who ardently trusted that semiotics can guarantee “scientific legimitateness, proficient analysis, and critical certainty” (Fadl 1990, 7).

Izz al-Din Isma’il favored a psychoanalytical approach to literature that he applied to poetry, drama, and narrative in his book Al-tafsir al-nafsī lil adab. Shawqi Dayf, on the other hand, rejected altogether using Western literary and critical notions: “it is difficult to relate [Arabic] literature to Western literary trends, with which it has no historical or aesthetic bonds” (Dayf 1978, 7). Instead, he resumed the medieval debate on “al-tab’wa al-san’ah” [spontaneity versus craft] in his famous book Al-fann wa madhahibihi fi al- shi’r al-‘arabi. Spontaneity was deemed irrelevant to art, and “al-san’ah” was further divided into three degrees of intensity: al-san’ah, al-tasni, and al-tasamnu, the first being the least intense, and the third being the most in terms of poets’ use of figures of speech and poetic craft.

What these seemingly different approaches have in common is that they apply indigenous or Western theories to diverse poetic practices rather than allow a theory to develop from them. When a theory is incapable of explaining a given practice, the latter is treated the same way “irregulars” are treated within the framework of prescriptive grammar, as anomalies. Theories, which are in essence formulations based on already existing practices, are turned by some critics into a means to control and regulate poetry. Theories are fetishized; they are not allowed to be revised, stretched, or overturned to accommodate new poetic trends. This explains why critics repeatedly harassed or ridiculed the poetry they could not account for within the framework of the theories in which they were well-versed. Opponents of free verse dubbed it “loose verse,” valueless poetry rooted in chaos and ungrounded in a clearly defined trend. One critic, al-Zayyat, went as far as advertising a monetary reward to be awarded to anyone who can understand a modernist poem by ‘Ali Tantawi (Abbas 2000, 11).

Criticism lost touch with poetry; while the latter has been getting more and more politicized, the former has been getting more and more elitist. Mocking the subject matter of their research and repeatedly suggesting the existence of a crisis in literature only exposes a crisis of a criticism that has not yet rigorously taken a cultural turn. The fact of the matter is that Arabic literature has never undergone any crises, even, in my estimation, during the so-called era of decline; it has always expressed the existential and national hopes and fears of at least one segment of the society to which it belongs. It has illuminated a host of issues of utmost importance to the individuals and the nation, and it primarily concerned itself with finding solutions to national
crises. Popular literature written in Colloquial Arabic thrived in Egypt during the Mamluk and Ottoman reign, dubbed by most critics as “‘asr al-inhital al-adabi” [the age of literary decline] (Mandur n.d., 73). The so-called decline is apparently representative of the viewpoint of mainstream criticism, which has often marginalized vernacular literature: If traditionalist poetry in Fusha, Standard Arabic, is in decline, all Arabic poetry was deemed to be in decline.

The so-called crisis of Arabic literature does not, in reality, refer to a literature in crisis but to criticism’s failure to theorize about a literature whose main concern has shifted into the articulation of political, economic, and cultural crises. It has been a crisis of a criticism that maintains rigid connections to the theories it grounds itself in and establishes impermeable boundaries among literature, criticism, and non-literary disciplines that could be capitalized on. It is a crisis generated by the absence or short supply of meta-critical and theoretical writings that evaluate, critique, and revise the dominant critical discourses. It is also a crisis of a criticism that is no longer capable of keeping up with the rapid transformations in the literature it studies. This crisis resulted in criticism’s inability to possess a broad enough interdisciplinary scope fit for reading postcolonial literary production and its fetishizing of Western theories, which critics treated as immutable or impossible to indigenize.11 A major morbid symptom of this crisis is criticism’s inability to simultaneously engage with the form, content, and cultural contexts of the literature it studies.

Because of their fixation with applying existing theory to literature, Arab critics have not taken advantage of ground-breaking theoretical formulations in non-literary fields, such as philosophy, history, jurisprudence, sociology, cultural studies, and political theory. They hardly capitalize on the illuminations of such theorists as al-Jabri, Hanafi, Kilito, El Saadawi, and Abu Zayd, whose work, firmly grounded in Arabo-Islamic tradition and informed by Western thought, could offer profound insights into feminist, postcolonial, and cultural criticism. It is only possible for a critic who has internalized the interconnectedness of the cultural and the aesthetic to be at ease with accounting for Arabic poetry at large and giving insightful readings of diverse poets who seemingly have nothing in common. Until the publication of Muhsin al-Musawi’s Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition, there has been no vigorous theory of Arabic poetry or Arabic literature that productively and innovatively capitalizes on Arabic poetics or creatively indigenizes Western theories (2006). There had been no critical venture in Arabic criticism, again, until al-Musawi’s book, comparable in goals and scope to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s in his ground-breaking The Signifying Monkey: “To identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within … vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of … literary tradition” rather than “read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without” (Gates 1988, XIX).

The few ventures that successfully formulated frameworks for analyzing Arabic poetry either came from Arab and Western critics of Arabic literature operating in the West and writing in European languages, like Muhsin al-Musawi or Susan Stetekvych, or from Arab critics like Mustafa Nasif and Raja’ Id, whose theorizations went unnoticed or received little attention by literary critics. In both cases, the groundbreaking works of these critics have not been significantly capitalized on by literary critics. Adonis, who writes in Arabic and is well known in Arabic literary circles, remains the author of the most influential theory of Arabic poetics. Like Taha Husayn’s theory of al-intithal [forgery], Adonis’s theory of the static and dynamic is, however, dismissed by many critics for its “attempt to purge Arab culture of its traditional religious thought” (Khouri 1987, 24). Other critics, for example Muhammad Bennis, are also often dismissed for their comparable assault against what Bennis calls a “dysfunctional modernity” (Bennis 2004). Ihsan ‘Abbas’s innovative contributions in Ittihat al-shi’r al-‘arabi al-mu’asir and ’Abbdallah al-Ghadhhami’s reinterpretation of classical poetry and poetics within the framework of cultural criticism in Al-naqad al-thaqafi: qira’ah fi al-ansaq al-

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11 I use Susan Friedman’s definition of “indigenization” as the process of “making native or indigenous something [borrowed] from elsewhere” (Friedman 2006, 430).
thaqafiyyah al-‘arabiyyah seem to be more accepted by Arab critics. Their influence on Egyptian critics, however, is limited, for Egyptian critics, as Jayyusi rightly observes, “had shown interest only in the writings of other Egyptians” (Jayyusi 1977, 561).

In spite of the lack of a comprehensive, coherent theory of Arabic poetry and modernist Arabic poetics, some critics were still able to identify “what modernist poets have in common,” something Al-Sharif claimed was not possible (Al-Sharif 1976, 38). It has been difficult to identify the technical traits of modernist poetry, simply because poets did as they pleased with meters, rhymes, language, rhythms, images, and metaphors. Arabic poetics is a poetics of nonconformity, as al-Musawi calls it. Thus, it defies any attempt to fence it within the confines of a functional definition. Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s analysis of the technical achievements of modernist poetry is detailed and erudite. On the level of themes and tones, critics identified in avant-garde poets a unified attitude vis-à-vis the postcolonial state and pinpointed the loss of Palestine in 1948 and the 1967 defeat of Arab armies as the driving forces behind it. This attitude is usually investigated within the context of Arabo-Islamic cultures and the tensions with the West. Ghali Shukri describes it as “resistance,” Luis ‘Awad as “rejection,” and Muhsin al-Musawi as “dissent.” Other words used to contextualize the tones of avant-garde poets include “anxiety,” “disintegration,” “alienation” and “neurosis” (Jayyusi 1977, 641–43).

Since the emergence of the Free Verse movement at the hand of the Iraqi poetess and critic Nazik al-Mala’kah till today, Arabic modernist poetry has been undergoing rapid and fundamental changes. The journey beginning from Al- Mala’kah, who pioneered the “Free” Verse Movement but permitted poets little “freedom” and insisted on so many restrictions, to Ahmad Fu’ad Nijm, who contends that “poetry is freedom, and each poet may label his own poetry as he pleases” (Nijm 2006, 8), illustrates this radical change. In her important book Qadaya al-shi’r al-mu’asir [Issues of Contemporary Poetry], which she dedicated to president Nasir of Egypt, Al-Mala’kah reprimanded critics for tolerating grammatical errors made by poets. She saw any deviation from the grammar of Classical Arabic as ignorant at best and conspiratorial at worst. Generally speaking, she insisted that all the rules that applied to traditionalist poetry must apply to free verse. The only liberty that she permitted was “the use of a varied number of feet in each line” (Jayyusi 1977, 606). Al-Mala’kah’s

Own poetic career manifests a feminist concern with expression to resist an overpowering masculine language, which she accused of limiting women’s writing. Although such a position could have led her into unlimited prospects of innovation, she succumbed to the idea that classical metrics were too sacred and great to suffer challenges at the hands of practice of poetry. (Al-Musawi 2006, 85–6)

The poetry of Ahmad Fu’ad Nijm and Najib Surur, author of the notorious and banned “Mother-Cunt Verses” and the dialogic “Luzum ma Yalzam” would not have been recognized as poetry by the pioneer of “Free” Verse.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s account of the Free Verse movement in Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry provides one of the most comprehensive examinations of this movement, emerging simultaneously in numerous Arab countries and embracing diverse poets (1977). Her investigations paid as much attention to the content of poetry as it did to its form and the conditions of its production and reception by the readers. It also included several meta-critical elucidations, commenting on predominant critical practices and predicting further future developments. Acknowledging the inseparable link between the political atmosphere and aesthetic practices, Jayyusi goes on to explain the aesthetic need that necessitated the prosodic

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12 See Section 1 of Chapter 8 of her book Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry for a detailed analysis of the prosodic innovations of modernist poetry.
13 For a fuller discussion of Surur’s modernist poetry, which puts into practice many of the theoretical formulations developed in this article, see my article entitled “Destructive Genesis: The Dialogism of Najib Surür’s Luzüm mā Yalzam.” Full bibliographical information is in the “References” section.
adventures Arab avant-garde poets have embarked on since the 1950s (1977). What these poets have in common is an obsession with the human condition of the oppressed masses, adoption of more oblique ways of self-expression, fusion of the personal and political, allowing the articulation of minority viewpoints, providing social and psychological commentaries on events, and breaking free from all shackles that obstruct or limit artistic expression (Jayyusi 1977).

In the preface to Arabic Poetry, Muhsin al-Musawi makes a clear statement that distances his book from previous books and articles discussing the history of movements and trends or regional poetic scenes (2006). He says,

> If [the book] makes any territorial claims it does so whenever there is a crossroad, a threshold, or a meeting ground among texts and voices that navigate between tradition and modernity. It caters for the poetic in its cultural complexity as pertaining to issues of selfhood, individuality, community, religion, ideology, nation, class and gender. (Al-Musawi 2006, xvii)

He decisively rejects the predominant contention that poetry is “a genre that calls only for formalist investigations” (Al-Musawi 2006, xvii). Poetry is investigated as a defining area at the center of Arab culture “with its deep rootedness in the past, and its complex engagements with issues of change, progress, nationhood, exile, class, gender, race, and language” (Al-Musawi 2006, xvii) as well as its “dialogue with Western life and culture” (Al-Musawi 2006, xvii).

All the promises al-Musawi makes in the preface are kept. While redefining tradition as entity transcending the canon and inclusive of the nonconformist pronouncements of many groups (Shiite, Sufi, female, non-Arab, non-Muslim, etc.), al-Musawi unearths from thorough readings of Arab and Western poets and critics what he calls “strategies of creativity and dissent” (Al-Musawi 2006, 91). These strategies are “a number of dialogic sites that enable the poem to retrieve narrative space although sustaining its poetic mode in the tradition-modernity nexus” (Al-Musawi 2006, 91). They include personae and voicing, parody, claiming and naming the forebear, juxtaposition and conversational poetics, redeeming language, revisionist poetics, among others. Al-Musawi investigates a number of stimulating issues pertaining to modern Arabic poetry, such as dedications as paratexts, Eliot’s far-reaching influence on Arabic poetry and criticism, and poetry of exile. Al-Musawi’s theoretical and critical arguments are presented through and supported by stimulating close readings of diverse male and female and ancient and contemporary poets whose works illuminate and illustrate the issues at stake.

Writings dedicated to meta-criticism, the examination of the principles of criticism, are scarce in Arabic criticism, notwithstanding the pressing need for them. An example of such writings is Mustafa Nasif’s Al-naqd al-arabi: nahwa nadhariyyah thaniyah [Arabic Criticism: Toward a Second Theory] published in 2000. The first theory implied in the subtitle references all critical theories that are not cultural in orientation and outlook. The goal of Nasif’s book is to familiarize Arab critics with ways in which the cultural turn in literary studies could be capitalized on in Arabic criticism. In other words, he offers ways to indigenize cultural criticism, which is still an unfamiliar territory for Arab critics, by transplanting its practices in Arabic criticism. Each of the fifteen chapters of the book closely examines one or more of the critical concepts or approaches, such as literary jargon, grammar as hegemony, collective myths, metaphor, cultural criticism, poetics, ethics, among others (Nasif 2000). He dismisses the typical critical approach which considers such important contributions as al-Jurjani’s books on Arabic rhetoric as individual achievements, and not as culturally significant texts. He contends that it is imperative to “release thought from the individual framework [interpreting it solely as the individual genius of its author] into a broader one, the framework of Arab culture. Each author distills this culture and marks one or more aspects of its depths” (Nasif 2000, 21).

Such a framework could potentially result in productive rethinking of such terms as balaghah, bayan, badi’, lafz, and ta’wil [rhetoric, explication, figures of speech, utterance, and interpretation]; such concepts as language, style, and metaphor; and such authors as al-Jurjani
and al-Mutanabi. If examined within its cultural context, the term bayan [explication], for example, could illuminate the cultural disputes and tensions that created the need for that and other terms to emerge in Arabic poetics in the first place. Bayan, with its emphasis on clarity and precision of expression, and badi’ [figures of speech], with its emphasis on defamiliarization, can only be understood in relation to one another. The emergence of both terms results from and reflects a cultural friction of racial nature. The book reexamines the critical pronouncements of al-Jurjani, the renowned medieval critic, in light of recent insights in the fields of criticism and theory. There is a need for critical works that apply the same framework to modern Arabic criticism, going beyond approval of or disagreement with this or that critic.

Al-Ghadhdhami’s project in Al-naqd al-thaqafi [Cultural Criticism] is similar to Nasif’s. He links the metaphor of al-fuhula [masculine potency] used to describe Arab Master Poets to the normalization of tyranny in the political and cultural domains: “Are there cultural structures that emanate from and are promoted by poetry which authorize inhumane or dictatorial conduct? Have the concept of fuhula and the poetic canon been the reason for the institutionalization [of these structures]?” (Al-Ghadhdhami 2005a, 7). In his book Ta’nith al-qasida wa al-gari’ al-mukhtalif [Feminization of the Ode and the Other Reader], he focuses on the exclusion of female authorship in Arabic literature and the attempts to re-inscribe the feminine in Arab poetics (2005b).

Conclusion

In an article entitled “Kayfa naktub al-azmah?” [How to Write the Crisis?], Sa’id Khatibi writes:

Literature is literature. Literature does not need ancillary definitions, such as the label “rushed literature,” which debases it…. When the crisis is over, readers alone will judge the worth of a given text, or lack thereof. They will not need “expert critics” to define their taste for them or biased newspapers…that categorize and label authors according to their [political] loyalties. The word “literature” alone defines a text, be it a narrative or a poem. Attempting to degrade literature by using derogatory labels is disrespectful to the readers and insulting to their intelligence. (Khatibi 2016)

Khatibi acknowledges an important fact: Arabic literature has been addressing the political, social, economic, and cultural crises of the postcolonial era, and it has been bending all rules while doing it. Critics should let a theory emerge from this already-existing body of new writing, instead of fruitlessly trying to enforce already-existing (traditionalist and/or and Western) theories upon it. At the very least, the relationship among theory, criticism, and literature should keep permeable boundaries, allowing for the emergence of an indigenous theory of Arabic literature. Such indigenous theory should be one with a broad enough interdisciplinary scope to tackle diverse literary production without recycling the inefficient, insufficient, or banal formulations of indigenous and foreign theories. In the absence of an indigenous literary theory and the overwhelming presence of Western theories of literature, which are conceived of as absolute and irresponsible to indigenization, criticism falls short of simultaneously analyzing the form, content, and cultural contexts of poetry. The critical writings of al-Musawi, Jayyusi, ‘Id, al-Ghadhdhami, and ‘Abbas; the meta-critical writings of such critics as Nasif; and theoretical writings in such non-literary fields as epistemology (Mohammed Abed al-Jabri), theology (Hasan Hanafi), and sociology (Nawal El Saadawi) can shed light on Arabic literature and criticism and catalyze the formulation of a theory of Arabic literature. The incorporation and indigenization of relevant Western frameworks, such as postcolonial theory, intertextuality, dialogism, cultural criticism, and feminism could also yield productive analyses of literature and criticism.

Since crisis literature’s main concern is with the crises of the postcolonial state, postcolonial readings of Arabic literature are particularly advantageous. In his important article “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application,” Wail Hassan emphasizes the
importance and relevance of reading modern Arabic literature through a postcolonial lens (2002). He writes, “Postcolonial studies and Arabic literary studies have much to offer each other. Postcolonial studies can add valuable dimensions to Arabic literary scholarship-interdisciplinary inquiry, theoretical sophistication, and historical contextualization-that are lacking in older modes of Orientalist scholarship and the current area studies model” (Hassan 2002, 59). I have identified elsewhere four attitudes toward modernization in a postcolonial context: Taqlid (traditionalism), Taghrrib (Western modernism), Tawfiq (Reconciliation,) and Tadhidith (modernization that questions indigenous tradition and indigenizes Western ones). I advocate for the adoption of tadhith, interdisciplinary approaches (especially postcolonial theory), and cultural criticism in reading postcolonial Arabic literature. This should hopefully lead to the organic development of a theory of modernist Arabic poetics from the body of modernist Arabic literature.

REFERENCES


14 For a fuller discussion of this paradigm, see my article entitled “Theorizing the Postcolonial Self: Arabo-Islamic Modernities, Modernisms, and Modernizations.” Full bibliographical information is in the “References” section.


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