

Cultural difference and openness to others

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze Al-Aroui's perspective on the relationship between the Arab self and the Other within the context of cultural creation and historical backwardness. The study employs a critical analysis of Al-Aroui's works, focusing on the concepts of openness and difference. The findings indicate that Al-Aroui asserts overcoming the crisis of the Arab self requires openness to the Other in its multiplicity and diversity, coupled with active engagement with global dynamics. The research concludes that Al-Aroui critiques contemporary Arab ideology, emphasizing the significance of positive cultural interaction for achieving progress and prosperity.

Keywords : Difference; Culture; Openness; Other; Identity.

Introduction:

1. Determine the purpose of the research:

The aim of this research is to study cultural difference and openness to others by relying on the thought of Abdullah Laroui as a model for analyzing how to deal with cultural difference and understanding how to deal with others, and achieving optimal communication between Arab society and the Western world through historical and critical discourse.

2. Determine the research hypothesis:

The main hypothesis that will be tested in this research is cultural difference and adopting the discourse of openness to others from the point of view of the thinker Abdullah Laroui, who gives a deep and critical

vision of the meaning of cultural difference and how to open up to other cultures without excluding oneself and cultural identity, and enhancing the level of communication and openness to others.

3. Determining the theoretical framework of the study:

The theoretical framework consists of a set of basic concepts related to cultural difference and the discourse of diversity in the thought of Abdullah Laroui, where it will be addressed.:

3.1-Abdullah Laroui's thought:

His thought is known for its profound criticism of Arab-Islamic heritage and thought from a historical perspective. He considers modernity the only option to escape from historical backwardness, as modernity is a historical necessity, and the way to achieve this is historicism as a method. Laroui calls for reading Arab reality through a critical historical perspective, stressing that engaging in modernity is an inevitable option, but without blind subservience to the West, but rather through absorbing modern values in a way that is consistent with the Arab context. His most important works are:

- Contemporary Arab Ideology (1967): A Critical Analysis of Modern Arab Thought
- The concept of history, the concept of the state, and the concept of ideology: My Concepts Series.
- The General History of Morocco: An Analytical View of the History of Morocco Beyond the Traditional Narrative.

3.2-Cultural difference:

Cultural difference is considered a cultural phenomenon and a characteristic of culture, i.e. culture, and it is an ontological phenomenon and separate from the self that practices contemplation, analysis and judgment.

3.3-Openness to others:

Openness is the gateway through which peoples and cultures meet, and the self gets to know the rest of the world. Through openness, coexistence and peace between cultures are achieved.

4-Determine the research methodology:

The methodology used in this research will be a qualitative approach based on the analysis of the philosophical texts of Abdullah Laroui, with the use of some previous studies that dealt with cultural difference and the role of openness to other cultures. The most appropriate approach in this study is the analytical and critical approach :

- **Analytical approach:** This is in order to analyse the concepts that are related to Abdel Aarrassi's perceptions on the issue of difference and the necessity of openness to the other, which are multiple and intertwined concepts that need deep analysis and linking.

- **Critical approach:** To identify Laroui's conceptualisation of the issue of cultural difference and to critique the mechanisms he proposes and the alternatives that must be taken to bring Arab societies out of the historical backwardness they face.

5-Identify the problem :

In order to achieve the objectives of this research work, it is necessary to raise a main problem, which is:

To what extent was Abdallah Laroui able, through his historical approach, to achieve a serious reading of cultural differences in Arab societies, and how can we achieve a rational openness to the other without dependence or self-absorption?

The sub-problems are as follows:

-How can critical thinking help us understand cultural difference without falling into extremism or alienation?

-Is it possible to build a real intellectual renaissance away from a radical critique of the cultural self?

-Does openness to others pose a threat to cultural identity or is it an opportunity to enrich it?

-How can we embrace modernity without falling into intellectual dependency or losing cultural specificity?

Abdullah Laroui, a prominent Moroccan thinker, historian, and novelist, stands among the leading contemporary Arab intellectuals who have rigorously addressed the themes of cultural difference and openness to the Other. Born in Morocco in 1933, Laroui pursued his academic studies at the Sorbonne University in France, where he was profoundly influenced by the critical historical school. This intellectual foundation shaped his approach to analyzing Arab history and thought within the dual frameworks of modernity and modernization.

1- Cultural Difference and the Rationalisation of Difference :

Laroui employed historical analysis as a principal tool to understand and address the intellectual and political challenges confronting Arab societies. He viewed the concept of "historical thought" as essential for comprehending societal transformations and consistently advocated for a historical approach as an effective means to overcome historical backwardness. His work emphasized the necessity of critically engaging with the past to forge a path toward modernity that is both culturally rooted and intellectually independent.

As a committed intellectual, Abdullah Laroui (note: consistent transliteration) engaged deeply with the pressing issues of his society and nation, focusing on contemporary realities and the underlying weaknesses and crises afflicting the Arab world. His approach relied on rigorous research and analysis to identify solutions or, at minimum, to understand the root causes of these challenges. Laroui vehemently opposed escapism, advocating instead for direct engagement with the challenges confronting Arab societies in the face of a dominant, often homogenizing cultural

force. He was particularly alarmed by the push for cultural globalization that sought to unify cultures, threatening the distinctiveness and diversity of individual societies—especially through the marginalization of minorities—in the name of cultural integration.

Driven by a desire to address the persistent crises plaguing Arab societies, Laroui emphasized the urgency of confronting the realities shaping the destiny of Arabs and Muslims. He argued that a democratic project cannot flourish in an environment that promotes cultural homogenization and unilateralism, which lead to the exclusion—or even radical violence—against differing cultures that embody the potential for diversity and hope needed to heal a fractured society.

1.1-Ejection of Exclusionary Logic and Imitative Thought :

Abdullah Laroui vehemently rejected exclusionary logics, which he argued had stifled the progress of Arab renaissance projects by obstructing genuine understanding. These projects, in turn, often harmed themselves by overloading societies with unrealistic rhetoric, leading to the emergence of ineffective ideologies that merely reacted to Western intellectual outputs rather than engaging critically with them. This aligns with the critique articulated by thinker Ali Harb, who observed that Arab ideological thought frequently fails to transform defeats into opportunities for growth or to creatively engage with the intellectual superiority of the Other. Instead of generating original knowledge, theories, or innovative methods, Arab thought tends to remain imitative, dependent, and self-referential—rehashing established ideas without sustained critical engagement (Harb, 1993, p. 179). While Arab thought may employ critique, Harb argues that this often serves as a defensive mechanism for justification or denial, rather than a pursuit of truth.

1.2-The Importance of Rationalizing Difference and Cultural Richness :

Abdullah Laroui sought to transcend the limitations of narrow-minded criticism of heritage and tradition by linking his ideas to contemporary challenges. He advocated for rationalizing differences and embracing the cultural richness inherent in Arab societies, which he

observed were often marginalized by newly independent nation-states . These states, according to Laroui, frequently failed to recognize the maturity and capacity of their citizens to participate in shaping societal policies, often under the guise of nationalist or ideological tendencies .

Abdullah Laroui emphasized that difference is "the only element upon which every society aspiring to advance its members depends" (Al-Qudour & others, 2007, p. 184). He argued that democracy is unlikely to thrive in a society characterized by ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic homogeneity, contrasting this with Japan—a homogenous nation often cited as an example of economic success but not democratic pluralism. Laroui underscored the necessity of recognizing linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity as foundational to the success of the Arab democratic project. He firmly rejected all forms of exclusion, particularly against historically rooted minorities who share the same geographical and temporal context as the majority. Laroui distinguished these minorities from those in Western European societies, where many minorities migrated from their homelands, highlighting the indigenous historical belonging of minorities in the Arab-Islamic East as a unique and integral part of its cultural fabric.

2- Mechanisms for achieving cultural diversity :

Abdullah Laroui asserted that the Arab modernist project cannot be realized without recognizing and valuing the cultural diversity inherent in Arab societies. He argued that this project can only be established through respecting the contributions of all groups to the construction and development of Arab-Islamic civilization. Laroui emphasized that the presence of Christian, Buddhist, and other minorities within Arab-Islamic societies is a crucial factor for the success of democracy, as their inclusion fosters pluralism and mutual accountability.

Furthermore, he advocated for consistency in demanding rights for minorities , asserting that Arab countries cannot expect Western nations to fully grant rights to Islamic minorities abroad without reciprocating by ensuring the rights of their own minorities at home (Al-Qudour & others, 2007, p. 184). Laroui framed this as a moral and pragmatic imperative, linking democratic legitimacy to the equitable treatment of all societal groups.

2.1- Openness and overcoming historical backwardness:

Abdullah Laroui argued that embracing openness to the wider world is essential for the Arab self to overcome its crisis of cultural stagnation and historical backwardness, thereby advancing toward development and progress. This requires a critical self-examination that transcends narcissistic self-absorption or inferiority complexes. Instead, it demands engagement with the Other in all its multiplicity and difference, as the Arab self cannot fully comprehend itself in isolation. Laroui urged a paradigm shift away from viewing the Other as a constant enemy and toward fostering a cultural dialogue that inclusively involves all peoples, irrespective of their differences.

He further emphasized addressing internal cultural differences within Arab societies, particularly those affecting marginalized linguistic and religious minorities. Laroui asserted that dialogue with diverse cultures—not only externally but also internally—paves the way for democratic progress, as it cultivates mutual understanding and equitable participation in societal development.

From this perspective, Abdullah Laroui argued that contemporary Arab ideology has failed to genuinely recognize the cultural diversity inherent in the West or the Other. When Arab culture engages in self-reflection, it often reveals a reactive and delayed alignment with Western paradigms, rather than a proactive embrace of its own pluralistic heritage. Laroui viewed this phenomenon not as mere agreement or incidental critique but as a symptom of a broader trend toward the unification of the human race—a developmental goal and outcome, not the foundational basis of historical progress (Laroui, 2006, p. 202).

Abdullah Laroui observed that Arab culture today often perceives itself not through its own internal frameworks but through the "mirror of the Other"—a perspective that reduces self-understanding to an external reflection. This leads to a passive form of acculturation, experienced not as an active process of creation, production, and intellectual exchange, but as a reactive mode of existence. Consequently, Arab societies frequently comprehend their relationship with the Other through comparisons and parallels, seeking the Other within their own heritage rather than engaging dynamically with its complexities. Laroui argued that this approach exacerbates a cultural crisis and obscures the true nature of the Arab self, trapping it in a cycle of imitation and disconnection.

Abdel Salam Ben Abdelali echoed this critique, asserting that meaningful cultural dialogue requires a reversal of power dynamics and an active "ownership" of the Other's culture—not through superficial imitation but through critical engagement and the establishment of

intellectual distance (Ben Abdelali, 2004, p. 28). For him, this entails transforming passive reflection into a proactive, dialectical process that respects cultural agency and difference.

Abdullah Laroui noted the eagerness of Arab culture to align with the West, often attempting to erase difference through forced homogenization and conformity. This pursuit of sameness is ironic, as the West itself has increasingly embraced a pluralistic universality by recognizing diversity and difference as foundational to human unity—a shift from its earlier claim to represent the singular "unity of humanity." Laroui warned that Arab societies risk cultural stagnation and further historical backwardness if they remain mired in exaggerated nationalist narratives that prioritize uniformity over pluralism. He argued that true universality demands a dual commitment: deepening the recognition of cultural specificity and individuality while fostering a shared human framework that transcends exclusionary boundaries

2.2- Re-reading the Arabic Heritage :

Abdullah Laroui rejected both the uncritical adherence to the past through superficial similarities and the total identification with Western modernity. He advocated for a "double criticism" —a concept articulated by Abdelkebir Khatibi —as a method to construct an original modernity that authentically reflects the future trajectory of Arab society. This approach requires transcending the present, which is often mired in a crisis of intellectual discourse, and moving beyond the limitations of rigid traditionalism or unreflective Westernization. Khatibi similarly argued against mechanically replicating the stages of Western thought or assuming a seamless continuity between modernity and ancient Arab knowledge systems (Khatibi, 1980, p. 163).

Re-evaluating the Arab self necessitates a critical re-examination of the self, history, and the Other , grounded in contemporary realities. This process must draw upon insights from contemporary human sciences, particularly anthropology, comparative religious studies, cultural criticism, comparative literature, and philosophy . These disciplines offer innovative frameworks for understanding history, moving beyond linear, deterministic positivist paradigms toward a nuanced historical rationality that accounts for both rational and causal factors, as well as aesthetic, intuitive, symbolic, and critical dimensions of thought and the self (Qasim, 2001, p. 18).

2.3- The intellectual as a mechanism for realising the Arab modernist project:

Abdullah Laroui emphasized that progressive intellectuals must intensify their efforts to defend democratic projects that foster tolerance and dialogue with all cultures, ideas, and religious traditions. He was particularly attentive to the Arab region and the establishment of democratic states founded on political principles rather than ethnic or sectarian identities. Laroui underscored the role of linguistic and cultural criticism in nurturing discourses of hope and progress, advocating for inclusivity and rejecting exclusionary practices against historically rooted minorities within Arab societies. He argued that true democratic advancement requires transcending narrow communal affiliations and embracing pluralism as a cornerstone of societal cohesion.

3- From the legitimacy of difference to the inevitability of diversity :

Abdullah Laroui highlighted medieval Arab-Islamic culture as an exemplar of integrating the Other as a collaborative force in civilizational development. This culture actively embraced differences both internally and externally, fostering a pluralistic ethos. This perspective aligns with Ali Oumlil's analysis in *The Legitimacy of Difference* (1991), which argues that while historical and religious texts often asserted monolithic truths, history itself is inherently a domain of disagreement and diversity (Oumlil, 1991, pp. 94–96). Laroui thus proposed shifting focus away from seeking singular values within Arab-Islamic heritage toward establishing contemporary institutional frameworks such as pluralism, consensual political systems, and equitable power distribution as foundational principles for modern societies (Oumlil, 1991, p. 97).

The intellectual contributions of Abdullah Laroui , Hisham Djaït , Mohamed Arkoun , and Edward Said provide indispensable frameworks for understanding the complex dynamics of cultural dialogue and self-Other relations. Laroui's works, in particular, redefined the concept of the Other as a collaborative interlocutor in contemporary cultural discourse, free from prejudicial assumptions. Unlike earlier scholarship that framed the Other exclusively through an Arab-Islamic lens, Laroui's later studies sought to explore themes of tolerance, acknowledgment of difference, and diversity in Arab intellectual traditions. His work moved beyond narrow ideological or political frameworks to interrogate the symbolic systems

shaping perceptions of the Other, emphasizing the need for critical engagement over reductive categorization.

Muhammad Nour al-Din Afaya noted that Laroui's analysis of the relationship between Islam and the European West was groundbreaking, as he approached the image of the Other through the lens of fundamental philosophical questions about the coexistence of self and Other as complementary elements of human thought (Afaya, 2000, p. 36). Laroui's approach thus transcended conventional binaries, advocating for a dialogue that recognizes the mutual shaping of identities and ideas across cultural boundaries.

Abdullah Laroui acknowledged the complex and often contradictory nature of the West, recognizing its capacity for both hostility and self-reflection. He distinguished between a self-absorbed, closed-off West and a "repentant West" —one that critically examines its historical conditions and revives ancient aspirations for a peaceful, reconciled humanity. Laroui argued that this latter vision of the West, which engages with both its own peoples and others in a forward-looking dialogue, merits engagement and intellectual openness. Notably, he cited Frantz Fanon, a trenchant critic of cultural imperialism, who acknowledged moments of progressive aspirations emerging from European thought (Laroui, 2006, p. 85). For Laroui, this duality underscores the necessity of transcending simplistic binaries and embracing the West's potential for constructive transformation.

3.1-Laroui's Contemporary Arab Ideology as à Model for Understanding the Other :

Abdullah Laroui's *Contemporary Arab Ideology* (third edition, 2006) stands as a radical, scientific, and critical analysis exemplifying a tolerant engagement with the culture and thought of the Other . In this work, Laroui dismantled earlier intellectual positions that framed the Other as a source of hostility and conflict, instead highlighting the futility of such approaches. He argued that hostile discourse ultimately becomes self-defeating , leading to societal isolation and the entrenchment of ideologies rooted in rejection and exclusion. Laroui asserted that Arab societies must reconcile with themselves, moving beyond rigid stances of absolute opposition—whether motivated by claims of cultural authenticity or Western antagonism (Laroui, 2006, pp. 87–88).

3.2 History and Progress : Beyond Imitation and Illusory Discourses :

Abdullah Laroui's stance is not rooted in unqualified admiration for the West's global achievements but derives from a belief in progressive historical laws that, when critically understood, can catalyze societal advancement. He rejected blind imitation, advocating instead for critical engagement with global developments. Laroui cautioned against the perpetuation of illusory discourses of violence and terrorism within Arab societies, urging an end to narratives that dehumanize and destroy. He questioned the logic of glorifying destruction and the erasure of human civilization's achievements in the name of outdated ideologies. Most critically, Laroui viewed the notion of an inherent opposition between Islam and the West—and vice versa—as two facets of the same flawed ideological framework, which perpetuates divisions and obstructs genuine mutual understanding (Harb, 2002, pp. 69–70).

3.3 The Imperative of Engaging with Universality:

Abdullah Laroui contended that engagement with universality is inescapable, urging societies to contribute to its progress and expand its boundaries. He warned that withdrawal or self-absorption inevitably leads to stagnation and societal decline. Laroui advocated for embracing universality as a pathway to situating the self within the broader human context, recognizing that the challenges confronting the Arab self are deeply intertwined with global issues. For him, universality was not a distant ideal but a dynamic framework through which societies could critically navigate their identities while addressing shared human struggles.

Practical Part : Case Study Analysis of Cultural Exchange

To illustrate the transformative potential of cultural openness, we examine the historical example of the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Abbasid Baghdad (9th–13th centuries). This institution exemplifies the success of cross-cultural exchange and intellectual openness, serving as a hub where scholars from diverse backgrounds—Persian, Greek, Indian, and others—collaborated to translate, synthesize, and advance knowledge. By embracing the contributions of the Other, the Bayt al-Hikma preserved and expanded global intellectual heritage, bridging civilizations and fostering advancements in science, philosophy, and medicine. This historical precedent underscores Laroui's argument that openness to difference is not merely a moral imperative but a

practical catalyst for progress, enabling societies to transcend parochialism and cultivate shared human achievements.

The Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Abbasid Baghdad (8th–13th centuries) epitomized the intellectual vibrancy of the Islamic Golden Age. As a central hub for knowledge production, it spearheaded the translation of scientific, philosophical, and literary works from Greek, Persian, Indian, and Syriac into Arabic, fostering cross-cultural synthesis. This initiative created a dynamic environment where scholars—regardless of cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds—collaborated, debated, and expanded upon existing knowledge. The Bayt al-Hikma's legacy lies in its role as a model of open intellectual exchange, preserving and advancing global intellectual heritage while bridging divides between civilizations. Its scholars contributed to breakthroughs in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy, laying the groundwork for Europe's Renaissance and shaping the trajectory of global scientific inquiry.

The establishment and success of the Bayt al-Hikma exemplify a profound openness to other cultures, embodying Abdullah Laroui's vision of critical engagement with the Other. The Abbasid caliphs actively supported the translation and study of Greek, Persian, and Indian texts, recognizing the intrinsic value of knowledge irrespective of its origin. This openness enabled the assimilation of diverse intellectual traditions—such as Hellenistic philosophy, Indian mathematics, and Persian astronomy—into Arab-Islamic thought. By integrating these ideas, the Bayt al-Hikma fostered advancements in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy, demonstrating Laroui's assertion that cultural exchange is not a threat to identity but a "conscious modernization" that enriches societies through pluralism.

The scholars of the Bayt al-Hikma did not merely adopt foreign knowledge uncritically. Instead, they employed a dialectical approach, rigorously analyzing, critiquing, and synthesizing ideas. For instance, scholars like al-Khwarizmi and al-Razi built upon Greek and Indian mathematical and medical frameworks while introducing innovations that transcended their sources. This critical engagement aligns with Laroui's call for "double criticism" —a process of simultaneously interrogating one's own cultural heritage and external knowledge to avoid intellectual dependency. The Bayt al-Hikma's legacy underscores Laroui's argument that true progress requires active transformation of borrowed ideas, not passive imitation.

The Bayt al-Hikma's example aligns seamlessly with Laroui's advocacy for a balanced approach to cultural exchange. Far from eroding Arab or Islamic identity, engagement with Greek, Persian, and Indian thought enriched it. Scholars like al-Kindi and al-Farabi integrated Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic theology, creating a uniquely Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition. This mirrors Laroui's insistence that cultural specificity and universality are not mutually exclusive : the Bayt al-Hikma's scholars preserved their identity while contributing to a shared human heritage of knowledge. Their work refutes the false dichotomy between cultural isolation and Western mimicry, a critique central to Laroui's critique of Arab ideological stagnation.

The Bayt al-Hikma's legacy offers critical lessons for contemporary Arab societies grappling with modernity and cultural identity. It demonstrates that intellectual curiosity and critical engagement with other cultures are essential for progress, as Laroui argued. By fostering environments where diverse perspectives are studied, debated, and synthesized, societies can avoid the stagnation caused by self-absorption or dogmatic rejection of the Other. The Bayt al-Hikma's success also highlights the importance of state support for intellectual endeavors, echoing Laroui's emphasis on institutional frameworks that incentivize innovation rather than ideological rigidity.

The Bayt al-Hikma stands as a historical exemplar of Laroui's theoretical framework : a society that embraces openness without losing its identity, critically engages with the Other, and transforms knowledge into progress. Its legacy challenges contemporary Arab societies to move beyond exclusionary nationalism or Western-centric modernity, instead pursuing a path where cultural specificity and global engagement coexist dynamically. This aligns with Laroui's vision of a pluralistic universality—one where difference is not a barrier but a catalyst for intellectual and societal advancement.

Conclusion :

Abdullah Laroui's intellectual journey began with a critical interrogation of Arab thought history, emphasizing that cultural difference is not merely an awareness of divergent customs but a profound understanding of the intellectual and social transformations shaping societal identities and their global interactions. His work underscores that the relationship between cultural difference and openness to the Other is not one of contradiction but of complementarity, contingent on a critically informed and historically grounded perspective. Laroui argued that cultural isolation breeds rigid, static identities, while uncritical openness

risks cultural alienation. His concept of "conscious modernization" advocates for a balanced engagement with the Other —a critical modernity that respects cultural specificity while avoiding the pitfalls of intellectual dependency.

Laroui's nuanced analytical framework rejects both isolationist introversion and blind imitation, championing instead a critical awareness that enables creative cultural interaction without sacrificing identity. For him, the challenge lies not in rejecting or passively accepting difference but in cultivating the capacity to critically absorb and reinterpret it through historical consciousness and experiential knowledge. This process fosters a modern Arab culture capable of adapting to global dynamics while preserving its heritage.

The historical precedent of the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Abbasid Baghdad (8th–13th centuries) serves as a powerful exemplar of Laroui's theories. This institution's success in synthesizing Greek, Persian, Indian, and Syriac knowledge into an Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition demonstrates the transformative potential of openness paired with critical discernment. By fostering cross-cultural collaboration and rigorous synthesis, the Bayt al-Hikma advanced fields like astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy, embodying Laroui's vision of "conscious modernization" —a model of progress that transcends parochialism while affirming cultural distinctiveness.

This analysis of Laroui's thought, contextualized through the Bayt al-Hikma's legacy, reveals the enduring relevance of his ideas for contemporary Arab societies. His framework challenges simplistic binaries of cultural conflict or assimilation, advocating instead for historical awareness and critical engagement with diverse cultures as pathways to intellectual and societal advancement. Laroui's work remains a compelling call to transcend ideological dogmatism, urging societies to engage with global thought through independent critical inquiry. He recognized that cultural or societal development cannot occur in isolation, yet such engagement must be guided by strategic discernment to preserve autonomy and cultural integrity.

In essence, Laroui's legacy lies in his insistence on pluralistic universality —a vision where difference is not a barrier but a catalyst for progress, and where openness is not a surrender but a strategic, historically informed dialogue. His ideas continue to offer a roadmap for navigating the complexities of modernity while honoring the dynamic interplay between cultural identity and global interconnectedness.

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