

The Ordeal of the Arab Intellectual and Its Religious and Political Causes“Ibn Rushd’s Ordeal as a Model”

محنة المثقف العربي وأسبابها الدينية والسياسية "محنة ابن رشد أنموذجا

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Abstract :

In this research paper, we addressed the most important issues that affect and concern the Arab intellectual, specifically those that hinder the progress of his thought and the development of his intelligence and genius. We focused in particular on the religious and political reasons that stand in the way of such progress. To highlight this, we relied on an analysis of the ordeal of Ibn Rushd, which is considered one of the most prominent intellectual and cultural events in the history of Islamic al-Andalus. It represented a clash between reason and philosophical thought on the one hand, and political and religious authority on the other. This ordeal left deep impacts on the course of Islamic philosophy and on freedom of thought in the Arab and Islamic world. Accordingly, this paper examines the intellectual circumstances experienced by Ibn Rushd, both before and during the ordeal, and clarifies the religious reasons behind it—namely, the hostility of the Maliki jurists in al-Andalus—as well as the political reasons, which are manifested in the change in the stance of Caliph Yaqub al-Mansur, who was compelled to appease the conservative current in order to consolidate his internal authority. The study also highlights the value of Ibn Rushd’s thought and its influence on Latin European thought. We ultimately conclude that the ordeal of Ibn Rushd was not merely a personal incident, but rather a reflection and embodiment of a civilizational conflict between culture, renewal, and free creative thought on the one hand, and theological thought that rejects change and the use of reason on the other. In conducting this research, we adopted the historical-analytical approach appropriate for such theoretical studies.

Keywords: Ibn Rushd, philosophy, reason, religion, jurists.

ملخص:

تناولنا في هذه الورقة البحثية أهم المواضيع التي تمس بالمثقف العربي وتهمة، وتحديدًا ما يعيق تقدم فكره وتطور ذكائه وعبقريته، ونخص بالذكر الأسباب الدينية والسياسية التي تحول دون ذلك، وقد اعتمدت في إبراز هذا على تشخيص نكبة ابن رشد التي تعد من أبرز النماذج والأحداث الفكرية الثقافية في تاريخ الأندلس الإسلامي، حيث مثلت صدامًا بين العقل والفكر الفلسفي من جهة والسلطة السياسية والدينية من جهة أخرى، وقد تركت آثارًا عميقة على مسار الفلسفة الإسلامية وحرية التفكير في العالم العربي والإسلامي، لهذا سنتناول في هذه المداخلة

الظروف الفكرية التي مرت على ابن رشد سواء قبل النكبة أو في ظلها، و نوضح الأسباب الدينية لهذه النكبة -عداء الفقهاء المالكيون في الأندلس- إضافة إلى الأسباب السياسية التي تتجلى في تغير موقف الخليفة يعقوب المنصور الذي اضطر إلى إرضاء التيار المحافظ لإحكام سلطته الداخلية. كما تم توضيح مكن القيمة في فكر ابن رشد وتأثير فكره على فكر أوروبا اللاتينية.

لنصل في الأخير إلى أن نكبة ابن رشد لم تكن مجرد حادثة شخصية، بل كانت انعكاسا وتجسيدا لصراع حضاري بين الثقافة والتجديد والفكر الحر المبدع والفكر اللاهوتي الذي لا يقبل التغير وإعمال العقل، وقد اتبعت في إنجاز هذا البحث المنهج التحليلي التاريخي المناسب لمثل هذه البحوث النظرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ابن رشد، فلسفة، العقل، الدين، الفقهاء.

Introduction:

During the Middle Ages, the Islamic world witnessed the emergence of a small group of scholars and philosophers who carried the torch of renaissance for the Islamic nation through the brilliance of their thought and the sharpness of their intellect. Among the most prominent of these figures were Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Hanbal, and Ibn Rushd. The scientific and cultural life during the era of Ibn Rushd flourished—unlike the period of the Almoravids, who were hostile to scientific and philosophical thought, as well as to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali—during the era of the Almohads, when al-Andalus became an Almohad province. This marked the beginning of a new era in the intellectual movement, as freedom was granted to scientific, literary, and philosophical activities. Consequently, their intellectual journey was characterized by prosperity and high status.

Ibn al-Abbar, in his book *Al-Takmila*, described Ibn Rushd as follows: “Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd... no one like him in al-Andalus emerged in terms of completeness, knowledge, and virtue. Despite his high status, he was among the most humble and modest of people. He devoted himself to knowledge from his youth until old age, to the extent that it was said he never abandoned study or reading from the time he reached maturity except for one night—the night of his father’s death... He inclined toward the sciences of the ancients and attained leadership in them above the scholars of his time. His legal opinions in medicine were sought just as his legal opinions in jurisprudence were sought...”.

In contrast, we also find contempt and belittlement of such figures due to their commitment to truth and their defense of it, particularly their suffering under the authority of conservative religious scholars keen on preserving their self-interested status. This means that Ibn Rushd, with his philosophical competence and his defense of truth in the face of religious authority, its tyranny and injustice, as well as against the selfishness and injustice of politicians, endured an ordeal—or calamity—that changed the course of his life and altered people’s perception of philosophy, both in his time and afterward.

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This raises the following questions: What were the reasons behind the ordeal suffered by Ibn Rushd? Did his philosophy have a role in it? And how can we overcome such ordeals and promote Arab-Islamic culture?

First: A brief overview of Ibn Rushd’s life before the ordeal (1126–1198):

Ibn Rushd is considered one of the greatest philosophers of Islam in the Maghreb and was known in Latin Europe as the greatest commentator on Aristotle. **(Al-Ahwani, 1985, pp. 102-103).** He was born into a prominent family in al-Andalus that held leadership in jurisprudence and legal opinions. His grandfather, known as Ibn Rushd the Elder, was the leading Maliki jurist, the imam of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the chief judge, and one of the senior advisors to the princes of the Almoravid state. His father, Abu al-Qasim Ahmad ibn Abi al-Walid, was a jurist at the Great Mosque of Córdoba and a judge.

Ibn Rushd studied under the jurist and memorizer Abu Muhammad ibn Rizq and memorized *Al-Muwatta’* of Imam Malik under his father’s supervision. He also studied under many jurists, among them Abu Ja’far ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, who authorized him to issue legal opinions in jurisprudence. In philosophy, Ibn Rushd was influenced by Ibn Bajja and was a close friend of Ibn Tufayl.

Ibn Rushd assumed the position of judge in Seville, then in Córdoba in 1169. He devoted himself entirely to research and writing. Ibn al-Abbar described him by saying: “No one like him arose in al-Andalus in terms of perfection, knowledge, and virtue. Despite his noble status, he was among the most humble and restrained. He devoted himself to knowledge from his youth to his old age, to the extent that it was reported that he never abandoned study and reading since reaching maturity except on the night of his father’s death. He authored, refined, and abridged nearly ten thousand pages. He inclined toward the sciences of the ancients and attained leadership in them above the scholars of his time. His legal opinions in medicine were sought just as his legal opinions in jurisprudence were sought, in addition to his great proficiency in grammar and literature”. **(Al-Ahwani, 1985, pp. 100-101).**

When Ibn Tufayl resigned from his position as physician, he proposed that Ibn Rushd succeed him. Subsequently, the Almohad caliph Abu Ya’qub summoned Ibn Rushd to Marrakesh and appointed him as his personal physician and as a judge in Córdoba.

Ibn Rushd authored several works, including in medicine—*Al-Kulliyat fi al-Tibb* (General Principles of Medicine); in jurisprudence—*Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid*; and in linguistic literature. He also specialized in commenting on Aristotle’s works, producing three types of commentaries: the short, the middle, and the long. Among those published are *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *Generation and Corruption*, *On the Soul*, and *Metaphysics*. Among his most important philosophical works is *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The

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Incoherence of the Incoherence), which was translated into Latin and influenced Thomas Aquinas. He also authored two small but highly significant books: *Al-Kashf 'an Manahij al-Adilla* (The Exposition of the Methods of Proof) and *Fasl al-Maqal fi ma bayna al-Hikma wa al-Shari'a min al-Ittisal* (The Decisive Treatise on the Harmony between Philosophy and Sharia). (Al-Ahwani, 1985, p. 105).

He also wrote commentaries such as: *Sharh Urjuza Ibn Sina*, *Jawami' Siyasat Aflatun*, and *Al-Kashf 'an Manahij al-Adilla fi 'Aqa'id al-Milla*. Toward the end of his life, Ibn Rushd suffered a severe ordeal, as jurists turned the caliph against him, which led to the caliph's anger and his exile to a town near Córdoba called Lucena. He was later pardoned and moved to Marrakesh under Abu Ya'qub, where he died in 1198 and was buried there. Three months later, his body was transferred to Córdoba. After his death, philosophy ceased to flourish, as the essential condition for its prosperity—the dynamism of thought—was abolished in the name of religion. (Al-Ahwani, 1985, p. 108).

This was due to the fierce campaign launched against him by jurists and extremists who accused him of disbelief and heresy. However, the pressing question remains: what were the reasons that led to this ordeal?

Second: The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual – Ibn Rushd's Ordeal and Its Political and Religious Causes:

The cultural history of Arab countries reveals the suffering of the Arab intellectual from recurring cultural crises. These crises are not limited merely to critical discourse as part of the cultural reality, but rather aim to extinguish the spark of any idea deemed unacceptable to the thinker's mind, and to divert the path of any Enlightenment-oriented intellectual by paralyzing his pen, destroying him morally, undermining his intellectual production, distorting his beliefs, demonizing his ideas, and creating social aversion toward everything related to thought and culture. Consequently, any cultural thought that does not conform to prevailing ideologies in Arab societies—especially extremist ones—is symbolically assassinated.

The crisis of the Arab intellectual and thinker is not new. Al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldun, and others—scholars and thinkers who shaped this civilization in the Middle Ages—used the book as a human document. They faced assassinations, whether moral or physical, because of their ideas and scientific output, which conflicted with narrow-mindedness and the selfish interests of those who fought them and incited the public against them in order to marginalize them and distort their reputations and ideas.

We clarify this through the suffering endured by Ibn Rushd during his ordeal and reveal its true causes. Owing to Ibn Rushd's intellectual brilliance, Ibn Tufayl introduced him to the founder of the Almohad state, Abu Ya'qub Yusuf ibn 'Abd al-Mu'min, to undertake the

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task of translating and commenting on Aristotle’s works at the caliph’s request, in order to bring the purposes of these books closer to people’s understanding. The caliph admired Ibn Rushd’s intelligence and philosophical acumen, appointing him judge of Seville and then Córdoba, and later his personal physician after Ibn Tufayl’s death.

Ibn Rushd succeeded in authoring many books, which further enhanced his standing at the caliphal court. When Caliph Yusuf died in 580 AH / 1184 CE and was succeeded by his son Abu Yusuf Ya‘qub al-Mansur, Ibn Rushd’s closeness to the ruler increased, and he retained the same high status, becoming second only to al-Mansur in prominence within the state. Ibn Rushd is quoted in Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a’s book as saying: “When al-Mansur brought Ibn Rushd close and seated him beside him, he conversed with him. Then Ibn Rushd departed with a group of students and many of his companions waiting for him. They congratulated him on his rank with al-Mansur and his favor. Ibn Rushd said: ‘By God, this is not something that deserves congratulations, for the Commander of the Faithful has brought me suddenly closer than I ever hoped or aspired to.’”

However, after thirteen years of this close relationship, it turned into an ordeal from which Ibn Rushd suffered greatly. This was due to informers around the sultan and his entourage who succeeded in turning al-Mansur against him, leading to his resentment and the order to exile Ibn Rushd to Lucena, forbidding him to leave it. He also punished a group of notable scholars, ordering that they be confined elsewhere, claiming they were engaged in philosophy and the sciences. **(Badawi, /, pp. 108-109).**

In 593 AH, the caliph issued a decree condemning Ibn Rushd and a group with him, describing them as a faction likened to poisons circulating in bodies, ordering the burning and destruction of their books, and even imprisoning them. Al-Jabiri argues that the true reason for the Almohad caliph’s reversal against Ibn Rushd remains a mystery, though some assert it stemmed from misinterpretations of certain texts and phrases twisted to the worst possible meanings. A jurist of Ibn Rushd’s stature would not have engaged in such matters, nor would it be reasonable for his opponents to travel from Córdoba to Marrakesh to inform the caliph of this issue. Others believed the ordeal resulted from Ibn Rushd describing the caliph as “King of the Berbers,” though this was merely a scribal error. **(Al-Jabiri, 1994, p. 07).**

Historians such as ‘Abd al-Wahid al-Marrakushi and Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a recount that the true cause was Ibn Rushd’s book on animals, in which he described the giraffe and wrote: “I saw the giraffe at the King of the Berbers,” meaning al-Mansur. When this reached the caliph, he was offended, and it became one of the causes of his resentment and Ibn Rushd’s banishment. It is said Ibn Rushd apologized, claiming he meant “King of the Two Lands,” as Almohad rulers were described as kings of the land of the Maghreb and al-Andalus.

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Al-Marrakushi also mentions that Ibn Rushd's opponents informed Ya'qub al-Mansur of a phrase in one of Ibn Rushd's commentaries stating: "The planet Venus is one of the gods," detached from its context, making it seem as though Ibn Rushd himself asserted it, thus accusing him of polytheism. Ibn Rushd was summoned before prominent figures in Córdoba; when asked if the writing was his, he denied it and said, "May God curse its author." The caliph ordered those present to curse him, then expelled him in humiliation and banished anyone engaged in such sciences, threatening punishment and ordering the burning of philosophical books, except those on arithmetic, medicine, and astronomy.

For the caliph, this was merely an opportunity to exact revenge on Ibn Rushd for personal reasons—or for political reasons, to appease jurists and the public at a time of intensified conflict with Christian Spain. It is reported that when al-Mansur sought to wage jihad in al-Andalus in 591 AH, jurists refused to support him and discouraged people from joining a ruler who favored philosophers. Thus, he appeased the jurists by publicly burning Ibn Rushd's books and exiling him to Lucena, whose inhabitants were mostly Jews, while poets mocked and vilified Ibn Rushd.

This ordeal affected not only Ibn Rushd but also a group of notable figures placed under house arrest for engaging in philosophy and ancient sciences, including Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd, Abu Ja'far al-Dhahabi, and the jurist Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ibrahim, judge of Béjaïa. **(Badawi, /, p. 115).**

Hostility also came from Christian Europe, where religious authority dominated political power. Averroist discourse was opposed in two ways: through authoritative decrees condemning Ibn Rushd and his Christian followers, and through encouraging anti-Averroist discourse led by figures such as Saint Albert the Great and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Later, thinkers like Farah Antun and Muhammad 'Abduh developed Averroist discourse in their struggle against religious authority. **(Al-'Iraqi, 2005, p. 456).**

Among the strangest accounts is that reported by al-Ansari about public hostility in Córdoba. Ibn Rushd said: "The worst that befell me during the ordeal was that my son 'Abd Allah and I entered a mosque in Córdoba at the time of the afternoon prayer, and some of the rabble rose against us and expelled us."

Al-Ansari also reports that Ibn Rushd was accused of denying the existence of the people of 'Ad and their destruction by a violent wind, contradicting the Qur'an. However, no other source corroborates this account. **(Badawi, /, p. 111).** Ibn Rushd's inclination toward ancient sciences, his summaries of Aristotle's works, and his attempt to reconcile philosophy and Sharia led to accusations that he deviated from Sunni doctrine—phenomena repeated throughout Islamic history in both East and West. **(Badawi, /, pp. 112-113).**

Yet this does not fully explain al-Mansur's stance, as he himself was interested in ancient sciences. More plausibly, as al-Ansari suggests, personal and political reasons were

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involved, including Ibn Rushd’s closeness to Abu Yahya, governor of Córdoba. Most convincingly, the fierce competition between philosophers and jurists—especially intense in al-Andalus—played a decisive role, with religious scholars portraying philosophers as heretics. (Al-Fakhuri, (Vol. 2, p. 387)

Many argue that a political-scientific accusation moved the caliph to prosecute Ibn Rushd, particularly due to his book *Summaries of Plato’s Politics*, which discussed sensitive issues such as governance and women, endorsing women’s leadership as Plato did. Ibn Rushd also criticized Andalusian political realities, praised collective governance over tyrannical rule, and exposed the excesses of despotic rulers, provoking public resentment and attacks against him. (Al-Jabiri, 1994, p. 08).

Al-Jabiri concludes that Ibn Rushd’s ordeal was primarily political, compounded by his political critique and alleged association with Abu Yahya, who aspired to seize power.

Regarding religious reasons, al-Jabiri argues that accusations of disbelief were merely a pretext. Ibn Rushd’s ordeal was fundamentally that of philosophy itself—a call, since Socrates, to care for the self through knowing oneself. What disturbed jurists was not atheism, but the liberation of believers’ relationship with themselves through reason. Free thought inherently threatens established institutions of truth—religious and political alike. Thus, Ibn Rushd’s ordeal was not that of reason, but of freedom: the courage to contemplate existence without guardianship, seeking truth beyond rigid religious traditions.

Third: The Status of Ibn Rushd and the Characteristics of His Thought:

Ibn Rushd represents the pinnacle of medieval thinking. He is considered the most famous and greatest philosopher of Islam and one of the philosophers who had the strongest influence on European thought. This is primarily due to his commentaries on Aristotle’s works and his deep understanding of them, surpassing that of earlier Muslim philosophers. This distinction stems from the fact that Ibn Rushd had access to a greater number of translations of Aristotle’s works than those known to Eastern philosophers. Through comparison and critical examination of these different translations, he arrived at many of Aristotle’s authentic views. He was also able to grasp many of Aristotle’s original ideas despite the distortions present in those translations. All of this reflects Ibn Rushd’s extraordinary intellectual brilliance, comparable to that of Aristotle himself.

Ibn Rushd also excelled in medicine, though he did not practice medicine for material gain among the general public. In addition, he was a highly competent jurist. However, his fame is mainly attributed to his genius in metaphysical (theological) philosophy. Among the most important characteristics of Ibn Rushd’s intellectual personality are the following:

1. His intellectual fairness toward philosophers: The source of Ibn Rushd's genius lies in his stance toward philosophy and philosophers. For him, the validity of an opinion is established through demonstrative proof, regardless of whether its proponent shares the same religious creed or not. Thus, he emphasized the necessity of benefiting from the efforts of earlier thinkers. This is clearly expressed in his book *Fasl al-Maqal* (The Decisive Treatise), where he states: "It is incumbent upon us to seek assistance, in what we pursue, from the statements of those who preceded us in this matter, whether or not they shared our religious community... If the ancients have already thoroughly examined what is required for rational investigation, then we should turn to their books and examine what they have said. If it is correct, we accept it from them; and if it is incorrect, we draw attention to it". (Rushd., 1986, p. 32).

This indicates that Ibn Rushd approached intellectual matters with impartial reason. Consequently, error is rare in his judgments, as he sought truth for its own sake, regardless of creed or ideology—*know the truth and you will know its people*.

2. His reliance on reason and the clarity of his judgments:

Ibn Rushd's dependence on reason made his opinions and conclusions clear and precise. The reason he refers to is the intellect that apprehends intelligible realities related to existence, not non-existence. It is the intellect that perceives beings in their order and understands the relationships between them—their causes and essences—rather than abstract universals detached from matter. Thus, reason has limits in his philosophy. As stated in *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence): "Philosophy examines everything that has come in the Law. If it apprehends it in the same way as the Law does, then both apprehensions coincide, and this constitutes the highest level of knowledge. If it does not apprehend it in the manner intended by the Law, philosophy declares the deficiency of human reason in this matter and affirms that it is something apprehended only by the Law". (Rushd, 2003, p. 12).

3. Reconciling the apparent and the hidden meanings of revelation:

Ibn Rushd resolved the relationship between the theoretical and practical dimensions of life by acknowledging that there is a domain in which reason is valid and a domain in which religion operates. In human practical life, some matters may be valid philosophically without necessarily being valid religiously.

If philosophy and religion agree, knowledge is more complete; if they differ, Ibn Rushd's position is clear.

Philosophical inquiry is directed toward a specific group—the seekers of truth—and philosophical texts have a single apparent meaning. Sharia, on the other hand, is directed toward all segments of society, aiming at their happiness. Therefore, it must be understood in different ways and meanings according to circumstances. Hence, Ibn Rushd affirmed that

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Sharia has both an apparent (exoteric) and an inner (esoteric) meaning. **(Farroukh, 1972, p. 649).**

When a conflict arises between religious texts and rational demonstration, Ibn Rushd resorts to interpretation (*ta’wil*), defined as shifting a word from its literal meaning to a metaphorical one, under strict conditions. He states: “We are certain that whenever demonstrative proof leads to a conclusion that contradicts the apparent meaning of the Law, that apparent meaning is subject to interpretation according to the rules of Arabic interpretation... Indeed, whoever practices this method and aims at reconciling reason and revelation will experience an immense increase in certainty”. **(Farroukh, 1972, p. 652).** Ibn Rushd restricted legitimate interpretation to those endowed with natural intelligence, moral virtue, and mastery of demonstrative reasoning.

He also positioned himself both with and against theologians (*mutakallimun*) regarding textual interpretation. He opposed them in publicly disclosing interpretations to the masses, as this, in his view, distorted religion and confused people. Interpretation should be limited to philosophers firmly grounded in knowledge, while the public should adhere to the apparent meanings.

Thus, scholars must reconcile wisdom and Sharia, since truth does not contradict truth. As he states: “If the Law is true and calls for rational inquiry leading to knowledge of the truth, then we, the Muslims, know with certainty that demonstrative reasoning cannot contradict what is stated in the Law”. **(Rushd., 1986, p. 35).** Ibn Rushd thus affirmed two levels of understanding religion:

- One for scholars—the people of demonstration—who are entitled to interpret texts rationally.
- Another for the general public, who must adhere to the literal meaning without interpretation. **(Al-Mahdali, 1987, pp. 180-181).**

Fourth: How to Revive Arab-Islamic Culture:

In addressing this issue, inspiration may be drawn from Salama Musa’s ideas in his book *What Is Renaissance?*, where he discusses the conditions of genius. He argues that what hinders genius and cultural revival are social conditions, including laws and traditions that punish thinkers and suppress original thought. He notes that the worst aspect of restrictive laws is when society itself supports them, especially when the majority aligns with such constraints. He cites examples showing how censorship and fear of ideas prevent the emergence of intellectual genius. **(Musa, 2000, p. 154).**

Musa further emphasizes that genius, like language—the greatest medium of intelligence—is a social phenomenon. If society neither needs genius nor tolerates it,

brilliance will appear only among rebellious individuals who are quickly exiled, punished, or destroyed, as happened to Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Nafis, and others.

He concludes that genius requires a free society, unburdened by rigid traditions, and a non-authoritarian government unafraid of new ideas. **(Musa, 2000, p. 157)**. In addition, the thinker must possess humanitarian values and a universal outlook, transcending local confines.

Conclusion:

We conclude that Arab and Muslim intellectuals must bear the banner of Arab-Islamic culture and revolt against all obstacles to renaissance and enlightenment. This requires engaging deeply with the intellectual heritage of predecessors—particularly the rational and Enlightenment-oriented thought of Ibn Rushd—and rooting his legacy in contemporary Arab reality.

Ibn Rushd's philosophy dominated European intellectual life for four centuries, influencing and provoking debate among philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and later Scholastic thinkers. His profound impact on European thought attests to the enduring value of his philosophy.

Ultimately, genius and intelligence belong to those who rebel against stagnation and injustice, who defend truth despite suffering. The Arab intellectual remains in constant struggle with authority and societal pressures, yet genius is patience and perseverance in overcoming hardship to achieve change for the better.

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