Grounding the Recipient's Critical Consciousness in the Light of Abd al-Malik Murtad's Theory of Criticism

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Abstract:

Criticism is a major foundation through which the literary text renews and develops itself, since it provides mechanisms for evaluating and rectifying literary works. It is also a set of analytical procedures that approach the text according to a specific critical perspective. Yet the concept has recently generated considerable debate over its meaning and limits, with each critical school seeking to affirm its own vision. This article examines this problematic notion through the thought of Dr Abd al-Malik Murtad, a major figure in contemporary Arab criticism. Murtad did not merely define, simplify, and present criticism to the reader; he also redirected the recipient's consciousness and reshaped critical awareness by deconstructing concepts and raising questions that move the reader beyond a single perspective toward a broader epistemological space, free from Western critical dominance and attentive to Arab textual specificity.

Key words: criticism; metacriticism; Arab criticism; Western criticism; critical consciousness.

Introduction

Criticism is the mechanism through which the quality of a literary work may be assessed and its aesthetic value and points of fascination brought to light. At the same time, it refines and develops this literary product, since the primary task of criticism is constructive rather than destructive: it identifies gaps in order to remedy them, not to diminish the value of the work or merely expose its shortcomings. In this sense, criticism functions as a developmental force across literary genres, guiding them towards greater maturity and formal completion.

Yet in the Arab world in particular, criticism has increasingly been treated in personal rather than scholarly terms. Many writers now perceive criticism as a depreciation of the work and, by implication, of its author. This is an undeniable reality. Criticism has consequently shifted from being a restorative, corrective, and refining practice into a trigger for personal conflicts. Its function has become impoverished, and what often remains is a series of hollow compliments that glorify both the work and its author, emphasizing his ability and craftsmanship while forgetting, or deliberately ignoring, that reducing criticism to the praise of the positive aspects of literary works, through exaggeration and glorification, without attending to their deficiencies, is a form of criticism that kills literariness and creativity. Writers have multiplied, criticism has aged, the function of the critic has declined, and both literary and critical production have weakened.

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This article seeks to foreground the concepts of the critic and criticism from the perspective of one of the most important Arab critics. It also attempts to clarify the role of the critic beyond praise, inflated commendation, and blind allegiance to the writer rather than to the book. This is achieved through an examination of the works of Dr ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad, particularly the prefaces to his books, which may be regarded as keys or guiding lights that enable us to enter the body of these critical texts without losing our way.

Through these prefaces, the article also seeks to address some of the central questions raised by Dr ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad in his writings. Although these questions may appear simple, innocent, or routine, he answered them with a critical consciousness which, if reactivated, could breathe life once again into the body of criticism and redirect it towards serving our literary production, much of which has become, in general, flaccid, devoid of depth and philosophical grounding, and immersed in subjectivity. These questions include: What is criticism? Who is the critic? Before these two questions, what do reading and writing mean? What is their relationship to criticism? What is the relationship between criticism and philosophy? The article therefore attempts to examine, seriously and in depth, the issues addressed by ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad, and to gather the critical fragments he dispersed throughout his works on this subject, in order ultimately to understand where Arab criticism is heading and how it may be redirected anew.

1. Writing as a Substitute for Reading

The contemporary Arab literary scene is witnessing a remarkable proliferation of literary writing. Our libraries and book fairs are inundated with vast quantities of books, while the act of reading itself appears to be almost entirely absent, except under the pressure of specialization or academic research. To be more candid, most acts of reading are specialized readings that rarely move beyond their field except to return to it or enrich it. If we exclude a very small minority, we find that this passion for reading fades once a given research project has been completed or a particular idea has been defended, even among specialists. This statement may seem severe, even accusatory, yet intellectual defects must be exposed and their roots examined if they are to be treated. Approaching them with superiority, or concealing them by pointing to a few exceptions that still regard reading as a way of life, will certainly have disastrous consequences over time.

If we reflect on the Holy Qur'an, we find that the first revealed verse was "Read," not "Write." Reading is the act through which civilizations have been built. Greek civilization would not have achieved what it did had its thinkers not added vowels and made education available to the majority. Likewise, Islamic civilization would not have attained its historical stature had the early scholars, as we now call them in our books, not championed the act of reading, founded the House of Wisdom, encouraged translation, and multiplied scholarly gatherings. In this way, all civilizations were established only after activating the act of reading.

Yet we have replaced this act with writing. We now encounter novelists who have read only a few novels by local writers, and poets who do not know the difference between prose and poetry.

Ambiguity, which was once a poetic feature capable of moving us from one state to another and from one spiritual or aesthetic station to another, has become a device that shackles poetic works and leaves us feeling helpless as we contemplate fragmented verbal puzzles in which meaning resembles a labyrinth from which escape seems impossible, let alone full apprehension. Then, after many of our poets exhausted their store of poeticity and their literary vocabulary, they turned to haiku as though it were the solution in which they had found their long-sought refuge, without research, awareness, or even sufficient knowledge of the nature of poetry and poeticity in the other tradition, of the rhetorical images it adopts, or of the modes of writing specific to one poetic form rather than another.

There are, of course, pioneering exceptions. However, we are speaking here of the broader reality of Arab literature, especially Algerian literature; and reality is measured by the general condition, not by the small persevering minority whose voices have grown hoarse as they attempt to rescue the literary scene, while the other side refuses to listen, particularly in light of the spread of publishing houses that show little concern for distinguishing the good from the poor. Consequently, reading has declined and writing has taken its place. The role of criticism and of the critic has likewise receded, and every serious attempt made by committed critics concerned with the literary work and the intellectual scene is met with disregard and rejection.

2. Reading / Writing

Unless writing is guided by a consciousness capable of mastering ideas, reworking them, scrutinizing them, and presenting them as a fully matured product after subjecting them to the fire of deconstruction, reconstruction, criticism, and correction, it becomes mere regurgitation and a rereading of what others have written. It will inevitably fall into ambiguity, superficiality, and subjectivism. As Dr ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad states: "How many are those who write without knowing what they write, for whom they write, or why they write? Although every writer may claim that he knows those about whom he writes, or at least the subject about which he writes, such a claim may remain in need of proof and demonstration. This is because writing often carries its author away, so that he no longer knows which path to take or which road to follow, and he becomes lost in a language that slips with him into worlds he had not originally known." (Mortad, 2010, p.10)

What is worse than this bewilderment is the widening of the gap between writer and reader, causing readers to turn away from reading. At that point, the writer is faced with two choices: either to work on himself and return to reading, since reading alone is capable of rescuing him from such bewilderment; or to claim, as we have increasingly heard from some writers and even critics, that he does not write for "the herd," but for serious and perceptive readers. Some may even claim that they write in defence of the act of writing itself, that they write for themselves, and that they do not await a reader's judgement. In all cases, writing, after once being a constructive intellectual and critical activity, is reduced to mere ink on paper or to recycled concepts that time has already surpassed. Murtad reinforces this point when he states: "Writing is the demolition of previous writing, its dismantling… Therefore, those who abstain from dismantling and reject it will most likely be unable to write anything at all, or at least anything of significance." (Mortad, 2010, p.8)

Writing, therefore, does not depend on the merely literal element, but on the intellectual or informational substance contained within letters and clothed in words. Writing that does not activate the principle of dismantling cannot be relied upon to build thought or consciousness, for it is a form of repetition that soon produces boredom and aversion.

The simplest example of this can be found in critical writings that have persistently followed in the footsteps of Western criticism until they reached advanced stages of distorting Arabic texts. Such writings have become little more than the dismemberment and fragmentation of these texts, the twisting of their structures, and the production of deformed critical entities. This is because they have failed to take into account the nature and specificity of the Arabic text, just as they have failed to consider cultural difference. They have not proceeded from the conscious existential questions that must inform any critical operation. Nor have they attempted to refine these methods; rather, they have approached them submissively, as though standing before the authority and dominance of method. Consequently, most of our critical approaches have become repetitive and similar models, differing only in the corpora to which they are applied.

Furthermore, immanent textual methods have often been regarded as bourgeois approaches that elevate themselves above both the writer and content. They attempt to make meaning speak through form alone, while abolishing references, however sacred they may be. They turn towards internal structures through enumeration, deconstruction, and reconstruction, bypassing everything they classify as external to the text. This is unsurprising, since these methods originally emerged in response to the capitalist current and its philosophy. They therefore had to submit to its logic, a logic that bypasses the human being, his thought, and his voice, replacing him with a machine whose primary concern is to ensure its own survival and continuity. Criticism was thus submerged in the details of form so that meaning could be deliberately neglected, because it wished to hear only its own voice: the voice of the centre, while cancelling the voice of the margin.

Accordingly, Dr ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad proposes three modes of reading: consumptive reading, which produces unwritten texts, or rather texts written in the reader's mind; professional reading, which produces a written literary text; and productive-interpretive reading, to which he gives the name criticism (Mortad, 2010, p.13). He also favours the term *reading* over *criticism*, as methodological approaches have shifted from prescription to description and from evaluation to analysis. Criticism, by contrast, entails adopting a position grounded in a philosophical or ideological framework. Reading is therefore more objective than criticism (Boumendjel, 2016, pp. 42–43).

3. Criticism / Creativity

Many critics insist that literary criticism is pure creativity, insofar as it is capable of containing the literary text and reshaping it according to its own interpretive visions. It can also deconstruct and reconstruct the text, regardless of the possible defects involved in such reconstruction. In recent stages of contemporary Arab critical thought, an urgent question has also emerged: which possesses greater status and authority, the creative writer, or the critic who approaches this creativity, legitimizes and elevates it, or else casts it down? This often takes place under the authority of the opinions, schools, and currents to which the critic belongs, regardless of whether there are common grounds between the writer's environment and the critics, or even between the school to which the writer belongs and the one to which the critic ingratiates himself in order to triumph over the text. Here, we may pose the more important question: what benefit does criticism offer the text, especially when critical discourse repeatedly speaks of illuminating and shedding light on texts, and when the expression "in the light of this or that method" has become dominant in university dissertations?

Method is the first path upon which the researcher may rely in approaching literary texts. It is the route or mechanism through which texts are deconstructed in order to uncover their modes of

construction and deepen our knowledge of them. In this sense, method offers a precise opportunity for analysis, away from thematic digressions that may lead to fragmentation.

Dr ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad categorically denies that criticism is pure creativity. Rather, he argues that criticism must preserve features that distinguish it from the literary text. He states: "There is no clear proof of the truth of criticism, just as there is no evident sign of its falsity either. Perhaps the only fixed thing is the reality of the literary text itself." (Mortad, 1983, p.13). Accordingly, the text remains the first genuine foundation, while criticism is no more than a reading procedure. Houcine Khemri (2011) advances the same view in *Narratives of Criticism*, arguing that critical writing is a transformative process that rewrites the text from a critical perspective, moving it from the level of literary creation to that of criticism (p. 35).

While we fully agree with the critic's position, we are today almost confronted with critical models that, in some cases, possess a high degree of poeticity and aesthetic refinement. The language of criticism itself has become subject to the logic of experimentation. Some critics no longer use the critical language whose rigour and authority we had come to know; instead, they employ rhetorical images and an attractive, aesthetically charged language. This may invite us to examine the poeticity of the contemporary critical text, since generic interpenetration no longer occurs only among literary texts, but has extended to critical texts as well.

In this regard, Murtad writes: "We apologise for what does not require apology, to learned readers and their masters, and to those who do not favour beautiful Arabic and elegant style, if we have ventured to disturb them with something that may be considered stylistic beauty while engaging in the writing of criticism and theory. If some people count this against us as a form of literary crime, then we commit it with premeditation." (Mortad, 2009, Pp.12-13).

Moreover, even if we accept the idea that criticism is a creative process, we would thereby condition it to abandon its evaluative role and become an end in itself. In other words, we would approach criticism in search of its creative dimension alone. This is precisely what happened with some contemporary methods, which became ends in themselves, while the text disappeared entirely or was deliberately made to disappear. The language of criticism, too, has become a language that draws attention to itself rather than to the text. Critical texts themselves have consequently come to require someone to illuminate them and decode their signs.

True criticism, as Murtad maintains, and as Robert Kaner before him suggested, "is not only that which can add to creativity, but also that which can be added to it at the same time." (Mortad, 2010, p.18). Thus, criticism is added to creativity; it is not pure creativity. It is far removed from verbosity, sophistry, impressionism, and dullness, and it remains close to objectivity while simultaneously resisting mechanical rigidity (Mortad, 2010, p.18).

In our view, criticism can neither be creative nor be added to creativity unless it is truly able to free itself from the burdens of strict methodology and become flexible rather than rigid. For this reason, ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad repeatedly called for the hybridization of method. This is confirmed in his statement: "The hybridization of any method is necessary in order to revitalize its tools and activate its procedures, so that it may become more capable of productivity." (Mortad, 2005, p.14). The method is less important than the subject under study; it is simply a means of examining it. Hijazi (2004, p. 14) makes the same point in *The Problem of Method in Contemporary Arabic Criticism*.

From Murtad's perspective, critical creativity can only arise through experimentation at the level of criticism, if this definition is acceptable. As for following the steps of others one after

another, this amounts to constrained regurgitation, devoid of sound critical thought. It harms the creative work more than it benefits it, and shackles it more than it allows it to soar (Mortad, 1944, p.233). He also favours an open methodological synthesis over readings confined to a single method, combining the rhetorical heritage with modern analytical tools drawn from Western systems of knowledge (Akak, 2024, p. 741).

4. Contemporary Arab Criticism: Existence / Theory

ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad opens this concern with the question: "Does there exist a contemporary Arab criticism that rises to the level of theory and attains the status of a critical school?" (Mortad, 2010, p.18). He answers this question with a critical professionalism that reveals the depth of his critical consciousness. Although he acknowledges the existence of Arab critics, he denies the existence of an authentically Arab criticism. This is because Arab critics have been unable to sever the umbilical cord that ties them to Western criticism. Despite their familiarity with this criticism, they have remained confined to the stages of assimilation, understanding, and application. Despite the breadth and abundance of their knowledge, they have been unable to move beyond Western criticism. In our view, the reason lies in their failure to practise a critique of Western criticism itself. More precisely, they refrained from subjecting it to a rigorous reading capable of reshaping some of its aspects, trimming some of its philosophical assumptions, and adapting some of its premises and procedures to the Arab creative, literary, and critical mentality.

One may argue that there have been serious attempts to reread Western criticism, such as Dr ʿAbd al-Aziz Hammuda's work in *The Convex Mirrors*. In the introduction to this book, Hammuda admits that he committed two "sins," the first of which was simplifying information as much as possible, a practice rejected by modernists who insist on viewing Western criticism through a convex mirror that beautifies and magnifies it (Hammuda, 1998, pp. 6–7). Here, however, it must be said that these attempts, despite their seriousness, remained individual and were not grounded in a collective scholarly institution. They also carried a considerable degree of subjectivity and bias, as though they constituted either absolute rejection or acceptance enveloped in much rejection. Perhaps this was because these critics saw the Arab mind, and behind it the Arab text, groaning and floundering under the weight of Western method. Their chief concern, therefore, was to rescue the text, without thinking of an alternative that would not abolish Western critical method, but would instead take from it only what was needed, without excess.

The clearest evidence that we remain subject to Western criticism and are still far removed from the production of an authentically contemporary Arab criticism is that, to this day, our university curricula teach contemporary criticism and contemporary critical methods as they were produced in the West. Even when we teach contemporary Arab criticism, we merely try to listen for echoes of these Western methods within Arab criticism. Arab semiotics, for instance, is nothing more than the semiotic lesson as understood by Western critics, or rather as transmitted by Arab critics from the West. We may therefore say that contemporary Arab criticism is Western criticism wearing an Arab cloak, which makes it resemble a madman repeating the statements of major Western philosophers and critics without being able to articulate his own view. If he does disagree with them, he does so without confidence, because he believes that the Western mind is more enlightened. This is perhaps one of the manifestations and by-products of Western modernity.

Murtad also places us before the mirror of history, from which the advocates of dubious modernity insist on severing ties and which they seek to diminish. Through this mirror, we see that the ancient critical school has every right to occupy a place among the decisive schools in the

history of reflective human thought. It is as though Murtad wants us, at least as critics, to be honest with ourselves: to recognize our inability to formulate a thought capable of rescuing us, and to acknowledge our dazzled fascination with what comes to us from elsewhere, even though we had no precedence in formulating it. From the outset, he "defines his relationship with Western theory through a rejection of unquestioning acceptance … tending towards a form of counter-writing and counter-thinking" (Ouaghlissi, 2009, p. 310). This is the stance Arabic criticism should adopt in its engagement with Western critical thought.

4.1.What Is Criticism?

As Dr Murtad attempts to grasp the threads that may answer the question "What is criticism?", he asks: "Is it reasonable to inquire into an extremely complex, highly intractable, and obscure problem with such a small question?" (Murtad, 2010, p.49). He then offers a number of answers in an attempt to address this question. Among these is his assertion that criticism is divided into two types: theoretical and applied. In both cases, its aim is to reach the truth of the text. Its definition is therefore determined by the purpose it seeks to achieve, namely serving the text and revealing its aesthetics, despite the view that the truth of the text cannot exist outside its language (Murtad, 2010, p.51).

Murtad then returns to the more important question: Is criticism necessary for creativity, or is it merely speech about speech? In truth, we wish to point out that criticism has long since lost its meaning and purpose. It no longer contributes to the development of the literary work or to the revelation of its aesthetics. Historical criticism treated the text as a historical document; at best, it searched for the real and the imaginary, especially in narrative texts. Social criticism devoted all its efforts to capturing social phenomena within texts, aligning itself with realism in its interpretive orientation. Psychological criticism, meanwhile, regarded the literary text as a document suitable for clinical analysis and began searching for the writer's complexes and illnesses.

Then came immanent methods with the advent of New Criticism, one of whose central pillars was the abolition of commitment and the adoption of immanent study. This approach, too, moved away from aesthetics, from the development of literature, from the refinement of experience, and from the artistic exploration of the depths of the text. It imprisoned us within language, and we have scarcely managed to escape from that prison. We no longer see the text or meaning outside the limits of the sentence, the word, the phrase, or even the single letter. Criticism thus weakened and became a mere mechanism or procedure that deconstructs, then forgets how to reassemble; it dismantles, then departs, leaving the text fragmented and deformed. Neither contextual nor immanent methods served the text. Criticism therefore weakened and began to flounder in details unrelated to creative experience. Here, Murtad maintains that it is useful to have methods through whose procedures we approach texts, but our absolute submission to them deprives us of the possibility of creativity and of the development of both literary and critical production (Murtad, 1995, p.207).

One of the most significant outcomes of this kind of criticism is the state of emaciation now witnessed in the literary scene, both in narrative and poetry. After once producing *muʿallaqāt*, we now have the haiku poem. After narrative experience had once been rich in its details, captivating in its language, and responsive to the needs of its present moment, it has become mere linguistic, psychological, and even temporal padding. Colloquial dialect has also become the language of fictional protagonists. After ambiguity was once a sign of weakness in poetry, it has become a mask worn by the contemporary poet to conceal linguistic poverty and lack of mastery over

imagery and rhetoric. All of this is the result of a modernity we seized upon as a starving person seizes a charitable morsel.

5. Metacriticism

The most effective course available to us at this stage is metacriticism, for it constitutes the only procedure capable of enabling us to move beyond Western criticism, whose mechanisms have consumed us just as we have consumed them. It also grants us the possibility of reactivating our critical heritage, which still groans under the weight of its old version, a version that the advocates of modernity regard as no longer serving the contemporary literary moment and as having been surpassed.

Because ʿAbd al-Malik Murtad writes with critical consciousness, he repeatedly attempts to root many critical concepts within the heritage system. He states: "Whoever objects to the claim that ancient Arab critics practised metacriticism must first have the courage to deny that the Arabs actually practised criticism… for the Europeans themselves acknowledge the existence of ancient Arab criticism, represented by a number of critics, among them Ibn Qutayba." (Murtad, 2010, p.229). Accordingly, Murtad acknowledges the precedence of Arab criticism and, at the same time, recognizes the professionalism of Western criticism in modernization and activation, without becoming an imitative, dependent, and alienated follower, nor a reactionary, repetitive, and closed-minded thinker.

It is therefore necessary to point out that many terms which appear modern, indeed contemporary, already have a presence in our critical heritage. Yet this presence has remained confined to an initial stage, meaning that we cannot use its old form to approach a contemporary text. However, if we return to this heritage and attempt to modernize it through a process of cross-fertilization with modern and contemporary terminology, without limiting ourselves to a single perspective, usually the Western perspective emerging from Western culture and philosophy, and if we then activate it according to our own linguistic logic, this would bring about a genuine revolution in literary criticism.

This is precisely what Dr Murtad had already undertaken. Dr Ahmed Youssef observes that Murtad "did not come to this new criticism stripped of all knowledge of heritage; on the contrary, heritage occupied a larger share in his studies, leaving no room for doubt regarding his ability to combine heritage and modernity" (Youssef, 2007, p. 467). This enabled him to proceed from solid ground, which made his position firm and refined both his critical consciousness and his creative experience.

The most important outcome that may be gained from modernizing heritage criticism is distancing ourselves from critical luxury, or rather from critical verbosity. Western methods in general, and here I refer particularly to modern and contemporary critical methods, have moved far away from the purpose of literature. More precisely, they either avoid, or feel considerable embarrassment in raising, the question of value: How has this or that literature contributed to the development of human consciousness in general and Arab consciousness in particular? What are the issues that serve the present moment and that the writer should have adopted, but instead avoided or neglected?

Writing, when reconsidered in this light, is nothing but a form of human expression. It must serve human consciousness, develop human thought, and frame human ideologies. Here lies the role of metacriticism, which must focus on such questions if we are to revive literature and its mission. It must also move literature away from the slogans of art for art's sake and from the

resulting claim that literature is an end in itself. This, then, is the function of metacriticism: it must clarify how literature, across its various genres, can reshape the recipient's consciousness. More importantly, it must move the recipient from a lower level of consciousness to a higher one. Put differently, criticism must return once again to the question of commitment and to other issues that once formed a foundational axis in the critical process, before being abolished in response to claims and visions entirely distant from our mode of thought and our frame of reference.

Finally, it must be noted that, through his critical practice, Dr Murtad did not merely shape our critical consciousness as recipients; he also redirected it through the breadth of his knowledge and mastery. He made us turn towards heritage. He was never satisfied with merely translating Western terms; rather, he constantly searched for heritage-based alternatives to them. The clearest evidence of this is his use of *hayyiz* instead of "space," and his heritage-based grounding of this term through reliance on language and ancient rhetorical concepts.

In this way, he recalibrates the compass of the reader or recipient who is dazzled by contemporary criticism, whether in its terminology or its procedures, and redirects him towards heritage. He also consistently sought to respect the specificity of the Arabic text, calling for the hybridization of method at a time when others regarded method as sacred to the point of explicit submission to it. He further clarified the boundaries governing the writer, the critic, and the reader, so that each may serve the text objectively.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the formation of the recipient's critical consciousness in the light of Abd al-Malik Murtad's theory of criticism. It has shown that, for Murtad, criticism is not a secondary activity that merely follows the literary text, nor is it a decorative discourse that praises the writer and legitimizes the work. Rather, criticism is a conscious reading practice that evaluates, questions, dismantles, reconstructs, and redirects both the literary text and the reader's relation to it.

It demonstrated that Murtad's critical project is grounded in a double movement: openness to modern critical methods, on the one hand, and resistance to passive dependence on Western criticism, on the other. His call for the hybridization of method, his insistence on the specificity of the Arabic text, and his constant return to the Arab critical heritage all reveal a critical vision that refuses imitation without falling into closure. In this sense, Murtad does not reject Western criticism absolutely; rather, he calls for its interrogation, adaptation, and reactivation within an Arab epistemological and aesthetic framework.

Accordingly, metacriticism becomes a necessary procedure for renewing Arab criticism. It enables the critic to question inherited methods, expose their limits, and recover the productive potential of Arab critical heritage without reproducing it mechanically. Through this process, criticism may regain its constructive function and contribute to the development of literary production, the refinement of aesthetic judgement, and the elevation of the recipient's consciousness.

Ultimately, Murtad's contribution lies in his attempt to recalibrate the relationship between the text, the critic, and the reader. He restores criticism to its role as an intellectual and aesthetic practice capable of serving the literary work without submitting blindly to method or reducing the text to formal procedures. His theory therefore offers a valuable horizon for contemporary Arab

criticism, one that seeks renewal through consciousness, methodological flexibility, and a renewed engagement with heritage.

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