

From Criticism of Orientalism to Criticism of Occidentalism: A Reading in the Jabri Project

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Abstract:

Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri (1935-2010) is considered one of the most prominent Arab intellectual voices in the modern era, and the most influential in the march of contemporary Arab thought. His intellectual project was characterized by inclusiveness and depth, and by constant preoccupation with issues of renaissance and modernization in the Arab world. This project has witnessed fundamental transformations and developments, the most important of which was the transition from the critique of Orientalism, which dominated the beginnings of its intellectual career, to the critique of Occidentalism, which formed a milestone in its thinking.

Keywords: criticism, occidentalism, Jabri, reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

The This research aims to trace the trajectory of this shift in Al-Jabri's intellectual project, and to analyze the motivations and shifts that led him from criticizing Western discourse about the East to criticizing

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Arab discourse about the West. He also seeks to highlight the manifestations of criticism of Westernization in his intellectual works, and to assess the importance and currentity of this criticism in contemporary Arab thought, and its role in building an independent Arab cultural identity and a balanced relationship with the West. In this context, we pose the central problem of the research: **What are the most prominent efforts that Al-Jabri presented to the intellectual arena through the surprising project?**

First: Al-Jabri and the Critique of Orientalism: Dismantling the Western Discourse on the East

The critique of Orientalism represents the cornerstone of the early stages of the Al-Jabri intellectual project, as it proceeded from dismantling the Western Orientalist discourse on the East, and revealing its hidden mechanisms and objectives. Al-Jabri realized early on that Orientalism is not just neutral academic studies about the East, but a cognitive, political and cultural discourse, intrinsically aimed at forming a stereotypical image of the East, serving the interests of the West and its colonial hegemony.

1. The concept of Orientalism in Al-Jabri:

Understanding Jabri Orientalism in a broader context than just linguistic and historical studies. He considered it a **“cognitive apparatus”** that produces knowledge about the East, and shapes the West's perceptions of it (Al-Jabri, *We and Heritage*, 1980). Al-Jabri was influenced in his critique of Orientalism by the work of Edward Said, especially his book "Orientalism" (1978), which provided a leading critical analysis of Orientalist discourse. Said says in his definition of Orientalism: **"Orientalism is a pattern of the relationship between the West and the East, a pattern of awareness of the East, a pattern of control over the East, a pattern of reshaping the East, a pattern of depicting the East, and a pattern of governance over the East."**¹ (However, Al-Jabri did not

fully adopt Said's vision, but proceeded from it to develop his own vision of Orientalism, focusing on the cognitive and methodological aspect of Orientalism.

Al-Jabri believes that Orientalism has several basic characteristics, including:

- **Western self-centeredness:** Orientalism starts from a Western position centered on itself, which considers the West the center of the world and the civilizational standard, while the East is the backward and primitive "other." This is confirmed by Al-Jabri by saying: **"Orientalism is a vision of the world from a Western point of view, that is, it is a vision of the world that is carried out from a center that is the West, and the West is considered the standard and measure"**² (
- **Profiling and reductionism:** Orientalism is based on reducing the East to ready-made stereotypes, ignoring the diversity and complexity of eastern societies, selectively focusing on negative and distorted aspects, and generalizing them to the entire East. This is what Abdullah Al-Arawi refers to by saying: **"Orientalism is the reduction of the East into one stereotypical image, a negative and distorted image, that ignores all the diversity and complexity that exists in the East"**³
- **Colonial historiography:** Orientalism is closely linked to Western colonial history, and serves the goals of colonial domination by justifying and beautifying it, and providing "scientific" and "cognitive" justifications for colonial intervention in the East. This is explained by Halim Barakat by saying: **"Orientalism is part of the Western colonial project, and aims to justify and beautify colonialism, and provide cognitive justifications for it"**⁴ (

- **The reductionist vision of the Eastern mind:** Orientalism believes that the Eastern mind is a superstitious mind, unable to think scientifically and rationally, lacks the ability to develop and progress, and is characterized by inertia and backwardness. This is what Al-Jabri strongly criticizes, stressing that **"Orientalism is based on a reductionist vision of the Eastern mind, which considers it a superstitious mind unable to think rationally and scientifically"** ⁽⁵⁾

2. Manifestations of Orientalism Criticism in Al-Jabri's Works:

Criticism of Orientalism was manifested in many of al-Jabri's intellectual works, especially in his early works such as "We and Heritage" and "The Arab Mind." This criticism can be felt at several levels:

- **Deconstructing Orientalist Concepts:** Al-Jabri deconstructed many of the Orientalist concepts popularized in Western discourse about the East, such as the concept of "Oriental Reason," "Oriental Tyranny," and "Religious Intolerance." He has shown how these concepts are fabricated and have no basis in reality, and that they are aimed at distorting the image of the East and justifying Western domination. For example, in his critique of the concept of "Oriental Mind", Al-Jabri asserts that **"this concept is an Orientalist concept par excellence, aimed at reducing the Oriental mind to a negative stereotype, and portraying it as a mind unable to think rationally and scientifically"**⁶ (Al-Jabri, *Al-Aql Al-Arabi*, 1984, p. 255).
- **Revealing the ideological backgrounds of Orientalism:** Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism was not limited to the cognitive level, but extended to revealing the ideological and political backgrounds that drive it. He showed how Orientalism serves the interests of the colonial powers, aims to entrench Western

hegemony over the East, and provides ideological justifications for this hegemony.

- **Defending Arab cultural identity:** Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism formed part of a broader project to defend Arab cultural identity and counter Western cultural domination. He saw Orientalism as a threat to Arab identity, aimed at assimilating it into Western culture, and imposing the Western cultural model on Arab societies. Al-Jabri confirms this by saying: "**Criticism of Orientalism is part of the project of defending the Arab cultural identity, and confronting Western cultural domination, which seeks to dissolve our identity and impose its cultural model on us**"⁷" (

3. The importance of the critique of Orientalism in Al-Jabri:

Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism represents a key step in the Arab Renaissance project. He realized that true renaissance can only be achieved by liberating the Arab mind from the influence of Orientalist discourse, and restoring confidence in self and Arab cultural identity. Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism has contributed to the achievement of important objectives, including:

- **Raising the awareness of Arab intellectuals about the danger of Orientalism:** Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism helped raise the awareness of Arab intellectuals about the danger of this discourse, revealing its hidden mechanisms and objectives, and alerting them to the dangers of its impact on awareness and identity.
- **Encouraging critical studies of Orientalism:** Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism encouraged the emergence of a new generation of Arab researchers, who engaged in critical studies of Orientalism, provided in-depth analyses of Orientalist discourse, and revealed new aspects in it.

- **Contributing to the building of an independent Arab cultural identity:** Al-Jabri's critique of Orientalism contributed to the building of an independent Arab cultural identity, capable of interacting with other cultures, without losing their identity and privacy, and without falling into cultural dependence on the West. He saw that **"the critique of Orientalism is an essential step in building an independent Arab cultural identity, capable of interacting with other cultures, without losing its identity and privacy"**⁸ (

Second: The shift towards a critique of Occidentalism: motives and justifications

After Al-Jabri exhausted the stage of criticism of Orientalism, and finished dismantling the Orientalist discourse, he moved to a new stage in his intellectual project, which was the **criticism of Occidentalism**. This shift was not a radical reversal of the previous stage, but rather a natural development and deepening of the intellectual project. Al-Jabri realized that the critique of Orientalism, while important, was not sufficient to achieve the Arab Renaissance. Renaissance also requires a critique of the Arab self, a transcendence of its negative view of the West, and a deeper understanding of the West itself.

1. The concept of astonishment in Al-Jabri:

Al-Jabri did not mean by surprise just the opposite of Orientalism, that is, just the production of an Arab anti-Western discourse, aimed at distorting its image and stereotyping, and falling into the same pitfalls in which Orientalism occurred. Rather, it is to understand astonishment in its critical and positive sense, as **"an attempt to understand the West critically, in order to absorb its positives and**

overcome its negatives, and to build a balanced relationship with it⁹." (

Al-Jabri believes that Westernization is characterized by several basic characteristics, which distinguish it from Orientalism and from just the negative reaction to the West, including:

- **The critical vision of the West: Westernization** does not deal with the West in a reverential or sanctifying manner, but rather looks at it critically, revealing its pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, without falling into generalization or profiling. This is what distinguishes critical astonishment, as Al-Jabri stresses **"the need to look at the West critically, revealing its pros and cons, without falling into reverence or sanctification, or absolute rejection"** ⁽¹⁰⁾
- **Benefiting from the experience of the West: Westernization** does not reject the West absolutely, but seeks to benefit from its experience of modernization and progress, and to absorb the positive aspects of its civilization, such as scientific and technological progress, institutional organization, and the values of democracy and human rights. Astonishment aims to **"benefit from the Western experience of modernization and progress, and to absorb the positive aspects of its civilization, without blind imitation or cultural subordination"**¹¹ (.
- **Criticism of the Arab Self through the West: Westernization** uses the West as a mirror that reflects the image of the Arab self, reveals its weaknesses and flaws, in order to overcome and correct them, and seeks reform and change in Arab societies. Astonishment aims to **"criticize the Arab self through the West, and use the West as a mirror that reflects our self-image, and reveals our weaknesses and flaws, in order to overcome and correct them"**¹² (

- **Building a balanced relationship with the West:**

Westernization aims to build a balanced relationship with the West, based on mutual respect and common interests, and goes beyond the logic of hegemony and dependence, and civilizational conflict and clash. Westernization seeks to **"build a balanced relationship with the West, based on mutual respect and common interests, and goes beyond the logic of hegemony and dependence, and civilizational conflict and clash"**¹³ (

2. Motivations for the shift towards a critique of Westernization:

There are several motives that led to Al-Jabri's shift towards a critique of Westernization, and the most important of these motives can be summarized in the following points:

- **His project has evolved towards inclusive critical**

rationality: Al-Jabri's project has seen an evolution towards inclusive critical rationality, which calls for a critique of everything, including both the Arab self and the West, without exception or bias. Al-Jabri realized that true renaissance can only be achieved with comprehensive critical rationality, which excludes no one, and affects all aspects of thought and practice. This is confirmed by Al-Jabri by saying: **"My intellectual project is moving towards comprehensive critical rationality, which criticizes everything, including both the Arab self and the West, without exception or bias"**¹⁴ (

- **Increased interest in issues of renaissance and**

modernization: Al-Jabri's interest in issues of renaissance and modernization increased in the Arab world, and he realized that achieving renaissance requires a deep understanding of the West, and an understanding of its experience in modernization and progress, while distinguishing between what is positive and what is negative in this experience. He saw that the West,

despite its shortcomings, represented a successful model of modernization that could be used, while being wary of its shortcomings. This is what Al-Jabri points out by saying:

"Achieving renaissance in the Arab world requires a deep understanding of the West, and an understanding of its experience in modernization and progress, while distinguishing between what is¹⁵ positive and what is negative in this experience ."

- **Realizing the importance of criticism of the Arab self as a condition for Ennahda:** Al-Jabri came to the conviction that criticism of Orientalism alone is insufficient, and that Ennahda also requires criticism of the Arab self, overcoming its weaknesses and flaws, and confronting its internal problems honestly and transparently. He realized that a large part of the problem of Arab underdevelopment lies in the Arab self itself, not just in the West, or in foreign conspiracies. This is what Al-Jabri confirms by saying: **"Ennahda requires criticism of the Arab self, overcoming its weaknesses and flaws, and facing our internal problems honestly and transparently, because a large part of the problem of underdevelopment lies within us and not only abroad."** ¹⁶
- **Go beyond conspiracy rhetoric and negative subordination to the West:** Al-Jabri rejected the conspiracy rhetoric that sees all the problems of the Arab world as being caused by the West, and that the West is the ultimate enemy. He also rejected the negative dependence of the West, which calls for imitating the West in everything without awareness or discrimination. He realized that these two discourses hindered the process of renaissance, and prevented the building of a balanced relationship with the West. He saw the critique of Westernization as helping to move beyond these two discourses, focusing on self-reform and building a positive relationship with the West. This is what Al-Jabri explains by saying:

"Criticism of Westernization helps to go beyond the discourse of conspiracy and negative subordination to the West, and focus on self-reform and building a positive and balanced relationship with the West¹⁷" (Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 1994, p. 125).

3. Justifications for criticizing Westernization:

Al-Jabri presented several justifications for criticizing surprise, and explained the importance of this criticism in the contemporary Arab context. The most important of these justifications can be summarized in the following points:

- **The need for a deep and comprehensive understanding of the West:** Al-Jabri believes that a deep, comprehensive and critical understanding of the West is a prerequisite for dealing with it effectively, building a balanced relationship with it, and the ability to benefit from its experience and avoid its negatives. Dealing with the West without understanding it, or understanding it superficially or stereotypically, leads to a fall into dependence or blind hostility, both of which hinder Ennahda. This is confirmed by Al-Jabri by saying: **"A deep, comprehensive and critical understanding of the West is a prerequisite for dealing with it effectively, building a balanced relationship with it, and the ability to benefit from its experience and avoid its negatives"**¹⁸ (
- **Benefiting from the Western experience in modernization and progress:** Al-Jabri believes that the West represents a pioneering experience in modernization and progress, which can be used in the Arab world, in the fields of science and technology, institutional organization, and the values of democracy and human rights. Absolute rejection of the West deprives us of the benefit of this valuable experience, and hinders the process of renaissance. This is what Al-Jabri points

out by saying: **"The West represents a pioneering experience in modernization and progress, which can be used in the Arab world, in the fields of science and technology, institutional organization, and the values of democracy and human rights, and the absolute rejection of the West deprives us of this benefit"** ¹⁹(

- **Correcting the stereotype of the West in Arab thought:** Al-Jabri believes that Arab thought suffers from a negative stereotype of the West, which reduces the West to colonialism and imperialism, and ignores the positive aspects of Western civilization, such as scientific and technological progress, and the values of democracy and human rights. He saw that the critique of Westernization helps to correct this stereotype, and to present a more realistic and balanced image of the West, combining the pros and cons. This is what Al-Jabri explains by saying: **"Criticism of surprise helps to correct the negative stereotype of the West in Arab thought, and to present a more realistic and balanced image of the West, combining positives and negatives"** ²⁰(
- **Transcending the dichotomy of East and West and civilizational conflict:** Al-Jabri believes that the dichotomy of East and West is an artificial and misleading dichotomy, that the human world is one, and that human civilizations integrate and interact, and do not necessarily clash or clash. He saw that the criticism of wonder helps to overcome this artificial duality, focus on the common humanity, and build relations of cooperation and integration among civilizations. This is confirmed by Al-Jabri by saying: **"Criticism of Westernization helps to transcend the artificial dichotomy of East and West, focus on the human common, and build relations of cooperation and integration between civilizations, rather than conflict and clash"** ²¹

Third: Manifestations of criticism of astonishment in the intellectual works of Al-Jabri

The critique of astonishment was evident in many of al-Jabri's later intellectual works, especially in his book "In the Critique of the Arab Mind: Towards a New Vision." This criticism can be felt at several levels and areas:

1. Criticism of Western Rationality:

Al-Jabri's critique was not limited to Orientalism as a Western discourse on the East, but extended to include a critique of Western rationality itself, as the epistemological framework and intellectual reference on which Orientalism is based. He saw that Western rationality, despite its positives and contributions to scientific and technological progress, carries with it some negatives and limitations, which must be paid attention to and overcome, and not be considered the only model of rationality.

Al-Jabri's critique of Western rationality has manifested itself in several key aspects:

- **Critique of instrumental and technical rationality:** Al-Jabri criticized instrumental and technical rationality, which focuses mainly on means and technical efficiency, and overlooks human and moral goals and values. He saw that this rationality led to the dominance of technology and technology in human life, to the deterioration of human and moral values, and to environmental and social crises. This is what Al-Jabri criticizes by saying: **"Western instrumental and technical rationality focuses on technical means and efficiency, and overlooks human and moral goals and values, which led to the domination of technology and the deterioration of values and ethics"**²² (

- **Critique of positivist rationality and materialist empiricism:** Al-Jabri criticized positivist rationality and materialist empiricism that reduces knowledge to sensory and empirical knowledge, and considers empirical science as the only source of knowledge, ignoring mental and spiritual knowledge, and the metaphysical dimensions of man and existence. He saw that this rationality falls short of understanding the complex and multidimensional human reality, and of meeting the spiritual and moral needs of man. This is what Al-Jabri explains by saying: **"Positivist rationality and material empiricism reduce knowledge to sensory and empirical knowledge, ignore mental and spiritual knowledge, and are deficient in understanding the complex and multidimensional human reality"** ⁽²³⁾
- **Critique of Western unilateral rationality and absolute reference:** Al-Jabri criticized Western rationality, which claims to be the only rationality and correctness, considers itself an absolute reference for knowledge and truth, and marginalizes other rationalities, such as Eastern rationality and Islamic rationality, and considers them backward or unscientific rationalities. He saw that there is a plurality of rationalities, and that each civilization has its own rationality, which expresses its cultural and historical peculiarities, and that rationality should not be monopolized or one model of it should be considered the ideal model. This is what Al-Jabri confirms by saying: **"Western rationality claims to be the only and correct rationality, and marginalizes other rationalities, while there is a plurality of rationalities, and each civilization has its own rationality"** ⁽²⁴⁾

Fourth: Al-Jabri's Efforts in the Surprise Project:

Returning to the main problem of the research, which is: **What are the most prominent efforts that Al-Jabri presented to the**

intellectual arena through the surprising project? The most important of these efforts and contributions can be summarized in the following points:

- **Establishing the concept of critical astonishment and its rooting in Arab thought:** Al-Jabri is considered one of the first Arab thinkers who established the concept of critical astonishment, provided it with a clear and detailed definition, defined its characteristics and objectives, and distinguished it from Orientalism and just the negative reaction to the West. His efforts have contributed to introducing this concept into the dictionary of contemporary Arab thought, enriching it, and making it a subject of research and study.
- **Developing a critical approach to astonishment based on critical rationality:** Al-Jabri not only established the concept of astonishment, but also developed a critical approach to astonishment, based on comprehensive critical rationality, comparative historical analysis, conceptual deconstruction, and a holistic and balanced view. This methodology has contributed to giving a scientific and methodological character to surprising studies in Arab thought, and providing analytical tools to deal with Western thought. This is indicated by many critics who consider that "**Al-Jabri developed a critical methodology for astonishment based on critical rationality, historical analysis and conceptual deconstruction, and gave a scientific and methodological character to astonishment studies.**"²⁵
- **Applying the critique of Westernization to diverse fields of Western thought and practice:** Al-Jabri applied the critique of Westernization to diverse fields of Western thought and practice, such as Western rationality, Western political and social thought, the capitalist system, cultural globalization, media hegemony, and others. He provided in-depth and critical analyses of these areas, revealing their strengths and

weaknesses, their pros and cons, and their importance and seriousness to the Arab and Third World. This is reflected in his work, which **"applied the critique of Westernization to various fields of Western thought and practice, and provided in-depth and critical analyses of these fields"** ²⁶(

- **Enriching the intellectual debate on the relationship with the West and overcoming sharp dichotomies:** Al-Jabri's surprising project has contributed to enriching the intellectual debate on the relationship with the West in the Arab world, and opening the door to new approaches to the relationship with the West, which go beyond the duality of hostility and dependence, and the conflict and clash of civilizations, and focus on building a balanced and fruitful relationship, based on mutual respect and common interests, and cooperation and integration between civilizations. This is confirmed by many thinkers who believe that **"Al-Jabri's surprising project enriched the intellectual discussion about the relationship with the West, and opened the door to new approaches that go beyond sharp dichotomies and²⁷ focus on a balanced and fruitful relationship ."**
- **Motivating surprising studies and encouraging researchers to engage in them:** Al-Jabri's surprising project encouraged the emergence of a new generation of Arab researchers, who engaged in surprising studies, made valuable contributions in this field, and enriched the Arab Library with in-depth studies and research on the West.

Conclusion:

Al-Jabri's intellectual project represented, in its two main stages: a critique of Orientalism and a critique of astonishment, a qualitative addition to contemporary Arab thought, and a prominent contribution to the march of the Arab Renaissance. It has contributed to liberating

the Arab mind from the influence of Orientalist discourse, to building an

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Hindawi Foundation, 2024), 15.

² Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Formation of the Arab Mind* (Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2002), 234.

³ Abdullah al-Aroui, *The Concept of the Mind* (Arab Cultural Center, 2001), 120.

⁴ Halim Barakat, *Contemporary Arab Society - A Social Exploratory Research* (Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2008), 98.

⁵ Al-Jabri, *The Formation of the Arab Mind*, 235.

⁶ *Ibid*, 255.

⁷ Mohamed Abed al-Jabri, *We and Heritage*, vol. 6 (Morocco: Arab Cultural Center, 1993), 180.

⁸ *Ibid*, 185.

⁹ Mohamed Abed al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 1984, 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 92.

¹¹ Muhammad, Abed al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights* (Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1994), 112.

¹² Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 101.

¹³ Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 120.

¹⁴ Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 116

¹⁵ Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 116

¹⁶ Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 119.

¹⁷ Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 125.

¹⁸ Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 123.

¹⁹ Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 118.

²⁰ Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 129.

²¹ Al-Jabri, *Democracy and Human Rights*, 122.

²² Al-Jabri, *Critique of the Arab Mind*, 132.

²³ *Ibid*, 139.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

²⁵ Dr. Abdul Latif Tibawi, *Arab Islamic Mysticism. A research in the development of Arab thought* (Arab Press Agency, 2022), 90.

²⁶ See: Barakat, *Contemporary Arab Society - A Social Exploratory Research*, 110.

²⁷ Al-Aroui, *The Concept of Mind*, 130.