

Undermining the Cultural Centralities in Abdullah Ibrahim's Critical Project

Remise en question des centralités culturelles dans le projet critique d'Abdullah Ibrahim

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Abstract:

Our critical endeavor in this research paper is summarized in an attempt to shed light on some aspects that indicate the importance of the project of the Iraqi critic "Abdullah Ibrahim," which spanned more than three decades of research and exploration and a serious and sober contribution to opening new horizons for literary and critical studies; Perhaps what was distinguished by his critical project as an encyclopedic critical project whose orientations varied from trying to reveal the aesthetics of texts and interrogating their artistry to trying to violate the sanctity of the texts' interiors by extracting, re-reading and undermining cultural phenomena and clarifying their internal contradictions and their effects on thought and knowledge.

Keywords: Undermining - centralities - cultural - critical project - Abdullah Ibrahim.

Résumé

Notre démarche critique dans cet article de recherche se résume à une tentative de mettre en lumière certains aspects qui témoignent de l'importance du projet du critique irakien **Abdullah Ibrahim**, lequel s'est étendu sur plus de trois décennies de recherche et d'exploration, et a constitué une contribution sérieuse et rigoureuse à l'ouverture de nouveaux horizons pour les études littéraires et critiques. Ce qui distingue peut-être son projet critique, en tant que projet encyclopédique, réside dans la diversité de ses orientations : depuis la tentative de révéler l'esthétique des textes et d'interroger leur dimension artistique, jusqu'à l'effort visant à transgresser la sacralité de leurs structures internes, en extrayant, relisant et déconstruisant les phénomènes culturels, tout en mettant en évidence leurs contradictions internes et leurs effets sur la pensée et le savoir.

Mots-clés : déconstruction – centralités – culturel – projet critique – Abdullah Ibrahim

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Introduction

There is no doubt that it is not easy to get acquainted with a distinguished critical project such as that of Abdullah Ibrahim, who disrupted many assumptions in the Arab cultural scene, which raised a lot of controversy; he is one of the most important Arab researchers who have always rallied around the attempt to crystallize contemporary literary criticism in light of this knowledge momentum that links criticism to the renewed human, social and cultural studies and knowledge.

Abdullah Ibrahim's concept of criticism goes beyond simply researching and analyzing literary texts and revealing the aesthetic elements within them. At the same time, it goes beyond interpreting those texts in a literary interpretation using a set of textual approaches and reading strategies to reveal the meaning, as criticism follows an intellectual and cultural path that aims to deconstruct cultural phenomena and their internal contradictions and their impact on thought and knowledge, which took upon itself to dismantle closed cultural centers and systems and interact with new literary and critical studies, intellectual and cultural currents such as feminism, post-colonialism, and others, perhaps this is what characterized Abdullah Ibrahim's critical project.

This intervention aims to trace Abdullah Ibrahim's project of cultural critique and his endeavor to undermine Western and Islamic cultural centers. So what is the meaning of cultural centrality for Abdullah Ibrahim?, what are its limits ? and the mechanisms he used to undermine these centrality ?.

1- Criticism of Abdullah Ibrahim's Cultural Centrality:

Talking about the critic Abdullah Ibrahim often brings us to that description that characterizes him as a controversial “problematic critic”; this is because of his critical proposals and ideas that disrupted the scales of artistic aesthetic criticism in the cultural and literary scene alike , Abdullah Ibrahim did not hesitate to take pride in what critics described him as a problematic critic, saying in one of his interviews conducted by « Waheed Taja » in « Al-Watan » newspaper, “The problematic critic in our Arab culture seems to be an undesirable person, perhaps an exile in the cultural sense because he practices his criticism of sensitive cultural phenomena outside the framework agreed upon by the group. I am not sure about your description of me as a “problematic critic.” If that is what you meant, I would not deny the description, but rather be proud of it. What is the value of thinking within the framework of axioms, submitting to them, and complying with their conditions, it has nothing to do with any kind of critical thinking that aims to invalidate those axioms, withdraw legitimacy from them, delegitimize them, and propose alternative approaches to describing, analyzing, and even interpreting cultural phenomena according to the needs of the modern era and the needs of the recipient. and propose alternative approaches to describing, analyzing, and even interpreting cultural phenomena according to the needs of the modern era and the needs of the recipient. I will not be conceited when you say that my critical theses have disrupted some cultural axioms, I am not writing to satisfy my personal ego, but I really look forward to disrupt these axioms from a radical critical perspective that can shake the false bases on which they are based, and if I succeed in some of this, it will be enough, as no single individual can do this, and that is why I call for the establishment of a critical current that adopts description, analysis and interpretation that is prepared to take this intellectual adventure(Waheed Taja, 2022), as the boldness of Abdullah Ibrahim's proposal ignited the culture of ‘difference’ and dismantled the culture of ‘conformity’.

One of the critical works that caused great controversy in the cultural milieu is the book 'The Arabic Narrative', his doctoral thesis in which he tried to classify and analyse the narrative structure in the Arabic storytelling heritage; using the structuralist approach in narrative critical studies to determine the nature of the latter - the Arabic narrative - with its constants and variables, in the cultural context in which it was formed, which required the researcher, as noted by critic "Nader Kazem", to address the link between narrating narratives, religious origins and Islam's position on storytelling. (Kazim, 2016, p. 217).

This linkage between storytelling narratives and religious roots with this research methodology is what formed the centre of the conflict between him and his opponents. In his view, it is intended to 'wound religious thought on the one hand and settle a score with Arab culture on the other, based on a kind of contrived linkage between orality and primitivism (Kazim, 2016).' They concluded that this book aims to destroy and undermine the foundations of the inherited culture, which led to the issuance of fatwas against the book.

However, this rejection of the critic Abdullah Ibrahim's arguments made him defend his intellectual approach and his aspiration to establish the rules of a new criticism that does not believe in the innocence of things and does not acknowledge facts that have formed over the decades as cultural centers whose sanctity cannot be compromised. This can be seen in the introduction to the second edition of his book Arab Narrative, where he points out that Arab culture needs to turn over its components and resume a serious critique of its internal contradictions, which is the solid ground on which the bet of modernisation is based (Ibrahim).

Therefore, the concept of criticism for Abdullah Ibrahim is formed from the idea of going beyond researching and analyzing literary texts by revealing their poetic and aesthetic elements, interpreting their meanings and interrogating their connotations by applying a set of ready-made reading mechanisms or critical theories and various textual arguments, as he summarizes the reality of criticism in his book "Narrative Conversations" by saying : "It is an intellectual practice whose purpose is to uncover and deconstruct cultural phenomena and to point out their internal conflicts and their effects on thought and knowledge. Thus, he concluded by linking narratives and cultural centrism. Any ethnocentric, religious or cultural self-centeredness is based on believing a narrative that elevates the self at the expense of the other and takes away tolerance (...) whether it relates to ancient and modern imaginaries or to cultural, religious and ethnic centrism, which are biased cultural narratives (Ibrahim A. , 2011, p. 8)." In this definition, we see the cognitive boldness and intellectual challenge that Abdullah Ibrahim ignited, announcing a dive into the origins, foundations, anchors and cultural references to search their insides, refusing to submit to the culture of conformity and rebelling against everything that is centralized and fixed, which is a real critical uprising that tries to dismantle the axioms and read them in a new way according to frameworks that are mainly based on the culture of difference (self/other-past/present).

Abdullah Ibrahim explains in one of his dialogues with critic "Wahid Taja", in which he was asked about his definition of criticism and what are the most important questions that a contemporary literary critic should answer. He stated that criticism is a systematic and organized dialogue that the critic establishes with literary texts, we mean by the dialogue to establish a living link between the critic's perceptions, ideas, hypotheses, and the purposes of the texts, as well as the hidden connotations, provided that this dialogue is conducted in a cultural context that gives this process an importance that benefits literature in terms of a metaphorical act, and benefits criticism in terms of a cognitive practice. This leads me to the

issues assigned to Arabic criticism. In addition to showing the aesthetics of texts and revealing their stylistic, narrative, and semantic structures, it is necessary, in my estimation, to reveal the types of representation that literary texts make of social and historical references, thus introducing an interpretation that benefits the recipient in this is because literature, especially narratives, is no longer written for entertainment and enjoyment, but is a metaphorical research into the hidden folds of sensitive issues, and its function is still important in representing the conditions of societies that are experiencing a number of serious conflicts in their private and public conditions. Reading literature does not lead to the bed, but to the public square, where there are hotbeds of tension, fear, lack of freedom, political and religious tyranny, and all forms of oppression, and criticism contributes to feeding the function of literature with all this, I think; This methodological dialogue that Abdullah Ibrahim referred to can only exist in the shadow of mutual cognitive interaction between criticism and other knowledge, such as the humanities and social sciences and the development and research openness to new analytical methods and mechanisms. This intellectual and cognitive cross-fertilization is what crystallized a new interactive critical thinking horizon that resulted in the emergence of new literary studies, such as feminist studies and cultural narratives.

Abdullah Ibrahim's project is a critical project characterised by encyclopaedic and open-mindedness and aims to violate the sanctity of the interior of texts by extracting and tracing cultural phenomena, undermining them and showing their internal conflicts and their effects on thought and knowledge, thus moving criticism from being a literary practice to an intellectual practice.

We do not hide the fact that we dealt with absolute astonishment with Abdullah Ibrahim's intellectual concepts and perceptions that shake the axioms of aesthetic art criticism. However, as we delved into the study, it became clear to us that he was trying to establish a new criticism and cultural hermeneutics that deals with the issue of cultural, religious and customary centralisms by searching for those stereotypical images of the self and the other, and he found that cultural centralisms are based on the adoption of a kind of narrative that fills the self with virtues and throws the other with vices. It is a cultural narrative that carries visions that glorify the self and belittle the other, but it settles on a deceptive narrative based on differential or pejorative judgements. I ended up linking the connection between the narrative in its literary sense and the narrative in its cultural sense, thus merging the two tracks that I had long been preoccupied with. In the end, I ended up merging the two paths that I had been preoccupied with (Waheed Taja, 2022), Criticism is a radical undermining of outdated norms, epistemological truths and intellectual beliefs that have attempted to define a false understanding of both the self and the other, thus confirming the idea of exposing and unmasking those self-centred cultures that have presented ready-made alternatives over a period of time in a cultural and civilisational context completely different from the one in which they were based as knowledge facts or as cultural, political, religious or ethnic axioms.' Criticism does not in any way mean making value judgments about a cultural phenomenon with its general conditions and does not claim to offer ready alternatives and is not capable of substituting one given for another. Rather, it is an analytical and interrogative intellectual practice that aims to provide contexts that enable the contradictions of self-centred thought to be revealed and to highlight its internal conflicts, sources and other cultural reductions (Abdullah, 1997, p. 8). Hence, we can identify the nature of the critique that Abdullah Ibrahim seeks, which is an epistemological critique that moves from thinking about

the cultural phenomenon to thinking about it and diving into its specificity that allows undermining concepts of conformity and establishing a culture of difference, and this is where the specificity of new cultural interpretation is determined.

2- Undermining the culture of conformity and creating a culture of difference for Abdullah Ibrahim:

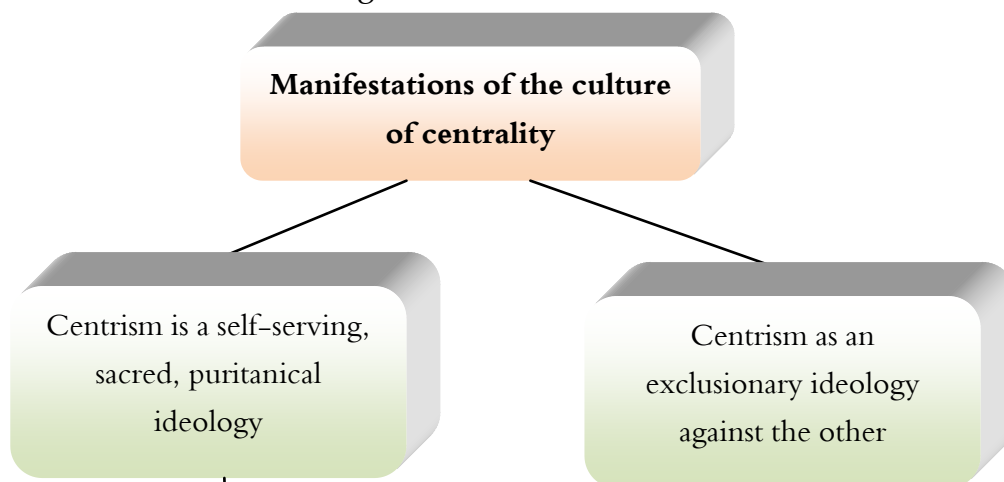
Abdullah Ibrahim's insight into the critique of centrality emerged through direct observation of the intellectual data that presents a viewpoint on history and the human being. Before delving into the details of the idea, we want to clarify the concept of centrality, which is 'a cultural pattern loaded with cultural meanings (religious, intellectual and ethnic) that was formed under certain historical conditions.' This pattern quickly transcended its historical dimension and reduced its origins and components to a set of abstract concepts that transcend that dimension to a kind of ahistorical theology. However, this pattern quickly transcended its historical dimension and reduced its origins and components to a set of abstract concepts that transcend this dimension into a kind of ahistorical theology, which is the condensation of a set of visions in a specific emotional field that leads to the formation of a homogeneous mass of rigid perceptions that produce the self and its cultural parameters as the best.' (Abdullah, *Conformity and difference*, 2007, p. 31).

In our analysis of this statement, we first point out that the self as a cultural and social formation interacts and grows with other selves that also have cultural and social formations, but with whom it establishes different relationships, as it constructs images of itself and the other synthesising images of itself and the other that is different from it, producing a cultural and intellectual context that wants to grow this generates an internal sense of narcissism, as "Mansour Zaghouti" describes in his article 'Criticism of Cultural Centres in Abdullah Ibrahim's Project, this sense of superiority over the other denies the existence of common elements in cultures that make the process of influence and interaction

This feeling denies the existence of common elements in cultures that make the process of influence, impact, and reciprocity possible an ambiguous and unclear relationship between the self-centred self and the other that is alien to it (Mansour Zaghwani, p. 543)

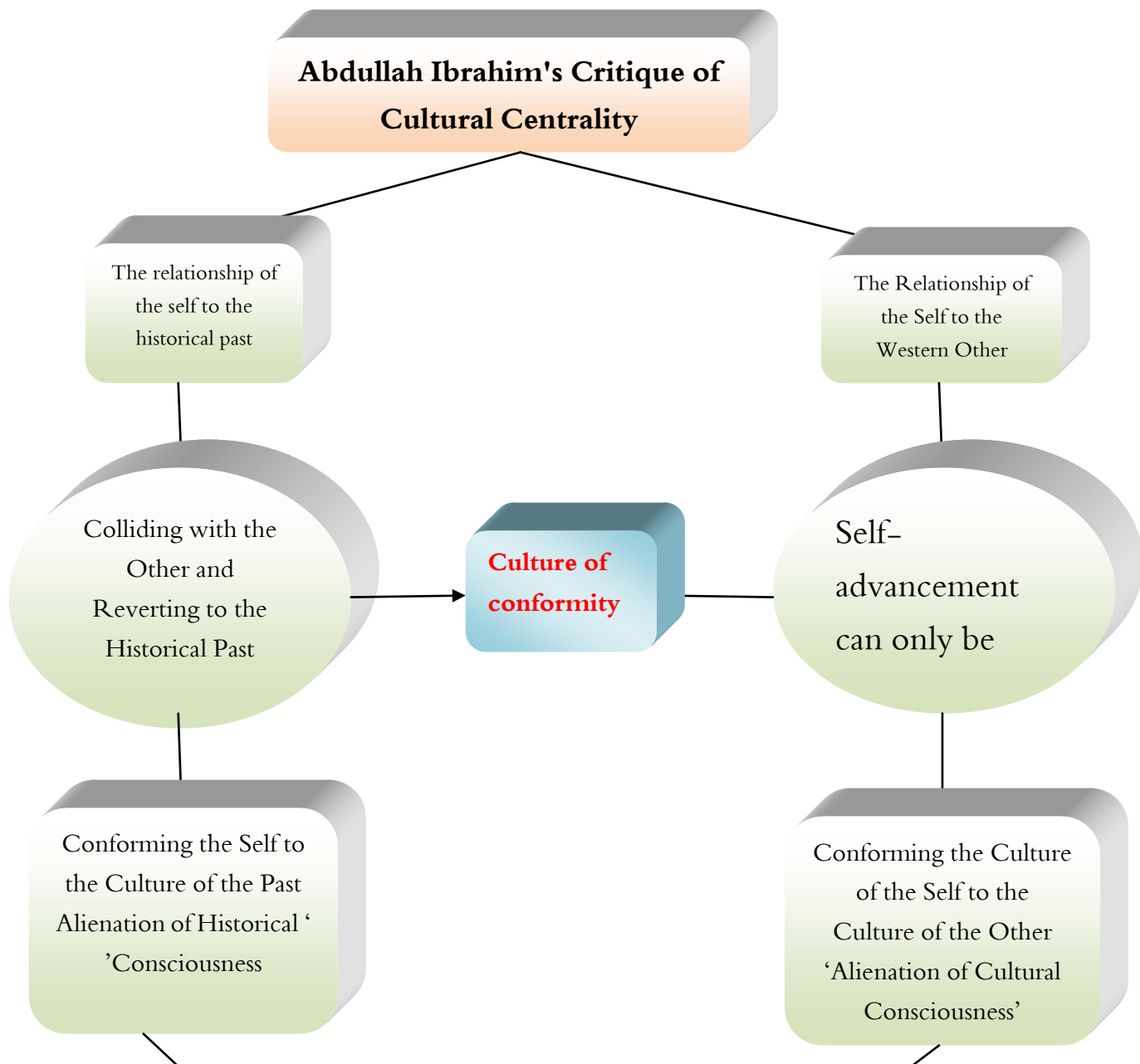
The dilemma resulting from this relationship is the emergence of another manifestation of centrism that is more intense than the first because it says that the self is superior to the other, in which the tendency, as Abdullah Ibrahim points out, is to the self claims absolute clarity and purity and accuses the other of religious, intellectual, and racial distortion.

In the light of this conflict, an ideology of purity and exclusion of the other is produced exclusionary ideology (Abdullah, *Conformity and difference*, 2007, p. 32), so we can say that there is a double vision produced by centralised cultures, according to which they produce a vision of the world and the human being, which can be summarised as follows:



This link between the formation of distorted images of the other and the triumph of the self is related to a full consciousness in the members of a single culture, as it represents a backward orientation to the ideas that are produced according to it, even if they are according to its perceptions only and its premises, and this is due, as Abdullah Ibrahim points out, to the existence of established references and institutionalised intellectual discourses. Institutionalism is the tendency to establish foundations that guide these ideas and perceptions. It is noticeable that any image formed by the self about itself or others stems from the authority of a single culture that determines the general system of those perceptions and intellectual systems that work to consolidate the way in which the image of the other is drawn.

After this brief presentation of the concept of centrality for Abdullah Ibrahim and its intellectual and cultural dimensions in the formation of the social and intellectual specificity of the culture of societies, we tried to summarise the starting points of his critical thinking process, which was established after a difficult labour of understanding, investigation and research into the axioms of knowledge that cannot be produced in the field of criticism alone but requires a cognitive reproduction between criticism and other knowledge, thus becoming an encyclopedic criticism revealing new horizons in thinking and literary interpretation of texts, we tried to collect the most important data of this project to study it in the following outline:



Abdullah Ibrahim tried to identify the elements of cultural hermeneutics by deconstructing the culture of conformity or, as he describes it, 'the myth of conformity', which he considers to be a metaphorical dilemma that colonises the internal fabric of Arab culture. (Kazim, 2016, p. 218)

The premise of Abdullah Ibrahim's thinking is based on the idea of undermining the culture of the modern self with the culture of the other or the culture of the past, without concern for the changing cultural and historical contexts over time because, in his opinion, our culture requires its components from the past or the other, because we were unable to reproduce the past in accordance with the spirit of the age and because we did not understand its specificity and did not realize its reference, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, we also could not establish a dialogue with the culture of the other, so we rushed to imitate, imitate and apply Western theories in literary, critical and social fields and even political, despite the ideological difference and cultural specificity, as a result of this.

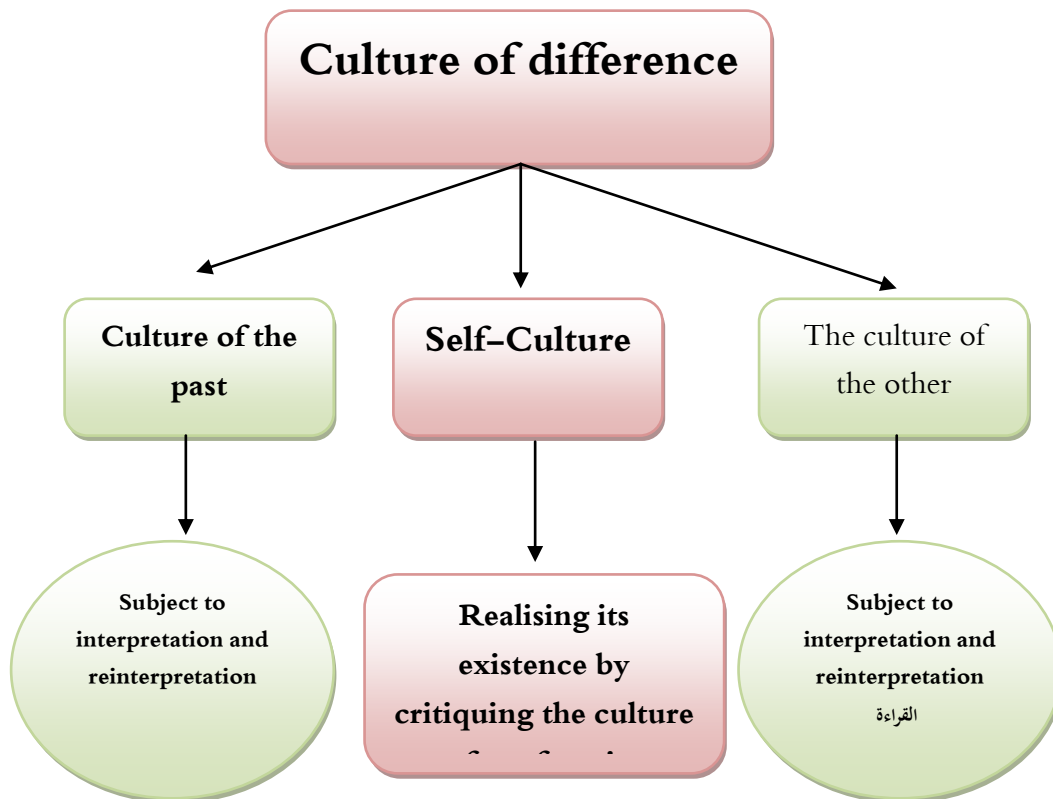
To answer this question, we may recall the words of Michel Foucault: 'Facts are nothing more than the hegemony of certain interpretations and narratives over other interpretations and narratives. This hegemony must be exposed and exposed, and it must be emphasised that it is only one of many interpretations of the culture of the past and the culture of the other, and this interpretation does not present itself as such, but always pretends to be the only, correct and final interpretation. (Safadi, 1988-1990, p. 25)

Abdullah Ibrahim stresses the need to get rid of the culture of conformity, whether it is conformity with the past because we borrow everything from it or with the other, from which we have taken everything that is produced to the point of identification, as it is necessary to symbolically separate from the self in order to clarify its pure and clear nature, and at the same time separate from the other in order to master dialogue with it, as it is not possible under any circumstances to produce a real culture under this type of conformity. (Yahya Al-Qaisi, s.d.)

He adds that the absence of analytical critical reading and the failure of the Arab intellectual's bet and the absence of his role is due to the absence of real interaction with the ancient Arab culture and the culture of the other. In my opinion, this is the reason behind the series of collapse in social and cultural values because he did not succeed in real interaction with the ancient Arab culture and the culture of the other. In the absence of cultural elites, other elites such as religious elites, political elites and military elites struggle to monopolise society! The Arab cultural elite was defeated because it did not include itself in the context of a critical interpretation of its history, and from Al-Tahtawi through Taha Hussein until now, the critic was legitimising reality and was not devoted to a real critique of that reality. (Yahya Al-Qaisi, s.d.)

In contrast to the occurrence of 'alienation of cultural consciousness' and 'alienation of historical consciousness' and the danger that is formed as a result of their occurrence, a systemic imbalance will appear when the culture of the self represents components that are alien to its contexts. What happens is that these components, as Nader Kazim points out, 'will exercise their action as if they were within their original cultural pattern, and this leads to exposing the components of the self to internal collapses, because those elements were placed side by side and did not install their carriers according to the historical conditions of the cultural self. (Kazim, 2016)' To achieve self-realisation of its own self and cultural specificity, Abdullah Ibrahim believes it must believe in cultural difference instead of cultural conformity. In addition to the culture of the other, the culture of the other and the culture of the historical past, there is the culture of the self whose existence is achieved through the critique of the culture of

conformity. 'I emphasised the need for difference, difference from the other, difference from the past, as I aimed to expose the conformist pattern in our modern culture, that pattern that made it identical in its most important pillars with the data of Western culture, as we borrow all our basic references from that culture, and I emphasised the need for difference: Difference from the other, difference from the past, and the establishment of a third zone of thinking that does not intersect with the two mentioned circles but dialogues with them, and establishes itself as a special foundation, hence the name of the general project (conformity and difference).



Conclusion

From this, it is clear to us that the idea of cultural criticism for Abdullah Ibrahim boils down to critiquing or undermining the culture of the Western other and the culture of the historical past in order to develop general and effective frameworks that enable the culture of the self to dialogue with other cultures and prove its existence and the specificity of its intellectual and cultural orientations, and this is what he did by dismantling the cultural and cognitive foundations of the Western and Islamic cultures by applying the idea of self-centeredness based on a sense of superiority and differentiation (Western and Islamic) in exchange for dwarfing and obscuring the culture of the other.

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