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| RESEARCH ARTICLE | Meta-Criticism and Contemporary Arabic Literary Criticism | |
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| Abstract | | |
| <p>This article investigates meta-criticism, a field that has yet to settle on a definitive understanding, let alone the concept it denotes. When discussing "applied meta-criticism," the mind tends to turn towards forms of approaches lacking a clear identity, whose banner oscillates between criticism, critique, and literary ideas. Undoubtedly, this hesitation and ambiguity can be attributed to the subject of "meta-criticism" itself, that is, to the fundamental and central point: criticism, which is difficult to define, delimit, and categorise both epistemologically and methodologically. Consequently, meta-criticism is even more complex.</p> | | |
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1. Introduction:

The article's introduction must include an appropriate preamble to the subject, followed by the presentation of the research problem and the formulation of suitable hypotheses, in addition to specifying the objectives and methodology of the study. The term "Criticism of Criticism" (or *critique de critique*) did not evolve into an independent concept within Arab culture except through the critical corpus that has increasingly asserted itself among scholars in the field of literary criticism. This development resulted in an awareness of the necessity for scientific conditions to be met within the critical phenomenon. As this awareness transformed into a concept, the process of assimilating and adapting these conditions within the framework of this new scientific orientation congruent with its old yet renewed subject, namely criticism, began. This process could only be achieved through specialised concepts relating to terminology, methodology, and the establishment of specific objectives and principles, thereby transforming it into a distinct discipline separate from neighbouring phenomena such as literary criticism,¹ Literary theory and literary historiography. Thus, literary criticism will be regarded as the subject of this new field of study despite its epistemological condition characterised by instability and change and the absence of a precisely defined reference framework.

The existence of the term "meta-criticism" within the critical arena serves as conclusive evidence of the emergence of a new consciousness striving to distinguish between "criticism" as a subject and "meta-criticism" as an act that examines and studies that subject. Thus, there is an acknowledgement of a demarcation between criticism and meta-criticism. This consciousness remains searching for a concrete conceptualisation: What theoretical and procedural formulations define

it? It remains a project whose function and objectives are difficult to determine and define.² The concept of meta-criticism is still being constructed and developed; it undergoes the typical progression from naming and general conceptualisation to refinement and testing before settling on a precise terminological meaning.³

In summary, we are producing a "metalanguage" specific to the discourse of criticism to generate a discourse of meta-criticism, which focuses on criticism and scrutinises it to accomplish work on existing work.⁴ Meta-criticism constitutes an intellectual activity and a form of interpretation, a reflexive practice that follows literature and its criticism; in other words, it concerns books about books, namely, critical texts.

We seek a precise definition of "meta-criticism," though not comprehensive and definitive. Through this practice, it is possible to delineate its relationships with discourses that approximate it to the point of overlap and identification. We also aim to clarify its contributions to the development of levels of critical reading, thereby affirming and persuading others of its importance and the legitimacy of its independence from criticism in particular, as well as from related fields such as reading and interpretation.

However, remaining in a state of doubt and scepticism regarding its possession of an independent epistemological identity, one characterised by specialised concepts, tools, mechanisms, and specific objectives, does not genuinely reflect the expansive scope of its activity in our era or the keen interest many critics have shown in engaging with it and writing about it. This position also fails to align with the substantial critical work available within the Arab and Maghrebi critical fields.

2. The Term "Meta-Criticism"

2.1. Linguistic Definition:

We shall begin by examining a highly sensitive issue related to the term itself: the precision and suitability of the term "meta-criticism" (the counterpart of the English term *Criticism of Criticism* or the French *critique de la critique*). The point of departure is the concept of "metalanguage" (*métalangage*), a linguistic term originating from the components *méta* and *langage* (*langue*). The prefix *méta*, derived from Greek, signifies succession, change, and participation; however, its meaning differs between philosophy and the humanities on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other.

In the humanities, this prefix conveys meanings such as "beyond," "after," "transcending," or "including" relative to a given object or field of knowledge.⁵ Specifically, it denotes notions of extraction, distancing, equivalence, and incorporation. Thus, which of these meanings is intended here? Is it the former or the latter? Moreover, which is more appropriate in this context?

In the humanities, the prefix "méta" (Méta) signifies adding one thing or field of knowledge to another through marginalisation and proximity. One element attaches to another, one discipline seeps into another, or one meaning intertwines with another to the extent of overlapping. This occurs due to the demands of epistemic relationships.

Should we then refer to the "second language" as "beyond language" or "after language," as is commonly done? Is the second language truly something external to the first language's framework? What does it mean to speak of criticism, or the language of criticism, being criticised on its margins or from its surroundings, thereby separating the second from the first by employing the term "beyond"?

Furthermore, if one professional critic speaks of another professional critic, do we thereby treat the second's work as separate and independent from the first? Or do the expressions "beyond" and "after" signify something different? Should we instead seek an equivalent for this expression or a counterpart for this meaning through another term?⁶

We may use the terms "metalanguage," "encompassing language," or even "the language of language" or "writing of writing,"⁷ *Métalangage* (Méta Langage) is a method and language employed to describe and explain another natural language.

The successive connotations of the Greek term are connected to the activities of "separation," "judgement," and "decision-making." As for the term "criticism" (*naked*), in its classical and ancient usages, it was organised within three specific domains: it was employed in the administration of "justice"; Aristotle used it to refer to judicial decisions that resolve disputes; and in the medical context, the term signified the critical moment or turning point in the course of an illness (critical).

During the Hellenistic era, the term acquired the meaning of studying literary texts. Thus, the term inherited a legacy drawn from three fields: legal, medical, and linguistic-philological⁸ (the study of the language of ancient texts).

The development of the term between the Classical period and the Renaissance proceeded along two relatively distinct and separate paths. Until the seventeenth century, the medical domain retained what can be translated into Arabic as "crisis" (*azma*). Meanwhile, the domain corresponding to what can be translated as "grammatical distinction" (*criticus / grammaticus*) maintained the classical understanding of the term, referring primarily to the activities of grammarians. Consequently, during the Renaissance, the term *nāqid* (critic/grammarian meant "grammarian," or more precisely, "scholar of ancient literary texts," with criticism accordingly understood as the study of such works.

This criticism remained concerned with verifying texts, reconstructing them, and correcting what had been corrupted. Hence, humanists and reformers employed this form of criticism to describe the authoritative judgment specialised in studying ancient texts, whether classical or biblical.⁹

A notable observation regarding this type of writing in the English language is its oscillation between two terms in usage: the term "critique of criticism," which is the more common, and the term "metacriticism," known in English as *metacriticism* and in French as *métacritiques*.¹⁰

So, which of these terms deserves the most selection among those we have mentioned? To answer this question, we must review the key concepts associated with the phenomenon labelled "critique of criticism" in its entirety so that we may choose the closest and most comprehensive term to encompass the new concept of this emerging scientific phenomenon.

2.1. The Term "Critique of Criticism" in Technical Usage:

Here, we begin from the premise that the term "critique of criticism" (*Criticism of Criticism*) in Arabic may mean that the second criticism seeks to attack the first criticism it addresses with intentions of disparagement, ridicule, or denigration. This interpretation alienates the original Western concept based on the Greek prefix denoting equivalence and distancing or juxtaposition and marginalisation.¹¹

These writings, which amount to disparagement and abuse, do not regard the issue of "critique of criticism" as one that rises to the level of establishing a new epistemological branch aimed at critiquing existing theories, correcting critical judgments concerning specific texts, and addressing shortcomings in approaches that may fail to meet the conditions of literary criticism. This latter endeavour corresponds to what is currently known as theoretical meta-criticism.

By contrast, under this description, such writings are closer to the *critique* (critique) concept and to the literary battles that have characterised Arabic literary culture. They also relate to applied meta-criticism, which encompasses both critique and literary criticism (*criticism*) in a balanced form.¹²

This form of criticism is not necessarily aimed at opposition or antagonism but rather at shedding further light on the origins of the critical school, clarifying its epistemological foundations, and elucidating the backgrounds from which its references are derived both at the cognitive and methodological levels.

It concerns the establishment of a discourse that investigates the principles of criticism, its terminological language, procedural mechanisms, and analytical tools. Jabir Asfour notes that meta-criticism is "another discourse on criticism that revolves around reviewing the critical discourse itself and examining it," meaning the review of critical terminology, its logical structure, fundamental principles, interpretive hypotheses, and procedural tools.¹³

However, contemporary Arabic "meta-criticism," at least in our estimation, is often expressed through opposition to a particular critical stance, and it is rare to find it rising to the level of systematically and profoundly investigating the foundations of critical knowledge.¹⁴

Otherwise, we might consider that all writings addressing a particular critical theory or a theoretical critique could be classified within the framework of "meta-criticism."¹⁵

"Meta-criticism" is a discourse that examines the principles of criticism (second-order criticism), its specialised terminology, procedural mechanisms, and analytical tools.¹⁶

Our study of selected models of contemporary Maghrebi criticism falls within the efforts aimed at adopting "meta-criticism" as a perspective and an attempt to achieve a critique of criticism along the same lines as Roman Jakobson's *Linguistics and Poetics*, that is, those qualitative characteristics that render a discourse genuinely critical.

We embark upon this endeavour fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead, recognising that this work is categorised among studies of books about books; it constitutes a second-order critical thesis. If the interest in and engagement with primary criticism are weak and limited, how much more so for a text that addresses what has come to be known as "meta-

criticism"? Here, we are confronted with several essential questions and inquiries, which we regard as central to the subject matter addressed in this article.

If criticism is affiliated with literature as a particular and distinctive correlate, then what can meta-criticism be affiliated with? Is it literature (the corpus) or criticism itself, or is there a third domain that constitutes the arena for what is known as meta-criticism?

What is the nature of this subject? Is it a hybrid or a pure entity? In other words, is our work and reflection focused on literature (the corpus) or criticism (the critical work)? Are we discussing the meaning of critical or literary works through that specific criticism?

This highly specialised field of study requires greater precision and definition. However, we have not yet judged the legitimacy of thinking about literature and criticism, as manifested in Maghrebi's criticism.¹⁷

Before delving into a detailed discussion of meta-criticism, let us begin by addressing its subject: criticism. Literary criticism, as a concept or, more precisely, this field of study, is rarely approached as an object in its own right within literary studies. A critic may present an author, offer a novel reading, provide a particular literary history, or classify specific literary works according to familiar genres (novels, poetry, theatre, etc.). However, it is rare to find a critic questioning the very nature of criticism itself.

Thus, although criticism is seldom the subject of theoretical inquiry, we rarely ask what criticism is. Its presence and practice are undeniable. This occurs through various means: scholastic commentaries, analytical readings, discussions of specific literary works or texts, close examination and reflection on specific poems, or commentary on particular scenes or characters. Through these activities, we confirm that we are constructing a second discourse upon a first discourse, expressed through commentaries, appreciations, observations, or judgments about specific textual constructions.

The discourse on criticism, driven by an endeavour to produce knowledge related to the philosophy of criticism, its mechanisms, and objectives, necessarily opens the way to discussing "meta-criticism." The task of meta-criticism lies in the capacity to reflect on criticism itself and its foundations and tools, as well as the ability to propose new alternatives (the task of critical theorising). Meta-criticism studies criticism not as a fixed and existing achievement but as a dynamic field of inquiry.

Returning to the idea of terminology and based on the concepts we have presented regarding this phenomenon, which has established a position for speaking about discourse itself, we assert that the term we propose to adopt and prefer for sound scholarly reasons is *metacriticism* (*metanaqd*). This term possesses evident terminological characteristics; it is not merely a linguistic addition of the word "criticism" to itself but rather expresses a level of methodological and epistemological engagement distinct from literary criticism. Moreover, it is closely related to linguistics and terms such as metaphysics, metalanguage, and metadiscourse.¹⁸

It is also necessary to note that the novelty of "meta-criticism" as a term does not necessarily imply the novelty of its concept; this concept can be found in many Arabic works, even if it is not explicitly named as such. Likewise, the incomplete construction of its theoretical edifice does not indicate a lack of prior interest. Therefore, we must proceed from the hypothesis that this field constitutes a knowledge project subject to the principle of continuous development.

3. The Relationship of "Meta-Criticism" to Adjacent Discourses:

3.1. The Relationship Between "Meta-Criticism" and Criticism:

The existence of "meta-criticism" as an entity separate from its neighbouring fields implies the presence of a distinct subject, namely, criticism itself. Meta-criticism is viewed as a science possessing its theoretical apparatus (its theoretical categories) that elucidates its conceptual structure and unique features.¹⁹ It also possesses methodologies and methodological principles that differ from those of adjacent fields, with which it may intersect in various ways.

Thus, meta-criticism appears intertwined with both theoretical and applied branches of criticism. Upon reviewing the writings classified under "meta-criticism," one finds them numerous and diverse; however, they raise an important question: Are these writings simply offshoots of literary criticism, or should they be regarded as part of the inquiry into the theory of criticism? In other words, does this endeavour remain within the scope of criticism in its theoretical or applied dimensions? Put differently, has an independent theory of meta-criticism been formed?

Therefore, there is a close connection between criticism and meta-criticism, even if the latter strives for separation and establishing its own distinct identity.²⁰

3.2. The Relationship Between "Meta-Criticism" and Critical Theorisation

The discourse of "meta-criticism," alongside the discourse of "critical theorisation," stands at the same threshold; however, this does not mean that they are identical. They are distinct and differentiated from criticism itself. Both arise from different working hypotheses and operate according to two divergent strategies that may complement and rely on each other but are not entirely congruent.

The discourse of meta-criticism focuses on criticism to produce a work on an existing work. In contrast, the discourse of critical theorisation engages with criticism to propose a new alternative through improvement, modification, and development. The outcome between the accomplishment of the work and the proposal of an alternative is sometimes similar. At times, the discourse of meta-criticism approaches that of critical theorisation to the extent that it may perform some of the latter's functions.²¹

The important point is that we are addressing the subject of criticism, around which a discourse will emerge called "meta-criticism," alongside "critical theorisation." Both study criticism to attain understanding; however, they differ.

Meta-criticism operates in two domains: criticism and theorisation. While critical theorisation seeks to propose a new alternative, meta-criticism studies an existing and established body of work.²²

3.3. The Relationship Between "Meta-Criticism" and Reader-Response Theory

In essence, meta-criticism is a form of reading of another reading, which has often remained confined either to disparagement, abuse, and invective or conversely to flattery and favouritism. What matters here is that meta-criticism is an intellectual activity akin to hermeneutics that broadens the reading horizon and allows for multiple interpretations and exegeses according to the reader's choices and capacity for interpretation, analysis, commentary, and reasoning.

It is not isolated from the various theories of reading creative texts; instead, it investigates the effect that the reading of a critical text produces in its reader. This involves examining the relationship between the critical text and its reader in terms of reception, interaction, interpretation, and exegesis alongside the effect that the reading of a creative text has on its reader, which often exceeds the effect produced by the creative text itself (thus shifting the focus onto the reader rather than the text).

Therefore, attention has turned to the essence of critical practice itself, to the deconstruction of its logic, the examination of its mechanisms, procedures, and intellectual, theoretical, and aesthetic references. This has facilitated the emergence of a systematic, qualitative critical discourse that brackets another critical discourse, what has come to be termed the discourse of "meta-criticism."²³

Accordingly, meta-criticism constitutes a point of convergence and intersection for epistemological positions concerning literary work, criticism, and critical theorisation.

Thus, we concede that meta-criticism is a form of reading that engages with primary reading. It is distinguished by varying intensity and subtlety, so much so that it can sometimes become a form of flattery, favouritism, or even falsification. Meta-criticism is a convergence of discourses, references, and cultures that interact and collide.

Its dialectical epistemological and artistic nature predisposes it to engage with diverse theories and approaches and is exceptionally equipped to encompass, transcend, and move beyond them. Furthermore, criticism, through its immersion in the endeavour to seek meanings within literary texts where the paths of signification are complex and the expressive techniques manifold, has evolved into a diversity of epistemological and methodological foundations guiding reading processes and a variety in modes of interpretation, exegesis, and openness.²⁴

Meta-criticism thus broadens the reading horizon and permits multiple interpretations and exegetical efforts according to the reader's choices and capacity for interpretation, analysis, and reasoning.

4. "Meta-Criticism" and Modern and Contemporary Arabic Criticism

A survey of Arab cultural production in literary criticism reveals a substantial presence of studies and articles engaging in the practice of meta-criticism, such as commentary on the works of other critics or the inclusion of the term "meta-criticism" as a conspicuous banner warranting attention. However, before elaborating on meta-criticism within modern and

contemporary Arab culture, it is essential to begin discussing modern Arabic criticism as the subject matter of meta-criticism.

The early foundations of modern and contemporary literary criticism in the Arab world can be traced to Jabr Dumit's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, published in 1899 and predominantly influenced by English culture. Similarly, French culture influenced Qustas al-Homsi's *Manhal al-Wared li 'Ilm al-Intiqad* (The Source of Criticism), published in 1907. Between these two dates, 1904, Ruhi al-Khalidi published *History of Literary Science among the Franks and Arabs*. Victor Hugo, in which al-Khalidi called for engagement with Western literature to develop Arab literature and criticism.

This call marks the inception of intercultural dialogue between modern Arabic criticism and Western criticism. It resonated widely and significantly shaped successive generations of pioneering Arab critics such as al-'Aqqad, Na'ima, Taha Hussein, Muhammad Mandur, Mahmoud Amin al-'Alam, and Louis 'Awad.

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arabic criticism has experienced the emergence of a new Arab criticism under the banner of a new literary movement influenced by Western critical experience without neglecting the accompanying heritage influences, whether consciously or unconsciously acknowledged by these critics. In its pursuit of establishing an Arab "meta-critical" practice with its foundations, concepts, and perspectives toward this "modern" criticism, it sought to appropriate all that was novel in Western criticism, transforming it into a factor enriching Arab literature in general and criticism in particular by developing its questions and deepening reflection within the scope of its aesthetic and epistemological functions.

Since then, Arabic criticism has continuously engaged in dialogue with Western theories and methodologies, drawing from them to construct a critical practice rooted in the specific cultural and intellectual milieu of the Arab world.

This corpus of modern or contemporary Arabic criticism occupies a considerable and undeniable position today. This compels us to question these prevailing approaches and methodologies, consider the extent to which they have shaped our criticism, and whether they have established clear and distinctive critical habits and traditions within critical practice.

Conclusion:

The research must conclude with a summary including the most significant findings, key recommendations, and suggestions relevant to the topic under study. This conclusion should be concise and avoid repetition of material previously addressed by the researcher in earlier study sections.

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