

Methodological Openness and the Critique of Methodological Authority in Contemporary Arab Literary Criticism: A Critical Reading of the Thought of Abdelmalek Murtad

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Keywords

Methodological openness; Non-method; Integrative criticism; Textual specificity; Contemporary Arab criticism; Abdelmalek Murtad.

Abstract

This study examines the concept of methodological openness as articulated in the critical project of the Algerian critic Abdelmalek Murtad, situating it within the broader epistemological debates of contemporary Arab literary criticism. Confronted with the dominance of rigid analytical systems and the uncritical transfer of Western critical methodologies, Murtad proposes a dynamic alternative grounded in what he terms al-lā-manhaj (the non-method). Rather than rejecting method altogether, this approach seeks to relativize its authority, subordinate it to the specificity of the literary text, and prevent it from becoming an instrument of interpretive closure. The paper argues that methodological openness in Murtad's work represents a conscious effort to preserve the vitality, semantic richness, and aesthetic productivity of the literary text. By reducing the coercive power of predefined methodologies, the text is allowed to generate meaning through successive readings shaped by diverse cultural, historical, and cognitive horizons. This openness enables the coexistence of multiple interpretive possibilities without collapsing into arbitrariness or critical anarchy. Through a conceptual and analytical reading of Murtad's theoretical positions, this study clarifies the philosophical foundations of the non-method, distinguishes it from integrative or eclectic approaches, and highlights its implications for textual interpretation in Arabic literary studies. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that methodological openness constitutes a critical strategy aimed at reconciling methodological awareness with textual freedom, thereby contributing to a more flexible, creative, and text-responsive critical practice in contemporary Arab criticism.

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Introduction

Contemporary Arab criticism faces a number of major issues, foremost among them the problem of searching for a critical method or critical methodologies capable of eliciting literary discourse and reading it in a creative manner.

Contemporary Arab literary criticism has been confronted with a set of profound methodological and epistemological challenges, foremost among which is the persistent question of method. Since the rise of modern critical movements in the Arab world, critics and researchers have struggled to identify analytical approaches capable of unlocking the semantic, aesthetic, and cultural layers of literary discourse without reducing the text to rigid theoretical frameworks. This concern has

become more acute with the massive influx of Western critical theories—structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, reader-response theory, and discourse analysis—which, despite their intellectual richness, often raise questions regarding their applicability to Arabic literary texts that emerge from different historical, linguistic, and cultural horizons.

Within this context, the issue of methodological authority has emerged as a central debate in Arab criticism. The tendency to absolutize method, to transform it into a dominant and controlling apparatus imposed upon the text, has frequently resulted in interpretive closure rather than openness. Literary texts, particularly those characterized by symbolic density, intertextual depth, and historical stratification, resist such totalizing approaches. Consequently, many Arab critics have begun to call for more flexible, text-centered modes of reading that prioritize the internal dynamics of the literary work over strict methodological loyalty.

Among the most prominent figures to engage critically with this problem is the Algerian critic 'Abd al-Malik Mortad, whose critical project represents a distinctive turning point in modern Arab criticism. Mortad does not merely adopt or adapt Western methodologies; rather, he interrogates the very notion of method itself. Through his proposal of what he terms *al-lā-manhaj* (the non-method), Mortad challenges the hegemony of fixed analytical systems and calls for a critical practice grounded in openness, flexibility, and responsiveness to the specificity of the literary text.

Methodological openness, as articulated by Mortad, does not imply randomness, arbitrariness, or the absence of critical rigor. On the contrary, it reflects a deep awareness of the limitations of methodological absolutism and an insistence on preserving the vitality, productivity, and interpretive generosity of the text. The literary work, in this perspective, is not a passive object awaiting dissection, but a living structure capable of continuous renewal through successive readings. Each act of reading becomes a creative encounter shaped by the reader's horizon, cultural background, and historical moment.

This study seeks to examine the concept of methodological openness in the critical discourse of 'Abd al-Malik Mortad, situating it within the broader debates of contemporary Arab criticism. It aims to clarify the theoretical foundations of *al-lā-manhaj*, distinguish it from integrative or eclectic methodologies, and explore its implications for textual interpretation, terminological usage, and critical practice. By doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink method in Arab literary criticism and to articulate approaches that respect both the uniqueness of Arabic literary heritage and the demands of modern critical inquiry.

1. The Concept of Method:

Linguistically, *manhaj* and *minhaj* mean the clear path, and *nahj* is the straight path. It is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an: "For each of you We have made a law and a method." Ahmed Matloub indicated in *The Dictionary of Ancient Arab Criticism* that method means way or style. Hazem Al-Qartajanni introduced the term *minhaj* in some sections of his book *Minhaj Al-Bulaghah' wa Siraj Al-Udaba'*, by which he meant "chapter," as he divided his book into four chapters or sections, calling each one a *manhaj*.

As for foreign dictionaries, they provide linguistically and lexically close definitions of the term "method." In English (Method), French (Méthode), Latin (Methodus), and Greek (Methdos), it generally means the path, way, or technique used to do a specific thing.

2. Arab Critical Awareness of the Problem of Method:

Awareness of the problem of method in the field of contemporary literary criticism does not appear to have a long history. Rather, it began with the efforts of the modern Arab critical movement, which started to take shape after the efforts of Hussein Al-Marsafi, particularly in the writings of Taha Hussein and Al-Aqqad, and later in the works of Muhammad Mandour, Louis Awad, Mahmoud Amin Al-Alim, Ali Jawad Al-Tahir, Ezzedine Ismail, and the new generation of Arab critics.

Methodological vision in the modern Arab critical movement increased thanks to the direct impact of the critical and theoretical explosion in Europe and the world since the 1960s, which began to find its echo in Arab critical life from the mid-1970s and crystallized more clearly in the 1980s through the rooting of some modern critical approaches based on linguistics, semiotics, and hermeneutics, such as structuralism, deconstruction, reception theory, and reader-response approaches, among others. This can be clearly observed in the theoretical and applied methodological perspectives of a considerable number of Arab critics, such as Abdel Fattah Kilito, Mohammed Berrada, Said Yaqtin, Mohammed Bennis, Hassan Bahrawi, Khalida Said, Yumna Al-Eid, I'tidal Othman, Mohammed مفتاح, Abdullah Al-Ghathami, Fadel Thamer, and others. During this particular phase, a fertile process of dialogue emerged among the new methodologies themselves, during which many critical foundations that were considered sacred constants were reviewed, making it possible to speak

with greater confidence about the existence of a modern Arab critical movement that rises to the level of contemporary global critical movements.

3. The Emergence of the Idea of the Non-Method in Abdelmalek Murtad's Thought:

Dr. Abdelmalek Murtad is considered one of the leading figures of modern Algerian criticism, and his writings are characterized by abundance, volume, and an encyclopedic spirit.

What distinguishes this critic is that he is among those who broke the rigidity of the method and established the idea of the non-method for the first time in his book *The Literary Text: From Where? And To Where?* He uttered a famous statement: "In short, and yet comprehensively, the non-method in dissecting the literary text is the method."

At the same time, he declared his rejection of the so-called integrative method, which he considered an impossible myth; this indicates that the critic affirms the idea of the non-method and rejects the integrative method.

Dr. Murtad proposes the term non-method to describe a special methodological behavior that secures his critical relationship with the general methodological reference from which he proceeds in his new critical studies, which encompass all that he produced starting from the 1980s, after severing ties with his traditional methodological past to which he had been loyal during the pre-Sorbonne phase (that is, the pre-doctoral stage, represented by his early critical works: *The Short Story in Ancient Arabic Literature* (1968), *The Renaissance of Contemporary Literature in Algeria* (1971), *The Art of Maqamat in Arabic Literature* (1980), *The Arts of Literary Prose in Algeria* (1983)). His doctoral dissertation *The Arts of Literary Prose* represents his last engagement with those traditional critical tools.

4. The Reception of the Idea of the Non-Method among Arab Critics and Scholars:

Many researchers have gravely wronged the critic due to their misunderstanding of the concept of the non-method, leading them to classify him under the category of the "integrative method," which he has always mocked along with its proponents. Included in this flawed understanding is the question raised by one of them at the threshold of the "non-method": "...We wonder and ask Murtad: what is the difference between his rejection of attempts to reconcile and patch together methods, and the method of the non-method that takes something from every method?"

This scholar responded by stripping the book *The Literary Text: From Where? And To Where?* of the attribute of the integrative method, and even went further to attach the book (*A-Y*) to the same methodological lineage. Even worse, he ended with an unfair fallacy stating that "the method adopted by Murtad today is not a method in the strict sense, but rather a set of steps and procedures that he carries out while dealing with a text."

The root of this entire fallacy lies in equating the "non-method" with the "integrative method," which is not the case at all; rather, there is a vast difference between them.

Dr. Abdelmalek Murtad believes that if two people study the same literary text, the results extracted from it will differ due to the difference in the method followed and the personal vision of each scholar. Likewise, if the same scholar studies a literary text today and then returns to study it after ten years, he will inevitably study it using a method that differs, to a greater or lesser extent, from the initial approach, and consequently will arrive at results that differ slightly or significantly from the previous ones.

"Every literary text, the more deeply one penetrates its unknowns and enters its inner spaces, yields fruits, results, or conclusions that it does not yield to others... The literary text appears at first glance as a small, simple, uncomplicated world with no branching paths."

It is clear that it is impossible to understand what the critic means by the non-method without referring to the theoretical context in which he introduced it, as it appears coupled with an extensive discussion of what he called "productivity" (*al-'ata'iyya*), that is, what a literary text can give us through probing its recesses and angles. Thus, we agree with André Miquel that the deeper we delve into a work while studying a literary text, the more its angles of vision multiply. It is as if the literary text renews itself and is reborn through every reading carried out by each reader. Thus, the giving of the literary text is eternally renewed and never exhausted; whenever a reader asks it, it gives.

The productivity of the text is directly proportional to the flexibility of the critical method applied to it, the degree of its openness, and the extent to which it is adapted to absorb the semantic and aesthetic fertility offered by the text. Hence comes the critic's concern with subjecting the method to the specificity of the text, sacrificing part of the authority of the method, and reducing the degree of its influence and dominance in favor of the life of the text and its productivity.

Dr. Abdelaziz Al-Maqaleh also viewed productivity as the method of the non-method in studying the literary text, which renews itself and is reborn through every reading carried out by each reader.

Youssef Wagheesi says: "The non-method, in its simplest form, therefore requires entering the text neutrally and shedding—as much as possible—rigid methodological mechanisms (which are undoubtedly tailored to a different textual scale), in order to confront the text with flexibility, displaying methodological tools that are adaptable in a way that deepens its productivity and leaves it a virgin space open to subsequent, diverse reading practices..."

Abdelmalek Murtad states that he draws upon both the old and the modern in his study of the text. He says: "...As for what we desire, it is to benefit from Western theories, many of which are grounded in science, just as we benefit from some elements of heritage, digest both, then attempt to knead them together thoroughly, and thereafter try to approach the text with an independent, future-oriented vision."

Murtad rejected fanaticism toward a single method and refused to submit to the dominance of any method. His adoption of the non-method was the result of his belief in the futility of any single method in studying and criticizing the literary text. He implicitly called on all researchers to abandon method when he said: "The method will remain the annoying incubus that haunts the path of all researchers."

Perhaps the most famous non-methodological means adopted by Abdelmalek Murtad to reduce the rigidity of the method and its pressure on the text, and to avoid falling into the trap of blind methodological imitation, was his attempt to combine methods that had not previously been combined. Thus, he combined semiotics and stylistics in (*The Poetics of the Poem: The Poem of Reading*), and semiotics and deconstruction in (*A-Y*), with a noticeable absence of the basic principles of deconstruction. Perhaps sensing this gap, he later contented himself—in the second edition of the book—with the phrase "a composite study" instead of "a semiotic-deconstructive study of the poem (Where Is My Layla?)" which appeared as a subtitle in the first edition. He also combined semiotics and deconstruction in his books (*One Thousand and One Nights*) and (*Analysis of Narrative Discourse*), while taking great care to harmonize the combined methodological elements to avoid the grave errors into which the integrative method fell at the hands of some traditional critics.

As for the non-methodological presence at the terminological level, Dr. Murtad skillfully handles the contents of the terminological apparatus through procedural approaches that enable him to innovate in modification, interpretation, and application more than merely transferring or imitating faithfully and rigidly. An example of this is his generalization of the term "icon" (*Icone*) to tangible, audible, and olfactory traces, rather than restricting it to the visual sense alone.

In his handling of the terms literariness (*Littérarité*) and poetics (*Poétique*), which Western terminology conventionally makes the former the subject of the latter, we see him reversing the relationship to the point of making the former more general and comprehensive than the latter, perhaps in harmony with Arab heritage traditions, which never imagined poetry to be more comprehensive than literature.

These were brief indications of a new methodological—or non-methodological—conviction whose sole concern is to deal with the literary text with flexibility and without fanaticism toward any specific methodological procedure, without any preconceived vision. The literary text is an unknown world full of secrets, whose keys are possessed by the perceptive reader (*le lecteur averti*), "who goes beyond content toward a broader and more open horizon of expectation, seeking the aesthetics of presenting this content."

Perhaps the dogmatic application of Western critical methods to literary texts strips them of many of their characteristics and artistic aesthetics. Moreover, the creative nature that characterizes literary texts contradicts the mechanistic nature of these methods. In addition, applying a Western method with philosophical and metaphysical origins far removed from Arabic literary texts is a matter of extreme contradiction.

And perhaps this is a call to Arab critics and scholars to establish clear foundations and features for an authentic Arab criticism capable of properly engaging with an authentic Arab text; for studying an Arabic poem whose age exceeds ten centuries according to a newly born method that is no more than fifty years old deprives it of much of its value, whether at the semantic level or at the aesthetic level.

Conclusion

The examination of methodological openness in the criticism of 'Abd al-Malik Murtad reveals a coherent and deeply reflective critical vision that transcends simplistic classifications of method and counter-method. Murtad's proposal of *al-lā-manhaj* emerges not as a negation of methodology, but as a conscious resistance to methodological rigidity and intellectual

dogmatism. It is an invitation to re-center the literary text as the primary source of meaning, authority, and interpretive direction.

One of the most significant conclusions drawn from this study is that Mortad's critical stance is rooted in a dynamic understanding of textual productivity (*al-'atā'iyya*). The literary text, according to this view, is inexhaustible; it generates new meanings with each reading and reveals new dimensions as the reader delves deeper into its internal structures and semantic networks. Such productivity cannot be adequately captured through a single method, regardless of its theoretical sophistication. Hence, methodological openness becomes a necessary condition for preserving the text's vitality rather than an optional critical strategy.

Furthermore, the distinction between *al-lā-manhaj* and the so-called integrative method is fundamental. While the latter often results in mechanical accumulation and uncritical borrowing from multiple approaches, Mortad's non-method is governed by a principle of internal coherence and contextual relevance. It does not seek to reconcile incompatible theories for the sake of inclusivity, but rather to mobilize conceptual tools selectively, pragmatically, and creatively, in accordance with the demands of the text itself.

The study also demonstrates that Mortad's methodological openness extends beyond analytical procedures to encompass terminological innovation and conceptual reconfiguration. His flexible handling of critical terminology, as well as his redefinition of relationships between key concepts such as literariness and poetics, reflects an effort to liberate critical language from rigid taxonomies and to adapt it to the realities of Arabic literary discourse. This practice underscores the inseparability of method, language, and interpretation in critical work.

Ultimately, this research confirms that methodological openness, as theorized and practiced by 'Abd al-Malik Mortad, constitutes a valuable contribution to contemporary Arab criticism. It offers an alternative path that avoids both uncritical imitation of Western theories and nostalgic retreat into inherited models. By advocating a flexible, text-responsive, and historically conscious critical practice, Mortad opens the way for a more authentic engagement with Arabic literary texts—one that honors their complexity, respects their cultural specificity, and acknowledges the creative role of the reader.

In this sense, methodological openness may be understood not merely as a critical choice, but as an ethical and epistemological position: a commitment to dialogue rather than domination, to exploration rather than closure, and to the continuous renewal of meaning within the ever-evolving landscape of literary criticism.

Ethical Considerations

This research is theoretical and analytical in nature and does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures. All sources cited are publicly available academic texts. The study adheres to internationally accepted standards of academic integrity, including proper citation, intellectual honesty, and respect for authorship rights.

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Conflict of Interest

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