Hamouda and the Arabic Literary Theory: A Critical Approach

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Abstract

There is much to celebrate in the publication of *Al–Maraya Al- Muqaara* (The Concave Mirrors) written in Arabic by Dr. Abdel Aziz Hamouda, Professor of English literature. In this book, the author questions the domination of Western theories in linguistics and literature over the Arab writers in the colonial and postcolonial periods. This paper concentrates on "the Arabic Literary Theory" proposed by Prof. Hamouda and on his efforts to establish the procedures for proving its existence and exploring its main aspects via re–evaluating Arabic literature in its golden age. Through an in- depth analysis of the Western critical theories in the twentieth century compared to the Arabic traditional ones, he discusses the constituent elements not only of an authentic Arabic critical theory but of a whole Arabic literary theory. Refusing to be defined by the dominant Western culture, Prof. Hamouda defines himself in this book and his Arabic identity, paving the way for a new generation of Arab writers who are well prepared to make the extra effort required to develop the long neglected Arabic literary theory without confining themselves to the rules of Western culture and its theories.

Keywords: Theories of linguistics, Arabic theory of criticism.

Introduction:

On reading Ronald Schleifer's words in his book *Modernism and Time* (2000), about the domination of the Euro-American culture "of both nature and non Western societies,"[1] a 'dominated' Arab intellectual can realize the significance of Hamouda's book *Al – Maraya Al – Moqaara.* (1992). This book is the result of the author's long process of cross – cultural studies as an Arab professor of English and American literatures. It is a documentary survey of the political and cultural crisis the Arabs faced in the second half of the twentieth century which culminated in the Arab writers' attempt to modernize their world by undermining the authority of the their past and underestimating the achievements of the traditional Arabic literary heritage in Linguistics and Literature. Owing to the feeling of superiority of the "other," the Arab writers sacrificed their nationalistic self – identity and imposed some sort of a complex interaction between their tradition and the Western theories of Modernism and Post–Modernism that were the natural outcome of the "other's" own cultural, social, political

and economic circumstances. The causes and effects of this crisis are fully explained in the first part of the book. The second part analyses and promotes systematic frameworks for the Arabic linguistic and literary theories.

This paper concentrates on Hamouda's attempt to dig for the foundations of an Arabic literary theory through his explorations of Arabic critical and linguistic theories. The following pages introduce a background of Arabic Modernism and the history of the Arab-Greek contact, then Hamouda's explorations of the history of Arabic rhetoric in its golden age- from the third to the seventh centuries- to prove the existence of Arabic theories in linguistics and literature. The literary theory includes six aspects: mimesis and creativity, language and rhetoric as tools for realizing creativity, truth and lying, plagiarism, tradition and talent, and finally form and content.

When the term Arabic Modernism is used, Mohamed Ali (1769 – 1849) is the first Arab leader to be remembered. He started the real Arab-Western contact in the eighteenth century with his attempts to modernize Egypt and its educational system, by scholarships granted to Egyptian intellectuals in Europe. Since that time, Western impact never seized to dominate the Arab mind. Hamouda mentions that a number of Arab thinkers are of the opinion that the dualism which resulted from Mohamed Ali's establishment of a new modern educational system while keeping the traditional religious one unchanged caused "a cultural break,"[. . .] then the Western occupation paved the way for a full adoption of the European model by the end of the nineteenth century. (26) This "cultural break" continued until it culminated after the defeat of the Arabs by the Israelis–aided by Western technology-in 1967. Hamouda agrees with Jaber Assfour and Shokry Ayad that there is a strong relation between the frustration of the Arab dream in 1967 and the adoption of modernism and post modernism,

> As a reaction to this defeat Arab modernists realized cognitive detachment with the past tradition [. . .] and turned towards the culture of the 'other' either Western European or American afterwards, (he asserts that). . . the aspiration to realize modernity was accompanied by the feeling of "inferiority" that dispersed among Arab intellectuals when confronted with the "other's" cultural superiority" (28).

Worldwide the West has always been keen on propagating its own culture to the extent of financially supporting specific cultural activities all over the world for this purpose. The documents that Frances Stonor Saunders collected and published in her book *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* prove that after World War II the American Administration financed, through the CIA, some Arab magazines like "Hewar"-which was the Arabic version of the one in London called the "*Encounter*", with one purpose that of "the indirect request of the mergence of the Arabs into the Western culture"(84). The CIA chose the elite of the Arab intellectuals, not the public, as its culture target group. The outcome is "the cultural break and duality in the Arab world" (85). Hamouda indicates that Arab modernism passed through two main stages:

> the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a process of learning from the West [. . .] of being intelligently influenced by European trends in   criticism and of careful choice from the products of the Western mind. But the next stage that started in different dates in the second half of the century transferred that "learning" to a process of "mergence" into the Western culture that threatens to terminate the Arabic identity, which has already occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century (71).

Among the various points of view analyzed in this context Ilyass Khory's statement summarizes the dilemma of Arab modernism as:

an attempt to look for the legitimacy of the future after the historical legitimacy of the past was lost in a world unified by Western capitalism and controlled by the West while all other parties are banished to the memory of history [. . .] looking for this legitimacy then is an attempt to avoid being obliterated, to stop self-destruction by accepting partial destruction.[3]

The need for reviving the past and locating Arabic culture with its own distinctive features in 'the new changing world' is now a necessity for survival. Besides, on reading that "Cultural self–definition and political self- determination were two sides of the same coin,"[4] the importance of Hamouda's journey of re-exploring the Arabic literary heritage becomes obvious. He considers his book "an attempt to determine a starting point for developing the Arabic theories in linguistics and literature" (490),by proving that the history of Arabic rhetoric in its golden age-from the third to the seventh centuries- includes the origins of both theories that, "if we had not neglected for ten centuries [. . .](especially) in the age of the Arab modernists' detachment from their heritage"(12), would have developed a literary theory that could challenge modern Western ones. The Arabic literary theory that Hamouda designates includes the following six aspects: mimesis and creativity, language and rhetoric as tools for realizing creativity, truth and lying, plagiarism, tradition and talent, and finally form and content. Before dealing with these aspects, it is important to give a bird's eye view of the impact of Greek thought and the literary encounters between the advocates of Abu–Tammam on the one hand and Al–Bohtory on the other and their schools of talent versus craftsmanship, besides, the controversies over the poetry of Al-Motanaby, all helped to enrich the Arabic literary environment and develop the art of rhetoric at that time .

The crucial point Hamouda stresses here is that " the development of the Arabic literary theory that would set rules for poetic creativity and criteria for its composition and evaluation, owes a lot to the indirect impact of Greek thought (314). Thus, during   the Dark Ages of Europe the Arab thinkers translated many works by the Greeks and were influenced by their culture. Muslim thinkers were looking for knowledge everywhere: "first to collect and ratify the Hadith of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) then, enlarged the scope of research to include all fields of knowledge […]. This mature intellect would have never rejected Aristotle and his logical thought"(313). In this context Al-Jabery confirms that, "the Greek influence introduced systematic and scientific support to the Arab regenerators in their encounters with the traditionalists in the golden age of Arabic rhetoric."[5]

In his discussion of the first aspect of the Arabic literary theory, mimeses and creativity, Hamouda concentrates on   Abdel–Qader Al-Jorjani as one of the founders of the Arabic literary theory. Ashmawi is of the opinion that the norms Al-Jorjani uses in his literary theory present him as a modern critic: "If there is in the Arabic history of criticism and rhetoric what could be comparable to what modern thought has introduced in critical and rhetorical studies , it has got to be Al-Jorjani's approach."[6] Hamouda believes that in Al-Jorjani's *book Dalael Al Eegaz wa Asrar Al –Balaghah* (Tokens of the Inimitability and the Secrets of Rhetoric) the Arab critic "had in mind a theory for composing or constructing poetry that relied mainly on the rhetorical usage of the language" (318). The methodology the Structuralist critics used in applying   linguistic concepts in their analysis of a literary text, Al-Jorjani used for his interpretation of poetry and verses from the Holy Quran according to a literary theory that emphasized a "structure" or a "system" that depended on the special usage of language(the use of rhetoric)." Al-Jorjani preceded Westerners in his usage of "Close reading" in which the principle of "coherence" is essential to good poetry. Bertens writes about the same concept in the twenty first century indicating that: "The idea of "Close reading," that is the focus on the text that Richards and Leavis had promoted so vigorously in England, in the hands of the New Critics(the label New Critics derives from the title of Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism(23).* Moreover, Al-Jorjani conceives of the object of his analysis in "close reading"

of the text to be the text as an entity in itself in addition to its structure. These bases are clearly relevant to twentieth century schools of criticism.

When discussing the first aspect of the Arabic literary theory, it is necessary to start with Aristotle's definition of poetry in his "*Poetics*" as "an imitation (in Greek, mimesis) of human actions. By imitation he means something like representation, in its fundamental sense: the poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and re-presenting it in a new medium, or material- that of words".[7] With Al-Jorjani the concept of mimesis is transformed into a theory of creativity:

> The real craft lies in the mental images that poetry creates, which listeners like or fear, that affect the praised and move them. The impact of these images is similar to that of visual productions like pictures and sculptures made by skilled artists when a person experiences a state of undeniable fascination that did not exist before. Similar feelings are invoked by poetry with what meanings it creates that make the person imagine the dead, inanimate object alive.[8]

Another undoubtedly genuine definition of poetry belongs to the Muslim rhetorician and critic Hazem Al-Qartajani (1211-1285) who makes use of both Arab and Greek rhetoric . In his book *Minhaj Al-Bolaghaa,* he defines poetry as:

> rhymed speech in meter that tends to make people like what poetry proposes to be liked so as to look for it, and it persuades them to avoid what poetry tends to make them dislike. This is done through the best way of using imagination and imitation independently or with good composition of speech ,its truthfulness its fame or all of them together.[9]

Hazem then recognizes both the linguistic and critical cornerstones of defining poetry: "the poet creates a mental image to the object of mimesis then uses words(parole) to communicate it to the recipient who transforms it in his mind to the image or "sign"(354). These ideas are indistinguishable from the thinking of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Bertens writes: "in the early twentieth century, he revolutionized the study of language […] (which) should first of all be seen as a system of signs" (56).

Hazem shifts his goals from the definition of poetry that includes mimesis to differentiate between direct mimesis and the indirect one. Hamouda's explanation of Hazem's idea is that in the direct type, poetry "imitates the object with its own descriptions that represent its image and the indirect one which gives the descriptions of something else that bears similarities to that object"(353). The second type is at the core of the Arabic literary theory. It is creativity that"represents the best that the Arab mind added to the Aristotelian concept of mimesis"(355). Related to the degree of creativity in literature that the Arab critics agreed or differed with Aristotle upon are the two issues of the relation of the substance and the image and the relation between the word and its meaning. In this respect "Qudama Ben Jaafar, before the Romantics, rejected the idea that some subjects are good for poetry and other subjects are not" (359). A poet should have full freedom to choose his substance and with his craft creates the meaning he wishes to convey to his readers. Hamouda quotes Qudama's words: "the meaning to poetry is just like the substance and what is made out of it . . . and as it is the case in every craft there is the material that could be shaped ,wood to carpentry, a poet when choosing a meaning . . . virtuous or vicious , with his craft he can reach perfection" (358-359).

Qudama adds to his concept of craft and perfection the belief that the only criteria for literary value judgment is the poetic experience itself. Again, the modern reader can easily recognize a similar view in New Criticism and the concept of reading the text "as in itself it really is" or "T. S. Eliot and his "impersonal theory" which implies a serious distinction between realistic and poetic experience" (374). Yet this process of "transformation" of the substance or meaning is controlled by Hezem Qartajannii "by being acceptable to reason" (368).

The second aspect of the Arabic literary theory consists of an attempt to combine language and creativity. First, Hamouda states that, "because poetry was the only genre in Arabic literature (drama was not known then) Arabic rhetoric relied mainly on language […] that is why there is an immense number of rhetorical and linguistic studies in Arabic" (374). Language as a tool of creativity that constitutes this aspect of the Arabic theory, is the basis of structuralism with the principle, as Abrams defines it, of viewing "literature as a second order system that uses the first order structural system of language as its medium, and as itself to be analyzed primarily on the model of linguistic theory" (280). The Arabs applied a variety of linguistic concepts to the analysis of literary texts since the third Hijry century and through his systematic analysis of a set of rich models of Arabic critical writings, Hamouda stresses the modernity of the Arab rhetoricians and the precedence of Arabic literary and applied criticism to modern trends of criticism.

By the end of the third Hijry century, Ibn Tabateba Al – Alawi confirmed the importance of "concretization" as the main approach to creativity in poetry. "He introduced an Arabic conception of mimesis as perfect creativity that makes the ugly beautiful and the beautiful ugly [. . .]When poetry presents"true features and agreeable similarities that make "the wild familiar "and vice versa, poetry does not only realize the uncovering of the faculty of comprehension but becomes the main approach to poetic creativity".[10]The twentieth century reader can easily distinguish the implied "modernity" of Ibn Tabateba's definition of the function of rhetoric in poetry when comparing it to Bertens' remark about the difference between Leavis and the New Critics: "Although Leavis, too, puts a premium on oppositions, juxtapositions, inversions, and similar techniques, he increasingly comes to judge poems in terms of the "life" and the "concreteness" they succeed in conveying"(18).

In the fifth century Al-Jorjani identifies the function of rhetoric concentrating on"the direct meaning which is realized through using the language according to what it indicates in reality and this type needs no effort on the part of the reader to understand and the second type is the indirect meaning that the use of rhetoric realizes and the reader has to exert a lot of effort to grasp"(386). This means that Al-Jorjani is referring to primary and secondary meanings in a similar way to that of Derrida. In spite of the fact that Al-Jorjani did not use the terms 'presence' and 'absence', he explained the same idea, "You can briefly say that there is a meaning by which you mean the surface meaning of the word and the meaning of meaning which is concerned with another meaning that you comprehend and that leads you to another meaning"(203). From this perspective, Hamouda concludes that Al-Jorjani was able to explain Derrida's concept of "presence and absence" eight centuries before the father of Deconstruction criticism.

The third aspect of the Arabic literary theory is close to the issue of the relation between the object of mimesis or the meaning and the image or language; it is about truth and lying. Here Hamouda clarifies the Arab rhetoricians' standpoint towards this issue and its relation to the function of literature in the real world of that time. He believes that in the first three Hijry centuries, "Arabic rhetoric concerned itself with the ethical and religious sides of truth and lying […] It was quite natural and logical that poetry in the early times of Islam should be related to religious and ethical truths and that critical judgment on poetry should depend on the degree of truth or lying it implies" (84).

With the beginning of the fourth century, influenced by the Greek culture, these concepts undergo "a slow process of transformation until they culminated with Hazem Qartajany's ideas that generated an early Arabic school of aesthetics as important as the aesthetics of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century" (422). But Qudama was the first Arab rhetorician to set rules for the criticism of poetry which included a rejection of ethical judgment over creativity,"We have to pass judgments on the meaning or make a distinction between good and bad poetry not as an ethical meaning but as a poetic meaning in the first place".[11] Al-Jorjani confirmed the "Literariness" of literature, for poems are not written as religious texts but just as poetry, thus, the first Muslims did not reject the traditional poetry that poets wrote before Islam. Hamoda believes that he defended poetry reassuring that "imagined lying in poetry could be true as the concept of lying itself does not mean comparing the reality of what is described and its image in the imagined poetic context" (433). Hazem Qartajany considered poetry as :

> A human activity that is related to man's endeavors to realize perfection […] thus, the ethical value and the aesthetic one are[…] inseparable. The beautiful is necessarily good, and good actions are the same as virtues. The most beautiful is the other side useful, as long as they are connected in a way that helps a human being to reach perfection. It is logical, then, that poetry should be related to a frame of ethical values" (337).

Hazem's views on the nature of poetry, beauty and ugliness in art and reality constitute his literary theory. Hamouda is of the opinion that the Arabs' view about the issue of truth and lying is an innovative one. It transformed the Aristotelian concept of the function of mimesis in which tragedy depicts people and actions "better than they really are" and "worse than they really are", in comedy to some sort of "conditioning that creates the beauty where it does not exist, and the ugly where it is not" (340). The Arab rhetoricians then were able to develop their ideals of taste, beauty and aesthetics that differed from Aristotle, and they created their criteria for the criticism of poetry that suited their own literature.

Plagiarism and inter-textuality represent the fourth aspect of the Arabic literary theory that, since the beginning of the third century till the end of the fifth, the Arab rhetoricians were occupied with. The importance of this aspect emerges from the fact that it is a way for establishing the legitimacy of the Arabic literary school. Hamouda, like many other Arab writers, believes that the majority of writings dealing with debates over this issue represent the essential forms of applied criticism in Arabic literature with the "close reading" of text as the basis for analysis. Ibn Tabateba, Al Amedy, Al Askary, Qudama and Al-Jorjani all discussed the advantages and the disadvantages of plagiarism. This issue is stressed by Al Ashmawy who writes, "We will not be exaggerating when we say that plagiarism was the core of the critical studies during that time with plagiarism representing the open door for the issues related to criticism." Besides, plagiarism paved the way for analytical criticism and comparisons between poets" (345).

Unaffected by foreign ideas or theories the Arab rhetoricians attempted to organize the relation between the one who commits the literary theft and the original owner of the source text. "This meant adjusting the relation between the word and the meaning or the substance and its image and constituted the real beginning of the Arab literary theory" (442). There is agreement amongst the Arab rhetoricians that meanings themselves are not objects to plagiarism as they are common to human beings. When poets agree on a certain meaning, this was not counted as plagiarism. Still, when it comes to "the signifier" of the purpose, there are two types of agreement. The first type is not considered a case of plagiarism as it is

commonly known to all, as in the simile of a courageous man to a lion. The second type where a poet uses another poet's original meanings and ideas without acknowledging the source text is indeed considered plagiarism.

Hamouda confirms the undeniable precedence of the Arab rhetorician's concept of plagiarism to the modern one of "inter-textuality" that Julia Kristeva defines as follows:

> The term inter-text denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has been understood in the banal sense of "study of sources" we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of […] enunciative and denotative positionality.[12]

Both the Arabic concept of plagiarism and the modern idea of inter-textuality suggest the inevitability of the agreement in meanings. Melaney adds that "The writer who approaches literature inter-textually performs a unique historical function that transcends the moment of composition."[13]Yet, the Arab rhetoricians rules and restrictions for plagiarism defined the scope of the process of the effect and being affected and thus protected the text from "the deborderment" that appeared with the concept of intertextuality.

The fourth aspect of the Arabic Literary theory, tradition and talent, answers the question of "what makes a poet a poet". "There is almost agreement among rhetoricians in all languages-old or new- that a poet should have a talent for composing poetry and full awareness of traditional poetry" (458).The ideas proposed by the Arab writers from Al Jahidh to Hazem Al-Qartajany are similar to the views that T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) emphasized in his *Tradition and Individual Talent* (first published in 1917). Eliot attacks the Romantics' concept that the poem is primarily an expression of the poet's personality. He argues that, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning   alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation   to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead."[14]

A good poet then acquires knowledge of the past in order to develop his own talent. Ibn Tabateba's advice to the poet, before composing his own poetry, is to read traditional poetry to gain a sense of both the language and the past which mingles with his talent to produce good poems. Al Jahidh, too, emphasizes the importance of talent and tradition. He believes that if a poet is knowledgeable of the works of the great poets of the past and is skillful in the language, but remains unable to compose poems should find himself another "craft." This is so because he lacks the required talent.

Qartajanni's objective views in the thirteenth century about the inadequacy of talent and the young poet's need to keep the company of older poets so as to learn the art of rhetoric and the rules of traditional poetry are significantly important when compared to Eliot's concept concerning the criteria for estimating poets edited by Adams as follows:

> One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he at least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but also the most individual parts of his work may be those, in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously (784).

In the twentieth century Eliot asserts Qartajanni's perception that the relation between talent and tradition is a process in which tradition and rules become part and parcel of talent, "Tradition (that) involves, in the first place, the historical sense, […] (which) involves a perception, not only of the pastiness of the past, but of its presence […] What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career (785).
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After proving that the Arab rhetoricians depicted the three components of the fifth aspect of the Arabic literary theory: talent, tradition and craftsmanship, Hamouda reaches the final destination with its last aspect: form   and content. He pursues multiple views concerning this issue which is closely related to the moral function of literature. Eliot, as Bertens indicates, "who is very much interested in poetic techniques and in the form of poems […] is ultimately even more interested in a poem's meaning" (14). Qudama's critical theory is based on a similar view, Hamouda points that, "He confirms the poet's right as a creative writer to choose his topic with no restrictions except the liability of the substance to be formed into good poetry […] the form cannot exist without the content or the content without form (467). Al-Jorjani too believes that the word has no meaning outside the structure. Similarly, the "parole" of de Saussure has no meaning outside the "system of signs" or the structure; "the relation between the sign […] and what it refers to is indeed fundamentally arbitrary"; this is what Bertens writes about Saussure's theory "in which form and meaning cannot be separated" (57-58). The Arab rhetoricians introduced the concept of "form and meaning cannot be separated" much earlier than De Saussre.

The purpose of this discussion is to provide all the aspects "that help establishing the legitimacy of the Arabic heritage and to prove that all the constituent elements of the new critical theories were not totally new to the old Arabic rhetoric" (467). This balance between these otherwise opposed cultures, i.e., Arab and Western that Hamouda was skillfully able to create, confirms that "the legitimate heir to culture is the one who views himself as its guardian",[15] and a true "guardian" Hamouda is. He considers the whole study "a scream for help directed to the Arab thinkers and intellectuals as well as a rejection to what is going on in our world [. . .] It is time to make our choice and decide who we are, what we want and which way we should go" (486).

Hamouda concludes his study arguing that the only way out of the crisis which the Arabs are facing in the world of globalization, is in fact, related to the issue of tradition and modernism. Tradition enables the Arab mind to develop "a protective identity" against the dangers of copying the West indistinguishably"(487). The Arabs need to assert themselves and their own nationalistic identity like any other nation and at the same time to choose electively from modernism what does not contradict the values of the Arab culture. Hamouda's literary theory may constitute one stand of a highly complex set of cultural developments at the beginning of the twenty first century in the Arab world. .

In the "New World" of the twenty-first century, it is obvious that one of the reasons for the complexity of the global cultural situation arises from the fact that the members of a specific culture assume that their way of life and of understanding the world around them, their norms and their materialistic civilization should be the only accepted ones. "Since the virtual disappearance of communism, the world is no longer divided into three worlds.The cultures of the world are now intertwined, involved in a possibly unprecedented power struggle. . . in an accelerated process of hybridization".[16] As Edward Said points out :"In today's global setting [. . .] the nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers".[17]

Still, Arabs' right to their "specificities" should be respected and the ongoing process of "confiscating their identity" should be stopped. Hamouda's contribution encourages a new generation of modern Arab writers to use their own Arabic literary theory to criticize and evaluate Arabic literature and to regain a trust in the ability of the Arab mind that developed an integral literary theory ten centuries before the modern Western ones. Hamouda's formation of the newly explored Arabic literary theory leads, at this point of history, to the emergence of a new modernized Arabic literature combining harmoniously Arabic literary tradition and new universal trends, Western or non – Western, that would be a serious addition to human thought

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