Literary Criticism's Evolution into Cultural Criticism: An Analytical Study of AlGhathami's Cultural Criticism Project

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Abstract

This study explores Abdullah AlGhathami's project of cultural criticism, examining his cultural reading of Arabic poetry and the ensuing debate between cultural and literary criticism. AlGhathami sought to apply Western cultural theories in a distinctive manner, adapting critical terminology to analyze the underlying structures masked by the aesthetics of Arabic poetry. His bold and penetrating reading unveils the systemic flaws beneath the surface, positioning his cultural criticism as an alternative methodology to traditional literary criticism. This study aims to answer the following questions: How does AlGhathami define cultural criticism? How does he apply this approach to classical Arabic texts? And how does he position his project as an alternative to literary criticism?

Keywords: *Cultural Criticism ; AlGhathami ; Critical Framework ; Underlying Structures ; Cultural Criticism; Alternative Literary Methodology.*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural criticism represents one of the most contemporary intellectual and critical movements. It emerged in response to a novel perspective transcends aesthetic appreciation, encompassing a criticism that focuses on the deep-rooted cultural frameworks hidden beneath linguistic structures. This movement reflects a reaction to the limitations of structuralist linguistic theories and the narrow focus of aesthetic, poetic, and semiotic studies, as well as the deconstructive tendencies of criticism. This has necessitated an openness to diverse fields of the humanities to enrich critical practice by uncovering latent and unspoken cultural phenomena.

The Arab critical landscape embraced this new approach, with many contemporary Arab critics adopting it, resulting in the rise of a novel critical paradigm—that of Abdullah Muhammad AlGhathami. He is regarded as the most prominent representative of *cultural criticism* in the Arab intellectual scene. AlGhathami reexamined the cultural frameworks in various examples of both classical and modern Arabic poetry, advocating for what he termed as the death of literary criticism, positioning his *cultural criticism project* as an alternative.

Consequently, this study selects AlGhathami's critical experiment as a model to investigate how this methodology was applied and localized within the Arab critical context. It also explores the conceptual foundations and proposals offered by AlGhathami regarding its application to Arabic literary texts. This study raises several epistemological questions, the most important of which are: What are the general theoretical foundations upon which AlGhathami bases his cultural-critical approach? What are the scientific principles underlying the theoretical and practical alternatives he proposes to implement this approach in Arabic texts? To what extent are these proposals convincing? And can *cultural criticism* truly replace traditional literary criticism? This research paper endeavors to answer these questions.

I. The Evolution of Cultural Criticism Terminology as seen through AlGhathami's lens:

Cultural criticism employs a systematic approach based on specific mechanisms, terms, and procedural tools, drawing from neo-Marxism, cultural materialism, new historicism, feminist criticism, post-colonialism, and technological narrative discourse. Prominent Arab critic Abdullah AlGhathami has significantly contributed to this field, authoring works like "Cultural Criticism: A Reading in Arab Cultural Frameworks"[1] and "Cultural Criticism or Literary Criticism?[2]" In these, he defines his concept of cultural criticism, detailing its mechanisms and his methodology. While aligned with broader principles, his approach introduces unique shifts in terminology and procedures, summarized as follows:

1. Systemic Function :

Roman Jakobson categorized the communicative model into six functions, each with a distinct focus: "emotive (sender), conative (receiver), referential (context), metalingual (code), phatic (contact), and aesthetic (message)."[3] AlGhathami, influenced by this model, noted its impact on modern critical thought but argued that focusing solely on the aesthetic function does not align with cultural criticism's goals. He thus introduced a seventh function, the "systemic function"[4], to highlight systemic meaning rather than just literary aesthetics[5], marking a shift from literal and implied meanings to systemic interpretation[6].

2. Type of Significance (Systemic Significance):

AlGhathami's cultural study relies on three levels of meaning: the explicit, direct meaning, which is tied to grammar and serves a communicative and informative function; the implicit, symbolic meaning, which carries a double meaning and is associated with the literary sentence, fulfilling an aesthetic function and thus grounding the conditions of literariness; and finally, the cultural-systemic meaning, which AlGhathami sought to introduce to liberate the term from the dominance of the aesthetic in literary criticism. This third level is linked to the systemic element and the cultural sentence, and it produces the cultural-systemic meaning.[7]

3. The Culturally-embedded Sentence:

"AlGhathami contends that cultural meaning and sentences are interdependent, with cultural sentences acutely attuned to the intricacies of cultural formation".[8] This anthropological view extends beyond customs and norms to include mechanisms like laws, regulations, and specific plans that instill centralization and subjugation values, reinforcing these through repetition and managing forms of coercive containment across cultural structures. Such systems are designed to dominate, resulting in a subjective bias in cultural discourse, often imposing one's traits onto "the other," making the other a mirror of the ego[9], as seen in ethnographic studies.

AlGhathami asserts that cultural criticism relies on distinguishing between the quantitative nature of grammatical sentences and their cultural significance. He argues that one cultural sentence can equate to thousands of grammatical ones due to its condensed meaning and expressive power. This makes the cultural sentence the main focus of analysis, as it encapsulates cultural discourse and uncovers contextual meanings linked to broader cultural settings.

AlGhathami argues that literary or rhetorical metaphor, traditionally used for individual words or sentences, is inadequate for cultural discourse analysis. "In cultural criticism, the goal is to reveal "cultural sentences" rather than merely grammatical or literary ones".[10] Thus,

metaphor extends beyond isolated words or sentences, encompassing entire discourses that both influence and are shaped by cultural responses.

4. The Dual Author :

AlGhathami completes his exploration of the obscurity afflicting Arabic literature and criticism, which blinds their awareness. He then addresses authorship, proposing a novel idea that departs from the traditional view attributing texts to a single author. "He argues that every creative work has two authors: the known author, central to literary studies, and an implicit author—culture itself".[11] This true author is shaped by a specific culture, serving as its voice, transmitting and promoting its systems often unconsciously. This cultural dimension possesses a systematic nature that ensnares the writer in its grand concepts, influencing the content of their discourse in line with ideological concerns. Thus, we encounter a dual-formed author: "one shaped personally and culturally, with the latter continually reshaping the former".[12] Ultimately, the contradiction between implicit meaning and explicit discourse drives cultural criticism,[13] clarifying the dual author's image and underscoring culture's decisive role in shaping discourses, where cultural frameworks consistently prevail.

5. Synecdoche :

It is well-established that a trope is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used in a context other than its literal meaning. As aptly states, "I know that the path of metaphor and expansion in what we have previously mentioned is that you use a word without intending its literal meaning, but rather to convey a related or similar meaning. Thus, you have exceeded the bounds of the word itself and the phrase".[14] Tropes have held a pivotal role in classical rhetoric, serving as a cornerstone of eloquence and a bedrock of aesthetic innovation. Their capacity to imbue literary texts with captivating stylistic nuances and evoke a sense of linguistic enchantment is unparalleled.

AlGhathami offers a distinct perspective on tropes, challenging their established aesthetic function within the critical paradigm. He argues that tropes serve as a linguistic veil, deliberately employed to propagate specific cultural ideologies, subtly influencing readers without their conscious awareness—a phenomenon he terms "cultural blindness." Within language, a constellation of key tropes, including synecdoches, converges and is strategically positioned according to a calculated design. This inherent danger lies in their capacity to manipulate meaning subtly. Thus, the trope emerges as a crucial theoretical tool in AlGhathami's project, representing the most effective means of uncovering the latent systems behind sophisticated linguistic constructions. "Without this tool, cultural criticism cannot achieve the breakthroughs that have eluded literary criticism and other disciplines".[15] This necessity calls for the development of innovative strategies and tools to reveal these systems, as traditional methods have proven insufficient.

6. Cultural Pun:

Etymologically, "the term "Pun" connotes concealment and obfuscation, implying the pursuit of a meaning that diverges from the literal sense of a word. In other words, it suggests that a word can possess multiple meanings".[16] This figure of speech is of paramount importance in cultural criticism, as it allows "readers to discuss characters and speakers without naming them, instead of discussing the authors of works (...) thereby facilitating the belief in the autonomy of literature".[17] AlGhathami challenges the notion of intentional ambiguity inherent in the classical Arabic rhetorical concept of pun, arguing that this "term, like the broader rhetorical system, is primarily concerned with the conscious expressive phenomena within

discourse and its interpretation".[18] This emphasis on intentional ambiguity has hindered the ability of pun to reveal underlying cultural frameworks, confining it to the realm of sophisticated aesthetic play, where both author and reader are cognizant of the intended meanings. Consequently, literary criticism has been reduced to the function of aesthetic interpretation, rather than exploring the elusive and ubiquitous cultural frameworks embedded within discourse.

From this perspective, AlGhathami expands the concept of pun, positing that it encompasses two meanings: a primary, superficial meaning, and a secondary, concealed meaning that is subconscious and often unknown to both author and reader. He argues that this deeper, latent meaning is the true foundation of discourse, exerting a profound and far-reaching influence that transcends conscious interactions and emotions. AlGhathami coins the term "cultural pun"[19] to describe this phenomenon, suggesting that it involves a deep excavation to uncover the hidden cultural implications beneath the surface of texts.

7. Subtext :

Whether dominant or marginalized, the subtext system is a pivotal element in cultural criticism. It is a central concept in cultural criticism, based on the premise that every culture carries within it underlying systems. For instance, the aesthetic and rhetorical systems in literature often conceal subtext systems.[20] This term is defined as a "set of values hidden behind texts, discourses, and practices".[21] AlGhathami has made this concept the cornerstone of his cultural criticism project, rooted in the belief that these cultural frameworks are historical, enduring, and pervasive, characterized by the public's inclination to consume cultural products that embody such systems. Whenever we encounter a cultural product or text that enjoys widespread and rapid acceptance, we are witnessing a moment of subtext systemic action that must be uncovered and explored.[22]

Hence, the study of discursive systems within their multifaceted contexts is therefore crucial. Every discourse contains non-aesthetic semantic elements embedded in cultural realities, shaped by social, political, and historical circumstances, and used to subtly propagate their systems while concealing themselves behind aesthetic masks. AlGhathami argues that "culture possesses its own dominant systems that rely on concealment behind thick masks, the most significant and dangerous of which is the mask of aesthetics."[23] The role of cultural criticism is to uncover, understand, and interpret these systems, lifting the veil from their hidden depths and exploring the truths obscured by deceptive appearances, ultimately revealing their influence within customs, history, and culture.

AlGhathami consistently emphasizes this specific systemic positioning throughout his project, stating, "The system is narrative in nature, moving within a complex plot, and therefore it is hidden and implicit, capable of constant concealment, using numerous masks, the most important of which, as mentioned, is the mask of linguistic aesthetics. Through rhetoric and aesthetics, systems pass safely and securely under the overarching umbrella".[24] "AlGhathami posits four conditions for a system: first, the coexistence and interaction of two systems within a single text or text-like entity; second, one system must be implicit while the other is explicit, with a central contradiction between them; third, the textual sample under examination must be aesthetic in nature; and fourth, the text must enjoy widespread public acceptance and readability".[25] Without these combined conditions, a cultural study is impossible.

II. AlGhathami's Methodological Approach to Cultural Frameworks :

AlGhathami selects examples from both classical and modern Arabic poetry as the primary material for his cultural approach and as embodiments of his systemic principles. He does so because he is aware of the significant role of poetry in Arab culture, its pivotal and profound influence on the Arab collective consciousness, and its powerful impact on the mass audience that relies on aesthetics. Poetry is, in his view, 'the dangerous repository of these systems, the germ disguised in aesthetics, which has continued to exert its influence and produce its models generation after generation, not only in poetic discourse but in all cultural manifestations, starting with prose, which one senses from an early stage, as well as intellectual, political, and creative discourse, including criticism'.[26]

AlGhathami begins his approach by deconstructing this cultural edifice and uncovering its hidden systems. He introduces new and unconventional cultural questions, replacing the question of discourse with that of the system, and the question of the subtext and the undisclosed with that of the explicit. "The question of mass consumption rises to dominance, while the question of the creative elite recedes. Moreover, questions about the process of influencing the audience, caught between the center and the margin, multiply".[27] Clearly, these questions take upon themselves the responsibility of conducting a comprehensive, focused, and precise cultural survey of the systems carried by Arab culture, through the subtexts that disrupt the inner workings of poetry, and by exploring the methods of their aesthetic presentation and their exploitation to serve cultural purposes. This is the central axis and core of AlGhathami's cultural project. He has worked on these selected Arabic poems, investigating their systems, the most important of which are...

1. Patriachal Discourse :

AlGhathami's analysis delves into the patriarchal discourse deeply embedded within Arab thought and consciousness. "This discourse, rooted in societal values deemed sacred within Arab culture, permeates public life and serves as a linguistic expression of masculinity, sexual potency, and procreative ability".[28] While it superficially revolves around notions of superiority, dominance, and the ideal characteristics of the Arab man, AlGhathami offers a different perspective, highlighting the underlying patriarchal discourse that masks these superficial meanings. This system, deeply ingrained in Arab social, political, and epistemological structures, manipulates them to its own ends. AlGhathami seeks to modify this patriarchal discourse, challenging the perceptions, faculties, and actions it frames and shaping the true Arab reality. He posits that the patriarchal paradigm serves as a critical lens through which to examine the dangerous territory that directs Arab thought and programming.

Based on this premise, AlGhathami examines the patriarchal cultural edifice in Arab society, delving into its layers and its parallel cultural frameworks. He highlights how patriachal discourse was established as a supreme value that could not be compromised, as "the tyranny of male authority controlled our symbolic structures, including language. From this perspective, language can be seen as the pillar that supports and defends this authority, and therefore, a researcher does not need a specific text to prove the existence of this patriarchal concept, reveal its components, and define its structure".[29]

AlGhathami selected ancient and modern Arabic poems, renowned for their significance in Arab literary history, including works by Jarir, Al-Mutanabbi, Abu Tammam, Al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani, Nizar Qabbani, and Adonis. He embarked on a critical inquiry, posing fundamental questions such as: Is Al-Mutanabbi a great creator or a great beggar, or both? He

sought to uncover the true purpose of panegyric poetry in classical Arabic, aiming to grasp the underlying motives that led Arab culture, represented by poetry, to promote a contradictory and falsified discourse that diverged from reality. This poetic invention, within the interplay of the poet, the patron, and the cultural milieu, established a system of lies and normalized it in an appealingly enjoyable form. "Thus, it became a cultural and social norm, sought after and expected. This aesthetic game was the most effective in Arabic poetry during its heyday, implanting this panegyric discourse in the collective consciousness, along with its most dangerous values: the image of the begging, hypocritical culture and the image of the patron, constructed from artificially created and self-serving attributes, thus elevating him above the conditions of reality and truth".[30]

AlGhathami highlights a dualistic value system that has accompanied Arabic poetry throughout its history. He argues that poetry has historically been associated with two contradictory perceptions: a glorified image, which is the dominant and prevalent perception in the Arab consciousness, "because the poetic cultural institution was the most powerful and influential"[31], and a tarnished image that has remained obscured, linked to a particular form of servility that connects poetry to begging, contempt, and moral decay. He bases his argument on major literary sources that chronicle Arabic poetry, including the poets' own diwans, such as Al-Asma'i's "Al-Bayan wa'l-Tabyin," Ibn Rashid's "Al-Umdah," Al-Masudi's "Muruj al-Dhahab," and Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's[32] "Al-Imtāʿ wa-l-Muʾānasah".

Given that the cultural institution elevated poetry to the status of the Arabs' sole knowledge and their magnificent existential record, both humanly and historically, the discourse that disparaged Arabic poetry was suppressed. The Arab society had no choice but to embrace poetry, learn it, and consider its representatives (poets) as the highest models of speech and action. They were, as Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi put it, the "princes of speech",[33] or in other words, the princes of culture. Due to the early and radical cultural shift experienced during the pre-Islamic era, the cultural centrality shifted from poetry to the poet. The poet's personal interests became a priority.[34] The emergence of paid panegyrics created a "cultural blend of eloquence and (beautiful) lies, involving a poet, a patron, and a bag of gold—a brave and generous patron on one hand, and an eloquent poet on the other".[35] This led to the replication of poetic values that disguised falsehood as truth, beautified the blameworthy, and elevated the undeserving, all with the support of the official cultural institution, which elevated poetry to the status of a repository of noble morals and achievements.

It is no surprise that these systemic traits seep into mentalities, shaping behaviors and portraying the ruler as the ultimate male.[36] Even when rhetoric replaced poetry, and the poet relinquished their collective role in expressing and defending the tribe, these tribal poetic values, such as boasting about tribal lineage, oppression, arrogance,[37] and haughtiness, found their way back through the backdoor. These were values associated with a life of raids and invasions, where the flagrant oppressor and the boastful tyrant, such as Amr ibn Kulthum, were equated with the wise poet. For example, Zuhayr ibn Abi Salma recited, "He who does not oppress others will be oppressed".[38]

Thus, ancient Arabic prose further reinforced the established poetic and cultural paradigm. The "cultural message shifted from tribal prowess to individual prowess, reflecting a self-serving appropriation of tribal values initially rooted in existential necessities, such as group defense for survival".[39] These false individualistic values, "perpetuated through emotional manipulation, distracted Arabs from their reality, fostering an emotionally reactive identity".[40] The invention of the "quintessential poet" solidified this individualistic paradigm,

becoming a dominant voice for the Arab nation. This inevitably produced values that catered to individual inclinations and personal interests, particularly evident in panegyric poetry, which epitomized individualism. Eloquent lies were often employed to secure substantial material rewards, further entrenching this individualistic value system and shaping the cultural identity of the nation.

This individual poetic voice became associated with the attributes of uniqueness and superiority; poets were considered the "Poets are the masters of rhetoric." On a critical level, this voice gained cultural legitimacy and authority through the creation of cultural hierarchies that ranked poetic/cultural prowess based on individual prowess. Consequently, the possessor of such prowess was awarded a badge of class distinction. Ancient Arab critics classified poets into four categories, placing the (The most poetic) at the top of the hierarchy. AlGhathami argues that this classification placed the "patriarchal" at the apex of the social pyramid, reinforcing the concept of distinction. The patriarchal began to acquire unique attributes, monopolizing self-description. For instance, while Amr ibn Kulthum may have begun his discourse with "I" and "we," the subsequent trend was that of the "Ego".[41]

The patriarchal discourse, with its rigid class distinctions, extended to govern issues of language and meaning, privileging language over meaning. This resulted in the formulation of a cultural discourse that surpassed other discourses in its linguistic eloquence. Words were stratified, as were meanings. Words were hierarchically ordered into noble, pure, and less noble categories. Even narrators were subjected to a class-based hierarchy.[42]

AlGhathami subsequently undertakes a critical analysis of the hidden patriarchal structures within various Arabic poems.[43] by investigating their symbolic content, he aims to uncover the underlying cultural assumptions. To illustrate his point, he references verses from Amr ibn Kulthum's ode:

> We claim this world, its lands and skies our own,
> When we strike, our strength is widely shown.
> As tyrants, we ascend without a fall,
> But first, we challenge those who stand tall.
> The seas we've filled until their shores can't hold,
> Their waves now tremble at our courage bold.
> When babes outgrow the cradle's gentle sway,
> Even giants bend beneath our sway.
>
> We drink from streams where waters purest flow,
> While others sip from depths murky and low.
> Let none forget the might we've come to claim,
> For we surpass the weak, outlast the lame.

These verses underscore the centralizing, arrogant, and exclusionary nature of tribal logic, rooted in the value of injustice—central to pre-Islamic values. This behavior is not merely situational but arises from a fundamental aspect of the pre-Islamic value system, as illustrated by the lines, "(We were the oppressed, yet we've never wronged, but soon we'll turn the tables on our wrongers)."

In this context, the tribe serves as the ultimate reference point, regardless of individual status, asserting dominion through coercion and intimidation. As the poetic "Ego" shifted from representing the tribe to the individual, it inherited these systemic particularities and modes of expression, exemplified in the poetry of Jarir:

Time perishes, but death and time abide,

Bring me a thing eternal, side by side

A cultural retort to Farazdaq's claim,

I am death, and I will quench your life's flame,

See how you strive, as death draws ever near.

The verses of Jarir and Farazdaq are rooted in the expression of an inflated, individualistic, and arrogant poetic ego. This ego is all-encompassing and unrivaled, and the cultural discourse it embodies is of the same essence. It positions the individual as both time and death,[44] and this lineage of patriarchal is perpetuated through generations. AlGhathami cites Al-Mutanabbi as the greatest exemplar and the undisputed heir[45] of this tradition, considering him 'the greatest translator of the tribal consciousness, making him our first poet (The patriarchal archetype)'.[46] AlGhathami quotes several of Al-Mutanabbi's early poems, including...[47]

To what great heights might I ascend, what depths descend?
I'll cast aside all creation, seen or penned.
My ambitions soar, boundless and untamed,
The world, like a single strand, I'll claim and command.

"And he will have many poems, countless in number, all of which will merely be variations upon this same pattern; such as":[48]

Time itself but echoes my verse's might,

My words ignite, and time takes flight.

Al-Mutanabbi, (Archetype poet), reaches the pinnacle of his hierarchical expression, he says:

My soul, so grand, disdains mortal frame,

A being divine, I claim my name.

Those to whom one aspires to belong are, in fact, the epitome of the patriarchal class that we have come to identify as the patriarchs) fuḥūl)[49] AlGhathami progresses in his approach to these poetic examples, moving from understanding and explanation to cultural interpretation. He concludes that ancient Arabic poetry exalts the masculinity of the individual, who is unparalleled, and that this is a fertile ground for delving into its undisclosed cultural undercurrents. This patriarchal discourse has not weakened, despite the passage of time, and it manifests in modern poetry, where the poet begins by distinguishing himself from others in a manner imbued with superiority. Ahmed Shawqi, for example, "speaks with the voice of the enduring old-new patriarchal discourse when he states in his famous verse":[50]

The garment of defiance beckoned, proclaiming,

You poets are the true essence of humanity.

This process of social and discursive categorization persists, distinguishing between poets and others, with the latter rendered as 'non-people.' AlGhathami's exploration culminates in an interpretation laden with cultural judgments, revealing the dangers inherent in this poetic discourse that invented the "patriarch." Despite its undeniable aesthetic appeal, this discourse contains deeply problematic flaws that have significantly shaped Arab identity and its trajectory. As a result, the Arab ego has become hyper-inflated, heavily influenced by the

discursive framework established by Arab cultural heritage, leading to substantial negative impacts. AlGhathami contends that "Arabic poetry, for all its beauty, contains extremely dangerous discursive flaws" that have contributed to defects in the Arab personality itself. The traits of the beggar, the liar, the hypocrite, and the greedy individual coexist with those of the solitary "patriarch"—an inflated ego that negates the other—both deeply embedded in poetic discourse and spilling into other discourses.[51]

The emphasis on poetic aesthetics has led readers to overlook significant discursive flaws, allowing the most dangerous elements of our cultural discourse to evade scrutiny. Consequently, "we have not examined the primary components of our cultural and behavioral identity".[52] AlGhathami, therefore, seeks to expose the severe consequences of the 'fahul' discourse within the dominant poetic narrative of Arab culture and the social, psychological, and intellectual poisons it has introduced into the Arab psyche. This discourse has shaped how Arabs perceive the world, becoming ingrained in daily behavior without conscious awareness. It is logical that these latent influences from the unconscious solidify into a deep reality, becoming fundamental to personality formation and the emergence of the "patriarch." AlGhathami asserts that uncovering and deconstructing the elements of this discourse is essential for understanding the hidden aspects of certain unconscious activities and their construction within Arab culture.

2. Oppressive Discourse:

AlGhathami argues that the binary system arising from the interaction between poetry and the "patriarch" has overwritten another binary: that of poetry and the tyrant. This shift is rooted in a significant cultural evolution at the end of the pre-Islamic era, which transformed cultural discourse from 'we' to 'I,' leading to a change from humanistic values to individualistic and self-serving ones. Consequently, cultural frameworks emerged that glorify and perpetuate lying and hypocrisy, exemplified by the culture of panegyric poetry embedded in Arab society. However, the dangers of the second system surpass those of the first. The tyrant does not simply invoke the 'I,' which exists by silencing the voice of the other, limiting their freedom, and demanding obedience. Instead, the tyrant embodies various forms of authoritarian oppression, maintaining significant vitality through the deceptive tactics used against opponents and the continuous creation of exploitative laws that enhance his control over the people. In this context, he invents values and concepts that coalesce into a delusional, mine-ridden system, safeguarding his tyrannical realm and logic.

Historically, the convergence of the concepts of "patriarch" and fatherhood among Arabs can be traced back to the penetration of the oppressive discourse into the Arab system in the late pre-Islamic era. This coincided with the emergence of kingdoms in northern Arabia (the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids), influenced by the patriarchal imperial system prevalent among the Persians and Romans. This produced the figure of the absolute monarch, exalted in his attributes and unique in his status. Thus, the Persian and Roman imperial customs seeped into Arab culture, and the Lakhmids and Ghassanids solidified their power not through military superiority but through panegyric poetry, in exchange for generous material rewards from poets. The tribal chief among the Arabs became a non-tribal ruler, controlling their laws, and poetry and the inherited attributes of sovereignty influenced him. In order to satisfy his desire to combine the awe of the sultan with the nobility of morals, the poet, having the center of "power at his disposal",[53] sought to fulfill the ruler's desires and create a new product that realized "the image of the absolute ruler, as we find it in the early panegyric poetry and the

resulting discursive attributes, "which created the metaphorical emperor as an emotive rhetorical sculpture".[54]

AlGhathami continues his exploration of the patriarchal discourse that has fostered the emergence of the tyrannical self, revealing its false heroisms in Arab culture across ideological, political, and social dimensions, while dismantling its power from within. Every sacredness fiercely defends its realm to consolidate itself, employing specific weapons to maneuver, pressure, and dominate. One of the most dangerous of these is the portrayal of culture through mythical, generalized symbolism, wherein the ruler embodies perfect masculinity and becomes an ideal to emulate.Central values in the tribal system often shift to appease the ruler, including generosity and courage—existential values intrinsic to Bedouin survival, unrelated to desires for praise or glorification. "Generosity, particularly, is vital for preserving life; honoring a guest is not merely an act of kindness but a necessity for survival in the harsh desert. Failure to uphold hospitality risks death for both the host and the guest".[55] Therefore, praising a Bedouin for this trait remains sincere and genuine, as it is deeply embedded in their cultural essence.

However, a significant transformation occurred in the nature of the praised when a Ghassanid or Lakhmide king emerged. Such a king held a special prestige. Despite the recent political changes, the underlying tribal value system persisted. Rulers sought praise for their courage and generosity to legitimize their leadership, highlight their exceptional qualities, and assert their unique entitlement. They were willing to purchase these attributes, and poets like al-Nabigha and al-A'sha excelled at fulfilling this demand. Tradition was sacrificed for financial gain and "opportunistic commercial logic".[56]

From that moment, the gates of cultural transformation swung open. Poetry became a utilitarian tool, and virtues like generosity, once central to tribal life, became associated with personal reputation and "individual glory".[57] as alGhathami observes, "Here, the image of the patriarch, the image of the tyrannical self, was born. Undoubtedly, it is a metaphorical image, but its metaphoricity did not prevent it from becoming a social, political, and cultural reality. In other words, the metaphorical and aesthetic poetic image transformed into a mental model that is absorbed and cultivated through poetic discourse, then socially and mentally replicated to become a cultural, systematic image".[58]

AlGhathami, in his exploration of Arab reality, notes the pervasive presence of this oppressive discourse in all aspects of this patriarchal society. It permeates every sphere, undermining the Arab individual's relationship with their state. This is manifested in the suppression of individuality, reducing individuals to subservient and obedient subjects, and the suppression of their intellectual and existential consciousness through the propagandistic promotion of an authoritarian ideology adept at deception, trickery, and disinformation.

Al-Ghathami offers Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi president, as a paradigmatic example of the tyrant in its ancient and modern forms. He posits Saddam as a human specimen that represents 'a cultural outcome of the discourse that produces its models not only in poetry but also in social and political reality'.[59] Saddam, in this view, aligns precisely with the attributes of the patriarch as conceived in ancient poetry. 'When we examine Saddam Hussein's lexicon, we notice a striking congruence with the poetic discourse model. He does not belong to the world as much as the world belongs to him. He is not Iraqi as much as Iraq is Saddamized. The army is Saddam's army; the Gulf War with Iran is described as Saddam's Qadisiyyah. Similarly, he is not Ba'athist as much as the party is Saddamized. These values, reinforced by the poetic discourse that prioritized the centrality of the actor over the action, are reflected in

the way attributes are ascribed to the praised as a necessary condition of being praised, just as the poet embodies traits of uniqueness and singularity as a condition of being a patriarch.[60]

AlGhathami conducts a thorough analysis of Saddam's lexicon and the transformation he imposed on humanistic, revolutionary, and nationalistic values. He manipulated these values into a false metaphorical framework that served his interests, consistently obscuring his tyrannical self-centeredness and consolidating his authoritarian leadership. Consequently, his discourse, like that of any tyrant, tailored the universe to fit his actions, positioning himself at the center. Values associated with action underwent significant systemic alteration; for instance, the value of revolution was reduced to an individual coup characterized by violence and the elimination of opponents, merely replacing one tyrant with another. "Similarly, citizenship was redefined as loyalty to the individual leader as an authoritarian figure, merging the revolutionary patriarch with the nation itself".[61]

AlGhathami consistently emphasizes the mutual interests between the leader and cultural institutions, which, despite their claims of producing neutral cultural values, have always been biased towards him. This complicity between the two dates back to the dawn of the pre-Islamic era. The cultural transformation experienced by Arab society, accompanied by a shift in the Arab cultural discourse, has led to a cultural discourse that is adept at lying, flattery, and embellishment. This has fundamentally disrupted the hierarchy of values, distancing them from their humanistic dimension and plunging them into a self-serving, materialistic dimension. The tyrant has exploited this new cultural discourse, using it as a powerful tool to control the masses.

III. The Evolution and Transformation of Cultural and Literary Criticism as Explored by AlGhathami:

AlGhathami classifies cultural criticism as one of the most significant outcomes of postmodern literary criticism, indeed, as the most robust approach to all discourses. It delves into the study of systems within their cultural frameworks, situating them within their social, historical, and institutional contexts. It engages in an exploratory excavation of the deep cultural layers of literary texts, extracting the underlying dominant systems that lie beneath the surface of all that is aesthetic. Cultural criticism is 'concerned with revealing not the aesthetic, as is the case with literary criticism, but rather with uncovering what is hidden beneath the masks of the rhetorical/aesthetic. Just as we have theories of aesthetics, what is needed is to develop theories of "the grotesque", not in the sense of seeking the aesthetics of grotesque, which would merely be a reformulation and reinforcement of the conventional rhetorical inauguration and reinforcement of the aesthetic, but rather, the theory of grotesque is intended to reveal the movement of systems and their counter-conscious and critical sensory activity'.[62]

Therefore, the underlying cultural frameworks does not undergo any actual change but merely gives the illusion of superficial change, engaging in a game of formulation by altering the discourse in which it is cloaked, thus further concealing itself. Consequently, cultural criticism adopts a multidisciplinary approach, and its choices are organized based on historical inductive foundations, making the text an operational given for understanding the veiled cultural content in the linguistic, literary, and aesthetic unconscious. In this light, it delves into uncovering the hidden cultural systemic organizations. As alGhathami argues, "it presents itself as a critical discourse that celebrates difference and otherness and opposes forms of stereotyping and domestication or "**The Grotesque in Discourse**" , which literary criticism, throughout its long history, has been unable to question its deadly movement and its possession

of various creative and intellectual discourse structures due to a comprehensive cultural blindness that has anesthetized its tools as a result of its submission to aesthetic consumption without criticizing and undermining its pleasure".[63] AlGhathami argues that literary criticism is destined to decline and be replaced by cultural criticism, as it has relied on a centralized approach focused on aesthetic engagement and elitism. This has resulted in flawed cultural frameworks. His judgment calls for a thorough scholarly discussion to properly contextualize both criticisms.

The initial steps toward realizing this rational approach arise from the foundational conditions of cultural criticism, which encompasses a broad spectrum of cultural research. This relatively recent perspective includes various cultural critiques, such as elite and popular culture, subcultures, ideologies, literary and cinematic creativity, social movements, everyday life, media, and philosophical theories. It employs these as analytical tools without allowing any single perspective to dominate. Unlike other discourses, such as philosophy, politics, or economics, which analyze reality through their specific frameworks, "cultural criticism recognizes that reality is inextricably linked to the practices that generate meaning, most of which are cultural media".[64]

What distinguishes this criticism is that it is 'not a fixed school of thought, but rather can be adapted to the critic's personality, culture, and orientations, as well as the nature, issues, and characteristics of the text. It is open to interpretation and to semiotic and discourse analysis methods, as well as various humanities related to literature. Moreover, it is linked to intellectual and revolutionary movements such as feminism, the Black Power movement, and the clash of civilizations and cultures, among other things that fall under the category of "implicit discourse within the text and the implicit system that drives it".[65] 'This refers to its constitutive reality; its epistemological structure does not allow it to be a scientific specialty or an independent field of knowledge that can establish a methodology. Rather, it is an activity concerned with the discourses, material and intellectual, produced by culture. It 'utilizes theories, concepts, and knowledge systems to achieve what the critical approaches have failed to reach or delve into. And since it is an activity and not a branch of knowledge, it seeks to reach other knowledge through the extensive use of theories and concepts that allow for proximity to the act of culture in societies'.[66] AlGhathami himself goes so far as to say that it is' a branch of general textual criticism, and therefore, it is one of the linguistic sciences, and a field of linguistics concerned with the criticism of implicit systems'.[67]

Upon examining AlGhathami's conceptual framework and procedural choices, we uncover a cultural vision marked by inconsistencies and significant gaps. This lack of rigorous epistemological scrutiny across theoretical, procedural, historical, social, psychological, artistic, and anthropological levels raises questions about their scientific validity. Consequently, contradictions arise that weaken the foundational concepts of his methodology, including cultural discourse, the dual author, and cultural pun. He posits that the existence of two opposing systems—overt and covert—is essential for literary discourse to fall under cultural criticism. His chosen poetic models are deemed to establish these systemic components, while anything outside this framework is excluded from consideration. This stance implicitly acknowledges the existence of other discourses that do not adhere to these dual systems and their interrelations.

AlGhathami's perspective on literary discourse challenges his claim regarding the eternal and pervasive nature of cultural systems across all texts, irrespective of their creative, intellectual, or philosophical differences. Recognizing the existence of distinct structural

formations in thought and creativity undermines any intellectual, methodological, or practical justification for declaring the death of literary criticism and dismissing its significance.

By employing terms like "dual author," "cultural discourse," and "cultural pun," AlGhathami effectively absolves the actual author of responsibility for reinforcing cultural discourse, exonerating them from any collusion with political or cultural institutions. He argues that the implicit and unconscious nature of systemic meaning limits the author's role, similarly denying the reader's involvement, as both exist beyond conscious awareness. If the author's consciousness is engaged, it is only in shaping implicit meanings that serve aesthetic purposes, resulting in mere refinement and embellishment of their work. However, this hypothesis lacks robust verification, as there is no compelling evidence to support the notion that cultural frameworks invariably infiltrate the author's consciousness without their knowledge.

Furthermore, what prevents an author from intentionally and collusively producing flawed cultural frameworks? It is also entirely possible for poetry to transcend flawed cultural frameworks, as there is no logical epistemological reason to deny the positive role of aesthetic value in literature and its importance in revealing hidden positive and non-flawed systems. This necessitates a review of the exclusive focus of cultural criticism on highlighting the grotesque associated with the underlying systems in the literary text and discarding aesthetic codes, as if this were an unquestionable assumption. Mohammed Alimat's study aims to break free from the complex of grotesque that AlGhathami has attached to ancient Arabic poetry, making it its sole characteristic, and thus burdened it with all the tragedies and failures of Arab history. Alimat, on the other hand, looked at this poetry, delved into its depths, and extracted from it many noble values, great achievements, and deposits of linguistic formations characterized by active semantic interaction and deep creative suggestive powers.[68] Thus, his reading combined the search for positive cultural frameworks and the features of aesthetic formation in literary discourse.

Regarding AlGhathami's dismissal of literary criticism as declining and nearing its end, it is important to emphasize the existence of critical approaches that are in a state of continuous development and scientific production. These approaches have achieved significant results in developing criticism, such as semiotic theory and its contributions to the fields of semiotics of action, semiotics of passions, and visual semiotics; deconstruction; reader-response criticism; hermeneutics; generative poetics; and interdisciplinary approaches.

AlGhathami's definitive judgment on the hierarchy of rhetoric and its scholarly decline, coupled with his proposal to modify its perspective on literary texts, which he termed 'unbinding the critical faculty'[69], suggests that he has fixed his cognitive lens on the traditional view of rhetoric. This view, as it evolved, established close connections between the rhetorical and literary aspects. However, a reconsideration of the reasons for the shortcomings and decline of ancient rhetoric led to a renewed interest in rhetoric through the integration of other linguistic sciences. This infusion revitalized rhetoric, injecting it with new life. Rhetorical studies witnessed a qualitative awakening from the late 1950s onwards, giving rise to what was termed "new rhetoric." This was an attempt to establish a general science for the study of all types of discourse. Nonetheless, despite these developments, the new rhetoric exhibited diverse and fragmented tendencies, significantly influenced by the dominant linguistic paradigm at the apex of "the new knowledge hierarchy".[70]

Rhetoric subsequently experienced profound shifts in its foundations and conceptual framework, with the goal of developing a comprehensive theory for analyzing literary

discourse. This rhetorical resurgence led to a maturation of rhetorical studies, which successfully provided a scientific account of the persuasive qualities of texts, drawing upon the insights of linguistics, pragmatics, and communication theories. Furthermore, rhetorical research, guided by these new methodologies, extended beyond the study of persuasion and stylistic analysis, assuming the character of contemporary scientific inquiry and delving into other fields of knowledge such as literary criticism, anthropology, semiotics, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. These developments, which were also shaped by advancements in philosophy,[71] "prompted the researcher Jamil Hamadawi to assert that AlGhathami's understanding of rhetoric had become outdated".[72]

It is notable that AlGhathami's project excessively connects the cultural frameworks of ancient Arabic poetry to political theories and ideological beliefs, such as materialism and neo-Marxism. This has led to sweeping political judgments. In fact, this tendency towards generalization was not confined to the political realm alone, resulting in a crude and arbitrary imposition of literature into base political, social documentary, or unified cultural explanatory purposes. This has distorted its artistic essence.

In his effort to liberate literary discourse from the hegemony of ideology and politicization, AlGhathami finds himself entangled in external approaches that excessively interrogate and judge the creative text, undermining its uniqueness. This has led to criticism of his methodology from various scholars. As noted, "What primarily undermines AlGhathami's position in his call for cultural criticism is his highly specific conception of literary criticism, deeply rooted in purpose and not widely shared by many contemporary Arab critics who still believe in literary criticism's vital functions in modern Arab societies."

AlGhathami's practice of cultural criticism raises concerns due to its selective bias, contradictory positions, and sweeping judgments lacking sufficient evidence.[73] It is untenable to claim that all ancient Arabic poetry merely reflects flawed cultural frameworks and degraded moral values dictated by a rigid ideological reality. Such an interpretation diminishes poetry's creative essence, transforming criticism into an ideological perspective akin to historical materialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, while neglecting aesthetics and the intrinsic value of the arts and literature. Moreover, AlGhathami makes broad moral and political judgments about the entirety of ancient Arabic poetry based on a limited number of examples, supporting these conclusions without rigorous scientific verification. This approach often seems arbitrary, crafted to uphold a predetermined notion of a flawed underlying system that compels all discourses to conform to its structure.

This is perhaps why some scholars consider AlGhathami's approach to be a response to a "ready-made hypothesis that burdens poetry with the weight of civilizational taste, attempting to uncover and expose the discourse produced by the dominant cultural institution, and to identify the underlying ideology within the aesthetics monopolized by critical practices for decades".[74] Consequently, AlGhathami accuses all of Arab modernist poetry of being reactionary because it draws its existence from an ancient reactionary tradition. He argues that "the political is not self-created but is a product of a systematic culture, just as the poet is not self-created but is a product of culture. The system, then, is an underlying cultural factor that must be uncovered and its signs sought.

Modernism is seen as reactionary, and Arab modernism emerges as a victim of a dominant system that influences the unconscious mind without individual awareness or acknowledgment of its origins.[75] AlGhathami emphasizes the condemned political issues and

the dissenting voice, identifying the patriarchal structure, shaped by political and social despotism, as central to ancient Arabic poetry. He argues that the purposes of praise and satire stem from this despotic centrality, rooted in social malice and political compromise, which facilitates individual tyranny in social and political contexts. Consequently, "the voice of patriarchy silences all others, including the poetry of love, as it contradicts Arab masculinity and challenges its authority".[76]

AlGhathami critiques all of Arab modernist poetry, addressing both classical and contemporary figures like Adonis and Nizar Qabbani. He asserts that "while Arab modernism emerged with Nazik al-Malaika leading a project to feminize Arabic poetry and male poets like al-Sayyab establishing a new humanistic and anti-patriarchal discourse, culture, along with its guardians, intervened to masculinize poetry once again". They reinstated patriarchal values, as seen in Adonis, who, despite appearing modernist and Enlightenment-minded, is fundamentally a patriarchal poet. Consequently, modernism shifted from a transformative project to one of coordination, reinforcing the existing system. This illustrates how the system operates centrally, quelling any attempts to transcend it.[77]

AlGhathami broadly critiques Arabic poetry, dismantling its aesthetics and dismissing its rich diversity and varied voices. He labels the poetry of the obscure and folk as manifestations of oppressive discourse, emphasizing the need to expose its mechanisms. In his view, literature is subservient to political power, becoming a series of ideological representations that highlight hegemonic influence. Such sweeping judgments overshadow personal interpretations, as AlGhathami "makes no distinctions, excludes no one, and does not differentiate between discourses, schools, or poetic purposes." As a result, he effectively stifles independent scholarship on both classical and modern Arabic poetry, imposing ready-made cultural-critical judgments that encompass the entirety of Arabic poetry.[78]

Literary criticism has undeniably gained from cultural criticism, which emerges from "an endeavor that engages with culture in its totality as a subject of research, thought, and expression of attitudes towards its developments and characteristics".[79] Cultural methodology operates within a broad framework, utilizing insights from the social and human sciences, alongside the ever-evolving paradigms of globalization and postmodernism. Thus, "it is reasonable to assert that cultural criticism represents the latest phase in the pursuit of philosophy".[80]

The result has been a widespread localization of the concept of culture within methodological studies. This cultural and cognitive orientation has evolved into what is now known as cultural criticism, which redirects literary criticism towards a deeper examination of the social and cultural phenomena underlying creative works. This approach moves beyond elitism, focusing more on popular and marginalized texts and the social, intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic systems they embody, promising a nuanced interpretation of these elements.

Arab literary criticism must continually evolve its knowledge and methods to effectively address shortcomings in interpreting new subjects. As one scholar states, although much of Arab culture relies on "inherited paradigms," there are intrinsic reasons for the decline of certain thought modes and the quest for new ones.[81] The cultural-critical approach has revitalized literature with overlooked insights, broadening perspectives and dismantling barriers between disciplines. It unites various human practices under culture, while challenging the distinctions between the real and the ideological, as well as between the material and the spiritual.

Literary criticism has increasingly embraced subjects it once avoided, adapting its analyses to explore new facets of life. Literature, as a reflection of life in its vastness and transformation, must encompass all systems representing society and the models it embodies, using its unique language. This engagement with reality reflects an attempt to achieve harmony within lived experiences. Since reality is mediated through language, literature reshapes this reality, rebelling against it to reconstruct it in new forms. This process makes the language appear alien to its original context, while simultaneously embracing a second reality—the reality of diverse expressions.[82]

This intellectual and cultural cross-pollination has bridged the gap between systematic and contextual approaches, fostering a critical perspective that unites the social and aesthetic in literary analysis. These elements are inseparable in literary creation, making it natural to study a text as an imagined socio-cultural event.

CONCLUSION

AlGhathami has constructed a unique conceptual apparatus for cultural criticism, showcasing his pioneering attempt to establish a project of cultural criticism among Arab intellectuals. However, his claim of transforming this project into an independent methodology, and achieving its legitimacy at the expense of traditional literary criticism, is epistemologically untenable. At best, it remains a critical practice that can be applied to all creative activities within society, contributing significantly to guiding literature and identifying various cultural manifestations. It aids in analyzing the characteristics that shape these manifestations, which are intrinsic to its formation.

In pursuit of this desired openness, which grants its critical practice depth and the ability to keep pace with the new, this project, however, undermines the values of art and beauty, negates the aesthetic function, and renders linguistic and semiotic structures devoid of significance. With such a perspective, it severs the bridges of intellectual and critical convergence between the project and the literary text. For the act of literary writing cannot be realized in isolation from the aesthetics of language and meaning. Literary language proves its cultural competence only by anchoring itself in the realm of the aesthetic, and it draws its discourse on culture from the very heart of its particularity, as it emerges and takes shape; that is, it is the way in which a culture reveals itself and the manner in which a knowledge system declares its existence and identity.

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