



Renewing the Methodology of Reading Contemporary Arab Thought Discourse in the Perspective of Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri

Soumaia Ben Bordi

soumaiabenbordi@gmail.com
University of Eloued, Algeria

Bey Ahmed Ameur

beyahmedameur@gmail.com
University of Eloued, Algeria

Received: 14/10/2023

Accepted: 03/12/2023

Published: 12/12/2023

Abstract

This paper examines Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's engagement with the discourse of Arab thought through a critical diagnosis of its underlying crisis. Al-Jabri identifies methodological issues and proposes innovative approaches that adhere to modern cognitive standards, aiming to reinterpret traditional heritage. His work challenges conventional methods of heritage analysis and suggests ways to engage with religious texts that align with contemporary realities. Consequently, this study is titled "Renewing the Methodology of Reading Contemporary Arab Thought Discourse in the Perspective of Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri."

Keywords: Methodological renewal, heritage, thought, modernity, contemporary Arab discourse

DOI Number: 10.48047/nq.2023.21.7.nq23110

NeuroQuantology 2023;21(7):1219-1224

1219

Introduction

The methodological issue is one of the significant concerns addressed by Arab thought, both historically and in contemporary times, particularly with the emergence of renewal movements advocating for progress and attempting to read religious texts using new mechanisms that are entirely different from traditional methodologies interacting with reality.

Undoubtedly, the advent of industries and discoveries in Western Europe since the twentieth century, which brought about a qualitative shift in the world and subsequently led to a revolution against religious texts as a reaction to the authority of the church in Western Europe, served as a gateway for Arab Islamic thought. This opening toward Western thought prompted a reevaluation of heritage and an attempt to abandon and reject everything old. Through this emergent transformation and fascination with the idea

of modernization, intellectual currents emerged advocating for the renewal of discourse, critiquing Arab thought, and revolting against old methodologies. They sought to filter out all that is old by modernizing mechanisms and means to produce new readings that align with the current reality.

Among these thinkers, we have chosen Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri and his critical intellectual project on Arab Islamic reason. He revealed the prevailing Salafi readings, which he termed ideological, arguing that the contemporary Arab mind is not the same as it was in the past; issues and concerns have changed and differ, necessitating a dynamic approach to thought and thus liberation from the authority of those readings.

The importance of this topic lies in its discussion of all contemporary intellectual and religious issues in society, especially the critique of Arab reason. According to Al-Jabri,



contemporary Arab discourse is no longer as effective and fruitful, requiring a renewal and modernization of the vision without merely imitating and rehashing the past or succumbing to the authority of any particular school of thought. His modernist vision transcends the Quranic text when the aim is to sift through and critique Islamic heritage and Arab reason, clearing it of any myths. Applying and employing new methodologies to read the religious text and understand reality, recognizing the limitations of old methodologies, suggests that the Arab mind can produce new visions and methodologies that correspond to contemporary issues. From this perspective, we will explore Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's thoughts and vision on the issue of how to renew or rather modernize the methodology for dealing with heritage, highlighting his critical spirit and the rational foundation he established to make heritage relevant to our times.

First: A Brief Biography of Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri

Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri is one of the most prominent contemporary Arab thinkers whose projects for revival occupied their consciousness, seeking to create an active Arab mind connected to its present and aware of its surrounding circumstances while simultaneously abandoning all traditional past elements. Dr. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri was born in the city of Figuig (also known as "Figuig" in Berber) in Morocco on December 27, 1935, in the southeast, near the border established by the French between Morocco and Algeria. He experienced a difficult childhood, especially after his parents separated. He became an orphan after his mother passed away when he was in his first year of preparatory school and his father, who was exiled in Figuig. He was raised by his maternal grandfather, Haj Mohammed, who ensured he received education from Sheikh Mohammed Al-Haj Faraj, memorizing texts, jurisprudence, and Quranic interpretation (1). He also received care from his paternal grandmother, who compensated for his losses (2). He joined the tailoring profession with his uncle as an assistant in Casablanca due to the cessation of studies at Al-Mohammadiya

School. However, his anxiety about his future and constant questioning of his ability to continue his studies led him to abandon tailoring and pursue his education (3).

His Works:

Dr. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri left behind dozens of works in various fields of thought, including:

- "Asabiyya and the State: Outlines of a Khilafite Theory in Islamic History" (1971)
- "We and Our Heritage: Contemporary Readings in Our Philosophical Heritage" (1980)
- "Contemporary Arab Discourse: Analytical Critical Study" (1982)
- "The Formation of Arab Reason" (1984)
- "The Structure of Arab Reason" (1986)
- "Problems of Contemporary Arab Thought" (1988)
- "Contemporary Morocco: Identity and Modernity, Modernization and Development" (1988)
- "The Arab Political Mind" (1990)
- "Dialogue Between Morocco and the East: A Dialogue with Dr. Hassan Hanafi" (1990)
- "Heritage and Modernity: Studies and Discussions" (1991)
- "Intellectuals in the Arab Islamic Civilization: The Ordeal of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the Tribulation of Ibn Rushd" (1995)
- "The Question of Identity: Arabism, Islam, and the West" (1995)
- "Religion, State, and the Application of Sharia" (1996) (4)

Second: Al-Jabri's Diagnosis of the Crisis in Arab Discourse

A. The Methodological Issue:

The development of methodologies, both theoretically and practically, has created a qualitative shift throughout history since the codification of sciences. It has been a central issue occupying the minds of European and Muslim scholars and philosophers, each with their distinct references and particularities, in the quest for understanding human existence, its fate, and its outcome in the afterlife.

Among those concerned with the methodological issue is the philosopher Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, whose thoughts were preoccupied with the question of revival. He believed that addressing this issue required a critique of Islamic heritage and Arab reason, identifying its ailments, which formed the starting point of his project aimed at discovering the crisis.

1. **The Concept of Methodology:** The term "methodology" refers to the approach a researcher follows to study the problematic aspects of the subject under investigation (5).

- **Prevailing Readings (Salafi, Liberal, Marxist Readings):**

Al-Jabri asserts that contemporary Arab thought generally suffers from an inability to analyze and a lack of capability to study intellectual, political, and social issues. This inadequacy stems from the analyses presented, including those that emerged in recent decades, which have a non-creative Salafi nature.

Salafi Reading:

Al-Jabri argues that it is essential to delve into the primary roots of this Salafi reading of heritage. Without addressing this matter, all forms of critique, study, research, and investigation will suffer from the ailment of Salafism and its proofs, and they will never be able to resolve this deep-seated issue (6).

He believes that the characteristic of this Salafism is its reliance on religion, as it initially appeared as a reformist religious-political movement with figures like Al-Afghani and Abduh.

In addition, their emphasis on authenticity, adherence to roots, and preservation of identity was directed at Islam itself, the true Islam, rather than the Islam practiced by contemporary Muslims (7). Al-Jabri also advocated for liberation from the authority of closed religious or ideological groups (such as political parties), thus promoting freedom of thought and the abandonment of sectarian, partisan thinking that claims exclusive possession of the truth.

Al-Jabri argues that doctrine should be transformed into opinion, striving to liberate the mind from sectarian dogmatism and

advocating for a critical and independent mindset (8).

Marxist Salafism:

Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri critically analyzed Marxist Salafism from an epistemological standpoint, highlighting its reliance on applying the dialectical method used in different historical contexts. He argued that this approach lacked objectivity and was more projectionist, similar to Orientalist readings, constrained by Eurocentric concepts and applying them to heritage with the aim of achieving revolution and building Arab Islamic heritage (9).

Liberal Salafism:

Al-Jabri criticized this trend for its ideological outcomes, akin to religious Salafi readings, as it adopted Orientalist methods in studying Arab Islamic heritage. Liberals, according to Al-Jabri, viewed and interpreted Arab Islamic history through contemporary Western European eyes (10). Orientalist readings claimed objectivity and neutrality, striving for knowledge and understanding, yet in reality, they utilized philological methods to comprehend Islamic ideas. Al-Jabri contended that liberals only saw in heritage what Europeans saw (11).

To illustrate this, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's critique of Arab reason can be divided into stages as outlined by Mohammed Wakidi:

1. Examining the characteristics of contemporary Arab reason.
2. Studying the historical formation and emergence of Arab reason to uncover its historical roots.
3. Analyzing the structure, mechanisms, elements, concepts, and epistemological systems of Arab reason, along with the internal structure of each system and its relation to the overall structure of Arab reason.
4. Reform and modification, conducted through a rational critical approach to all intellectual and practical dimensions, especially in understanding heritage (12).

The Problem of Continuity:

Al-Jabri views heritage as not merely a historical product but a co-production of

history and society. To understand heritage, it is necessary to transcend the limits of language and logic. He believes this transcendence can only be achieved through "intuition," not the mystical, personal, or phenomenological intuition, but rather mathematical intuition, seen as a pioneering forward-looking vision. This allows the reader to grasp what the original author left unsaid. Al-Jabri does not seek to discard logic but to push it to its limits and derive the inevitable conclusions from its premises and twists (13). According to Al-Jabri, the reader must possess a high degree of comprehension and interact with the text impartially, free from personal biases. Contemporary rationality is empirical rather than the intellectual rationality of the past (14).

B. The Problem of Vision:

Lack of Historical Perspective:

From a visionary standpoint, Al-Jabri argues that the absence of a historical perspective undermines all existing views. The lack of critical historical awareness and interpretation leads to the stagnation of these views, preventing the renewal of heritage to align with contemporary times. He contends that the past, present, and future are often perceived as a static continuum (15).

Thirdly:Renewing the Method in Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's Thought for Reading Contemporary Arab Heritage

The concept of modernity, as it emerged in Western thought, also permeated Arab intellectualism, notably through literature. For instance, Arab poets adopted the method of symbolism in their works. NasifNassar defines modernity as indicative of renewal and creative activity, stating that where there is creativity, there is modernity. Thus, modernity is a universal historical phenomenon present in various cultures, characterized by a departure from traditions and a state of renewal.

To elucidate his perspective, Al-Jabri elaborates on the notion of framing, which he interprets as heritage encompassing the reader to the extent of stripping them of independence and freedom. This means that the reader absorbs their heritage indiscriminately, treating it as absolute and

immutable truths without critical examination or filtering. Al-Jabri asserts, "The Arab reader, when reading his heritage, does so as a recollector, not a discoverer or inquirer." He emphasizes that this process of separation is essential, serving as a preliminary step towards objectivity and enabling the individual to reclaim their identity and history (17).

For this mission to succeed, Al-Jabri's method incorporates three key processes:

Structural Analysis:

This process, according to Al-Jabri, begins with the author's ability to comprehend all transformations clearly and justifiably when addressing a problem. It involves linking ideas coherently and consistently. When tackling an issue, the author must remain within the topic's framework and manage it skillfully without deviating, even amidst changes. This reading process helps delineate the text's structure and its epistemological system, whether demonstrative, philosophical, or empirical.

- **The Demonstrative Epistemological System**
- **The Philosophical Epistemological System**
- **The Empirical Epistemological System**

Historical Analysis:

This process involves connecting the author's thoughts with their historical context, encompassing cultural, ideological, political, and social dimensions. Al-Jabri aims to test the validity of the previous structural model, where validity denotes historical potential—what the text can potentially encompass and what remains unsaid, thus differentiating myths and imagination from hidden truths. Al-Jabri employs a skeptical method to prompt the text to reveal its hidden contents, suggesting that every recorded piece of heritage might contain inherent flaws. This method seeks to deconstruct fixed relationships within structures, transforming constants into variables, absolutes into relatives, and ahistorical elements into historical ones, thereby uncovering the rationale behind many closed issues (18). However, despite his efforts, Al-Jabri did not venture as boldly into these hidden aspects as

contemporary scholars like Hassan Hanafi and Mohammed Arkoun, who rigorously examined the unspoken elements in religious texts (19).

Ideological Approach:

Al-Jabri insists on using this approach to uncover the true function of texts, whether socially or politically ideological, and to identify the historical period to which a text belongs. He considers this ideological approach the only means to make any thought contemporary, linked to its world and context. Al-Jabri applied this method to the Qur'anic phenomenon, allowing the Quran to interpret itself, a principle also upheld by Islamic scholars (20). However, Al-Jabri's application of this method did not introduce anything novel, as the notion that the Quran explains itself has been widely circulated among interpreters, some tracing it back to Ibn Taymiyyah. This has led to criticisms regarding the inconsistency in his intellectual foundations concerning his advocacy for rationalism for renewal (21).

Al-Jabri's critique of prevailing Salafi readings, which he accused of adopting European thought, paradoxically sees him adopting modernist approaches, particularly when he employed the epistemological break method of Gaston Bachelard (22).

Conclusion

This paper aims to encapsulate the main findings concerning Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's thought and vision for renewing the methodology of Arab discourse. The key points are:

- Al-Jabri identified the crisis in Arab discourse as a methodological crisis, rooted in the three Salafi readings and their ideological practices, and a vision crisis due to the lack of historical analytical perspective.
- He dissected Arab reason to purge it of the prevailing Salafi readings' authority and to uncover the unspoken aspects of heritage.
- Al-Jabri advocated for a method of separation and continuity in reading heritage.
- He proposed renewing the method through structural analysis,

epistemological critique of Arab reason, and dividing it into three systems: demonstrative, philosophical, and empirical; conducting historical analysis to sieve out myths; and applying the ideological approach to heritage and religious texts, positing that the Quran explains itself.

- Al-Jabri aimed to transform doctrine into opinion to align with contemporary times.
- He sought to achieve a progressive intellect capable of addressing contemporary Arab thought issues and interpreting current transformations.

References:

1. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Excavations in Memory from Afar," 1st Edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut-Lebanon, 1997, p. 21.
2. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Excavations in Memory from Afar," 1st Edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut-Lebanon, 1997, p. 137.
3. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Excavations in Memory from Afar," 1st Edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut-Lebanon, 1997, p. 145.
4. Mohammed Said Baalbaki, "Dr. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri: Democracy and Human Rights," Issue 95, Wednesday, July 5, 2006, published by UNESCO 1996, Center for Arab Unity Studies, p. 03.
5. Rabah Turki, "Research Methods in Educational Sciences," National Book Foundation, 1984, p. 129.
6. Group of Researchers, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri: Study of Theories and Critiques," Contemporary Critical Visions, Al-Abbas Holy Shrine, Volume 4, 1st Edition, Islamic Center for Strategic Studies, Najaf-Iraq, 1442 AH, 2021, p. (Page number missing in the original).
7. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "We and the Heritage: Contemporary Readings in Our Philosophical Heritage," 6th Edition, Beirut-Lebanon, 1993, p. 17.

8. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Problems of Contemporary Arab Thought," 2nd Edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut-Lebanon, 1990, p. 183.
9. Mohammed Al-Shibah, "Al-Jabri's Method in Reading Arab Philosophical Heritage," Mominoun Without Borders Foundation, Department of Philosophy and Humanities, February 1, 2023, p. 4.
10. Mohammed Al-Shibah, Ibid, p. 03.
11. AbdelilahBelkeziz, "Critique of Heritage: Arabs and Modernity," Center for Arab Unity Studies, 3rd Edition, Volume 3, p. 327.
12. Group of Authors, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri: Study of Theories and Critiques," Contemporary Critical Visions, Volume 4, 1st Edition, Al-Abbas Holy Shrine (Islamic Center for Strategic Studies), Iraq, 1442 AH-2021, p. 131.
13. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "We and the Heritage: Contemporary Readings in Our Philosophical Heritage," Arab Cultural Center, 1st Edition, Beirut-Lebanon, 6th Edition, 1993, p. 25.
14. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Study of Theories and Critiques," Ibid, p. 27.
15. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Study of Theories and Critiques," pp. 16-19.
16. Ali Wutfu, "Approaches to the Concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity," Journal of Thought and Criticism website, <https://www.algabriabed.net/41-50%20table.htmK2001>.
17. Ali Wutfu, "Approaches to the Concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity," Journal of Thought and Criticism, p. 23.
18. Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, "Heritage and Modernity: Studies and Discussions," Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st Edition, Beirut-Lebanon, July 1991, p. 47.
19. HishamTawfiq, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri in 'Introduction to the Holy Quran,'" Enlightenment Observer website, Issue 3, January 2009, p. 1.
20. HishamTawfiq, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri in 'Introduction to the Holy Quran,'" Enlightenment Observer website, Issue 3, January 2009, p. 24.
21. HishamTawfiq, Ibid, p. 1.
22. Group of Authors, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri: Study of Theories and Critiques," Contemporary Critical Visions, Ibid, p. 220.

Website:

1. Mohammed Al-Shibah, "Al-Jabri's Method in Reading Arab Philosophical Heritage," MominounWithout Borders Foundation, Department of Philosophy and Humanities, February 1, 2023, www.mouminoun.com.
2. Ali Wutfu, "Approaches to the Concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity," Journal of Thought and Criticism website, <https://www.algabriabed.net/41-50%20table.htmK2001>.