ARAB-MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES TO MODERNITY: NAVIGATING ANXIETY AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE THOUGHTS OF MUHAMMAD ABID AL-JABIRI AND ABDURRAHMAN TAHA

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Abstract

This study aims to unfold the intellectual dynamics within modern Arab thought, particularly during the second phase of the Arab Renaissance, which seeks to overcome civilizational anxiety in dealing with modernity. Rather than outlining the broad spectrum of modern Arab intellectual discourses—ranging from Salafists and liberalists to Marxists—this research focuses on the "epistemological approach" introduced and championed by two modern Moroccan philosophers, Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri (referred to as al-Jabiri) and Abdurrahman Taha. By engaging with the intellectual works of al-Jabiri and Taha, this study demonstrates how their readings and approaches to tradition (*turath*) provide alternative ways of overcoming Arab-Muslim civilizational anxiety and discovering authentic forms of modernity. While al-Jabiri offers a contemporary reading of tradition that advocates the Rushdian spirit, Taha emphasizes the inter-relational, ethical, and practical aspects of tradition necessary for building a solid foundation of Arab-Muslim ethical modernity.

Keywords: Al-Jabiri; Abdurrahman Taha; Arab-Muslim; anxiety; authenticity; modernity.

Khulasah

Kajian ini bertujuan membongkar dinamika intelektualiti pemikiran Arab moden, terutamanya semasa fasa kedua Kebangkitan Arab, yang bertujuan mengatasi kegelisahan peradaban dalam menghadapi kemodenan. Sebaliknya daripada menggariskan spektrum luas wacana intelektual Arab moden—dari Salafi dan liberalis kepada Marxis—kajian ini memfokuskan 'pendekatan epistemologi' yang diperkenalkan dan diperjuangkan oleh dua ahli falsafah Maghribi moden, Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri (dirujuk sebagai al-Jabiri) dan Abdurrahman Taha. Hasil penelitian karya intelektual al-Jabiri dan Taha, kajian ini menunjukkan bagaimana pembacaan dan pendekatan mereka berdua terhadap tradisi (*turath*) telah menyediakan kaedah alternatif bagi mengatasi kegelisahan peradaban Arab-Muslim dan menemui bentuk kemodenan yang tulen. Ketika al-Jabiri menawarkan pembacaan kontemporari terhadap tradisi yang menyokong semangat Rushdian, Taha pula menekankan aspek antara hubungan, etika dan praktikal tradisi yang diperlukan untuk membina asas kukuh kemodenan etika Arab-Muslim.

Kata kunci: Al-Jabiri; Abdurrahman Taha; Arab-Muslim; kegelisahan; ketulenan; modeniti.

Introduction

The internal dynamics and polemics within Arab scholarship seem to be deliberately left out of Edward Said's project, Orientalism. He criticizes Western Orientalists for misrepresenting, creating, and dominating the Orient (i.e., the Arab world).[1] For Robert Irwin, this lack of attention towards Arab intellectuals is plausible. Said neglects the works of Arab scholars such as Nabia Abbott, Fazlurrahman, Mohammed Arkoun, George Makdisi, Muhsin Mahdi, Fouad Ajami, and other important

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[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1979).

intellectuals at least for two reasons: hostility and the accusation of being a political and cultural satellite of the United States.[2] Unfortunately, Irwin himself only mentions the overlooked Arab intellectuals who live in the West and mainly writes for Western audiences. He seems to be ignorant of Arab intellectuals who engage in a serious debate within their own society and over their own culture and civilization.

The modern Arab intellectual debates are primarily triggered by what Joseph A. Massad calls "civilizational anxiety."[3] According to Massad, Abu Nuwas is considered the source of civilizational anxiety in the Abbasid Arab-Islamic period—because of his 'deviant' sexual desires. Arab *nahdah* scholars (Arab intellectuals who aspire to what is called the "Arab Renaissance") tend to deny and explain away such sexual predilections and shameful practices in classical literature. By disavowing such deviant desires and acts, these scholars want to show that the golden period of Islam as a point of civilizational reference is morally noble. Massad's observation of an embarrassing or shameful fact that tends to be covered and not discussed is applied in this study to indicate the phenomenon of "civilizational anxiety". In this respect, one wants to show the noble and virtuous qualities of a certain civilization, but this civilization has certain moral or historical defects, which tend to be covered or denied.[4]

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[2] Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (New York City: Overlook Press, 2006), 292.

[3] Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-97.

[4] Kevin W. Martin applies Joseph Massad's civilizational anxiety in his study of the true face of Syria, in which poverty in the forms of the omnipresent beggary tends to be disclosed to show the good face of Syria. See Kevin W. Martin, "Presenting the "True Face of Syria" to the World: Urban Disorder and Civilizational Anxieties at the First Damascus International Exposition," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), 391-411.

In modern Arab-Islamic civilization, two events render such civilizational anxiety. First, the invasion of Napoleon in 1798 shocked the Arab-Islamic world and sparked a desire to "catch up" with Europe. Second, the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, which prompted Arabs to rethink their own heritage/tradition (*turath*) [5] and confront modernity (*hadathah*). [6] The first event inspired the emergence of the first generation of what is called the "Arab Renaissance (*Nahdah*)" which described the Arabs at that time as "decadent."[7] The second event gave rise to the birth of a later generation of *Nahdah* or intellectual movement whose purpose is to revive, reform, or reinterpret the *turath* and to find their own forms of 'modernity'.

This study aims to unfold these intellectual dynamics within modern Arab thought, particularly in the second phase of the Arab Renaissance, whose main purpose is to overcome civilizational anxiety through what is considered an authentic Muslim tradition (*turath*). For this purpose, the intellectual responses to modernity of two prominent figures in contemporary Arab-Islamic scholarship, namely Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri and Abdurrahman Taha (sometimes written as Taha Abdurrahman), will be examined and discussed.[8] Al-Jabiri's and Taha's thoughts

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[5] *Turath* is in this paper translated sometimes as "heritage" and sometimes as "tradition" depends on the context. But, if the *turath* used in the adjective sense, namely *turathi,* the translation will be "traditional, salafist, or classical."

[6] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 18.

[7] Brutus al-Bustani (1819-83) described the present Arab in this way, "decadence" and "fallen state." See Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 8.

[8] Regarding the right name of Abdurrahman Taha, Wael B. Hallaq suggests that his last name is Taha, not Abdurrahman as widely published. Based on his correspondence with Taha, Hallaq concludes that, "Taha seems to have felt compelled to make a correction to the way his name has been cited in all publications, including his own. I learned from the response that his last name is Taha, not Abdurrahman, and find it felicitous that he chose to make a global

are not only important because they have elicited "rich and multifaceted debates," but they have also provided "very clever, learned, and thought-provoking" contributions towards the invention of the authenticity of modern Arab thought.[9]

Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri has been extensively studied in the context of his critiques of Arab reason, Qur'an interpretation, and Islamic studies in general.[10] Meanwhile, studies on Abdurrahman Taha's thought are primarily introductory or preliminary studies.[11] They are,

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correction through this book." See Wael B. Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xvi. This information makes me convinced to use "Abdurrahman Taha" instead of "Taha Abdurrahman" although both are interchangeable and the latter is more popular than the former.

[9] Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 54.

[10] See Ahmad Fawaid, "Kritik Atas Epistemologi Tafsir M. Abied A-Jabiri: Studi Kritis atas *Madkhal ila al Quran al Karim*, " *Ulul Albab* 16(2) (2015); Miftah Khilmi, "Problematika Kajian Al-Quran di Era Modern: Studi Pemikiran 'Abid al-Jabiri, " *Quran and Hadith Studies* 7(1) (2018); Mushodiq Muhamad Agus, "Perilaku Patologis Pada Kisah Nabi Musa dan 'Abd Dalam Al-Qur'an: Telaah Epistemologi al-Jâbirî dan Semiotika Peirce," *Ulul Albab* 19(1) (2018); Ahmad Hasan Ridwan, "Kritik Nalar Arab: Eksposisi Epistemologi Bayani, 'Irfani, dan Burhani Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri," *Afkaruna: Indonesian Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies* 12(2) (2016), https://dx.doi.org/10.18196/afkaruna.v12i2.2793.

[11] Belhaj Abdessamad, "The Fall of The Western Family" Taha 'Abd al-Rahman's Critical Islamic Ethics," *ReOrient* 4(1) (2018); Ramon Harvey, "Qurʾanic Values and Modernity in Contemporary Islamic Ethics: Taha Abderrahmane and Fazlur Rahman in Conversation," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Mohammed Hashas & Mutaz al-Khatib (Boston: Brill, 2020); Mohammed Hashas & Mutaz Al-Khatib, "Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives," (2021); Mohammed Hashas, "The Trusteeship Paradigm The Formation and Reception of a Philosophy," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative*

however, studied separately rather than comparatively, in order to understand their respective thoughts. Only a few studies compare their distinct methods and positions in responding to the dialectics of tradition (*turath*) and modernity, which presents a form of civilizational anxiety.

Samuel Kigar employs Jacques Derrida's notions of "difference" and "archive" to analyze the debate between al-Jabiri and Taha. He argues that this debate essentially echoes the historical argument between Matta ibn Yunus (d. 940) and Abu al-Hasan al-Sirafi (d. 979) on grammar and logic, which symbolizes the tension between indigenous and foreign knowledge systems.[12] Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed presents contrasting views of al-Jabiri and Taha on the concept of time in Islamic mystical tradition, Sufism, and its relevance for modernity. While al-Jabiri argues that mystical temporality is incompatible with modernity, Taha contends its relevance. Their differing stances are considered representative positions within Arab-Islamic society regarding the relationship between Sufism and modernity.[13]

However, while Kigar focuses on the dialectical nature of al-Jabiri and Taha, and Ben Hammed emphasizes their stance on mystical temporality, there remains a gap in understanding how al-Jabiri's and Taha's epistemological

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Perspectives, ed. Mohammed Hashas & Mutaz al-Khatib (Boston: Brill, 2020); Harald Viersen, "The Modern Mysticism of Taha Abderrahmane," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Mohammed Hashas and Mutaz al-Khatib (Boston: Brill, 2020).

[12] See Samuel Kigar, "Arguing the Archive: Taha ʿAbd al-Rahman, Muhammad ʿAbid al-Jabiri, and the Future of Islamic Thought," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 11(1) (2015), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.30824.

[13] Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed, "(Dis)Enchanting Modernity: Sufism and its Temporality in the Thought of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Taha Abdurrahman," *The Journal of North African Studies* 26(3) (2021),
https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2019.1697241.

proposals address the challenges of modernity. Therefore, this study aims to comparatively examine their intellectual approaches and perspectives on dealing with the dynamics of tradition and modernity, including civilizational anxiety and the quest for authenticity.

Contemporary Arab Thoughts

There are three general trends among Arab intellectuals. First, some Arab intellectuals adhere to the tradition (*turath*) handed down from the past to be applied in the present. This tradition or heritage is believed to be the source of the Arab-Islamic renaissance (*nahdah*).[14] These intellectuals are often labeled as "Islamist", "Fundamentalist", "Salafist", or "Revivalist", terms generally associated with movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, whose prominent figures include Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. They also encompass the revivalist movement led by Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh.

Secondly, some intellectuals lean towards adopting Western methods, advocating for revolution, rationalization, secularization, liberalization, and modernization (*hadathah*) to reconstruct Arab civilization.[15] These scholars are represented by liberal thinkers such as Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), and Marxist intellectuals like Tayyib Tazini and Husain Muruwwah. Additionally, other Arab intellectuals tend to selectively invoke inspirations from both tradition and modernity in their pursuit of authentic Arab modernity.[16] There are two main approaches used by Arab intellectuals in this third category; the ideological approach of Hassan Hanafi and

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[14] Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: Contemporary Critiques*, trans. Aziz Abbasi (Texas: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies The University of Texas at Austin, 1999), 9-11.

[15] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 11-13.

[16] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*.

the epistemological approach of Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri and Abdurrahman Taha.

The first and second groups of Arab intellectuals will not be the focus of this paper because they do not reflect a creative engagement with tradition or modernity. Their project is merely to revive tradition (*turath*) for application in the present or to blindly adopt Western values and practices into Arabic contexts. The third group of intellectuals, who are engaged in the search for authentic Arab modernity, is more interesting because they demonstrate creativity and critical engagement with both tradition and modernity.

However, rather than discussing Hassan Hanafi's ideological approach, which is criticized as overly encyclopedic, cerebral, and theoretical,[17] this research focuses on al-Jabiri's and Taha's epistemological project of re-reading and rethinking tradition (*turath*). Al-Jabiri proposes a 'contemporary reading' of tradition instead of a 'traditional reading', aiming to reinterpret it for modern contexts. Abdurrahman Taha, on the other hand, emphasizes rethinking tradition through interpenetration and interrationality, which informs practical applications. These approaches to tradition aim to address "civilizational anxiety" and seek to define "authentic Arab modernity".

Classical Attitudes Towards the *Turath*

The term '*turath*' is actually a modern term which, according to Massad, refers to "the civilizational documents of knowledge, culture, and intellect that are said to have been passed down from the Arab of the past to the present."[18] The discussion about the *turath* emerged and accelerated after the 1967 Arab defeat, aiming to understand the reasons behind such a defeat. The underlying question that drives the study and assessment of

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[17] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*, 45.
[18] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 17.

the *turath* is often posed by many Arab intellectuals: "What are the reasons behind the defeat, and how can we achieve progress?"[19]

The contemporary Arab thoughts from revivalists, liberalists, and Marxists each offer specific approaches to reading the *turath* in order to overcome feelings of defeat and achieve progress. According to al-Jabiri, Arab intellectuals propose three existing methods of reading: the fundamentalist reading, the liberal reading, and the Marxist reading.

The first method of reading (*al-qira'ah al-salafiyah* used by Salafists, fundamentalists, Islamists, or revivalists) is based on two questions: "How do we regain the greatness of our civilization?" and "How do we revive our *turath* (heritage, tradition)?"[20] Accordingly, the *turath* is seen as both a means and a goal for regaining the greatness of civilization. Initially, one must look back to the *turath* of the past. This is essential for discovering an "authentic Arab-Islamic identity" rooted in a 'golden age' when "true Islam" was faithfully practiced. Subsequently, this 'golden age' is perceived as the ultimate goal, aiming to revive and restore such an ideal civilization in the present era. The underlying premise of this approach is that "what was achieved in the past can be attained in the future."[21]

In a similar vein, the second reading method, the liberal approach, revolves around the questions, "How do we live in our era, and how do we relate to our *turath*?"[22]

If the Salafiyah reading looks to the Arab-Islamic tradition of the past, the liberal reading aligns with the Western-European tradition both in living contemporary life and interpreting the *turath*. This method expects the

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[19] Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (Virginia: Pluto Press, 2004), 259.

[20] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 9.

[21] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 9.

[22] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 11.

Arab-Islamic tradition today to adopt a "European frame of reference", thus interpreting tradition through the lens of European perspectives." [23] Therefore, an Orientalist-like reading of the *turath* is prevalent. For example, when interpreting the Arab-Islamic philosophical tradition, this method reconstructs it back to its origins in Jewish, Christian, Persian, Indian, and other traditions.[24] The role of Arab-Islam is merely an intermediary between the Greek and modern European civilizations. If the 'glory of Arab-Islamic civilization' in the past was achieved through the assimilation of a foreign past (mostly Greek) into Arab culture, then by analogy, future Arab-Islamic civilization should also adopt and assimilate into "the European present-past".[25]

The third reading, which is the Marxist method, is derived from the questions: "How do we achieve our revolution and "how do we restore our traditions?"[26] In the leftist reading, the *turath* is approached solely with the aim of advancing the revolutionary project, using revolution to restore the *turath*. However, a problem arises because concepts like 'class struggle' and 'dialectical materialism' are not inherent in the Arab-Islamic tradition. This approach tends to manipulate historical reality to fit a theoretical framework borrowed from Marxist founders, placing theoretical schema above historical data. It suggests that the primary goal of reading the *turath* is to validate the preconceived dialectical method advocated by Marxian theorists". [27] Therefore, the aim of this leftist reading is simply to apply the pre-existing Marxian dialectical method within the Arab-Islamic context.

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[23] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 12.
[24] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 12.
[25] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 13.
[26] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 13.
[27] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 14.

The three methods of reading mentioned above, according to al-Jabiri, are essentially the same from an epistemological perspective.[28] All of them are governed by a hidden-unconsciousness which acts as logical reasoning. Their fundamental mode of reasoning is what ancient Arab scholars termed the "analogy of the unknown to the known" (*qiyas al-gha'ib 'ala al-shahid*)."[29] To be more precise, in all of these reading frameworks, "the unknown (*al-gha'ib*)" corresponds to "the future", while "the known (*al-shahid*)" corresponds to their current epistemological references—whether it's "the greatness of civilization in the past", "Western-European civilization", or "the Russian/China model of revolution."

In other words, despite their different ideologies and aspirations, they share a common mode of reasoning, namely "the analogy of the unknown to the known" or "the analogy of the future to the known others (past civilization, European civilization, or Russian/China model of civilization)." The uncritical use of such analogical reasoning by Arab intellectuals indeed results in what al-Jabiri refers to as the understanding of the *turath* confined within the tradition (*qira'at al-turath li al-turath*),[30] or what Massad literally translates as the "*turath* view of *turath*."[31]

These three forms of reading that al-Jabiri identifies may not be applicable to some Muslim scholars whose epistemological reference cannot be simplified into one mode of reasoning or one model of reference. Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, for example, do not read the *turath* solely for the purpose of reviving it in a modern context (which al-Jabiri would classify as *al-qira'ah al-salafiyah*). Instead, they critically engage with both the legacy of *turath* and modern progress to formulate

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[28] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 2.
[29] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 17.
[30] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 2.
[31] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 24.

an Islamic form of modernity. This approach makes their reading of the *turath* unfit to be categorized solely as traditional or liberal.[32] In this respect, al-Jabiri appears to oversimplify the complexity of intellectual readings and nuances to fit into his category of *turath* reading.

However, in this regard, Abdurrahman Taha seems to agree with al-Jabiri regarding the problematic stance of Salafists, liberalists, and Marxists towards tradition, albeit for different reasons. Al-Jabiri criticizes their use of analogical reasoning to serve their respective agendas, whereas Taha critiques them for neglecting the relationship between content and method, overlooking the function of praxis, and more importantly, adopting foreign methods uncritically.[33]

For Taha, the borrowing of foreign methods can manifest as "denuded rationality" and ideology.[34] This rationality operates on the principle of "pick and choose" when dealing with tradition. It retains parts of tradition that are compatible with "denuded rationality" and disregards those that are not. Accordingly, Salafists may use a religious reformist rationality to interpret tradition, justifying their religious and political projects. Liberals might employ liberal rationality to interpret the *turath*, seeking a traditional (*turathi*) foundation to advance their liberal agendas. Marxists could also use the lens of "class struggle" or "dialectical materialism" rationality to

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[32] See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Nuriye Aksoy, "Meeting the Challenges of Modernity as Experienced by Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh" (M.A., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, 2015) (1603538); Willem Van Der Sluis, "Islam and Modernity. Perspectives of Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani" (1838-1897)," *Historisch Tijdschrift Groniek Midden-Oosten* 217 (2017), https://doi.org/10.21827/groniek.217.35727; Aasia Yusuf, "Islam and Modernity: Remembering the Contribution of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905)," *ICR Journal* 3(2) (2012).

[33] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 38-40.

[34] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 53-54.

interpret tradition, aiming to validate leftist theories or legitimize their political aspirations.

Similarly, according to Taha, politically oriented scholars engage with tradition through what he terms "politization" (*tasyis*). They tend to reject aspects of tradition that do not align with their political agendas while selectively adopting those that support their ideological goals. Taha writes,

> "…the Salafis, for instance, have been 'rigidified' in their exclusive focus on the early predecessors' texts, the exclusion of others. In their selectivity, on the other hand, the nationalists have tended to appropriate those aspects of tradition that appear to exalt history, language, and race, even as socialists have privileged texts that lend themselves to an interpretation that promotes liberation and revolution; the liberals, meanwhile, stockpile for their own use those texts that are construed as calling for freedom, democracy, and scientific thought."[35]

Re-reading and Rethinking the *Turath*

Al-Jabiri's fundamental project aims to oppose the "*turath* view of *turath*" by developing a "contemporary view of the *turath*".[36] His approach to contemporary reading involves three stages: first, the necessity of an epistemological break from the understanding of *turath* confined within itself; second, separating the "read-object (*maqru'*)" from the "subject-reader (*qari'*)"; and third, reuniting the reader-object with the subject-reader.

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[35] Taha Abdurrahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj fi Taqwim al-Turath* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-ʿArabi, 2007), 27. The translation belongs to Wael B. Hallaq. See Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 54.

[36] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 2.

The first stage of contemporary reading aims to establish a definitive epistemological break from the structure of Arab reasoning in the "era of decline" and its continuation in contemporary Arab thought. This break does not entail rejecting the *turath* itself, but rather rejecting the *turath*'s own understanding of itself. In other words, what is rejected is not the *turath* itself, but rather our approach to tradition—a traditional understanding of tradition through analogical reasoning (*qiyas al-gha'ib 'ala al-shahid*) that leads to the stagnation of Arab thought. This approach not only confines our modern era within the paradigm of the "era of decline", but also perpetuates what al-Jabiri terms "a continuous presence of the past within the realm of thought and affective experience, thereby providing ready-made solutions for the present." [37] Therefore, this traditional relationship should be epistemologically deconstructed and replaced by a contemporary relationship with the tradition (*turath*).

The second stage of contemporary reading aims to establish an objective approach to the *turath*. This objective reading of tradition is necessary because contemporary Arab "readers" are often constrained by tradition, which absorbs them, thereby depriving them of independence and freedom.[38] Al-Jabiri describes such acute absorption of the subjectivity of the Arab reader by tradition (*turath*) as follows:

> "From the day of his birth, we have not ceased to instill tradition in him, in the forms of a certain vocabulary and certain concepts, of a language and thought; in the form of fables, legends and imaginary representations, of a certain kind of relationship to things and a certain way of thinking; of types of knowledge

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[37] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 22.
[38] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 25.

and certain truths. He receives all this without
the slightest critical reaction or critical mind."[39]

The objective reading of the *turath* operates based on
the idea of the necessity of two reading moves: first, the
separation of the subject-reader from the object of reading;
and second, disjoining the object of reading from the
subject-reader. The first move in reading allows us (the
subject) to regain our dynamism, enabling us to rebuild the
turath (object) from a new perspective. The second move
in reading allows the *turath* (the object) to "regain its
independence, personality, identity, and historicity."[40] By
employing these two reading moves, one could achieve
"objectivity" in terms of building a relationship with the
tradition (*turath*) and the *turath* can achieve its own
"contemporaneity."[41] Accordingly, one would be aware of
their own identity, consciousness, and freedom concerning
the tradition, while the tradition would be understood and
situated within its desires, aspirations, problems, and
historical stages as a whole (episteme). This renders the
tradition contemporary to itself.

The third stage of the reading aims to render the *turath*
contemporary to us, the subject-readers. Therefore,
rejoining the read-object (*turath*) with the subject-reader (a
contemporary reader) is deemed necessary by al-Jabiri. In
his view, this can only be achieved through intuition
(*hads*).[42] It is not intuition in the sense of mysticism.
Instead, this intuition is akin to logical or mathematical
intuition, allowing contemporary readers to uncover what

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[39] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy,* 26.

[40] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 28.

[41] The *turath* becomes contemporary to itself, which means the *turath* is
read with regard to its own time, its own problems, its own discourse
and episteme (Al-Jabiri calls these discourse and episteme as "great
strides that are being made worldwide", see al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic
Philosophy*, 2.

[42] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 30.

the read-object has concealed. This intuition must "decipher signs within the text undoubtedly folded inside the game of thought that are hidden by the strategy of discourse."[43]

If the silenced aspects within the text (i.e., tradition) are unveiled, contemporary readers could discern its ideological as well as its cognitive contents. However, according to al-Jabiri, the cognitive contents of Islamic tradition—which primarily draw from the physical sciences of Aristotle—are defunct subjects, unable to be revived. They have become obsolete with the advent of modern science.[44] However, the ideological contents of the tradition remain alive, in the form of a dream. This dream envisions a potential future, distinct from those who seek to revive the past greatness of civilization. We call it "a dream" when "the future" is projected into the time to come.[45] Therefore, the task of contemporary readers of tradition is to interact critically with the tradition, seeking an enlightened dream from the surviving tradition, and making it engaged with our desires, aspirations, and concerns. In this way, the *turath* will be considered contemporary to us modern readers.

Abdurrahman Taha would consider al-Jabiri's reading proposal above insufficient. According to him, 'reading' has been engulfed in "anxiety (*qalq*) and confusion" because it originates from an imported method that often conflates the reader and the object of reading (*al-tadakhul bayn al-qari' wa al-maqru'*).[46] The contemporary reading by al-Jabiri implies the selective adoption of aspects of tradition that align with contemporary dreams, aspirations, and concerns. Consequently, parts of the tradition that do not meet contemporary needs are ignored. Abdurrahman

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[43] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 30-31.
[44] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 122.
[45] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 123.
[46] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 36-37.

Taha criticizes this approach as a practice of "slice and choose", driven by denuded rationality and ideology. Furthermore, such selective reading complicates the separation between the subject-reader and the object of reading, making achieving the desired objective reading nearly impossible.

Instead of reading, Taha proposes the practice of "thinking."[47] In the practice of "thinking" or "rethinking" the tradition, the main task is not to modernize or rationalize the tradition, but rather "to understand it, to develop a command of its methods, and to ascertain its contents."[48] If these series of 'thinking' practices are undertaken, those who wish to rethink and renew tradition will be able to judge its contents. They understand the tradition and have a good command of its methods, enabling them to formulate their own methods that align with the spirit of tradition, demonstrate experiential knowledge of it, and finally, extract contents of the tradition that are appropriate for our contemporary age.[49]

In line with the practice of thinking tradition, Taha introduces the notion of *tadawul* to interact with tradition. *Tadawul* represents what Hallaq describes as,

> "The persistence of works whose benefits transcend to the other, so that it is both communicative and interactive. It is also that which yields benefits that transcend to the future, so that it becomes both an ethical refinement and a devotional rapprochement."[50]

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[47] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity,* 37.

[48] Taha Abdurrahman, *Su'al al-Manhaj: fi Ufuq al-Ta'sis li Unmudhaj Fikri Jadid*, ed. Radwan Marhum (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-ʿArabiyyah li al-Fikr wa al-Ibdaʿ, 2015), 60; Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 42.

[49] Abdurrahman, *Su'al al-Manhaj*, 55 and 60.

[50] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 43-44.

In this regard, tradition is understood to have three major components: creed, language, and knowledge. According to the principle of *tadawul*, creed must engender practical effects, speech must be accompanied by action, and discourse must correspond with practical conduct.[51] Meanwhile, language, as the second element of tradition must serve a dual purpose: one for the self and another for others. Finally, the third element of tradition, knowledge, must be evaluated based on its application. Knowledge is considered valuable if it leads to an ethical outcome. According to Taha as summarized by Hallaq, for knowledge to function in this manner, it must be governed by three commanding precepts: a) that Islamic knowledge, whose sources must begin and start from the *turath*, enjoys primacy over all other forms of knowledge; b) that theoretical knowledge depends on praxis and practical knowledge; and c) that positive reason (*al-ʿaql al-sharʿi*) depends on *sharʿi* reason.[52]

Taha's primary concern regarding modern scholars' reading of the *turath* is their failure to understand tradition in terms of practical knowledge and praxis. This lack of understanding prevents them from comprehending the methods and contents of the *turath*, let alone being able to propose a new reading and modernize it.

Overcoming Anxiety: Finding Authenticity Towards Modernity

Al-Jabiri employs the aforementioned stages of reading to reassess Islamic scholarship, encompassing fields such as Islamic jurisprudence, theology, Arabic grammar, Arabic poetry, rhetoric, Quranic exegesis, Hadith criticism, and philosophy. He notes that these disciplines began to be systematically recorded and codified by Arab scholars during what is known as 'The Age of Tadwin' or 'The Age

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[51] Abdurrahman, *Su'al al-Manhaj*, 63.
[52] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 44-46.

of Codification'. starting from the middle of the second century of the Islamic era.[53] The process of intellectual recording and codification extended into the Abbasid era, during which the oral traditions of Islam were collected, translations from non-Arab cultures were made, and the system of Arab-Islamic thought was established. Consequently, as Arab scholarship reached maturity, three major intellectual disciplines emerged that eventually shaped what al-Jabiri refers to as "Arab Reason".

First, the discipline of explication (*'ulum al-bayan*) employed an epistemological method known as analogical thinking (*al-qiyas al-bayani*) across a wide range of early Arab-Islamic scholarship. This method was applied in fields including grammar, rhetoric, prosody, lexicography, Quranic exegesis, Hadith sciences, Islamic law and legal theory, and Islamic theology (*kalam*).[54] This analogical reasoning requires the availability of a certain kind of origin/original case (*asl*), the derivate/new case (*far'*), the reason/the cause (*'illah*), and the logical/judicial conclusion (*hukm*).[55]

For example, drinking wine is prohibited because it is intoxicating. Taking drugs, although its explicit legal ruling is absent in either the Qur'an or Hadith, is also prohibited based on analogical thinking, which refers to the case of wine. The reason for the prohibition of drugs is its similar effect to wine, namely the intoxicating effect. In this case, drinking wine is the *asl,* taking drugs is the *far',* the intoxicating effect is the *'illah*, and the prohibition is the *hukm.*[56] So, the legal ruling in the new case (taking drugs)

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[53] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*, 51.

[54] Muhammad ʿAbid Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi: Dirasah Tahliliyah Naqdiyah li Nuzum al-Maʿrifah fi al-Thaqafah al-ʿArabiyyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah, 1990), 137-145.

[55] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-Aql al-'Arabi*, 145.

[56] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 200.

can be known by means of analogy to the original case (drinking wine) based on its similarity (intoxicating effect). This kind of reasoning is also used in other disciplines, although they may have different terms. In theology, for instance, the *asl* is called *al-shahid* (the known), whereas the *far'* is *al-gha'ib* (the unknown). To understand the reality of the unknown (e.g., God) can be achieved through analogy to the reality of the known (e.g., human attributes). In Qur'anic studies, furthermore, all contemporary issues (*far'*) are supposed to be assessed by the *asl*, which is the Qur'an. The reason underlying the use of this analogy (*al-qiyas al-bayani*) is to seek harmony between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*).

This tradition, according to al-Jabiri, is not worth emulating. It traps contemporary readers in problematic systems of reference (*sultah al-marji'iyah*), namely associating the unknown with the known in the realm of epistemology, and making infinite attempts to harmonize reason with revelation in the realm of ideology.

Unfortunately, contemporary scholars still adhere to this system of reference. They treat past heritage or Western-European civilization as the *asl* or *al-shahid* (the known), while the future serves as the *far'* or *al-gha'ib* (the unknown). Despite the obvious deficiency in this analogy—specifically the absence of reason or similarity (*'illah*)—they persist in imposing the logical conclusion (*hukm*), insisting that the future (the unknown) should conform to the known (either the past or the West). The extension of this epistemological reasoning and ideological vision from the age of *tadwin* into the present is unacceptable. Therefore, al-Jabiri advocates the aforementioned deconstructive reading projects, namely the necessity of the epistemological break and historical reading. Without these, contemporary Arab Reason will remain trapped within the *turath*.

Second, the discipline of Gnosticism (*'ulum al-'irfan*), which relies on inner revelation and insight as an epistemological method, encompasses Sufism, Shiʿi thought, Ismaʿili philosophy, esoteric Qur'an exegesis, Oriental illumination philosophy, theosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic, and numerology.[57] Gnosticism asserts that philosophy and religion can be synthesized through its Gnostic reasoning. However, al-Jabiri denies the epistemological method of Gnosticism not only due to its ideological contents—such as the influence of Persian aristocracy[58] using the cover of Shiʿism or their heritage like Zoroastrianism.[59] But more importantly, he rejects it because of its heretical and irrational characteristics.

First, the epistemology of Gnosticism is fundamentally Hermetic, which lacks Arabic or Islamic content but attempts to cloak itself with Islam.[60] Second, this epistemological method is founded neither on reason nor on the senses, but on inner revelation and insight (*kashf*). It claims that knowledge is not derived from analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) or demonstrative reasoning (Aristotelian syllogism), but is acquired through the claim of direct experience with the divine.[61] Third, Gnostic epistemology is characterized by a mythological, mystical, and magical way of thinking. In this view, truth does not result from religion, philosophy, or science, but rather from uncovering esoteric-mystical meanings preserved in mythologies.[62] For al-Jabiri, this type of epistemology cannot be an inspiration for Arab intellectual progress.[63] The dream it offers is not an enlightening one, nor does it

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[57] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*, 53.

[58] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 49.

[59] Rabi, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 264.

[60] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi*, 372-374.

[61] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi*, 374-376.

[62] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi*, 379.

[63] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*, 53.

inspire the emergence of an independent Arab reason and authenticity.

Third, the discipline of inferential evidence (*'ulum al-burhan*), whose epistemological method is based on empirical observation and intellectual inference. This includes logic, mathematics, physics (all branches of natural sciences) and even metaphysics. [64] The epistemological foundation of the disciplines of *al-burhan*, however, is basically rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, especially the method of logical demonstration, which employs deductive and inductive reasoning through syllogism. In the Arab-Islamic context, this tradition was developed by al-Kindi and al-Farabi,[65] and later reached its peak in the hands of Ibn Rushd.[66]

According to al-Jabiri, *al-burhan* differs from other disciplines whose epistemology is based on revelation, consensus, and legal reasoning (where analogy is their main logic), or based on the sainthood (*wilayah*) and inner insight (*kashf*). *Al-Burhan* is the only discipline whose epistemological reasoning is based on human intellectual and natural capacities, including senses, experiments, and rational judgment. [67] This is the tradition that al-Jabiri advocates. It is a tradition whose dreams and epistemology are worth emulating, although its contents may be disputable. Al-Jabiri refers to this tradition as "the spirit of Averroism/Ibn Rushd (*al-ruh al-rushdiyah*)." [68] In the Rushdian scheme of truth, religion and philosophy coexist; despite their different epistemological systems, their truths are considered harmonious and non-contradictory.[69] At this

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[64] Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thoughts*.

[65] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 56-57.

[66] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 124.

[67] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi*, 383-84.

[68] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 128.

[69] Peterson Adamson & Richard C. Taylor, *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press University, 2005), 187.

level, Rushdian spirit embodies "rationalism, realism, axiomatic and critical approach."[70]

Accordingly, al-Jabiri launches two major projects to establish the authenticity of Arab Reason. First, achieving complete historical independence for the Arab self (*al-istiqlal at-tarikhi li al-dhat al-ʿarabiyyah*)[71]; and second, laying the foundation for a New Age of *Tadwin* (*asr al-tadwin al-jadid*).[72] The first project requires modern Arabs to liberate themselves from two predominant frames of reference: the Arab-Islamic past and present Western Europe. Instead, al-Jabiri proposes adopting the Rushdian spirit, as explained earlier, to establish independence for Arab historical identity.

By embracing this spirit, modern Arabs can maintain a connection to the authenticity of their own tradition (since the Rushdian spirit is rooted in Arab-Islamic tradition) while also benefiting from Western-European modernity (as both advocate rationalism). However, al-Jabiri's second project appears somewhat utopian. It envisions the inception of a new age of *Tadwin* based on the Rushdian spirit. This would entail restructuring all Arab-Islamic sciences and disciplines around the epistemology of *burhan*, thereby moving away from the methods of *bayan* and *ʿirfan*. Accordingly, al-Jabiri argues that just as the Cartesian spirit characterizes French thought, or the spirit of empiricism initiated by Locke and Hume characterizes English thought, the spirit of Ibn Rushd must also be present in Arab modern thought.[73]

Al-Jabiri's preference for Ibn Rushd and the Rushdian spirit is not without criticism. Abdurrahman Taha criticizes al-Jabiri for neglecting the phenomenon of what he refers

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[70] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 128.

[71] Muhammad ʿAbid al-Jabiri, *al-Khitab al-ʿArabi al-Muʿasir* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah, 1992), 205.

[72] Al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabi*, 555.

[73] Al-Jabiri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 128.

to as *tadakhul* (interpenetration) within the *turath*. Traditions should not be viewed as singular and uniform, but rather as diverse yet unified. Generally, there are two categories within the substrata of *turath*: indigenous (*ma'sul*) and assimilated (*manqul*). Indigenous traditions are authentically rooted in Islamic lands, while assimilated traditions are transplanted from non-Islamic sources.[74] The indigenous sciences include Arabic linguistics, Qur'anic exegesis, *hadith*, *fiqh* (Islamic law), Sufism, *kalam* (Islamic theology), and other sciences derived from the purpose of understanding Islamic canonical texts. The assimilated tradition includes rational-based sciences such as philosophy, medical science, logic, and similar disciplines.

According to Taha, these two sciences interact within themselves and with other sciences as well. This interpenetration occurs in three forms. First, the interaction and interpenetration take place among indigenous sciences, known as "internal interpenetration." [75] For example, Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) results from reciprocal interactions among linguistics, *fiqh*, and *kalam*. [76] The science of the higher objectives of shariʿa (*maqasid al-shariʿah*) also emerges from the intersection of *usul al-fiqh* and ethics (*akhlaq*). However, when a theoretical indigenous science attempts to penetrate a practical indigenous science, or vice versa, priority should be given to the practical, as the paradigm of praxis is considered "hegemonic."[77]

The second form of interpenetration is termed "proximate external interpenetration". This occurs when an assimilated science enters and interacts with one or more indigenous sciences, either fully or partially, aiming to

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[74] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 46.
[75] Abdurrahman, *Su'al al-Manhaj*, 66. See also Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 47.
[76] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 46.
[77] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 47.

integrate itself according to the prevailing principles of *tadawul* in indigenous scientific traditions. For instance, this can be observed in the integration of Greek philosophy into *kalam*, Aristotelian logic into *usul al-fiqh*, and theories of atom and motion into Islamic theology and philosophy. Thirdly, interpenetration occurs when an indigenous science seeks validation from an assimilated or imported science, in part or in whole, termed "remote external interpenetration". An example of this interpenetration is the integration of the science of kalam into metaphysics.[78]

Considering that tradition (*turath*) is primarily a product of the interpenetration of sciences, Taha would argue against al-Jabiri regarding Ibn Rushd and his rational legacy. The Arab rational 'reason' of Ibn Rushd is not entirely indigenous and, therefore, not worthy of wholesale adoption and revival as al-Jabiri aims to promote. Similar to other sciences within the tradition, which are "products of direct as well as indirect intellectual exchanges between self and the other, whether the other is Muslim or not,"[79] for Taha, Rushdian rationality also results from the interpenetration of sciences and dialectical deliberations that occur within and among branches of the tradition. The failure of modern thinkers, including al-Jabiri, to recognize the existence of such intellectual interpenetration and the dialectical nature of tradition results in a "slice and choose" rationality and politicization (*tasyis*) of tradition. They selectively choose branches of tradition that align with their forms of rationality and ignore those branches that contradict their pursuit of political recognition and dominance.[80]

In this regard, Taha offers a critical and humanistic approach to tradition through what he calls *ta'nis*

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[78] Abdurrahman, *Su'al al-Manhaj*, 66-67.
[79] Abdurrahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj*, 20. The translation belongs to Wael B. Hallaq. See Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 52.
[80] Abdurrahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj*, 26.

(humanism). According to *ta'nis*, the ethical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of various branches of tradition are crucial for fostering intellectual enlightenment, where "the value of the 'read text' lies in the practical and moral effects of that text on the 'reader.' "[81] In this regard, I concur with Hallaq when he states that Taha's persuasive finding is the fact that tradition is actually "a dialectically woven tradition, manifestly characterized and structured by interpenetration"[82] and his emphasis on the ethical and praxis aspects of the tradition. Through this understanding and intellectual stance, Taha believes he could provide a solid foundation for Muslims to overcome their civilizational anxiety and develop their own forms of modernity.

Conclusion

The above exposition attempts to illustrate the internal dynamics of two modern Arab intellectuals, namely Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri and Abdurrahman Taha, as they engage with the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition and interact with Western-European civilization. Here, the Arab, the Orient (using Said's term), and Islam are not represented or spoken for by others, whether Orientalists or Arabs residing in the West. Instead, genuine Arab intellectuals, represented by al-Jabiri and Taha, articulate their own struggles to define their path, ideals, and identity amidst "civilizational anxiety".

In this respect, al-Jabiri offers Arab intellectuals two pathways to attain the authenticity of Arab modernity and resolve Arab civilizational anxiety. Firstly, by re-reading Arab-Islamic traditions and heritages (*turath*), and secondly, by reconstructing Arab reason based on the Rushdian spirit. Meanwhile, Taha advocates for "thinking"

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[81] Abdurrahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj*, 27. The translation belongs to Wael B. Hallaq in Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 54.
[82] Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 76.

tradition through the lens of *tadawul* and *tadakhul*. *Tadawul* enables Arab-Muslims to understand the ethical and practical aspects of tradition, while *tadakhul* makes them aware of its inter-relational, dialectical, and interactive aspects. Through these approaches, the Arab-Islamic world can cultivate its authentic forms of modernity.

While al-Jabiri's and Taha's exposition of the *turath* and their critique of fellow Arab intellectuals may not be entirely free from their own ideological motives (such as al-Jabiri's aim to revive the intellectual superiority of the Maghrib and Taha's preference for Islamic spiritual tradition), their contributions to the discourse of Arab Nahdah are significant. Their value lies not only in their understanding of the *turath* and the current Arab situation, but also in their search for the authentic identity of Arab-Islamic modernity. This comparative analysis of al-Jabiri's and Taha's thoughts not only explores their engagement with the same archive of Islamic intellectual tradition, as suggested by Samuel Kigar, and their differing positions on Sufism, as studied by Ben Hammed, but also highlights their complementary proposals and prescriptions to address the dialectics between tradition and modernity. These include advocating for new ways of reading the *turath*, embracing the Rushdian spirit, and approaching tradition through the lenses of *tadawul* and *tadakhul*.

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