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The Theory of Reading according to "Abdelmalek Murtad

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Abstract:

"Abdelmalek Murtad" is considered one of the foremost Algerian critics who have played a significant and influential role in the world of criticism and knowledge, owing to his language, writing style, and the important critical content he offers. His book "Theory of Reading: Toward Establishing a General Theory of Literary Reading" represents an attempt to lay the foundations for an Arab theory of reading and constitutes a rich contribution to Arab criticism, given the critical insights it contains regarding reading.

Murtad sought to define the concept of reading and the inherent relationship between writing and reading, presenting a number of concepts and terms, among them "reading the reading," as well as the transition of reading from a hobby to a professional practice. He also addressed reading in relation to creativity and innovation. Thus, what are the fundamental principles upon which Murtad based his vision of the theory of reading?

Keywords: Theory of reading; Abdelmalek Murtad; reception; interpretation; reader; reading the reading.

1- Introduction:

Discussing the text in all its stages helps us uncover the transformations it has undergone. At the outset, the focus was placed on the author; consequently, the text receded and became merely a means toward another end namely, the author himself. Through the text, the image of the author is manifested; the text thus becomes a document that reveals the author's world and psyche, what is referred to as the "document-text."

Then came the period of modernity, during which standards changed, and the text itself became the central basis upon which literary knowledge was grounded. This occurred through the search for the internal structure, leading to the designation of the text as the "masterpiece-text." This period was marked by the dominance of a single mode of reading, which in turn generated a certain monotony and stagnation.

Subsequently, the postmodern period opened the door to multiple readings by focusing on the reader and the process of interpretation, enabling the text to open itself according to the reader's capacity and cognitive background. This is what is known as the "sign-text."

From here emerged the theory of reading, which attracted the attention of many critics, among whom we find Abdelmalek Murtad. He moved beyond the stage of historical criticism to reach a qualitatively different phase characterized by transformation and development, in accordance with the changes of the age. This is evident in the ideas he articulated in his works, including his book "Theory of Reading," which constitutes a synthesis of his ideas on establishing a general theory of reading, as well as his conception of reading and the position of this theory between heritage and modernity. He also highlights the role of interpretation, leading to practical procedures related to this subject.

Abdelmalek Murtad believes that reading is what grants any creative work its literary or critical value, as it revives it by reactivating its meanings with each new reading. Every reader offers their own readings, aiming to present perspectives according to their methodology. Given the differences among readers, there exist both the ordinary reader and the critical reader. The hope remains that a reader may one day present new ideas that rise to the level of theory. Indeed, reading was created for theorization before it was for pleasure, as Roland Barthes notes: "Reading alone loves the literary work... for to read means to desire the work, to long for it, and to refuse its duplication apart from any discourse other than its own."

What renders a literary work enduring is the artistic effect it leaves within the text, which transforms into a psychological impact upon the reader. The reader then attempts to interpret this effect and produces a range of interpretations, corresponding to the multiplicity of readings.

Murtad thus sought to present concepts of reading and the interconnected relationship between writing and reading, reviewing various notions and terms, including "reading the reading" and its transition from hobby to professionalism. He also addressed reading within the context of creativity and innovation.

2- Reading between Creativity and Innovation:

Murtad draws a distinction between creative writing and analytical writing. Creative writing is that which produces the text and through which a tangible reality is manifested. Analytical writing, on the other hand favored by modern scholars focuses on reading the text from multiple perspectives and seeks to interrogate its ideas.ⁱ

For this reason, criticizing creativity proves to be difficult, since: "Speaking about speech is difficult; the first speech is criticism, while the second is creativity." Thus, in order for contemporaries to dismantle this inequitable relationship between creativity and criticism or, if one prefers, between primary creativity and secondary creativity; or again, between creativity and innovation they have tended to abandon the term criticism when referring to the act of writing, favoring instead other designations. Among the most widely used, almost obsessively in our time, is the term reading. Despite this, the concept of reading, ultimately, does not correspond to criticism or a form of it in the traditional critics' view.ⁱⁱ

Reading is therefore considered a creative process that draws upon previous readings with the aim of regenerating ideas. The concept of reading is not confined to a mere critical activity seeking to extract the jewels and essences of the text; rather, it encompasses the generation of multiple ideas from a single idea, or the rewriting of an idea in a more stable form in which meaning becomes clearer and more elevated in significance. Murtad believes that the literary text, though it may appear closed, remains open to interpretation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The reader's concern revolves around the task of reshaping the ideas present within the text. This is achieved by deciphering its enigmas and overcoming the obstacles set by the author. This process is embodied in writing, for writing in its essence is not merely a representation of modern critical and intellectual viewpoints; rather, it is the stabilization of what might have remained unexpressed had writing not existed. It is as though the initial act of writing is itself a reading of what precedes writing namely, what stirs within the writer's mind before those scattered and fragmented ideas are fixed upon the page in a certain order marked by artistic expression.^{iv}

Thus, reading becomes an active attempt by the receiver to comprehend meanings and embody them in writing that narrates their details. "It is as though reading which has come to replace criticism or is in the process of doing so is nothing but a form of that first reading which embodied the general and wandering ideas in the creator's mind before they were set down on paper, forming a beautiful texture resembling an embroidered garment, a splendid cloak, or an ornate carpet crafted by the hands of artisans, ensuring its continuity and enabling its growth and productivity."^v

This example reflects the reality embodied by the reader, who shapes it through writing. From here, the relationship between reading and writing becomes clearly manifest.

3- The Relationship between Writing and Reading:

The relationship between writing and reading is a close and inseparable one, as emphasized by Murtad in his book "Theory of Criticism." From the outset, he considers writing to be a form of reading, and both writing and reading as two sides of the same coin.^{vi}

Writing is the embodiment of reading, as the reader seeks through reading to understand the meanings within the text and to apply them through writing. This perspective holds that reading relies on imagination, and this imagination arises from a "white reading," that is, an internal, imaginative reading formed within the creative writer's mind as he transcribes the text onto paper. The relationship between reading and writing thus resembles that between body and soul, existence and being, cause and effect.^{vii}

Both reading and writing complement one another in a process of interaction and integration. This is evident in Murtad's definition of writing, which he describes as a form of reading in some sense. He further adds that writing is indispensable for those who master it, while reading is the primary key to knowledge, as it expresses what lies within the conscience and translates what resides in the heart. Descriptive writing or what Murtad calls the "language of language" is then followed by his definition of writing as an existence constituted by agreed-upon black symbols organized according to a specific system and manner of use, representing linguistic features also agreed upon within a particular linguistic community.^{viii}

Some have also viewed this relationship from the perspective that writing cannot truly exist unless it is grounded in the act of reading.^{ix}

Each reader produces diverse readings that vary according to differing interpretations. Every text undergoes a process of interpretation through its deconstruction and reconstruction. It is evident that methods of reading and procedures have developed remarkably in the present time. It is as though every new school of thought necessarily relies on dismantling the preceding one either entirely or in part. Yet, there is no escaping the necessity of destruction before construction.^x

For instance, stylistics is characterized by its concern with uncovering the system of style through the morphological features of sentences, as well as their phonetic properties and structural components. Thus, methods of reading differ according to methods of writing. In this context of the relationship between reading and writing, Murtad also addresses the concept of "reading the reading."

4- Reading the Reading:

This term refers to the critique and evaluation of critical writings. It has found resonance among Arab critics, including Muhammad Mandour in his book "Methodological Criticism among the Arabs," where one finds a compelling example of the concept of "reading the reading." This term has been employed in modern linguistic studies as an alternative to the traditional term criticism.^{xi}

This process is based on the reader's revision of a text previously read, through examining its linguistic levels and correcting any errors where necessary. The term "reading the reading" has evolved from a mere identity into a professional practice, as noted by Murtad, who believes that: "Reading is characterized by its comprehensiveness, extending across the entire text and often across an entire corpus in many phases. Perhaps Al-Marzouqi was among the earliest prominent literary readers who approached poetic texts with high professionalism. It is also evident that later scholars may have subtly reworked the expressions of their predecessors, presenting them in new forms and weaving them anew."^{xii}

While reading a text, the reader inevitably draws upon their cognitive reservoir. This may be described as imitation or emulation, or more precisely as "absent reading." The later writer rarely acknowledged at least from a documentary perspective their indebtedness to earlier efforts, their intertextual engagement with them, or the ways in which they built upon or circled around them. At times, their work seemed dependent upon prior writing, and in some cases this methodological tendency reached a degree of overlap and entanglement. Yet explicit acknowledgment of such influence was often absent.^{xiii}

In light of prior readings, the receiver unconsciously interprets the text based on these accumulated experiences a phenomenon known as intertextuality. Murtad does not overlook this aspect; rather, he addresses and elaborates upon it. He believes that professional, methodological reading may have begun with the work of Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Yahya al-Suli on the poetry of Abu Tammam's *Hamasa*, alongside a number of distinguished commentators in the fourth century AH, such as al-Amidi, Ibn Jinni, al-Marzouqi, and Abu Hilal al-Askari.^{xiv}

This mode of reading developed historically alongside the progression of eras, transitioning from the realm of amateur practice into that of professional engagement. It continued to evolve in tandem with the growing status of the reader and the act of reading itself. Murtad, in turn, advanced his own vision of this theory, clarifying its principal advocates and deepening the understanding of the aesthetic dimensions associated with the theory of reading.

5- Elements of the Theory of Reading:

Murtad believes that the theory of reading is realized through persuading the receiver that aesthetic value is achieved by their own engagement in eliciting the meanings of the text. This requires the reader to possess sufficient knowledge to delve into the experience of decoding the text's symbols and veils elements that safeguard the literary work embedded by the author and are ultimately interpreted by the reader. Even when these meanings diverge from the author's intended purpose, such divergence is precisely what allows the text to open itself fully. Thus, readings multiply and differ according to the reader's cognitive perspectives.

In this context, Murtad adopts a particular methodology in his approach to the theory of reading.

1-5 Murtad's Methodology in Reading:

Murtad approaches the process of reading on the basis of creative practices embedded within the literary text practices that evolve in accordance with the text's internal demands. These demands point to textual levels that can be applied to the text, whether poetic or narrative. He states: "At the very least, a literary text should be read from five angles; it may be approached from six, and perhaps even from seven."^{xv}

By applying these levels, we grasp the creative dimensions exercised upon the literary text in a practical and systematic manner. This is also reflected in writing, as Murtad notes: "There are forms of writing that were practiced upon the literary text in classical Arabic literature. In our continual effort to establish roots, we seek to connect the contemporary with the ancient, and the modern with the traditional, whenever possible. Among these are the commentaries produced on well-known poetic corpora such as the *Mu'allaqat*, the two *Hamasahs*, and especially the *Diwan* of Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, as well as prose works like the *Maqamat*, particularly those of al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri. We have previously alluded to these literary practices, which were later classified in the history of Arabic literature under various forms and diverse terminologies."^{xvi}

These constitute applied examples alongside others mentioned by Abdelmalek Murtad in his book "Theory of Reading" intended to provide practical evidence parallel to the theoretical framework. All of this contributes to understanding the epistemological vision that Murtad proposes for the theory of reading. This is achieved through a fundamental review of its origins, as he notes: "The Russian Formalist school undertook the task of establishing a theory concerned with focusing on the literariness of literature, encapsulated in the proposition that the subject of literary science is not literature itself, but rather its literariness."^{xvii}

2-5 The Aesthetics of Reception:

Murtad believes that the aesthetics of reception elevates the artistic level of the literary text and aims to understand its inherent artistic features, which are elicited through well-established rules and principles. Abdelmalek Murtad "coined the term 'rhetoric of reception' or what is referred to in modern critical language as reading. However, the latter, he argues, is shared across multiple domains, encompassing all forms of reading such as journalistic, practical, or religious reading. For this reason, it is somewhat distant from the field of literature and has thus lost a degree of specificity. In contrast, the term 'aesthetics of reception' tends toward referring to a network of procedures that seek to establish a field

of professional reception aesthetics, one that parallels the artistic level at which the literary text stands with all its semantic and aesthetic weight.^{"xviii}

By adopting the term aesthetics of reception, Murtad favors reading over criticism, since reading, in his view, constitutes a second-degree creativity, whereas criticism is merely a judgment upon creativity. The choice of terminology is itself part of Murtad's critical language a refined discourse that combines knowledge with the aesthetics of reception by focusing on the reader as the primary agent responsible for generating the creative layers that accompany the original act of creation. As he notes, "Reception theory, as an idea, is as old as critical thought itself; however, as a fully developed theory grounded in foundational principles, it only emerged in the 1960s. It appears to have arisen as a response to the methodological rigidity of structuralism. Indeed, all schools and critical tendencies have, to a certain extent, encompassed forms of aesthetic philosophy or particular aesthetics of reception."^{xix}

Thus, Murtad does not depart from his predecessors in his view of the receiver; rather, he builds upon the foundations they established. Reception, in the end, is a form of creativity refined by rules that enable the uncovering of its secrets, thereby shaping a theory that defines its contours. Reception cannot be complete unless it is accompanied by interpretation. Through interpretation, multiple readings become possible, and the text opens itself according to the reader's creative capacity for interpretation an idea emphasized by Murtad in his book "Theory of Reading."

3-5 Reading and Interpretation:

Reading and interpretation are two interrelated and overlapping concepts. Reception theory essentially relies on the principle of reading as performed by the receiver, and on interpretation as the means through which the reader understands the literary work and extracts its meanings. "Reading and interpretation are intertwined terms; some have even conflated them, treating them as one and the same without distinction."^{xx}

Reading is considered the primary means of reaching interpretation. The receiver first reads the text and then interprets it. In modernist thought, reading is also seen as "a production of the text, a process of enrichment, acculturation, and aesthetic engagement... Professional reading is devoted to the text and its specialists; indeed, the true writer is one who writes around the reading he performs."^{xxi}

As for interpretation, it is the inevitable outcome of reading. Once the professional reader completes the act of reading, their creative faculty inspires the process of interpretation. "Interpretation is not merely an explanation of a word, nor a simple clarification of a phrase, nor a superficial understanding of meaning. Rather, it refers to hermeneutics a complex network of procedures and an advanced system of channels and tools through which one can control the system of reception. Thus, we do not merely use the text we read; we interpret it in a way that does not rely on arbitrary judgment but seeks to extract its elements based on contextual and structural markers."^{xxii}

Accordingly, interpretation becomes governed by methodological principles in which the reader's creative ability plays a central role. There is, therefore, an inevitable overlap between the concepts of reading and interpretation. Indeed, "Classical Arab scholars did not clearly distinguish between reading through interpretation and interpreting reading. Interpretation, in this sense, is a structured apparatus for explaining meaning, through which we can regulate the process of reception during reading, so that we do not merely use the text according to a desired purpose."^{xxiii}

The ultimate aim is to uncover the hidden depths of the text and elucidate its latent meanings. Thus, reading and interpretation complement one another, both striving to serve a comprehensive theory with deep roots, continuity, and development in modern times. This is precisely what Murtad presents through his exposition of this theory and his articulation of ideas related to the aesthetics of reception in his book "Theory of Reading."

4-5 Reading through Procedural Levels according to Murtad:

Given the multiplicity of texts, readings naturally vary. Each text possesses its own distinct features and characteristics that set it apart from others. Thus, "every text imposes specific procedures when subjected to certain readings, the most important of which are the reading of poetic texts and the reading of narrative texts."^{xxiv}

In addition, there is the reading of the sacred (divine) text, which according to the theory of reading is considered a noble genre of reading. In contrast to these genres, a plurality of readings becomes necessary in order to grasp all artistic values and aesthetic manifestations. These are necessarily approached through textual levels that come close to exhausting the richness of the literary text though such richness ultimately remains inexhaustible.

1-4-5 The Linguistic Level:

Here, "the term deconstruction is used in the sense of breaking down the elements of language and dispersing its words back to their original state either based on their proximate meanings or according to other considerations."^{xxv} The focus is on language as it is grounded in both sound and meaning, which the writer employs in composition. For example, the multiplicity and repetition of words allow us to assess the extent of the linguistic material from which the poetic text is constructed, while also revealing its nature and characteristics.

2-4-5 The Spatial Level:

The reader may "descend to a second level in our procedures, embodied particularly in what we call the spatial level that is, the text as presented for reading. This procedure is based on a philosophy of space, since most linguistic elements or verbal features carry spatial meanings in one way or another."^{xxvi}

For Murtad, the spatial level consists of two types:

- a. The Foreground Space: what is visible and perceptible, such as the word palace and the meanings it conveys.

b. The Background Space: that which underlies and constructs the foreground space, encompassing the various activities and processes responsible for its formation for example, questioning the number of stones and materials used in building that palace.^{xxvii}

3-4-5 The Temporal Level:

"Time may precede space, or it may not, depending on their inherent interdependence from the very beginning. Neither time nor space can attain its existence independently of the other; each is bound to the other in complete integration. Time exists outside space, and space outside time, both emerging from non-being into non-being."^{xxviii}

4-4-5 The Rhythmic Level:

This level refers "to the rhythmic structure, which signifies the poetics and aesthetics of rhythm... Indeed, rhythm manifests in various forms, as everything can generate rhythm within itself and in relation to others when repetition occurs in harmony and coherence. Rhythm differs from meter in both music and poetry."^{xxix} Thus, regardless of its transformations, rhythm retains its essential presence.

5-4-5 The Isotopic Level:

"The term isotopy, as understood from the structural properties of Arabic discourse, refers to the exchange of formal relations between two or more elements."^{xxx} This concept closely resembles a notion in classical Arabic rhetoric, namely resemblance or equivalence. The nature of this procedure requires the deconstruction of the text into units verse by verse, or in pairs of verses to facilitate analysis and ensure comprehensive coverage of the text.

6- Conclusion:

In concluding this study, we have attempted to cover as much as possible of the knowledge related to this multifaceted subject, which still encompasses numerous unresolved issues. Among the main findings we have reached are the following:

Abdelmalek Murtad is considered one of the foremost Algerian critics who have played a significant and influential role in the field of criticism and knowledge, owing to his language, writing style, and the rich critical content of his works, which carry distinctive literary features.

Murtad's strong connection to the Arab historical, cultural, and critical heritage in general and the Algerian heritage in particular is clearly reflected in his language and critical style, granting his critical approaches a certain depth and resilience.

Murtad's openness to various modern Western critical schools and trends has enriched his critical project, enabling him to construct a discourse that harmonizes the duality of heritage and modern developments.

Murtad is among the critics who devoted considerable attention to the theory of reading, as evidenced in his work "Theory of Reading."

Murtad believes that reading is the element that gives artistic value upon any creative work, and that the theory of reading is realized through the receiver, as this aesthetic dimension emerges from the reader's engagement in eliciting the meanings of the text.

There remain many controversial issues surrounding the theory of reading that require further research, observation, and analysis, with no foreseeable end to inquiry or questioning regarding its critical and epistemological challenges.

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ⁱ See: Ibrahim Abdelnour, The Contributions of Abdelmalek Murtad to the Theory of Reading: A Study of the Book "Theory of Reading", Qira'at Journal, University of Biskra, Issue 02, 2010, p. 51.

ⁱⁱ Abdelmalek Murtad, Theory of Reading: Toward Establishing a General Theory of Literary Reading, Dar Al-Gharb for Publishing and Distribution, Oran, n.d., p. 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: Ibrahim Abdelnour, The Contributions of Abdelmalek Murtad to the Theory of Reading, p. 51.

^{iv} See: Abdelmalek Murtad, Theory of Reading: Toward Establishing a General Theory of Literary Reading, p. 46.

^v Ibid., p. 46.

^{vi} See: Abdelmalek Murtad, On the Theory of Criticism: A Survey of Major Contemporary Critical Schools and Their Theories, Dar Houma for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Algeria, n.d., 2002, p. 6.

^{vii} See: Abdelmalek Murtad, Theory of Reading: Toward Establishing a General Theory of Literary Reading, p. 147.

^{viii} See: Abdelmalek Murtad, On the Theory of Criticism, p. 6.

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- ^{ix} See: Abdelmalek Murtad, *Theory of Reading*, p. 147.
- ^x See: *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ^{xi} See: Ibrahim Abdelnour, *The Contributions of Abdelmalek Murtad to the Theory of Reading*, p. 52.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ^{xiii} Abdelmalek Murtad, *Theory of Reading*, p. 81.
- ^{xiv} See: *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 47.
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- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 86.
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- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 226.
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