

Critique of the Orientalist Vision of the Arabic Literary Heritage in the Enlightenment Translation Project of “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh” - A Reading in its Intellectual and Critical References -

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Abstract:

The enlightenment project of the Algerian thinker and writer “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh¹” is based on re-reading the Arabic literary heritage and attempting to define and analyze it epistemologically from a modern Western enlightenment perspective, through activating the act of reading and interpretation that he employed to deconstruct the propositions of Western thought as reflected in an orientalist discourse bearing a Eurocentric and supremacist culture that constructed a forcefully stereotyped image of the East. Through a literary legacy and critical efforts, “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh” broke the artistic aesthetics of the Arabic literary heritage, creating a dynamic in critical consciousness and Algerian comparative studies by employing critical tools with modern critical references, through which he approached problematic texts in the

Arabic literary and cultural heritage such as the tales of “One Thousand and One Nights,” an approach that distanced him from orientalist stereotypes and colonial discourse propositions.

Accordingly, this article attempts to answer the following problem: To what extent did the enlightenment project of “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh”—with its literary legacy, critical efforts in the field of Arabic poetics and literary translation, and its intellectual and critical references—contribute to critiquing orientalism and undermining its authority? And what is the significance of his project for Algerian comparative studies?

Keywords: Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, critique of orientalism, translation project, intellectual reference, critical reference, Arabic literary heritage.

1. Introduction:

Orientalism in Arab thought carries a different kind of historical knowledge, being a distinct

discourse with central propositions that shape its fabric and a vision that does not reflect facts or realities but rather portrays representations or forms of symbolic representation that conceal many negative and reductive evaluations when it comes to constructing the image of the East. This led many researchers and pioneers of the enlightenment movement among Arab thinkers, in their intellectual and critical writings and literary works, to attempt to deconstruct the central propositions of orientalism, which establish a cultural and racial singularity that must be exposed, showing the fragility of many of its foundations by retreating inward and rereading them to critique the illusions contained in Western literary orientalism, perpetuated by generations of Western fictional writers fascinated by the marvelous and exotic in the

Arabic heritage. Escaping the dominance imposed by orientalist thought on general Arab thought requires, first and foremost, the awareness that the West's interest in the East was not for the sake of the East itself, but always to serve Western interests and reinforce a Western, supremacist, central culture that developed in an environment full of prejudices about the East, fed by Western fictional literary texts. Therefore, this awareness must be followed by a systematic and precise analysis of European thought in general and orientalist thought in particular, targeting its foundations and internal

structures. Confronting European orientalism is not achieved solely by critiquing orientalism but by critiquing European thought itself, as orientalism is the product of a cultural climate that contributed to its production, development, and formulation of its propositions, vision, and strategies, which ultimately led to a Western knowledge blockade, a fracture in Western cultural centralities, and a crisis of civilizational dialogue between East and West, and North and South, as the world is witnessing today. From here, this article attempts to answer the following question: To what extent did the enlightenment project of "Jamal Eddine Bencheikh"—with its literary heritage and critical efforts in the field of Arabic poetics and literary translation, and its intellectual and critical references—contribute to critiquing orientalism and undermining its authority? And what is the significance of his project for Algerian comparative studies?

To answer this question, our study is based on the following hypothesis:

Since orientalism is the product of European culture based on racial, cultural, economic, and political centralities, the discourse it produces—with its propositions of "power, dominance, and Western control"—has contributed to the formation of complex power relations that are difficult to break between the Eastern and Western worlds by exploiting language as a tool of discourse. Therefore, the misunderstanding between the Arab Eastern

and Western worlds can only be addressed by returning to the language of discourse. This is what many Arab researchers and thinkers—such as Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, Mohamed Arkoun, Hichem Djaït, Abdallah Laroui, and Jamal Eddine Bencheikh—have realized in their enlightenment projects and critical writings, which began with language and specifically with the “text,” in an attempt to deconstruct the propositions and foundations of this dominant orientalist discourse and undermine the illusions it planted about the East, which it forcefully stereotyped.

2. Critique of Orientalism in Arab Enlightenment Projects: The Problem of Method and Reference

The enlightenment efforts of “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh” fall within the framework of Arab intellectual enlightenment projects that focused on critiquing Western orientalism and attempting to undermine its authority, which it exercised for long decades over Arab thought. This made orientalist practices—with their dominant colonial discourse—deeply rooted in Arab intellectual and literary heritage, prompting thinkers to exert serious and diligent efforts to liberate it from the superior orientalist legacy and its propositions that reinforce Western hegemonic strategies over the East. Perhaps the most significant issue that arises in the field of orientalism critique is the issue of **methodology**. Orientalism cannot be critiqued without addressing the methodological

dimension and the issue of references, since orientalist thought has exercised—and continues to exercise—epistemological and methodological authority over Arab and Islamic thought. The latter, in fact, only began to give importance to method in recent years, in the face of growing intellectual dependency and the shock of modernity.

One of the constants of Western thought is the deep epistemological debate between **reason (Raison)** and **method (Méthode)**. Western reason is based on a methodological revolution, and the interconnection of reason and method forms the basis of Western intellectual modernity from Descartes (René Descartes) to the philosophy of difference and deconstruction.

The problems and obstacles facing Arab and Islamic thought are primarily determined at the methodological level. Neglect of the question of method persists, methodological theorization remains weak, and the transition from one method to another constitutes a severe epistemological crisis experienced by modern and contemporary Arab critical studies, especially when they declared a break with traditional methodologies and adopted modern critical methods. This is evident in the statement of the thinker Abdallah Laroui: **“When I speak of method, I actually mean the logic of modern thought after it has separated from old thought.”²**

From here, the rupture with traditional methods was considered the epistemological constant that current Arab thought cannot abandon. It is the tool for critiquing heritage, critiquing Arab reason, and waging an epistemological battle against the orientalist institution that embodied Western intellectual transformations and interacted with the revolutions of science and methodology. Orientalism, then, imposes itself epistemologically before formulating an ideological theory.

Thus, any retreat from the gains of epistemology and the science of methods is a submission to the authority of traditional knowledge and the beginning of failure to deconstruct orientalist discourse. Based on the above, we conclude that critiquing orientalism rests on the foundation of building a critical Arab reason, grounded in methodological liberation from traditional references and the adoption of contemporary methods through which we can achieve a modern Arab intellectual renaissance that must be approached with a critical and creative mindset. This serves the purpose of undermining the methodological weapon of orientalism in a way that serves the goals of philosophy in contemporary Arab society. In this context lies the importance and legitimacy of epistemologically approaching orientalist discourse and establishing enlightenment projects aimed at constructing a critical philosophical Arab mind, liberated from the

authority of irrational tradition on one side and the dominance of the “Other” and its ready-made epistemic models on the other.

The scholar of the Arab intellectual movement will notice that it has produced profound epistemological conceptions primarily within the framework of critiquing Orientalism. This is evident through the contributions of “Abdallah Laroui,” “Mohammed Abed AlJabri,” “Mohammed Arkoun,” and “Jamal Eddine Bencheikh.” The achievements of the latter are in urgent need of study, critique, and enrichment, especially as they fall within the core of the project of re-reading Arab literary heritage and its problematic texts using modern critical tools that stem from the Arab self and identity, far from the dominance of the incoming Western culture, which has imposed its hegemony on Arab literary heritage, both poetry and prose.

The fall into the ideology of Orientalism stemmed from a methodological absence and a weak engagement with intellectual modernity and its developments on the part of Arab thought. The attempts of Arab Enlightenment pioneers are nothing but an entry point to redress this imbalance, especially since the pressing dilemma is: to deconstruct the claims of Orientalism, which has proven its strength and competence in studying the Arab-Islamic heritage. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt methodologies that respond to contemporary Arab challenges in order to understand the

nature of the hegemony imposed by “literary Orientalism” on Arab heritage texts: “The readings provided by classical Islamic studies of these texts mislead the reader more than they enlighten him about the real stakes of current events, competing powers, collective ambitions, and dominant orientations imposed in Arab and Islamic societies.”³

Jamal Eddine Bencheikh’s Enlightenment project falls within a set of efforts made by Arab immigrants who experienced two different cultural realities. This allowed them to uncover the real and actual differences between the Eastern and Western worlds. Bencheikh’s exposure to the French cultural environment during his academic work as a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research and the University of Paris until his retirement in 1997 enabled him to authentically represent his Arab culture, which the Western reader and thinker—and sometimes even the Arab one—did not come to know except through the “clichés” and “stereotypes” disseminated by a colonial and Orientalist discourse steeped in its centralism and biased in its vision of the Other. Perhaps the most important of these clichés were presented in medieval texts, whether related to ancient poetry, fantastical and sacred narratives, or Islamic interpretation of themes with a particular nature in Islamic culture, from the seduction of ancient Arabic poetry to the captive discourse in “One Thousand and One Nights.”

The misreading of Arab literary heritage texts in both Western and even Arab cultures can be traced back to the “contradictory” dualism established by the Western “Other” between East and West, incorporating a Eurocentric tendency that glorifies the West and belittles the East. This tendency has taken on various forms that can be limited to two directions: one characterized by admiration and fascination with the magic of the East, which we can classify under imaginary or conceptual alterity that presented an image of the Eastern man, the result of the work of a large generation of imaginative writers, poets, travelers, and epic systems such as *La Chanson de Roland*, the poetry of Goethe and Alphonse de Lamartine, and the works of some thinkers and writers like Voltaire, Gustave Flaubert, and Chateaubriand, among others who transmitted to us an image of the astonishing East—East of *One Thousand and One Nights*—and the barbaric, brutal, savage East, which in both cases constituted a reference through which the West habitually defined itself, as a reference that confirmed, despite its contradictions, the superiority and centrality of the West. The East, with its contradictions and charm, became a mirror through which the Western entity, for many decades, saw itself and highlighted its superiority over it. Thus, we find that it devoted itself to studying and writing about it: “The Mediterranean East forms a reference used by the Western consciousness. It is a reference that

changes in color and shape, contradictory in its features, which shift with circumstances, but it remains fixed in its polarizing function.”⁴

The second direction is driven by the will to power, produced over centuries through a series of academic Orientalist discourses and research that attempted to create a stereotyped East by force, never exceeding the scope of the imaginary, remaining merely a subject of study, the purpose of which is knowledge for the sake of domination⁵. Hence, the real and the imagined merged, giving myth a significant place in our vision of this East.

Within this framework, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh presented a remarkable and notable work in which he opened Arab literary and cultural heritage to the questions of modern methodology and the duty of knowledge and its contemporary philosophical and aesthetic sources, aiming to integrate it into the process of reading and interpretation that takes it out of the circle of prohibition and sanctification, and liberates it from the constraints of the Orientalist vision.

3. *Jamal Eddine Bencheikh and the Project of Translating the Tales of “One Thousand and One Nights”:*

The tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* occupy a global position as a problematic text in Arab heritage, exploited by the West, especially Orientalists, in constructing the image of the East in the Western imagination. The text of *The Nights*, which became

internationally renowned thanks to the translation by Antoine Galland (1646–1715), which took 13 years and was published in 17 volumes⁶, constituted the cornerstone in shaping Western Orientalist thought, which began “theologically” with the Catholic Church’s leaders and became “astonishedsymbolic” with Galland’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*, then turned “institutional,” thus moving from the stage of founding to institutionalization (i.e., institutional Orientalism).

The translation carried out by Jamal Eddine Bencheikh—a specialist in medieval Arabic literature—in collaboration with French thinker André Miquel—a specialist in Arab and Islamic civilization—is a new and modern rendering of an ancient heritage text, freed from the Orientalist stereotypes that dominated it for decades. This was achieved by employing scientific and methodological advances in critical thinking and linguistic studies imbued with a critical awareness of language’s function and role in discourse, meaning production, and its ability to engage with the spirit of our contemporary era, as well as its capacity to encompass the complex relationship between the oral and the written in the tales.

The modern translation published by the French publishing house Gallimard, in which Algerian, Arab, and French efforts converged, was an important milestone in the path of

comparative Arab and Algerian scholarship, and a form of positive intercultural exchange and civilizational dialogue that reflects the spirit of the times, far from the 18th-century mindsets that dominated Antoine Galland's translation, which adhered to the considerations, vocabulary, and moral assumptions of the 18th century.

As for the translation by Joseph-Charles Mardrus in the 19th century, based on the Bulaq edition, it went further: "the translator's imagination added even more fantastical and pornographic situations," whereas the translation by René Khawam, housed in the National Library in Paris and based on manuscripts, remains the closest to literal fidelity to the texts.⁷

The translation by Jamal Eddine Bencheikh and André Miquel can be considered the most faithful and credible, as it was based on thorough scholarly knowledge from the two translators—the Algerian and the French—both known for their deep engagement with the study of Arab and Islamic civilization and its literatures. Moreover, both are poets and writers, which allowed them to combine rigorous scholarly research with poetic and literary intuition. This modern translation of this Arab heritage text is the result of decades of work on *One Thousand and One Nights* as heritage, history, literature, and language. Although interest in the book began in the 18th century in France, it reached its peak as a

subject of scholarly inquiry in the 1980s and 1990s. Jamal Eddine Bencheikh and André Miquel published several works that preceded and accompanied their translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Gallimard Publishing House, simultaneously with the publication of the first volume of the translation by Bencheikh and Miquel—which included 327 nights and 1,250 pages—released a luxurious album bearing the same title, *Album of One Thousand and One Nights*, which extended the tales and their atmosphere.⁸ The album discussed the impact of *One Thousand and One Nights* on the

Western imagination in all fields, and included images and pages from the earliest manuscript translations and their covers.

4. *Critique of the Orientalist Reading of Arab Literary Heritage Texts: The Translation of "One Thousand and One Nights" and the Deconstruction of Stereotypical Images of the East:*

If we start from the premise that the 19th century is rightly considered the century of Orientalism in its specialized sense—"as it took on a strictly organized form and adopted new methods and approaches inspired by various human sciences, especially the history of religions and anthropology, to be closer to science and objective knowledge"⁹—we find that the Orientalist movement was particularly active¹⁰ during this period, with the French playing a major role in constructing the image of the East

that circulated widely among the Western public.

This intense Orientalist activity coincided with the expansion of colonialism, the means of resource acquisition, the strategies of occupation, and the unveiling of ambitions in the East and its material and intellectual penetration—an intrusion that shook its foundations and principles. Moreover, the connection of Orientalist institutions and the involvement of many Orientalists with colonial institutions, as employees, soldiers, or advisers, “prompted the Arab intellectual and political elite to take stances to resist this intellectual-colonial onslaught. These positions varied in intensity according to their ideological affiliations but generally did not go beyond four attitudes”:¹¹

1. A stance that rejects everything produced by Orientalists, considering it the worst form of invasion.
2. An admiring stance that accepts everything from Orientalists without critique or analysis.
3. A selective stance that differentiates between types of Orientalists.
4. An analytical and foundational stance that treats Orientalism as a construct—“For unless we understand Orientalism as a construction, we will never be able to grasp the highly organized branch through which Western culture was able to manage the East, even to the point of

producing it politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.”¹²

These positions formed

the intellectual reference points from which most Arab critical studies of Orientalism departed. The efforts of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh in his Enlightenment project fall within the latter stance. In this, he does not deviate from Edward Said’s perspective and his analysis of Orientalist discourse. Thus, the research calls for a new kind of critical practice that breaks away from the old interpretive mechanisms that proved inadequate in analyzing and deconstructing the claims of Orientalist discourse.

After years of continuous work within the framework of medieval Arabic literature seminars that Jamal Eddine Bencheikh directed at the Collège de France, he published the book *One Thousand and One Nights: Or the Captive Discourse* in 1988, comprising five analytical studies of selected tales, along with an introduction and conclusions in which he presents the conception that guided him in analyzing the texts and the questions that directed his intellectual adventure with *One Thousand and One Nights*: “In reality, it is a complex method drawn from morphological studies of the tale and its poetics, comparative studies of myths and writings of the imaginary,

and above all, from the poetic sensitivity internalized by Jamal Eddine Bencheikh.”¹³

According to Mohammed Berrada, who wrote the preface to this book, this study will become a foundational reference among the various scholarly works that have explored *One Thousand and One Nights*. It achieves this status because it combines meticulous, detailed analysis with a form of critical creativity that captures the latent meanings of signs, symbols, and narrative spaces. Moreover, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh distinguishes himself from his predecessors by adopting a perspective that liberates *One Thousand and One Nights* from the weight of historical approaches and from ready-made ideological projections—unlike what Khalil Ahmad Khalil did in his book *The Content of Myth in Arab Thought* (Dar AlTali‘a, 1973), where he reduces *One Thousand and One Nights* to a mere record of the debauchery of kings, princes, and merchants, and to representations of female enslavement and the exercise of repression upon women.¹⁴

In stark contrast to this projection-based view, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh approaches *One Thousand and One Nights* as imaginative texts that interweave reality with dream, the historical with the mythical, and the deep reservoir of memory with the spontaneity of improvised speech. “They are, above all, open texts,” he argues—texts that never froze into a fixed form, that were not the work of a single

author, but rather underwent multiple formulations, additions, and deletions. Yet their essence persists, for it is rooted in imagination, in the spontaneity of the popular imagination, and in the continuity and surges of the unconscious.¹⁵

In this sense, *One Thousand and One Nights* cannot be considered mere tales for entertainment. As Bencheikh treats them, they are a cultural treasure of global significance, charged with mythical symbols and signs whose meanings are revived within the broader framework of early human culture and its marvelous modes of expression. These modes allow for the unveiling of what is repressed, of what contravenes norms, and of what rebels against established laws.

Therefore, the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* call for a reconsideration of how we approach their texts. We must stop reducing them to repetitive discourses, simplistic judgments, or prepackaged Orientalist structures. According to Bencheikh, these are multivalent texts—whether in terms of authorship, language, or symbolism. They are also marginalized texts within the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition, despite their widespread diffusion, circulation, and their grip on the imagination of both elites and commoners. This marginalization stems from the interplay between (moral) censorship and the classical ideals of eloquence and rhetorical refinement, which collectively deny *One Thousand and*

One Nights a status within the canon of esteemed texts. But can literariness be confined to predetermined linguistic criteria? Or can it be achieved through imagination and simple vernacular language, open to infinite formulations?¹⁶

These are among the core questions that Jamal Eddine Bencheikh engages in his book project. He also explores the relationships that *One Thousand and One Nights* establishes with itself—that is, the image the tales present of their own internal imagination. “Since *One Thousand and One Nights* is a collective, anonymous construction forged across centuries and rooted in distant memories, it can only represent itself. I do not ask it to speak to me, but rather to speak to itself—so that I may be surprised by its language.”¹⁷

In this way, Bencheikh sought to free *One Thousand and One Nights* from the weight of predetermined evaluations that had buried its imaginative energy and obscured its capacity to astonish and delight.

The book includes analysis of five tales: the frame tale that opens the Nights, the story of the vizier “Nur al-Din and his brother Shams al-Din,” the story of “Qamar al-Zaman and Budur,” the tale of “Abu Sir and Abu Qir,” and finally, the tale of “Hasib Karim and the Queen of the Serpents.” In studying these narratives, Bencheikh focuses on uncovering the mechanisms of meaning production and highlighting their essential significance—read

in light of the elements of the imagination that transcend cultural boundaries. He illustrates how meaning shifts through transformations in narrative structure.

Bencheikh launched his translation project of *The Nights*, published by Gallimard in 1988, with a guiding question: What makes the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* a treasure of world literature and a realm of dreaming, where speech and action are but moments in a single, unified truth?

From all the above, it becomes evident that the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* are not merely entertaining tales. Their deeper narrative leads us further—into a world where magic still governs the mysteries of existence. His book *One Thousand and One Nights, or The Captive Discourse* analytically addresses tales that predominantly revolve around themes of love and womanhood, revealing the implicit perspectives toward women and the positions adopted regarding them. Although the author begins by analyzing the tale that prefaces all others—the tale before Shahrazad’s entrance—he underscores a fundamental dialectic: that between desire and law, a confrontation that spans the entire work, from its beginning to its unresolved ending.

Bencheikh’s reading of the tales points to their frequent presentation of negative portrayals of the Eastern woman—depictions that align with what we find in French writers like Voltaire and Flaubert, who emphasized deceit and betrayal

as female traits. This betrayal begins at the very first moment of narration, with the death of both Shahriyar's and his brother's wives, alongside the execution of palace slaves and more than a thousand maidens.

This focus on the deceitful nature of women recurs in numerous tales—for instance, the story of the “Enchanted Youth,” which recounts the fate of the son of King Mahmoud, ruler of the Black Islands. He marries his cousin, only to discover she is unfaithful with an ugly black man who treats her roughly. Upon discovering this betrayal, the king wounds the man severely. Yet the queen does not give up; she nurses the man and weeps constantly. Possessing supernatural powers, she turns the lower half of her husband into stone and strikes him a hundred times a day—until another king appears, kills both her and her lover, and rescues him.

What stands out in this tale, as Bencheikh notes, is the implicit association in the collective unconscious between the white king rejected by his wife and the brutal black slave she prefers. This, he argues, reinforces the demeaning and immoral image of the Eastern woman—a stereotype deeply embedded in eighteenth-century Western consciousness, shaped through Antoine Galland's translation and a darker phase of Western philosophy, in which women were viewed as the ultimate source of evil. Bencheikh's close reading of the tale reveals the dominance of a hidden cultural

structure in this classical narrative—one that centers around the relationship between the black man and the white man. In this context, Bencheikh demonstrates that although some stories within *One Thousand and One Nights* portray women in a negative light—as Orientalist discourse sought to generalize—these tales do not represent a unified worldview or ideology. Rather, they offer a multiplicity of perspectives and attitudes toward both men and women, allowing readers to confront the contradictions and complexities of the human psyche. Thus, these tales defy conventional molds, often diverging from dominant narrative patterns. At times, they depict male betrayal and female fidelity, or the opposite, or mutual betrayal or mutual loyalty. For this reason, Jamal Eddine Bencheikh resists simplistic, judgmental readings and calls for a deep engagement with the text—one that deconstructs its inner structures without succumbing to Orientalist biases that have shaped so many Western and even Arab interpretations of classical Arabic literature. This kind of study necessitates an active critical apparatus, grounded in attentive, context-aware readings of Eastern societies, away from prefabricated typologies. More precisely, it involves activating narrative language to uncover meaning and significance, whether the subject is the self or the Other, in classical and contemporary texts alike. Accordingly, if we are to treat these stories as forms of narrative

representation, we cannot impose absolute judgments on characters or link them rigidly to historical reality. “The East that appears in Orientalism,” as the text asserts, “is a system of representations shaped by the powers that subjected the East to Western knowledge.”¹⁸

Bencheikh’s approach in *One Thousand and One Nights, or The Captive Discourse* seeks to dismantle the illusions embedded in Western literary Orientalism and its portrayals of the Eastern Other. By focusing on tales that conform to a pattern reinforcing female inferiority, his aim is to expose the impact of Orientalist discourse in distorting the East—an image that remains confined to the realm of fantasy. In contrast, the French scholar Marie Louise Helouibeck, in her 1927 book *The Femininity of Shahrazad*, published by Rado in Paris and based on Mardrus’ “ironic” translation of *The Nights*, argues that these tales do not always endorse Shahriyar’s position toward women. Instead, they often serve a larger agenda—restoring women’s dignity. The tales do not offer a monolithic image of women. Alongside “the lewd concubines” and “Dalilah the Trickster,” we find characters like “Qut al-Qulub,” and others—this diversity is precisely what pushes Shahriyar to reconsider his view and treatment of women.

5. The Question of “Poetics” in Jamal Eddine Bencheikh’s Enlightenment Project:

Poetics, with its modern Western terminology and concepts, has seeped into the understanding of Arab modernist critics and into the details of their writings. What they presented was repetition and regurgitation in its theoretical aspect, although they demonstrated brilliance in its practical application. We mention here, for example: the study by “Bassam Qattous” entitled *The Features of Poetics in Al-Mutanabbi’s¹⁹ Panegyric Introductions, or The Poetics of Praise in Abu Tammam* by “Thanaa Anas Al-Wujoud.”²⁰

Despite the foundational work and theorization poetics has enjoyed in critical heritage, Arab critics who adopted modern critical approaches did not make this critical legacy a reference point for formulating the concept and term of “poetics.” Instead, they hastened to analyze the theory of poetry among the ancients, such as the study by Al-Akhdar Ja‘mi on *The Theory of Poetry among Muslim Philosophers*, and Jaber Asfour’s work titled *The Concept of Poetry: A Study in Critical Heritage*, and the important work by Tawfiq Al-Zaydi *The Concept of Literariness in Critical Heritage until the End of the Fourth Century*, in addition to important titles bearing the term “poetics,” such as Jamal Eddine Bencheikh’s book *Arab Poetics*, and likewise *Arab Poetics* by Adonis, and Kamel Abu Deeb’s work *On Poetics*, which was built on modern Western thought and methodology.

6. The Intellectual and Critical References of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh in His Book *Arab Poetics*:

Jamal Eddine Bencheikh established his own methodology for reading Arab poetics, and a distinctive critical vision concerning poetry in its relation to Arab-Islamic culture, which he clarified at the beginning of his book *Arab Poetics*, published in French in 1989 and translated into Arabic in its first edition in 1996, stating: "Poetry was its first product, and it was the most significant expression... the most representative of its originality and genius... it is the repository of this culture and its history, that is, the work that attains the level of collective glorification, and a field for the exercise of collective, not individual, consciousness."²¹

Poetry, according to this vision, is considered an extension and continuity of Arab culture and history: "This continuity lasted fifteen centuries, a rare scene in human poetry—rarity worth pausing upon in our time, where Arab society strives to define its modernity and question its past... it appeared to us legitimate to interrogate texts that interpret a particular culture."²²

From here, the significance of the poem is linked to the cultural climate that produced it, and within that same climate, it transcends reality to produce its own intrinsic meaning: "The poem is a totality that does not seek to detach itself from the reality that produced it,

but rather to transcend it. Its relationship with reality does not exhaust its meaning. On the contrary, it seems to us that the poem in its entirety is filled with its own intrinsic meaning, and every part of it participates in this intrinsic meaning, accordingly, it seems that the whole closes in on itself."²³

From this thesis regarding the meaning of the poem and its relation to reality in Bencheikh's project, the influence of Marxism becomes somewhat evident—an enlightenment intellectual current focused on the scientific method, which often takes on the character of exact science, calling for a strategy that glorifies reason, freedom, democracy, and humanism, and establishes an epistemological rupture with the traditional methodological heritage in approaching classical texts.

Bencheikh formulated his vision of Arab poetics through a deep study of the structure and language of classical Arabic poetic discourse and its relation to the Arab cultural and social context, away from stereotypical Orientalist molds and conceptions, through his translation project which granted Arabic poetic text a global status with an Arab identity. At the same time—and through precise and scientific critical excavation in classical Arab critical heritage using modern methodologies—he clarified the richness and diversity present in our classical Arab critical heritage. Bencheikh's efforts focused on analyzing the critical opinions of Ibn Sallam Al-Jumahi, Ibn

Tabataba, and Ibn Qutaybah, and delivering their critical views to the global reader through translation.

Within this same orientation, Bencheikh translated the works of a number of ancient poets such as: ('Adi ibn Zayd, Abu Mihjan AlThaqafi, Jarir, Al-Farazdaq, Hassan ibn Thabit, Al-Hutay'ah, Imru' al-Qais, Al-Kumayt, Kuthayyir 'Uzza, Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, Abu Nuwas, Abu Tammam, Al-Mutanabbi), and modern poets such as: (Adonis, Salah Abdel Sabour), as well as scholars of rhetoric and criticism such as: (Ibn Rashiq, Al-Jahiz, Ibn Khaldun); he also shed light on the art of the *maqama*, the history of Arabic literature, and Maghrebi literatures.

In his book *Arab Poetics*, the author adopts a methodology that establishes an epistemological break with classical conceptions and tools in approaching medieval Arabic poetic heritage, with the aim of identifying the foundations of this poetry and its system through a penetrating methodological vision whose conceptual apparatus and descriptive language do not submit to any external authority foreign to the Arab cultural and social reality, and which is not based on scientific logic in dealing with heritage texts. He clarified this at the beginning of his book in an article devoted to critical discourse: "...The status of poetry has been determined within a thought of an epistemological nature. Poetic production

collected by linguists was considered a highly representative corpus to be used for formulating linguistic knowledge, and poetry was considered a practice capable of legitimizing the usage it sought to crystallize. Based on this status, we will undertake a complex process whose characteristics we must analyze."²⁴

Despite the importance of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh's efforts in tracing the influence of the era's cultural components on the Arab poetic corpus, and the extent of its connection in shaping a poetic language wherein reality mixes with imagination and the poet's self and personal vision, his efforts have remained neglected and abandoned within the history of our contemporary poetic culture since their first appearance—at a time when literary studies cloaked in ideology and theories of external circumstances dominated the discourse on poetry, criticism, and its circulation, and many of them did not bear the duty of knowledge or the pursuit of modern methodology.

Based on the foregoing, we may say that Jamal Eddine Bencheikh's study of Arab poetics is an enlightenment, modernist, epistemological project. He aimed to study the poet's project—his artistic poetic output and its relation to the socio-cultural structure of society—such that he studied the socio-cultural project of the social structure by specifying the environment and the time period studied (the end of the second Hijri century and the beginning of the

third—approximately forty years). This specification, for him, governs the issuing of judgments and the determination of results. In his study, Bencheikh selected critics whose critical works bore the imprint of ancient times in their cultural structure, which made the poet subject to its rules. This meant that the external context conditions constrained the poet's creative practice.

Bencheikh did not overlook the influence of Qur'anic and linguistic studies in shaping the structure of Arabic poetry and in creating the form and content of the classical Arabic poem. His translations of several poets, along with his detailed study of the components of poetic language—meter, rhyme, rhythm—led him to conclude that Arab poetics lies essentially in its truthful expression of reality, and in the use of figurative language that imitates and reflects the cultural and social reality as faithfully as possible.

Within this project that offers a serious reading of the socio-cultural structure of the classical Arabic poetic corpus, Bencheikh rejects the positioning of Arabic poetic heritage within the orbit of dependency on Western Orientalist achievements. Despite the efforts of Orientalists in the field of Arab heritage, it is incorrect to view our narrative or poetic heritage through this Orientalist lens, or through the doctrines of Orientalism which strove to impose stereotypical images of the East. The matter, then, requires a type of

scientific, epistemological investigation that approaches the heritage from the perspective of the specificity of Arab and Islamic identity and civilization.

7—Conclusion:

At the conclusion of our reading of the critique of the Orientalist vision of the Arab literary heritage in the enlightenment project of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh—in the fields of translation, poetics, and critical theorization—we arrive at a set of findings, among which are the following:

1. The enlightenment project of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh falls within the framework of Arab efforts calling for the establishment of an Arab criticism grounded in the very socio-cultural structure of Arab societies, relying on the highlighting of the particularity of Arab-Islamic civilization, through a precise scientific approach to the Arab literary heritage—an approach that liberates it from the Orientalist legacy and its claims that perpetuate dependency on Western culture and the dominance over the broader components of Arab culture.
2. Through his efforts in the field of translation (whether the translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* or the translation of classical Arabic poetic texts), Jamal Eddine Bencheikh occupied a prominent position in the field of comparative Arabic and Algerian scholarship, given the

effective role translation plays in fostering dialogue between the Eastern and Western worlds.

3. The critical project of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh contributed to revealing the creative energies of the ancient Arabs and highlighting the astonishing richness of Arab-Islamic culture during a specific period in which it demonstrated its ability to absorb and interact with other cultures, far from any form of arrogance or egocentricity.
4. The project of Jamal Eddine Bencheikh highlights the role of the intellectual in correcting and clarifying the stereotypical images constructed by Orientalist discourse about the East,

and forcefully inserted into the Western—and even Arab—imagination, which are, in most cases, distorted, vague, and largely far from reason and truth.

5. Through his deconstruction of the claims of Orientalist discourse, Bencheikh revealed that most of the readings presented of the Arab literary heritage are subject to preconceived views that have been entrenched for centuries through generations of intellectuals and thinkers, who in turn transmitted them to their societies, which adopted them as fixed truths and unquestionable axioms. This is what drives any individual who is

protective of his nation to work—within his field of expertise—on correcting this exotic and virtual image of the East, and replacing it with the truth, which must take its rightful place in correcting the

¹ **Jamal Eddine Bencheikh** was an Algerian intellectual and literary figure, born in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1930, to an Algerian family originally from Tlemcen that had migrated to Morocco. He studied there and obtained the **agrégation** (advanced teaching diploma) in French literature. He also studied Arabic and mastered it. After Algeria's independence, he taught at the University of Algiers, where he is credited with founding the field of **Comparative Literature**. He collaborated with his friend, the French orientalist **André Miquel**, in translating *One*

relationship between Arab culture and its Western counterpart in general, and its European counterpart in particular—due to their closeness and strong historical and intellectual ties. And we find no better witness and documentation of the image we wish to send and substitute for the ones entrenched by Orientalist discourse for generations and decades in the minds of both Western and Arab audiences, than the literary text itself.

6. The translation of the literary text and its delivery to the global recipient—while preserving the cultural identity of that text—can prove that we are a living nation, with a positive and decisive role

in shaping the ideas and major outlines that distinguish the historical and intellectual dynamism of the world we live in.

8.Footnotes

Thousand and One Nights into French. He also produced several other translations, including a collection of poems by *Adonis*, *Issa Makhlof*, and *Ahmed Abdel Muti Hijazi*. He translated *Sahar Khalifeh*'s novel *The Sunflower* (*Al-Şabbār*), along with other books and poetry collections. His renowned book *Arab Poetics* was published in French by Gallimard in 1989. He also authored *Europe and the Arab East* and a number of poetry collections, including *When Silence Took Refuge in Silence* (1981), *Alchemical Poems* (1991), and *The Blind Man with the Papyrus Face* (1999). His

novel *A Black Rose Without Fragrance* (1998) is inspired by the world of the Black Revolt.

Jamal Eddine Bencheikh passed away in August 2005 at his home in the outskirts of Paris, where he was also buried.

² Abdallah Laroui, *The Concept of Reason (An Essay in Paradoxes)*, Arab Cultural Center, 1st ed., Beirut–Casablanca, Lebanon/Morocco, 1996, p.12.

³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islamic Thought: Criticism and Ijtihad*, trans. Hashem Saleh, Dar Al Saqi, 1st ed., Algeria, 1990, p.166.

⁴ Thierry Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East: The West's View of the Mediterranean East*, trans.

Ghazi Buro & Khalil Ahmad Khalil, Dar Al-Farabi, 1st ed., Beirut-Lebanon, 2004, p.107.

⁵ See Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as cited by Salem Al-Maoush in *The Image of the West in the Arabic Novel*, Al-Rihab Publishing, Beirut–Lebanon,

1998, p.88:

(Said argues that “the East is the East and the West is the West and never the twain shall meet. The East's weakness and backwardness is the West's strength and progress. The old East is the current East. The East cannot know itself; the Western Orientalist can know it. The East was created to be inherently subject to Europe's right to rule and control it. The East is either frightening or submissive.”)

⁶ Mohamed Ghoneimi Hilal, *Comparative Literature*, Al-Nahda Publishing and Distribution, 3rd ed., Cairo–Egypt, [n.d.], pp. 216–217.

⁷ Ibid,p.217

⁸ Ibid,p.217

⁹ Salem Himmich, *Orientalism at an Impasse*, Publications of the Arab National Cultural Council, 1st ed., Algeria, 1991, p.77.

¹⁰ (Oriental languages departments multiplied in European universities. Many journals and conferences were organized—26 between 1873 and 1914. The French played a key role in institutionalizing Orientalist scholarship. The first chair in Oriental languages was established in Paris in 1539, and the first Orientalist conference took place in Paris in 1873. In 1795, the National Unity Government established the School of Living Oriental Languages.)

¹¹ Hamad Al-Sabahi Al-Alani, *French Orientalism and Classical Arabic Literature*, Dar Alpha Publishing, 1st ed., Tunisia, 1998, pp. 19–24. ¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism: Knowledge, Power, and Discourse*, trans. Kamal Abu-Deeb, Arab Research Foundation, 3rd ed., Beirut–Lebanon, 1991, p.39.

¹³ Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, *One Thousand and One Nights, or the Captive Word*, trans. Mohamed Berrada, Youssef Al-Antaki, Othman Miloud, French Center for Culture and Cooperation / Supreme Council for Culture, Algeria, 1998, pp. 10–11.

¹⁴ Ibid,p10

¹⁵ Ibid,p10

¹⁶ Ibid,p11

¹⁷ Ibid,p16

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, trans. Kamal AbuDeeb, Arab Research Foundation, 4th ed., Beirut – Lebanon, 1995, p. 214.

¹⁹ Bassam Qattous, *Reading Strategies:*

Theoretical Foundations and Critical Application, 'Alam Al-Kutub, 2nd ed., Beirut – Lebanon, [n.d.], pp. 178–194.

²⁰ Thanaa Anas Al-Wujoud, *Analytical Studies in Classical Poetry*, Dar Qibaa, 1st ed., Egypt, 2000, pp. 81–100.

²¹ Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, *Arab Poetics*, trans. Mubarak Hanoun, Mohammed Al-Wali, Mohammed Ouragh, Dar Toubkal Publishing, 1st ed., Morocco, 1996, p. 5.

²² Ibid., p. 5.

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7

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