

Occidentalism and Approaches to Reading Digital Literature

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Abstract

This research paper examines the role of Occidentalism (*al-Istighrāb*) in the emergence and advancement of contemporary Arab digital literature, conceptualizing it as a critical epistemological apparatus for engaging with Western experimental paradigms without falling into subservient imitation or passive dependency. The study interrogates the profound ontological mutations that digital literature has introduced into the concepts of textuality, authorship, and readerly reception, primarily through the incorporation of multimedia, hypertextuality, and interactive aesthetics. Concurrently, it highlights the methodological deficiencies of conventional print-based literary criticism in accommodating the multi-layered specificities of electronic literature. As a corrective paradigm, this paper proposes Comparative Digital Criticism as a viable gateway to cross-fertilize Western theoretical models and develop Arab critical practice. Furthermore, the study evaluates the scholarly efforts of leading Arab researchers across theoretical grounding, critical application, and translation. It concludes that translation serves as a vital first phase toward establishing Arab digital literary knowledge; however, it must transcend mechanical transfer toward genuine conceptual grounding, localized creativity, and active participation in global digital humanities.

Keywords: Occidentalism, Arab digital literature, comparative digital criticism, hypertextuality, interactive poetry, digital textuality, cybernarrative, translation studies.

1. Introduction

Historically, Orientalism served as an open conduit for the Western world to scrutinize, decipher, and extrapolate the culture of the East. Through this systematic encounter, Western scholarship assimilated extensive oriental knowledge, which contributed—both directly and indirectly—to the consolidation of its intellectual and cultural hegemony. Conversely, the Arab world lacked a reciprocally structured, institutionally consolidated counter-movement of acculturation. Nevertheless,

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scattered historical and contemporary efforts under the banner of Occidentalism (*al-Istighrāb*) compel us to closely examine this intellectual current, which has yielded fruitful results across various Arab fields of knowledge (Hanafi, 1991; Al-Namlah, 2015).

Consequently, defining the Occidentalist movement—and rigorously weighing its merits and shortcomings—is an essential scholarly prerequisite before investigating Arab critical efforts in an eminently vanguardist field: digital literature. While examining the nascent intersections between Occidentalism and Arab digital literature may initially appear conceptually challenging, tracking this modernist phenomenon represents a compelling necessity. It embodies a positive, productive mode of Occidentalism that enriches contemporary Arab letters by seeking to restore equilibrium to universal human culture (Hanafi, 1991). In this inquiry, we consciously transcend the traditional conception that confines Occidentalism strictly to historical heritage; instead, we emancipate these efforts to engage dynamically with cutting-edge experimental and creative developments within Western digital culture.

2. Destabilizing the Text and Transformations of Writing

Among the foremost theoretical impediments that have hindered the reception and institutional legitimation of digital literature is the presumption of a radical rupture between print-based literature and its electronic counterpart. This perspective assumes that technological evolution must permanently terminate the era of the printed page. However, such an assumption—though often driven by enthusiastic embrace of the new—erases the foundational principle of literary history: the principle of continuity, coexistence, and generic transformation (Gourram, 2009; Yaktine, 2014).

The electronic text exhibits exceptional structural and semiotic properties rooted in non-linear hypertextuality. Hypertextual architecture allows the reader to access the same node (lexia or textual fragment) multiple times across divergent reading pathways. With each iterative traversal, semantic signification shifts, demonstrating that textual meaning is contingent not merely upon the isolated text itself, but on its relational dialogue with previously traversed lexias (Chaibani, 2013, 2014; Landow, 2006). What occurs within the digital realm is not an absolute rupture, but rather a fundamental reformulation of the literary question: shifting the focal point from the author-producer to the interactive reader, and re-situating narrative language from the exclusive medium of signification into one semiotic component among multiple multimodal codes—including algorithmic programming languages, sonic textures, and dynamic visual graphics (Bouchardon, 2014; Chaibani, 2013).

2.1. The Impetus of Experimentation: The 'Eighth Art'

Literary experimentation remains a driving force in human intellectual evolution. Interactive experimentation constitutes an advanced manifestation of aesthetic modernity, characterized by some theorists as the 'Eighth Art' (Hassan, 2008). It merges computer engineering with interactive media, forging a visually and acoustically immersive culture through multimedia. This experimental mode is deeply polyphonic, dramaturgical, individual, and collective—uniting a singular voice with millions of potential networked voices within an open-ended semiotic horizon (Hassan, 2008).

This experiential shift has profoundly redefined the nature of literary theory, liberating the literary inquiry from the static constraints of traditional canonical frameworks (Gourram, 2009). The structural stability of the printed text is fundamentally dismantled through the interweaving of writing, acoustic signals, and moving images, the infinite replicability of digital files, and the dynamic branching of hyperlinks (liens hypertextuels) that connect the text to external webs of meaning (Clément, 1995; Aslim, 2008). Consequently, the literary work is no longer the sovereign, completed property of a single author, but an open, multi-accessible, evolving ecosystem.

In analyzing cybernarratives (*al-mahkiyy al-mutarābit*), literary criticism must incorporate the organic and semiotic affordances of the expressive medium (*le média expressif*) into its analytical apparatus (Chaibani, 2014). The spatialization of digital narrative dictates that critical attention shift toward spatial storytelling strategies. The text produced by the author is distinct from the text realized by the reader during onscreen interactivity. Hence, digital poetics demands a nuanced critical approach that maintains a middle ground: evaluating the digital text through the lens of overarching literary theory while rigorously respecting its technological and interactive specificity (Melhem, 2013). This conceptual void in the Arab critical landscape necessitates engaging with Western theoretical benchmarks via positive Occidentalism.

3. Occidentalism: Concept, Epistemology, and Digital Application

Conceptualizing Occidentalism (*'Ilm al-Istighrāb*) requires establishing its linguistic root and scholarly parameters. Historically, Occidentalism emerged as an epistemological counter-discourse to Westernization (*al-Taghrīb*), which had permeated cultural life, endangered civilizational autonomy, and disrupted indigenous linguistic and architectural identity (Hanafi, 1991; Al-Namlah, 2015). Because digital literature is intrinsically linked to modern computational technology, traditional historical models of Occidentalism cannot fully account for its digital manifestations. Nonetheless, the Arab engagement with Western knowledge has deep historical roots extending back to the Graeco-Arabic translation movements under classical Islamic philosophy (Hanafi, 1991).

Projected onto digital literature, the computational medium constitutes an active form of techno-intertextuality (*intertextualité technique*) inseparable from literary content (Al-Fifi, 2011). The technological channel is not an ornamental vehicle, but an organic dimension of the text, compelling the literary critic to evolve into an 'interactive critic' capable of interpreting verbal art intertwined with digital media (Al-Fifi, 2011; Melhem, 2013). The hybrid structure of the digital text has created hesitation regarding its generic classification and critical reception. Because critical discourse emerges from creative accumulation, the relative scarcity of Arab digital creative works has left theoretical and critical frameworks incomplete (Melhem, 2013).

Here lies the necessity of positive Occidentalism: it allows the Arab scholar to bridge conceptual deficits by drawing upon established Western theoretical and critical lexicons without reinventing basic categories (Gourram, 2009; Yaktine, 2014). Arab scholars such as Said Yaktine, Zhour Gourram, and Abdelkader Fahim Chaibani recognized this urgency, appending glossaries of digital literary terminology to their foundational works to naturalize informational vocabulary within the Arabic critical idiom (Chaibani, 2013; Gourram, 2009; Yaktine, 2014).

4. The Theoretical Project: Comparative Digital Criticism

Occidentalism attains scholarly efficacy when mediated through comparative methodology. Comparative Digital Criticism (*al-Naqd al-Raqamī al-Muqāran*) serves as an indispensable epistemological tool at this developmental stage of the Arab digital lesson. Engaging with the theoretical debates of Western critics prevents redundant research cycles and provides Arab creators with mature experimental models (Melhem, 2013). While digital authorship flourishes across American and European landscapes due to advanced technological infrastructure, high digital literacy, and dedicated institutional funding, the Arab digital creative output remains constrained by structural socio-technical factors (Gourram, 2009).

4.1. Nahida Sattar and Comparative Cultural Criticism

In her extensive critical study on electronic literature, Nahida Sattar (2013) constructs an interactive critical model grounded in cultural criticism. Analyzing the foundational Arab digital poem—*Tabārīh

Raqamiyyah li-Sīrah Ba'duhā Azraq* (Digital Agonies for a Biography, Partly Blue, 2007) by Iraqi poet Mushtaq Abbas Ma'n—Sattar argues that the resistance to digital literature in the Arab world is primarily an ideological and cultural dilemma rooted in collective readerly habituation (*al-i'tiyād wal-ulfah*) rather than a purely aesthetic or methodological dispute (Sattar, 2013).

Sattar emphasizes that cultural inquiry must engage with shifts in subjectivity, individual freedom, and technological practice to foster an Arab intellectual renaissance capable of meeting the civilizational challenges of the information age (Gourram, 2009; Sattar, 2013). While Sattar designates her framework as 'Comparative Cultural Criticism,' her analytical practice operates largely within cultural semiotics and aesthetic inquiry, laying important groundwork for subsequent comparative endeavors.

4.2. Ibrahim Melhem and Comparative Interactive Criticism

Dr. Ibrahim Melhem (2013, 2014) provides a structured methodology for Comparative Interactive Criticism. Melhem establishes his framework through a rigorous comparative dissection between Mushtaq Abbas Ma'n's *Tabārīh Raqamiyyah* (2007) and American digital poet M. D. Norman's *Assault Forever* (2007). Melhem notes that Western electronic poetry has developed over 600 distinct subgenres classified according to computational techniques (Loss Pequeño Glazier), user interaction dynamics (Marie-Laure Ryan), or temporal screen duration (Giovanna di Rosario) (Melhem, 2014).

Melhem highlights crucial infrastructural distinctions in medium and dissemination: while Norman's *Assault Forever* was published as a web-native video on the author's portal and streaming platforms for global open access, Ma'n's *Tabārīh* was initially produced on a physical compact disc (CD) with limited gift-based circulation before transiently appearing on internet forums (Melhem, 2014). This comparative approach yields profound insights into technological medium specificity and aesthetic execution, demonstrating how Occidentalist comparative reading enriches the Arab critical and creative horizon.

Table 1
Comparative Dimensions in Theoretical and Applied Arab Digital Criticism

Critical Dimension	Theoretical (Occidental Axis)	Grounding	Applied Manifestation in Arab Scholarship
Epistemological Horizon	Overcoming restoring engaging Western without subservience.	Eurocentrism; cultural balance; cyber-theory	Theorizing Arab digital literature; establishing terminological glossaries (Yaktine, Gourram, Chaibani).
Methodological Apparatus	Hypertext theory (Landow); media specificity (Bootz, Bouchardon); cybertext aesthetics (Aarseth).		Comparative Interactive Criticism (Melhem); Comparative Cultural Criticism (Sattar); Semiotics of Hypertext (Chaibani).
Comparative Studies	Case Western digital benchmarks: M. D. Norman (*Assault Forever*), Alain Salvatore (*Sunscreens*).		Arab foundational works: Mushtaq Abbas Ma'n (*Tabārīh Raqamiyyah*), Mun'im Al-Azraq, Mohamed Sanajlah.
Translation Reception	& French and seminal studies in electronic	Anglo-American studies in electronic	Extensive translation corpora by Mohamed Aslim (Aslim.ma) and

literature, cybernetics, and digital semiotics.	Abdou Hakki; critical readings by Labiba Khmar.
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Note. Synthesized by author based on Arab critical scholarship (Chaibani, 2014; Gourram, 2009; Melhem, 2013, 2014; Sattar, 2013; Yaktine, 2014).

5. The Applied Project: Translation as an Engine of Occidentalist Transfer

In the context of this study, the applied dimension refers primarily to the extensive translational efforts undertaken by Arab scholars to make Western theoretical and creative texts accessible to the Arabic-speaking readership. Translation represents an essential conduit of positive Occidentalism (*Gharbology*), providing an indispensable foundation for comparative critical analysis—particularly for researchers constrained by foreign language barriers (Khmar, 2008; Melhem, 2013). However, translation must not remain an uncritical, superficial importation of disparate essays; it must evolve into a reflexive, epistemologically grounded project.

5.1. The Translational Corpus of Mohamed Aslim

Moroccan scholar and critic Mohamed Aslim played a foundational role in bridging Western and Arab digital literary studies. Aslim recognized that critical theory cannot develop in a vacuum without direct engagement with active creative and theoretical models (Aslim, 2008; Melhem, 2013). Through his pioneering digital platform (*aslim.ma*), Aslim translated seminal works by leading French and international theorists, including:

- Pierre Lévy: *Hypertext: A New Stage in the Life of Language* (*Le texte hypertextuel: Une nouvelle étape dans la vie du langage*).
- Serge Bouchardon: *The Interactive Narrative Text* (*Le récit interactif*).
- Guy Lacroix: *Cybernetics and Society: Norbert Wiener or the Setbacks of a Rebellious Mind*.
- Jean Clément: *The Danger of the Digital on Literature* (*La littérature au risque du numérique*) and *Goodbye Gutenberg* (*Adieu Gutenberg*).
- Philippe Bootz: *Digital Literature: A Transformation of Literature* (*La littérature numérique: Une mutation du littéraire*) and *What is Digital Literature?*
- Cécile Debray: *A Signpost in the History of Digital Poetry* (*Repères dans l'histoire de la poésie numérique*).
- Alain Vuillemin: *Poetry and Informatics* (*Poésie et informatique*) and *Media Culture and Literature* (*Culture médiatique et littérature*).
- Sophie Marcotte: *George Landow and Hypertext Theory* (*George Landow et la théorie de l'hypertexte*) and *Hypertext* (*L'hypertexte*).

Aslim's translations were rigorously selected to introduce core conceptual definitions, investigate the intersections between literature and neighboring computational disciplines, and historicize electronic art (Aslim, 2008).

5.2. The Translational Contributions of Abdou Hakki

Similarly, critic Abdou Hakki established a substantial translation corpus aimed at building an Arab critical consciousness around digital literature through his dedicated portal (*abdouhakkisite.blogspot.com*). Key translated studies include:

- Jean Clément: **The Text and the Adventure of Digitalization** (**Le texte et l'aventure de la numérisation**).
- Marie Lebert: **The Transformations of the Book in the Internet Era** (**Les mutations du livre à l'heure de l'Internet**).
- Anne Vuillemin / Vauquelin: **Transformations of Digital Narrative** (**Les mutations du récit numérique**).
- Edmond Couchot: **Questions of Criticism Confronting Digital Creation** (**Les questions de la critique face à la création numérique**).
- Xavier Marbrel: **What Did Interactivity Add to Digital Literature?**.
- Pierre Bootz: **The Concept of Text in Digital Literature** (**Le concept de texte dans la littérature numérique**).
- Leonardo Flores / Olats: **The Death of the Author Between Hypertext and Hypermedia**.
- Laurence Malcolm: **Digital Art: A Gateway to Understanding Its Mediality and Communicative Aesthetics**.

These translations offered the Arab reader direct access to mature Western theoretical perspectives. Similarly, scholars like Labiba Khmar (2008) in **The Poetics of the Interactive Text: Narrative Mechanisms and the Magic of Reading** presented close readings of Western creative benchmarks, such as Alain Salvatore's **Sunscreen** (**L'Écran Solaire** / **La Brebis Égarée**). Such applications provide vital blueprints for evaluating Arab digital texts while overcoming analytical redundancy (Khmar, 2008; Melhem, 2013).

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Comparative Digital Criticism serves as a vital bridge for placing universal human digital experiences in fruitful dialogue. The historical gap separating Arab digital literature from Western milestones is neither vast nor insurmountable; the temporal difference spans merely a few decades. This synchronicity presents a historic opportunity for Arab scholarship to advance concurrently within global digital humanities.

Occidentalism in digital literature operates along two complementary axes: a theoretical axis focused on translating and adapting digital literary concepts via comparative inquiry, and an applied axis centered on translating and analyzing Western creative and critical benchmarks. While the scholarly contributions reviewed represent exceptional individual achievements, the institutionalization of collective research initiatives under official academic councils remains imperative. By breaking the historical time-lag and dismantling Eurocentric hegemony, positive Occidentalism empowers the Arab critical consciousness to transcend passive consumption and emerge as an active co-creator in the global digital literary landscape.

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