

Research Article

Towards Digital Arabic Criticism: A Contemporary Vision of Literary Criticism in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of literary criticism in the context of contemporary digital and cultural change, with particular emphasis on the Arabic critical field. It investigates how digital technologies, interactive media, and artificial intelligence have challenged traditional critical concepts such as text, authorship, reading, interpretation, and aesthetic judgment. The article aims to clarify the theoretical shifts produced by digitization and to propose a contemporary vision for Arabic literary criticism that remains attentive to both technological innovation and cultural specificity. Methodologically, the study adopts a multi-layered approach that combines historical analysis, critical interpretation, and comparative synthesis. It draws on major contributions in digital humanities, reception theory, computational criticism, and modern Arabic criticism in order to trace the evolution of key concepts and assess their relevance in the digital age. The analysis focuses on how emerging digital environments have redefined the relationships among text, reader, and critic, while also creating new possibilities for large-scale literary analysis, participatory reading, and algorithm-assisted interpretation. The study argues that digital criticism should not replace established humanistic approaches, but rather expand them through methodological pluralism. It concludes that the future of Arabic literary criticism depends on integrating close reading with computational methods, developing Arabic-specific digital tools, and maintaining critical awareness of ethical issues such as bias, representation, and cultural marginalization. In this sense, digital Arabic criticism must balance innovation with tradition in order to produce more comprehensive and context-sensitive critical practices.

Keywords

Digital Criticism, Cultural Transformations, Technology and Criticism, Contemporary Critical Theory, Digital Arabic Criticism

1. Introduction

In recent decades, critical concepts have witnessed radical transformations whereby traditional critical theories are no longer capable of accommodating the accelerating cultural and technological changes. The digital revolution has led to

the reshaping of the nature of text, reader, and critic, necessitating a reconsideration of the theoretical foundations of literary and cultural criticism. Arabic literary criticism is not isolated from these radical transformations, especially with the

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emergence of digital technologies and social media. This transformation raises important questions about the future of Arabic criticism and the necessity of developing critical methodologies that align with the contemporary digital literary landscape. This study explores how critical concepts interact with cultural and technological transformations and offers a contemporary reading of criticism in the age of digitization.

The research problem centers around the central question: How have contemporary technological and cultural transformations affected traditional critical concepts, and what new critical concepts have emerged to keep pace with these transformations?

1.1. Core Questions Raised

- 1) Does artificial intelligence threaten the role of the human critic?
- 2) What are the limits of the machine's ability to understand beauty and creativity?
- 3) How can balance be achieved between automated analysis and critical sensibility?
- 4) What are the ethical standards for AI-supported criticism?
- 5) Does artificial intelligence contribute to crystallizing a modern Arab critical vision?

1.2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study adopts a multi-layered methodological approach that combines historical analysis, critical interpretation, and comparative synthesis to examine the transformation of literary criticism in the digital age.

1.3. Methodological Approaches

- 1) Historical-Analytical Method: This study traces the evolution of critical concepts from traditional literary theory through poststructuralism to contemporary digital criticism. By examining seminal works chronologically, the research identifies ruptures and continuities in critical thought, particularly focusing on how technological developments have necessitated conceptual reformulations.
- 2) Comparative Cultural Analysis: The study employs comparative methodology to examine Western digital humanities scholarship alongside Arabic critical tradition. This approach identifies both universal challenges in digital criticism and culturally-specific considerations for Arabic literary studies.
- 3) Theoretical Synthesis: Drawing on cultural studies, reception theory, and digital humanities, the research synthesizes diverse theoretical frameworks to develop an integrated approach suitable for digital Arabic criticism.

1.4. Source Selection and Analysis

The research corpus comprises:

- 1) Foundational theoretical texts on digital criticism and humanities computing (2000-2024)
- 2) Classical and contemporary Arabic literary theory, including works by Mohammed Berrada, Abdullah Al-Ghadhami, and Mohammed Miftah
- 3) Recent studies on artificial intelligence applications in literary analysis and computational criticism
- 4) Cross-cultural comparative studies examining non-Western perspectives on digital humanities

Sources were selected based on theoretical significance, methodological innovation, and relevance to Arabic literary criticism. Priority was given to works that bridge theoretical abstraction with practical application, and to scholarship addressing linguistic and cultural specificity in digital criticism.

1.5. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework proceeds through three stages:

- 1) Conceptual mapping of how traditional critical concepts (authorship, textuality, reading) are challenged by digital technologies.
- 2) Critical evaluation of computational approaches to literary analysis, examining both potentials and limitations.
- 3) Synthesis toward methodological proposals specifically designed for Arabic digital criticism, accounting for linguistic complexity and cultural context.

This methodology balances theoretical rigor with practical applicability, aiming to develop frameworks that scholars can implement while remaining grounded in Arabic literary tradition and responsive to contemporary technological possibilities.

2. Technological Transformations and Their Impact on Critical Concepts

2.1. Redefining Text in the Digital Age: From Static Text to Transformative Text

Digital technology has brought about a real revolution in the concept of text, where text is no longer a fixed, limited entity, but has become a transformative entity capable of interaction and modification. George Landow affirms that "digital text is characterized by features that distinguish it from traditional text, the most important of which are interactivity, non-linearity, and linkability" [2]. This radical transformation has led to the collapse of traditional text boundaries, where digital text has become an open space that accommodates unlimited possibilities for interaction and branching.

The characteristics of digital text are manifested in several fundamental dimensions: first, interactivity that gives the reader the ability to influence the course and development of

the text. Second, non-linearity that breaks the traditional sequential system of reading and opens the field to multiple reading paths. Third, digital intertextuality that allows linking texts to each other through hyperlinks, creating a complex network of textual relationships.

2.2. Critical Challenges of Digital Text

In the Arab context, Mohammed Aslim pointed out that "digital text poses new challenges to the critic, as they do not face one text but multiple and interactive texts" [3]. This transformation necessitates the development of new critical tools capable of dealing with the changing and interactive nature of digital text.

These transformations raise complex critical issues, including: How can the boundaries of text be determined in a digital environment characterized by unlimited openness? How can traditional critical approaches be applied to constantly changing texts? What are the appropriate critical standards for evaluating interactive texts?

2.3. Digital Text and Cultural Memory

Digital text raises new questions about its relationship with cultural memory and literary heritage. While digital text offers enormous possibilities for preservation and archiving, it simultaneously faces challenges of continuity and stability. Assmann discussed the concept of cultural memory in the digital age and emphasized that "digital technology reshapes the ways of preserving collective memory" [4].

3. Transformations in the Concept of Reader and Reception

3.1. From Receiving Reader to Participating Reader

The concept of the reader has undergone a radical transformation in the digital environment, where the reader is no longer a passive receiver of the text, but has become an active participant in its production and formation. Jay David Bolter confirmed that "the digital reader exercises a creative role in interacting with the text" [5], which raises new questions about the boundaries of authorship and reading and the nature of the creative process itself.

This transformation in the nature of the reader is manifested at several levels: the interactive level where the reader interacts with different elements of the text, the participatory level where they contribute to content production, and the evaluative level where they participate in evaluating and criticizing texts through various digital platforms.

Reception Theories in the Digital Environment: Reception theory in the digital environment introduces new concepts such as "author-reader," "participatory text," and "network

reading," which require reformulation of traditional critical theories. Abdullah Ibrahim points out that "digital interactivity redefines the triangular relationship between author, reader, and text" [6].

These transformations require revisiting classical reception theories, starting from Jauss and Wolfgang Iser's theory of reception aesthetics, up to contemporary theories that address digital interaction. The digital reader does not merely fill textual gaps as Iser's theory suggests, but actually participates in producing and shaping these gaps.

3.2. Multiplicity of Digital Reading Patterns

New reading patterns have emerged in the digital environment that differ from traditional reading, including browsing reading characterized by speed and selectivity, network reading that relies on following links and references, and interactive reading that includes interaction with different text elements.

Nicholas Carr discussed in his book "The Shallows" the impact of the internet on reading patterns "and warns of the shift of reading from deep mode to shallow mode" [7]. This transformation raises important questions about the quality of critical reception in the digital age.

4. Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Literary Criticism

4.1. Artificial Intelligence as an Advanced Critical Tool

The field of literary criticism is witnessing radical developments with the rise of artificial intelligence technologies, which are no longer merely auxiliary tools but have become capable of offering independent critical approaches for large-scale text analysis and the detection of stylistic patterns and textual relations that may escape human attention.

Researchers like Stephen Ramsay propose the concept of "algorithmic criticism," arguing that computational methods can reveal critical insights unattainable through traditional approaches [8]. AI-powered tools enable distant reading of vast literary corpora, pattern recognition across thousands of texts, and quantitative analysis of stylistic features and thematic elements.

For example, recent applications of natural language processing to Arabic poetry have revealed patterns in classical qasidah structure that eluded traditional scholarship. Computational analysis of thousands of pre-Islamic poems identified statistically significant correlations between meter choice and thematic content, suggesting systematic conventions in oral composition. Similarly, stylometric analysis successfully attributed disputed texts in the Andalusian tradition, using lexical and syntactic features to determine authorship with high confidence.

In contemporary contexts, sentiment analysis tools trained on Arabic social media data have tracked evolving responses to literary works, revealing reception patterns across geographic regions and demographic groups. These computational approaches offer insights into collective reading practices that individual close reading cannot access.

Computational Literary Analysis: Computational criticism employs various techniques including text mining, sentiment analysis, network analysis, and machine learning to uncover patterns in literature. Matthew Jockers demonstrates how macroanalysis can reveal trends invisible at the level of individual texts [9]. Ted Underwood shows how distant reading transforms literary history by enabling analysis of thousands of texts simultaneously [10].

However, these approaches raise philosophical questions about the nature of interpretation and understanding. Can algorithms truly comprehend aesthetic value, symbolic meaning, and cultural context? Or do they merely process patterns without genuine understanding?

4.2. Distant Reading and Literary History

Franco Moretti introduces the concept of distant reading as a counterpoint to close reading, presenting it as an approach that enables forms of large-scale literary analysis that close reading alone cannot provide [11]. This approach treats literature as a quantifiable phenomenon, using graphs, maps, and trees to visualize literary history. While traditional criticism often focuses on canonical works, distant reading extends attention to the “great unread,” that is, the vast majority of published texts that receive little or no critical attention.

Critics debate whether distant reading complements or threatens close reading. Some argue it reveals macro-patterns invisible in individual texts, while others contend it sacrifices nuance and aesthetic appreciation for quantitative data. The integration of both approaches may offer the most comprehensive critical perspective.

4.3. Ethical and Philosophical Challenges

The integration of AI in criticism raises significant ethical concerns. Edward Said's emphasis on the critic's worldly role [12] seems threatened by algorithmic approaches that may lack cultural sensitivity and historical awareness. Additionally, questions of bias in training data, algorithmic opacity, and the dehumanization of literary experience demand careful consideration.

Scholars like Safiya Noble document how algorithms can perpetuate oppression and bias [13]. In literary criticism, this means AI tools may reinforce canonical hierarchies, marginalize non-Western literature, or misinterpret culturally specific elements. Critics must remain vigilant about these technological limitations while exploring AI's potential benefits.

5. Reimagining Critical Concepts in the Digital Age

5.1. Authorship and Authority

The digital environment fundamentally challenges traditional notions of authorship. Collaborative writing platforms, generative AI, and interactive fiction blur the boundaries between author and reader. The concept of the author as sole creative authority, already questioned by poststructuralist theory, becomes increasingly untenable in digital contexts where texts are fluid, collaborative, and continuously modified.

This raises questions about intellectual property, creative attribution, and the nature of originality itself. When AI generates text based on training data from countless human authors, who owns the resulting work? When readers contribute to narrative outcomes, are they co-authors? These questions require new critical and legal frameworks.

5.2. Aesthetic Judgment and Computational Aesthetics

Arthur Danto's work on aesthetic judgment [14] raises the question: Can beauty be algorithmically determined? While AI can analyze formal features like rhythm, metaphor density, and structural patterns, the subjective, culturally situated nature of aesthetic experience resists reduction to computable parameters.

John Searle's Chinese Room argument [15] illustrates fundamental limitations of computational understanding. A system may process linguistic symbols without genuine comprehension of meaning. Similarly, AI may identify stylistic features without understanding their aesthetic or cultural significance. This suggests AI should augment rather than replace human critical judgment.

Consider the case of metaphor analysis in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. While AI can identify metaphorical language through semantic anomaly detection—flagging phrases where literal interpretation creates logical contradictions—it struggles to evaluate the aesthetic power or cultural resonance of specific metaphors. The image of the 'passport' in Darwish's work carries historical and political weight that computational analysis cannot fully apprehend without extensive cultural knowledge encoding.

This limitation becomes particularly evident in evaluating intertextual allusions. When Adonis references Sufi mystical poetry, the aesthetic effect depends on readers recognizing layers of textual memory that computational systems lack access to. Beauty in such contexts emerges from cultural embeddedness rather than formal properties alone.

5.3. Hermeneutics and Interpretation

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes the historical situatedness of interpretation [16]. Understanding

emerges from the fusion of horizons between text and interpreter. AI lacks historical consciousness and embodied experience, limiting its interpretive capacity. George Steiner's concept of "real presences" [17] suggests meaning arises from encounter and presence that transcends algorithmic processing.

Yet AI offers new hermeneutic possibilities by revealing patterns across vast textual archives, enabling comparative analysis at unprecedented scales. The challenge lies in integrating computational methods with traditional hermeneutic approaches to achieve richer, more comprehensive interpretations.

6. Towards a Digital Arabic Criticism

6.1. Specificities of the Arab Digital Context

Digital Arabic criticism must address specific cultural and linguistic challenges. Arabic's rich morphological system, dialectal variation, and diglossia present unique computational difficulties. Additionally, the relationship between classical literary tradition and contemporary digital production requires sensitive navigation.

The dominance of English in digital platforms and AI training data risks marginalizing Arabic literature. Developing Arabic-specific NLP tools, building representative Arabic text corpora, and creating culturally informed critical frameworks are essential for equitable digital criticism.

Several Arab critics have emphasized that the development of digital Arabic criticism requires renewed engagement with modernization, conceptual transformation, and the adaptation of critical discourse to digital environments [24-27].

6.2. Digital Platforms and Arabic Literary Production

Social media, blogs, and digital publishing platforms have democratized Arabic literary production, enabling voices previously excluded from traditional publishing. This shift challenges established critical hierarchies and necessitates new evaluative criteria. How should critics assess viral poetry, collaborative fiction, or multimedia narratives?

The ephemerality of digital texts, their multimodal nature, and their participatory character require critics to develop flexible, responsive methodologies. Arab critics must engage with these new forms while maintaining connection to literary tradition and cultural heritage.

Platforms like Wattpad Arabic and Goodreads Arabic exemplify how digital spaces transform literary circulation and reception. On Wattpad, serialized fiction accumulates reader comments in real-time, creating collaborative textual experiences where audience feedback influences narrative development. Authors modify plot trajectories based on reader response, blurring traditional boundaries between production and reception.

Twitter's Arabic literary community demonstrates another form of digital participation. Poets share verses in thread format, with each tweet becoming a node in extended poetic composition. Readers respond with their own verses, creating collective poetic exchanges that challenge conventional notions of authorship. The hashtag #شعر_تويتِر (Twitter Poetry) has generated thousands of collaborative poems, suggesting new forms of collective creativity enabled by platform architecture.

These examples demonstrate how digital platforms don't simply distribute existing literary forms but generate new modes of textual production requiring novel critical approaches.

6.3. Preserving Literary Heritage in Digital Form

Digitization of classical Arabic texts offers unprecedented access but raises preservation concerns. Andrew Piper explores the transformation of reading practices through digitization [18]. For Arabic literature, this means navigating between preserving textual integrity and enabling new forms of engagement and analysis.

Digital archives enable computational analysis of classical texts, revealing patterns and connections invisible in traditional scholarship. However, critics must ensure digitization doesn't flatten the richness of manuscript traditions or ignore the material culture of books. Jeff Gomez's assertion that "print is dead" [19] requires critical examination in the Arabic context where print and manuscript traditions retain cultural significance.

6.4. Convergence Culture and Transmedia Narratives

Henry Jenkins's concept of convergence culture [20] describes how stories flow across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to the whole. This phenomenon challenges critics accustomed to analyzing self-contained textual objects. Narratives now unfold across books, films, games, and social media, requiring holistic critical approaches.

For Arab critics, this means engaging with popular culture, digital media, and participatory narratives while maintaining critical rigor. The boundaries between high and popular culture, always contested, become increasingly porous in digital environments.

7. Methodological Proposals for Digital Arabic Criticism

7.1. Hybrid Critical Approaches

Digital Arabic criticism should embrace methodological pluralism, combining close and distant reading, qualitative

and quantitative analysis, traditional hermeneutics and computational methods. This hybrid approach leverages strengths of each methodology while mitigating their limitations.

Critics should employ AI tools for pattern detection and large-scale analysis while retaining human judgment for interpretation, contextualization, and aesthetic evaluation. Franco Moretti's distant reading [21] complements rather than replaces close reading, offering macro-perspectives on literary history.

7.2. Developing Arabic NLP Tools

Robust Arabic criticism requires sophisticated natural language processing tools designed specifically for Arabic's linguistic features. This includes: morphological analyzers that handle Arabic's complex derivational system, sentiment analysis tools trained on Arabic text, named entity recognition for Arabic contexts, and stylometric tools for authorship attribution and style analysis.

Investment in Arabic digital humanities infrastructure is essential. This includes building comprehensive text corpora representing Arabic's geographic, temporal, and generic diversity, developing open-source tools accessible to researchers across the Arab world, and training new generations of critics in both literary theory and computational methods.

7.3. Ethical Guidelines

Digital Arabic criticism must address ethical concerns including data privacy, algorithmic bias, cultural representation, and intellectual property. Critics should advocate for: transparency in AI systems used for literary analysis, diverse training datasets representing Arab voices across regions and demographics, respect for author rights in digital reproduction and analysis, and critical awareness of how algorithms may perpetuate biases.

Following Safiya Noble's analysis of algorithmic oppression [13], Arab critics must scrutinize how digital tools may marginalize non-Western perspectives or reinforce colonial hierarchies in literary canons.

7.4. Pedagogical Implications

Training future Arab critics requires curriculum reform integrating digital literacy, computational thinking, traditional literary analysis, cultural studies, and ethical reflection. Programs should balance technical skills with humanistic inquiry, preparing students to navigate both classical texts and emerging digital forms.

Collaboration between literature departments, computer science programs, and cultural institutions can foster interdisciplinary approaches essential for digital criticism. N. Katherine Hayles advocates for technogenesis - understanding how technology and human cognition co-evolve [22] - which should inform critical pedagogy.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges several significant limitations that should inform interpretation of its findings and suggest directions for future research.

8.1. Theoretical Focus

This research primarily offers a theoretical framework rather than empirical analysis of specific digital Arabic texts or platforms. While theoretical groundwork is essential for establishing conceptual foundations, subsequent research should validate these frameworks through systematic application to Arabic digital literature. Case studies examining particular platforms, genres, or authors would test the practical utility of proposed methodologies.

8.2. Technological Pace

Given the rapid evolution of AI and digital technologies, some observations may require updating as new tools and methodologies emerge. Large language models are advancing quickly, with capabilities expanding beyond what this study addresses. Future research must remain responsive to technological developments while maintaining critical distance from technological determinism.

8.3. Arabic NLP Limitations

Current limitations in Arabic natural language processing tools restrict full implementation of proposed computational approaches. Arabic's morphological complexity, dialectal variation, and diglossia present ongoing challenges for NLP systems. While acknowledging these constraints, the study advocates for investment in Arabic-specific tools. Future research should document progress in Arabic NLP and assess its implications for literary criticism.

8.4. Scope and Genre Limitations

The study focuses on literary criticism and may not fully address implications for other forms of Arabic cultural production including journalism, religious texts, or popular culture. Different genres present distinct challenges and opportunities for digital analysis. Research extending these frameworks to broader cultural texts would enrich understanding of digital Arabic criticism's scope.

8.5. Institutional and Educational Contexts

The study does not extensively examine institutional structures necessary for implementing digital criticism in Arabic universities and research centers. Questions of curriculum development, resource allocation, and institutional support require dedicated investigation. Future research should address pedagogical implications and institutional requirements for

training digital Arabic critics.

8.6. Directions for Future Research

Several promising research directions emerge from this study's limitations:

- 1) Empirical case studies of specific Arabic digital literary platforms, examining user practices and textual production
- 2) Development and testing of Arabic-specific NLP tools tailored for literary analysis
- 3) Comparative studies examining digital criticism traditions in other non-Western contexts
- 4) Pedagogical experiments in teaching digital criticism to Arabic literature students
- 5) Longitudinal studies tracking evolution of digital Arabic literary production and reception over time
- 6) Investigation of institutional frameworks and resource requirements for implementing digital criticism in Arabic universities

These research directions would address current limitations while advancing the field of digital Arabic criticism toward practical implementation and empirical validation.

9. Conclusion

This study has explored the profound transformations affecting literary criticism in the digital age. The emergence of digital texts, AI-powered analysis, and participatory reading practices necessitates fundamental reconceptualization of critical concepts including authorship, textuality, readership, aesthetic judgment, and interpretation.

For Arab critics, these challenges present both opportunities and risks. Digital technologies offer unprecedented access to Arabic literature, enable new forms of analysis, and democratize literary production. However, they also threaten to marginalize non-Western voices, privilege quantifiable over qualitative aspects, and undermine traditional humanistic values.

The path forward requires methodological pluralism that integrates computational and traditional approaches, investment in Arabic-specific digital infrastructure, ethical vigilance regarding algorithmic bias and cultural representation, and ongoing dialogue between technology and humanistic inquiry.

Walter Benjamin's reflection on mechanical reproduction [1] remains relevant: technology transforms art's social function while raising questions about aura, authenticity, and value. Similarly, digital criticism transforms literary scholarship while requiring critical examination of what is gained and lost in transformation.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the literary field [23] reminds us that criticism operates within power structures and institutional contexts. Digital transformation reshapes these structures, potentially democratizing literary culture while introducing new forms of inequality and exclusion.

Ultimately, digital Arabic criticism must balance innovation with tradition, technological capability with human judgment, and global participation with cultural specificity. The goal is not to abandon traditional criticism but to expand its capacities, developing richer, more comprehensive understanding of Arabic literature in all its forms.

This study represents an initial attempt to theorize digital Arabic criticism. Much work remains: developing practical tools, training new critics, building institutional support, and engaging with Arabic digital literary production. The field invites collaboration among scholars, technologists, and cultural institutions to realize the promise of digital criticism while preserving the humanistic values at criticism's core.

From this perspective, contemporary Arabic criticism is called upon not only to respond to technological change but also to rethink its concepts and methods in light of both local critical traditions and new digital textualities [24-28].

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Abbreviations

NLP	Natural Language Processing
AI	Artificial Intelligence

Author Contributions

Moussa Omar: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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