

STRUCTURALISM AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN THE WRITINGS OF CONTEMPORARY ARAB CRITICS —Selected Examples—

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Abstract

Language is the vessel that stores and carries thought; for this reason, it has been a focus of study throughout the ages. If the study of language has continually occupied thinkers and researchers, the study of literature—which takes language as its medium—has received even greater attention. Literature is connected to internal influences arising from the writer’s own self, as well as to external influences. Since scholars approach literature from different conceptions and hold diverse ideologies, numerous approaches to literary study have emerged. One of the most important is structuralism, whose foundations were first laid by Ferdinand de Saussure as an approach to the study of language. It soon developed into a scientific method with its own principles and rules, which critics transferred to and employed in the study of literature. These critics include Abd al-Salam al-Masaddi, Kamal Abu Deeb, Salah Fadl, Yumna al-Eid, Ibrahim Zakaria, and Abdullah al-Ghadhami.

Keywords: language; structuralist approach; literature; criticism; approaches.

Introduction

Before the emergence of structuralism in the middle of the twentieth century, Western society was dominated by existentialism and Marxism, both of which held sway over the intellectual scene. Despite the tangible material prosperity of the time, people had not become happier. This situation led Western thought to search for an alternative capable of addressing the problem. Structuralism consequently emerged as an intellectual movement and, within a short period, swept across the intellectual landscape, influencing many fields, including literature. It attracted supporters and pioneers who adopted its approach and principles in their works and books. This study seeks to examine some of the most prominent critics who adopted structuralism in their literary and linguistic writings.

Before considering its manifestations in literary discourse, however, it is necessary first to define structuralism as an intellectual orientation and movement.

1. Structuralism

A. Structure

In Arabic, the word **binyah** (structure) derives from the trilateral verb **banā** (to build). It denotes a building or a method and also conveys the meanings of construction, architecture, and the form a building takes (Ibn Manzur, **Lisan al-‘Arab**, vol. 9, entry “*banā*,” p. 11). It can also refer to the manner in which something is constructed. In Arabic grammar, the duality of meaning and form is based on how the units of Arabic are constructed and on the transformations they undergo. An increase in form therefore entails an increase in meaning: any transformation in structure leads to a transformation in signification. Structure is an organized entity with its own form and internal unity, since the word originally conveys the idea of a whole composed of coherent phenomena, each of which depends on the others and is defined through its relationship with them.

The term **structure** derives from the Latin **structura**, from **struere**, meaning “to construct.” Claude Lévi-Strauss regards structure as a method or approach that can be applied to any kind of study, including structural analysis in other disciplines (al-Khayyas, 1993, pp. 68–69). Lévi-Strauss defines a structure as “a system composed of elements such that a transformation affecting one of them brings about a transformation in the other elements” (al-Manasira, p. 540). Structure, then, is not merely the appearance, framework, elements, parts, material unity, or objective thingness of an object, nor is it simply the generalization that connects its parts.

The term structure is also traced to the Latin root **struere**, meaning construction or the method by which a building is erected. In linguistics, it refers to a complex of coherent, interrelated elements in which the notion of individuality is set aside: each element depends on the other elements and on the nature of its relationships with them. Structure is an organization that expresses the coherence of relationships within a unified text.

2. The Emergence of Structuralism

The origins of structuralism are traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Ferdinand de Saussure’s **Course in General Linguistics** was published in 1916. The book became a principal source for structuralism in the West, which was embraced in France in the early 1960s (Qassab, 1428 AH, p. 118). Saussure’s studies and research constituted the first foundation for the emergence of linguistic structuralism, which benefited from the principles of empiricism (Sturrock, 1985, pp. 18–31).

The Russian scholar Roman Jakobson, one of the pioneers of the Russian Formalist School, wrote the “Theses” that he dedicated to his student Claude Lévi-Strauss (al-Khayyas, 1993, pp. 68–69). Some scholars have gone so far as to regard Russian Formalism as early structuralism. The term “structures” was used early in this tradition, and the term “structuralism” is reported to have been used for the first time in 1929.

Structuralism emerged as a movement in France in the 1960s. A large number of structuralists theorized about and applied it across various scientific fields, from literature and literary criticism to linguistics, anthropology, psychology, Marxism, epistemology, and even mathematics. It subsequently spread to most parts of the world. Structuralism is a systematic, scientific attempt to study phenomena from the perspectives of structure, model, formal construction, and the internal relations that constitute an object.

Structuralism is a method for analyzing cultural forms. Since literature is a form of social and cultural activity, it can be analyzed semiotically by identifying the signs of which it is composed and explaining how the system governing their use and arrangement operates. The structuralist method analyzes the internal structures of a text. Rather than focusing on meanings or signifieds, it focuses on signifiers. This is what Roland Barthes means when he states that literature represents the sovereignty of language, that language is the content of literature, and that all the writer does is read language. Structuralist criticism assumes that criticism extends the act of reading and that the critic is an exemplary reader with an exceptional capacity for expression. Reading differs from criticism in that reading involves immersion in the literary work, whereas criticism places the critic at a certain distance from the text. Criticism involves the active construction of the text’s meaning. From a structuralist perspective, literary works do not possess a single, exclusive meaning.

Structuralism can thus be understood as the study of relationships among the different structures within a literary text, or as a theory concerned with identifying the functions of the interconnected elements that constitute the text. Anthropologists have described it as a method or system applicable to any kind of study. In this sense, criticism becomes comparable to a surgical or anatomical procedure.

A second source of structuralism was New Criticism, which emerged in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s. Its leading figures argued that content was not essential; rather, the poetic form was what mattered, and literature’s purpose was literature itself. Linguistics was the third source—and perhaps the most important—especially the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, regarded as the father of structural linguistics. Although Saussure did not use the word “structure,” all structuralist currents

emerged from his linguistic thought. He helped establish the literary text's independence as a distinct linguistic system.

Saussure distinguished between **langue** and **parole**. For him, **langue** is a social product independent of the individual, associated with the human faculty of speech, whereas **parole** is an individual event connected with performance and the speaker's personal ability. He argued that language should be studied synchronically and descriptively rather than through a diachronic, evolutionary approach. If language is a structure or symbolic system, he reasoned, it must be approached as a system whose operation can be studied in its own terms. Saussure emphasized internal, descriptive analysis and understood language as a specific system of signs that express ideas. In his account, the signifier—the sound-image of a word—does not inherently refer to the content of the signified.

Saussure distinguished three levels: language in the broad human sense, **langue** as the shared system used to produce communication, and **parole** as individual utterances. Language is a system of signs expressing ideas and may therefore be compared with writing, symbolic rituals, political formulas, military signals, and other systems, although it is more extensive than any of them. Linguistics forms part of the broader science of signs, semiology or semiotics.

Saussure also distinguished between synchronic and diachronic approaches to language and gave priority to synchronic study. Another distinction concerns syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical) relations among signs. The horizontal or sequential element affects the position of a sign: a word's meaning is determined by its place in the sentence and its relationship to the grammatical units within that sentence.

The pioneers of French structuralist criticism were influenced by Saussure, and this influence encouraged them to uncover the systems, orders, and structures of literature, treating literature as a symbolic system containing subsidiary systems. Barthes worked on formalizing narrative and analyzing storytelling, while Tzvetan Todorov focused on literariness—that is, what makes literature literary. Barthes suggested that structuralism attempts to transfer the linguistic model to other cultural fields. His theoretical and practical critical essays gave the concept of structure an early point of departure. In 1964, he published “Elements of Semiology,” helping establish the semiology of literary criticism. In **S/Z** (1970), reading generates new interactions and interpretations shaped by the power and fascination of the signifier.

In applying structuralism to the human sciences—including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism—Claude Lévi-Strauss is considered the leading structuralist in anthropology. He studied Indigenous societies in Brazil and later continued his studies in New York, where he met Roman

Jakobson, a founder of Russian Formalism and a key figure in the Prague Linguistic Circle. Jakobson's methodological influence on Lévi-Strauss led to an intellectual relationship that contributed to the development of structuralism. In 1962, the two scholars jointly produced a structural analysis of Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Cats," which became a classic example of sophisticated structuralist practice.

Lévi-Strauss applied Saussurean structuralism to his study of so-called primitive societies. Like Saussure, he gave priority to **langue** over **parole** and emphasized synchronic analysis, without denying diachronic dimensions. He mediated between opposing elements and drew on phonological methods that moved beyond conscious linguistic phenomena to the study of unconscious structures. He rejected the treatment of words or units as independent elements.

Jacques Lacan applied structuralist principles to psychology. For him, language became an independent scientific theory through which the unconscious could be described scientifically and its laws understood with great precision. On this basis, Lacan proposed that the discourse of the unconscious is organized as a coherent structure, like a language, and that personality consists of several linguistic levels. He found support for his views in the writings of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, both of whom pointed to unconscious components in literary texts.

Michel Foucault also drew on binary oppositions in his attempt to uncover the unconscious archaeology of knowledge in **The Archaeology of Knowledge**. His system of things relied on structuralist assumptions. He studied madness, medicine, and psychotherapy through epistemic structures associated with historical periods and incorporating Freudian notions of the unconscious. These structures are rooted in society. Louis Althusser, meanwhile, rejected the anthropological premise underlying the intellectual debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Lévi-Strauss. He emphasized Marxist economic concepts and distinguished observable social phenomena from the underlying laws of class conflict. In doing so, he became associated with structuralism through his emphasis on economic structures and class positions.

Noam Chomsky's structural account of language rests on the distinction between surface structure and deep structure in every language. He advocated moving linguistic sciences—especially grammar and syntax—from purely theoretical inquiry toward applied science.

By claiming scientific status and objectivity through its reliance on exact disciplines such as linguistics, structuralism represented a decisive step toward methodological clarity in the scientific analysis of narrative. Structural linguistics became a major focus of attention for linguists in Europe and America. Its contribution lay in insisting on the descriptive study of language, filtering linguistic events of their

changing circumstances, emphasizing comprehensive systems, and avoiding the dispersal of effort across minor details.

The study of structure requires analyzing and breaking down the text into its constituent elements without reference to external contextual factors, however influential they may be. Structuralism provided criticism with a methodological tool for identifying a text's aesthetic qualities and grasping its internal components and relationships. This principle raised a major issue in literary and critical circles: the structuralist slogan "the death of the author." Structuralists used this slogan to place limits on psychological and sociological approaches to literature and to concentrate on the text itself, regardless of its author, the period to which the author belonged, or biographical information. The point was not that information about the author could never be considered, but that such information should not become the essence of literary criticism or the principal basis of analysis. The text itself should remain the starting point.

When this approach privileges the text's internal reality to the exclusion of other considerations, it may disregard transcendence and moral values. The article's author argues that such disregard undermines interaction between text and reader and conflicts with Islamic belief. Structuralism proved productive and was adopted in the study of numerous fields, including myths, stories, poetry, and literary criticism. Yet, although it brought a degree of objectivity to the human sciences, it also risked depriving studies of their particularity and vitality by keeping them captive to the linguistic model. In this way, it encountered the difficulties of rigid positivism and normativism.

Structuralism did not remain dominant for long. It began to lose its position in France and the wider Western world in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its decline had already begun following Jacques Derrida's intervention at the Johns Hopkins conference, which helped open the way for deconstruction (Saussure, 1984, pp. 127–139).

Applications of Structuralism among Arab Critics

Structuralism is not merely a research method in the human sciences; it also provides researchers with analytical tools that enable them to reach theoretical conclusions which may ultimately form a coherent doctrine, sometimes described as scientific and precise.

Important work on structuralist studies has been undertaken in the Arab world. Among the most significant are the applied studies conducted by Dr. Kamal Abu Deeb at Yarmouk University in Jordan, as well as the theoretical and practical work of committed researchers in Tunisia's Faculty of Arts,

including Dr. Abd al-Salam al-Masaddi (Fadl, 1998, p. 138). There has also been active work in social and literary studies closely connected with structuralist ideas.

One leading structuralist argues that, since structuralism is neither a school nor a literary doctrine, there is no justification for restricting it in advance to scientific thought. It should instead be described—not narrowly defined—as broadly and flexibly as possible. Some writers and artists practise structuralism not merely as an object of intellectual reflection but as a distinctive creative experience that exceeds abstract analysis. The term “structural person” may therefore be applied not to someone identified by their ideas or language, but by their imagination and way of conceiving things—in other words, by how they experience structure internally. For those who draw on it, structuralism is above all a human activity (Fadl, 1998, p. 119).

This study focuses on prominent Arab critics who adopted structuralism in theory and practice. It considers the contributions of the Moroccan critic Muhammad Bennis, Abd al-Salam al-Masaddi, Salah Fadl, Kamal Abu Deeb, Abdullah Muhammad al-Ghadhami, Hamid Lahmidani, Saeed Alloush, and Yumna al-Eid. Taken together, these early critical approaches can help formulate and explain the structuralist programme through theoretical and practical equations, ultimately revealing the degree of maturity—or otherwise—of structuralist critical awareness in its linguistic form in the Arab world.

1. Abd al-Salam al-Masaddi

For al-Masaddi, structuralism is “a method that has offered diverse contributions to Western thought in general, and French thought in particular. It influenced Arab research indirectly but profoundly, producing far-reaching shifts. This influence was especially evident when researchers drew inspiration from structuralism as they studied the past and investigated its hidden dimensions” (al-Masaddi, 1991, p. 25).

Structuralism is also “a mechanism for carrying what came before into what follows and transforming acquired knowledge into a resource for changing anticipation. Epistemologically, it is a theory that interprets what has passed through the logic of what has not yet occurred” (al-Masaddi, 1991, p. 48).

One of the earliest Arab studies to adopt a structuralist approach was al-Masaddi’s important book **Stylistics and Style**, published in 1977. In its introduction, he discusses the nature of structuralism as a textual practice concerned with the meanings of structure as a form constituted by a network of links and hidden relationships. By clarifying this nature, al-Masaddi established a firm theoretical basis for structuralism, which he describes as follows: “It is neither a science nor a form of epistemic art; rather, it is a methodological hypothesis whose sole assumption is that the identity of phenomena is determined

more by the relationships among their components and the network of links than by the essences of things. Since the text is one of structuralism's objects, and since structuralism is a fertile source of highly abstract formal perspectives—sometimes extending to the methods of formal logic—some approaches in Arab criticism adopted structuralist lines and drew on linguistics in their formal structures. The formal and the stylistic consequently became mixed, causing confusion for many” (al-Masaddi, 1998, p. 6).

The general framework underpinning al-Masaddi's ideas is therefore distinctly structuralist. For this reason, the present study places his critical project within structuralist criticism, which he treated extensively in **The Question of Structuralism**, published in 1991. He discusses several dimensions of structuralism: its formative, methodological, philosophical, epistemological, doctrinal, and critical dimensions (al-Masaddi, 1991, pp. 11–45).

He examines these dimensions in theoretical detail and follows them with a discussion of the foundations of structuralism in its anthropological, formalist, and formative forms. He also addresses structuralist approaches to the poetics of texts, along with other highly significant issues in structuralist criticism raised in the same book.

2. Salah Fadl

One of the works most clearly committed to structuralism is Salah Fadl's **The Structuralist Theory of Literary Criticism**. Published in 1978, it represents a serious attempt to establish a theoretical foundation for structuralism. Fadl examines its various intellectual sources, including the Geneva School, the Russian Formalists, and the Prague Circle.

He also discusses applications of the structuralist method to the human sciences, the debate between existentialism and Marxism, structuralism in literature, and levels of literary analysis. Elsewhere, he addresses the requirements of structuralist criticism, the language of poetry, the analysis of narrative, semiological systems, and literature (Fadl, 1998, p. 237).

3. Ibrahim Zakaria

Ibrahim Zakaria's **The Problem of Structure**, published in 1978 according to the discussion in this article, is among the books that have illuminated the different fields of knowledge explored by structuralism. The author divides the book into the following topics: the nature of structure; structure in linguistics; structure in anthropology; structure in epistemology and the history of knowledge; structure in psychoanalysis; and structure in Marxism (Zakaria, 1972, p. 7).

The book opens with a discussion of structuralism in modern knowledge and its sudden emergence and dominance over other approaches: “Structuralism suddenly leapt from the back rows to occupy a leading position in the concepts of modern thought in less than ten years. [...] Between 1960 and 1966, the banks of the Seine witnessed the birth of a new philosophical tendency called [...] structuralism. Just as Nietzsche had announced ‘the death of God’ at the end of the previous century, structuralist philosophers of this era came to announce ‘the death of man’ [...]” (Zakaria, 1972, p. 7).

In this work, Ibrahim Zakaria attempted to survey the various connections between structuralism and other fields of knowledge, such as anthropology, linguistics, and psychology. However, the common ground between structuralism and linguistics, particularly in concepts and terminology, was not always clearly delineated. The same applies to the other fields discussed by Zakaria, where the account is not free from vagueness and ambiguity. Nevertheless, the study remains a serious contribution when considered in the historical context in which Zakaria presented his general conception of the diverse fields that formed the major pillars of structuralism (Zakaria, 1972, p. 7).

4. Kamal Abu Deeb

Kamal Abu Deeb is among the leading Arab critics who attempted to apply structuralism and adapt it to textual forms different from those in which the method originated in the West. This was particularly evident in the 1970s, in his book **The Dialectic of Concealment and Manifestation: A Structural Study of Poetry**, published in 1979. He devoted the first chapter to poetic imagery and the second to poetic space, examining the structures and conceptions involved in the study of a poem’s space. The third chapter, “Towards Structural Laws of the Development of Poetic Rhythm: Phenomena in Modern Poetry,” considers the structural laws governing poetic rhythm.

The fourth chapter addresses structural systems in human thought and literary works. In the fifth, Abu Deeb offers a structural study of the poetry of Abu Nuwas through two poetic examples. The sixth chapter is theoretical and is entitled “The Hidden Mechanism: Towards a Structural Theory of Poetic Content.”

Abu Deeb insists that structuralism should be understood as a methodological description: “Structuralism is not a philosophy; it is a way of seeing and a method for examining existence. As such, it represents a radical transformation of thought and of its relationship to the world and its position toward it. [...] Through its rigour and insistence on deep investigation, multidimensional understanding, and immersion in the actual components of a thing and the relationships that arise among them, structuralism changes the thought that examines language, society, and poetry, turning it into a questioning, restless, alert, and probing form of thought” (Abu Deeb, 1984, p. 7).

Abu Deeb describes the ambition of his book as transforming how thought examines culture, humanity, and poetry, moving it away from partial, superficial, and personal approaches toward a mode of thought that is complex, investigative, objective, comprehensive, and radical. In other words, he seeks a structuralist thought that does not settle for perceiving isolated phenomena but aims to identify their basic components in culture, society, and poetry; capture the network of relationships that extend from and between them; determine the meanings generated by those relationships; and investigate the fundamental transformations of structure. Such transformations produce new manifestations that can be understood only by linking them back to the underlying structure, through a clear awareness of surface and deep structures. In this sense, the book becomes both revolutionary and foundational, while also rejecting established approaches (Abu Deeb, 1984, pp. 7–8).

In the present author's view, however, Abu Deeb's book is marked by a degree of obscurity and ambiguity that makes it difficult to understand its tables, geometric forms, and statistical procedures. These features can confuse readers and discourage them from continuing. By applying structuralism to these Arabic texts, Abu Deeb may, in the author's opinion, have transformed them into obscure symbols and signs. A genuine structuralist approach, the author argues, should engage directly with the substance of the text and do so with sufficient clarity to make appreciation of the text and recognition of its aesthetic qualities possible.

Despite these criticisms, Abu Deeb's attempt remains serious when compared with earlier efforts.

5. Abdullah Muhammad al-Ghadhami

Al-Ghadhami addressed structuralism in his book **Sin and Atonement: From Structuralism to Deconstruction**, published in 1985. The book discusses structuralism, semiotics, stylistics, and anatomy or deconstructive analysis at a theoretical level, accompanied by practical procedures that demonstrate al-Ghadhami's critical competence and boldness (al-Ghadhami, 1998, pp. 32–33).

Conclusion

At the end of this research paper, it can be said that most of the structuralist attempts discussed above remain quite limited and modest. Nevertheless, they are ambitious and full of potential. They also display shortcomings, particularly when their objectives become unclear or are lost from view. This may be attributable to the absence of precise methodological criteria for structuralism, whose principles became dispersed amid other critical approaches.

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