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Between True Reflection and Invention: The Crisis of Urban History Representation and the Techniques of Historiography

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Abstract

In his discussion regarding different types of historical material offered to history readers, Bernard Lewis identifies three types of history; remembered, recovered, and invented¹. He points out that critical history begins with dissatisfaction with memory and a desire to cure its deficiencies. Subsequently, the body of techniques, theories, and principles of historical research and presentation, which is called historiography has been criticised on its overall reading in search of formal analogies or translations of meaning. It has also been questioned on its credibility of transmitting the correct and complete historical image 'as it has been.' Those issues are increasingly dominating the field of historical studies, and urging for a search for unconventional methods of representing and understanding of architectural and urban histories. This paper attempts a discussion of potential methodologies to establish alternative methods in historiography. The paper examines different techniques of rewriting history, 'the mother of all the sciences of man'². Although the problem of historical writings is a common worldwide issue, the focus of this research is on the historiography of Baghdad in the eighteenth century, which is complex and mysterious. The aim is to search for possible methodologies for rewriting histories and explore crucial openings for present practices of architectural history writing that promote a better understanding of history.

Historiography and Predetermined History Writings

'What happened, what we recall, what we recover, what we relate, are often sadly different, and the answers to our questions may be both difficult to seek and painful to find'³

The conventional historiography of Baghdad in the eighteenth century is contradictory. It focuses on the physical components in composing the image of the city. Conventional

writings of the eighteenth century demonstrate an unpleasant cityscape with narrow streets and demolished houses, while other literature sources suggest the pleasing atmosphere of a beautiful city blessed with a great river with large areas of greenery on its edges. A comprehensive reading of this historiography asserts the uneven reflection of natural and cultural landscapes. It also indicates superficial observations based on perceptible aesthetics and political circumstances, in addition to preoccupied judgments backed by a lack of historical understanding. The complex history of the city and the indeterminacy in the interpretation of architectural and urban forms contribute to this historiography of obscurities. This crisis stresses the urgent need to search for a new method of rewriting architectural and urban histories. Because of the limited scope of this paper, the study focuses on the search for alternative methods in historiography rather than a detailed investigation of the historiography of Baghdad.

The inquiry into unconventional methodology in historiography is complicated. These questions increasingly dominating historical studies because of the insufficient and contradictory tendency in conventional historiographies that rely upon iconic recollections of history, which utilise 'visible' and materialistic approaches in representation rather than opening up to approaches that maintain strong and diverse relationships with vast range of social and human sciences. Historiographic studies are gradually becoming a major focus of architectural historians who are shifting their emphasis 'from the aesthetics of architecture to the politics of production process'⁴. Bernard Lewis identifies historiography as 'historical writings written for the express purpose of recording the events of the past for the information and guidance of the present and the future'⁵. The general criterion of rewriting history is to search for the original sources and the real historical backings. This body of literature deals with historical matters which may have been subjected to invention, diversion, and corrupt transmission.

In general, history may be initially be written for different purposes. It may be written for political or documentation purposes or for entertainment; by exaggerating some events to increase social interaction or by modifying authentic stories to maintain the sanctity of some figures and taking them to a mythical standard above what they really are⁶. Lewis notes that the recoveries of history usually begin with what is remembered and transmitted. He illustrates the motives of critiquing histories. 'The critical scholar may be dissatisfied with what remembered history offers him because he feels that it is inaccurate or deficient or misleading'⁷. However, Lewis points out that there is other dissatisfaction that emerges from a different cause. He states that historians would rather rewrite history not as it was, or as they have been taught that it was, but as they would

prefer it to have been. For historians of this school 'the purpose of changing the past is not to seek some abstract truth but to achieve a new vision of the past better suited to their needs in the present and their aspirations for the future. Their aim is to amend, to restore, to replace, or even to recreate the past in a more satisfactory form'⁸. He calls this process 'the invention of the past'. The fundamental feature of this kind of scholarly research is that it is always directed to preset outcomes, which raises questions about its historical credibility and acceptance.

Lewis identifies a distinctive example of embellishment to correct or remove what is unpleasant of the past as a 'foundation myth'; 'most countries and peoples and powers arise from humble origins, and having risen to greatness seek to improve or conceal their undistinguished beginnings and attach themselves to something older and greater'⁹. He notes that the recovery of history is basically a phenomenon that began in Europe at the time of the Renaissance and remains to the present day primarily a concern and an achievement of Western European civilization. He also recognises the writing of colonial, post-colonial, and pre-colonial histories as outstanding examples of the purposive use of historiography. In addition, he classifies the official myths about the barbarism and backwardness that were largely challenged and criticised as obvious examples of inventive historiography¹⁰. I believe that although the purposive use of historiography is evident in colonial related histories, the modification of history is noticeable in almost all written histories in the world. In particular, the history of architecture of Baghdad and the surrounding region was apparently subjected to inventive historiography during the eighteenth century and thus it became a fertile ground for new interpretations.

Conventional Historiography and the Crisis of Representation

The conventional method of reading architectural history is usually limited to comparative and descriptive methodologies, and consequently the representation 'is totally divorced from historical truth'¹¹. The unfolding of modern natural science and the global domination of scientific methods have had a great impact on historical writings and raised questions about the uniform effect of history and its directionality, and whether it is possible for industrialised societies to return to a pre-modern or pre-scientific situation. This dilemma became a major focus for historians and raised a great amount of argument that evoked attempts to 'correct' confused historical statements. Accordingly, conventional historiography has been criticised for its vague and misleading representation of history. Historians argue that transmitted histories are written 'from a particular viewpoint or perspective'¹² and that they hardly reflect the actual historical events.

In his book *The End of History and the Last Man* Francis Fukuyama suggests that modern economics are forcing the homogenization of mankind, and destroying a wide variety of traditional cultures in the process. He considers cultures as 'potential obstacles in the march of the Universal History'¹³. Mark Crinson supports this view and calls it a crisis of architectural typology loss when the contrast between history and memory forms is augmented because of modernism outcomes¹⁴. On the other hand, Sibel Bozdogan notes that historiography problems have increased because architectural history is mainly Eurocentric and historiography emphasises cultural difference rather than cultural diversity¹⁵. According to Geoffrey Gunn, this tension between cultural relativism and universalism is very much a modern-day phenomenon¹⁶. Besides, Bernard Lewis proposes that neglecting history and taking historical facts too lightly are the main causes of historiography problem. He notes that 'the early expressions of the collective memory of a community are usually literary'¹⁷. And he considers secularism as one of the crucial products of the tension between modernity and culture¹⁸. Moreover, Edward Said considers repetition and the bizarre variety of discourse today as the main results of the decline in historical representation. He notes that 'a discourse does not represent an idea, nor does it embody a figure: it simply repeats, in different mode, another discourse'¹⁹.

In addition to comparative, descriptive and repetitive tendencies, conventional historiography implements puzzling terminologies every so often. Because they play an important role in historiography, terminologies have a huge impact on the understanding and representation of architectural history. Conventional methods may freeze some terminologies in abstract linguistic frames and do not let the words move in both practical and spiritual atmospheres. For example, terms like pre-modern and post-modern establish a huge cut in the concept of time flow and give the impression of greatly separated periods that lack any sign of continuity. Another example of distracted terminologies is the use of the term 'civilization' which generally refers to an advanced state of any human society, though in current historiography the term, as Nilfur Gole suggests, does not refer in a historically relevant way to specific cultures, but instead designates the historical superiority of the West as the producer of modernity²⁰.

Further, the term 'traditional' is widely used to refer to some human societies that are related to religion as a form of social organisation whose continuation does not rely on the existence of a specific nation. According to Steve Fuller, anthropologists and sociologists largely use religion as 'a residual term designed to cover all so called

traditional forms of social life'²¹. Fukuyama suggests that this understanding of history is mostly associated with philosophers like Hegel and Marx, and that this concept is also implicit in the use of other words like primitive, advanced, and modern²². Therefore, the issue of memory loss became a major concern of architectural historiography since it is strongly connected to the 'traditional' and 'pre-modern' terms. For instance, Crinson suggests that the extreme memory loss and the loss of familiarity contribute strongly to the problem, since post-modern urbanism 'treats the past as something to be quoted selectively, something already deracinated'²³. On the other hand, Hans-Georg Gadamer recommends a major reconstruction and reformation of memory; 'for memory is not memory for anything and everything'²⁴. Those memories can be constructed into numerous mental maps, each registering difference and otherness in particular ways²⁵. The reconstruction process of memory has already occupied an important place in current historical studies. It involves imagination, examination, and a new interpretation of history, which is the core objective of this study.

The crisis of conventional historiography and current representation of architectural history, as Paul Rabinow suggests, took place with the shift of the vocabulary of architectural forms from architectural type and its historicity and formalization to architectural style, when 'the meaning of style in architecture gained an entirely new value, or more accurately, took on value'²⁶. In addition to the problems of conventional representation that are previously illustrated, it is believed that current methods underestimate the social phenomenon which is 'the world problem that preoccupies thought today and touches its core reality'²⁷. Historians recognised the problematic relations between history and sociology; 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both'²⁸. They have known that categories of the individual and self are dependent upon particular cultural and historical practices and that the analyses of those categories are essential in founding strong starting point for critical historical studies.

Although it seems that conventional historiography has received much criticism, it has undoubtedly contributed to the enrichment of historical studies, yet this contribution is limited and incomplete. Early efforts to resolve the crisis of representation and offer a new and original expression suggested 'a transition from imported architecture to adapted architecture that must be reflected in education'²⁹. Although this method introduces a different criterion for architecture, it cannot provide a perceptive basis as it also focuses on physical qualities rather than values and principles. Historical moments are generated by other moments that contributed to their creation and coexistence. Highlighting

particular cultural, social, architectural, and urban features, and interconnecting them with sources from other disciplines would generate more possibilities for the comprehensive examination of history. This would promote integrated historiographies that ensure connectivity between all the elements that created the city and represent meaning in their relationship to one another.

In his book *'the Evaluative Image of the City'* Jack Nasar borrows Rapoport's notion of the levels of conception in relation to meaning. He implies that meaning has three levels; lower level or denotative meaning, which applies to the recognition of physical appearance, and middle level or connotative meaning which applies to the feelings and emotions. The third level is the higher level of understanding which refers less to the object than to broader values³⁰. Accordingly, conventional interpretation provides the lower level of meaning, and the study of other related disciplines provides the middle level. The integration between both sources establishes a meaningful image and represents the highest level of meaning. In order to explore the techniques that may solve historiographical problems, it is crucial to demonstrate relevant historians' suppositions that can offer the basis for an alternative method.

Suggested Methods and the Search for 'Truth'

The investigation of truth is in one sense difficult, in another easy. A sign of this is the fact that neither can one attain it adequately, nor do all fail, but each says something about the nature of things; and while each of us contributes nothing or little to the truth, a considerable amount of it results from all our contributions³¹.

The main feature of current historical studies is the utilization of sources outside the discipline of architecture to search for unconventional methods of architectural history representation. Their aim is to remain within the language of architecture, but speak of it differently. Because of the strong connection of this kind of research to the original foundations of things, the process of investigating alternative methods to solve historiography problems is always associated with the concepts of truth, knowledge, and understanding. The theory of knowledge plays a great role in this investigation, because knowledge is the preliminary source of philosophical advance toward establishing a solid understanding of all phenomena in this world. Scholars suggested different approaches

and techniques to interpret truth and knowledge. Those ideas and suggestions are demonstrated here briefly.

The philosopher and religious scholar Al-Sadr suggests the search for the 'common source of knowledge' in order to attain truth. He states that in forming new knowledge, a human being is assisted by previous knowledge; however, the issue is 'to be able to put our finger on the primary threads of thought and on the common source of knowledge in general'³². The search for the primary threads of thought is a big challenge for historical studies as it involves deep investigation of the different layers of history and a discovery of the early ideas that surround one another in the form of knowledge. According to Al-Ghazali, the first approach to this search is to be sceptical in order to obtain high levels of certainty and knowledge. However, he advises caution when doubting things, as some sceptical sources can be arrogant at the same time³³. On the other hand, Edward Said calls the key concept of the current discourse of historiography an 'historical understanding', which is 'to identify a beginning, particularly that of a historical movement or a realm of thought'³⁴. Also Gadamer considers 'reconstructing the condition in which a work passed down to us from the past'³⁵ as an important aid to understanding. Yet Foucault focuses on the techniques of rewriting history; commenting that 'we should no doubt revise the way in which we traditionally write the history of history'³⁶.

Thus, there are two main distinct cores of current suggestions to promote 'understanding' and to overcome the crisis of historiography belonging to two opposite schools of thought; empirical or semi empirical, and speculative or theoretical schools. Mitchell Dean illustrates the division between the two philosophical reflections as 'one grounded on experience, meaning, and the subject, the other on knowledge, rationality and the concept'³⁷. The empirical or scientific method is promoted by the theory of conceptual formation and signification suggested by Michel Foucault, Marx, Hegel, and others. The speculative method that belongs to the human sciences is supported by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger, and others. This paper is searching for a 'third space'³⁸ that is neither empirical nor speculative, but rather a combination, a refinement, and an accumulation of extra ideas and concepts.

Although it is important to elucidate both existing ideologies in the process of searching for a different method, the focus of this paper is on the speculative study that opens up to art and literature, which relates significantly to the first moments of formation of architectural ideas. However, it is important here to bring up a brief explanation of the empirical approach too. This approach usually privileges analytical sophistication over

theoretical system, and plural and diverse intellectual adventures over the search for foundations. According to this school, signification occurs when all representations are interconnected as signs, and the complete network of signs is linked together and articulated according to patterns proper to meaning. The group of signs will constitute the image of things. Although Foucault considers meaning as the principle component that connects signs, he proposes that meaning is not the main law of the formation of signs. He notes that 'no specific activity of consciousness can ever constitute a signification'³⁹, and that 'meaning is entirely on the side of that which is signified'⁴⁰, which raises questions about the nature and value of signs if they cannot represent consciousness or meaning. Foucault utilises a comparative analysis to outline the unity that must totalise discourses without reducing their diversity. He suggests that instead of considering that discourse is made up of a series of homogenous events, this analysis distinguishes several possible levels of events within the bulk of discourse⁴¹.

Similarly, Andre Gunder Frank stresses the significance of unity in diversity. He notes; 'we can neither understand nor appreciate the world's diversity without perceiving how unity itself generates and continually changes diversity'⁴². He argues that if received social theory is unsatisfactory because it is based on Eurocentric historiography, then it is logical to start by doing better non-Eurocentric history, yet this needs a better perspective or theory. He suggests a global theory to solve the problem as 'only a holistic universal, global, world history, as it really was, can offer the historiographical basis for a better social theory'⁴³. Although the concept of plural and diverse intellectual adventure seems to be a great historical reference, I believe that the focus on geographical characteristics would not solve the problem unless the alternative social theory is informed by elements other than physical settings, in which conceptual beliefs constitute the basis for their advancement, integration and continuity.

Edward Said supports the ideas discussed above, though he suggests that history is not a homogenous territory, but 'a complex interaction between uneven economics, societies, and ideologies'⁴⁴. He proposes that the act of historical understanding occurs when a beginning of a historical movement and a realm of thought is identified⁴⁵. He warns against perpetuating discourses of otherness and discrimination, and he stresses the fact that no race possesses a monopoly on beauty. In addition, he argues that historical narration shade into one another in practice; 'a discourse does not represent an idea, nor does it embody a figure: it simply repeats, in different mode, another discourse'⁴⁶. He refers to criticism as a cognitive activity that constitutes a form of knowledge. He identifies literature, history, and psychology as systems from other groups because of their self-

definition that includes the implication of their differences. Said rejects a single identity of discourse; 'discourses of identity that are centred on a single identifier are seriously inadequate for defining what are, in fact, complex and multiply constituted identities, which in turn, make the cultural artistic, or architectural product irreducible to such identifiers'⁴⁷. Hence Said strongly emphasises the crucial role of culture in historical writings. The role of culture in architectural history interpretation is also emphasised by Sibel Bozdogan who suggests a solution for the crisis of representation by introducing 'new interpretations that problematise distinct and mutually exclusive boundaries between the western canon and other cultures'⁴⁸.

The second school of thought attempts at an investigation of truth through the examination of text, aesthetic perception, and historical consciousness. Gadamer suggests that the task of aesthetics is precisely to ground the fact that the experience of art is a mode of knowledge that is certainly different from the sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and from all conceptual knowledge, but still knowledge, conveying truth⁴⁹. He describes understanding as a 'superior experience' that enables us easily to see through the illusion of the historical method, and that understanding must be consciously created by an unambiguous mediation.

Gadamer proposes two methods that assist in exploring the phenomenon of understanding. Firstly he recommends the use of the inductive method that employs a critique of aesthetic consciousness in order to defend the experience of truth that comes through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that is restricted to a scientific conception of truth. Thus the truth that lies in every artistic experience is recognised and at the same time mediated with historical consciousness. He considers human sciences and self-evident concepts like philosophy, art, and history as modes of experience that contain a wealth of history in which the truth is communicated, and this communication cannot be verified by scientific methodological means. Gadamer refers to literature as 'a function of being intellectually preserved and handed down and therefore brings its hidden history into every age'⁵⁰. He proposes that all literary works of art are actualised only when they are read and that 'the work of art is actualised only when it is presented'⁵¹. He points to the unique criteria of culture or 'Bildung' as a genuine historical idea that became extremely important assessor in the human sciences.

Secondly Gadamer recommends the reading of the concept of 'taste' as a social phenomenon and as an intellectual faculty of differentiation that implies a mode of knowing. He argues that the corresponding positive is not speaking of what is tasteful, but what does not offend taste. Thus, taste is defined precisely by the fact that it is offended by what is tasteless. He considers taste as 'the object of critical judgment by an observer'⁵². Therefore the validity of an aesthetic judgment cannot be derived and proved from a universal principle. Gadamer notes that all phenomena involve the use of language to reach understanding and that the phenomenon of taste clearly involves language. Yet the new language certainly does not mean a totally new language⁵³, because it always relates to other languages and cannot be totally definitive.

The concept of aesthetic consciousness is also discussed by Samer Akkach but from a slightly different perspective which involves more sensibility and spirituality. Akkach states that human imagination cannot deal with anything that does not have a sensible form, and representation should act as an imaginary reflection of sensible prototypes. He notes that ontological imagination plays an essential role; 'it is seen as the creative source of manifestation, the very cause of our existence, and the powerful intermediary that enables us to remain in constant contact with the infinite and the absolute'⁵⁴. He advises that the interpretive condition is influenced by a preoccupation with artistic creativity and a desire to understand the creative mechanism of imagination, both at human and divine level. He also suggests a comprehensive reading of both the universal natural symbols and particular symbols, and he focuses on the idea of the 'sacred' considering it as 'a key concept in modern discourses of the symbolism of premodern architecture'⁵⁵.

For Akkach, the 'seen' or the visible is the world of natural realities that can be known directly through sense perception, while the unseen is the world of spiritual realities that can only be grasped by imagination. He stresses the fact that religious teachings have resorted to analogy and metaphor in order to help human imagination gain insight into the unseen, and that 'the efficacy of analogy, as an illustrative and cognitive tool, hinges on the ontological link between the embodied and the abstract'⁵⁶. Hence, he suggests that analogy is the cornerstone of religious expressions that are concerned with spiritual phenomena, and that 'the Quran uses many tangible examples from the seen to explain or describe matters of unseen'⁵⁷. In order to promote a range of explorations that could enrich the understanding of architectural imagination, Akkach suggests shifting the focus from 'the unchanging essentiality of form, style and aesthetics onto the multiple and changing concepts of self and place that arise in cross-cultural encounters'⁵⁸. He

indicates two strategies that might fruitfully be tested; learning towards comparative philosophy, and also towards literature.

Likewise, Al-Sadr proposes that the interlocking aspects of things would support their interpretation and promote more understanding. He suggests a rational philosophical measure for the knowledge of the soul. The crucial role of the knowledge of the soul is emphasised by other philosophers as well. For example, Nicholas Smith asserts that we should give a primary place to the inquiry concerning the soul, because it 'contributes greatly to every kind of truth and especially to nature'⁵⁹. Al-Sadr suggests that the soul is not something that exists in an abstract form and prior to the existence of the body. It is rather the result of a substantial movement in the matter. The soul begins with this movement as material, characterised by material qualities and subjugated to the laws of matter. By means of this movement and process of completion, it acquires an immaterial existence not characterised by material qualities and not subject to the laws of matter, even though it is subject to the general laws of existence⁶⁰. Al-Sadr proposes a hypothesis that constitutes this interlocking criterion. He argues that perception is divided into two kinds; conception, which is a simple knowledge, and assent, which involves a judgement. The human mind contains two kinds of conception; simple conceptual ideas and composite ideas, which are the conceptions that result from a combination of simple conceptions. The third conception is composed of the two conception types. Consequently, all composed conceptions are reduced to simple conceptual units⁶¹. Al-Sadr calls this hypothesis 'the dispossession theory' which can be summarised as the division of mental conceptions into primary and secondary conceptions. On the basis of this framework the mind gradually establishes secondary conceptions, and as a result the stage of innovation and construction begins⁶².

Because this study is basically concerned with text, literature, and culture, I believe that the combination of some relevant theories demonstrated here may introduce an effective method for history representation. The hypotheses of both Gadamer and Akkach are particularly appropriate to this study because of their interconnectivity attitudes and their broad scope that opens up to some key concepts of understanding like art and literature. The emphasis of those thoughts on culture and on cross-cultural research would enrich the way we understand history and assist in establishing a foundation for an unconventional method in historiography. Besides, the dispossession theory of Al-Sadr may enhance this search because of the different levels of conception it applies and the connections of those levels to the 'beginning' of things. However, because the strategy of this research is to combine and integrate different ideas of different schools of thought in

order to reach a complete understanding of the 'real' urban experience, other suppositions are also included in the study.

Conclusion

The discussion of the problems of writing and representing architectural and urban histories that was carried out in this paper underlines the need for another method of interpretation and understanding history. The search for this method initiated a demonstration of the theories and hypotheses proposed by current scholars to solve the problem. Although those theories are different and sometimes contradictory, their overall outcomes add significantly to historical understanding and contribute strongly to this kind of research. This research utilises selected works of scholars like Gadamer, Akkash, and Al-Sadr, which focus on conceptual analysis more than materialistic analysis. However, this approach does not exclude scientific metaphors, but it highlights art conceptions and combines them with science in order to build a more comprehensive knowledge that helps to solve the mysteries of architectural history.

The main principle for the new method is to expand the search to other disciplines outside architecture, which would be more fruitful and more enriching. The basic incentive is to discover the goals of the conscious movement of historical achievements that is very significant in architectural studies and in art, as 'representative of higher truth'⁶³. The method looks at history as a science and does not deal with it emotionally. In addition, the terms that are implemented in this method in relation to crucial variables, such as social and cultural variables, should be understandable and as explicit as possible. Those terms should not be instructive so that they promote a different understanding of the urban experience, and call for reflections on space and architecture and different ways of historical writings that are not eminent acts of politics.

Endnotes

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³ Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, 71.

⁴ Resat Kasaba and Sibel Bozdogan (eds.), *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 146

⁵ Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, 53.

⁶ Ammar Naqshawani, *Certainty* (Toronto, Canada, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcJt7XSsHbw, 2009)

⁷ Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, 55.

- ⁸ Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, 55.
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- ²² Fukuyama, *the End of History and the Last Man*, xii.
- ²³ Crinson, *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*, xi.
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- ²⁸ C. Wright Mills, *the Social Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3.
- ²⁹ Darab Diba, *Architecture Education in the Islamic World*: proceedings of seminar ten in the series Architectural transformations in the Islamic world (1986), 188.
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- ⁴³ Frank, *ReOrient : global economy in the Asian Age*, 340.
- ⁴⁴ Said, *The world, the Text, and the Critic*, 222.
- ⁴⁵ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 32.
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