

# EMERGENCE OF FREE VERSE MOVEMENT IN ARABIC LITERATURE

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## Abstract

*The thrust of this paper is to discuss the emergence of free verse in Arabic literature. This paper also throw lights on the motives and factors which led to its composition. The coming of free verse marked a new era which changed the set pattern of metre and rhyme. In the new poetical dispensation, the metrical basic is on the uniformity of the taf'ilah and not of the verse and the poet is free to choose the number of feet in each line. The uniformity of the rhyme disappears in the new qasida and its place a number of variety of liberal rhymes appear which do not insist on the same rhyming sound at the end of every line. The new rhyme represents the culmination at which a musical sequence could be brought to an end.*

The beginning of free verse movement can be traced to 1947 in Iraq, Baghdad to be precise. This movement grew until it reached the whole Arab world and because of the great response it received from the people, it nearly swept away the other forms of Arabic poetry entirely (al-mala'ika, 1962).

At the end of the year 1947, two young Iraqi poets, both graduates of the Teachers' Training College, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, (1926 - 64) and Mrs. Nazik al - Mala'ika (born in 1923) succeeded in creating Lyric poems based on each other.

## Pristine

Revolutionary's technique called it Shi'r hurr, free verse (Morah, 1976). Their success encouraged other poets to follow them, as a result, each of the two poets claimed to have been the first to write this method and thereby to have caused the revolution in the Arabic poetry.

In December 1947 two poems were published with a new kind of versification. On 1 December 1947 the Beirut magazine al - 'Uruba published a poem by Nazik al - Mala' ika entitled al - Kulira which was described as Shi'r'hurr. To support herself in claiming prior authorship of free verse, she argued that her poem al - kulra was not only published on 1 December 1947, but in fact had been composed on 27 October of the same year. She composed it to describe or show her feeling on cholera epidemic that be felt Egypt. She said that it was due to necessity of expression that made her to discover free verse (Morah, 1976).

Al - Kulra is in al - Mutadarik metre, some verses of it run thus: -

طلع الفجر أصغ الى وقع خطى الملشين فى صمت الفجر أنظر ركب الباكين عشرة أموات عشرونا لا تحص أصبح  
للباكين اسمع صوت الطفل السكين صوتى ضاع العدد صوتى صوتى لم يبق غد فى كل مكان جسد يندبه  
محزون لا لحظة اخلا لا صعت هذا ما فعلت كفا الموت تشكو البشرية تشكو ما يرتكب الموت

### Meaning

The day breaks

I listened to the impact of the movement of people silence of the morning, he shouted, look at the caravan of people that are crying.

The deads, twenty

Do not count, he shouted to the people that are crying.

Listen to the sound of the poor child

Death, death, the count is lost,

Death, death, there is no tomorrow

In very place is a body, a sad person lamenting on it

It is not silence

This is what the hands of death have done

Death, death, death

Human complains of what death has done.

In the same month Badr Shakir - Shakir al - Sayyab published his collection Azhar dhabila in a periodical called al - Hurriyya. In it is an ode which its metre is of type, it is of al - Ramal metre and it is titled Hal Kana hubban "was it love". The poem, which was dated 29 November 1946, was described by al - sayyab. "This poem is a new attempt (Muhawala) at the verse which has various metres and rhymes. As in most western poetry - especially English - this poem combines one metre and its shorter forms (tajma' bayna bahr min al - buhur wa - majzu' ath) i.e., the number of feet (tafa' il) of the same kind differ from verse (bayt) to verse. This is an example from the collection.

هل يكون الحب انى بت عيدا اللتمنى ام هو الحب اطراح الا منيات والتقا الثغر بالغر ونسيان الحياة واختفاء العين  
فى انتشاء كانشيال عاد يفنى فى هدير أو كظ فى غدير

Will the love be that I

Became, a servant of hope or  
Is it the lover that rejects hope  
Kissing and forgetting life  
And hiding of eyes willingly.  
Like a shadow in a well.

Other pioneers of this movement include Ahmad 'Ali Bakathir. He translated Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, actually this work was an adaptation of Abu Shadi's and Shaybub's method of free verse. He changed both the metre and the number of feet from time to time.

Two years passed and no free verse was published in periodicals, until 1949 when al - Mala'ika published her *Shazaya wa - ramad* in free verse. Although she was highly criticized by the people, it is followed by success as odes were being written in free verse and sent for publication. It gradually developed afterwards.

In March 1950 an anthology of poetry was published in Beirut which was composed by Iraqi poet, 'Abd al - wahab al - Bayyati titled *malaika wa Shayatin*, (Angels and devils). There is an ode in the collection that is of free verse. Other poets followed suit in composing in free verse until some poets leave composing in two hemistichs as was the practice before (Morah, 1976).

### **Motives and Factors which led to the Composition of Free Verse**

'At the end of World War II, many Arab poets were aware that the traditional form could not do justice to the new concept of poetry which they had acquired by reading western literature. They sought a new form which would be suitable to their new styles, techniques and experience, hence the birth of a new genre in free verse composition.

The modern poet wants a new medium which keeps the clear metric rhyme, yet is simple enough to convey his feelings and thoughts but at the same time flexible enough to allow the employment of new techniques.

The new method aims at helping a poet to compose and ends his composition when what he intends to express is complete as he is not forced to end his speech in a fixed feet, he can now stop wherever he wants to do so. The new system also aims at releasing the poet from the many obstacles which confront him in conventional poetry, besides enabling him to express himself concisely (iyaz) and simply (suhula).

The real factor of innovation is the influence or the contact of foreign cultures and western poetical schools. It is this great encounter between the Arabic heritages on the one hand and the European poetry on the other which gave birth to this tremendous shock which hit the pillaristic metres of Khalil. The pioneers of this free verse movement in Arabic poetry knew the western poetical schools and were influenced by them. Sayyab stated in the introduction to his collection *Asatir* (1950), that he was influenced by English poetry in his delving into the free verse.

## *Pristine*

The attempt to imitate European poetry in form and content was as a result of the contact. The great break-through at the time technologically and otherwise and which incidentally for Arab poets a period of political struggle and changes in customs, values and ideology as well as the acquisition of a broader education made the Arab poet more sanative, more keenly aware of the events happening around him and all these are now to be reflected in his poems.

The modern Arab poet's interest in his inner world led him to sense things that cannot be expressed in conventional language therefore his poetic style tended to be obscure (Morah, 1976).

As the form and content of the old qasida are no longer suitable to modern life he then looked forward to western literature to supply him with a form and content suitable to the spirit of the time, hence the imitation of all forms of western poetry under the illusion that these imitations would rapidly bring about a literary revolution such as that which had occurred in European poetry.

According to Nazik, social factors which necessitated free verse are many but she restricted herself to four, all linked to the general public tendencies vis-a-vis a modern Arab and it revolved around the distinguishing the old poetry and the peculiar of the free verse itself.

### **1. The Tendency towards Realism**

Free use of metres enables the poet to escape from the romantic environment to reality and actuality. The modern Arab poet looked into the old forms of two hemistics and found it to be in conflict with his aim because it is a rule that qasida has to be long and with only one rhyme and in another sense it is full of singing, embellishment and highly beautiful. As the poet is chained down by the old metres coupled with many challenges of modern life which cannot give him much time to waste on the old rules he looked for freedom in a new composition. Also, the traditional form is lyrical and highly rhetorical while the poet needs a form which gives more a freedom and a simpler diction. All this is fulfilled in free verse which has a line without caesura, an irregular rhyme pattern.

2. The tendency of modern poets towards independence in the line of modern poetry where he will impose his modern personality as differentiated from the old poet's own. He wants to be independent and innovate for himself things that will be derived from modern necessities. He wants to stop from following Imrul Qays, al- Mutanabi and al- Ma'ari.

3. Their aversion to predetermined patterns, it is the nature of modern thought generally to run away from imitation of the past in arts and any other thing. The modern poet does not want to be restricted by all rules that are guiding poetry compositions of likewise language which is the source of all thoughts and poetry also do not follow an old set pattern.

A poet composes as necessity warrants, he prolongs at times and shortens when the message is conveyed and not basically on a compulsory geometrical pattern.

4. The emphasis on content rather than form. Content and form are regarded in modern philosophical investigation as two different things and they cannot be separated. As the composition of decadent period concentrated mostly on form at the expense of content, it is not a surprise when the modern Arab poets react by paying attention as well to the content and they try to be free from external superficialities. Free verse is one of these tendencies for it is a revolution on form's arbitration in poetry. The modern poet is not bound by composing in the form of two hemistiches ending with only one rhyme for he can stop his composition when his message has already been passed.

These are the four major factors according to Nazik although she says there are others if viewed from another perspective for example the view of Arab critics with regard to the old poetry seems to the young Arabs as if the old composition is the best and there is no way of composing better than it. This exoneration from blame seems to the young and modern poets to disregard any creativity or innovation.

As a result of these, a new form of Arabic poetry, *al - shi'r al - hurr* 'free poetry' emerged, which met the demands of most of the young poets, and which in their opinion, was entitled, to take the place of the classical *qasida* (Morah, 1976).

### **The Reactions of the Poets, Critics and the General Public to the Composition of Free Verse**

As usual with new invention or idea, the first reaction is usually rejection; this is the case with free verse as well. Free verse at its inception in Iraq was met with opposition from the public as well as the poets.

They regarded it as an innovation which aims at destroying Arabic poetry. The drastic change in Arabic poetry from hemistich (*shatr*) to feet (*tafilah*) is a blow to the public for it is asking it to effect a fundamental change in his understanding of poetry, hence a negative response to the new invention. The public regard the advocates of free verse as poets who are not competent enough to be abided by the rules of prosody in Arabic poetry and that any one can compose in free verse.

Some poets regard free verse as poetry which originated from *muwashshah* of Andalus and in *al - band*, 'an eighteenth century method of versification in which lines of irregular length and rhyme pattern were composed in *Ramal* and *hazaj* only'. Nazik replied by showing the fundamental difference between free verse and *muwashshah* in the first one being poetry of feet (*tafilahs*) and the other on hemistich. She argued that *al Band* was not known except in Iraq with its colloquia 1 form and so, it is clear that free verse cannot originate from it. Some poets of the period even called it a prose and not poetry. With regard to the critics, many of them could not see the difference between conventional poetry and free verse and were therefore opposed to the latter. Some argued that it was not poetry at all, but prose distributed into sections over the page, since it lacked the conventional form of the *qasida* while others said it was improved from Europe and would be rejected by the Arabic language while others counted it as a plot against Arabic language, nationality and heritage.

In conclusion, the first reaction was that of enmity at the new movement of the free verse in 1947 but it started spreading greatly in 1952 (Morah, 1976).

### **The Forms of Free Verse and How it Differs from Classical Composition**

The classical form of the Arabic qasida (poem) consist in keeping each one of its verses completely identical with the others in the chosen number of tafilahs (feet) in the accepted standard of the metre used. Thus the first poetic line will be a standard that will hence be followed in the subsequent lines and the number of taf' ilahs will remain unchanged in the poem. The poet therefore could not increase or decrease the number of feet in any line until the end of the poem (al-Jeboury, n.d.).

Each line of the poem is divided into two equal halves and each contains the same number of taf' ilahs. Each verse, bayt, plural abyat, consists of two hemistichs, termed misra'u or shatr. The first of these hemistichs is called sadr, and the second al-'Ajuz.

In the words of Wright (1977), 'The rhyme, al-gafiya is under special restrictions, for according to ancient rile, the two hemistichs of the first verse of a qasida must rhyme with one another, and the same rhyme must be repeated at the end of every verse throughout the whole poem, the rhyme may be of two types, muqayyada and mutlaqu. It is called muqayyada or fettered, when the verse ends with a consonant and mutlaqu or loose when it ends with a vowel.

Al-Rawiy, is the essential part of the rhyme which is a letter, it remains the same throughout the entire composition and it binds the verses together to form one whole and it is by its letter that the whole poem is called. If it ends in lam (letter l) it is called lamiya. The changes that caruxxiir to the feet of a poetic line called zihafat and ilal. In this case the particular foot is being re-arranged and they are of different types with particular metres that they can match. In the case of 'ilal, the change can either be by addition or subtraction of letters as the case may be.

Due to the very nature of poetical composition, a poet is given some licences which in the normal prose-writing, it is not given. Some slight changes in the consonants of a word, or in its vowels can be effected by a poet due to the exigencies of metre or rhyme poetical necessity (Wright, 1977).

In all, the Arabic metres are ordinarily reckoned to be sixteen in number and they are enumerated as follows with their feet. Each hemistich will be repeated twice to form a line:

الطويل = فعولن مفاعيل فعولن مفاعيل

المدید = فاعلاتن فاعلن فاعلياتن

البسيط = مستفعلن فاعلن مستفعلن فعلن

الكامل = متفاعلن متفاعلن متفاعلن

الوافر = مفاعلتن مفاعلتن فعولن

الرمل = فاعلاتن فاعلاتن فاعلن

السريع = مستفعلن مستفعلن فاعلن

al-Munsarij = مستفعلن فاعلاتن مفتعلن المنسرج  
al-Khafif = فاعلاتن مستفعلن فاعلاتن الخفيف  
al-Mudhari = مفاعلهن فاعلاتن المضارع  
al-Muqtadhab = فاعلاتن مفتعلن المقتضب  
al-Mujtath = مستفعلن فاعلاتن المجتث  
al-Mutadarik = فاعلهن فاعلهن فاعلهن المتدارك  
al-Mutaqarib = فعولن فعولن فعولن المتقارب

'Among these if rajaz metre is left out of account the favourites with the old poets are the tawil, kamil, wafer, basit, mutaqarib and sari'.

These metres serve as the musical basis for the qasida, however its main concern is the equality of each one of its verses in the number of metrical units and consonants' as well as vowel' sequence. The classical Arabic metres do not concern itself with the internal musicality of work which results from the different sounds, vowels, and consonants. The result of this was that the traditional metres acquired the sharp, strong musicality having a succession of bangs on the ear-drum, full of repetition and monotony (al-Jeboury, n.d.).

The set pattern remains almost without change in its long journey from the pre-Islamic era to modern period which covers about 1500 years, in its journey different ages and civilization were come across.

It is in the light of this that the new free verse movement came after the meeting with the technologically superior and advanced west, then the rejection of the traditional form of qasida began shattering the uniformity which imposed on the poet's emotions a specific, regular and definite reaction hence the new movement emphasizes the incapability of the traditional metres to accommodate the new content. In the new poetical dispensation, 'the metrical basis is on the uniformity of the taf' ilah and not of the verse and the poet is free to choose what number of feet in each line. This may be one taf ilah or even half a taf ilah. It could even be any number of taf ilahs the poet requires to build up his musical sentence in response to his emotions and his artistic inclination.

The uniformity of the rhyme also disappears in the new qasida and in its place a number of variety of liberal rhymes appears which does not insist on the same rhyming sound at the end of every line. The new rhyme represents the culmination at which a musical sequence could be brought to an end. Hence the modern poet is free of artificiality of seeking a suitable rhyme in a list of words having the name ending which is the practice of the old poet. The new rhyme can be any word in the language which constitutes a complementary musical structure; the modern Arabic poets felt the inadequacy of the limited poetical metres to adequately express their emotions and feelings. It is the desire to express the tunes that are set by their emotions that easthetic philosophy which underlines the traditional musical patterns.

## *Pristine*

In her book *qadaya al-shi 'ir al-Mu'asir*, Nazik al-Mala'ikah laid down rules with regards to the feet and metres of free verse. However, as this was based on her own taste coupled with the rules that she laid down which restrict the freedom of a poet, the modern poet gives himself more freedom than she gave.

According to her, if for example a poet is composing in al-ramal metre the freedom he gets is that he can vary the number of feet but the number cannot exceed its maximum number which is three in a line and that the metre cannot be mixed with other meter.

With regards to its metre, she divided them into two, namely the pure metres and the mixed metres. The pure ones are the metres in which the feet are the same throughout the hemistich while the mixed ones are whereby there are variations of feet. She therefore chose eight metres that are suitable for modern free verse poetry, they are as follows: al-kamal, al-ramal 'al-Hazaj, al-Rajaz, al-Mutaqarab, al-Mutadarak, Al-sari' and al-Wafir. None of the remaining traditional metres, she says, can be suitable for modern free verse poetry. 'As it has already been pointed out, the modern Arab poet gives himself more freedom than the one dictated by Nazik according to her taste (al-Jeboury, n.d.).

There are some inventions also with regard to feet and metres one of such inventions is the foot fa'ilu which is being used in Mutadarik metre whose main foot is Fa'ilun, and another variation (zihaf) of which is fa'ilun (Khabah) as used by Nazik al-Mala'ikah, ' Salah Abd al-Sabur and others. The poets also engaged in mixing metres like using rajaz feet in verses of kamil metre and vice versa. It may also be altering of the last foot in verses with mustafilun from fa'ilun to fa'ulun, and thereby mix rajaz with sari' or mixture of hazaj and wafer by mixing their different feet after some alternations.

However this revolution included the rhyme (qafiya). Instead, of rhyme variation in Arabic poetry, he gives himself great license by changing the rhyme according to the idea or the feeling involved. The fixed and rigid structure of a poem, and the matrix of an opening and closing part of the verse were done away with. The use of enjambment (tadmin) was permitted, that is linking of a verse with that coming after it or before it with regard to content and grammatical construction - which was absolutely forbidden in classical poetry. In the words of Moreh, 'another concession in the rules of rhyming was in the use of qafiya muqayyada, a rhyme ending in sukun, in order to be rid of the grammatical construction which requires that every rhyme should have the same, final vowel (qafiya mutlaqa).(al-malai'kah, 1962)

## **Conclusion**

There were many attempts to change the form of Arabic poetry but they did not succeed. However, the great break-through came towards the end of the year 1947 when two young Iraqi poets composed without following the traditional two hemistichal and it was done in free verse. The two successful pioneers are Nazik al-malaika and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. Despite the criticism that the trial first met two years later when



Malaika published another poem in free verse, it was followed by many compositions in free-verse afterwards. After the efforts of these poets, the new genre spread all over the Arab world, especially among young poets.

The real factor which helped in the innovation and which made free-verse possible was the contact of foreign cultures and western poetical schools. Modern poets believe that the traditional way of qasida cannot express their inner feelings. According to Nazik, there are four major factors which necessitated the free verse composition. They are (a) The tendency towards realism (b) The tendency of modern poets to be free from the traditional set-pattern of Arabic composition, (c) Their aversion to predetermined patterns and (d) The emphasis on content rather than form.

As a result of these, the young poets embraced the free verse and with the hope that it will replace the classical qasida.

The drastic change which was effected in Arabic poetry is that the basis of Arabic poetry which was hemistich was now changed to feet.

As usual with new inventions, they first of all meet opposition and enmity but they will be accepted later, so also was free-verse. It was in 1952, five years after its inception that it started spreading greatly.

The classical form of Arabic poetry consists in keeping each one of its verses completely identical with the others in the chosen number of *taf' ilahs* (feet) used in a metre. This will be a standard to be followed in the rest composition with the same feet. Each line of the poem is divided into two equal halves with the same number of feet. The rhyme must also be the same throughout. *Al-rawly* is the essential part of the rhyme and it is a letter. The poem is named according to the last letter of the rhyme.

A poet is also given some licences which in the normal prose-writing, he is not given. The metres are sixteen and they are not concerned with the internal music of a work which results from the different sounds, vowels, and consonants. The traditional pattern remained almost without change in its 1500 years sojourn from pre-Islamic era to modern period.

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