The Strategy of Iconization through Metaphor in Contemporary ArabicPoetic Discourse

A Reading of the Poem "The Book of Exile and the City" by Mohamed Afifi Matar

استراتجية الأيقنة عبر الاستعارة في الخطاب الشعري العربي المعاصر

-قراءة في قصيدة كتاب المنفى والمدينة لـ محمد عفيفي مطر -

Lemdjadie Souria
souriya.lemdjadi@univ-relizane.dz
Relizane University – Algeria

Received 2025-05-07 Accepted 2025-08-12 Published. 17-12-2025

Abstract:

Metaphor performs the function of iconic formation in poetic discourse. Mohamed Afifi Matar intensively utilizes it in a way that transforms his discourse into an icon, contributing to the generation of meanings that are continuously born and flow in a dynamic movement that defines the path of the discourse.

This research paper aims to examine the effectiveness of metaphor in the structural formation of poetic discourse and in expanding its visual domain. In Matar's poetry, metaphor dominates through formations that resist submission to conventional standards and break free from logical constraints, aligning instead with the demands of his poetic experience. It operates by opening up meanings parallel to his intentions and reinforces his unique visions. Based on the foregoing, we conclude that metaphor is effective in the iconic formation of poetic discourse and contributes to constructing the bridge of the poem, allowing for the extension of the visual dimension of writing. Thus, we may ask: to what extent do its meanings align with the architecture of the discourse? Do they integrate with its requirements, melting into a unified crucible and a singular icon that indicates specific meanings, or do the icons multiply and the meanings fragment with the variation of metaphors?

Keywords: metaphor, icon, meanings of iconization, poetic discours

ملخص:

تؤدي الاستعارة فعالية التشكيل الأيقوني للخطاب الشعري، ومن ثم يرد استثمار "**محمد عفيفي مطر**" لها بكيفية مكثفة، تحيل خطاباته إلى أيقونة، تسهم في إنتاج الدلالات التي تتوالد وتتوالى في حركية مستمرة محددة مسار الخطاب.

من هنا تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية للوقوف على فعالية الاستعارة في التشكيل البنائي للخطاب الشعري وتوسيع حيزه البصري إذ تهيمن في خطاب **عفيفي** الشعري بتشكيلات تتأبّى الخضوع للمعايير الوضعية، وتتنافى أسر المكبلات المنطقية فتساير مقتضيات تجربته، إذ تمارس فعل الفتق للدلالات الموازية لمقاصده وتكرس لرؤاه المتفردة.

وردفا على ما تم إيراده نخلص إلى فعالية الاستعارة في التشكيل الأيقوني للخطاب الشعري، ومساهمتها في تشييد جسر القصيدة، إذ تتيح مكنة تمدد الحيز البصري للكتابة. وعليه يمكننا التساؤل عن مدى تساوق دلالاتها مع هندسة الخطاب، وهل تتوافق ومقتضياته، بحيث تنصهر ضمن بوتقة جامعة وأيقونة موحدة، تشي بالدلالات المحددة، أم تتعدد الأيقونات وتتشظى الدلالات بتغاير الاستعارات؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعارة، الأيقونة، دلالات التأيقن، الخطاب الشعري.

1. Introduction:

Poetic writing entered the path of modernity when it departed from linear rhetorical structures and transcended their prior constraints through metaphorical practices that are constantly renewed, forming a unique style with its own horizon. Thus, it became necessary to move beyond the narrow concept of metaphor, as it shifts from being a fixed given to a broader realm where it becomes a fundamental essence in structure and formation, with its paths generating meanings that determine the trajectory of discourse. This shift culminated in true contrast with modern writing, moving toward a "modern visuality that severs its ties with traditional metaphor to create new foundations for poetic expression," thereby expanding into open and renewed forms[i].

Metaphor was not limited to theoretical visual rhetoric but underwent modern procedures in attempts to uncover its complexities and elicit its meanings. It was no longer confined to the gears of critical tradition but instead aligned with modern techniques—especially semiotics, which is the most suitable field for dealing with visual discourses with iconic traits. Hence, metaphor becomes an echo of the path laid by Mohamed Afifi Matar, who sought to escape the coercion of reality through constant transformation and change, aiming to transcend to an alternate reality.

Based on this, we may ask: to what extent does metaphor contribute to expanding the space of poetic discourse? And how is the strategy of iconization achieved through metaphor?

2. The Icon of Metaphorical Formation

2.1 Metaphor and the Field of Iconization:

Charles Sanders Peirce conceptualized the icon as part of his classification of signs[ii], based on their relationship to their object. He defined the icon by its reliance on similarity, distinguishing it from the index, which is based on causality or logic, and the symbol, which is shaped by convention and agreement[iii]. If metaphor falls under the category of the icon, it is because "the principle under which the iconic sign operates is the same principle that organizes metaphor[iv]"—that is, similarity, which is the umbilical cord connecting the two. Thus, every metaphor becomes an icon contributing to the structural formation of poetic discourse and expanding its visual domain, as long as its system is founded on similarity. "In this context, a sharp philosophical debate emerged regarding the iconic tendency and the principle of similarity, especially among Italian semioticians, where visual semiotics focused on exploring the relationship of similarity offered by the aesthetics of the image in modern and postmodern literature[v]," where the image gained performative authority and vision became an active means of approach.

Accordingly, metaphor becomes a path toward liberation from restrictive standards and a means to access visual rhetoric. In Matar's work, metaphor follows a trajectory aligned with the linearity of writing, where the components interconnect and reinforce one another, moving collectively toward a specific meaning. If one unit shifts toward a certain intention, the other units follow in loyalty and alignment.

2.2 Metaphor and the Meanings of Visual Formation:

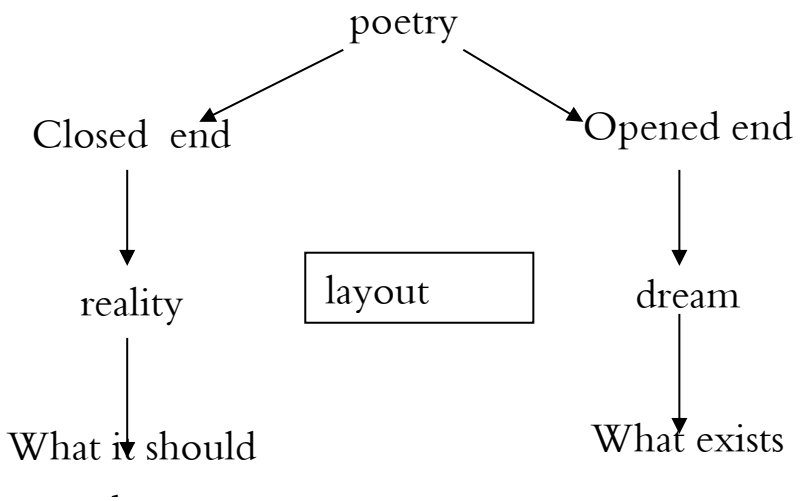
Following this path of metaphor, his poem *The Book of Exile and the City*[vi] presents a harmony between the external structural framework and the internal content formation, turning the entire discourse "with all its partial elements into a 'semiotic unit' or a 'grand sign,' wherein the external aspect (…) functions as the signifier or the carrier of the sign, and the internal conceptual aspect represents the signified or the concept[vii]."

As the discourse is based on an icon of contrast between (what is—the reality) and (what should be—the dream), visual formation can be considered a signifying unit. "The poem demonstrates a high degree of necessity in selecting and organizing the visual scene[viii]" consisting of ten sections that reflect the poet's vision and experience in shaping a binary: between reality and dream, between what exists and what should be.

This reflects the shattered, collapsing reality of the Arab nation, especially after the 1967 defeat and successive failures and betrayals, and the poet's dream of change and longing for a

bright future. Yet, the bleakness of this reality does not lead the poet to retreat or surrender, but rather to call for transformation.

Thus, we witness the discourse's opening and closure—opening when it is linked to the dream and hope for renewal, and closure when it is bound to reality. This can be illustrated in the following way:



We may confine our identification of the poem's external visual structure to the tenth stanza, as it serves as an icon that summarizes the course of the discourse and suggests its meanings. In it, the poet follows two movements based on contrast.

The first movement, represented by the *right side*, shows the poet starting from his current reality in a horizontal motion, journeying toward a dreamlike time and an ideal world filled with meanings of light, brightness, strength, unity, and freedom. This takes the form of a vertical ascending movement from bottom to top, representing the poet's personal journey and his hope for a safe passage toward another world characterized by renewal, unity, freedom, and life.

The second movement, represented by the *left side*, depicts the poet beginning again from the negativity of his shaky, defeated reality, moving horizontally and then ascending to a mythical dreamlike time illuminated with radiant brightness, also in a vertical upward motion. However, this journey does not last long; his hope is shattered, his dream dissipates, and he returns to his earthly, realistic world filled with meanings of weakness, fragmentation, defeat, death, and extinction.

We find that the **open ending** is associated with the *right side* and with the concept of the "right" in both religious teachings and popular tradition, which is often linked to goodness,

blessing, optimism, strength, work, and peace. It is also a symbol of faith and a happy ending, as in the Almighty's saying:

"Then as for he who is given his book in his right hand, he will say: 'Here, read my book! Surely I knew I would meet my reckoning.' So he will be in a pleasant life, in a lofty Garden." (Surah Al-Haqqah, 22)

And also:

"Except the companions of the right, [who will be] in gardens, asking one another…" (Surah Al-Muddaththir, 39)

Thus, the right is associated with a good reward, entry into Paradise—which is light, freedom from Hell, security, and victory of faith over disbelief, truth over falsehood, light over darkness, and freedom over slavery. Accordingly, the *right side* becomes linked to the hope for victory, the achievement of freedom and unity, and the dream of a happy ending for the unified Arab-Islamic nation. Just as the end of the companions of the right is open to a new life filled with light, goodness, liberation, and the attainment of desires, so too is the ending of the poem's right side open to the hope of a bright future, a new reality, and the fulfillment of the poet's longing for victory, unity, and freedom. The "right" is also connected to the behavior of the believer, and numerous sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) affirm this notion (eating and drinking with the right hand, sleeping on the right side, etc.).

On the other hand, the **closed ending** is associated with the *left side*, and with the concept of "left," which is, as confirmed by religious texts and popular tradition, a symbol of evil, weakness, fragmentation, loss, defeat, and enslavement. It also symbolizes disbelief and a tragic, grim, and dark ending. As Allah says:

"But as for he who is given his book in his left hand, he will say, 'Oh, would that I had not been given my book and had not known what is my account! Would that it [death] had been the end! My wealth has not availed me. My authority has gone from me.' Seize him and shackle him. Then cast him into the Hellfire." (Surah Al-Haqqah, verses 25–31)

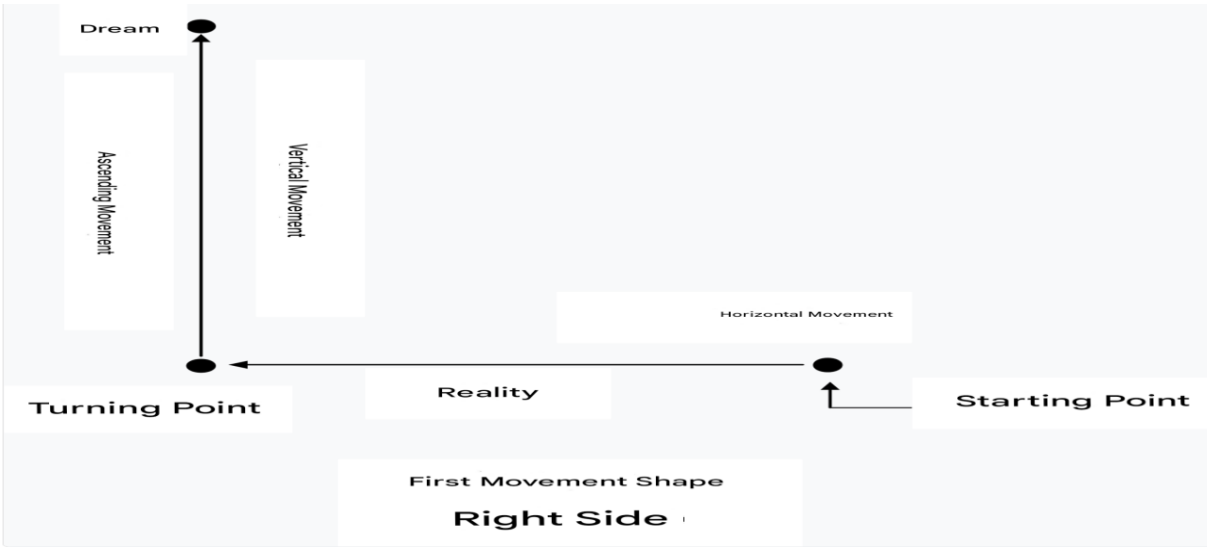
The *left* is thus associated with a closed, hellish ending, a determined fate, and a bad reward—hell, torment, loss, defeat, enslavement, death, and annihilation. This is the punishment for the disbeliever, and it aligns with the ending of the left side in the poem, which suggests a tragic, hellish, and terrifying ending for the Arab nation, in its weakness, defeat, and surrender. It also expresses the poet's disbelief in this reality, his rejection of it, and his refusal to submit to it.

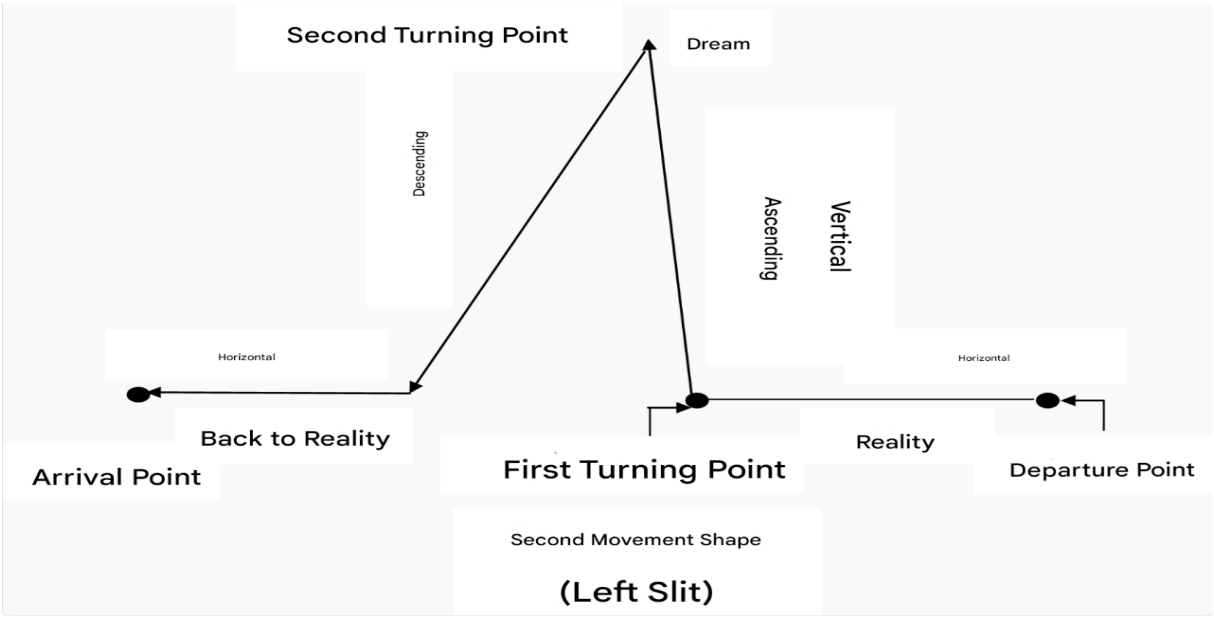
The *left* is also associated with the behaviors of the disbeliever (the acts of Satan), all of which are evil, suggesting darkness, weakness, defeat, and slavery—all meanings embodied by the *left side*.

Moreover, we find that **dreaming and hope for a new tomorrow** are linked to the *right side*, while **acknowledging the defeated reality** is linked to the *left side*. As scientifically confirmed, and in terms of the **human brain**, the right hemisphere is responsible for imagination and dreaming, whereas the left hemisphere is responsible for logic and reality. Therefore, in the *right side*, the poet dreams of achieving his aspirations, while in the *left side*, he is subjected to the authority of the mind and can only submit to his reality and acknowledge its tragedy and defeat.

When the poet speaks of his reality, his motion is **horizontal (material)**, indicating monotony and attachment to the lower, degraded realm. In contrast, the **vertical movement** is associated with his ascension in the kingdom of the dream (his soul), with its implications of elevation, transcendence, and nobility. This passage also evokes the **Isra and Mi'raj** (the Night Journey and Ascension) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), where the *Isra* was a horizontal (physical) journey, while the *Mi'raj* was a vertical (spiritual) ascension.

We can represent the dynamics and visual structure of this stanza with the following diagram:





Arab-Islamic nation is likened to the earth, which in turn is likened to a corpse—suggesting weakness, rigidity, petrification, death, and extinction.

The earth is like a corpse after burial, outstretched,

Its yellow hands slack, its face empty,

And its braid tied with terror[viii]

The poet intensifies the negative implications by adding *"after burial,"* since a corpse before burial still retains some features, while after burial it becomes remains, losing all distinct features. In this way, he amplifies the connotations of the Arab nation's dissolution, weakness, the disappearance of its civilization, features, and values.

The fate of a corpse after burial is either Paradise or Hell, and the reward corresponds to the deeds. The *hand* is a symbol of action, as in the verse:

"Indeed, We have warned you of a near punishment, on the Day when a man will observe what his hands have sent before, and the disbeliever will say, 'Oh, I wish I were dust!'" (Surah An-Naba, verse 40)

Based on the hand—symbolizing action—the state of the *face* (a symbol of fate and outcome) becomes apparent. As in the verse:

"Some faces that Day will be bright, laughing, rejoicing. And other faces that Day will be covered with dust, enveloped in darkness." (Surah Abasa, verses 38–40)

If the corpse has let fall yellow hands, then surely its face bears the marks of weakness and fading—and thus fear and terror of a tragic end. There is a progressive causal sequence between the *hand*, *face*, and *terror*. The yellow hands cause the empty face, which in turn leads to *terror*, which is the final outcome. Similarly, the Arab-Islamic nation has become petrified and lost its identity and foundations because it failed to assert its presence and did not harness what would ensure its strength and freedom, leading to a tragic end and fear of both the present and the future, and from enemies lying in wait.

In the sixth stanza, he says:

"And in the dreadful nights
My eyes are a nest for birds,
A beacon for ships,
Perfume bottles for virgins,
A pie for the weaned child,
A missing father for orphans,
And for broken hearts
Connections, and a sun
Hidden, unseen
Except by blind eyes.[ix]"

The poet multiplies the negative connotations of reality by using the metaphor *("dreadful nights")* to signify it. *Nights* suggest: darkness, fear, weakness, defeat, and enslavement. He intensifies their terrifying connotations by adding the adjective *"dreadful,"* creating associative, symbolic relationships that reflect the ugliness of reality and thus the urgent need for change.

And the meanings that emanate from 'my eyes' are as follows:

First Limit	Second Limit
For the birds	Nest
For the ships	Lighthouse
For the infant	Pastry
For the orphans	Absent father
For the virgins	Perfume bottles
For broken hearts	Connections and the sun

Broken hearts – connections and a sun"

This indicates the reality's need for completion. Upon mentioning *(the bird)*, we immediately recall *(a nest)* due to the bird's essential need for it—they are interdependent. The same applies to the remaining images:

- **Nest**: reinforces the meaning of the bird's need for shelter.
- **Beacon**: reinforces the meaning of the ship's need for guidance.
- **Pie**: reinforces the meaning of the weaned child's need for food.
- **Absent father**: reinforces the meaning of the orphan's need for paternal care.

Thus, this forms a flood of meanings that intensify the *nation's* urgent need for transformation, emphasizing the poet's rejection of his current reality and his aspiration for a new tomorrow. This can be illustrated in the following diagram:

Reality The Need for Change Needing Needed By

Terrible Nights	**My Eyes**	**For the Birds**	**Nest**
		For the Ships	Lighthouse
		For the Infant	Pastry
		For the Orphans	Absent Father
		For the Virgins	Perfume Bottles
		For Broken Hearts	Connections and the Sun

Negativity of Reality → Change

A gradual relationship, one leading to the other due to its necessity and urgency.

The poet deceives the reader and subverts their expectations in the line:

"Connections and a sun

Hidden, seen only

By blind eyes."

The *hidden sun* is a metaphor for the Arab nation the poet dreams of. The reader expects the conclusion: *"seen only by discerning eyes"*, but the poet subverts this with: *"by blind eyes"*, intensifying and reinforcing the idea of the nation's absence and emphasizing the negativity of reality.

Likewise, in the tenth stanza:

"A body abandoned by water,

And water abandoned by memory.[x]"

The poet uses this metaphor as an icon of the Arab nation's reality—a body without water signifies death and extinction. But the idea of memory abandoning water raises the question: does water even have memory? Most might agree it doesn't. Yet water has a deep and rich memory, as it is tied to the Arab nation's civilization and history (Tigris and Euphrates, Nile, Mediterranean). No great civilization can exist without water—it holds the memory of a people and a nation, their foundations, principles, victories, and civilization.

If memory has abandoned water, it signifies the erasure of the nation's civilization and its forgetfulness of its heritage, past, and history—its values and foundations lost. This expresses the material decline of the Arab nation (*a body abandoned by water*) and its spiritual decline (*water abandoned by memory*). Thus, the inevitable death of this nation—materially and spiritually.

We find that *"a body abandoned by water"* is in the present tense, while *"water abandoned by memory"* is in the past tense. There's a consequential relationship between them: the first is the result of the second. So, the nation's abandonment of its values and forgetfulness of its ancestors' memory has led to weakness, decline, and defeat. Physical death is a result of spiritual death. There's a temporal gap between the two deaths—the latter precedes the former—hence its expression in the past tense, while the former is in the present tense, indicating ongoing weakness and decline. A reverse reading suggests that the nation's victory depends on its adherence to its heritage, values, and principles.

As for metaphors that serve as icons of the *dream* (what ought to be), they appear densely in the poem, in parallel and contrast to those representing *reality*. We focus here on the metaphor from the tenth stanza:

"I dream that in
Flourishing poems,
A new sun
And a cloud and a bridge shall bloom."[xi]

These lines are syntactically correct, yet what Rivater calls "syntactic transgression" appears on the level of meaning and imitation, not grammar[xii]. The poet likens the *poems* to a *tree* (the metaphorical object), omits the direct comparison, and retains one of its attributes—*"to bloom"*—assigning it to *poems*, and describes them as *flourishing*. This metaphorical construction contains implicit meanings and conveys them symbolically or through what semioticians call *connotative meanings* [xiii]beyond conventional meanings.

Flourishing poems cannot literally *bloom*, but this metaphor evokes ideas of renewal, rebirth, greenness, fertility, growth, freedom, and life. The *new sun* becomes an icon of the poet's dream: it symbolizes brightness, light, hope, and freedom. The *cloud* connotes fertility, growth, and life, while the *bridge* symbolizes unity and strength. These meanings intertwine, drawing the reader's attention away from dictionary definitions and toward the artistic qualities of the poem's language[xiv]—serving the poet's desire for a new dawn, a strong, unified Arab-Islamic nation.

If we have pointed to some metaphors as icons of either dream or reality, many more in the poem point to both. They thus become *icons of contrast*, such as in the first stanza:

"I came to her... between the gasp of celebration and dying
I placed my palm on her belly,
And my love for her became the spell of ripening
And my wrath toward her a cracked ship
Between oil and fire
And my voice became an angry supplication and a waiting
For the spikes of wounds
And my love became a bleeding and a spear tearing the flesh of defeat
Digging in the heart of ancient borders
A grave, splitting the belly of the winds
I placed my hand on her breast
And she handed me a map from which I begin conquests
And she handed me a banner—for death (or for resurrection)"[xv]

Previously, the poet likened the earth to a corpse. In this passage, he uses the metaphor of *womanhood*, omitting the direct comparison and retaining signs of it (*belly* and *breast*). Thus, the earth becomes a woman, for she holds the potential for fertility, rebirth, and life—humanity was formed from her clay, and people are her children. So both earth and woman serve as metaphors for the Arab nation.

The poet foretells the state of the nation by placing his hand on its *belly* and *breast*. The *belly* and *breast* are complementary—the first enables birth, the second sustains life. In the poem, the belly becomes an icon of *reality*, associated with materiality, offspring, and physical conditions—representing the nation's material state, its people's weakness and defeat.

The *breast* becomes an icon of the *dream*, what ought to be, as it nourishes life and growth. A child feeds from their mother's milk—the source of their development. The earth's breast is the

source from which we draw spiritual values, Islamic and human principles: freedom, justice, righteousness, and victory—it is the source of spiritual growth and transcendence.

Thus, the poet affirms that these principles still exist and will not vanish. Victory is only possible by embracing and embodying them. If the *body* (belly) is lost, the *spirit* (breast) remains.

While the poem as a whole presents an external form supported by an internal vision, revealing a contrast between *what is* and *what could be*, this *icon of opposition* is subsumed under a broader *icon of divergence*. The poet draws on the image of *earth* to portray the Arab nation's dual state: the current *reality* (what is) versus the *dream* (what should be), evolving and intersecting in ways that fuel the continuity of meaning and the movement of the poetic discourse. This can be summarized in the following diagram:

Icon of Opposition

Icon of Divergence

Similarity	**Reality**	≠	**Dream**
Woman	My woman		My imagined woman
Arab lands			Distant lands
Hidden sun			New sun
Bedouin cities		≠	My distant city
Dreadful nights			Green sun and its clear sign
Time (descending stairs)			Time (horizon)

Contrast

**"And based on what has been presented, we discern Afifi's obsession with contradictions and his passion for paradoxes through the icon of opposition. This icon not only structures this particular text but also extends to color many of his poems. It thus becomes his signature, the hallmark by which he is known, the doctrine he follows, and the code to which he is bound. For it represents 'a foundational element [...] that enables words and images to serve as stimuli, prompting other words and images to emerge, be born, or explode[xvi]

It embodies his rejection of a collapsed reality, his rebellion against its monotony, and his resentment toward its consequences. As a result, he suffers from spiritual exile and a spatiotemporal alienation—something clearly reflected in his declaration:

'Neither is the land my land, nor are the days my days.

O my thirsty body,

Drink your own blood, and dig your bleeding grave

In the wind.'[xvii]

Conclusion:

In summary, we arrive at the effectiveness of metaphor in the iconic structuring of poetic discourse and its contribution to constructing the bridge of the poem. Metaphor enables an expansion of the visual space of writing, as the inner layers of the text take shape in the form of images and visual scenes that we observe, interact with, and through which we experience shifting times and explore diverse places. In this way, writing diversifies with the variety of metaphors and is renewed through differing situations, enriched by the imaginative space that allows for variation in weaving the fabric of imagery—by invoking the absent, personifying the unknown, embodying the abstract, and animating the inanimate.

However, 'limiting their meanings to what is perceived by sight alone, as was previously conceived, narrows their scope and prevents a vast array of other sensory images—with all their functional significances and evocative powers—from being included.' This is because imagery, in its formation, relies on all types of senses: hearing, smell, taste, touch—even intuition and feeling. Consequently, metaphorical images multiply[xviii], their branches extend and intertwine into a set of interconnected icons, which collectively contribute to a coherent network that signifies a unified meaning across the entire fabric of the discourse.

References

[i] khayr bik kamal (1982). *The movement of modernity in contemporary Arabic poetry: A study on the social and cultural aspects of literary trends* (Trans. Committee of the Author's Friends). (1st ed., p. 193).

[ii] Fakhouri, A. (1990). *Streams in semiotics* (pp. 23-24). Dar al-Tali'a. Piers, C. S. (n.d.). *Writings on the sign* (G. Deledalle, Trans.). (pp. 148-149, 154-161).

[iii] Al-Makri, M. (1961). *Form and discourse: An introduction to phenomenological analysis* (p. 309). The Arab Cultural Center

[iv] Yusuf, A. (n.d.). *Descriptive semiotics: Semiotic logic and the laws of signs* (p. 87). The Arab Cultural Center.

[v] Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (pp. 57-84).

[vi] Qasim, S., & Abu Zayd, N. (1986). *Introduction to semiotics* (pp. 240-241). Dar Elias al-Asriyah.

[vii] Schulz, W. (1994). *Semiotics and interpretation* (S. al-Ghanimi, Trans., pp. 93-94). The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing.

[viii] Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (p. 57).

[ix] Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *The book of exile and the city: Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (p. 65).

[x] Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *The book of exile and the city: Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (p. 84).

[xi] IBID ,77

[xii] Schulz, R. (n.d.). *Semiotics and interpretation* (p. 82).

[xiii] Al-Ghadami, A. (2006). *Sin and atonement from structuralism to anatomical theory: Theory and application* (6th ed., p. 26). The Arab Cultural Center.

[xiv] Qasim, S., & Abu Zayd, N. (n.d.). *Introduction to semiotics* (p. 243).

[xv] Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *The book of exile and the city: Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (p. 60).

[xvi] - Al-Yousfi, M. L. (1992). *On the structure of contemporary Arabic poetry: A case study of Al-Sayyab, Saadi Yusuf, Darwish, and Adonis* (2nd ed., p. 85). Dar Beiras for Publishing and Distribution

[xvii]. Afifi Matar, M. (n.d.). *The book of exile and the city: Features of the ambid face and Qulaisi* (p. 64

[xviii] - Shafi, S. (1999). *Reading poetry and building meaning* (p. 238). Dar Gharib.