

**Modernist experimentation in Algerian poetry: A study in the poem
Against the Time of the Mule by Ammar bin Zayed as a model**

التجريب الحداثي في القصيدة الجزائرية دراسة في –

قصيدة ضد الزمان البغل- لعمار بن زايد- أنموذجا.

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Abstract:

Modernism seeks to uncover the new and represents a clear attempt to reveal and express the progress of Arab thought over half a century, adapting to the demands of the era. Experimentation, in this sense, is a step beyond the prevailing norms. It can be said that any attempt in literature could be labeled as experimental because it encompasses notions of novelty, creativity, and innovation.

Keywords: Poetic experimentation, poetic modernism, contemporary Algerian poetry, creativity.

ملخص:

ترمي الحداثة إلى الكشف عن الجديد وهي محاولة واضحة للبحث والتعبير عن تقدم الفكر العربي عبر نصف قرن، والتماشي مع متطلبات العصر، والتجريب هو تجاوز وتخطي لما هو سائد، ويمكن القول أن كل محاولة في الأدب يمكننا أن نطلق عليها تجريباً لأنها تحمل معاني الجدة والخلق والابتكار.

كلمات مفتاحية: التجريب الشعري، الحداثة الشعرية، الشعر الجزائري المعاصر، الإبداع.

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1. Introduction

The creative poetic experience lies in the vision of the modern poet, his inclinations, and his artistic experimentation, shaped by profound social and political changes that significantly impact his psyche. The poet, as part of the world, seeks to carve a place for himself. The Arab world was not isolated from foreign influences coming from all directions. The search for newness in literature and art has been a constant, and initiating cultural change within the Arab society is far from easy. However, Arab modernism has pushed art and creativity to break free from stifling conventionalism.

The emergence of a pioneering modernist literature, both rebellious and aspirational, is often perceived as the literature of the elite. Nonetheless, it represents a collective defiance of traditional forms, with creativity built on difference, experimentation, and the breach of the familiar. This includes rejection, rebellion, ambiguity, symbolism, and mythology, alongside the diversity of experimental challenges in contemporary Algerian poetry. These challenges weigh heavily on both creators and critics. The contemporary poet strives to achieve an ideal, innovative text that bears the mark of originality, breaking monotony.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Algerian poetry witnessed a strikingly creative renewal, with poets mastering the aesthetics of their literary productions through experimentation. Our focus is the poem "Against Time, the Mule" by Algerian poet Ammar Bin zayed. What can be said about this poem as a contribution to literature? Has Ammar Bin zayed succeeded in crafting a purely modernist text in this poem? What are the features and manifestations of modernist experimentation in "Against Time, the Mule" in terms of structure and meaning?

Among the most prominent hypotheses to consider in this context are:

- Experimentation is modernism.
- Experimentation is a hallmark of modern poetry.
- Experimentation is the essence of creativity and innovation.

Objectives of the Research:

The research aims to:

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1. Attempt to define a comprehensive concept of modernism and experimentation and explore the relationship between them.
2. Analyze the chosen poem within the scope of experimentation.
3. Focus on Algerian poetry in light of the surrounding circumstances and changes it has undergone, both in form and content, across generations—from the revolutionary generation to the independence generation, and beyond. One reason for selecting this topic is its relevance to my academic thesis, particularly focusing on the works of certain poets, including Ammar Bin zayed.

This research consists of a critical and analytical study of Arab poetry in general, and Algerian poetry in particular, across its various manifestations. It analyzes a modernist poetic model from both aesthetic and experimental perspectives.

1. Modernist Experimentation: Term and Problematic

The experimental trend, emerging from modernist perspectives in literature, has taken a rising trajectory in the Arab and Algerian literary scene. This stems from a desire for differentiation and a fast-paced move towards breaking and surpassing old systems. Consequently, experimentation has become a prominent feature in the trajectory of deep, and at times, turbulent transformations, a result of the profound engagement with the spirit of modernist poetry.

Modernism and experimentation, as they started with Émile Zola in the novel, quickly captivated poetry. It became a primary concern for poets weary of the ready-made templates and banal images typical of Algerian Arabic poetry. Breaking free from meter and rhyme was no longer enough; even the restructuring of meter became insufficient. Poets dismantled all the foundational elements of traditional Arabic poetry, venturing into uncharted territories and opening the doors wide to newness with prose poetry and the open-ended text.

The modernist inclination towards experimentation was no longer confined to pioneers. It became the obsession of the new generation of poets in Arab and Algerian circles, particularly the youth who resonated with the spirit of modernity due to the deep transformations experienced by poetry on one

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hand, and the translation of world literature on the other, along with openness to the world facilitated by technology and globalization.

Thus, the tendency towards experimentation in contemporary poetic writing, along with the radical changes that the poetic text has undergone, necessitates new strategies for studying and understanding the essence of Algerian Arabic poetry. This is reflected in the many approaches that explore modernism and experimentation.

Experimentation, as a term, remains one of the most expansive and elusive concepts, with critics offering varying interpretations without arriving at a clear consensus. Despite this, the term has contributed to addressing the rapid transformations in Algerian poetic texts and providing alternative readings of many concepts.

1.2 Concept of Modernism:

Modernism (Modernité) refers to novelty and innovation. In the *Lisan al-Arab*, "hadith" is defined as the opposite of "old (Ibn Manzur, 1290, p 113-134)." This term is a contemporary Western concept that made its way into Arab thought. Modernism as a fully developed concept emerged in the mid-19th century, distinct from the term "modernity" which originated in the 16th century, coinciding with the transformations of the Renaissance and the new social, cultural, and economic structures it brought.

This modernism came as a response to the changing realities of the new era, born from the civilizational clash with the West, which manifested in colonial conquests and the spread of Western modernist models under the guise of "universal science." As a result, modernism appeared as an inward void in Arab history, disconnected from both the present (reality) and the past (heritage), and distanced from the future (the West). It situated itself in a no-man's land, revealing only its own internal contradictions and the fragility of its form, on the Absence of Organic Unity, the Myth, the Instability of Images, and the Arbitrary Nature of Language.

Time does not pass without revealing successive and simultaneous collapses in the ideological structure, politically, socially, and culturally (the catastrophe of Palestine in 1947 and 1967, the Lebanese Civil War, the bloody national conflict, revolutionary decline, repression and terrorism,

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illiteracy and consumer culture, the deterioration of development and the superficiality of plans...). (Rahmani, 2007, p 35)

Consequently, modernity is a contemporary Western term that has entered Arab thought, signifying the necessity of transcending all that is old in pursuit of uncovering the new. Modernity—in this sense—is a revolution against the past and the present alike, as it aims to challenge everything we have learned from our history while also resisting immersion in the values, arts, literature, and philosophy of the present.

Adonis, who is regarded as a pioneer of modernity, asserts that poetry from a modernist perspective is disconnected from reality; it represents a separation that shakes the language and prevailing forms. It embodies a rebellion against the static, a vision for revelation, and a fracturing of the self. In his declaration on modernity, Adonis articulates a clear theory regarding the foundations of modernity and its prevailing illusions. He begins his discourse on modernity by dispelling its illusions, summarizing them into five: divergence, temporality, similarity, prose formation, and the creation of content.

Adonis acknowledges the existence of an Arabic modernity in poetry, which emerged in the climate of two interrelated factors: the grasping of the emerging civilizational moment and the utilization of language, meaning the expression in a new manner that allows for a vivid and artistic embodiment of this grasp. Based on this, he establishes an initial framework for the concept of Arabic poetic modernity and its particularities. In general theoretical terms, it raises questions about everything, and the answers come from the movement of reality itself. Poetically, writing questions the world in a continuous inquiry and places the act of writing itself under constant questioning.

Thus, Adonis admits that he did not recognize Arabic poetic modernity from within the prevailing Arab cultural system and its cognitive apparatuses; rather, his reading of Baudelaire changed his understanding of Abu Nuwas, revealing to him his poetry and modernity. Similarly, readings of Rimbaud, Nerval, and Breton led him to discover the mystical experience through their reading and beauty.(Bin Khalifa, 2007, p 12)

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Modernity, therefore, emerged as an expression of the profound psychological crisis experienced by the creative self, necessitating diverse modes of expression. The term modernity cannot be entirely defined, as it encompasses a variety of interpretations, including "a new vision," which is essentially a vision of questioning and protest against what is possible and a challenge to the prevailing. Thus, the moment of modernity is characterized by tension—namely, the contradiction and collision between the prevailing structures in society and what the profound transformative movement requires from structures that respond to and harmonize with it.

1.3 Concept of Experimentation:

Experimentation (Expérimentation) is synonymous with creativity, as it involves innovating new methods and techniques in various forms of artistic expression. It is the essence of creativity when it transcends the familiar and ventures into the unknown, requiring courage and risk. In contemporary Arabic poetry, experimentation has always sought to challenge language and structure within the text's form. (Yahiaoui, 2014, p 15)

In conclusion, the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the concept of experimentation have led some scholars to propose alternative terms, such as "adventure" in theatrical studies. However, the essence of experimentation remains: the drive to surpass the conventional and create new, innovative values in artistic construction in 14th description.

Experimentation is a rebellion against fixed molds.

Experimentation is connected to society.

Every play contains some form of experimentation.

Experimentation is creativity through the invention of new methods and techniques in artistic expression by transcending the familiar.

Experimentation is a break from stagnation.

There is no precise definition of experimentation.

Experimentation is tied to expertise in the field of theater.

Experimentation is a revolution.

Experimentation is linked to the technology of performance.

All these definitions revolve around a single concept of experimentation: surpassing the familiar in theatrical techniques and searching for new

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methods. This confirms the ambiguity of the term. Hence, some scholars have considered replacing it with the term "adventure," as Osama Abu Talib did in his study titled Adventure in Theater. (Abu Bakr, 1993, p 166)

3. The Problem of Experimentation in Modern and Contemporary Arabic Poetry:

3.1 Modernist Poetry:

Modernist poetry is one of the forms of modern poetry that follows a unique artistic direction in poetic performance. Researchers who have examined modernist poetry have focused on uncovering the features of its artistic structure (or form), in addition to their interest in content. In fact, it seems that their attention to form often surpasses their attention to content, as modernism is seen more as an artistic and formal phenomenon than a mental, intellectual, or ethical one. (Al-Khalil, 2019, p 317)

Modern Arabic poetry established a new mode of writing, which emerged because of social and historical factors such as the Arab defeat in 1967, the student uprisings of 1968, and the Cultural Revolution in China. In addition, new textual practices emerged that embraced change and renewal, drawing from the West. (Yahiaoui, 2014, p 15)

A group of poets took the lead in modern Arabic poetry, believing that the classical musical and expressive forms of Arabic poetry had served their purpose and exhausted their potential. They called for abandoning the traditional meters categorized by Al-Khalil and freeing themselves from previous constraints in writing poetry. This liberation did not stop at the traditional meters and rhyme schemes but extended to rejecting anything that could be seen as merely a continuation of the past.

Contemporary poetry, in its conception, is fundamentally based on experimentation and plurality. It introduces new poetics that offer modern concepts of the structural laws of the poem. This confirms the existence of multiple poetic systems and the engagement with relativity, which allows the modern poet to take risks in experimentation, shifting from a closed form to an open one. (Bin Khalifa, 2007, p 151)

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The beginning marked a rebellion against inherited poetry by discarding Al-Khalil's meters as pre-established musical patterns (a collection of notations) that language is molded to fit, from the poem's start to its end.

Action Poem:

Perhaps the most prominent definition of free verse comes from its pioneer, the Iraqi poet Nazik Al-Malaika, who said: "It is primarily a prosodic phenomenon. It deals with the musical structure of the poem, concerns itself with the number of feet in each hemistich, and relates to the arrangement of lines and rhymes, the use of enjambment, the foot, and other purely prosodic matters." (Al-Malaika, 1983, p 69)

Arab poets invented the poem they called free verse, or the *tafila* poem, for its liberation from the restrictions of Al-Khalil's meter while maintaining a musicality derived from the unity of the foot. They drew on their memorized classical poems, rich in musicality, and among the most prominent figures who led this new direction in poetic writing were Nazik Al-Malaika and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab. One must not forget the serious attempts that began in the early 20th century with Amin Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, the head of the Pen League in the diaspora, and the prominent figures of the "Diwan" and "Apollo" schools in Egypt.

Renewal in Poetic Imagery:

In classical Arabic poetry, imagery was bound by external constraints and fixed molds imposed upon it. This forced the poet to crystallize his idea in a fragmented image, limited to metaphor, metonymy, and simile.

"Modern imagery juxtaposes two or three elements, entering into a humanistic process of birth. It focuses on composition and condensation. Thus, it approaches the depth and universality of symbolism while moving away from metaphor. It presents innovative, fragmented images that do not represent preconceived material in memory, coming forth suddenly and sequentially in a psychological unity with no logical connection between them. Their meaning can only be grasped within the context of the entire poetic experience." (Rahmani, 2007, 322)

One of the most distinctive features of poetic imagery in the Romantic movement is its subjectivity, meaning it became a tool for expressing the

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poet's feelings toward the subjects he addresses. Taher Bouchouchi, focusing on the effect of "clarity" in his heart, states:

"How many lessons for the heart in the clarity if it only knew,
Yet it remains weary and restless,
Oh my frozen heart, calm down, for these
are the early joys greeting you in melody."

Now let's read these lines from the poet Ammar bin Zaid, from our selected model:

"And once again, we chew on sorrows as usual,
We left the mule of time with seashells and let it pass,
We came to flog the dead, and we said: Khaled betrayed.
And once again, we chew on sorrows as usual.
Jamal was killed, and we didn't avenge,
Why, O lords?
Jamal was slain by the blind Tatar,
His land full of wheat and martyrs' light,
Is now ruins where ravens and owls dance without restraint,
And yet, we did not avenge,
And once again, we chew on sorrows as usual,
Why, O lords?" (Bin zayed, 1983, p 19-20)

These lines, at first glance, seem laden with metaphor and simile. The first line contains both a clear simile and a metaphor. The simile is found in "we chew on sorrows as usual," and the metaphor is embedded in the same phrase, "chewing on sorrows." Are both this simile and metaphor artistic images? Or do they, at the very least, work together in that line to highlight the image? From a rhetorical perspective, one might critique the simile in terms of the relationship between its two elements, the subject and the comparison, connected by the tool "as."

"Chewing on sorrows" is a metaphor for defeat over defeat, without anyone taking action.

The ellipses take two different forms in Ammar bin Zaid's poetry. One of them, "...", serves as space between two verses, and the first represents an incomplete idea for several reasons...

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In any case, Al-Shafi'i's viewpoint is worthy of respect and indicates his deep knowledge of Arab heritage and his exposure to foreign literature (Bin zayed, 1990, p 93). This clearly shows how they were influenced later on by the formal structure of the poem.

In our selected example, *Against the Mule of Time* by Ammar bin Zaid, we find that he writes most of his poems in a manner distinct from conventional writing. He leaves ample white space at the beginning of the page before the actual text starts and relies on successive dots between lines, as seen in the following example:

Poets began to distance themselves from directness and explicitness, which were characteristics of the poetic language of conservative traditional poets. In this poetic passage, we encounter a significant use of white space:

"We were deceived again,
We drank water mixed with the bitterness of salt, soap, and tobacco...
We were bitten by the mouth of tragedy and sorrow,
Yet despite the wound and the shackles,
We played a melody of brilliance,
And we killed the mule of time with refusal." (Bin zayed, 1990, p 20)

The Use of Mythical Symbolism:

One of the most striking artistic phenomena in the new poetry movement is the tool of expression. It is not surprising that poets use symbols and myths in their poetry. The ancient connection between mythology and poetry justifies this use, signaling a deep understanding of the nature of poetry and poetic expression. However, the type of symbols and myths used by contemporary poets, and their methods of employing them, urge us to closely examine this phenomenon and evaluate it. (Ismail , 2002, p 169)

Azeddine Ismail emphasizes the importance of symbolism in poetry, stating: "One of the most notable features of new poetry is the intensive use of symbolism as an expressive tool used by the poet to convey his idea to the reader."

Symbolism shifts language from its primary function of communication to a suggestive function, giving rise to multiple concepts of symbols.

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"Modernists introduced a different kind of symbol, one unparalleled in either classical or contemporary Arabic poetry. By this, I mean embedding the poem with a myth, a legendary tale, or a historical figure who holds a significant place in literature, such as Antara, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, Al-Zir Salim, or Kahlil Wail. This includes figures like Zarqa Al-Yamama, known for her sharp eyes that could spot enemies from miles away, or Sindbad, who became a symbol of travel and exploration, as well as literary figures like Al-Ma'arri, Al-Mutanabbi, and Tarafa bin Al-Abd." (Ibrahim, 2019, p 333)

Ordinary language, with its rigid rational structure, cannot adequately express this, which makes it necessary to choose an imaginative and indirect style. This breaks away from standard language rules, allowing for a unique aesthetic symbolic language to craft these poetic meanings with their complexity and depth. (Rahmani, 2007, p 337).

The use of mythical symbolism in poetry serves as a tool for artistic expression. One of the purposes of using myth in poetry is to overcome linguistic limitations. According to Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, myths serve as the magical conduit through which the endless energies of the universe flow into human civilization. Religions, philosophies, arts, social structures, and even dreams—all emanate from this core mythic wellspring. Myths are a rich source of human experiences, filled with spiritual significance. Modern poetry has returned to myths to symbolize the missing spirit, a reconstruction of humanity. On another level, modern poetry has sought to revolutionize poetic theory and offer alternatives by searching for tools and techniques to reshape poetic imagery to align with an intellectually demanding civilization. One of these intellectual tools is the myth, which enriches the imagery with vibrant human experiences and abundant visions. (Yahiaoui, 2014, pp 183-184)

An example of mythological symbolism in Ammar bin Zaid's poetry is seen in this part of his poem, where he employs the Sphinx—a mythical symbol, a creature with the body of a lion and the head of a human, carved from limestone, likely once coated in plaster and painted, with remnants of its original colors still visible:

"We kept the key despite the waves and the blow,

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About haoul,

We killed it." (Bin zayed, 1983, p 19)

He also uses the Roman month of June, the sixth month in the Gregorian calendar, as a symbol. In Iraq and the Levant, it is called Haziran, and in Egypt, Youniyah. June begins when the sun is in Gemini and ends in Cancer. Ammar bin Zaid mentions this in the following lines: (Bin zayed, 1983, p 19)

"We tore through the silence, shattered the myths, and destroyed June,

We opened the doors toward God,

We ignited the heavy sorrow into a volcano,

And we besieged our sins, declaring that truth will never bow down."

Finally, Ammar bin Zaid references two prominent figures in Arab and Muslim history, symbols of courage, heroism, and victory, in the following passage:

"Were we defeated? No, we were not,

Ali was not present,

Salah was not present,

And we fought with our own hands against the armies of oppression and treachery." (Bin zayed, 1983, p 17)

Before this, the poet referenced the Islamic figure Khalid ibn Al-Walid—may God be pleased with him—symbolizing him as the "Sword of God," in the following lines:

"We fought the mule of time in the land of prophecies,

Famine met us in the field,

The wound became like a cave in the heart,

Were we defeated?—the world said—without bombardment or strike we lost,

We lost our fangs and claws in battle." (Bin zayed, 1983, p 18)

The poet then returns to Khalid and Jamal, using them symbolically and mythologically, saying:

"We left the mule of time with seashells and let it pass,

We came to flog the dead, and we said: Khaled betrayed.

And once again, we chew on sorrows as usual,

Jamal was killed, and we didn't avenge,

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Why, O lords?

Jamal was slain by the blind Tatar,

His land full of wheat and martyrs' light,

Is now ruins where ravens and owls dance without restraint,

And yet, we did not avenge,

And once again, we chew on sorrows as usual,

Why, O lords?" (Bin zayed, 1983, pp 19-20)

Renewal in Poetic Music:

Poetic music is one of the most prominent artistic phenomena in contemporary Arabic poetry, which itself is in dire need of change. Serious attempts emerged in pursuit of this change, as noted by critic Azzedine Ismail. He writes, "When we speak of the plasticity in Arabic poetry, the distinction comes to mind, which has been recognized and widely known since the second half of the 18th century, between 'the art of words' in one of its forms, as a temporal art—like music—and pure spatial arts, such as painting, sculpture, and the like." (Ismail, 2002, p 42)

"This is the aesthetic foundation we seek to highlight here. An ancient attempt dating back to the founder of Arabic prosody, Al-Khalil bin Ahmad, gained wide recognition and perhaps still has advocates today. This attempt aimed to dispel this misconception by ascribing a psychological character to each meter or group of meters. Some meters are suited to states of sadness, while others to states of joy, and so on. Therefore, when a poet expresses themselves through a particular meter, they choose the form that most naturally aligns with their poetic state. At that point, one could say that the meter—although an abstract form—carries a general, vague poetic significance, which the words later clarify." (Ismail, 2002, p 42)

Poet Ammar bin Zayed demonstrated a clear transformation in his musical composition, shifting from the traditional musical framework of classical poetry in meter and rhyme to a new musical structure based on the "hazzaj" meter, which aligns with his style but follows the system of meter, not the system of verse. We observe that bin Zayed adhered to the same meter in this passage, which is "mafa'ilun," part of the hazzaj meter, whose key is as follows:

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"Upon hazzaj we ease,
Mafa'ilun Mafa'ilun."

"However, despite the abundance and diversity of these attempts, the change that occurred was not a fundamental one in the sonic structure of the poem. It was merely partial and superficial. I say this, recalling the early attempts during the Abbasid era to introduce some formal variety into the musical structure of the poem." (Ismail, 2002, p 48)

Conclusion:

The contemporary Algerian-Arabic poetic movement, in its transformations and ongoing experimentation, has kept pace with global developments. Modernist experimentation always reveals something new and aims for creation and innovation. It constantly seeks to surpass and break away from the past. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- The features and manifestations of modernist experimentation in the poem "Against the Mule Time" reflect innovation in both form and meaning.
- Modernist poetry is a type of contemporary poetry that adopts a specific artistic approach to poetic expression.
- Algerian-Arabic poets have recognized the importance of linguistic renewal to achieve aesthetic impact in modern poetry, as modern man realizes the vast potential and creative capacity hidden within language (linguistic innovation).
- The contemporary poet's work has broken free from the constraints of the past, expressing their concerns in artistic images that align with their psychological and emotional states (innovation in imagery).
- Serious attempts have emerged from our poet in pursuit of change in poetry (innovation in poetic music).

Lastly, we can only extend the utmost appreciation and gratitude to all those who contributed to the completion of this research.

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