

**Modernism and the use of
Metaphor in Contemporary
Arabic Poetry.**

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The right use of metaphors is a sign of inborn talent and cannot be learned from anyone else.

Aristotle, *Poetics*

In his short essay for the "metaphor" (isti'ara, literally "borrowing") entry in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, W. P. Heinrichs laments the remarkable lack of studies on the nature and function of metaphor in Arabic poetry: "A history of metaphor and its function in Arabic poetry (or literature in general) has not been yet written, and studies of metaphor in circumscribed corpora of texts, such as the oeuvre of a particular poet, are few and far between." Even in S. Moreh's *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800-1970: The Development of Its Forms and Themes Under the Influence of Western Literature* (1976), a work that has been considered crucial in delineating the main characteristics of modern Arabic poetry, there is a jarring absence of discussion of the modernistic uses of metaphor. Yet Aristotle, whose work *Poetics and Rhetoric* was translated into Arabic around the ninth century and became profoundly catalytic in the formative period of Arabic literary

criticism, postulates the centrality of metaphor in the very act of the literary creation. Respectfully labeled as "The First Teacher," Aristotle put forth a concept of metaphor that not only made many Arab critics and poets conscious of metaphor as the essence of great literature but also inspired them to experiment with it. Hence the nature of literary *tajdid* (innovation) throughout Arabic literary tradition cannot be fully appreciated without a careful examination of the historical evolution of metaphor. In this paper, I will first highlight the transforming power of metaphor in Arabic poetic tradition, then examine its nature and function in belletristic modernism, focusing on the poetry of two contemporary Arab poets, each of whom represents distinct aspects of modernism. These are the Egyptian Muhammad 'Afifi Matar (b. 1935), and the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish (b. 1941).

As a literary term, metaphor, though it is epistemologically saturated with cultural significations, does mean and function in Arabic as it does in English and other Western literatures. A survey of literary studies of metaphor indicates that the concept is generally defined, even in its mushiness and unruliness, in similar terms in Arabic and in English literary criticism. Twentieth-century studies of languages have aided literary critics in further studies of metaphor. One of the revolutionary landmarks in the study of metaphor is I. A. Richards's classic, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1939), in which he convincingly expands the traditional function of metaphor from merely creating verbal pictures to

creating new meanings. His crucial idea is that metaphor "is the omni-present principle" of all language, for "the metaphors we are avoiding steer our thought as much as those we accept" (92). In other words, metaphor, Richards argues, makes language possible. Building on Richards's theory, Owen Barfield, Philip Wheelwright, and Winfred Nowotny, among others, recognize the omnipresence of metaphor not only in poetry but even in everyday language. Recent investigations of metaphor, such as Paul de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996) and Paul Ricoeur's *Rule of Metaphor* (1973), have identified the function of metaphor as not merely a figure of speech that helps expand the language by fusing a word with another one in order to produce a synthesis, but as the essence of all figurativeness that makes even our expanding thought possible.

Metaphor and Innovation in Classical Arabic Poetry:

Before I discuss the modernistic manifestations of metaphor in selected poems, I think it is imperative to outline the evolution of metaphor in classical and muhdath ("new poetry," after the early Islamic period from around the ninth century) Arabic poetry. Arab scholars were exposed to Aristotelian definitions of literary terms much earlier than were European scholars. Hence, metaphor has a longer and more complicated history in Arabic literature. Yet the abovementioned recent Western studies of language and metaphor have had a profound impact on modern Arabic literary criticism. Literary historians usually attribute the

emergence of Arabic literary criticism and literary theory to two historical factors:

- 1) The challenges of the Qur'an and the subsequent active Qur'anic exegesis that primarily focused on the hermeneutic significance of the literal and the figurative or tropical (*majaz*), on the one hand, and on the location of meaning and truth in the interaction between the literal and the figurative, on the other hand.
- 2) The translation of the Greek works, especially the philosophical works of Aristotle and Plato around the second century of Hijra (approximately the ninth century A.D.). Around this time major critical theories and schools began to become established, with Umayyad philologist Al-Asma'i (d. 213/828) founding his poetic standards for good poetry. Later, Ibn Sallam Al-Jumahi (139-232/756-846) reflected his critical evaluation of poetry in his *Tabaqat Fuhul Al-Shu'ara'* (Classes of Great Poets). Al-Jahiz (b. 160/776) postulated his theory of style and was the first to define metaphor. According to him, metaphor is the borrowing of one aspect of a word and attributing it to another (Azzam, 36). He did not distinguish between metaphor and other figures of speech as we know them now, assuming, probably following Aristotle, that metaphor is the quintessential trope or figure of speech, in that all figures of speech are essentially metaphorical.

Frequently the particular use of metaphor seems to have defined the nature of *tajdid* (innovation) and of the individual talent of a poet; that is, the more imaginative the poet, the more

sophisticated his or her metaphor. Significantly, the literary battles between the traditionalists and the innovators in Arabic poetry as they are reflected in the history of literary criticism from early medieval times to the present were in most cases fought over the nature of metaphor and figures of speech (*majaz*). The major innovators throughout Arabic literary history were usually initially attacked because of the nature and function of their metaphor. In other words, change in metaphor has been considered change in the very nature of poetics and of meaning in general. In *Jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic) poetry, simile rules supreme in the poetic landscape, though we find occasional uses of metaphor that do not go beyond conceptual comparison, as in the famous elegy by the *mukhadram* ("a poet who lived in *Jahiliyyah* and Islam") Abu Dhu'ayb al-Hudhali on the death of his sons: "I have stayed behind after they [have gone], with a life that is full of misfortune. I see myself trying to follow them and overtake them./ [How] eager I was to protect them; but when Fate advances it cannot be warded off. / When Fate fixes its claws [into its prey], you find every charm [against it] to be of no avail" (11. 7-9; Jones, vol. 2, p. 259). A clear use of implied metaphor occurs in line 9, in which Fate, an abstraction, is given the claws of a wild animal. Yet in its sixty-two lines, the poem seems to reach its peak of power when it uses metaphor as in line 9.

In the *Mu'allaha* (Ode) of Imru' Al-Qays (sixth century), which is traditionally considered the jewel of *Jahiliyyah* poetry, one finds in its eighty-two lines twenty-four

uses of simile and only six metaphors. These six are primarily one-line metaphors, and in most cases are genitive:

When they stood up, *the scent of musk* wafted from them like breath of the east wind bearing the fragrance of cloves (1. 8)

I said to her, "Ride on, but slacken the reins of *your camel*.

Do not put me at a distance from the fruit that can be plucked time and time again from you (1.15)

And if there is some trait of mine that has vexed you, draw my *garments* from yours [and] they will slip away (1.20)

Your eyes have shed their tears only that you may smite with the two arrows of *your eyes that strike* into the fragments of a slaughtered heart (1.22)

When either of us gets something, it slips away from him. Whoever *tills your tith* or mine will find lean pickings (1.52)

From time to time I used to journey in the morning, whilst the birds were still in their nests, on a well-built short-haired [*horse*], able to rein in wild game (1.53)

Obviously, to contemporary readers these are very simple and vapid metaphors, and the translation has reduced

their poetic power by failing to reflect either their cultural connotations or their linguistic delight. Language, especially in poetry, not only becomes more cultural; it even becomes more tactile, providing special pleasures for the mouth and the ear. The italicized words in the above lines are metaphors in the Arabic original, though in line 2 the translation reduces the metaphor to a simile by using "like." And in line 53, a classical example of metaphor is totally lost in the translation. In the Arabic text, the line describes the lean, fast horse as a chain or lock of wild animals. It is interesting to note that most of the metaphors in this mu'allaqa are simple and are constructed in one single line or phrase. Yet, by the standard of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, they were probably as striking as Homer's similes.

The historical evolution of figures of speech in Arabic poetry reveals that metaphor is a creation of a sophisticated imagination and bold semantic and syntactic adventures. When the Qur'an was introduced, it caused a linguistic and figurative revolution so stunning to the Arab poets and orators that they believed it was a divine or Satanic work (Azzam, 67-68), considering it impossible for humans to compose anything even remotely similar. Thus, the Qur'an, perceived as a challenge and/or a miracle, triggered literary activism that inaugurated the idea of exegesis, which in turn gave birth to literary criticism. A prominent aspect of the powerful eloquence of the Qur'an is no doubt its figurative language. Major Qur'anic exegetes painstakingly tried to account for the

miraculous power in its divinity, claiming, for example, that it is the very word of God or that God naturally would not endow a human with the ability to produce a text similar in its spiritual power to the Qur'an, thus making His Book inimitable.

Even by the poetic standard of medieval Arabic poetry, pre-Islamic metaphor was considered dead metaphor, and poets sought fresh ways to respond to a relatively more complex life. Al-Mutanabbi (c. 303-54/c. 915-65), considered the most prominent Arab poet of all times, became the epicenter of one of the longest and fiercest literary debates in history, primarily because of his radical innovations in metaphor. To a lesser extent, other major poets such as Abu Nuwas, Abu Tammam, and Bashshar Ibn Burd, who are called *muhdathun* or "modernist poets" in the early Abbasid period, faced harsh criticism from both traditional critics and poets. In all of these cases the change in metaphor was the evidence of their poetic sin, so to speak (Heinrichs, 1984, pp.185-89; Stetkevych, p.p.8-19; 'Abbas, p.p.167-68).

During the early Abbasid period, the new urban life, the active translation movement, and the stimulating encounter with more advanced civilizations of Persia, Greece, and Rome inspired Arab poets to modernize their poetic styles and themes. The emergence of new poetry called *muhdath* ("novel" or "modern") and its practitioners, *muhdathun* ("creators of novel poetry"), necessitated the invention of new critical discourse and critical terminology. The battle between the innovators and the traditionalists gave birth to what is now

called Arabic literary criticism when Ibn Al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908) published his *Kitab Al-Badi'* (The Book of the Original Style). Ibn Al-Mu'tazz defines Al-Badi' by five major characteristics and considers the new use of metaphor as the first criterion in the production of the new poetry (Heinrichs, "Badi'," 122). Thus, metaphor and its particular uses seem to have always been at the center of any innovation in literature. Let us examine some of the convoluted metaphors in Al-Mutanabbi's poetry that outraged many critics during medieval times. In one famous poem, he describes his encounter with several social problems: "The age has hurled rough times at me my heart is numb from its missiles / And neatly where the arrows struck me the point of one struck the other" (Al-Mutanabbi. 3. 11. 101-2). In another example, he describes his hero Sayf Al-Dawlah, the ruler of Syria, during one of his battles:

With other shepherds, not you, have the wolves trifled:
other blades, not you, have the blows blunted. You in
your possession the souls of men and jinn. How would
Kilab [the enemy tribe] hold on to theirs? They did not
flee you [literally, forsake you] out of rebellion, but one
shrinks from going to water when death is the drink.
You pursued them all the way to their watering places,
[till the clouds were frightened that you would search it
for them].

These metaphors are typical of Al-Mutanabbi, whose poetry represented the highest artistic creation in the renaissance of Arabic verse. Compared with traditional metaphors, his manifest both a complex, agile imagination and a linguistic playfulness that usually bend the sacred syntactic rules in order to produce *recherche* metaphors.

More than any other critic, 'Abd Al-Qahir Al-Jurjani (d. 471/1087 or 474/1081), the most prominent literary theorist of medieval times, devoted significant attention to the study of metaphor in the Qur'an, in the Hadith (the Prophet's sayings), and in Arabic poetry. Although he does not mention Aristotle, many modern critics, such as Taha Hussein and others (Matlub, 291-304), believe that Al-Jurjani was influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, which were available in Arabic early in the ninth century. In his treatment of metaphor, Al-Jurjani cites examples to illustrate what he considers effective metaphor. The most effective metaphor, he believes, is one that is based on imagination or one that requires imagination to be appreciated, such as "Follow the light that has been revealed for you," with "light" as metaphor for the Qur'an; or "Beware of the greenness of dung," an example of the paired metaphor in which greenness stands for a beautiful young woman and "dung" for her corrupted family or tribe (Al-Jurjani, 41-89). Clearly, Al-Jurjani seems to have appreciated the new poetic style introduced by "modern" poets in the Abbasid period, rejecting the simple, worn-out clichés or dead metaphors of the traditional poets. Yet, by modern poetic standards, Al-Jurjani's

concept of metaphor, which continued in use until the middle of the twentieth century, would no longer explain the new complex metaphor.

Modernism and Metaphor:

In the twentieth century, poetic modernism, mostly influenced by the West, has been so radical that it involves not only changes in perception of metaphor but also a rejection of some of the revered fundamentals of Arabic poetics, usually called 'Amud Al-Shi'r (literally "the pillar of poetry"), such as the unity of the poem (wahdat Al-qasidah) manifested in the required use of monometer and monorhyme in a poem composed of two hemistiched lines. Needless to say, it is impossible to separate modernism in Arabic literature from Western colonialism and imperialism, but the focus of my discussion of modernism and its impact on metaphor will be limited to the impact of the Western influence, whether in the form of translation of Western literatures or the westernization of Arabic education or the impact of war and occupation. Literary historians of Arabic literature seem to agree that the modern period in Arabic letters began around 1800 and continued through the typical phases of neoclassicism and romanticism to the present. The metaphorical forms in poetry have gone through radical changes. Now one can talk not only about paired metaphor, complex metaphor, subtle metaphor, organic metaphor, and telescoped metaphor, but also about psychological metaphor and surrealist metaphor.

One of the interesting figures of modernistic poetry is the Egyptian Muhammad 'Afifi Matar. His poetry is a balanced blend of Western poetic styles and the best tradition of Sufi and mystic poetry in Arabic. It reminds Edward W. Said of Blake, Smart, and T. S. Eliot. And Andrei Codrescu believes Matar's rich poetic world has the "ecstatic expansiveness of Saint-John Perse's oceanic vision. ... Yet Matar's work springs fully from an ancient Islamic tradition."

Matar's poetry "has grown in complexity, and he is now one of the most difficult poets in contemporary Arabic, using many allusions and images from his Arab, Egyptian, and contemporary local heritage" (Jayyusi, 347). The following selections of metaphor are from Matar's collection *Ruba'iyat Al-Farah* (written 1970-88 and published in Arabic in 1990 in London), translated into English as *Quartet of Joy* by Ferial Ghazoul and John Verlenden (1997). The four sections of this long poem (hence "quartet") are consecutively titled "Earth Joy," "Fire Joy," "Water Joy," and "Air Joy," reflecting the poet's cosmic vision that celebrates the four basic constituent elements of the universe. Interestingly, Matar employs the traditional Arabic convention of ghazal and nasib (love poetry), usually devoted to a female beloved, in his mystical love of the elements, which, in his particular vision, are each in love.

The fired shot of glassy water
with translucent bullet:
the sea aimed it -- between resting
and rising up -- and

it felled me with rapturous blow;
I blanked out from glare
of high-distancing noon ...

My limbs: a mare.
The sea: a spring season
of flesh well toned,
spreading for me its tables of hunger,
dish after dish.
And my dreams: wild birds,
night surprised them with bafflement
and the call of space

There is metaphor within metaphor to the point that semantics, syntax, and meter, all traditional elements of poetry, become subordinate to the pursuit of metaphor and rhythm. The result is crystal ambiguity, which is delightful to the eye, mouth, and ear but very hard to understand fully. The modernist's cultivation of esthetic ambiguity is not really entirely new. It has been an essential aspect of Sufi and mystical poetry, not to mention the many enchanting esoteric passages in the Qur'an. Interestingly, the style of the Qur'an, though received in the seventh century, has always been viewed as new, even by most iconoclastic modernists. Matar's poetry is laden with Qur'anic phrases and echoes, as in the following lines: "So Speak up, O my Certitude, / and blow my blood in the Trumpet. / Let me fight and attest that cities / of

the living and the dead / under the pure touch quiver, / stirring
the eruption of the daily scene / with apocalyptic vision"
(Matar, 8). The visionary context, which is the tenor of the
metaphor, that introduces the metaphorical vehicles "Trumpet"
and "apocalyptic" makes the lines quiver with Qur'anic
imagery and cadence.

Matar's metaphor is totally informed by his vision. It
relies heavily on imagism in which metaphor becomes an
integral part of the vision, which is definitely Sufistic. In other
words, metaphor in Matar becomes a mirror that at once
expands his vision and embodies it. By subordinating the
metaphor to the larger picture of his mystical vision, Matar
sacrifices some clarity and lyricism for the sake of mysticism.
In the following lines from the section "Air Joy," one can sense
Matar's systematic fragmentation of his metaphor, which is
ingeniously appropriate in describing the act of making love.

Now is that singular time for the onset
of beginning or the last of ending – everything ends:
they are two bodies on a spot of blood,
a magic killing; she is killed
and he is killed,

Who between the two aimed the blade?

Who between the two initiated the act and the
passion?

It is the one stab.

Who between the two was ablaze
in the burning ember,
by a kiss sneaking up
until the mixing
of the vigorous blood;
or by the cry of ecstasy
meshing its ah with death? [Air Joy, 128]

Within this consciously fragmented metaphor for the sexual act are smaller metaphors or implied metaphors such as "a kiss sneaking up," fittingly suggesting the archetypal snake of sexuality in the biblical and Qur'anic story of Adam and Eve. Though it is interesting, even delightful, to reconstruct this scattered metaphor, which may be called a puzzle metaphor, it is predictable, after all. Most of the metaphors in Matar's *Quartet of Joy* are purposely fragmented in an effort to subordinate language, even figurative language, to the mystical or philosophical vision.

Poetic visions inform the very nature of modernism in Arabic poetry, which in its elegant and effective form is a synthesis of Sufi and Qur'anic tradition on the one hand and the impact of Western modernism on the other. Modernism is brilliantly manifest in the poetry of Adonis, Sa'di Yusuf, and Mahmud Darwish. The idea of having a vision or being possessed by a vision seems to be very attractive to all poets, probably because it legitimates their assumed personae as prophets whose visions or missions are inspired by some sort

of divine or supernatural powers. This vision or mission is very evident in the poetry of Darwish, who introduced into Arabic letters a new perfection of the poetic genre: the poetics of place and space. Many Arab poets wrote about places and spaces from the ancient theme of Al-Buka'a 'ala Al-Atlal ("weeping over the ruins") to the modernistic interest in place and nature. Intensely lyrical and desperately meticulous in depicting Palestinian places, trees, soil, animals, food, and smells, Darwish's poetry powerfully employs the Arabic convention of Sufi love in his Palestinian poetic epic. His metaphors are so extended and detailed that they verge on becoming elaborate conceits and symbols. In the opening of his "Qasidat Al-Ard." (Poem of the Land), written in celebration of the Palestinian Day of the Land on 30 March, the speaker describes the day when the Israeli army fired at student demonstrators, killing five young girls. The metaphor elegantly moves from land to plant to girls to blood, weaving mournful lyricism and love poetry.

In the month of March
 in the year of the uprising
 earth told us her blood secrets
In the month of March
 five girls at the door
 of the primary school
Came past the violet
Came past the rifle
 burst into flame

With roses
and thyme
they opened
the song of the soil
and entered the earth
the ultimate embrace
March comes to the land
out of earth's depth
out of the girls' dance
The violets leaned over a little
so that the girls' voices
could cross over
the birds
pointed their beaks
at that song and at my heart

The dominant metaphor is violent death, described in terms of wedding and rebirth, in which all things inanimate and animate participate. The poet utilizes the symbolic connotations of March as the month of rebirth in many ancient Middle Eastern mythologies and religions. Here, however, March comes not only from the earth but also from the girls' dance of death, which promises new life. Violets and birds and the speaker's heart and even the soil join the girls' singing while bursting into flame, roses, and thyme. The metaphor, gathering all these images and colors and smells, acquires inexhaustible mythical and ritualistic dimensions. An essential part of this

dramatic, colorful metaphor is "the rifle," a metonym which appears in the drama as an inhuman, antilife entity but is defeated by the persistent continuity of life.

The speaker goes on mourning (in a stanza not translated by Jayyusi and Middleton), becoming the earth itself while talking apparently with one of the murdered girls: "I am the land / and the land is you / O Khadija, do not close the door / do not enter into absence. / We will drive them [the enemies] out of the flowerpot and the laundry line / we will drive them out of the rocks of this long road / and out of the air of Galilee" (my translation). By identifying with the occupied land, the speaker is able to express the desire of the rocks, the air, the flowerpot, and the laundry line. Every intimate detail is enlisted in his struggle without weapons.

I name the soil I call it
 an extension of my soul
I name my hands I call them
 the pavement of wounds
I name the pebbles
 wings
I name the birds
 almonds and figs
I name my ribs
 trees
Gently I pull a branch
 from the fig tree of my breast

I throw it like a stone
to blow up the conqueror's tank

Here is a detailed metaphor that seems very close to a conceit in which the comparison is elaborately and fancifully constructed. Although Darwish's poetry of resistance, his elegant, labyrinthine use of metaphor saves his verse from deteriorating into propaganda.

For Darwish, most tragically conscious of the loss of his homeland and his roots, metaphor has become a synthesizing power that magically reconstructs his atomized world. This power of re-creating what has been destroyed is brilliantly manifested in the metaphors in a poem titled "I See What I Want," from which I quote stanzas 4 and 7:

I see what I want in the soul: the face of a stone
scratched by lightning -- green. oh land, green is the
land of

my soul -- haven't

I been a child playing at the edge of a well?

I am still playing ... this space is my playground and the
stone is my wind

I see what I want in prison: days of a flowering

that led from here to two strangers in me

seated in a garden -- I close my eyes:

How spacious is the earth! How beautiful the earth from
the

eye of a needle

The fifteen quatrains in this poem all utilize various metaphors as windows for new seeing and for freedom. Hence, the metaphor becomes an empowering outlet for the powerless and a home for the homeless. Much has been written about the power of the arts to reconstruct new worlds out of ruined or deteriorating ones. Darwish's poetry, and especially his unsparring metaphors, which seem so omnipresent that they lyrically embrace every corner in his homeland, is an artistic re-creation of lost Palestine. Crucial aspects of modernism in Arabic culture are largely found in the literary response to Western challenges, exile, war, and uprooting.

Modernism has radically transformed the traditional structures and styles in Arabic poetry. While there have been vigorous studies of metaphor in Western modernism, there is almost no serious study of the transformation and the transforming power of metaphor in Arabic modernism. Recent Western studies of metaphor, in light of modern literary, critical, and linguistic theories and methodologies, are very informative and can be fruitful in studying the interactions between metaphor and modernism in any national literature; nevertheless, historicity and cultural studies rightly warn against the pitfalls of universality. One does not need to be a translator or bilingual to realize the complex interlacing of language and culture. Despite many basic similarities between metaphor in Western poetry and Arabic poetry, metaphor in

Arabic modernism requires careful examination that takes into account historical, cultural, and linguistic factors. The three examples of modernistic metaphor discussed in this paper are by no means exclusive, nor do they represent all the metaphorical innovations in contemporary Arabic poetry. In my treatment of metaphor in three modernist Arab poets, I hope that I have examined to the reader's satisfaction how such major characteristics of modernism as the free-verse movement, the use of myth, the rediscovery of Arabic heritage, and the impact of the West have radically changed the traditional ways in which metaphor was constructed, received, and evaluated in Arabic verse.

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