

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MODERN AND TRADITIONAL ARABIC POETRY

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**Abstract:** *Arabic poetry has been a cornerstone of Arab culture for centuries, with its origins rooted in pre-Islamic times and evolving through the classical and modern periods. This article delves into the differences between traditional and modern Arabic poetry, examining the changes in form, structure, language, and thematic concerns. While traditional poetry adhered to strict metrical systems and communal themes, modern Arabic poetry, influenced by Western literary forms and political upheavals, adopted free verse and individualistic expressions. The exploration covers how poets from both eras reflect the sociopolitical climates of their times and how modern poetry challenges classical conventions while engaging with contemporary issues. This comparative analysis provides insights into how Arabic poetry has evolved and the continued relevance of both forms in the Arab literary tradition.*

**Keywords:** *Arabic poetry, traditional poetry, modern poetry, free verse, classical prosody, Arab culture, poetic evolution, sociopolitical themes.*

Poetry has long been considered the highest form of literary expression in Arab culture, holding a unique position not only as a form of artistic output but also as a medium of cultural, historical, and social communication. From the days of the Jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic period) to the present, Arabic poetry has evolved, reflecting the changing realities of Arab societies. Traditional Arabic poetry was highly formalized, adhering to strict metrical rules and focusing on themes of love, valor, and communal identity. However, with the advent of modernity, particularly in the 20th century, Arabic poetry underwent a profound transformation. Modern poets began to challenge the old forms and explore new ways of expressing individual and collective experiences in a rapidly changing world.

This shift from tradition to modernity was driven by various factors, including political upheavals, colonialism, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the influence of Western literary movements such as romanticism, modernism, and surrealism. Modern Arabic poets embraced free verse, broke away from traditional meters, and introduced new themes, such as alienation, existentialism, and political resistance. This article will explore the structural, thematic, and linguistic differences between traditional and modern Arabic poetry, focusing on how these changes reflect broader cultural and social transformations in the Arab world.

Traditional Arabic poetry, particularly the *\*qasida\**, is renowned for its rigid structure, which has been meticulously codified since the 8th century. Developed by the scholar Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, the system of *\*al-Arud\** classified Arabic poetry into 16 different meters, known as *\*buḥūr\**, each with its own distinct rhythmic pattern. The *\*qasida\**, a monorhymed, lengthy ode, could range between 20 and 100 lines, maintaining the same rhyme throughout the poem. Classical poets like Imru' al-Qays and Al-Mutanabbi mastered this form, weaving together complex metaphors and intricate descriptions of nature, love, and warfare. The role of the poet was not only to entertain but also to preserve the honor and values of the tribe or ruler they represented.

The classical “qasida” often began with a nostalgic prelude (“nasib”), where the poet would lament a lost love or a bygone era. This would be followed by a journey section (“raḥil”), symbolizing the poet's travels through the desert, which could be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. The final section would typically involve praise (“madīh”) or satire (“hija”), directed at a patron, rival, or the poet's tribe. This tripartite structure became a hallmark of traditional Arabic poetry, offering poets a framework within which to express their thoughts and emotions.

In addition to the “qasida”, other classical forms such as the “muwashshah” emerged in Andalusian Spain. The “muwashshah” featured more complex rhyme schemes and was closely associated with musical performances. While the “qasida” was often formal and grandiose, the “muwashshah” allowed for a more lyrical and playful expression, frequently centered around themes of love, nature, and spiritual longing. The poetic mastery required to excel in these traditional forms reinforced the status of the poet as both a cultural custodian and a master of linguistic craft. Arabic poets were not only expected to adhere to strict rules of prosody but also to demonstrate their deep knowledge of Arabic grammar, vocabulary, and rhetoric.

The subjects of traditional Arabic poetry often revolved around communal values, loyalty to the tribe, heroism, and the pursuit of honor. In pre-Islamic times, these poems

served as oral histories, chronicling the victories and defeats of tribes, their migrations, and their code of ethics. The poet was a tribal historian, responsible for maintaining the memory and prestige of their people. Thus, traditional Arabic poetry was deeply intertwined with the collective identity of Arab society, reinforcing societal norms and values through its structured form and thematic focus.

The early 20th century marked a period of significant change in the Arab world, both politically and culturally. The rise of nationalism, the struggle for independence from colonial powers, and the introduction of modern education systems that exposed Arab intellectuals to Western literary movements all contributed to the transformation of Arabic poetry. One of the earliest and most influential shifts in this era was the movement towards free verse (\*shi'r hurr\*), which allowed poets to break away from the rigid structures of classical prosody.

Modern Arabic poetry rejected the monorhymed, highly metered patterns of traditional poetry, opting instead for freer forms that allowed greater flexibility in expression. Pioneers of this movement, such as Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, and Mahmoud Darwish, introduced new techniques that reflected both the personal and political turmoil of their times. These poets were influenced by global literary trends, including romanticism, surrealism, and modernism, which emphasized individual experience, introspection, and experimentation with form.

The introduction of free verse revolutionized Arabic poetry, as it removed the constraints of meter and rhyme, giving poets more creative freedom to explore themes of alienation, dislocation, and political dissent. This shift was not merely a stylistic one; it represented a broader philosophical and cultural departure from the communal focus of traditional poetry. Modern Arabic poets sought to engage with contemporary issues such as identity, colonization, exile, and personal freedom. In doing so, they often used their poetry as a form of resistance against oppressive regimes and colonial powers.

While traditional Arabic poetry largely focused on communal themes, such as loyalty, honor, and the celebration of tribal or national victories, modern Arabic poetry shifted towards more individualistic and introspective themes. This transition was reflective of the broader societal changes taking place in the Arab world, as individuals began to grapple with the effects of colonialism, the disintegration of traditional social structures, and the search for new forms of identity in a modernizing world.

In traditional poetry, the poet often played the role of a spokesperson for their tribe or ruler, using their verse to preserve history and uphold societal values. Themes of love, nature, and warfare were often intertwined with moral or ethical lessons. For example,

the pre-Islamic “qasida” often invoked the harsh desert landscape as a metaphor for human endurance and resilience, emphasizing the importance of communal bonds in the face of adversity.

In contrast, modern Arabic poetry became a platform for exploring personal and existential questions. The impact of political events such as the Nakba, the displacement of Palestinians in 1948, and the ongoing struggles for independence across the Arab world deeply influenced the thematic concerns of modern poets. Figures like Mahmoud Darwish used their poetry to articulate the pain of exile and the yearning for a lost homeland. Their work became a powerful tool for expressing the complexities of modern Arab identity, shaped by both historical trauma and the desire for liberation.

While traditional poets often glorified the past and celebrated communal values, modern poets like Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber) used their verse to challenge established norms and question authority. Adonis, in particular, was known for his use of surrealist imagery and his rejection of classical forms, which he saw as limiting the potential for true creative expression. His work reflected a broader trend in modern Arabic poetry towards breaking with tradition and embracing more abstract, philosophical themes.

The language of traditional Arabic poetry is characterized by its precision and adherence to the rules of \*fusha\* (classical Arabic), with an emphasis on rhetorical devices such as metaphor, simile, and allusion. Classical poets often drew upon the rich imagery of the desert, animals, and nature to convey their messages. The use of elaborate, highly stylized language was seen as a mark of the poet's skill and mastery of the Arabic language.

Modern Arabic poetry, however, adopted a more flexible approach to language, often incorporating colloquial speech and blending classical and modern Arabic to reflect the realities of contemporary Arab life. This linguistic shift mirrored the broader social and political changes taking place in the Arab world, as poets sought to make their work more accessible to the general public. Modern poets also experimented with new forms of imagery, drawing not only from the natural world but also from urban environments, political struggles, and global cultural references.

For instance, poets like Nizar Qabbani used simple, everyday language to express deep emotions, particularly in his love poetry. Qabbani's use of colloquial Arabic, combined with his direct, often controversial subject matter, helped to democratize Arabic poetry, making it more relatable to a wider audience. His work stands in stark contrast to the highly formalized, metaphor-laden verse of classical poets.

In addition to linguistic experimentation, modern Arabic poets embraced new forms of symbolism. While traditional poetry often used familiar, concrete symbols drawn from Arab culture and history, modern poets introduced more abstract, sometimes surrealist imagery. Adonis, for example, employed symbols that were open to multiple interpretations, drawing from Islamic mysticism, modernist philosophy, and contemporary art to create a complex, layered poetic language that challenged readers to engage with his work on multiple levels.

In traditional Arab society, poets held a privileged position as the chroniclers of their community's history and values. The poet was seen as a representative of their tribe or nation, and their verse was often used to praise rulers, celebrate victories, or commemorate important events. Classical poets like Al-Mutanabbi and Abu Tammam enjoyed close relationships with political elites, using their work to both entertain and inform.

In the modern era, however, the role of the poet has shifted dramatically. Modern Arabic poets often see themselves as outsiders, challenging the political and social structures of their time. The move towards free verse and more experimental forms can be seen as a rejection of the hierarchical, often authoritarian structures that characterized much of Arab history. Poets like Mahmoud Darwish, whose work became synonymous with the Palestinian cause, used their verse as a form of political resistance, critiquing oppressive regimes and advocating for national liberation.

Modern poets are often more concerned with the individual's place in society, exploring themes of alienation, existentialism, and personal freedom. This shift from the collective to the individual reflects the broader cultural and political changes that have taken place in the Arab world over the past century. As Arab societies have become more fragmented and politically unstable, modern poets have used their work to explore the complexities of personal identity in an increasingly globalized world.

In conclusion, the evolution of Arabic poetry from its traditional forms to modern free verse reflects the broader sociopolitical and cultural transformations that have shaped the Arab world over the past century. While traditional poetry was characterized by its formal rigidity, communal focus, and reverence for linguistic purity, modern Arabic poetry has embraced new forms, themes, and languages to express the complexities of modern life. Despite these differences, both traditional and modern Arabic poetry continue to play a vital role in the cultural and intellectual life of the Arab world. As modern poets continue to innovate, drawing on both classical and global influences, Arabic poetry remains a dynamic and evolving art form that bridges the past and the present.

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