

RESEARCH  
ARTICLE**Criteria for Renewal in Modern Algerian Literature: Perspectives of Ramadan Hammoud and Ahmed Reda Houhou****Sayhi Ahmed**

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**Abstract**

The most prominent manifestation of innovation in modern Algerian literary criticism can be observed in the works of Ramadan Hammoud and Ahmed Reda Houhou, particularly in their critical stance toward traditional literature and its prevailing concepts. Both figures pioneered new perspectives on literary genres and styles, advocating for transformation across multiple dimensions of literary creation. The socio-cultural transformations that emerged in Algeria from the early 1920s profoundly influenced the nation's intellectual and artistic climate, which, in turn, was reflected in literary production. This period witnessed an active call for renewal encompassing vision, thought, artistic expression, language, style, form, and thematic content.

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**Introduction**

The renewal movement in modern Algerian literary criticism began to take shape in the pages of *Al-Muntaqid* and *Al-Shihab* in the aftermath of the First World War. The profound political, social, economic, and cultural transformations that followed the war brought about significant changes in the conception, function, and role of poetry, as well as in its relationship to the individual and society.

Amid this wave of transformation that permeated all aspects of material and artistic life—and within the psychological tension between entrenched values and the influx of new influences—there emerged a group of literary critics distinguished by their cultural depth and intellectual awareness. Open to the ideas and sensibilities of the modern world, they articulated critical perspectives that reflected personal engagement with their rapidly changing reality. Their writings introduced novel concepts into Algerian literary discourse, signaling a break from rigid traditionalism.

These critics were particularly influenced by foreign literatures, notably the French literary school, from which they adopted certain perspectives on the nature, function, and techniques of poetry. Yet, they did not abandon their Arab cultural identity. Instead, they adapted these external influences to their own intellectual and social

contexts, maintaining a connection to their heritage while fostering a literary renewal that resonated with Algerian realities.

The most vivid embodiment of this innovative spirit is found in the works of Ramadan Hammoud and Ahmed Reda Houhou. Both took pioneering stances against the established concepts of traditional literature, especially in their views on literary genres and style. The socio-cultural awakening of the 1920s manifested itself in literature, giving rise to a call for renewal across vision, thought, artistic expression, language, style, form, and thematic content.

The genuine turn toward emotionally charged romantic poetry in Algeria began with Ramadan Hammoud (1906–1928) in the mid-1920s. This is evident in his critical writings, which articulated his conception of poetic experience, his understanding of the function of poetry, and his critique of conservative traditionalism. Hammoud emerged as a leading figure breaking the monotony of the prevailing literary order and is widely regarded as the first modernizing force in Algerian poetry—a rebellious voice challenging the principles and objectives of the Poetic Revival School.

Before examining his position on traditionalism and his critical theories, it is necessary to pause and acknowledge the profound loss his early death represented for modern Algerian thought. Struck down in the prime of his life, at only twenty-three years of age, Hammoud's passing deprived Algerian literature of a promising intellectual force.

### Main discussion

Born in Ghardaïa in 1906, Hammoud moved with his father to Relizane at the age of six and enrolled in a French school. There, he became acutely aware of the gap between two educational systems: the French, modern in method yet undermining of cultural identity, and the Arabic, rich in heritage but weakened by outdated pedagogical approaches. At sixteen, Hammoud traveled to Tunisia on an educational mission, studying at several institutions, most notably *Al-Khaldounia* and *Al-Jami' Al-A'zam*. However, societal expectations—specifically the tradition of early marriage—forced him to abandon further studies and return to Algeria.

Settling in his birthplace, Hammoud immersed himself in intellectual and literary activities, writing for *Al-Shihab* and *Wadi Mzab*, and publishing his book *Seeds of Life (The Youth)*. On November 20, 1925, during a large nationalist demonstration in Ghardaïa against Governor-General Violette, colonial authorities arrested numerous nationalist figures, including Hammoud, and imprisoned them—a reflection of the repression that marked the period.

For the poet Ramadan Hammoud, imprisonment was not a source of suffering, sorrow, or alienation; rather, he viewed it as preferable to the grandeur of palaces. In one of his poems, he reflected:

*I had heard that prison is narrower than a grave,  
But I found the prison's depths better than a palace.  
What good is a palace when the heart is bewildered?  
What harm is prison to one who has worth?  
He who has not tasted the bitterness of death in his struggle  
Will complain of harm with tears streaming from his eyes.  
He lives gloomy and bewildered all his life,  
Seeing from the vicissitudes of time hardship upon hardship.*

Hammoud's life, however, was tragically cut short. Afflicted by tuberculosis, he passed away in January 1929, his fate resembling a blooming flower that had suddenly withered. Despite his brief literary career, Hammoud made a significant contribution to Algerian letters. His diverse writings, liberated ideas, and bold critical stances—often expressed through the militant Algerian press—positioned him as a leading voice for renewal within the romantic movement in Algerian poetry.

He was uncompromising in his opposition to conservative imitation in literature, directing his criticism at those who, in his view, remained detached from the realities of their era. Hammoud called upon emerging generations

of poets to transcend the rigid conventions of the classical *qasida* and to develop new poetic forms unbound by the formalities reinforced by centuries of critical tradition.

In 1927, Hammoud began publishing his critical writings in *Al-Shihab*. At a time when the Arab literary world was preparing to crown Ahmad Shawqi as the “Prince of Arabic Poetry,” the young rebel seized the opportunity to use *Al-Shihab*—beginning on February 2—as a platform for his bold and confrontational critique of Shawqi and the conservative, imitative school of poetry. This critique appeared as a series of articles titled *The Truth of Poetry and Its Benefits*, a title that underscored Hammoud’s intellectual ambition and his drive to question prevailing norms.

Of Shawqi, Hammoud wrote:

“Shawqi has not brought forth anything new previously unknown, nor has he created a method unique to himself or devised a style suited to the age. Most of his poetry is closer to the old era than to the twentieth century, which needs national, patriotic, political, and enthusiastic poetry that brings benefit, repels harm, and stirs the zeal of the idle—especially as the young East stands at the dawn of its new renaissance.”

In Hammoud’s assessment, Shawqi’s poetry offered little innovation. At a time when the Arab nation demanded verse that could galvanize political consciousness and inspire liberation, Shawqi’s focus on the beauty of palaces and gardens seemed out of step with the urgent needs of the era. Hammoud lamented that Shawqi’s work differed little from that of his predecessors, whether in subject matter or language. Even in his dramatic works, Hammoud argued, Shawqi would have served his audience better by embracing a fervent, politically charged style capable of stirring a people yearning for freedom. As he declared, “This nation needs dramatic poetic plays ablaze with enthusiasm and patriotism.”

### Criticism of the School of Poetic Revival and Ahmad Shawqi

Ramadan Hammoud deemed it necessary to direct his critical attention toward the foremost figure of the traditional conservative movement—known as the *School of Poetic Revival*—embodied in Ahmad Shawqi. In critiquing the leader of this school, Hammoud was in effect challenging classical tendencies in Arabic literature broadly, and in Algerian literature specifically. At the time, Shawqi held an eminent position in the Arab literary world, his poetry serving as a widely emulated model. His prestige in Algeria equaled that in the Arab East, and his works were received with similar reverence.

Through his pointed critique of Shawqi and his exposure of weaknesses within the latter’s verse, Hammoud articulated his rejection of the traditionalist conception of poetry, which, in his view, impeded genuine emotional expression and artistic freedom. In this regard, his position paralleled that of the *Divan* school poets in their critical assessments of Shawqi.

While Hammoud’s criticism was bold and uncompromising, it did not entail outright denial of Shawqi’s literary merits, as was the case with ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād. Rather, Hammoud acknowledged Shawqi’s distinguished role in reviving Arabic poetry and the rightful eminence he achieved. He paid tribute to Shawqi’s literary stature, likening him to celebrated Western figures:

“It was only round after round until, from among those heavy clouds, appeared the knight of the field, Ahmad Bey Shawqi, carrying the banner of rhyme over the heads of his fellow poets, walking before them, his nose high toward the sky. He revived the state of poetry and elevated it after its fall, honored it after its humiliation. His reward for this admirable work was that people acknowledged for him the grand emirate in his noble state. He bore it deservedly, and here is the young Islamic world wanting to celebrate its Ahmad as France celebrated its Hugo and the English their Shakespeare. So many thanks to the celebrator, and congratulations to the celebrated.”

Following this acknowledgment, Hammoud returned to a more critical tone:

“Yes, Shawqi revived Arabic poetry after its death and opened the door long closed by the passing years. Yet, with that, he did not bring forth something entirely new, nor did he invent a unique method or devise a style suited to the modern age. At most, he adapted the ancient structure of poetry—formed in bygone centuries—studied its

form, and clothed it in the garment of his refined imagination, delicate style, majestic diction, and strong content. He crowned it with the breadth of his knowledge and struck chords that resonated with hearts longing for someone to recite to them the melodies of the great poets of old. In Shawqi, they found a link binding their lives to the unbroken chain of their ancestors. Thus, they welcomed him eagerly.”

Hammoud’s critique sharpened as he identified the core of his objection:

“Shawqi—what do you know of Shawqi?—a wise and skilled poet, standing among the giants of the past, yet deeply attached to the old literature, to the point of imitation and disregard for its other dimensions. Most of his poetry is closer to the old era than to the twentieth century, which needs national, patriotic, political, and enthusiastic poetry that brings benefit, repels harm, and stirs the idle.”

Hammoud clarified that he did not deny Shawqi’s engagement with political and social themes, citing, for example, “The Wet Nurse of Islam,” a lament for Damascus. Rather, he argued that a poet capable of producing such works as *The Echo of War*, *Major Events of the Nile Valley*, and *The Nile*—with sustained energy, without weakness or decline—could have also created dramatic, impassioned, and patriotic verse comparable to, or even surpassing, the works of Voltaire, Lamartine, Shakespeare, and Hugo.

Importantly, Hammoud’s call for renewal was not rooted in disdain for heritage. He rejected the interpretation that innovation entailed severing ties with the past. Instead, his pride in Arab cultural heritage motivated his desire to rejuvenate it, ensuring its vitality for the future:

“Renewal is not a tool with which we demolish what our forefathers built, but it is an infinite force with which we restore the past and pave the way for the future.”

In articulating his position, Hammoud explicitly stated that his aim was not to elevate an Algerian poet at the expense of the “Prince of Poets,” but to highlight the genuine cultural exchange between the Maghreb and the Arab East—at a time when the East often assumed Algeria spoke only in French. He remarked:

“I would not like it to be understood from raising this topic that I wish to add a new reputation to an Algerian poet at the expense of the Prince of Poets, like the poet who satirized Bashshar to gain fame from his reply to him. Rather, I wish to show the extent to which the interaction was genuine between the Maghreb and the Arab East, at a time when the East thought it spoke only in clear French.”

Hammoud’s justifications for his critical engagement with Shawqi, a figure universally recognized for his distinction in poetry and literature while Algeria was in a state of cultural decline, can be summarized as follows:

1. Serving literature regardless of geographical origin.
2. Avoiding any attempt to diminish the reputation of a major poet.
3. Affirming the Maghreb’s long-standing intellectual and cultural connection with the Arab East, despite colonial barriers.
4. Recognizing Egypt as the contemporary center of Arabic language, sciences, and literature, and wishing to see its continual progress.
5. Using Shawqi’s example to illuminate the path for Algerian literary development, as the East had no immediate need for external guidance.
6. A deep passion for renewal, especially in literature.
7. Non-recognition of the modern Eastern renaissance unless it was built upon strong principles, a national literature, and a new intellectual life.
8. Advocating for literary approaches distinct from those of earlier generations.
9. Opening the field of Algerian literary criticism, viewed as the governing authority in the realm of literature and science.
10. Emphasizing that each era has its own figures, and each figure belongs to his era.
11. Asserting that imitation and stagnation are incompatible with progress.

Hammoud's renewalist appeal was most clearly articulated in his extended study *The Truth of Poetry and Its Benefits*, where he addressed his fellow men of letters:

"O free-spirited men of letters, cast off affectation and pedantry in language, pour the beautiful meaning into the beautiful expression, submit to the voice of conscience and duty, cleanse yourselves of revenge before criticism, and do not bind your writings to the method of anyone, no matter his status and standing in literature, or the magic of his eloquence. But I hope your pens revolve around one axis, and the steeds of your thoughts race toward one goal, which is: 'The happiness of the East by any means!'"

### Ramadan Hammoud's Concept of the Poetic Experience and Artistic Sincerity

Ramadan Hammoud's conception of the poetic experience was grounded in the conviction that Arabic poetry must shift away from its excessive preoccupation with formal craftsmanship and rhetorical ornamentation toward a deeper engagement with message and content—content that reflects and confronts the lived reality of the oppressed Arab nation.

Central to this vision was the principle of *artistic sincerity*, a subject that had long preoccupied critics from both classical and modern traditions. The debate, framed historically between those who maintained that "the sweetest poetry is the most false" and those who insisted that literature achieves authenticity only when the writer conveys emotions genuinely felt and beliefs truly held, was a point of critical departure for Hammoud.

For Hammoud, artistic sincerity constituted the foundation of all successful artistic creation. In this respect, the poet's role is analogous to that of the painter: just as a painter cannot succeed without drawing upon a living energy of feeling, so too the poet cannot captivate minds or move hearts unless he excels in portraying the profound emotions that emerge from the depths of his own experience—whether personal or collective. Poetry that relies merely on artifice, falsification, empty affectation, mechanical composition, or outright falsehood, he argued, inevitably diminishes both the work and its creator in the eyes of an intelligent nation.

In Hammoud's formulation, artistic sincerity entails placing emotion at the center of the poetic process. He regarded emotion as the primary element upon which the success or failure of poetry depends, cautioning young writers against entering the literary profession armed solely with grammar, morphology, prosody, and rhetoric. These tools, he warned, are of little value without a strong inner compulsion toward genuine artistic creation. Poetry, in his view, is not a commodity or a craft, as maintained by traditional conservatives, but rather a product of emotional inspiration and the call of conscience. Literature that does not arise from a sensitive soul will fail to penetrate the depths of other souls, will lack enduring vitality, and will soon be forgotten.

This perspective aligns closely with the renewalist doctrine that emerged in the Arab East through the efforts of the *Divan* school, the *émigré* poets, and the *Apollo* group, as well as with the Western Romantic conception of poetry. All of these movements granted emotion a central role in literary creation, reflecting the Romantic prioritization of the heart over the intellect. Hammoud's engagement with the ideas of the French Romantic school—already influential in the Arab world, particularly through the Shaabi school in Tunisia—was profound. While the Shaabi school is most closely associated with Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, Hammoud can be regarded as one of its distinguished figures.

The renewal Hammoud advocated—embodied in his own poetic output—was not, as Mohammed Messaïf suggested, an act of Westernization. Rather, it was a renewal born from the very conditions of contemporary life, a conscious and explicit stance that he articulated clearly: "The call for sincerity in artistic depiction, sincerity in emotion, and probing the depths of life is not imitation of anyone, but an expression of the era in which the critic lives."

Hammoud saw poetry as the utterance of truth, "a truth felt by the heart," to borrow from Chaplin. The sincere poet, in his view, is one close to inspiration, and poetry is too elevated to be entrusted to materialist versifiers, slaves to imitation, and enemies of innovation. Only those endowed with penetrating intellect, sound judgment, and refined taste could grasp its essence—distinguishing its pearls from its shells, its fine from its coarse. Attempting to mine the treasures of poetry without these attributes, he asserted, is to undertake the impossible.

In satirical verse, Hammoud castigated those who clung to stagnation and imitation:

*Brought words that stirred no listener,  
An old woman with a half and a half is the chest,  
Gathered its parts under a tent,  
Like rotting bone enclosed in the grave,  
Adorned with meter that is followed,  
With a rhyme for the hem cast by the sea,  
And said: we set poetry as a guide for people—  
Yet it is neither magical poetry nor prose,  
But rather a jumble of verse and scattered speech,  
Falsehood and deceit that kills thought.*

His rejoinder to such poets was unequivocal:

*Know that feeling is poetry,  
Not polishing and falsifying by one who knows,  
For poetry is only what the chest yearns for.  
This is the murmur of water, rhythmic poetry,  
This is the light foam of love sung by the bird,  
This is the lion's roar defending its den,  
This is the whistle of the wind striking the rock,  
This is the crash of thunder raging in the sky,  
This is the crow of night driven away by dawn—  
That is true poetry itself,  
Even if the stagnant, dead, naïve one never tastes it.*

Hammoud lamented that many poets of his time, having abandoned their national responsibilities, inclined toward frivolity and moral laxity, thereby encouraging the public to imitate them and allowing national sentiment to wither. He criticized the proliferation of quatrains, imitative stanzas, and verses dedicated to praise, satire, and romantic dalliance, interpreting this trend as symptomatic of the idleness afflicting the Arab peoples and eroding their cultural vitality. Addressing the youth, he issued both a warning and a charge:

“O young poets, by you the nation lives and by you it dies—God forbid— you are the messengers of freedom and eternal happiness if you wish, and you are the heralds of death if you wish. If you fulfill your duty—bravo! If you neglect it—alas!”

This call to artistic responsibility was further reinforced in verse:

*Renew an age of light for your poetry,  
For the chain of imitation is broken by the age,  
Lead it toward perfection and restore,  
Its landmarks until the moon greets it,  
As in the days of al-Rashid and after him,  
Those were the ages of poetry surrounded by victory.*

Through such pronouncements, Hammoud articulated a renewalist vision in which sincerity, emotional truth, and national responsibility formed the core of the poetic enterprise—principles that he saw as indispensable to the revival of both literature and the Arab nation itself.

### **From Ramadan Hammoud to Ahmed Reda Houhou: Romanticism and the Principle of Artistic Sincerity in Algerian Literary Criticism**

Ramadan Hammoud's critique of poetic imitation culminated in an open denunciation of restrictive conventions and an impassioned call to reclaim the nation's cultural and historical glories. In his exhortation to fellow poets, he declared:

*Enough, enough, life has changed,  
Choose what is best by the finest means,  
Move swiftly and reclaim your pride,  
For wretched is a man's life under servility.*

Within Hammoud's theoretical framework on poetry and its function, he defined the critic's essential tools in three interdependent qualities:

1. **Penetrating Intellect** – The critic must possess far-sighted analytical ability, deep familiarity with the nature of poetry, knowledge of its origins, causes, and techniques, and an insider's understanding of literary creation gained through lived artistic experience.
2. **Sound Judgment** – A balanced, disciplined intellect capable of restraining impulsive judgments and offering credible, reliable assessments.
3. **Refined Taste** – A cultivated sensibility enabling the critic to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of literature, an attribute essential for evaluating poetic freshness and artistic merit.

Hammoud's voice, distinguished for its originality and defiance of the prevailing conservative trend, was silenced prematurely by his death in 1929 at the age of twenty-three. Yet, the turbulent socio-political and economic climate in Algeria—before, during, and after the Second World War—rekindled the Romantic impulse in Algerian poetry, inspiring a new generation of poets to embrace emotional expression as a literary principle.

The postwar spread of Romantic thought across the Arab world further strengthened this literary current. Algeria, in turn, witnessed the emergence of writers and critics who welcomed these ideas and adapted them to local realities. Romantic influence extended beyond poetry into the realm of literary criticism, where figures such as **Ahmed Reda Houhou**—teacher, journalist, reformer, and cultural activist—played a formative role. Born in Sidi Aqba in 1911 and martyred in 1956, Houhou articulated a modern critical vision that analyzed Algerian literature's stagnation and dependence, offering a new discourse aimed at cultural revival both before and after independence.

In his critical writings, Houhou asserted:

“Poetry is no longer that rhymed, metered speech, and writing is no longer those resounding words and correct constructions. Yes, these elements are necessary for any literature and art, but they are not literature and art. They are but a structure lacking the soul, and this soul is sincerity in expressing feelings, sensations, and the stirrings of the soul to reach the feelings of others and address their spirits. You are a man of letters or an artist if you can correctly express your feelings and sensations, and honestly portray your imaginations and stirrings of the soul, without accounting for readers or aiming for their satisfaction or fear of their displeasure.”

This emphasis on sincerity in expression mirrors the Romantic creed. For Houhou, poetic authenticity was inseparable from the truthful articulation of inner emotion; insincere verse, regardless of technical excellence, was devoid of artistic value. In his view, literature should function as “*a spiritual language with which to address the souls of others*,” and without this, it risked becoming “nonsense or the idols of a nation.”

Houhou's literary renaissance thus rejected the perpetuation of traditionalist forms—“*inflating that dead corpse*”—and called instead for innovation, vitality, and the adoption of new intellectual currents. His position, like Hammoud's, linked poetic renewal to the rejection of inherited constraints and the affirmation of the writer's individual voice.

Between 1927 and 1948, Romantic-minded Algerian poets and men of letters advanced a vision of literature grounded in *artistic sincerity* as the primary criterion for creation. Their revolt against the stagnant traditionalist trend reflected two central aims:

- Reforming the concept of poetry in line with modern expressive needs.
- Rejecting imitation and restoring the poet's role as the authentic interpreter of personal and collective experience.

However, Romanticism in Algeria was not embraced as a comprehensive philosophical doctrine. Much like in the wider Arab world, Algerian writers adopted Romanticism selectively, particularly in its opposition to traditional literature and its advocacy for the writer's return to his own lived experiences—without resorting to the inherited formulas and exhausted imagery of earlier eras.

This adaptation marks a clear distinction between Algerian (and Arab) Romanticism and its European counterpart. Whereas European Romanticism emerged as a broad cultural revolt against Classicism's rationalism, moral strictures, and institutionalized constraints, Algerian Romanticism arose from the urgent need to voice the psychological and political struggles of a colonized people. It was, above all, a means of resistance, renewal, and self-affirmation.

Despite limitations in critical methodology, these early contributions constituted the foundation of Algerian literary criticism. The period's critics, though often working from partial perspectives and with limited exposure to global literary movements, laid essential groundwork for later intellectual development. As Ammar Ben Zayed observed:

“Both literature and criticism need more time, experience, and expertise to give us the desired results and to take us out of the circle of obscurity, disorder, and turmoil into the circle of clarity and maturity. The disorder in modern Algerian literary criticism goes back to two reasons: the first is the weakness of modern Algerian literature and its lack of diversity at the time, and the second is the limited literary and critical culture of Algerian critics, especially regarding literary movements and critical methodologies.”

In this light, the Romanticism of Hammoud and Houhou stands as a transitional force—bridging colonial-era stagnation and the intellectual awakening that would follow—anchored in the conviction that sincerity of emotion and originality of vision were the lifeblood of literature and the keys to cultural revival.

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