

The Reception of the Prose Poem in Algerian Poetry

Hamza Bessou (1)

Dr., University of Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif2
Algeria, h.bessou@univ-setif2.dz



Hicham Toumi (2)

Dr., University of Khenchela
Algeria, toumi.hicham@univ-Khenchela.dz

Received date: 12.01.2023; **Accepted date:** 23.05.2023; **Publication date:** 20.06.2023

Abstract

The present investigation aims to shed light on a poetic form that emerged within the context of modernity and its glowing call for new artistic alternatives and innovative poetic forms namely the prose poem. It concentrates on this type within the dynamics of contemporary Algerian poetry by examining two models of the Algerian prose poem in order to elucidate the artistic development that occurred between the early stages and the stage of maturity during the third millennium. Moreover, the research paper seeks to present the perspectives of some Algerian critics and scholars regarding the prose poem throughout its artistic evolution.

Keywords: reception, prose poem, Algerian poetry, poetic renewal, poetic modernity.

Introduction

The free verse poem is one of the products of poetic modernity, which constantly strives to create artistic and expressive alternatives that subvert the traditional poetic system at the levels of structure, form, vision, and rhythm. This has been achieved for the free verse poem through a genre-opening that has established an intimate relationship between poetry and prose. The free verse poem has replaced musical rhythm (meter and rhyme) with a unique rhythm that derives its energy from the tension of the psychological state, the rhythm of the sentence, and the condensation of the poetic image, in addition to visual engineering and its semantic dimensions.

¹ © 2023 The Author(s). Published by Science, Education and Innovations in the context of modern problems (SEI) by IMCRA - International Meetings and Journals Research Association (Azerbaijan). This is an open access article under the **CC BY** license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Doi : DOI: [10.56334/sei/6.1.9](https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/6.1.9)

Contemporary poetry continues to innovate structural and formative mechanisms that go beyond what is established in conventional poetry. Poetry is no longer measured, rhyming speech that expresses meaning—as the ancients, including Qudamah ibn Ja'far, concluded. Rather, poetry has become a climate for imagination, vision, revelation, productive reading, transcendence, and experimentation, in line with the setbacks of the self and the paradoxes of contemporary reality. It is also a natural response to the propositions of modernity and post-modernity and the call it produced to undermine fixed structures and demolish the foundations upon which the traditional style was erected. It is then to innovate flexible structural and formative artistic alternatives that are open to experimentation, which bestows an aesthetic touch imprinted with the uniqueness of the creative self, with the intention of involving the reader in generating transcendent meanings at the moment of astonishment resulting from breaking the horizon of his expectations. This, then, is the uniqueness of contemporary poetry and artistic taste, and the prose poem is an exemplary image and space for the transformation that contemporary poetry has undergone.

Based on the aforementioned issues, a number of problematic questions arise in the context of this research paper:

What are the foundations of the prose poem? What artistic tools does it employ?

How has the prose poem been received in the Arab poetic context in general and the Algerian context in particular?

Has the prose poem been able to establish itself as an independent poetic entity and system?

What is the position of Algerian critics and scholars on the prose poem?

We seek to answer these questions through this study, by tracing the trajectory of the prose poem in Algerian poetry and its artistic transformations.

The Prose Poem: Definition and Origin:

Many scholars have delved into the definition and concept of the prose poem. Ezzedine Manasra defines it, as "a hybrid literary text open to poetry, narrative, and artistic prose, transcending genres. It lacks a systematic quantitative sound structure, but possesses an irregular internal rhythm through the distribution of punctuation marks, a semantic structure based on contrast, and dialectic of relationships within the text that creates a hidden rhythm. The prose poem is an independent literary genre belonging to the genre of the edge.¹"

And if every literary genre has origins and roots - according to the theory of the evolution of literary genres - then the origins of the prose poem, as many scholars (such as Adonis and AzzEddinMnasra) have gone to, go back to the writings of al-Niffari, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, al-Suhrawardi, al-Bistami, Ibn Arabi, and Jalal al-Din al-Rumi. As for the beginnings of the prose poem, they go back to what was called (prose poetry), which appeared with Amin al-Rihani (1905), Ali al-Nasir, Hussein Afif, and Ramadan Hamoud in his theoretical articles (The Truth of Poetry and Its Benefits) and his poem (O My

Heart), which included some prose sentences. Let us consider his statement, pointing to what we are dealing with, he says: "Some may think that poetry is that metered, rhyming speech, even if it is devoid of eloquent meaning and attractive spirit, and that prose speech is not poetry, even if it is sweeter than clear water and more fragrant than the flowers of the hills. This is a corrupt assumption, an empty belief, and a cold judgment²." This is not Except for a founding speech for what is called (prose poetry).

However, the actual beginning of the free verse poem dates back to the early 1960s with Adonis, Unsi al-Hajj, Muhammad al-Maghut, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Tawfiq al-Sayegh.

The free verse poem is based on the concept of openness in terms of vision, genre, form, and rhythm. It is well known that "the open poem with its open form includes initiatives that constantly change our poetic and aesthetic standards. From here, the new poet opposes constancy with transformation, the limited with the unlimited, and the closed, single form with the open, infinite form. He declares that poetry has transcended its old qualitative boundaries³." This rebellious tendency is a characteristic of modernity and post-modernity, which tends toward liberation from everything fixed, restricted, and closed.

Nevertheless, we are wondering here about the musical rhythm. Indeed, it is the main element of the Arabic poem, and its essence. Since ancient times, the traditions of poetic writing have established it; and without it, the poem cannot stand. So what is its position in the prose poem?

As an independent poetic entity, the supporters and defenders of the prose poem confirm that the rhythm of this poetic form, which is a special rhythm, different from the rhythm of the traditional classical poem. Adonis confirms believes that "the rhythm of the sentence, the relationships of sounds, meanings and images, the suggestive energy of speech, and the tails that the suggestions drag behind them from the multiple colorful echoes – all of these are music, and they are independent of the music of the verse form. They may exist within it or without it⁴." This means that the concept of rhythm has changed for these people, or has expanded and stretched until it has come to include what was not rhythm in the view of early poets and scholars. Hence, "the prose poem, is music, but it is not the music of submission to old rhythms. Rather, it is the music of responding to the rhythm of our experiences and our new lives – a rhythm that is renewed every moment⁵." Adonis goes further than that when he saw that the rhythmic form alone does not necessarily make the poem a poetic work, as something else must be present, which is the "vision" present through the body of the poem, its material, or its rhythmic form. Thus, poems as a rhythmic form alone are not poetry, but rather poetic artifacts⁶.

Whatever the case, the rhythm of the prose poem operates through two formulas⁷:

Linguistic formula

Rhythm is manifested through the syllables and phonemes of the language through letters and words and the repetition of certain sounds between voiced and unvoiced, strong and soft, or specific words within the poetic text. It is also represented in the

investment of the grammatical and morphological structure in the linguistic system through the repetition of certain grammatical and morphological forms, such as the repetition of the verb, noun, adjective, hyperbole, overstatement, overemphasis, amplification, comparatives, time or place conjunctions, for example; and the repetition of a sentence with equal grammatical dimensions.

Technical formula

Rhyme, alliteration, antithesis, duality, the rhythm of the poetic image, the psychological rhythm of the text, the typographical distribution of the form of the poetic page, the repetition of textual necessities (only, perhaps, while, whenever, where...) are some of technical formula. Additionally, transformation through the use of verbs at the ends of texts, parenthetical sentences, unexpected conjunctions, the rhythm of narration, the rhythm of description, the rhythm of dialogue, and the rhythm of atmospheres (the atmosphere of the text): mythical, exotic, emotional, sentimental, philosophical, contemplative, existential, and death.

On this basis, "the way language is used is a basic and direct measure of distinguishing between poetry and prose. Deviating from language's normal mode of expression and meaning, adding to its energy the qualities of excitement, surprise and astonishment becomes poetry; and imagery is one of the most important elements⁸".

In this context, we state the question:

What is the position of the prose poem within Algerian poetry? Who are its leading figures? What is the position of Algerian critics and researchers toward it?

The reception of the free verse poem in the Algerian poetry movement

Algerian poetry has known the free verse poem within the framework of innovation and experimentation by a group of young poets. Among the early experiments was that of Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga in his collection (The Vacant Souls), which included prose poems written by its author in the 1960s and 1970s. This was followed by attempts by a number of poets, including: Jarwa Allawa Wahbi, Abdelhamid Chekil, Abu Bakr Zermal, Lakhdar Chaudar, Miloud Hakim, Meshri Ben Khalifa, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Zainab Al-Aouaj, Rabia Jilti, Nouara Lahrach, and Munira Saada Khalkhal.

A researcher has pointed out that the free verse poem constitutes approximately eighty percent of Algerian women's poetry⁹. This means that the Algerian female poetess embraced the free verse poem (both prose and poetry), eagerly and enthusiastically seeking liberation from the constraints of the classical poem, which has been dominated by the dimension of "virility" since ancient times. In doing so, it was resisting this dimension and freeing itself from its authority. This poetic liberation is matched by a liberation on the cultural and social levels in reality. As for the poetic liberation among Algerian male poets, it was primarily driven by the influence of the concepts of modernity and experimentation.

Anyone who studies the trajectory of Algerian free verse poetry will notice a clear shift from reportorial and directness to visionary and symbolic forms, from narrative to

poetry, from drama to lyricism, and from superficiality to depth. A wordplay and a deepening engagement with language and its potential is noticed. Thus, free verse poetry has been able to assert its presence in the Algerian literary and poetic arena, sparking considerable debate among critics and scholars.

Perhaps we will suffice here with two examples of Algerian free verse poetry, one ancient and the other modern, to record the remarkable development we mentioned:

In his poem "The Flower Bearer," Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga depicts the story of an Algerian soldier who participated in World War II and, upon his return to Algeria, found the tragedy of May 8th, 1945, awaiting him. He says:

He bore his flowers, and he walked
toward the newborn city.
From afar—
a glimmer,
golden light,
spilling from white tongues of flame,
its branches climbing the sky.
O light that wrapped them whole,
then drifted upward—
where the dying sun cast
its last, sad smiles
upon the martyrs' graves.

He came too late.
The door was shut.
He turned away—
but then,
sharp voices split the air,
striking deep within him:

"O bearer of flowers... O bearer of flowers..."

He stood frozen,
bewildered,
as laughter rippled through the heavens,
then fell away into a silence
as vast and final as the void.

Back he went,
to a hut darker than despair,
to a stillness deaf and mute as stone—
no wife,
no children,
only scraps and shreds
drenched in blood.

What a grief—
black, unending.

He opened the window,
sat in the night
alone with his memories,

...

...

...

and cried:

*"What wolves—
treacherous to the bone!"¹⁰*

The poem continues in this narrative style and dramatic imagery until the end of the poem/story. We notice the poetic harmonization with the narrative prose, though the narrative prose is the dominant one. If Ben Hadouga had not resorted to the system of short sentences/lines that include a faint rhythm: white/sky/martyrs/space/blood... and the syllabic system, the visual geometric formation, and the punctuation marks, we would have considered it a story with all its components that fulfilled all conditions, not a prose poem.

When "poetic formulation resorts to a mode of expression called 'narration,' expression opens up to a sense of observation (...) and whenever it crosses into this narrative, lyricism diminishes and drama takes shape, because the former sings of the feelings of the self as it speaks, while the latter rids itself of subjectivity and speaks of the world in its conflicts¹¹." Most of the poems in the collection "Vacant Souls" follow this pattern and approach.

In general, this model is sufficient to present a picture of the beginnings of Algerian free verse poetry, which was characterized by simplicity, superficiality, and narrative, and a departure from displaced and tense language, artistic ambiguity, symbolism, and profound vision. However, this model is circumscribed by its circumstances. It is not appropriate to evaluate it according to the criteria applied to prose poetry for the demand for which has grown steadily over time.

We present an example of the Algerian poet- Munira Saada Khalkhal— a prose poem in the third millennium, in which she relied on condensation, metaphor, imagery, vision and revelation in a way that is consistent with poetic modernity. She says in Portrait of Language:

The night withdraws into its own darkness.
The darkness withdraws into wakefulness,
and wakefulness into accord—

an accord like fatigue,
slipping into the rivers of realms
that have always turned toward me

when the world is wrapped
in the pulse of light
resting in the palm of the wheat ear.

Then wishes rise—
beaming,
sometimes reckless,
carrying the spirit of songs,
the fabled Babel of imagining.

Naïve questions spring forth,
cutting a chapter
from a crooked ether
that stands in for the journey,
worn away by scratches
that sketch their nests
on the walls of the wind,
leading to the glory of the image.

Cursed be the hand of language!¹²

Basically, the language of the poem delves into the realms of revelation and vision. We notice this metaphorical flow, resembling the flow of water from a waterfall. However, the expansiveness of meaning exhausts language, as the Sufis say: "The more the meaning expands, the more the expression narrows." This is perhaps confirmed at the end of the poem, specifically in the phrase "Cursed be the hand of language!"

Naturally, "this is the dividing line in the poet's interaction, renewing the outside of form between the linguistic and the metaphorical, compensating for the absence of rhythm. Indeed, through their intermingling, they achieve a rhythm of their own for the prose poem¹³." Although we sense some rhythm in the construction of some phrases (verb + subject + preposition): (The night turns to darkness/Darkness turns to wakefulness/Wakefulness turns to harmony/It infiltrates the rivers of the fields/It turns to me), and in the meter of the two words (cheerful/careless).

In general, the poem has its own rhythm, emerging from the linguistic and artistic forms mentioned above.

Hence, Amina Balali pointed out that the modernizing vision of Algerian female poets is embodied in two points¹⁴:

- Liberation is the fundamental characteristic, as there is a strong tendency to break free from the confines of vertical and free rules. This liberation has led female poets to embrace experimentation with all its concerns and constraints. Even those committed to a particular form, such as vertical or free verse, are soon found writing in both free and prose.

Secondly, the marginalization of women's poetry as a consequence of modernity, as this poetry faces the decline of meaning and the emergence of writing devoid of meaning, in which many female poets were content with arranging words one after the other to the point that it became, for some of them, like a hallucination. In reality, it is a phenomenon closely associated with contemporary poetry in general, and it goes back to understanding the concepts of modernity as immersion in ambiguity, a passion for signifiers, creating a break with Arab heritage, and withdrawing into the poets of modernity.

In fact, these two characteristics apply to both women's and men's poetry (liberation and ambiguity). There is a great difference between artistic ambiguity and obfuscation and vagueness. Artistic ambiguity is a characteristic inherent in modern poetry, as it is a revelation and a vision, and it is a requirement of contemporary taste, while vagueness is the burial of meaning and a deepening of meaninglessness. This is something that even the greatest enthusiasts of modernity do not approve of. Adonis acknowledges that if "poetry is the opposite of clarity, which makes the poem a surface without depth, poetry is also the opposite of vagueness, which makes the poem a closed cave,¹⁵" then poetry should not become mere fantasies that deprive poetry of its water, splendor, and freshness.

Yet, it has settled in the minds of many poets spawned by modernity—with its liberating rhetoric (freedom from form, rhythm, and even meaning), and its absurdity in some aspects—that revelation and vision are "excessive symbolism and exaggeration." Arabic poetry has thus become increasingly obscure, rendering it alien to its subject and to its recipient. This ambiguity has not only created a rift between poet and reader, but also between the poet and the outside world. Delving into creating unfamiliar relationships between words has become the pursuit and the ultimate goal. Readers have been forced to resort to the methodological medium imposed by secularism, in order to view the text as a world of symbols that suggest what suggests nothing¹⁶. The question that comes to mind after this elaboration is:

What is the position of Algerian critics and scholars on the prose poem?

In his in-depth study of modern Algerian poetry, Mohamed Nasser points out that this type of poetry "is hardly found in production that warrants division or mention due to its artistic weakness. Perhaps the possibility of including it in prose is more appropriate than including it in poetry, because this trend has not met with success or acceptance from poets. Rather, it is trying to find the ground on which it stands, after it failed to prove itself in the Arab East, where the possibilities for success and spread are more abundant¹⁷." However, his judgment applies to the models that appeared at that time and up until 1985, the year of the publication of his book. At that time, the conflict was raging and the debate was ongoing in the Levant between the supporters of the free verse poem (headed by: Adonis, Muhammad al-Maghut, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Tawfiq al-Sayegh, Azzeddine Mnasra...) and its opponents, headed by (Nazik al-Malaika) who described the call of the group of the magazine (Shi'r) to this type of poetry as "a weak call devoid of meaning¹⁸," and described the free verse poem as a strange innovation, as she said: "A strange innovation has spread in the literary atmosphere in Lebanon in the

past ten years, so some printing presses began to publish books that contain between their covers natural prose like any other prose, except that they write the word (poetry) on their covers.¹⁹

Therefore, Algerian critics and scholars on the free verse poem, such as Larbi Dahou, who indicated that he does not believe in the existence of any musical formation in this type of poetry. He believes that it is not in keeping with our Arab heritage, but rather; it requires an extraordinary linguistic skill to astonish the reader through the word, and this is a dear requirement²⁰. Perhaps his focus on the musical rhythm in distinguishing between what is poetry and what is not, is what led him not to consider the free verse poem as poetry, and this is evident in his saying: "The element of music is what makes our desire to read poetry certain, and this is what is lacking in the experience of the prose poem²¹."

The same attitude is evident in Abdullah Rkibi, who insists on poetic music to avoid falling into the abyss of prose. He believes that "when new poetry deviates from the system of metrical feet, it loses its important aspect, which is music, and there can be no true Arabic poetry without this music²²." He also warned young poets against being lenient in their use of rhythm, lest they "fall into the abyss of prose that has overwhelmed new poetry, and even lest they be led by the 'prose poem', which its prose writers have been calling for since the early 1960s for well-known goals, even if they have adopted art and aesthetics as a cover²³." Perhaps by doing so, he is exposing poets who lack poetic talent and artistic ability and who have seized the opportunity to venture into poetry.

As for Abdelmalek Mortad, who seemed confused in his position, sometimes insisting on the boundaries separating poetry and prose, and other times tending to remove those boundaries, so some prose is poetry and no problem! based on the fluidity of the concept of poetics. In order not to go on and on invoking his opinions that clarify his position on the prose poem and the overlap of literary genres (poetry-prose), we will suffice with proving two conflicting positions of his; for example, in his book (The Poetics of the Poem, the Poem of Reading, 1994), he declares: "We reject, as many of those dealing with literary texts in the west now reject, the establishment of boundaries between literary genres. Therefore, any truly literary text is poetic from one perspective or another²⁴." In his book (Theory of Reading, 2003), he goes in the opposite direction of what he had previously said, saying: "We still distinguish between poetry and prose, despite the fact that some modernist pedants, especially in France, are trying to prove to people that the literary text is one and the same: it is neither lyrical nor prose²⁵." He returns to the idea of removing boundaries in his book (Theory of the Literary Text). He returns once again to establishing boundaries between them in his book (Issues of Poetics), so the prose poem does not enjoy legitimacy in his view. Perhaps we can explain this by the dialectic of heritage and modernity in his mind. The more he is controlled by the circles of modernity, the more he tends to remove the boundaries between poetry and prose. The more he returns to heritage, draws from its source and is delighted by the rhythm, beauty and pleasure of classical poetry, the more he tends to establish boundaries between them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, free verse poetry has garnered limited recognition among Algerian poets, critics, and scholars since the 1960s, largely owing to the prevailing artistic sensibilities in Algeria, which were neither sufficiently attuned to nor familiar with this poetic form. However, the situation changed somewhat with the dawn of the third millennium, as the free verse poem found its own advocates, supporters, and readers, establishing itself within the circle of contemporary Algerian poetry, although the controversy surrounding it continues to this day.

Furthermore, the free verse poem has attracted a large proportion of Algerian female poets. This may be due—as we have indicated—to the flexibility and freedom that characterize this poetic form, as well as its role as a counter to the classical male poetic style that has been entrenched among male poets since ancient times.

Citations

1. Adonis. (1979). *An introduction to Arabic poetry* (3rd ed.). Dar Al-Awda.
2. Al-Arabi, D. (1991). *Studies and research in Algerian literature*. University Publications Office.
3. Al-Malaika, N. (1967). *Issues of contemporary poetry* (3rd ed.). Al-Nahda Library Publications.
4. Al-Samti, A. (2010). The prose poem between aesthetic and rhythmic values. *Alamāt fī al-Naqd*, 18(71), 228–229. Literary and Cultural Club, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
5. Belala, A. (2014). *The discourse of structures: Arabic poetry at the dawn of the third millennium* (1st ed.). Arab Diffusion Foundation.
6. Benhedouga, A. (1981). *The vacant souls* (3rd ed.). National Publishing and Distribution Company.
7. Daho, A. (1991). *Studies and research in Algerian literature*. University Publications Office.
8. Hammoud, R. (1927). The reality of poetry and its benefits. *Al-Shihab Newspaper*, (82).
9. Khalkhal, M. S. (n.d.). *The desert at the door*. In A. Belala, *The discourse of structures* (pp. 245–246). Arab Diffusion Foundation.
10. Mnasra, E. (n.d.). *The prose poem... (As it is): An open hybrid poetic text, transcending genres and independent*. *Rai Al-Youm Newspaper*.
<https://www.raialyoum.com/%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%8E/> (Accessed: 14/12/2022).
11. Mortad, A. (1994). *The poetics of the poem: The poem of reading* (1st ed.). Arab Selection House.
12. Mortad, A. (2003). *The theory of reading*. Dar Al-Gharb.
13. Nasser, M. (2006). *Modern Algerian poetry* (2nd ed.). Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami.

14. Rakibi, A. (1982). *The Aurès in Arabic poetry*. National Publishing and Distribution Company.
15. Yahiaoui, R. (2018). *Issues in contemporary Algerian literature* (1st ed.). Mim Publishing House.