

Received date: 22.05.2024
Accepted date: 22.07.2024
Publication date: 23.11.2024



Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems

International Academic Journal

ISSN: 2790-0169; E-ISSN 2790-0177; OCLC Number 1322801874

The Poetics of Transformation and Absence in the Poetry of Laqab Belkhir: *Diwan al-Dawawin* as a Model

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DOI: 10.56334/sei/7.4.25

Abstract

This study examines the poetics of transformation and absence in the poetry of the Algerian poet Aqab Belkhir, taking *Dīwān al-Dawāwīn* as a representative model of his poetic project. It argues that transformation and absence function not as separate thematic motifs, but as a unified ontological and semantic structure that constitutes the core of a modern Sufi vision in contemporary Algerian poetry. Drawing on a semiotic–hermeneutic methodology informed by the works of Paul Ricoeur and Gilbert Durand, and placed in dialogue with classical Sufi thought—particularly that of Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Ḥallāj, and Ibn al-Fāriḍ—the study explores how Belkhir’s poetic language enacts a continuous process of annihilation and manifestation. The analysis demonstrates that transformation in Belkhir’s poetry exceeds the notion of change or rebirth, operating instead as an ontological reconfiguration of both language and subjectivity. Absence, rather than signifying loss or negation, emerges as a generative condition through which meaning and presence are disclosed via erasure, silence, and withdrawal. At the linguistic level, the poet employs strategies of semantic displacement, negation, and silence to destabilize fixed meanings and produce an open interpretive field. Through close readings of selected poems, the study shows that language in Belkhir’s work becomes a site of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*), where meaning arises precisely at the moment of its textual and semantic retreat. Ultimately, the article contends that Aqab Belkhir’s poetry constitutes an open hermeneutic space in which Sufi metaphysics and modern critical thought converge, presenting transformation as perpetual absence and absence as an endless movement of transformation. In doing so, the study contributes to contemporary debates on modern Sufi poetics, linguistic ontology, and the dynamics of meaning in Arabic poetic discourse.

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Keywords: Modern Algerian Poetry; Aqab Belkhir; Sufi Poetics; Transformation; Absence; Hermeneutics; Semiotics; Poetic Language

Introduction:

The poet *Aqab Belkhir* is regarded as one of the most prominent Algerian poetic voices to have successfully transformed individual experience into a universal vision that transcends the local toward the human. This is achieved through a language saturated with symbols and charged with spiritual energy, where Sufism intersects with modernity. In his texts, major existential themes—such as transformation, absence, death, and rebirth—condense to establish a poetics that takes the letter, meaning, and the Absolute as a space for manifestation rather than for direct statement. From the poem “*My Homeland*,” pulsating with a resistant consciousness that refuses fracture and betrayal, to the poem “*Transformation*,” which constitutes the apex of his Sufi experience, a poetic project takes shape—one that views language as a path to salvation, and sees transformation and absence together as a unified semantic structure expressing the movement of being between annihilation and subsistence, between nothingness and fullness, between the letter and silence. This dual structure is not merely a pairing of themes, but rather a mechanism for the production of meaning, through which the poetic self emerges as a being that transcends the sensory toward the metaphysical by means of language.

What distinctly characterizes Belkhir’s poetry is that transformation and absence are inseparable within his poetic discourse: transformation is the result of absence, and absence is the condition of transformation. Thus, when he says in the poem “*Transformation*”:

Do not tell the end to begin,

Do not tell the wolves to stop,

Do not tell blackness to turn white...

Here, refusal is transformed into existential affirmation, and absence into spiritual presence, in a process akin to Sufi annihilation (*fanā*) in the sense intended by Ibn ‘Arabī when he states that non-being is the manifestation of the Truth in the forms of creation. From this perspective, the study raises the following research question: **How do the poetics of transformation and absence manifest in the poetry of Aqab Belkhir, as a single structure that constitutes the core of the modern Sufi vision in Algerian poetry?**

This inquiry proceeds from the hypothesis that transformation in Aqab Belkhir’s poetry is not merely change or rebirth, but an ontological transformation of both language and self; and that absence does not signify loss, but rather the manifestation of presence through erasure, according to a symbolic Sufi logic grounded in the unveiling (*kashf*) of meaning rather than in its retrieval.

The approach adopted is based on a modern critical methodology grounded in the semiotic–hermeneutic interpretation of poetic discourse (as developed by Paul Ricœur and Gilbert Durand), in dialogue with classical Sufi references (Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Ḥallāj, Ibn al-Fārid). In this way, the ancient Sufi vision is integrated into a modern reading that reconstructs the relationship between language, being, and meaning.

The structure of transformation and absence in modern Algerian poetry—and in the poetry of Aqab Belkhir in particular—is thus founded upon a dual awareness: a Sufi consciousness that views absence as a path to vision, and a modern hermeneutic consciousness that conceives transformation as an open, infinite semantic structure.

In the Sufi experience, transformation represents the passage of being from one state to another, from multiplicity to unity, and from form to meaning. It is not a mere external change, but an **ontological transformation** that reshapes the relationship between the self and the Absolute. Ibn 'Arabī states: "Every transformation is a face of existence; existence never remains fixed, for it is in perpetual manifestation."

In this sense, transformation becomes the poetic counterpart of annihilation (*fanā'*), whereby the poet transcends the materiality of language toward the unveiling of its inner, spiritual core. This principle finds a clear resonance in the poetry of Aqab Belkhir, who adopts transformation as an operative structure recurring across the levels of imagery, rhythm, and meaning. He writes, for example:

*I was transformed within myself... yet I did not depart from myself
As though I were the 'I that is not my I'.*

Here, negation turns into affirmation, the self into a trace, and identity into an open trajectory. This mode of expression articulates a linguistic and Sufi transformation simultaneously, for being is affirmed only through its temporary loss—an idea that corresponds to the Sufi concept of annihilation in subsistence (*fanā' fi al-baqā'*).

As for absence, it is not the opposite of existence in Sufi poetry, but rather its supreme condition. When something withdraws, meaning begins to manifest. Al-Ḥallāj expresses this notion when he says: "I vanished in You from myself, so they thought I had died; they did not know that I am alive through You." This concept appears poetically in Belkhir's texts, which invest absence as a semantic mechanism of manifestation: the self recedes so that utterance may appear, the world withdraws so that the Absolute may be revealed.

The poem thus becomes a space of **creative absence**, in which existence is re-produced through the effacement of the sign. From a modern hermeneutic perspective, this corresponds to Paul Ricœur's notion of *semantic disappearance*, according to which meaning manifests itself only at the very moment of its textual withdrawal.

In Aqab Belkhir's poetry, absence does not signify loss or death; rather, it is a reconfiguration of being within language, as expressed in his lines:

I dwell in what is not said,

vanish in order to be present in what is said of light,

I So that upon the balconies of absence I may establish my speech.

In this sense, absence becomes the core of the poetic process, for the poet does not articulate existence itself, but rather what remains of it as a linguistic and spiritual trace.

Sufism thus intersects with modern hermeneutic thought in their shared view of language as the dwelling place of ever-transforming meaning. For the Sufis, transformation is a perpetual manifestation of being; for hermeneuticians, it is the continuous movement of meaning within the text. Both are grounded in the principle of decentering: no fixed subject, no final signification. Ricœur states: "The text does not say one single thing; it proposes a path of interpretation that never closes."

This is what renders the poetics of Aqab Belkhir an open hermeneutic space, where language is not treated as an instrument, but as a living entity that transforms and conceals itself in order to disclose. In this way, Sufism and hermeneutics converge within a poetic project founded on transformation as perpetual absence, and absence as an unending transformation.

Manifestations of the Poetics of Transformation and Absence in Selected Poems by Aqab Belkhir

1- At the linguistic level:

Language in Aqab Belkhir's poetry is grounded in a force of displacement and continuous transformation. It is not a mere instrument of utterance, but a medium of annihilation and creation simultaneously. His language turns against itself in order to generate its meaning from within its own absence, moving between silence and disclosure, between unveiling and concealment.

In one of his selected poems, he writes:

When I fall silent... things speak through me,

And when I speak... words abandon me.

This oscillation between action and non-action, between speech and silence, expresses an ontological vision of language as a being that shifts from direct presence to semantic absence.

This perspective closely aligns with Paul Ricoeur's analysis of symbolic language, in which he argues that the symbol "gives rise to thought more than it says"¹—that is, meaning is realized through absence rather than explicit statement.

Thus, language in Belkhir's poetry becomes a site for the manifestation of absence, where poetic truth is achieved only through the impossibility of language itself, as in his words:

As though the letter walks upon its shadow,

Fearing meaning when meaning draws near .

Here, language evades its own meaning, retracts within it, and transforms into an open semantic trace. This renders transformation and absence as two aspects of a single stance toward expression: meaning is not spoken, but indicated.

2. At the semantic level:

Belkhir presents the poetic self in a state of perpetual passage, never settling into a fixed form or stable identity. The self in his poetry is a Sufi being that transcends its limits in search of the Absolute, continuously transforming from an individual "I" into a cosmic "I."

He writes in the poem "*Tajallī*" (*Manifestation*):

I am the one through whom the prophets of shadows passed,

Yet they did not recognize me.

"...because I was present in all of them."

Here, the self is not a coherent, closed entity, but a shifting specter that continually redefines itself through the Other, in a manner akin to the concept of **open identity** in Sufi thought. This ontological transformation of the self is always coupled with its absence: the poet effaces himself in order to become total, dissolves into the Absolute to become one of its images.

This understanding intersects with what **Gilbert Durand** proposes in his analysis of symbolic imagination, where absence within mythic structures is viewed as a form of symbolic transformation.

3. At the imagistic level:

The poetic image in Aqab Belkhir's work is neither descriptive nor ornamental; it is an intellectual and spiritual movement. It marks a passage from the sensory to the abstract, from the real to the universal.

In the poem "*Transformation*," he writes:

There dwells within me a star;

If they extinguish it... it lights the country in my heart.

Here, the symbol shifts from a sensory meaning to a spiritual function: the star becomes a sign of inner light, that is, a moment of Sufi unveiling (*kashf*).

The image in his poetry, as in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's, is not a representation of the Absolute but its manifestation within language. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Reverie*, argues that the poetic image is a new birth of the world in language—an idea that applies precisely to Belkhir's poetry, where transformation and absence constitute the rhythm of the image itself: each image effaces itself to give birth to another, in a chain of perpetual annihilation.

4. At the rhythmic level:

Rhythm in Belkhir's poetry expresses absence through fragmentation, rupture, and the repetition of irregular segments. The poet does not seek metrical regularity, but rather a rhythm of loss and transformation—a rhythm reminiscent of Sufi chanting, governed less by prosodic rules than by the impulses of the spirit.

Repetition, in this context, is not ornamental but a summons of absence, as in his line:

I return... I return... to where I do not return.

Here, repetition creates a sonic vortex that mirrors annihilation: a return to the point of no-place, to creative nothingness. This corresponds to what **Henri Meschonnic** terms *inner rhythm*—the rhythm of poetic consciousness at the moment of its transformation.

5. At the spiritual dimension:

In Belkhir's poetic experience, absence becomes a means of knowledge rather than a state of negation. It opens the field of inner vision, as he writes:

I vanished only so that I might see You within me,

And I appeared only in order to deny myself.

Here, the Sufi vision reaches its clearest expression: annihilation in the Other and the discovery of the self through its erasure. This epistemic absence renders transformation an open structure, never confined to a final limit or definitive meaning.

Thus, Belkhir's poetry becomes a field for the dialectic of presence and absence, language and silence, self and Absolute—a dialectic that constitutes the core of modern Sufi poetics in Algeria.

The Symbolic Structure and the Sufi Dimension in the Poetics of Transformation and Absence

1. Major symbols:

Aqab Belkhir constructs his poetic universe by transforming existence into a symbolic system, wherein objects become signs of what lies beyond them. Earth, light, sea, letter, and clouds are not scenic elements, but mutable symbols within a cosmic vision that transcends the event to reach indication.

The **letter** occupies a central position in his experience, functioning as both an instrument of creation and a metaphor of unveiling. In the poem "*Entering the Kingdom of Letters*," he writes:

The letter flees the map of the crooked,

Do not say I have broken—

Their dreams are what shattered.

I gather words for you

And reorder the field of language.

Here, the letter is not a mere linguistic unit but a Sufi being that symbolizes the essence of existence, as in Ibn 'Arabī's thought, where letters are the spirits of things. The letter thus becomes a site of annihilation and rebirth simultaneously—collapsing in order to be reconstructed within a new semantic order. This process is precisely the poetics of transformation.

Clouds, stars, and the sea represent different levels of this cosmic symbolism: mediators between earth and sky, density and abstraction, loss and fullness. In his lines:

The cloud had the vastness of the sea; it loosened,

And I sailed this earth with the waves of my steps.

Cloud, sea, and earth intersect in a displacement that transforms matter into spiritual movement. The image thus exceeds sensory limits to become a sign of passage from opacity to translucence—the essence of Sufi thought.

2. The dialectic of presence and absence:

Absence in Belkhir's poetry is not death, but another mode of presence. Knowledge is achieved not through possession but through loss, as he states:

I vanished only so that I might see You within me.

This Sufi absence corresponds to al-Hallāj's famous dictum: "*Between the servant and the Truth there is a distance that cannot be crossed, except when the servant vanishes from himself.*"

Absence thus becomes a path to cognitive transformation: the poet does not seek God externally, but within the inner transformation of the self. Accordingly, absence bears a dual meaning: the self's withdrawal from itself in moments of unification, and the disappearance of the empirical world in favor of the symbolic presence of total being. Absence thereby emerges as the dynamic core of meaning—transformation cannot be understood without passing through it.

3. The Sufi symbol between unveiling and concealment:

Symbols in Belkhir's poetry perform a dual function: indication and concealment. The Sufi symbol reveals only in order to veil, and discloses only what can be endured of illumination.

He writes, for example:

Let the evening birds fly with the birds or turn back,

And when the rain clouds arrive,

The letter trembles above the wall;

The letters said: now the ending has begun.

Evening birds, rain, and the wall emerge as symbolic images of annihilation and manifestation. The bird signifies the spirit, rain signifies revelation, and the wall marks the boundary between two realms. The closing phrase—“*now the ending has begun*”—encapsulates the Sufi vision founded on beginning in annihilation and existing within non-existence.

Here, the symbol moves beyond linguistic signification to become an epistemic horizon, echoing **Paul Tillich's** assertion that religious symbols do not merely point to meaning but participate in its presence. This is precisely what Belkhir's symbols accomplish: they do not refer to absence—they embody it.

4. Transformation as a path to salvation:

Belkhir's texts reveal transformation not as simple transition, but as an act of liberation from repetition and stasis, as in his lines:

Do not tell the end to begin,

Do not tell the wolves to stop,

Do not tell blackness to turn white,

Transform, then—you are destined now to transform.

This is a latent Sufi call toward inner rebirth. It recalls Ibn 'Arabī's assertion that transformation in realities is itself constancy in spiritual stations. The poet does not demand the transformation of the world, but the transformation of perception. Transformation thus becomes a shift in the angle of awareness—a moment of unveiling in which the world is reconstructed through letter, image, and symbol.

5. The Sufi “I”:

In the poem “*Transformation*,” he writes:

I am who I am... who was within me and who will be,

I am more than one man, wider than a circle.

Here emerges the transcendent, total self, akin to what Ibn 'Arabī calls the **Perfect Human**. The ego is not negated, but purified of its egotism, becoming a mirror of the Whole. This passage from the finite to the infinite marks the apex of the poetics of absence, where the poet annihilates himself within the experience until he becomes the poem itself.

Thus, the comprehensive symbolic structure of Belkhir's poetry becomes clear: all symbols—the letter, sea, light, cloud, bird—operate within a unifying system defined by the transformation of being on its path toward the Absolute, where absence is not lack, but cognitive and aesthetic fulfillment.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the poetics of transformation and absence in Aqab Belkhir's work are not thematic concerns, but a **conceptual and aesthetic structure** constituting the essence of his poetic experience. He is a poet who writes from a modern Sufi consciousness that perceives the world as perpetually transforming and language as a living being that changes and effaces itself in order to reveal what lies beyond.

The core features of this poetics can be summarized as follows:

1. Transformation functions as the foundational principle of the poem, governing language, image, and rhythm.
2. Absence is not negation, but a condition of poetic and epistemic existence.
3. Symbolism does not refer to abstract ideas, but actively participates in creating the spiritual experience itself.
4. Sufism in his poetry is not doctrine, but an intellectual and aesthetic vision that situates the self before its continuous transformation.
5. The poem is an open space of rebirth: every absence is a new birth, and every annihilation another unveiling.

Accordingly, Aqab Belkhir's poetry redefines modern Algerian poetry by shifting it from the space of discourse to the space of unveiling, from direct utterance to profound existential experience—where linguistic transformations intersect with spiritual transformations in a rare, cohesive Sufi aesthetic.

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