

Algerian feminist prose poetry: Between Tradition and Poetic Transcendence

Dr. Chikhaoui zeyneb¹, Bensaha Afaf Imen²

¹University of Oran 01 Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria, Email: Chikhaoui.zeyneb@edu.univ-oran1.dz

²University of Oran 01 Ahmed Ben Bella, Linguistics and Discourse Analysis Laboratory, Algeria, Email: bensaha.affaf@edu.univ-oran1.dz

Received: 17/05/2024

Published: 20/10/2024

Abstract:

Contemporary Arabic poetry has undergone a period of radical renewal known as the ‘poetic revolution’, based on the principles of transcending traditional forms and liberating poets from the constraints of the past. This transformation has opened up new horizons for poets. Contemporary Algerian poets, for example, have adopted innovative poetic forms to express their rebellion against traditional metres and rhythms, creating what is known as free verse poetry and other similar styles. This research paper focuses on Algerian feminist prose poetry, examining a selection of contemporary female Algerian poets whose prose poems are characterised by uniqueness and innovation. These works transcend what was familiar to both creators and recipients alike.

Keywords: feminism, prose poetry, Algerian poetry, transcendence, renewal

Introduction:

Since the early twentieth century, Algerian feminist voices have emerged as a significant creative force, particularly in poetry, a genre traditionally dominated by men. Historically, women had minimal representation in this arena, where their voices were considered less significant and influential. However, feminist poets have succeeded in challenging this status quo, establishing their presence and influencing the poetic landscape. They have become effective collaborators with male poets.

Amid the wave of renewal and experimentation that characterised contemporary poetry, the work of feminist poets played a pivotal role. They made significant contributions to the development of contemporary poetry, particularly prose poetry, which provided a space for expression and liberation. This enabled them to make distinctive contributions and highlight new perspectives. Prose poetry became a medium through which they could convey their visions and experiences, becoming ‘the tongue of women, or their language in transition today, as a system of signs in the context of poetic writing’¹. The

poetess's task is to bring women back to writing and place their presence at the heart of life. This statement encapsulates the profound concept of the poet's role in presenting women's language and integrating it into the literary context. It implies that the evolving language of women is a system of signs that must be recognised and understood within the framework of poetic writing. In this context, the poetess is not just a messenger, but an active agent in reintegrating women into writing in a manner that reflects their experiences and voices.

According to this notion, the poet is interested in rebuilding women's presence in literature through poetry, enabling them to express themselves in fresh and impactful ways. This process is not limited to writing; it also involves integrating women into the heart of cultural and social life, amplifying their voices and influence. Through these writings, women can embody their identities and translate their personal experiences using their own unique language.

Section One: Prose Poetry

The Nature of Prose Poetry

As a literary genre, prose poetry combines characteristics of both poetry and prose in a distinctive way. Despite its non-adherence to traditional forms, the rhythmic and poetic aspects of prose poetry are highlighted. It is not merely a mixture; it has its own structure and organisation, as well as profound rules that give it genuine artistic merit. This perspective affirms that prose poetry is not merely an evolution of poetic form, but an autonomous artistic expression reflecting shifts in literary aesthetic standards. Suzanne Bernard supports this view, stating that "prose poetry is a completely different genre, not a hybrid halfway between poetry and prose, but a specific kind of poetry, akin to rhythmic prose written with delicate poetic qualities, imposing its own structure and organisation"². We must declare the laws — laws that are not only explicit, but also deep and organic, as is the case with every true artistic genre.³

Prose poetry can be considered a modern form of poetry that reacts against the seventeenth-century standards of absolute beauty. John Cohen defines prose poetry as 'a meaningful poem', explaining that the meaningful characteristics found in poetic verse also exist in prose poetry. The poet in prose poetry is undoubtedly liberated from the constraints of metre, allowing for greater flexibility in exploring meaning.

From this discussion, it is clear that, despite not being bound by meter and rhyme, prose poetry remains a 'meaningful poem' due to its deep similarities with traditional poetry

in terms of its meaningful characteristics. This liberation grants prose poets greater freedom to explore and develop meaningful and symbolic dimensions, enabling them to express thoughts and emotions in a flexible and creative manner. Consequently, prose poetry emerges as an effective means of achieving new levels of meaningful expression, free from the constraints of traditional poetic forms.

Taha Hussein offers an in-depth perspective on the issue of the historical documentation of literary phenomena. He addresses this topic by stating that ‘the history of literary phenomena poses a particular challenge to those who wish to scrutinise and define them because they only emerge after several preliminary conditions have been met, some of which are dependent on others. It is from this convergence and interaction that the literary phenomenon emerges.’⁴ Documenting literary phenomena is one of the most complex processes due to the difficulty of accurately determining their time of emergence. This is because literary phenomena do not appear suddenly, but rather undergo preliminary stages in which various factors and circumstances interact. A literary phenomenon cannot be understood in isolation from its historical and cultural context because these phenomena are shaped through continuous interaction among a set of influences.

This interaction involves a concordance between several elements, where each plays a role in shaping and developing the literary phenomenon. Through this concordance and interaction, the literary phenomenon emerges as a product of a complex process that entails integration and interconnection among various factors. Consequently, documenting literary phenomena requires a careful examination of a set of preliminaries and contributing factors, rather than merely focusing on the final phenomenon itself.

Nizar Qabbani defines it as “a fruit of freedom, a result of the cultural and political revolutions tilling the soil of this planet, and a reflection of this ambitious era that changes every minute”⁵. Abdullah Al-Ghudami states that poetic expression is ‘every poetic sentence that appears within the genre of prose’⁶. These two definitions highlight that the current literary phenomenon is a direct result of significant cultural and political transformations affecting the literary and global arenas. It reflects the nature of the modern age, which is characterised by rapid change and continuous transformation. This suggests that literature cannot be considered separate from the historical and social context in which it is created; rather, it is a product of the global changes influencing literary creativity.

In this context, Al-Ghudami defines poetic expression as any poetic language within prose, reflecting a shift in understanding poeticity. He expands the concept of poeticity to include poetic expression within prose texts, indicating that it is not confined to traditional forms of poetry, but extends to include new, flexible and diverse literary forms. This definition reflects a transformation in literary understanding, highlighting how contemporary literature transcends traditional genre boundaries, influenced by cultural and political revolutions in society.

Section Two: The Poetics of Transcendence in Algerian Feminist Prose Poetry. A Collection of Examples

Algerian feminist prose poetry has undergone a radical transformation in modern literature by blending artistic liberation with a rejection of traditional constraints. This embodies the poetics of transcendence in its purest form. This serves as a unique expressive medium through which female poets reflect their personal and societal experiences, challenging stereotypical narratives and outdated aesthetic standards.

Feminist prose poetry emerges from a deep desire to break free from the cultural and social constraints that have long silenced women, transcending the traditional boundaries of poetry through innovative language, profound symbolic imagery and an open structure that invites interpretation. In this context, the poetics of transcendence is an act of resistance and a redefinition of the feminine self within a broader, freer literary space, not merely a means of literary expression.

We will study a selection of poetic texts by Algerian female poets, beginning with a poem from Rabi'a Jilti's collection *The Tree of Words*, titled *The Alternative*:

Stop!

Moment, stop!

O you who delve into the recesses of Arabic

Stop, like fire...

Like a dream,

like the wonder of the embryo.

We hear a joyful flute amidst the thunder.

asking the victim at the table one last question:

Where is the wound?⁷

To understand this text as a prose poem that transcends traditional poetic constraints, we will analyse it using the elements of prose poetry and modern poetics. Prose poetry is characterised by its lack of adherence to metre and rhyme, instead relying on poetic qualities that emerge through imagery, emotion and language.

1. Liberation from Meters and Rhymes:

The text does not follow the traditional patterns of poetic metre or rhyme, giving it freedom of expression and allowing it to transcend the conventional constraints of classical or rhythmic poetry.

2. Modern Poetics:

A. Symbolic and metaphorical imagery:

‘Delving into the Arabic recesses’ is a metaphorical reference to a deep engagement with Arab culture and history.

- ‘Stop like fire... like a dream, like the wonder of the embryo’ uses contrasting similes to reflect the complexity of the human experience, adding a profound poetic dimension.

B. Linguistic density:

The text is concise, containing no superfluous words, which enhances the impact of each word and phrase. This density is a key feature of modern poetics in prose poetry.

C. Dramatic tension:

‘Asking the victim at the table one last question’ creates dramatic tension and piques the reader’s curiosity, thereby increasing the text’s appeal.

D. Emotional expression:

The text conveys a range of contrasting emotions, such as joy and sorrow, strength and weakness, reflecting the depth of human feelings.

3. Transcending Traditional Constraints:

The text transcends the traditional constraints of poetry by using modern and unconventional imagery and vocabulary. For example, in the line ‘We hear a joyful flute wrapped in thunder’, joy is combined with thunder, which is usually associated with anger or intensity. This creates a new and unexpected effect.

A. Innovative Language:

The use of innovative and unfamiliar expressions such as ‘delving into the Arabic recesses’ and ‘the wonder of the embryo’ signifies a renewal in poetic language.

B. Contradictions and oppositions:

The contrast between ‘fire’ and ‘dream’, as well as ‘joyful thunder’, highlights a transcendence of traditional concepts and invites the reader to view things from a fresh perspective.

C. Mystery and Reflection:

The text is filled with mystery, leaving much for the reader to ponder and reflecting a move away from direct, clear poetry towards a more complex, profound form.

D. Philosophical Dimension:

The final question, ‘Where is the wound...’, adds a philosophical dimension, reflecting a shift from superficial thought to a deeper exploration of human pain and suffering.

As a prose poem, the text clearly transcends old poetic constraints by liberating itself from meters and rhymes, using innovative language and complex symbolic imagery, and creating dramatic tension. This enhances the poetics of transcendence, reflecting the depth of human experience in innovative ways.

Excerpt 2:

I travelled in a moment of days

The soil and celestial bodies embraced me,

And the blossoming dream, the henna, and the blessings.

and my mother’s shy hand.

And the bullets.

The bullets

and the joyous cries⁸.

1. Experimentation in Structure and Style:

In *Lisan al-Arab*, the term *jarrab* is defined as ‘the tested man... A tested man has experienced what he has, and a tested person has known and tried various matters.’⁹ The

term ‘jarrab’ is discussed in the context of individual experiences and is interpreted as a test or trial. ‘Experience’ is defined as the process of undergoing and testing multiple experiences, while ‘jarrab’ refers to a seasoned individual who has encountered a variety of situations, rendering them knowledgeable and experienced in diverse matters.

In a technical sense, experimentation is closely linked to creativity, as it enables the artist to innovate new methods and styles of artistic expression. In this context, experimentation transcends traditional models and seeks to boldly and courageously open doors to the future, venturing into the unknown with no guarantee of success. Thus, experimentation is a primary driver of the creative process, embodying the spirit of adventure and exploration¹⁰.

Conversely, experimentation is considered an ‘artistic mechanism’ that encourages breaking away from traditional artistic frameworks, leading to the exploration of new horizons and the creation of art in unconventional ways. Experimentation is also seen as a manifestation of an innovative style that relies on new tools and methods. This requires profound experience, enriching the artistic work and creating new means of expression. Through experimentation, artistic visions become broader and more inclusive, enhancing the depth and renewal of creativity¹¹.

A. Free Structure:

The text transcends traditional poetic forms that rely on metre and rhyme, reflecting an experiment in structure and style. This enables the poet to express themselves freely and without constraints, thereby enhancing the power and diversity of the text.

B. Repetition:

The repetition of the word ‘bullets’ intensifies the drama and creates an internal rhythm, emphasising a sense of tension and danger. This experimentation with repetition adds an extra layer of depth to the text.

2. Renewal in poetic imagery and symbolism:

A. Complex Imagery:

The text’s imagery is characterised by complexity and diversity. For example, the phrase ‘the soil and celestial bodies shared me’ combines earth and sky into a single image, reflecting the multifaceted dimensions of human experience. These complex images signify a renewal in poetic expression.

B. Deep symbolism:

The text is imbued with deep symbolism through the use of elements such as “the blossoming dream”, “henna” and “my mother’s shy hand”, reflecting beauty, hope and nurturing. In contrast, “bullets” and “joyful cries” symbolise the juxtaposition of joy and pain, life and death.

3. Transcendence in Expression and Content:

A. Transcending Traditional Dualities:

The text transcends traditional dualities, such as life and death or joy and sorrow, by merging them into a single poetic image. This reflects the complexity of the human experience, avoiding the reduction of it to simple concepts.

B. Expressing the Feminine Experience:

The excerpt conveys specific feminine experiences through imagery such as ‘my mother’s shy hand’ and ‘henna’, moving away from traditional poetic themes and expressing feminine identities creatively and innovatively.

4. Creativity in Combining Contradictions:

A. Combining opposites:

The text brings together contradictory elements, such as ‘bullets’ and ‘joyful cries’, reflecting a complex and intertwined reality. This combination of opposites enhances the creativity and depth of the text.

B. Balance between dream and reality:

The text blends the concept of a ‘blossoming dream’ with the harsh reality of ‘bullets’, showcasing creativity in expressing the human experience in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

5. Creativity in Creating Emotional Effects:

A. Dramatic impact:

The repetition of the word ‘bullets’ and the inclusion of ‘joyful cries’ at the end create a strong dramatic effect that reflects internal and external conflict. This creative structuring enhances the text’s emotional and sensory impact.

B. Emotional Implication:

The text uses images that carry strong emotional implications. For example, “my mother’s shy hand” reflects tenderness and love, whereas “bullets” represent violence and fear. This contrast intensifies the emotional impact of the text.

The excerpt demonstrates clear experimentation and renewal in terms of structure and style, transcending traditional themes and typical poetic forms. Evidence of creativity is seen in the complex poetic imagery and deep symbolism, and in the innovative way in which feminine experience is expressed. The combination of contradictions and the creation of strong emotional effects strengthen the text and highlight its poetics of transcendence and creativity.

In another text, the poet Naeja Saliha writes:

‘Inside me, there is a woman...

Burning in her revolution.

Her femininity intensifies in the clash of world civilisations.

Inside me, there is a woman.

The realms cry out to her.

The witnesses

scream with full truth

that an epic is to come.

For she is the beginning.

All the witnesses

settle upon my land.

Inside me, there is a woman.

destined for immortality.

Among the ranks of Zenobia, Bilqis and the others.

Inside me, there is a woman.

whose details shine with grandeur.

whose fingers weave the body’s hopes.

Inside me, there is a woman...

carrying a symbol

dispelling weakness,

crafting the future as a riddle¹².

1. General analysis of the prose poem:

A. Structure and style:

Free structure: The excerpt is not constrained by metre or rhyme, reflecting the expressive freedom that characterises prose poetry.

- Repetition: The repeated use of the phrase ‘Inside me, there is a woman’ unifies the text and strengthens the poetic message.

B. Poetic Imagery and Symbolism:

- Fervour and revolution: phrases such as ‘burning in her revolution’ and ‘her femininity intensifies’ express powerful internal feelings and symbolise the latent energy and strength of the female body.

- ‘Witnesses and epic’: ‘Screaming with full truth’ and ‘that there is an epic to come’ reflect confidence and faith in a bright future, serving as symbols of strength and the ability to effect change.

C. Deep emotional expression:

- Grandeur and immortality: ‘Destined for immortality’ and ‘her details shine with grandeur’ express pride and self-worth in the feminine self, reflecting a strong sense of identity and self-worth.

2. Analysis of the Body Discourse in the Poem:

A. Feminine Identity:

Inside Me, There Is a Woman: The repetition of this phrase highlights an awareness of an internal feminine identity, with a focus on the body as the homeland of this identity.

Femininity in the Clash of Civilisations reflects the tension between feminine identity and surrounding society, indicating a perpetual conflict between tradition and modernity, and between femininity and social constraints.

B. Strength and ability:

- Burning in her revolution: An expression of the internal energy and latent strength within the female body.

‘Her femininity intensifies’: Reflects the internal emotions and struggles experienced by women, indicating vitality and inner strength.

C. Historical and mythological symbols:

- Zenobia, Bilqis and others: The reference to these strong, well-known historical figures highlights the power and esteemed history of women, reflecting the connection between the female body and historical strength.

Her fingers weave the hopes of the body: Expresses a woman’s ability to build and shape her future, indicating creativity and the power to effect change.

D. Immortality and Grandeur:

- Destined for immortality: Refers to a woman’s sense of her eternal value and lasting contributions.

Her details shine with grandeur: Reflects a sense of pride in the details of the female body and what they represent in terms of strength and greatness.

E. ‘Symbol and Future’:

- ‘Carrying a symbol’: Indicates that the female body carries significant symbols and meanings related to identity and culture.

- Crafting the future as a riddle: Reflects creativity and the ability to overcome limitations and challenges in order to build a better future.

The excerpt clearly conveys the strength of the female body, as well as its internal and external struggles, emphasising feminine identity and self-pride. The discourse of the body manifests in the affirmation of latent power and the ability to transform and create, as embodied by historical symbols and legends that enhance the value and status of women. This discourse reflects experimentation and renewal in prose poetry, affirming transcendence and creativity in expressing the feminine experience.

Conclusion:

1. Experimentation and Liberation:

The prose poems in question clearly demonstrate a liberation from the traditional constraints of poetry in terms of metre, rhyme, structure, and form.

The experimental style is characterised by innovative techniques such as free structure, repetition and contradictions between poetic images.

2. Poetic Imagery and Symbolism:

The texts demonstrate a renewal in the use of symbolic and metaphorical imagery, integrating natural and historical elements to express complex emotions and concepts.

The complex, multidimensional images enrich the texts and deepen their meanings.

3. Deep Emotional Expression:

The expression of internal emotions and personal struggles is marked by depth and complexity, reflecting rich and impactful human experiences.

The focus on feminine identity and internal conflicts further enhances the emotional impact of the texts.

4. Transcendence and Creativity:

The texts transcend traditional dualities, such as joy and sorrow or life and death, by merging them into complex poetic images that reflect the multifaceted nature of human experience.

Creativity is evident in the combination of contradictions and the creation of powerful emotional effects, which enhance the poetics of transcendence in prose poetry.

5. Body Discourse:

The texts highlight the discourse surrounding the female body, focusing on themes such as identity, strength, adaptability, and creativity.

The historical and mythological symbols used enhance the value of the female body, highlighting its status within cultural and historical contexts.

6. Philosophical and Symbolic Depth:

The texts have a philosophical dimension, reflecting contemplations on life and human suffering and adding layers of meaning and significance.

The use of deep symbols and philosophical reflections adds value to the texts and opens the door to multiple interpretations.

The analysed prose poems showcase clear experimentation and renewal in modern poetry, focusing on deep emotional expression and discourse surrounding the female

body. They transcend traditional constraints, creating distinctive poetic effects through the use of symbolic imagery, repetition and contradictions. They reflect philosophical depth and creativity in their combination of contradictions, resulting in powerful and expressive representations of complex human experiences.

Footnotes:

¹- Mohammad Abbas, 'The Moon's Guardians: The Secret of the Feminine Poetic Text', Dar Ninawa, Damascus, 2nd edition, 2010, p. 10.

²- Suzanne Bernard, *Prose Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present Day*, translated by Zuhair Muhammad Maghamis, Horizons of Translation, General Authority for Cultural Palaces, Cairo, 1st edition, 1993, p. 41.

³- John Cohen, *The Structure of Poetic Language*, translated by Ahmed Darwish, Dar Al-Gharib, Cairo, 4th edition, 2000, p. 33.

⁴- Taha Hussein, *Renewing the Memory of Abu Al-Ala*, Dar Al-Ma'arif, Egypt, 6th edition, 1963, p. 39.

⁵- Al-Rabai Ben Salama, 'The Evolution of Artistic Structure in Arabic Poetry', Dar Al-Huda, Ain Melila, Algeria, no date, p. 118.

⁶- Abdullah Al-Ghadami, 'Sin and Atonement: From Structuralism to Anatomy', Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo, 4th edition, 1998, p. 98.

⁷- Rabia Jalti, *The Tree of Speech*, Al-Anbaa Press, Rabat, 1st edition, 1991, p. 61.

⁸- Rabiaa Jalti, 'Landscapes of a Non-Parisian Face', National Company for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, n.d. (1983), p. 41.

⁹- Ibn Manzur, *Lisan Al-Arab*, 1997, p. 262.

¹⁰- See: Salah Fadl, *The Pleasure of Novel Experimentation*, Atlas Publishing, Cairo, 2005, p. 212.

¹¹- See: Saeed Hamid Kazem, *Experimentation in the Iraqi Feminist Novel after 2003*, House of Books and Documents, Baghdad, 1st edition, 2016, pp. 38–39.

¹²- Naidja Saliha, *The Sad Memory*, Publications of Voices of the City, Constantine, Algeria, 1st edition, 2004, pp. 38–39.