



Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani: Body, Love, and Social Rebellion in Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry (A Comparative Literary Study)

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comparative analysis of two highly controversial yet influential figures in the history of Arabic poetry: Abu Nuwas, one of the most provocative poets of the Abbasid era, and Nizar Qabbani, a central voice of modern Arabic poetry in the twentieth century. Although separated by more than a millennium, both poets share a radical engagement with themes of the body, love, and social rebellion. The research examines how each poet challenged dominant moral, aesthetic, and social norms through poetic language, and how their representations of desire and the human body functioned as acts of resistance within their respective historical contexts. Using a historical-contextual and textual comparative methodology, the study argues that Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani represent two distinct but interconnected moments of poetic rebellion—one emerging from the libertine culture of the Abbasid court, and the other from the modern Arab world shaped by patriarchy, political repression, and cultural conservatism. The paper concludes that despite differences in form, ideology, and audience, both poets redefined Arabic poetic discourse by transforming love and the body into tools of aesthetic and social critique.

1. Introduction

Arabic poetry has historically functioned not only as a literary art but also as a powerful medium for expressing social values, cultural tensions, and individual resistance. Across different periods of Arabic



literary history, poets have used the language of love, desire, and the body to negotiate their relationship with society, authority, and morality. In this regard, the poetic traditions of classical and modern Arabic literature offer striking examples of how poetry becomes a site of rebellion against dominant norms.

Among the most prominent and controversial figures in this tradition are Abu Nuwas (d. ca. 815 CE) and Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998). Though separated by vast historical, cultural, and ideological distances, both poets shocked their audiences by openly engaging with themes considered taboo in their societies. Abu Nuwas revolutionized Abbasid poetry by rejecting traditional Bedouin values and celebrating wine, pleasure, and the physical body, often with shocking explicitness. Nizar Qabbani, in turn, challenged modern Arab societies by foregrounding erotic love, the female body, and emotional intimacy as forms of protest against patriarchy, political repression, and linguistic rigidity.

This study seeks to explore the literary “competition” between these two poets—not as a question of influence or imitation, but as a comparative confrontation between two modes of poetic rebellion. By examining how each poet constructs the body, love, and social defiance within his own historical framework, this paper aims to reveal deeper continuities and transformations in Arabic poetic discourse from the classical to the modern era.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts a comparative literary approach, combining textual analysis with historical and sociocultural contextualization. Rather than comparing poetic techniques in isolation, the research situates each poet within his specific cultural environment, examining how social norms, power structures, and moral discourses shaped their poetic strategies.

The analysis focuses on three central thematic axes:

(1) the representation of the body, (2) the discourse of love and desire, and (3) social rebellion through poetic language.

These themes are examined through close readings of selected poems, alongside critical perspectives from classical Arabic literary criticism and modern theories of body politics, gender, and resistance literature. This integrated approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how poetry functions as a form of cultural confrontation across historical periods.



3. Abu Nuwas and the Classical Context of Poetic Rebellion

Abu Nuwas emerged during the Abbasid era, a period marked by cultural pluralism, urban sophistication, and the decline of traditional tribal values. Unlike pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets who glorified desert life, honor, and restraint, Abu Nuwas openly rejected the moral authority of the Bedouin tradition. His poetry represents a decisive shift toward urban sensibility, individual pleasure, and aesthetic experimentation.

Central to Abu Nuwas's poetic project is the celebration of the body as a site of pleasure and freedom. His wine poetry (*khamriyyat*) and erotic verses depict desire not as a moral failing but as a natural and even philosophical response to life. By foregrounding physical enjoyment, Abu Nuwas challenges religious hypocrisy and social pretension, exposing the contradictions of a society that outwardly promotes piety while indulging in hidden excesses.

Importantly, Abu Nuwas's rebellion is not merely thematic but linguistic. He breaks away from classical poetic conventions by adopting a direct, conversational tone, replacing idealized metaphors with concrete sensory imagery. This stylistic boldness reinforces the poet's ideological defiance, making his poetry both aesthetically innovative and socially subversive.

4. The Body as Defiance in Abū Nuwās's Poetry

In Abu Nuwas's poetry, the body is not an object of shame but a symbol of autonomy and resistance. His explicit descriptions of physical pleasure confront dominant moral discourses that associate desire with sin and social disorder. By naming the body openly, Abū Nuwās destabilizes the boundaries between public virtue and private indulgence.

The poet's treatment of desire often carries an ironic tone, mocking moral authorities and exposing the fragility of social norms. This irony transforms erotic poetry into a form of critique, where pleasure becomes a weapon against hypocrisy. In this sense, Abu Nuwas's poetic rebellion operates from within the elite culture of the Abbasid court, challenging its values while simultaneously benefiting from its intellectual openness.

5. Nizar Qabbani and the Modern Arab Cultural Context

Nizar Qabbani emerged as a poetic voice in the mid-twentieth century, a period marked by profound political, social, and psychological upheaval in the Arab world. The collapse of colonial empires, the rise



of authoritarian regimes, repeated military defeats, and the persistence of deeply rooted patriarchal structures created an atmosphere of collective frustration and cultural stagnation. Within this context, Qabbani's poetry appeared as a disruptive force that challenged not only literary conventions but also social and moral hierarchies.

Unlike Abu Nuwas, whose rebellion unfolded within the relatively pluralistic and cosmopolitan environment of the Abbasid court, Qabbani wrote in societies that publicly emphasized moral conservatism while simultaneously suppressing individual freedom—especially in matters of gender and emotional expression. His poetic project was thus shaped by a sense of urgency and confrontation. Qabbani viewed poetry as a means of exposing social hypocrisy and reclaiming human intimacy from ideological control. For him, love poetry was not escapist or ornamental; it was deeply political.

Qabbani's significance lies in his decision to center the female body and female voice within Arabic poetry, transforming both into instruments of resistance. By doing so, he challenged a long-standing literary tradition that either idealized women abstractly or silenced their subjectivity altogether. His poetry insists on the legitimacy of desire, tenderness, and emotional vulnerability, positioning them as fundamental human rights rather than moral transgressions.

6. Love and the Female Body as Cultural Resistance

In Qabbani's poetry, love is inseparable from rebellion. Unlike traditional Arabic love poetry, which often idealizes longing within socially acceptable boundaries, Qabbani presents love as an embodied, lived experience that resists regulation. The female body in his work is neither a passive object nor a metaphorical abstraction; it is a speaking, desiring presence that challenges male authority and social control.

This poetic strategy directly confronts patriarchal discourse, which historically positioned the female body as a site of honor, shame, and surveillance. By writing openly about desire, intimacy, and emotional equality, Qabbani disrupts dominant narratives that associate morality with silence and repression. His poetry redefines love as a space of freedom, where the private becomes political and the personal becomes a form of protest.

Qabbani's language is deliberately accessible, rejecting the elevated diction and rigid structures of classical poetry. This stylistic simplicity is itself a revolutionary act, aimed at democratizing poetry and



bringing it closer to everyday experience. Through this linguistic choice, Qabbani transforms love poetry into a mass cultural phenomenon, amplifying its subversive potential.

7. The Body in Qabbani's Poetry: From Eroticism to Ideology

While Abu Nuwas celebrates the body primarily as a source of pleasure and aesthetic delight, Qabbani invests the body with ideological significance. In his work, the body becomes a battleground where power, identity, and freedom are contested. The erotic dimension of his poetry is inseparable from its political implications, particularly in societies where sexuality is tightly regulated and gender roles rigidly enforced.

Qabbani frequently associates bodily repression with political oppression, suggesting that authoritarian regimes and patriarchal cultures rely on the control of desire to maintain dominance. In this sense, his poetic rebellion extends beyond gender politics to encompass broader critiques of censorship, conformity, and ideological violence. The body, in Qabbānī's poetry, symbolizes resistance to all forms of domination.

This transformation of erotic poetry into ideological critique marks a significant departure from classical traditions. Whereas Abu Nuwas's eroticism often revels in irony and hedonism, Qabbani's eroticism is marked by urgency and moral seriousness. It seeks not merely to shock but to awaken, to provoke reflection on the cost of emotional repression in modern Arab societies.

8. Language, Simplicity, and Modern Poetic Revolution

One of the most distinctive aspects of Qabbani's poetic rebellion is his linguistic strategy. He consciously abandons complex metaphors and ornate rhetorical structures in favor of direct, emotionally charged language. This stylistic choice reflects his belief that poetry should communicate, not obscure; it should confront reality rather than retreat into aesthetic elitism.

This approach stands in contrast to Abu Nuwas's sophisticated play with classical forms and intertextual references. While Abu Nuwas subverts tradition from within, Qabbānī seeks to dismantle it altogether. His poetic language mirrors modern sensibilities shaped by journalism, mass communication, and political activism, making his work accessible to a broad audience.

Through linguistic simplicity, Qabbani expands the social reach of poetry, transforming it into a platform for collective expression. His poems circulate widely beyond literary circles, becoming part of popular



culture and public discourse. This mass appeal amplifies the impact of his critique, turning love poetry into a form of cultural resistance.

9. Comparative Reflections: Classical Hedonism vs. Modern Protest

The comparison between Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani reveals both continuity and transformation in Arabic poetic rebellion. Both poets challenge moral authority by foregrounding desire and the body, yet the nature and purpose of their rebellion differ significantly. Abu Nuwas's poetry reflects a hedonistic defiance rooted in personal pleasure and aesthetic freedom, while Qabbani's work embodies a collective protest against systemic repression.

Abu Nuwas operates within a courtly culture that tolerates contradiction and irony, allowing him to mock moral norms while remaining embedded within elite society. Qabbani, by contrast, confronts societies marked by censorship and ideological rigidity, where poetic transgression carries greater social and political risk. Consequently, Qabbani's rebellion is more overtly confrontational and morally charged.

Despite these differences, both poets redefine the role of love poetry in Arabic literature. They transform it from a genre of emotional expression into a mode of cultural critique, revealing how intimacy and desire can function as powerful tools of resistance.

10. Poetic “Competition” Across Time: Confrontation Without Influence

Although Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani are separated by more than a thousand years, their poetic projects invite comparison not through direct influence but through a shared confrontation with dominant moral and cultural systems. This comparative “competition” does not operate along the lines of literary borrowing or historical continuity; rather, it emerges from a structural similarity in how both poets position themselves against authority through the language of love and the body.

Abu Nuwas challenges the moral absolutism of early Islamic society by exposing the gap between public piety and private indulgence. His rebellion is ironic, playful, and embedded within elite culture. Nizar Qabbani, by contrast, confronts societies marked by authoritarian politics and rigid patriarchy, where desire is regulated as a means of social control. His rebellion is direct, emotionally charged, and explicitly ideological. In this sense, the “competition” between the two poets lies in their different strategies of resistance: one destabilizes norms through aesthetic excess, while the other seeks to dismantle them through moral urgency.



Despite these differences, both poets redefine the function of poetry itself. They transform love poetry from a genre of personal expression into a site of cultural struggle, where questions of freedom, identity, and power are negotiated.

11. The Body as a Literary and Political Site

A central point of convergence between Abu Nuwas and Qabbani is their treatment of the body as a meaningful literary site. In both cases, the body becomes a space where social norms are challenged and reimagined. However, the symbolic function of the body differs according to historical context.

For Abu Nuwas, the body represents liberation from inherited tribal ethics and ascetic moralism. His explicit celebration of pleasure asserts the autonomy of the individual against collective norms. The body is sensual, immediate, and unapologetically physical, reflecting the urban sophistication of Abbasid culture.

For Qabbani, the body—particularly the female body—is politicized. It is not merely a source of pleasure but a site of oppression and resistance. By reclaiming the body as a legitimate subject of poetic discourse, Qabbani exposes the mechanisms through which power operates in modern Arab societies. In doing so, he aligns bodily liberation with broader struggles for political and intellectual freedom.

This distinction highlights a shift in Arabic poetic consciousness: from individualistic rebellion rooted in aesthetic pleasure to collective resistance grounded in social critique.

12. Love Poetry as Social Criticism

Both poets elevate love poetry to the level of social criticism, yet they do so in distinct ways. Abu Nuwas uses love and desire to mock moral pretension and undermine religious hypocrisy. His poetry often adopts a tone of satire, suggesting that rigid moral codes are artificial constructs that collapse under the weight of human desire.

Qabbani, on the other hand, treats love as an ethical necessity. His poetry insists that emotional intimacy and tenderness are fundamental human needs denied by patriarchal and authoritarian systems. Love, in his work, becomes a form of protest against violence, repression, and emotional desolation.



This contrast reveals how the same poetic theme—love—can serve radically different critical functions depending on historical circumstances. In both cases, however, love poetry becomes a means of exposing the limitations of dominant moral frameworks.

13. Language, Audience, and Cultural Impact

The difference in linguistic strategy between Abu Nuwas and Qabbani further underscores the nature of their poetic competition. Abu Nuwas operates within the highly codified system of classical Arabic poetry, manipulating its conventions to subvert expectations. His audience consists primarily of educated elites capable of appreciating irony, allusion, and formal experimentation.

Qabbani deliberately breaks away from such elitism. His accessible language, emotional directness, and conversational tone aim to reach a mass audience. This democratization of poetic language enhances the political impact of his work, allowing it to circulate widely beyond literary circles.

As a result, while Abu Nuwas's influence is primarily aesthetic and intellectual, Qabbānī's impact is cultural and social. Both forms of influence, however, contribute to the ongoing evolution of Arabic poetic discourse.

14. Rebellion and Risk

Another crucial point of comparison lies in the risks associated with poetic rebellion. Abu Nuwas, despite his controversial themes, enjoyed the protection of courtly patronage and a relatively tolerant cultural environment. His transgressions, while shocking, rarely threatened the political order.

Qabbani's rebellion, by contrast, unfolded in societies where censorship, surveillance, and ideological control were pervasive. His poetry often provoked public outrage, institutional backlash, and political condemnation. This difference highlights a transformation in the relationship between poetry and power: from negotiated dissent within elite circles to open confrontation with state and social authority.

15. Conclusion

This comparative study has demonstrated that Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani represent two pivotal moments of poetic rebellion in Arabic literary history. Through their engagement with the body, love, and social defiance, both poets challenged dominant moral and cultural paradigms, reshaping the boundaries of poetic expression.



While Abu Nuwas's rebellion reflects the aesthetic freedom and cultural plurality of the Abbasid era, Qabbani's poetry embodies the moral urgency and political tension of the modern Arab world. Together, they illustrate how Arabic poetry continuously reinvents itself as a medium of resistance, adapting its strategies to changing historical conditions.

Ultimately, the "competition" between Abu Nuwas and Nizar Qabbani is not about superiority but about transformation. Their works reveal the enduring power of poetry to confront authority, articulate desire, and redefine human freedom across time.

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