



The Pioneer of Free Verse: Socio-Political Representation and Formal Revolt in the Works of Nazik Al-Malaika

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of Nazik Al-Malaika (August 23, 1923-June 20, 2007) to modern Arabic poetry, with particular attention to her role as a pioneer of free verse poetry (*al-shi'r al-hurr*) and her socio-political engagement through poetic innovation. The study explores how Al-Malaika challenged the rigid conventions of classical Arabic poetry and introduced a new poetic structure capable of expressing the anxieties, political crises and emotional fragmentation of the modern Arab world. Through an analytical reading of selected poems such as *Al-Cholera (Cholera)*, *Qadaya al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir (Issues of Contemporary Poetry)*, *Shazaya wa Ramad (Splinters and Ashes)*, *Ashiqat al-Layl (The Women Lover of the Night)* and other writings, the paper demonstrates that her formal experimentation was inseparable from her social consciousness. Her poetry represented themes of alienation, women's oppression, political instability, human suffering, and collective trauma. The article further argues that Al-Malaika's free verse movement was not merely aesthetic rebellion but also a cultural and ideological revolt against traditional literary authority. By combining literary criticism, socio-historical analysis, and textual interpretation, the research highlights her enduring influence on Arabic modernism and feminist literary discourse.

**Introduction:**

Modern Arabic literature underwent a radical transformation during the twentieth century, particularly after the emergence of free verse poetry (*al-shi'r al-hurr*). Among the leading figures of this of Arabic verse. Born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1923, Al-Malaika emerged during a period marked by colonial pressure, political unrest, social inequality, and cultural transition in the Arab world. Her literary career coincided with growing demands for intellectual freedom and artistic renewal. Al-Malaika is widely regarded as one of the founders of Arabic free verse poetry, especially after the publication of her famous poem *Al-Cholera (Cholera)* in 1947, which reflected the human tragedy of the cholera epidemic in Egypt. Scholars identify her as a pioneering voice who transformed Arabic poetry both structurally and ideologically. Her poetry departed from rigid classical meters and embraced rhythmic flexibility, emotional intensity and modern symbolism. The significance of Al-Malaika lies not only in her formal innovation but also in her engagement with socio-political realities. Her works reveal deep concern for humanity, women's rights, social alienation, political violence, and existential despair. Through free verse, she created a poetic form capable of expressing modern anxieties and collective suffering. Her literary theories, especially those expressed in *Cholera, Qadaya al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir (Issues of Contemporary Poetry)*, *Shazaya wa Ramad (Splinters and Ashes)* *Ashiqat al-Layl (The Women Lover of the Night)* and other writings contributed substantially to the intellectual foundations of the free verse movement. This article investigates how Al-Malaika employed poetic revolt as a means of socio-political representation, cultural resistance and state-sanctioned injustice, making her a vital voice in modern Arabic social realism.

Statement of the Problem:

Classical Arabic poetry traditionally depended on strict metrical systems and conventional thematic structures. While these forms dominated Arabic literary culture for centuries, they increasingly failed to represent the fragmented realities of modern Arab societies during the twentieth century. The political upheavals, colonial experiences, gender inequality, and existential crises demanded new literary expressions. The problem addressed in this study concerns the relationship between poetic form and socio-political representation in the works of Nazik Al-Malaika. Although many studies recognize her as a pioneer of free verse, fewer critically examine how her formal rebellion functioned as a response to political and social conditions. There remains a need to explore the extent to which her poetic experimentation served as an ideological challenge to literary conservatism and social oppression.

This research therefore seeks to answer the following questions:



1. How did Nazik Al-Malaika challenge the traditional structure of Arabic poetry?
2. In what ways did her poetry reflect socio-political realities?
3. How did free verse become a medium of resistance and cultural reform in her works?
4. What is the relationship between poetic innovation and feminist consciousness in her literary production?

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research methodology. The research is based primarily on textual analysis of selected poems and critical writings by Nazik Al-Malaika. Poems such as *Cholera*, *Fragments and Ashes*, and selected works from her poetic collections are examined to identify thematic and stylistic elements related to socio-political representation and formal innovation. The study also applies a socio-historical approach by situating Al-Malaika's poetry within the broader political and cultural context of the Arab world during the mid-twentieth century. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and literary criticism, are used to support the analysis and provide theoretical perspectives on Arabic modernism and free verse poetry. Additionally, feminist literary criticism is employed to evaluate the representation of women and gender consciousness in her works. The combination of these approaches allows a comprehensive understanding of Al-Malaika's poetic contributions.

Discussion:

1. Formal Revolt and the Birth of Arabic Free Verse

Al-Malaika was a strange person in her society, and she broke a lot of traditions to become a poet. She faced intense criticism not only from traditionalists but also from her own family for making the transition from classical poetry to free verse, which was fraught with controversy. She was highly educated, fluent in four languages, and gave impassioned speeches on women's role in Arab society urging them to have more of a voice and challenging the deeply entrenched patriarchal system. She became financially independent, which was extremely uncommon at the time. In her writings and speeches she shared intensely personal revelations, yet preferred to remain physically secluded from the outside world.



One of the most revolutionary aspects of Al-Malaika's poetry was her rejection of the traditional Arabic qasida structure. Classical Arabic poetry relied heavily on fixed meter and monorhyme, which often limited emotional spontaneity and thematic diversity. Al-Malaika believed that modern experience required modern expression. Her theory of free verse emphasized rhythmic flexibility rather than total abandonment of musicality. Her poem *Cholera* is frequently regarded as a landmark in Arabic literary modernism. Inspired by the cholera epidemic in Egypt in 1947, the poem employs irregular rhythms and fragmented sounds to imitate the movement of funeral processions and the chaos of death. The free verse structure intensifies the emotional impact of collective suffering. Scholars note that the poem established her international reputation and symbolized the beginning of a new poetic era. The formal rebellion in her poetry therefore represented more than technical experimentation; it was an intellectual rejection of literary rigidity and cultural stagnation.

2. Socio-Political Representation in Her Poetry

Al-Malaika's poetry reflects profound awareness of social injustice and political anxiety. Her works portray themes such as poverty, war, death, exile, and psychological alienation. Living through periods of political instability in Iraq and the broader Arab world deeply influenced her poetic imagination. Her poetry frequently addressed the suffering of ordinary people. Critics describe her as "the poetess of common people" because of her emotional connection with social pain and collective trauma. Through symbolic imagery and melancholic tone, she represented the fears and frustrations of modern Arab society. Moreover, her poetry reveals existential concerns shaped by modernity and political uncertainty. Death appears repeatedly as a dominant motif in her work, symbolizing both personal despair and civilizational crisis. Her poetic world often reflects loneliness, spiritual emptiness, and disillusionment with social realities.

3. Feminist Consciousness and Women's Representation

As a female intellectual in a patriarchal society, Nazik Al-Malaika challenged traditional gender expectations through both her life and literature. Her poetry and criticism advocated women's intellectual participation and social recognition. Scholars argue that her shift toward free verse itself constituted resistance against patriarchal literary structures. Al-Malaika's writings often expose the emotional isolation and suppression experienced by women. Unlike romanticized representations of women in classical Arabic poetry, her female voices express anxiety, resistance, and individuality. She emphasized women's psychological depth and their struggle for self-expression within conservative societies. Her feminist orientation was not limited to explicit political slogans; rather, it emerged subtly through themes



of confinement, silence, and emotional suffering. This nuanced feminist perspective contributed significantly to modern Arabic feminist literature. Al-Malaika's change of heart didn't stop her from becoming a true female role model because of her fame in the modernist movement. She was an independent thinker, a respected scholar and a prolific writer who expressed herself eloquently. She managed to excel in a world that was male-dominated, and it was especially significant that she excelled in the literary arena. What women experienced in Arab society at the time was the impulse to suppress, not express, their emotions and inner life.

4. Poetry as Cultural and Ideological Resistance

The free verse movement initiated by Al-Malaika and other modernist poets represented a broader cultural transformation in Arabic literature. It challenged not only literary conventions but also intellectual authoritarianism. Her theoretical writings defended poetic freedom and emphasized the necessity of adapting literature to contemporary realities. By redefining poetic language and rhythm, Al-Malaika opened space for future generations of poets to address taboo subjects, political oppression, and existential crises more openly. Her literary revolution therefore contributed to the democratization of poetic expression in the Arab world.

5. The Structural Gender and Institutional Axis

Al-Malaika's socio-political critique targeted internal social oppression just as sharply as external imperialism. She recognized that a society could never achieve genuine political liberation while keeping half its population systematically subjugated. Her landmark poem "To Wash Disgrace" (*Shadhlan lil-Aar*) offers an explicit critique of state-tolerated violence against women, taking aim at tribal honor killings:

*"The executioner strikes... and a woman disappears...
The night hides her blood, while the city sleeps...
And men gather to celebrate their washed disgrace..."*

Through this visceral representation, Al-Malaika exposed how patriarchal violence operates with institutional complicity. She explicitly tied the oppression of women to a wider, broken socio-political framework that protected the perpetrators while erasing the victims. Her sociological prose, including her famous 1953 lecture "*Women between Two Poles: Negativity and Morals*" delivered at the **Women's Union Club** in Baghdad, consistently argued that social reform and the dismantling of patriarchal legal systems were foundational prerequisites for any meaningful national development.

**Conclusion:**

Nazik Al-Malaika occupies a central position in the history of modern Arabic literature as both a pioneer of free verse and a socially engaged intellectual. Her poetry transformed Arabic poetic tradition by rejecting rigid classical forms and introducing a more flexible structure capable of expressing modern realities. Through this formal revolt, she articulated themes of political suffering, social alienation, women's oppression, and existential despair. The study demonstrates that her poetic innovation was deeply connected to socio-political consciousness. Her use of free verse was not merely an aesthetic experiment but an ideological act of resistance against literary conservatism and social repression. Furthermore, her feminist perspective enriched Arabic literary modernism by foregrounding women's experiences and challenging patriarchal norms. The mental makeup of al-Malaika has been a major literary topic of discussion. The poet was highly self-aware of her personal psychology, and did not shy away from attempting to explore all of its dark recesses. Arab women rarely made such an attempt at the time. Al-Malaika's legacy continues to influence modern Arabic poetry and literary criticism. Her works remain an essential example of how poetic form can become a powerful instrument of social representation and cultural transformation.

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