

The Poetics of the Facebook Poem

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Abstract.

The current study examines the changes undergone by the poem as it moves from the printed form to Facebook. After examining hundreds of Facebook poems, I have identified the following new features: brevity, departure from the strange, refraining from using vowel marks (Tashkeel), and using visual and auditory cues.

Keywords: binary opposition, visual poetry, deviation, counter expectation.

1. Introduction

The current study examines the features of poems posted on Facebook in an attempt to answer the following questions: Are these features different from the ones used in the paper poem? What are the differences and similarities? Despite the inevitable changes imposed by Facebook on poetry, is it still possible to produce good poetry? Or, is it possible to take advantage of these new features to make poetry more popular among readers without compromising quality?

This study analyzes texts posted on Facebook, especially through online poetry forums, such as Muntada Al-Kalema, Muntada Al-Qalam, Muntada Noon, etc.

This study of the Facebook poem is listed under the field of poetics. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin with defining the term "poetics." According to Roman Jakobson, "poetics" is, first and foremost, an answer to this question: what gives a verbal message an artistic impact?¹ Roland Barthes considers poetics to be a literary field of knowledge. Similarly, Todorov, sees it either as a theory regarding a form of literary discourse and its function or as a group of abstract features that contribute to the uniqueness of the literary phenomenon, i.e. literariness.² Although literature is – by nature – not a field of knowledge but a form of discourse that is evasive and elusive, poetics attempts to subjugate it to the standards that would function as a means to analyzing literary texts in terms associated with knowledge. As for poetic texts, poetics attempts to answer a variety of questions, including what are the characteristics that turn a certain discourse into a poetic text? What are the ingredients of the poetic work? How do they function? How do these ingredients come together to create the poetic body, the poem, and thus generate its implications? In short, how is it possible to differentiate what is poetic from what is not? What are the elements that turn a text into a poem? The current study attempts to answer such questions. It should be noted, however, that the Facebook poem has its own features: some of these features are different from those of the paper poem, while others are similar to varying degrees.

2. The Features of the Facebook Poem

2.1. Brevity. Poetry has its own environment, out of which it cannot function. This environment imposes certain limitations. Poetry – much like other literary genres – adapts itself to time and place, and, as such, it either accepts certain limitations that are the product of the dominant culture, or produces a resistance or even a revolution against those limitations. The desert, for instance, imposed its own values and presence on pre-Islamic poetry. Islam, in turn, imposed its own values, negating many pre-Islamic ones and emphasizing others. If one defines poetry – in principle – as a kind of language that communicates and intensifies meaning more than normal language does, intensification becomes an integral feature of poetry.³

Arab renaissance poetry was a reaction to the western invasion, on the one hand, and to the policy of Turkification, on the other.⁴ It was an effort to revive Arab poetry's golden ages. However, this wooden sword

¹ Roman Jakobson, *Qadāyā al-Shi'riyya*, (trans. Muḥammad al-Walīy & Mubārak Ḥannūz), (Al-Dār al-Bayḍā', Dār Topqāl, 1988), 24.

² Tazfitan Todorov, *Al-Shi'riyya*, (trans. Shukrī al-Mabkhūt & Rajā' Salāma), (Al-Dār al-Bayḍā', Dār Topqāl, 1987), 23.

³ Thomas R. Arb, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), 3.

⁴ Khālida Sa'īd, "'Aṣr al-Nahḍawal-Ṣilabayna al-Nuṣuṣ al-Qadīmawal-Ḥadītha", *Ḥarakīyyāt al-Ibdā'*, (Beirut, Dār al-'Awda, 1982), 19-21.

could not resist the western cannon. No matter how skillful an imitation is, the original remains more powerful and valuable. The romantic movement came as a revolt against renaissance poetry, highlighting the individual's concerns and troubles, while rising against past values that had no relation whatsoever to the present. The new values came to mirror the social and economic changes taking place at the time, and to reflect the birth of a middle class that rejected the past while attaching itself to the future. Revolutions in poetry continued to take place. Realism appeared in the free-verse, meter-patterned poem. It was followed by the prose poem, which liberated poetry from rhyme and pattern but imposed implicit limitations, such as rhythm, intensification, gratuitousness and deviation, etc.

No poet could not have anticipated the recent lightning shock: globalization and the rise of Facebook and social media outlets and their contribution to the outbreak of political and social uprisings. Since literature is part of the elite structure, it is affected by the lay structure. This is where the impact was especially powerful. It should be noted that these changes have been recorded in the short story. There are so many social media outlets that no single reader can follow everything posted on all of them. This is why it is necessary to focus on short literary texts. This change could lead to making poetry more democratic, in the sense that it belongs to all the people who can read it. Thus, the first feature of the Facebook poem has been entrenched as being concise, without exceeding 10 lines (which is a random and approximate number).

2.2. Departure from the Strange. Modern poetry tends, in nature, to be more ambiguous, especially in that it depends on deviation and deployment of new, unfamiliar poetic imagery. Ambiguity is an implicit feature that is irreplaceable in every meta-message; the dominance of the poetic function over referential function does not obliterate reference, but rather makes it ambiguous.⁵ The Facebook poem is ultimately a message directed at the audience. One must, therefore, ask what is the culture of this audience? For the most part, it is mediocre or middlebrow. For the message to reach this audience, the Facebook poem – in terms of language and structure – must break away from concealment and estrangement, on the one hand, and from old, classical vocabulary, on the other. Instead, it must draw from the language of media outlets, specifically television.

Nevertheless, since readers of the Facebook poem belong to different cultural backgrounds, the poem must address readers from as many of these backgrounds as possible, including the cultured and educated. Hence, the poem must be structured geometrically in the sense that it implies multiple inferences through the use of certain techniques. This feature is called the layered or archeological poem. This poem has layers of gradual inferences beginning with the simple and ending with the deep so that it speaks to various cultural backgrounds, unlike the paper poem, which is usually written for the educated and the intellectual. For example, intertextuality. A simple reader does not need to comprehend intertextuality and its complex inferences. However, an educated reader reads the poem on a much deeper level to decode its inferences by participating in the game of intertextuality and identifying other poetical techniques.

Let us take, for instance, Rabia Al-Adawiyya's poem "I love Thee with Two Loves,"⁶ where the title is textually linked to the mystic poetry of Rabia Al-Adawiyya. An educated reader would link this poem to its mystic origin. However, the Facebook poem must break away from mimicry because it will lose its function and its value before the original one.⁷ The paper poem, on the other hand, reflects the culture of its writer, and usually tends to be more difficult and much deeper since its readers are small in number and mostly educated.

2.3. Refraining from Using Vowel Marks (Tashkeel). There are two types of writing in Arabic: words with tashkeel and words without tashkeel. If a poem is composed on a smart phone, it does not have any kind of tashkeel since most of those who type do not know how to use vowel marks properly. In addition, it is very difficult to use vowel marks on a smart phone because the screen is fairly small. This leads to a situation where most texts composed on the smart phone have no tashkeel, which leads, in turn, to various readings. These readings can vary either in part or in whole from the original text as intended by the author.

One of the most notable examples of this situation happened on the Makan radio station where the poet Ranya Irshaid broadcasts a nightly poetry program called "All the Poems." On one occasion, when Ranya recited a poem titled "I Love Thee with Two Loves," she used the female "thee" in Arabic rather than the male one as if the poem was addressed to a female. Thus, the meaning changed entirely from a mystic to a love poem.

I Love Thee with Two Loves

Loving you [female] with two loves is not enough
The blue sky
The cool sheets
And the tears of a woman

⁵ Jakobson, *Qadāyā al-Shi'riyya*, 51-55.

⁶ Fu'ād 'Azzām, *Ḥibr al-Ghaym*, (KafrQāsim, Maṭba'atKafrQāsim, 2018), 43.

⁷ The Russian scholar Mukarovsky says: "The poetic language must be changed constantly because the aesthetic effect of any artistic means is eliminated by automation". See: Jan Mukarovsky, *On Poetic Language*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 18.

The light spray on
 The sad windows
 The dark lost hearts
 And yet your face [female] is everywhere
 The blue sky
 The cold music
 The broken smiles
 And yet your face [female] is everywhere
 The blue sky
 The sick bodies
 The sound souls
 The blue seas
 Everything points to you [female]...
 Loving you [female] with two loves in not enough

This occurred because Ranya was not aware of the use of intertextuality in the poem by Rabia Al-Adawiyya, "Divine Love" addressed to God. The change that was made here affected the entire poem. Thus, the lack of tashkeel may lead to a partial or radical shift in meaning. Various interpretations are integral to modern literature, which make the reader an active participant in the process of writing the text. In the paper poem, on the other hand, the author uses vowel marks in such a way that controls the meaning. The absence of vowel marks allows the reader to pick the simplest and closest meaning to him or her; s/he is not bound by one meaning or by the meaning intended by the author. In the paper poem, however, the poet uses the Harakat to polish his/her text in such a way that creates meaning. The absence of Harakat allows the reader to choose the simplest and most appealing meaning.

2.4. Visual and Auditory Poetry. There is a noticeable tendency in Facebook poetry to engage the reader by inserting new elements for the purpose of making it easier to understand. Using shapes in words and letters is not exclusive to Arab poets. In fact, some classical poets used a similar approach known as "Arboreal Poetry."

This kind of poetry depends on the visual formation of the text by employing various techniques, including visual and auditory effects, like images, drawings, colors and music.⁸ It has evolved from visual poetry on paper. However, it is different in the sense that the latter depends on visual formation of the written text only, i.e. the way in which words are organized on paper. Digital visual poetry – in addition to what has been mentioned – depends on visual and auditory effects that provide the words with a physical and sensual nature, making them more vivid and alive.⁹ Music has become a significant element in the Facebook poem, as in poems by Nizar Qabbani, Enad Jaber and Fouad Azzam. Some of the poems using vowel marks are delivered in the form of clips.

2.5. Binary Oppositions in the Facebook Poem. Facebook poetry is characterized by intense opposition. The entire poem is usually structured based on binary oppositions that rely on dramatism, on the one hand, and dialogue, on the other. This appears to be the result of media influence, especially with one-on-one programs. In addition, the Arab revolutions have further promoted the conventions of a wide spectrum of people engaging in dialogue while they simultaneously deepened sociopolitical conflict. This is demonstrated in literature through posing different perspectives and conflicted ideas. It must be noted that this feature is not limited to the Facebook poem, but is also found in the paper format. The difference is in the degree of intensity.

It is important to emphasize that the Facebook poem is open to all people; as such, binary oppositions ought to be addressed- at least on the surface level. However, there could be more than one level of binary opposition. The following example has two levels: a clear and simple level as well as a concealed and hidden one. This poem is an example of concealed binary oppositions, yet they present no obstacle for the average reader to understand its surface meaning. On the other hand, an expert reader can deconstruct the text and examine its binary oppositions to comprehend a deeper meaning. Thus, the Facebook poem suits all kinds of people, unlike the paper poem, which is exclusive to a small number of educated and elite readers. Let us take, for example, the poem "The Woman is a Moon of Sapphire"¹⁰:

The woman is not a drawer
 You fill with your rubbish.

⁸Imān Yūnis, *Ta'thīr al-Intarnet'alāAshkāl al-Ibdā'wal-Talaqqīf al-Adab al-'Arabī al-Hadīth*, (KafīQar', Dār al-Hudāwa-Dār al-Amīnīl-Nashr, 2011), 42-43.

⁹ Ibid, 42-43.

¹⁰Fu'ād' Azzām, *Lil-ṢabāḥiAktubu*, (KafīQāsim, Maṭba'atKafīQāsim, 2018), 39-40.

The woman is not a fur coat
 You cover yourself with in your spare time.
 The woman is not a sand clock
 You approach during thirst hours.
 The woman is feeling, trees from the trees of paradise,
 Words from honey and tenderness.
 The woman is a garden and Pulicaria that withers
 Without the words' neigh. [??]
 The woman is pure water.
 The woman is a song,
 A bottle of perfume, a lamp, a moon,
 A bow of rain,
 Drops from Paradise's drops,
 The horse's defiance.
 The woman is a moon of sapphire.

In "The Woman is a Moon of Sapphire", there is binary opposition between the implicit and the explicit. The implicit finds its way to the reader's mind through the letter K (Qaf) – which is Killing (honor killing). These are ideas that reside in the unconscious Arab mind; hence, the poet creates this opposition to express his rejection of the idea. Instead, he uses the same letter K (Qaf in Arabic), to create beautiful images. The K of the woman stands in all its glory in the face of the K of the killing; the forests of Ks are paralleled with the K of killing and the K of Crushing in men. The opposition often depends on repetition. Repetition here begins from the title "The Woman is a Moon of Sapphire," which sends a positive message [?]. It is a clear reporting statement that has the elements of emphasis and positivity.

This poem sends a message to men, encouraging them to detach the negative elements from the image of the woman. The poem begins with a negation in which the poet rejects various preconceptions about women. The word "woman" appears three times in negated images, as opposed to five times in affirmative ones. Thus, quantitatively, positivity is emphasized in women. The poet then uses repetition – repeating the word "woman" eight times. By contrast, the letter K (Qaf, in Arabic) is repeated (a letter pun). If some readers believe that the letter (Qaf) is heavy and rough, it is because it rejects the implicit K (Qaf) in the word "killing". There are more implicit binary oppositions here: "the implicit killing, سقط المتاع, وقت الفراغ (the negative Qaf is repeated twice versus ten positive times (المرأة ماء قراح, قارورة عطر, قنديل, قمر, قوس من قرح, قوس من قرح, قمر من ياقوت)

The positive attitude of the poet towards women appears here on two levels: the quantitative and the structural; the quantitative in terms of number and the structural in terms of where the poem begins (the opening statement and the closing statement: The Woman is a Moon of Sapphire).

Thus, the poem is constructed on the basis of binary oppositions through the repetition of the opening line and of the letter pun as well.

Repetition here has many functions. It is an internal pattern that compensates for the absence of rhyme; it is also a dramatic and psychological recurrence that captures inner feelings and mental states. Through his poem, "The Waste Land", T.S. Eliot had a great influence on modern Arabic poetry.¹¹

2.6. Deviation. It should be noted that the elements of the Facebook poem are not entirely distinct from those of the paper poem. They share common features. Deviation is when a word deviates from its literal meaning. Arabs called this "metaphor." The knowledge-field language is markedly different from the poetic one. While the knowledge-field language approximates zero in writing,¹² the poetic language breaks away from the scientific and dictionary language. This distinction caused a poetic war between the modernizers and the conservatives in the Middle Ages. An excellent example of this is in the poetry of Abu Tammam as he focused on modernizing and intensifying deviation:

Do not quench my thirst with the water of the blameworthy,
 For I am drunk with love and I enjoy the water of my own tears.

Deviation appears in all of its glory here. Some conservatives mocked him by sending people with buckets to have them filled with the water of the words he claimed to possess. Yet, he confuted them by saying that he would give them what they had asked for on the condition that they bring him a feather from the wing of humbleness mentioned in the Holy Quran. Abu Tammam was famous for using deviation to the extent that one

¹¹ Shmuel Moreh, *Al-Shi'r al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth 1800-1970*, (trans. Shafī' al-Sayyid & Sa'd Maşlūh), (Cairo, Dār Gharībilīl-Nashr, 2003), 311-378.

¹² "The Zero Degree in Writing" is a title of the book Written by R. Barthes, see: Roland Barthes, *Le Degre Zero de l'écriture*, (Paris: Seuil, 1953 (Paris: Seuil, 1953). This issue has been translated in Arabic, see: Roland Barthes, *Al-Daraja al-Sifrīlīl-Kitāba*, (trans. Muḥammad Barāda), (Beirut, Dār al-Ṭalī'a, 1980).

conservative critic – Abu Amr Ibn Alalaa – said about his poetry: “if this were poetry, then all the rhetoric of the Arabs is false.”¹³ Another example is a line by the French poet Valery: “a calm surface upon which doves wander.” The poetic phenomenon begins at the moment we call the sea a "surface" and the ships "doves.”¹⁴

2.7. Counter-Expectation. This element is linked to the concept of deviation since expectation is, literally, that which is expected. Counter-expectation, on the other hand, is a deviation from the expected. This breakaway from the expected creates a gap that takes the reader by surprise. What characterizes the poetry of the 20th century is the notion that it breaks away from the principle of adherence to the rules that prohibit including certain elements and enable connecting dissonant ideas in the text.¹⁵ The Russian researcher Lotman gives us an example of this principle from a poem by Tyutchev¹⁶:

A dark misty evening...
Listen! Is that the sound of a lark?
Is that you, O guest of the fair morning,
At this late, dead hour?
So soft, playful, pure in sound,
At this late, dead hour,
Like terrifying mad laughs,
It shivered the depths
Of my soul

This poem is clearly formed in such a way that it semantically includes groups that cannot be put together: a dark rainy evening and the song of a lark. "A Dark Misty Evening" represents a real situation, followed by the interference (exclamation) "Listen!" This makes us expect that something about sound is about to be stated in the following words. The presence of these two messages compels us to come up with a list of possibilities from which the poet will choose what will follow (for instance: the hooting of an owl, the squeaking of dry woods, moaning, the clatter of bones, the ringing of a bell, etc.). Choosing one of these elements (or what is equivalent to them) allows us to create a field of the possible and the impossible in the messages that will follow. Yet, the poet chooses a group of impossibilities rather than possibilities. Thus, he betrays our expectations as far as "Listen!" predicts a certain sound, where as the poet is, in fact, describing a different kind of sound. The line changes from "Listen! Is that the sound of a lark?" into "Listen! Is that the cry of a bird?" "Why interfere with the limitations despite the notion that the "sound of a lark" and the "cry of a bird" could be used interchangeably in a certain context?. Of all the characteristics of a lark, the poet chooses to activate the "morning bird," an expression that cannot be grouped into the image created at the beginning of the poem.

Later, the entire poem is structured according to this notion of grouping that which cannot be grouped together: "guest of the fair morning" and the "dark late hour" (notice the change of the position of words in the repetitions in lines 4 and 6 – and, thus, the probability of prediction lessens).

All this reaches its peak with "terrifying mad laughs." This is how the poet constructs a message he wishes to communicate: non-expectation, the chaos of nature itself, and non-coherence as a universal rule. When Wafeeq Heiby says:

Embrace me with a warm pinch of rain.¹⁷

he betrays our expectations because we expect his beloved to embrace him with a pinch of roses. His betrayal of our expectations takes place on two levels: the pinch of rain, on the one hand, and the use of oxymoron, on the other, in a "pinch" of cold rain.

2.8. Intentionality and Print Distribution/Black and White. Poetry depends, basically, on intentionality. In other words, a person intentionally writes poetry. Hence, the poetic text is called *Qassida* in Arabic because the poet intends (*Yaqssed*) to communicate an idea, which was once used to praise an emir or a king for financial or moral purposes.¹⁸ Poetry is the kind of language that says more and intensifies more than normal language does. Roman Jakobson argues that every verbal message has six functions. These functions

¹³Abū Bakr al-Šūlī, *Akhbārabi Tammām*, (Beirut, al-Maktab al-Tijārī, n.d.), 244; For more information on this subject, see: Adonis, *Al-Thābit wal-Mutaḥawwil: al-'Usūl*, (Beirut, Dār al-'Awda, 1974), 53.

¹⁴ John Queen, *Binā' Lughat al-Shi'r*, (trans. Muḥammad al-Waliy & Muḥāarak Hannūz), (Al-Dār al-Baydā', Dār Topqāl, 1988), 24.

¹⁵Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, (trans. Gail Lehoff & Roland Vroon) (1977), 78-80; Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text* 127-128.

¹⁶Kamālābū Dīb, "Baḥṭhfi al-Shi'riyya", *Mawāqif* 46 (1983), 85-95.

¹⁷ Wafiq Hibi, *Tāwilatuki*, (Kafr Qāsim, Matba'at Kafr Qāsim, 2018), 37.

¹⁸ Thomas Arp, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Southern Methodist University, 1997), 3

appear in every verbal text to varying degrees. The question is which function is dominant? If we were to focus on the "message," the dominant function would be the poetic function, referred to by some critics "the aesthetic function" presented in the following structure:¹⁹

	Reference (Context)	
Emotional (Sender)	Poeticism (Message)	Explanatory (Recipient)
	Attentive (Communication)	
	Metalinguistic (Rules)	

In Facebook poetry, the message is rather less significant than the referential function, i.e. the context, while not entirely ignoring the importance of the meaning.

Poems take many shapes and forms, depending on the historical era in which they are produced. Since pre-Islamic times and until the meter-patterned poem, which appeared in 1946 (with some exceptions, such as blank verse), poems used to have lines. Every line was divided into two parts with the first half (Sadr) and the second half (Aajz) separated with a gap. When the meter-patterned poem took over, the white blank of the paper became larger and the poem acquired a title. Some poets experiment with the shape of the poem to express ideas. In "Broken Jugs" by Al-Bayyati, the poet uses this method – drawing in words – to emphasize the outbreak of revolution and the birth of a new life:²⁰

A new spring
A flowing spring in the idleness of our lives
A new spring

This form helps the reader imagine the explosive revolution like an arrow penetrating reality. Organizing the words on paper vertically indicates to the readers that they have entered the field of poetry. Thus, the readers deal with the text as poetry regardless of its quality. This technique appears in the Facebook poem with more variations than can be included in the paper poem due to visual effects in the text (such as different images, drawings, and colors in addition to the dispersion of words and sentences) as well as auditory effects, especially music and recitation. One notices the use of this technique in Fouad Azzam's "A Runaway Cloud,"²¹ which concludes as follows:

My name breaks down into
F
R
A
G
M
E
N
T
S

In a different poem, titled "The Horse of Memories," the poet uses a different technique: the possibility of reading horizontally or vertically:²²

Bloom and shine
From the ink of my ways
My eyes

Here is another example of breaking down a word into letters taken from a poem by Nabil Tannous²³:

The clouds are red
Red red
Red

¹⁹ Jakobson, *Qadāyā al-Shi'riyya*, 32-33

²⁰ Reuven San'ir, *Rak tānfi al-'Ishq: Dirāsafi Shi'r 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī*, (Beirut, Dār al-Sāqī, 2002), 69.

²¹ Fu'ād 'Azzām, *Ahlām al-Sunūnū*, (Ammān, DārFaḍā'āt, 2015), 166.

²² Fu'ād 'Azzām, *Ahlām al-Sunūnū*, (Ammān, DārFaḍā'āt, 2015), 166.

²³ Nabil Tannūs, *Wa-Yaṭūlu al-Intizār*, (KafrQāsim, Maṭba'atKafrQāsim, 2018), 10.

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Yet, such techniques, i.e. breaking down words and dispersing sentences for semantic and aesthetic purposes, can be seen in the paper poem. The visual and auditory elements such as colors, recitation, images and music cannot be seen on paper; they are limited to the Facebook poem. These new elements have become part of the semantic and aesthetic elements that overlap with previous traditional ones, especially in written texts. As such, the online text has many interrelated elements with the written text.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that a medium like Facebook has had a profound effect on published literature. This effect has imposed new features on the Facebook poem as well as a new status. The current study attempts to tackle the new ingredients of the Facebook poem. These include shortness, departure from the strange, intentionality, the use of music, refraining from the use vowel marks, and experimenting with forms of writing. The traditional ingredients in the paper poem, which had to undergo a process of change, are binary oppositions, deviation, and the betrayal of expectations. These ingredients have turned writing poetry into a more popular act in the sense that it no longer belongs to a small elite group.

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