



## The Sonnet in the Modern Arab Poetry

Raed W. Jaradat<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D, Associate Professor. Modern Arabic Literature, Tafila Technical University, TTU.

\* Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the world of the sonnet in the modern Arabic poetry in light of its structure, its origin, and its content. After reviewing the history of the sonnet in the western poetry, mainly Shakespeare's patterns, two major Arabic poets' sonnets were presented and compared with their English counterparts. It was found that there are a lot of commonalities between the structural form of modern Arabic sonnets and those of Shakespeare's. However, in light of content, Arabic modern poets varied in their employment of the sonnet and dedicated it to their own political views. Both Khaled Mostafa and Mahmoud Darwish imitated the Western style of the sonnets to express their own ideas and thoughts about their hometown, but with transparent way, unlike of Shakespeare's ambiguous style.

**Key words:** Arabic Sonnet; Shakespearean sonnet; modern Arab poets; Elizabethan sonnets

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### INTRODUCTION

Two main approaches can be traced regarding the evolvement of Arab poetry. One has remained very relevant to the traditional Arab heritage where it reveals meanings, forms, and imaginations; reproduces its images with different yet new garments most often and imitates

other's poetry at other times. But in general it is an extension of traditional poetry. The second type of poetry is somehow irrelevant to the Arab traditional heritage where few matches could be found except for some linguistic features and other little connections represented by a few poets. This type highly embraces renovation especially in poetic style and content. Here, we can easily observe the foreign influence on this kind of poetry, a feature that might look like as if it were originally copied from the foreign style or as if it were a complete mimicry of it.

Undoubtedly, the sonnet, being part of the poetic devices used in the modern Arab poetry, is a good example in this regard. By definition, the sonnet is one form of art originated from the Western poetry, entered the scope of modern Arab poetry, and was adopted by many well-known Arab and famous poets who imitated its style, patterns but not its content. Among the well-known poets who mimicked and followed the pattern of the western sonnet are Mahmoud Darwish, Khaled Ali Mostafa and Hasib Sheikh Jafar who, as a matter of fact, adopted the narrative pattern of the sonnet rather than its poetic style. In "Samarqand Columns" (Sheikh, Jafar 1-2), translated into Arabic as A3 medato Samarqand, he collected his sonnets in an animal's story collection resembling Khalilah and Dimnah. Lavonntte and Ahmad Shawqi also adopted the same modern English style like that of Shakespeare, whereas Khaled Ali Mostafa and Mahmoud Darwish adopted the poetic style of the English sonnet with its western patterns of structure. The current paper addresses only two models of sonnets.

### 1. THE SONNET IN THE EUROPEAN POETRY

The sonnet is considered one of the closest poetic arts that adheres to the form because of its strong tendency to stereotyping and specificity. As for its content, it changes according to the subject matter and topics it tackles.

When western critics tackle these sonnets in their literary commentaries, works, and encyclopedias, they imitate its form. The sonnet is defined as a lyric that consists of fourteen lines and employs a methodological approach in terms of the rhyme. It was also a very special form among the poetic forms in western literatures due to maintaining its position through the process of attracting the most famous poets to such a style during the past five years (Greene, 4). It seems that the sonnet was originated in the thirteenth century among the Sicilian school poets; then it was transferred from the provincial to spread in Tuscany where it reached the summit of glory in the fourteenth century in Petrarch sonnets which was named after him, especially after he composed 317 sonnets in one collection that is presented to his sweetheart Laura. The petrarchal or the Italian sonnet, as it is sometimes called, had represented one of the two major forms of the sonnet in western literatures along with the English and Shakespearean sonnets (Greene, 5).

The Italian sonnet deals with the major themes in two main forms: the first eight lines, which are called the octave, tackle a problem, or raise a question or an emotional issue. As for the last six lines which are called the sestet, they present a solution for the problem, an answer for the question, or a relief for the emotional issue. While the octave rhyme is formed as follows: abba/abba, the sestet rhyme is different as it might rhyme as cdecde or cdccdc or cdcedce. The Petrarchal sonnet had a great influence on the European poetry, namely the Spanish poetry, Portugal poetry, French poetry and the Polish poetry (Preminger et al ed. 1993).

The Italian sonnet was then transferred to England with different poetic forms. Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard were among the most major authors of it in the sixteenth century. The pattern of the English sonnet that consisted of 14 lines is also: abab cdcd efef gg. Further, its numerous number of rhymes makes it much more flexible than the Italian sonnet (Greene, n.p.). The Elizabethan ideal usage of the sonnet was in a form of some consecutive poems following Petrarch's style. Despite the fact that each sonnet was a successive poem, it had contributed positively to the narrative manner. Among the Elizabethan poets who composed a succession of poems are Sir Philip Sidney in his collection "Strophe and Stella" in 1951, Samuel Daniel in his collection "Delia" in 1952, Michael Drayton in his collection "Ideas Mirror" in 1954, and Edmund Spenser in his collection "Amoretti" in 1951. Probably, the greatest poetic successions that follow the pattern of the sonnet were the ones written by Shakespeare, whose main characters were a young man and a black lady (Greene, n.p.).

## 2. SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

It is a series consisting of 154 sonnets. Its first publication appeared in 1609. Each Shakespearean sonnet is divided

into three couplets and a lock, based on the rhyme abab cdcd efef gg (Stirling 21). Apparently, Drayton, Sidney, and Daniels influenced Shakespeare's sonnets. However, none of Shakespeare's sonnets was a direct translation for any of an Italian, French, or English sonnet. Commonly speaking, when composing a sonnet, it should consist of a collection that tackles one major subject which normally addresses a flirt for a real or imaginary woman. Also, sonnets could be read as separate or together. As for Shakespeare's sonnets, there is some suspicion that his sonnets had only one succession of poetry with no unified theme or and no specific subjects. However, the conditions that surround sonnets' scripts and their publication do not help us here because the only evidence for being unified is an internal one; critics have found that reading sonnets as being easy pieces is a possible thing. Sonnets have also undergone much criticism by critics and editors, even more than once, (Preminger et al, 1993). Recently, much academic effort has been exerted to translate Shakespeare's sonnets. According to Tina (2012) such efforts and knowledge have helped translate Shakespeare's prosodic features, his dedicative lexical choice and word order, as well as his figurative language by harmonizing the intertextual signs into Arabic (XIII).

Based on the edition of 1609, the first sonnets always introduce a young man from a noble family and with good features who is asked by the poet to get married so as to have children who carry the same noble features and qualities. The sonnets that addressed this young man range from 1-126, whereas the rest of the sonnets which range from 127-152 address a black woman with black-laden character and normally was referred to as "the black woman". Sonnets 153 and 154 tackled some abstract literary experiences (Preminger et al, 1993).

## 3. THE SONNET IN OTHER LITERATURES

The sonnet in the American literature did not come into the literary circles until the last quarter of the eighteenth century in the work of Colonel David Humphrey. Soon, it spread out very quickly to reach Long Fellow's reign (1882-1807) when the Italian form of the sonnet was adopted. A variety of themes and content was adopted by Lowell, George Henry Boker and Paul Hamiton Hayne along with others. A century later, the sonnet topics had expanded in Europe and the US to include any subject and case, despite its commitment to the main subject matter in general. Such development indicates that this poetic form may not disappear in the future.

Among the literatures that were influenced by this poetic form is the modern Arabic poetry. The Shakespearean sonnet was the main form employed by Arab poets after translating a number of these sonnets which, with their English editions, were disseminated

in most of the Arab countries. That is why in this study we compare Arabic sonnets with the Shakespearean one, whether in light of the form or the content.

#### 4. THE SONNET IN THE MODERN ARAB POETRY

##### Palestinian sonnets for the poet Khaled Ali Mustafa

Some Arab scholars have been greatly influenced by Shakespeare's inventions of free verse and his sonnets style. Moreh (1976) explained how Abu Shadi, an Arab famous literary critic and writer, has been influenced by Shakespeare. He mentions, "Abu Shadi was considered by I.A. Edham. [He] was the one who shared the activities of Shukri in blank verse: "[he] should have given conspicuous mention to his invention of free verse in Arabic, to his evolution of Arabic sonnet." (140). Like wise, Khaled Ali Mustafa is one of the Palestinian poets who dedicated his poetry to his usurped homeland. Reviewers of Mustafa's poetry can easily identify his peculiar poetic taste due to his vast knowledge and his continuous exploration of literary works. He amalgamated his education with the vast knowledge and combined them with special signs and hints in his poetic divans. His subjects were normally different and tackled issues related to his usurped homeland. In his divan "Flirt in Hell", he composed a number of poems, around ten, and named it differently: Hamra, street in Haifa, Death Company, the borders, and Laila's fool. These titles were classified as Palestinian sonnets in which he imitates Shakespeare in light of the form. As for the subject of these sonnets, Mostafa's subjects differed to a great extent from Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare's sonnets talked about love, friend ship and its resistance to love and destruction. His sonnets also included his philosophy of beauty, immortality, and man's will towards nature and human relations; his opinion about his age in light of social classes and his opinion on writing and Drama. To illustrate these features, sonnet number 18 is quoted:

Shall I Compare thee to a summer's? Thou art more lovely and more temperate: Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And Summer's lease hath all too short a date: Some time too hot the eye of heaven Shines, And often is his gold complexion dimmed, And every fair from fair Sometime. Declines, By chance, or natures changing course untrimmed But they eternal Summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thon ow'st, Nor shall death brag thon. Wand'erst in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st, So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

This poem is translated by Gabra as thus;

أبيوم من أيام الصيف أشبهك؟  
لأكثر جمالاً أنت واثد اعتدالا.  
فالرياح العتية تجني على براعم أيار الحبيبة  
وعقد الصيف ما أقصر أجله !  
وعين السماء أنا تشرق بقيظ ملتهب  
وأنا في صفحتها الذهبية يخبو البريق,  
وكل حُسن عن الحَسَن يوماً يفترق  
فأقداً زهوة بطارئ أو بمجرى الطبيعة المتقلبة:  
أما صيفك الأبدي فلن يسري فيه الذبول ولن يفقد الحسن الذي تمتلكه ,  
ولن يفخر الموتُ بأنك تطوف في ظلّه ,  
حين تعاصرُ الأزمانَ في أبيات خالدة :  
فما دام في الناس رمقٌ وفي العيون بصر  
هذا القصيدُ سيحييا , وينفخُ فيك الحياة.

(qtd. in Abdel-Hafiz, 2014)

Here, it can be noticed that the rhyming pattern in Shakespeare's sonnets is:

Abab cdcd efef and jj, a pattern that is completely not adopted by Khaled Ali who sometimes varied, as thus:

- hamra abab \ cdcd \ jj (slightly dissenting)
- match abba /cdcd / effe/jj (slightly dissenting)
- Street in Haifa abab /cdcd /effe /jj (slightly dissenting)
- Death company abba /cdcd /effe /jj (slightly dissenting)
- The three abab \ cdcd \ efef and \ jj (identical)
- Ink bottle abba /cdcd /jj (slightly dissenting)
- A street in Jenin abab \ cdcd \ jj (identical)
- Smuggling abab \ cdcd \ efef and \ jj (dissenting in the first Quartet)
- Waterfall abab \ cdcd \ efef and \ jj (identical)
- The Borders father abba \ cdcd \ efef \ jj (slightly dissenting)
- Waiting abab \ cdcd \ efef and \ jj (identical)
- A message of forgiveness abab \ cdcd \ efef \ jj (identical)

Here, we can say that the structure of the sonnet for Khaled Ali Mostafa is a Shakespearean one despite some of the very slight differences in light of the rhyme. The poet here wanted his sonnets to be successive like those of Shakespeare and could have two readings: the first reading is related to sonnets that explore the issues of losing hope, stability and home. The second reading is related to sonnets that address different subjects.

We can also view the poet mentioning some historical symbols and famous legends in history that represent different historical, literary, religious, political, and narrative references. It is noticeable that the Palestinian sonnets are structured in a coherent heritage-like way

in spite of the ambiguity that might encompass these sonnets. They also conceal clear and simple meaning behind highly-intensive metaphorical constructions where it is noticeable that the poet succeeded in intensifying the denotative expressions and providing more imagery without having any hindrances attributed to the structure of the sonnet.

In his sonnet entitled a “Yemeni Vision”, the poet employs a name that has historical connotations as it alludes to Arwa, the Yemeni Queen. The poem is narrated by one of her ministers who had great compassion and love for her but his dream didn’t come true as she neither recognized his feelings nor exchanged love with him. She encompassed herself with an impenetrable fence from which he couldn’t enter. However, he all of a sudden woke up to find himself very close to his beloved but without being proud of getting her due to being the weakest ever; so he was nicknamed ‘ the mouse’. However, it was full of historical legendary symbols and hints that all in all revolve about Yemen and other references to the exact news mentioned in the Holy Koran.

The sonnet also hinted at the current Arab conditions regarding the issue of Palestine. Here, the poet mentions openly his beloved name unlike Shakespeare, whose beloved names remained a secret until these days. The Yemeni Dream sonnet reads as thus:

رؤيا يمنية  
 أنا الذي نصبتُ أروى ملكة  
 أوقفتُ حولها يدي والقلب حارسين  
 في الصبح أرمي في الجبال الشبكة  
 وفي الماء أقتني للدمع صاحبتين  
 \* \* \*

تأتي الوفود بالهدايا . تخرج الوفود بالهدايا  
 والناس في صنعاء يعرفون  
 أني ملأتُ ملكها بالخيل والسرايا  
 وجنتها من مأرب بالنبأ اليقين  
 \* \* \*

فكيف نمتُ ، ذات ليلة ، على الرصيف  
 ملتصقاً بخلمي المسروق في النهار ؟  
 الشمس تستديرُ في نقابها الشغيف  
 والقمرُ استراحَ في خزانة الغبار  
 وقبل أن أفيق ، كان السيلُ يجتاحُ المدينة  
 الفأرُ وحده هو الناجي على ظهر السفينة

Below, I translated the sonnet ideationally, trying to capture the exact message rendered in the original text. However, it was hard to preserve both the form as well as the content. So, most of the form is lost and therefore the rhyme definitely differed. The translation reads:

## A YEMENI DREAM

It is I who proclaimed Arwa a king,  
 Employed my heart and hands as guards for her,  
 In the morning, I throw in the mountains my network  
 And in water I channel for my tears as twins,  
 Delegations come with gifts, delegations leave with  
 gifts  
 And people in Sana’a know that  
 I filled her kingdom with horses and castles  
 And provided her from Ma’reb with the certain news  
 How could I sleep one day on the sidewalk?  
 Glued to my dream stolen in the day?  
 The sun turns with its erotic veil  
 And the moon relaxed in the dust closet  
 And before I woke up, the city was gripped torrent  
 The mouse alone was alive on board.

[My own Translation]

Notably, the first quartet presented the problem, and in the second quartet the problem expands, then starts to conflict in the third until it comes up with a conclusive tragedy in the last excerpt, thus representing the common thematic structure of the sonnet.

## 5. MAHMOUD DARWISH’S SONNETS

Another Palestinian poet who mimicked Shakespeare in his sonnets is Mahmoud Darwish who was born in the occupied Palestine and experienced its suffering since his very early days, during his youth, and until very recently. Darwish employed his poetry for the Palestinian issue, and he collected most of the political poems in a special divan which he called *Sareer Al Gharibeh* which translates into “The Stranger’s Bed”. In it, he composed six sonnets with serial sequence from one through six, somehow different from Shakespeare. From the land of steadfastness and challenge and from the immortal time of blood and alienation, Darwish, with his rhyming language of his Arabic poetry, hinted at lots of historical and legendary directions taken from the Arabic, Iraqi, and Egyptian traditional heritages. (Viz, the Two Gods of Egypt and Somer, Jamil Bothayneh, Gays wa Layla, Nabokhed Nasser). The major purpose for doing so is to collect all names and symbols in a way that reflects his national identity and his will to preserve an identity in a world full of cruelty and hatred day after day.

In his sonnets, Darwish proves that he is a well-educated poet, who equips his expressions with all magic yet transparent words mixed with a sense of dramatic emotions that strongly attract the recipient and get him emotionally involved. Like Shakespeare, he does not explicitly mention the name of his beloved and never name any of his sonnets. Further, the structure of his sonnets resembles that of Shakespeare, mainly consisting of fourteen lines with three quartets and a conclusion. In most of his sonnets, Darwish addresses his close

sweetheart, Palestine, using the feminine pronouns (e.g., you, I saw you, your two dimples, your ambiguity, - all with female pronouns). However, with such style, Darwish's way of depicting his beloved did not rise to the level of uncertainty in Shakespeare's sonnets, but it was much more transparent and expressive. Let us illustrate another sonnet for Darwish. In sonnet one, he writes

إذا كنت آخر ما قاله الله لي ، فليكن  
نزولك نون ال "نا" في المثني . وطوبى لنا  
وقد نورّ اللوز بعد خطى العابرين ، هنا  
على ضفتيك ، ورقّ عليك القطا واليمام  
\* \* \*  
بقرن الغزال طعنت السماء ، فسال الكلام  
ندى في عروق الطبيعة . ما أسم القسيمة ؟  
أمام ثنائية الخلق والحق ، بين السماء البعيدة  
وأرز سريرك ، حين يجن دمّ لدم ، ويئنّ الرخام  
\* \* \*  
ستحتاج أسطورة للشمس حولك هذا الزحام  
الهات مصر وسومر تحت النخيل يغيرن أثوابهنّ  
واسماء إيامهن ، ويكملن رحلاتهن الى آخر القافي  
وتحتاج أنشودتي للتنفس : لا الشعر شعراً  
ولا النثر نثر . حلمت بأنك أما ما قاله  
لي الله حين رأيتكما في المنام ، فكان الكلام

The translation of the aforementioned sonnet is:  
If you are the last thing God revealed to me, let it be  
The way *noon* is originated in the *na* of the dual.  
Blessed be us  
That the almonds lightened right after transients passed  
by, here  
On your river banks, mushrooms and doves breed.  
With the horn of the deer you stabbed the sky, letting  
the speech flow  
With dews in nature veins. What's the name of the  
poem?  
In front of the dual creation and righteousness,  
between the distant sky  
And your bed, when blood yeans to blood and when  
marble grows.  
You will need the myth of the sun around the hustle  
Goddesses of Egypt and Somer change their clothes  
underneath the palm trees  
And the names of their days, and continue their trips to  
the end of the rhyme.

My chant needs to breathe: verse is no longer a prose,  
and verse is no longer verse. Dreamed of you-----my  
lord told me in the dream, when the speech began.

Although it is a sonnet, it does not match with that of  
Shakespeare in light of the content and the structure, way  
different from those of Khaled Mostafa. The iambic meter  
was aab /cbcb /bxx /xxb. Clearly, all the words rhyme  
with the letter sound *meem*, thus indicating to a great  
distortion of the regular pattern of the sonnet.

## CONCLUSION

I have found that the sonnet has a western poetic style that  
is totally influenced with the old eastern traditional patterns  
and that this kind of poetry had reached its heydays in  
Shakespeare's. From there, our Arabic literary modern  
traditions were taken, thus forming a cycle of transferring  
different literatures from one generation into another and  
indicating to a number of creative literary movements that  
distinguish this era as well as the western one.

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