

Fluri 'Abd al-Malik: The Marginalization of a Woman Romantic Poet in the Sixties^[1]

Osama Ibrahim Amer

Supervised by

Dr. Dina Heshmat

Introduction

Fluri 'Abd al-Malik (1925-1983) was an Egyptian poet whose career flourished in the sixties of the twentieth century; she stopped writing after publishing her only poetry collection *Ruh Ha'ima (A Perplexed Soul)* in 1969. The poetry collection, which includes most of her poems, is concerned with themes of nature, family, motherhood, and national belonging. This paper aims at contextualizing 'Abd al-Malik's romantic poetry within the Arab romantic tradition and proposes a hypothesis of why she is not included in Arabic literary canon. Her marginalization, I argue, is due to two main reasons: the literary environment in the sixties that encouraged committed literature and the difficulties she faced as a woman because her father did not allow her to continue her education.

General Background

Fluri 'Abd al-Malik draws on a rich romantic Arabic poetry tradition that stretches back to *Mahjar* poetry groups and the Apollo group spanning the Arab world map and including numerous poets from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Tunisia, among others. 'Abd al-Malik's literary project belongs and represents a mature version of Apollo poets' Romanticism. In his chapter titled "Romanticism in Arabic Poetry", Paul Starkey notes that it is not easy to separate the Arabic movement from a universal Romanticism movement.^[2] Considering the cosmopolitan culture of most of the Arab romantic poets, according to the biographies of many, multilingualism, readership of English and French literature, and artistic multi-talents were common traits. These qualities did not solely form pre-romantics such as Khalil Mutran (1872-1949), romantics such as Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi (1899-1955), founder of the Apollo group and periodical, Ibrahim Nagi (1898-1953), Jamila al-'Alayli (1907-1991) or even late romantics such as Nizar Qabbani (1923-1993)^[3], it also shaped the lens through which they perceived the universe and how they expressed it in the form of art.^[4]

Robin Ostle summarizes Romanticism as a poetry convention in the form of five main attitudes, he lists: "(a) the desire not to conform to traditional social norms or institutions; (b) the celebration of scenes of natural beauty and intense emotional identification with such scenes;" (c) glorification of the poetic isolation; (d) "strong sense of the neo-platonic duality of body and soul; (e) [writing] amatory poetry which is ethereal and spiritual rather than

physical.”^[5] Starkey highlights that not all of the attitudes listed by Ostle conform to Arabic Romanticism, as some of these themes go back to pre-Islamic poetry.^[6] However, Ostle’s definition works as a valid reference to understand how *incrementally* different Romanticism was compared to neo-classicism and the later defined genre of committed poetry. In a short interview with the newspaper *Watani*, Fluri ‘Abd al-Malik answers the question about how she sees life: “my perception of life consists of [concepts of] the immortality of the soul and the permanence of good deeds and a journey that converts annihilation into eternity.”^[7] ‘Abd al-Malik, Arts school graduate of Philosophy and Sociology major at the time, lists three romantic concepts as a guiding manifesto for herself.

As a romantic woman poet beginning to publish her refined poems in the early sixties, Fluri ‘Abd al-Malik benefited from Jamila al-‘Alayili’s role in the thirties in establishing a romantic woman poetry tradition. In his chapter about Romanticism in Arabic Poetry, Paul Starkey merely mentions any women poets, except for Nazik al-Mala’ika and Fadwa Tuqan, whose names he includes as poets influenced by romantic poetry. Neglecting the influence of Jamila al-‘Alayili on the Apollo group and Romanticism in general highlights how men dominated the historiography of romantic poetry. In her article “Women and emotional poetry” published in the Apollo periodical’s fifth issue, al-‘Alayili argues that women are more capable of writing romantic poetry than men. Although she uses the word *‘atifi* instead of *romantic*, the poet claims, using her own verses, that women can write romantic poetry, not just as good as men, but better. Al-‘Alayili also employs romantic concepts such as “duality of body and soul”, as she differentiates between “the emotion of the heart and the emotion of the soul.”^[8] The poet adds that “women were alone created as goddesses of feelings.”^[9] However, the article builds on stereotypical gender rules as the masculine has to think and the feminine has to feel, even though al-‘Alayili does not imply inferiority of feelings to thoughts; she sees them as equal parts that constitute existence as an absolute concept.

The significance of such an article lies in how it reclaims romantic poetry for women. Fluri ‘Abd al-Malik wrote extensively about these feminine feelings in the fifth part of her collection, “inspired by Eve”. In her poem *‘Itab li Ummi Hawa’*, ‘Abd al-Malik renders poetic blame for her disobedience to God and moves on to add the difficulties a woman suffers for being a woman as follows:

كل حواء بحظ من حظوظ العيش عائر“

^[10]”قد حسبنا بعض إنسان ... وبعض الظلم ساخر

The poet says: Every Eve has her share of atrocities. We were counted as part humans, and some injustice is just cynical.

A Reading in Forms and Themes

In her poetry collection, Fluri 'Abd al-Malik wrote traditional poetry, i.e., *qasida* 'amudya and free verse, i.e., *shi'r hurr*. She adopted a stanzaic formula in her free verse poems and partitioned many of her traditional poems into three or four-verse stanzas. 'Abd al-Malik was a pianist and she also experimented with the rhythm of the verse, namely with meter. Ahmad Rami (1892-1981), a prominent Egyptian romantic poet who wrote the introduction of 'Abd al-Malik's collection praises her for inventing, "in these meters (*buhur*), new sequences (*maqayies*) that conform to the meter but differ in its *qudud*." [11] The use of the word *qudud* is also musical. It refers to rhyming themes and connotes folkloric songs that were hugely influenced by the Andalusian *muwashshahat* form.

Being creative with the poetic form is a characteristic of the romantic movement since its beginning. Although the members of the Apollo group were not as creative as the *Mahjar* poets, they introduced and challenged several concepts in form and themes. Paul Starkey highlights that the *Apollo* periodical "embraced a number of poetic approaches in terms of form." They published both traditional poetry and "radical experimental verse," [12] as Ahmed Shawki (1870-1932), a prominent neo-classical poet, [13] and Khalil Mutran published side by side with the prominent romantic poets on the pages of *Apollo*. The notion of form inclusivity in the Apollo group can be seen in two ways. Firstly, they were welcoming to publish for any poet who accepted their trials for "revitalization of contemporary Arabic poetry". [14] Secondly, they felt the need of approval from the *old school*, as Ahmed Shawki published and Abbas al-Aqqad co-edited their first volume, an approval that will be quickly retrieved. These reasons are not very far from Fluri 'Abd al-Malik writing and publishing her poetry in the sixties, which is an idea that will be revisited later in this paper.

It is also difficult to deny the influence of the free verse rising poetry convention on 'Abd al-Malik. Experimenting with rhyme *qafya* is recurrent in 'Abd al-Malik's poetry, as she alternates the rhyme following a stanzaic formula, where the rhyme is the same in each three or four verses as in her poem *thawrat nafs* ("Self's Anger"). In other cases, she alternates the rhyme within the same stanza, as in her translation of Charles Kingsley's (1819-1875) "Youth and Age", where she flawlessly adopts the same rhyme scheme of Kingsley. She translates each line into two verses as follows:

[1] عتزل والزم رحاب الدار واستسلم هناك

بين واه وقعيد هذه العمر وشابا

ولعل الله يهدي للقا وجه هناك

[15] "!!كنت قد أحببته حين الوري كان شابا

Which is as follows in Kingsley's poem:

“Then hie back in the thy hame, lad, –the maimed and sick among:

Thank God! If then you find one face you loved when you were young.”^[16]

Besides her traditional poetry and stanzaic form free verse, ‘Abd al-Malik made an innovative formula for her poem *yaqulun* (They say). She organizes the poem into the printed pages as three pages, writing the right hemistichs *shatr* to be *what they say* in only two lines. Then, the rest of the page is made of only left hemistichs of her reply in a first-person narrative. The pages’ length also differs according to the tone; the first page is introductory to her position compared to her enemies. The second page comes longer and in a conversational tone, while the third and last page comes shorter and in a determined tone. ^[17]

‘Abd al-Malik dedicates the third and fourth parts in her poetry collection to be “inspired by Nature” and “inspired by Mansura”. In these two parts, she celebrates the beauty of nature, emotionally identifies with nature, and centralizes her eternal mystical soul against limited physical existence. She writes separate poems for the spring, flowers in her garden, the sea, the Mansura Nile River, and her abandoned house back in Mansura. *Zahrati al Bayda’* My White Flower describes her peaceful garden and her longing for the perfect white flower. In her search, she humanizes the flower, identifies with it and become oneself all together, the calm talks of the flowers enslave her, and the enchantment of the gardens obliterates her existence:

وسحر الروض ينسيني وجودي

“حديث الزهر يسبيني بهمس”^[18]

When she finds the flower, she continues the personification extended image and talks to the flower about what they share together: “I see amiability between me and you, no wonder I named my birthday after you. And I notice in your whiteness what resembles my spirit’s purity towards... promises.”^[19] ‘Abd al-Malik employs whiteness as a metaphor for purity. Side by side to the verses, the poet paints two petals of white lilies, a flower known for its single petals.

The Old School Attacking Romantic Poetry

In her poetry collection *Ruh Ha’ima* published in 1969, Fluri ‘Abd al-Malik dates her first published poem to spring 1960, hence dating her public literary activity to the sixties. Romantic poetry was the target of scathing attacks from prominent critics and authors since the short-lived Apollo periodical. In his editorial contribution to the first volume of the Apollo periodical, Abbas al-Aqqad criticized naming it “Apollo”: “Even before the west, Arabs have known a God for arts and literature, they named him ‘*Utared* [...] I wish for the founders of this periodical to change its name.”^[20] Naming their group and periodical Apollo was a meaningful notion of how these poets were embracing their cosmopolitan heritage. Apollo, as a signifier, signified “sought links with the classical civilization of the west, [and showed that the group] adopted a forcefully cosmopolitan approach to contemporary writing and art”.^[21] Taha Hussein (1899-1973), as a founding father to the literary institution, was part of the rhetoric attacking romantic

poetry. In 1934, Hussein published his article *fi al-Shi'ar: Wara' al-Ghamam/ Doctor Ibrahim Nagi*, reviewing the then published Nagi's poetry collection. Hussein overlooks the aesthetics of romantic poetry and focuses on fatal linguistic errors, as he sees it. Hussein also refers to a previous article about *al-muhandis* (the engineer) referring to Ali Mahmud Taha (1901-1949), claiming that both authors are not capable literary figures as they belong to other professions. The reviewer provides a close reading that stops at certain verses claiming that these poetic imageries are "familiar" and "full" of linguistic errors.[\[22\]](#)

After the death of both Hussein and Nagi, Salih Gawdat, a comrade of Nagi and a romantic poet, published in 1977 Nagi's reply in a letter addressed to Hussein. The letter refutes each linguistic error that Hussein commented on and claims novelty to his poetic images; it seems that only Hussein was able to voice his authoritarian opinion and Nagi's reply was not published at the time.[\[23\]](#) Nagi's tone in the letter is generally sorrowful demanding the approval of Hussein about the poet's abilities. Nagi comments on Hussein favoring Taha over him for not being so romantic and less musical, Nagi provides a powerful statement against "mighty *Jabbar* poet" that Hussein requires saying: "this era requires the mighty poets, but our poetry? It is soft, literature of weeping and weakness."[\[24\]](#) Then, he illustrates canonized world literature works that celebrate similar themes to contest Hussein.[\[25\]](#)

The Sixties and Committed Poetry Euphoria

The literary equation shifted gradually towards "committed literature" after the second world war, influenced by major national events such as the Arab's defeat in Palestine in 1948 and the Free Officer's revolution in 1952, till it became a dominant literary genre in the sixties. In his chapter titled "The recoil from romanticism", Muhamad Mustafa Badawi describes the rise of committed literature against romantic poetry. This case is clear in the coining of the term committed poetry. Badawi claims that, among other reasons, the "harsh political and social realities" after the second world war pushed the literary environment towards "commitment". Romanticism used to be labeled as "escapist, immature, wanting in reality, as devoid of a hard core of sense, as too vague and lacking precision."[\[26\]](#) Along with the rise of nationalist rhetoric in the fifties and the sixties, committed literature was celebrated, highlighting what is collective rather than personal. On the other hand, "Arabic romantic poetry [centralizes] the individual rather than society."[\[27\]](#) The shift that overlooked other genres of literature, including romantic poetry, was led by a generation of Marxist authors and critics who dominated the literary scene. For example, Louis 'Awad's interpretation of T. S. Elliot's poetry, "in which he put forward a clearly Marxist interpretation of literature inspired by certain Marxist English literary critics."[\[28\]](#) 'Awad published his influential articles in the "finest cultural periodical" of Taha Hussein, *al Katib al Misri* (1945-1948). The rise of committed literature was accompanied by the

continuous attack on Romanticism. In the Egyptian periodical *al-Thaqafa*, Mufid al-Shubashi wrote in 1951, dismissing “the whole of ‘romantic’ literature as ‘adolescent’” [29]

According to Badawi, the term itself “commitment” *iltizam* was coined following the definition of Jean-Paul Sartre’s “engagement”. Commitment as a new term was used to praise literature which delivered “a message” for social change. Taha Hussein provided “convincing and eloquent refutation of ‘commitment’ in his debate with Ra’if Khuri in Beirut 1955. [30] Sartre himself excluded poetry from his definition of commitment; however, in the second issue of *al Adab*, a periodical that manifested and celebrated committed literature, Anwar al-Ma’addawi, member of the editorial board of *al Adab*, “finds that Sartre is not committed enough”. Later in 1968, Sartre’s views were rechallenged by committed poet Abd al-Wahhab Al-Bayati (1926-1999), who wrote: “I disagree with Sartre [...] the poet is immersed up to his ears in the chaos and welter of this world and of the revolution of man.” [31]

Fluri ‘Abd al-Malik wrote and recited her poetry in that literary environment that dismissed any other genre of Arabic poetry for the sake of the sacred committed poetry which is canonized and celebrated. ‘Abd al-Malik recited her poems on several poetry occasions, including three annual National poetry ceremonies *mahragan al shi’r*, in 1963, 66, and 68. For which ceremonies, she recited three of her “nationally inspired” poems, from the final part of her poetry collection. *Ruh Ha’ima* comes in six parts and ‘Abd al-Malik puts her national poems as the final part, which indicates how marginal her national poems were compared to her romantic poetry. Themes of the other five parts come as Reflections, then four parts “inspired” by Family, Nature, Mansura, and Eve. There are only six poems that deal with national themes among seventy poems. Most of her literary production can be categorized as romantic poetry. Thus, for ‘Abd al-Malik to choose to recite three national poems in poetry occasions can be read as a result of a coercing literary environment that celebrates committed poetry.

Are ‘Abd al-Malik’s national poems committed poetry? I argue that although they are thematically related to committed literature, they can be read as romantic poems, which belong to ‘Abd al-Malik’s romantic literary project. In her poem *ghadan naltaqi* (Tomorrow, we will meet once more), ‘Abd al-Malik tells the story of a mother who lost her son in the Nakba of Palestine in 1948. The poem does not criticize certain political conditions or call for reform or social change, which are the main purposes of committed poetry. Instead, the poem paints a picture of a traditional mother-son relationship with mother devotion and sorrow over her son. The narrator keeps painting scenes of sad nature over her lost son as follows:

مضت السنون البائسات ثقيلة

والحزن يذوي نضرتي وقوايا

وأنا وليلاتي العليلات السكرى

[32] "وصدى يردد في الظلام دعايا

The poet says: My heavy miserable years past slowly when sadness weakens my youthfulness and strength. Staying in my bland drunken nights, and my prayer echoes in the darkness. 'Abd al-Malik keeps using nature metaphors to describe her sadness over the lost son; she uses the term *nadara* as a metaphor for her youthfulness which bales away like a tree leaf. 'Abd al-Malik fails in portraying this "mighty" poet that Taha Hussein refers to in his article. However, her national poems come as sorrowful and weepy, to use the terms used by Nagi to describe himself as a romantic poet. At the end of the poem, 'Abd al-Malik resorts to her garden escaping as follows:

..سأعود للبيت الحبيب، لكرمتي

"لجنى غصوني في سفوح ربايا

The poet says: I will return to my lovely home, to my vine, to the heavens of my branches, at the feet of my knoll. The escapism from the social reality to intensely identify with natural beauty is a trope of Romanticism and not of committed poetry. Even if the goal of the poem is to raise awareness for the Palestinian tragedy, 'Abd al-Malik does not conform to how these committed poets saw the nation. She portrays this nation from her romantic lens as a mother, and as an escapee poet. Another poem that resembles the poet's romantic feeling within the national context is her poem "Heart's feelings in the Sad Spring", in which she vividly portrays scenes of sad nature. According to her collection, this poem was written before the Naksa defeat in 1967, as she wrote it in 1966. However, she recited it in the national poetry convention in 1968 –since the 1967 convention had been canceled.[33]

Dealing with small scale Patriarchy

In his review of 'Abd al-Malik's poetry collection, Niqula Yusif reports that the poet started writing *zagal* and other poetry since she was fourteen years old.[34] Why did she not write poetry professionally or publish it until she was older than thirty-five years old? 'Abd al-Malik added a note before her poem "a Tribute to College of Arts", saying that she always dreamt of completing her education, but her dad urged her to educate herself at home.[35] A dream that did not come true until her marriage in 1950 and moving to Alexandria with her cousin and husband, and her father's death in 1958. She got enrolled in the Department of Philosophy and Sociology in the College of Arts at Alexandria in 1965 when she was forty years old and after having her children. She finally graduated and published her poetry collection in 1969, after around eight years of publishing individual poems in literary periodicals. The father's refusal to complete her education was a continuation of parental practice he used to raise his daughter. Working as a doctor, he took her to live with him away from her beloved hometown, Mansura. After traveling around Egypt, he enrolled her in a boarding secondary school in Cairo, Kulliyyat

al-Banat. Fluri 'Abd al-Malik's father used his power to domesticize and seclude his daughter, which delayed her literary prospects. Niqula Yusif adds that her father refused to get her enrolled in college, so that "she would learn the domestic chores that prepare the girl for a satisfactory married life."[\[36\]](#)

Decades before Fluri 'Abd al-Malik struggled to complete her education and pursue her literary project, Jamila al-'Alayli, in the same city, as she mentions in her testimony, faced a similar parental refusal to complete her education, read or write creatively. Al-'Alayli was "forced" by her family to be taught domestic affairs instead of general education. Mayy Ziada (1886-1941), a feminist and prominent literary figure, greatly influenced al-'Alayli. She read Ziada's articles by accident and then started to send her the poems she wrote until Ziada invited her to the famous literary salon that she held at her house. Ziada, alongside Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi, adopted the talent of al-'Alayli.[\[37\]](#)

'Abd al-Malik, however, did not find a similar hosting environment in the sixties. In contrast, al-'Alayli found support in the Apollo group and the guidance Mayy Ziada. Writing and publishing romantic poetry in the sixties, 'Abd al-Malik was part of a fading cultural movement in Alexandria. She was a member of *Atelier al-Iskandariyya* and *Gam'iyyat nashr al-Thaqafa*. Members of both organizations at the time were a generation older than 'Abd al-Malik, which shows that she did not exactly belong, in literary terms, to her age group.[\[38\]](#) Additionally, both organizations did not promote specific literary conventions, as they were concerned with supporting the publication of the literary production of their members.

Conclusion

Fluri 'Abd al-Malik represented a short-lived continuity of romantic poetry benefiting from the rich Arabic Romanticism and women poets such as Jamila al-'Alayli who established women's romantic poetry tradition. 'Abd al-Malik was inventive using forms and themes of Arabic romantic poetry. The romantic convention in poetry was attacked by the old school critics such as Taha Hussein and Abbass al Aqqad. However, this attack shifted to complete dismissal in the fifties and sixties. As a result of the literary environment in the sixties, 'Abd al-Malik published and recited national poems that resembled her romantic views and did not conform to committed poetry attitudes. The patriarchal practices of the woman poet's father delayed her literary prospects.

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[1] I would like to thank Dr. Dina Heshmat for her generous help, insightful comments, and detailed feedback throughout this research journey.

[2] Starkey, Paul. "Romanticism in Arabic Poetry", *Modern Arabic Literature*. Edinburgh University Press. 2006. pp. 60-78.

[3] The classification of the romantic movement into pre-romantics, romantics and late romantics is Paul Starkey's.

[4] Badawi, M. M. "The Recoil From Romanticism", in *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*. Cambridge University Press. 1975. pp. 204-260.

[5] Qtd. in Starkey, Paul. p. 60.

[6] Starkey, Paul. p. 60.

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[12] Starkey, Paul. p. 68.

[13] Ahmed Shawki wrote a welcoming tribute to the periodical before his death in 1932.

[14] Starkey, Paul. p. 68.

[15] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 23.

[16] Warner, C.D. et al., comp. *The library of the world's Best Literature*. An Anthology in Thirty Volumes. 1917.

[17] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 16-18.

[18] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 107.

[19] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 111.

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[21] Starkey, Paul. p. 67.

[22] طه حسين. "في الشعر: وراء الغمام/ الدكتور إبراهيم ناجي". نظرية الشعر: 4- مرحلة مجلة أبولو. القسم الثاني. تحرير محمد كامل الخطيب. منشورات وزارة الثقافة السورية. 1966. ص 432-444.

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[25] صالح جودت. ص 445-452

[26] Badawi, M. M. p. 204.

[27] Badawi, M. M. p. 204.

[28] Badawi, M. M. p. 206.

[29] Badawi, M. M. p. 207.

[30] Badawi, M. M. p. 209.

[31] Qtd in Badawi, M. M. p. 208.

[32] فلوري عبد الملك. ص. 179

[33] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 182-186

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[35] فلوري عبد الملك. ص 40

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