



Sufism in the feminist poem "Mystical Lilies of the Messenger" by Nazik al-Malaika is an example

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to shed light on the poem "Sufi Lilies for the Prophet" by Nazik Al-Malaika, as Sufism in women's poetry represents an intersection between Sufi spirituality and the female experience in poetic expression. The woman uses Sufi symbols to embody her personal and existential experience while reformulating a feminine vision of existence. In Sufism, woman is not merely a subject but an active and distinctive element. Through her Sufi poetry, the woman expressed a unique spiritual symbolism. In this study, we aim to explore feminine Sufism as a feminine vision of existence that transcends the traditional Sufi view, moving beyond it to a spiritual and social perspective.

Keywords: *Sufism, Arabic poem, poetry, modernity, feminism, woman's experience, poet, Nazik Al-Malaika.*

Le soufisme dans le poème féministe « Les lys mystiques du messager » de Nazik al-Malaika en est un exemple.

Résumé :

Cet article vise à éclairer le poème « Lys soufis pour le Prophète » de Nazik Al-Malaika, dans lequel le soufisme, au sein de la poésie féminine, représente un point de rencontre entre la spiritualité soufie et l'expérience féminine exprimée en poésie. La poétesse utilise les symboles soufis pour incarner son expérience

personnelle et existentielle, tout en reformulant une vision féminine de l'existence. Dans le soufisme, la femme n'est pas un simple sujet, mais un élément actif et distinctif. À travers sa poésie soufie, elle exprime un symbolisme spirituel unique. Cette étude explore le soufisme féminin comme une vision de l'existence qui transcende la conception soufie traditionnelle, pour s'inscrire dans une perspective spirituelle et sociale.

Mots-clés : *Soufisme, poème arabe, poésie, modernité, féminisme, expérience féminine, poétesse, Nazik Al-Malaika.*



Introduction:

Anyone who examines our contemporary Arabic poetry will find a wide presence of Sufism, including among women poets. Their focus has been on the purely spiritual aspect that uplifts the Arab character—or rather, the feminine character. Sufism represented the memory of these women as well as their struggle within a society full of challenges. Thus, Sufi poetry became their refuge, the window through which divine love of the spirit is conveyed. Through it, the woman was guided toward her civilizational path, finding in Sufi themes a rich material full of symbolic and spiritually Islamic meanings. This is what we observed in the works of the Iraqi poet Nazik Al-Malaika, who made poetry a refuge for her dreams and pains. She is known for her new ideas and challenges, and what caught our attention in her poems is that they are filled with symbols and meanings, especially the symbolic aspect referring to the Holy Qur'an and Islamic culture. From here, we can begin with the following question: How did Sufism appear in the poetry of Nazik Al-Malaika?

1- Definition of Sufism:

1.1. Linguistically:

It is stated in *Lisan al-Arab*: “(Sawafa) – wool is for sheep and the like, and wool for sheep is like hair for goats and fur for camels; its plural is aswaf.”¹

And in *Maqayis al-Lugha* by Ibn Faris: “Sawafa refers to the known wool, and it is said ‘a woolly ram’ (kabsh aswaf).”²

1.2. Terminologically:

It is said: "Sufism is the science of truth, a science through which one knows how the perfection of human beings ascends in their degrees of happiness, and the conditions that befall them in their stages, according to human capacity."

"It is the science of purifying the soul from vile morals and cleansing the heart of base diseases."³

Sufism has concerned itself with those emotions that transcend the poet and relate to God Almighty and His noble Messenger ﷺ. Over time, it became necessary for the poet to adopt Sufism as an outlet for the anxieties of the human soul, through which he poured into the text pure emotions and spiritualities almost detached from worldly dealings. These poems, in their aesthetic nature, remained grounded in the author's social environment and psychological state, leading the recipient to offer various interpretations of this kind of poetry.

2- Sufism in Feminine Poetry:

Contemporary Sufi women poets have expressed, through their poems, a renewed spiritual and human experience, employing Sufi symbols to embody their reflections on life, while adding their distinctive feminine touch that reflects the woman's experience in the realm of Sufism.

Modern feminine Sufism is not necessarily traditional Sufism, yet their works carry spiritual, contemplative, and philosophical dimensions.

The woman has played a unique and distinguished role through her Sufi experience, embodying divine love.



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Moreover, contemporary Sufi women poets reveal poetic experiences that combine Sufi spirituality with human and existential concerns, using Sufi symbols to express the self and the universe. This direction seeks to liberate the literary text in general from any ordinary communicative function such as that performed by language in its familiar daily use. Among the contemporary female voices that have presented poems with a Sufi character, we find:

2.1. Amal Al-Sahlawi:

“She is an Emirati poet who was born and raised in the Emirate of Sharjah. She writes both classical Arabic poetry and free verse. She studied Arabic literature at the University of Sharjah. She has several works, the most famous of which is the book *‘I Had to Postpone You’*.”

She says:

If I had known it would be ... the last time,

I would not have closed my eyes to look away.

If I had known it would be the last time,

I would have avenged absence by taking thousands of pictures.

If I had known it would be the last time,

Neither words nor love nor sleepless nights would have sufficed.

If I had known it would be the last time.⁴

2.2. Qamar Sabri Al-Jassim:

“She is a Syrian poet, holding a Bachelor’s degree in Economics from the University of Damascus. She is a member of the Arab Writers Union and the World Union of

Culture and Literature. She is both a poet and a media figure, and she says:"

We have become strangers,
And the face of the road knows
How often we kissed it before.
Once, we were friends,
From your rib the jasmine.
We have become strangers,
And the water gathers us on two shores.⁵

2.3. Amani Al-Zuaibi:

"She is a Tunisian poet who holds a Ph.D. in Contemporary Philosophy. She has published several works, the most notable of which is 'A Rhyme for the Last of Miracles'. She has also translated some books and novels. She says:"

I wrote poetry from parts of me and parts of me,
And part of poetry is written by the light.
A star blossomed in the chant of the soul,
And the sky leaned upon the earth.
A river called out through the ribs of the earth,
And the morning became the river's breath of air.
As if the funerals of rivers were pregnant
With the gazelle of light since the tears had fasted. ⁶

2.4. Rawda Al-Haj:

"She is a Sudanese poet, born in eastern Sudan. She won the title '*Poetess of Souk Okaz*' in 2005 and works as a broadcaster at Sudan Radio. She says:"

Today, let us agree —
It makes no difference to you whether we are exiled or you depart.



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It makes no difference to you if we sacrifice like this —
falsely —
And if I alone have wept.
I have left my loved ones behind,
While you have lovers and a home.
I have abandoned my city,
And to you, my other half, I came.
I have withdrawn from people,
From roads, and from the world.
So what have you spent to make me stay?
And what have you gained? ⁷

3- Sufism in the Poetry of Nazik Al-Malaika:

When life became exhausting in the modern era, “it was necessary for the poets of this age to search for moments of revelation and contemplation beyond the limits of time and space, away from the draining material existence; thus, they adopted Sufism during this period.”⁸

She emphasized that the literary essence of her poetry lies in the styles and techniques that distinguish her from others.

On this basis, Sufism became the central focus of a group of contemporary women poets, foremost among them **Nazik Al-Malaika**, who adopted Sufi poetics in her verses.

Her Sufi experience emerged as a result of her suffering and deep contemplation of existence, which is manifested in her poem “*Sufi Lilies for the Prophet*”.

It also appears in her poem “*Migration to God*”, where she says: ⁹

I knew You in the bewilderment of my devotion and in the
heaps of carnations,
I knew You in the greenness of the myrtle,

I knew You in the certainty of death and the graves,
I knew You in the farmer scattering seeds into the soil,
And the hoe blossoms in his hands.
I knew You in a child with dark eyes,
And an old man with withered cheeks,
I knew You in a Sufi, rich in heart and feeling.

4- Excerpt from the Poem "Sufi Lilies for the Prophet":¹⁰

A beautiful bird came to me
And landed beside me,
Pouring serenity upon my longing,
Sprinkling my eyelashes
With innocence, tenderness, and gentleness.
I said, "O my bird! O emerald one!
From where have you come?
Which star bestowed upon you its softness?
O scent of orange, O fragrance of jasmine,
What is your sweet name?"
He said, "Ahmad."
And the air filled with the fragrance of the Israa,
The taste of the Qur'an,
And above the faintness of the sea
Spread a light from the name *Ahmad*.

5- Interpretation of the Poem:

The poem "Sufi Lilies for the Prophet" represents Nazik Al-Malaika's Sufi experience—an experience unique in women's literature as a whole. Nazik Al-Malaika says in her collection "The Sea Changes Its Colors":

"I was born in Baghdad in 1923 and was the eldest of my



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siblings. I graduated from secondary school in 1939 and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1944. I learned several languages, including English and French. Since 1941, I have been passionately devoted to writing poetry, and in 1947 my first collection was published, which I titled '*Lover of the Night.*' In 1949, my second collection '*Splinters and Ashes*' was published in Baghdad. Later, I published '*The Depth of the Wave*' in 1957 and my first book on literary criticism in 1962, followed by '*The Small Tree of Life*' in 1978." ¹¹

"Nazik Al-Malaika passed away in 2007 in Cairo." ¹²

The poem "*Sufi Lilies for the Prophet*" constitutes a poetic experience that is rare and profound, as it presents a woman engaging in a Sufi philosophical experience in praise of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This gives her text aesthetic depth. Moreover, "the readable text is one that we recognize, understand, and consume submissively as readers, while the writable text requires the reader's active cooperation, demanding participation in the production and writing of the text." ¹³

This is what draws us to Nazik Al-Malaika's poetry – the dynamic relationship it establishes between the text and the reader. The experience derives its subjects through social behavior or the written text itself, which in turn transfers it from individual subjectivity to collective objectivity. This is what contemporary critics strive for.

The poet begins her poem with a new tone unfamiliar in earlier prophetic praises, saying:

The sea is a fainting of a melody of love, the sea is blueness,

The sea is a child with flowing hair.

Here, the poet expresses her profound spiritual experience and her connection to the Prophet ﷺ, reflecting a unique emotional experience distinct from traditional forms of praise. This reinforces a central idea: texts change.

“The value that readers attribute to a text is neither final nor absolute, but constantly subject to change and modification according to the shifting literary standards, measures of value, and cultures. Each generation reads within a different horizon according to the reader’s surrounding conditions.”¹⁴

Such transformation can only be achieved through the reader, who must leave his own imprint, for the reader has the right to participate in the production of meaning he exists before meaning is constructed.

The poet yearns for the Prophet ﷺ, and the reader senses the resonance of that deep love. She portrays that love through both symbolism and confession, blending poetic, narrative, and descriptive elements in her poem.

This invites the reader to interpret these symbols: what does the poet mean by *the scent of orange*, *the fragrance of jasmine*, or *the light of the sea*? Perhaps they are glimpses of Prophethood itself.

Moreover, “the act of interpretation itself reveals a deep determination to overcome distance and cultural separation, as it also reveals an effort to make the reader an equivalent to a text that has become foreign by integrating its meaning into present understanding, which man can derive from within himself.”¹⁵

Language, then, is fundamental to the act of understanding, leading the reader toward the triad of *understanding, interpretation, and application*.



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The poem represents a clear Sufi experience within a distinctly feminine framework, where the poet views the Prophet ﷺ as a symbol of her spiritual experience and deep conviction.

The poet says:

I knew You in the bewilderment of my devotion, and in my heaps of carnations.

This reveals her profound connection to him and establishes a relationship between the literary work and the reader.

Jauss states:

"The relationship between the work and the reader reveals, in fact, two aspects aesthetic and historical. The reception that a work receives from its first readers implies an aesthetic value judgment, then refers it to other works previously read. This initial, pure perception of the work can then evolve and refine itself from generation to generation, forming throughout history a continuous chain of successive receptions." ¹⁶

Thus, meaning becomes a structure created by reception, through the absence of prior concepts or references and the transcendence of the singular linguistic given. The reader then comes, with their operational concepts, to transform the textual structure into a dialogic relationship.

Jauss also emphasizes the importance of interaction between text and reader:

"Interaction leads to exchange between authors, works, and readers between the artistic experiences of the present and the past." ¹⁷

The poet's social context produced a fusion of Sufi poetry that astonished readers with its dynamism, influencing their horizons so that reading became an active

and aesthetically rich act. It begins with the poet's intention in constructing a world for the reader and continues through the reader's active participation in giving life to that poetic world. Sufi poetry has possessed immense power in captivating the reader's emotions through the passageways of language.

This allows the reader to perceive the difference between traditional praise poetry and the poet's work. Her poem raises many philosophical and existential questions such as the search for meaning and existence. She says:

*A beautiful bird came to me,
And absorbed my heart.*

Then, in her confusion before life and death, she says:
From where have you come?

This distinguishes her poetry from the traditional praise we have long known.

The poet also employs a poetic language rich with symbols and imagery that express her emotional and spiritual state such as the word "lilies", symbolizing purity and beauty, representing the Prophet ﷺ as the embodiment of truth and certainty.

Language is the first element that opens up new horizons of appreciation for readers, evolving through each phase of reading. The poet's work reveals a semantic field filled with human emotions. She found, through her Sufi poetry, an audience that loved to listen to her words.

In her poem, *innocence, the scent of orange, jasmine, and the light of the sea* all converge as emanations of prophethood. The reader discovers this through the act of reading, which becomes a form of dialogic participation between text and reader an active contribution to the creation of meaning. The



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world created by the text is incomplete; it naturally requires the reader's interaction to achieve wholeness.

"Reading is an attempt to bridge the gap between past and present. When we read in the present, we cannot avoid the fixed concepts of our culture; however, within this historical framework, we can strive for an understanding that ultimately sheds new light on an old text." ¹⁸

Thus, the poem "*Sufi Lilies for the Prophet*" differs from traditional praise poems that focus on the outward attributes of the Prophet ﷺ. The poet delves instead into the spiritual and emotional dimensions, making it a poem of deep human essence rather than mere external praise. Furthermore, words themselves carry *unspoken meanings*, which opens the way for discourse analysis making it a means to uncover the hidden layers of the text in the search for the mechanisms of meaning production, leading to the integration of discourse analysis with the science of semiotics.¹⁹

Thus, reading is an interaction between the reader and the text, and this is a fundamental condition for the aesthetic value of meaning.

Among the **Sufi symbols** that appear in the poem are:

Lilies: They symbolize purity and spiritual clarity, representing a natural image that expresses inner cleanliness and spiritual transparency.

Roses and carnations: In Sufi poetry, the rose symbolizes divine love. In this poem, it expresses the spiritual fragrance that binds the poet to the Prophet ﷺ.

Astonishment and contemplation: These are mystical emotions that express the loss of self and the annihilation of the ego in the presence of the Beloved.

Through these symbols and philosophical concepts, the reader can **reconstruct the poem** through his interaction with it. The term *configuration* appears frequently in the writings of **Paul Ricœur**, “as one of the methodological tools used by the linguistics of the text to justify its structure and logic. Understanding a story in light of this linguistics does not mean examining the plot units separately but rather in their coherence and consistency, upon which the story is built... Therefore, configuration has a double meaning: it is linked to the act of producing the plot as well as to the act of re-producing it by the reader a process known as reconfiguration.”²⁰

Furthermore, the **contemporary Sufi text** is a spiritual discourse through which **Nazik Al-Malaika** transcended sensual expressions into a deep spiritual dimension characterized by its unique language and symbols. These, in turn, require the reader to perceive their aesthetics in order to understand them properly. It is a text that expresses a **spiritual state**, enabling the reader to engage with its symbols and meanings, which move between the apparent and the hidden, life and death, divinity and love.

The poet used the **Sufi text as a rich creative source**, through which she portrayed her vision of existence and humanity while preserving the intellectual dimensions required by the spirit of the age and the concerns of modern man. Reading the contemporary Sufi text therefore requires **special awareness**, as it carries codes stretching back to earlier eras. It remains an **interpretive project** that needs a new reader to give it life, being a creative synthesis between the deep Sufi heritage and the spiritual and intellectual concerns that continually occupy society.



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Hence, the Sufi text is a **fabric of white space** that the reader must fill in a process that raises several questions invoked through engaging with the Sufi poem. We find ourselves before texts the reader did not expect to encounter, which arouses curiosity and motivates one to approach such works. Sufi poetic texts, since ancient times, have opened wide horizons of reading and interpretation because of their “whiteness” those unspoken spaces that call for completion. This element confronts the reader with many questions, making reading itself an active process that leads the reader toward a specific meaning. This is precisely what we aimed to clarify in these brief pages.

Thus, the poem “*Sufi Lilies for the Prophet*” is a **philosophical Sufi work**, unlike traditional classical poems. It expresses the poet’s deep spiritual experience with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in a uniquely poetic style.

Conclusion:

Through this exploration of feminine Sufism, we have reached the following conclusions:

- For women, Sufism is a vision of divine love based on pure love and union with God.
- In feminist literature, Sufi discourse holds a strong presence with its symbolic and philosophical dimensions.
- Feminine Sufism seeks to present a contemporary formulation that transcends traditional Sufism.

- Sufism in feminist literature constitutes a distinctive spiritual space through which women have been able to affirm their existence.
- The female poet, in her Sufi experience, combines poetic expression with spirituality.
- The poem “Sufi Lilies for the Prophet” is a Sufi and philosophical poetic work expressing a deep emotional and spiritual connection between the poet and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).
- This poem is distinguished by innovation in the style of feminine praise poetry through symbolic language and philosophical reflections that mirror Nazik Al-Malaika’s poetic experience.
- Nazik Al-Malaika expressed a renewed spiritual and human experience using Sufi symbols.

Footnotes:

¹ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Dar Sader, Beirut, Lebanon, 1997, Vol. (10).

² Ibn Faris, *Maqayis al-Lugha*, edited by Abdel Salam Haroun, Dar Al-Fikr, 1979.

³ Muhammad Al-Tunji, *Al-Mujam Al-Mufasssal fi Al-Adab*, Dar Al-Kutub Al-‘Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, Vol. 2, 1999, p. 257.

⁴ Alarabiya, 20-03-2024.

⁵ Afaq Horra Foundation, Afaqhorra.com, Editor-in-Chief: Muhammad Salha, Managing Editor: Muhammad Fathi Al-Miqdad.

⁶ Fargad Creative Magazine, Interview with Randa Abu Hara, November 2023.

⁷ Alarabiya, 20-03-2024.



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- ⁸ The Sufi Experience: A Study in Contemporary Arabic Poetics, University of Al-Qadisiyah, 18-09-2021.
- ⁹ Nazik Al-Malaika, *The Sea Changes Its Colors*, General Authority for Cultural Palaces, Cairo, 1998, p. 85.
- ¹⁰ Nazik Al-Malaika, *The Sea Changes Its Colors*, p. 73.
- ¹¹ Nazik Al-Malaika, *The Same Collection*, pp. 5–8.
- ¹² Youssef Atta Al-Turki, *Nazik Al-Malaika: Her Life and Poetry*, Dar Al-Ahliya for Publishing and Distribution, Amman, 2011, p. 10.
- ¹³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Poetics*, translated by Chokri Al-Mabkhout, Dar Toubkal, Casablanca, 1st ed., 1987, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ Nadia Khamis, *Al-Hikam Al-Ataiyya: A Reading in Commentaries and Teaching Mechanisms*, Alam Al-Kutub Al-Hadith, Jordan, 2022, p. 53.
- ¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, translated by Mundher Al-Ayashi, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jadeed Al-Muttaheda, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2005, p. 34.
- ¹⁶ Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception: Toward a New Interpretation of the Literary Text*, translated by Rachid Benhadou, Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, 1st ed., 2004, p. 56.
- ¹⁷ Previous reference, p. 132.
- ¹⁸ Hassan Al-Banna Ezzeddine, *Classical Arabic Poetry: Within the Framework of Reception Theory and Orality (Dhu Al-Rumma as a Model)*, Ain Center for Human and Social Studies and Research, 1st ed 2001, p. 09.
- ¹⁹ Muhammad Aleem, *Mada Al-Nass: The Horizon of Interpretation*, Dar Kunuz Al-Ma‘rifa, Amman, 1st ed., 2019, p. 59.
- ²⁰ Muhammad Aleem, Same reference, p. 17.

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