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Poetry and the Arab Spring

By

George Simon

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University New York.

2015

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies  
in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

# Poetry and the Arab Spring

By: George Simon

Advisor; Prof. Christopher Stone

**Abstract:** In 2010-11 the world saw the rise of the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings across the Arab world. These uprisings were attempts by the Arab peoples to overthrow their governments and bring freedom and change to their societies in order to live in dignity and grace. These populist uprisings produced powerful poetry that of cuses on the corruption of Arab governments and the rampant economic social problems. In the following work I have chosen a number of Arabic poems which I translated and analyzed in order to see the relationship that exists between the rise of the Arab Spring, and the poetry produced by it.

IN DEDICATION TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER  
YOU TAUGHT ME TO BE A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD  
EVEN BEFORE I KNEW WHAT THAT MEANT

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## Introduction

The winter of 2010-11 marked the beginning of major cultural and social uprisings across the Arab World. These uprisings affected nearly all aspects of life in certain Arab countries. In this paper I will focus on the role that Arabic poetry played in these uprisings. I will explore how Arabic poetry was given a center stage and audience across the Arab world in the months and years following the rise of the Arab Spring, and also how the nature of Arabic poetry was affected by the Arab Spring. In studying the role Arabic poetry played in these revolutions, I will also consider both linguistic and cultural effects that the Arab Spring had on Arabic poetry and what the future holds for political Arabic poetry.

I will first explore a short and concise history of Arabic poetry, including the pre-Arab Spring notions of poetry in order to see how it was changed in subsequent poems that we will consider later. The Arabs from the first written accounts of their histories were renowned for their language. According to the traditional Islamic histories, the centuries and period immediately before the Islamic revelations is known as the “jahiliya” or the “time of ignorance.” In pre-Islamic Arabia, there were great competitions between poets in Mecca. These spoken word competitions were not unlike modern rap contests. The pre-Islamic poets were held in the same company and honor as the royalty and elite of Mecca, as they were supposed to have been given a gift, the gift of language. These competitions in pre-Islamic Arabia culminated with the greatest of the poets being given a chance to recite their poems in front of the entire city of Mecca. The importance of pre-Islamic poetry has been described as follows;

“This poetry expressed and preserved the values of the warrior aristocracy most majestically in its full tripartite form, consisting of nasal (erotic or elegiac prelude), rahil (desert journey) and gharad (the goal of the qasida, most often madih, praise of a ruler)” (Stetkevych, XIII.)

Arabic poetry took on many new forms after the coming of Islam. Islamic poetry which began in the 7th century reached a zenith in the middle ages. Much of Arabic poetry was based on royal court life, often based on love and even illicit affairs. Islamic poetry was greatly influenced other cultures absorbed in the Islamic empire. Other important features of Islamic era poetry were the heavy use of romantic imagery along with satire. The golden era of Islam produced a large body of literary criticism mainly focused on religious works, debates, and religious based works of literature and art.

Arabic poetry in the 19th and 20th centuries were heavily focused on nationalism, as the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Arab nationalism that grew out of the end of World War I was clearly represented in much of early modern Arabic poetry. The 21st century saw new developments of Arabic poetry, focusing on both nationalistic and political themes, along with poetry that spoke of love and ideas of romanticism, paving the way for the revolutionary poetry that we will discuss in this work.

Political slogans that were used by protesters early on in the Arab Spring would become precursors to later Arabic political poetry in the form of YouTube videos, televised poetry competitions and other avenues of expression. One particular political chant that was created very early on in the Arab Spring seemed to take on a life of its own. This chant crossed borders and spread like wildfire across the Arab world, a cry of dissidence and revolution, “al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam.” This statement translates simply as, “The people want the fall of the regime.” This was the first unified call of defiance that would be used across much of the Arab world. About the slogan, Rashid Khalidi writes,

“One is struck by the ubiquity wherever Arabic is spoken, from Morocco to Bahrain, of the slogan raised first by the Tunisian revolutionaries and then by their sisters and brothers in Egypt: “Al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam” (The people want the fall of the regime.) Whatever the result, these events are a spectacular confirmation not only of the common aspirations for freedom and dignity of an entire generation of



young Arabs, but of the existence of a common Arab public sphere. Although this owes much to modern media, including satellite TV, it is a mistake to focus excessively on the specifics of the technology.” (Khalidi)

Just as the Arab Spring kindled the spirit and feelings of the Arab youth, it certainly had a great impact upon contemporary poets and Arabic poetry in general. Traditional Arabic poetry follows strict grammatical rules and is most often written in the classical Arabic of the Qur’an called, “Fusha.” Fusha is an Arabic word which means “elegant” or “proper” and this is the modern version of Quranic Arabic used in professional and official capacities. Fusha is the language of Friday sermons and the international Arabic media, and it remains an important language for both historical and cultural reasons.

I would like to mention here that the political slogans that came about in the first days of the Arab uprisings were a very unique mix of both classical Fusha Arabic and colloquial street language. This means that the verbs, nouns, and word choice remained at a very high linguistic register, but the pronunciation of the words themselves were in a colloquial register. Elliot Colla states,

“Consider the most prominent slogan being chanted today by thousands of people in Tahrir Square: “Ish-sha’b/ya-rîd/is-qât/in-ni-zâm.” Rendered into English, it might read, “The People want the regime to fall”—but that would not begin to translate the power this simple and complex couplet-slogan has in its context. There are real poetic reasons why this has emerged as a central slogan. For instance, unlike the more ironic—humorous or bitter—slogans, this one is sincere and states it all perfectly clearly. Likewise, the register of this couplet straddles colloquial Egyptian and standard media Arabic—and it is thus readily understandable to the massive Arab audiences who are watching and listening” (Colla)

One reason that Fusha holds such a high place of prestige in the Arab world is the fact that it is the written language of the Quran and in addition, it was the language of the Islamic empires and the golden age of Islam. Fusha is held in a very high esteem

across the Arab world because it serves as a direct link to ages of grandeur that blossomed across the Arab world.

I spent a long time looking for contemporary Arab poets whose poetry I would use as examples of revolutionary Arabic poetry. There was a great deal of material to choose from; but having compiled a group of five Arab poets hailing from countries in which revolutions began, I feel that the overall ideas and quality of the poetry that was produced from the Arab Spring is truly reflected and represented by these five poets.

The poets that I have chosen are; Hisham El-Jokh, Alaa Alasharee, El General, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Abnudi, and Tamim El-Barghouthi. I chose these poets because they represent a diverse cross section of the Arab world hailing from the nations of Tunisia, Egypt and Palestine. In addition, I feel that their poetry is particularly politically charged, speaking directly to the heart of the political dissidence and social problems that proved to be the spearhead of the Arab Spring. These reasons were behind the social discontent felt by millions of youth across the vast geographical, social, religious, and historical region that is the Arab World. Some of the poems that we will consider have been made into popular songs, and we will discuss this process later at length.

I chose these poets because they have retroactively become mouth-pieces for millions of people across the Arab world who have suffered unimaginable injustices. It was through the medium of poetry that these voices were finally heard, not only by the participants of the Arab Spring, but by the entire world through media outlets like YouTube and television programs. These various media outlets allowed powerful and emotional poems to be translated and uploaded for the entire world to see.

It was in this fashion that the very nature of Arabic poetry began to change, taking on new forms, colors, local flares, dialects and attitudes. Among the various subjects that must be considered when looking at the selected Arabic poems that were written during the days of the uprisings are; social injustice, poverty, government corruption, and an utter lack of upward mobility in Arab society. These were the main motivating factors that caused the youth of the Arab world to rise up in protest against their governments. I believe that the poems that I have selected speak directly to these issues.

## Hisham Al-Jokh - A Eulogy for Arabism

The first poem that I would like to consider in this work is a poem by Egyptian poet Hisham Al-Jokh. Al-Jokh is a very popular poet from southern Egypt. He gained popularity across the Arab world through his appearances on televised poetry contests based mostly out of the Gulf nations of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In doing so, he became a household name across the Arab world.

Being from southern Egypt, the dialect that Al-Jokh speaks is considerably different from the mainstream or more well-known "Cairene" dialect that has been made famous around the Arab world due to the popularity of Egyptian films and songs, though it must be said that there are many many Egyptian films and television series that feature the Sa3iidii or southern Egyptian dialect as well. Al-Jokh has produced some very powerful poetry in the few years following the rise of the Arab Spring. "The Visa" which he presented in 2011 is one of his most famous poems.

This poem speaks to many different ideas. The most important of these ideas is the poet's struggle to make peace with his inner child, who once believed in the love and brotherhood that was supposed to exist between all Arabs. Pan-Arabism is the notion that all Arabs belong to one grand Arab nation. Even though I do not believe that the Arab Spring has been based on ideas of ethnic Pan-Arabism, it is very clear from Al-Jokh's poem that these ideas are still alive in the heart of the poet and his inner conscience. The poet's references to grand ideas of international Arab brotherhood, as we will see later, are used in a satirical and critical manner.

I would like to discuss examples of the poet's attempt to deeply criticize the idea of Pan-Arabism as a concept that remains very much a hope in the minds of many Arabs around the world. The stark reality of the present situation in the Arab World is a far cry from the ideals of Pan-Arabism. The past few years of the Arab Spring have shown the world many things including sectarianism, tribal hatred, a total lack of respect for human rights, a new generation of extremism, and some of the ugliest crimes that the world has ever witnessed.

The author opens up with a powerful statement that touches directly the Arab soul, saying, "أَسْبِحْ بِاسْمِكَ اللَّهُ" which translates into "I praise your name Allah." I believe that it is very symbolic that the poet begins with this statement because Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews all use the name Allah to refer to God, although the use of the word "tasbiih" meaning "praise" does have a definite Islamic connotation. After a closer examination of Al-Jokh's poem we will discover he is very critical of the Arab world, and more specifically the Arab governments and shortcomings in Arab societies. The poem opens up with this statement;

وقد علمتُ في صغرى بأنَّ عروبتى شرفى  
وناصيتى وعنوانى  
وكُنَّا في مدارسنا نردّد بعض ألحان  
نغني بيننا مثلاً  
بلاد العرب أوطاني - وكلّ العرب إخواني

A translation of this sentence is, "And I was taught from my youth that my Arab-ness is my honor, my foundation, and my title. We would in our schools repeat some

songs singing between ourselves, the Arab nations are my homeland and all Arabs are my brothers.”

We can see that the poet is striking a very deep nerve in the hearts of his audience. The harsh reality of the post Arab Spring Arab world is an entirely different situation in which hatred, sectarianism, and animosity seems to be ruling the day. Even people from the same nation cannot seem to find middle ground and live in peace.

As the poet points out, it was quite common in schools throughout the Arab world for children to be taught a deep admiration and love for the Arab world and Arab identity. The youth were often influenced through songs, banners, anthems and nationalistic teachings according to the poet.

The author describes himself in this poem as a young child filled with hopes and dreams. Moreover, a great deal of excitement would swell in his young heart believing that in fact his Arabness was a great honor only bestowed on a few. Through this Arab birthright he would be able to cross the Arab world and visit the land of his, “brothers.”

The author states;

سأبحر عندما أكبر  
أمرّ بشاطئ البحرين في ليبيا  
وأجني التمر من بغداد في سوريا  
وأعبر من موريتانيا إلى السودان  
أسافر عبر مقديشو إلى لبنان  
وكننت أخبئ الأشعار في قلبي ووجداني

The translation is, “ I will sail when I grow up. I will pass by the shoreline of two seas in Libya, harvest dates from Baghdad in Syria and cross from Mauritania to Sudan. I will travel across Mogadishu to Lebanon. I used to hide my feelings in my heart and conscience.”

The exuberance of the child portrayed in this poem is a harsh social criticism of the Arab world, in particularly Arab leadership who betrayed their people and the masses, pitting them against one another, creating enemies out of brothers. It seems that patriotic ideas of Pan-Arabism were focused on over and over again to keep the populations across the Arab world distracted with peripheral issues, while at the same time pushing more pressing social and economic issues into the background.

This way of looking at the Arab world through rose colored glasses is in fact a clever tool that the poet uses to criticize the leaders of the Arab World, and the brain washing of Arab youth. When the Arab Spring came to life in the winter of 2011 in Tunisia, it is my opinion that it was not based in any way on the notion of Pan-Arabism.

The revolutions that took place across much of the Arab world were nationalistic in nature, meaning that the revolution in Tunisia was a Tunisian, grass roots revolution; as were the Egyptian, Libyan, and Syrian uprisings. I am certainly not stating here that there was no relationship between the revolutions, for they were intertwined through mass media, all the while remaining separate, nationalistic movements with no connection to ideas of Pan-Arabism.

Al-Jokh seems to see things in a very negative light, and the sad reality of his poem reflects the shattered dreams of the poet’s inner child, longing for Arab unity. I do

not believe that the poet is speaking about the unification of the Arab world or nationalism in this poem. It appears to me that the poet is criticizing the powers that be for the current ruin and loss of positive relationships between different Arab nations. There is a grand chasm between the notions of Pan-Arabism and the current affairs in the Arab World.

وحين كبرت  
لم أحصل على تأشيرة للبحر  
لم أبحر  
وأوقفني جوازٌ غير مختومٍ على الشباك  
لم أعبّر  
حين كبرت  
لم أبحر ولم أعبّر  
كبرت أنا  
وهذا الطفل لم يكبر

This translates as, “When I grew up I was unable to attain a maritime visa, I did not sail. My unstamped passport stopped me at the window, I did not pass. When I grew up I did not sail and I did not pass. I grew up but this child did not grow up.”

This very powerful passage speaks directly and emotionally to the audience. The warm feeling that the poet held in his heart as a child, to fulfill his birthright and travel across his Arab “homeland” would not come to fruition. As an adult he would be stopped at every turn, and every step that he takes is made impossible by the same Arabs that he as a child considered brothers. This is the same fallacy that we will see in



further poems, the illusion of Arab unity that exists in the minds of many Arabs with the rise of the Arab Spring.

In the wave of nationalistic revolutions across much of the Arab world, one would naturally expect that a cross-national product of poetry would arise. Poetry that speaks to the glory of the Arabs, the wonder of Arab culture and the greatness of the golden Arab past reborn once again in the flags of revolution and political slogans of freedom. This simply was not the case.

In reality, there is a deep criticism and negativity found in Arabic poetry created during the Arab Spring, speaking on the state of affairs that at least in part led to the rise of the Arab Spring. We will see later that there is also the strong focus on the hatred, sectarianism and ultra nationalism that seemed to have engulfed much of the Arab world. Another thing that we will notice through this examination of revolutionary poetry is an overwhelming feeling of national competition, disappointment, and betrayal, felt by not only the poets themselves, but by the people whom their poetry represents.

I believe that the title of Al-Jokh's poem rings especially poignant in the days following the Arab revolutions. As the world watched, hoping that positive results might come from the populist uprisings, the reality of the situation remained a dark and hopeless one, and the word "visa" took on a new meaning, the escape from a crumbling Arab world. The poet further states;

نُقاتلنا طفولتنا  
وأفكارُ تَعَلَّمنا مبادئها على يدكم أيا حكام أمتنا  
نُعَدِّبنا طفولتنا

وأفكارٌ تَعَلَّمنا مبادئها على يدكم أيا حكام أمتنا  
ألستم من نشأنا في مدارسكم  
تَعَلَّمنا منهاجكم

The translation is, “Our childhood’s combat us, ideas and concepts we learned from your hands oh rulers of our nation. Our childhood’s torture us thoughts and concepts we took from your hands oh rulers of our nation. Was is not in your schools we were raised and learned from them your concepts?”

The poet speaks directly to the heart of the matter; the lies and utter failure of Arab governments, who promised everything and gave nothing. This was the basis and point that the poet is trying to make in this beautiful criticism of Arab governments. Al-Jokh does not place blame on foreign influences or invaders who came to the Arab world with unclean intentions, but rather, claims that the greatest sower of unrest throughout the Arab world, that pits brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, are the Arab governments themselves.

The soul of the poet screams out, but we notice that it is not the poet himself that is screaming, but rather the poet’s inner child who screams a challenge to the leaders, the officials, teachers, and others in positions of authority who filled his young mind and the minds of youth across the Arab world with lies.

The poet repeats an important word in his poem, and that word is “مبادئها” which translates into English as “principles.” This word is repeated in the poem for the simple

reason that the youth of the Arab world were brain washed to believe that there is no difference between peoples across the Arab world.

The unique nature of Al-Jokh's poem is that it is a conversation between the author and his inner child. The conflict that rages is between the author who sees the bitterness of the current state of affairs, and the rosy picture of the Arab world he imagined as a schoolboy, as taught by his teachers and leaders. As stated in the previous section, the author's inner child recalls all of the false notions that were spoon-fed to him by his teachers.

He is left wondering if in fact the current state of affairs in the Arab world will come to pass or is everything that he was taught in fact false and a deliberate misrepresentation. Nonetheless, the poet remains defiant and proud. He states:

أنا العربي لا أخجل  
ولدتُ بتونس الخضراء من أصل عُمانِي  
وعمري زاد عن ألف وأمي ما تزال تحبل  
أنا العربي في بغداد لي نخلٌ  
وفي السودان شرياني  
أنا مصري موريتانيا وجيبوتي وعمانِ  
مسيحي وسني وشيعي وكردِي ودرزي وعلوي  
أنا لا أحفظ الأسماء

The translation is, "I am Arab and I am not embarrassed. I was born in Green Tunis, from Omani origins and my age is more than one thousand. My mother still gives birth. I am Arab and I have palm trees in Baghdad and in Sudan are my veins. I am

Egyptian, Mauritanian, Djiboutian, Omani. I am Christian, Sunni, Shi'ie, Kurdish, Druzi and 'Alawi. I do not memorize the names.”

I believe that these lines that appear towards the end of the poem not only reiterate the sad affairs of the Arab world, but also the voice of the poet's inner child through his adult understanding of the Arab world to whom he is speaking.

It is made very clear in these lines that the ideal reality is that there truly are no boundaries between the Arab peoples. They come in every shape, color, religion, nation, creed, but their Arabness is what unites each and every one of them together.

The author's inner child realizes that all of the other secondary issues are used to take attention away from the truth, which is that Arabs should be brothers and sisters. This is very much the inner struggle of the poet, who speaks with his heart and communicates with his inner child.

It is very interesting to see how this poem although spoken from the lips of a single poet, is very much speaking across a large distance of space and time, while at the same time speaking to the soul of a greater narrative, the narrative of the Arab peoples, their history, their future, and their collective identity.

The poet feels a deep pain that runs through the Arab mind and experience, but this pain that he feels does not come without some sort of hope, a hope of redemption and a future free from suffering, a future of Arab brotherhood.

The author states;

سأكبر تاركاً للطفل

فرشاتي وألواني  
ويبقى يرسم العربيّ  
ممشوقا بهامته  
ويبقى صوت الحاني  
بلاد العرب أوطاني  
وكلّ العرب إخواني

“I will grow up, leaving to the young child my furnishings and colors. He will remain painting the Arabic with its importance and the voice of my songs will remain the Arab nations are my homelands and all the Arabs are my brothers.”

The poet’s statement gives a glimmer of hope that one day his childhood dream of traveling across a united Arab world might come true. The nature of the poem is a dual one, that flows artistically between the bitterness of the Arab World’s reality and the Arab world that once was and could be once again. This poem is certainly an example of how Arabic poetry was affected by the rise of the Arab Spring, as it gave poets new horizons and material to write about.

Al-Jokh, like many of the poets that we will discuss in this work, has not only been given a warm reception by the Arabic speaking audience across the world, but has also won awards and has grown quite popular via YouTube, where his number of “hits” range from tens to hundreds of thousands. His most notable reception was his participation in the Emirati television poetry contest, “Prince of Poets” where he debuted his poem, “The Visa” in front of the entire Arab world in 2011, coming in second place in the competition.

## Alaa Alasharee - Street Corner Poet

The next poem that I would like to consider is a poem that was written by the poet Alaa Alasharee in 2013, in the wave of the second military uprising in the Egyptian revolution called “أيه رأيك” or “What is Your Opinion.”

The first thing that we notice in this poem is that it is performed and written in Egyptian street language, or the Cairene dialect. I believe that the poet chose to recite this poem in the Egyptian dialect for a practical reason, and that reason being that he is speaking specifically to the people of Egypt.

I believe that this is by far the most effective delivery for this type of poem, and that there is a distinct correlation between the poet’s use of Egyptian colloquial Arabic and his target audience, the Egyptian people. The delivery of the poem in “Fusha” would have come off quite awkward, as the poet is speaking about social and economic problems that everyday Egyptians suffer from. It just makes sense that the poet would deliver this poem in a local register. The use of this colloquial register is certainly not a new phenomenon, but rather the heavy use of Egyptian street language has been the status quo since the 19th century in Egyptian mass media. Ziad Fahmy, about the use of Fusha in Egyptian popular culture states,

“In Egyptian mass media, only the Cairene dialect was portrayed as understandable to all Egyptians and hence familiar and “normal.” Speaking in Fusha was and still is portrayed as not only haughty but also incomprehensibly distant from everyday Egyptian life” (Fahmy, 9.)

We can notice this attitude immediately not only in the poet’s tone, but his usage of words. The poet states,

إي رائك لو مرة قالواك وطنك ارضك بلدك عرضك كله ما فيش  
دور في جيوب الناس على وطنك مش هتلاقي غير قرش حشيش  
واحد سكران و التاني عطلان هيقولك فكك مني و سيبني اعيش

The translation states, “What’s your opinion if one time they told you that your nation, land, country and honor did not exist? Look for your nation in the pockets of the people and you don’t find anything except some hashish. One person drunk another without work will tell you leave me alone and let me live.”

The poet speaks directly to the Egyptian people asking them in a manner as if he were having a discussion with a close friend on a street corner. The poet makes it very clear that the difficult economic, social, and political problems were making the Egyptian people feel as if they were truly without a nation, honor, or a homeland. A nation, according to the poet, that is rotting from the inside out, and is not able to fix itself except through the medium of revolution. Alaa Alsharee penned this poem in response to the failed presidency of Muhammad Morsi, who was later overthrown by a military coup that took place on July 2nd, 2013.

The nature of this poem is filled with accusation, anger, and the frustration of an entire nation. Particularly the young men and women in Egypt who either were not able to afford an education that might allow them to gain meaningful employment and a comfortable lifestyle. This poem speaks even to those who were able to attend the top universities in Egypt, only to graduate and become virtual prisoners in a society that suffers from rampant poverty and total lack of upward mobility.

The author states:

طول عمري قايل الكلمة حق لكن بلدي ما سمعتنيش. و العيب مش فيها العيب في النظام. كسر عظام منع الكلام  
قال ده حرام و إنت كافر ما بتصلنيش. قتلوا ارادة صلب السعادة و كثير بصبر نفسي لاجل اعيش. و كل ما اقول الازمة هتمر  
ارجع من تاني و اذوق المر.

The translation states, “All my life I have said the word “right” but my country did not hear me. The wrong is not in the nation, but rather in the regime. It broke bones, outlawed speech, said this is forbidden, and you are an unbeliever if you don’t pray. They killed the will and crucified happiness. I have made myself patient in order to live. Every time I say that the disaster will pass, I return once more and taste the bitterness.”

The use of heavy street language by the poet gives the audience a much closer and personal feel. The use of colloquial Arabic conjures up the picture of a young man sitting in a coffee shop, smoking a cigarette, while complaining to his friends about the current affairs in Egypt.

The poem explains the frustration that the poet feels not only for himself, but for an entire generation. When the author states, “All my life I have said the word “right” but my nation did not hear me,” he gives his audience a very clear window in which they can see the desperation of the youth of Egypt.

Unlike the first poem that we have discussed in this work, this poem is not shy when it comes to naming who is to blame for the rampant poverty, corruption, and social problems that seem to be tearing Egyptian society apart at its seams. The poet places the blame on the government. The poet states, “The wrong is not in the nation, bur rather in the regime. It broke bones, outlawed speech, said this is forbidden, and you



are an unbeliever you don't pray." The poet attacks the government in a very direct manner, and this blunt language is in and of itself a very new development in the use of Arabic Poetry.

Another very important point is that of all of the poems that we will discuss in this work, this is the only poem that seems to follow a fairly strict set of rhyme and rhythm. The rhythm that is given to the poem lends to it a certain personality, an almost human characteristic that is not found in the other poems discussed in this work. The rhythm of the poem is an up and down rhythm, that takes the listener back and forth between false hope and the hopelessness of the current reality according to the poet.

The poet skillfully chooses his words in a manner so that not only is the rhyme preserved within the poem, but deep meanings are conveyed as well in both literal and metaphorical language. He references his own life experiences of teaching himself patience, only to be disappointed time and time again.

The poet states,

شئنا مبارك و جينا رئيس إخواني. قال انا هاحكم بكتاب الله. يا من انت كريم يا الله. اخيرا الشرع يا ناس هيزود و الحق هيرجع تاني و يعود و هنبقى شوك و حلق اليهود و هيرجع تاني صلاح الدين هنعارب من تاني بجيش حطين و هناخذ الاقصى من الملاعين

"We got rid of Mubarak and brought an Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) president. He said, "I will rule by the book of Allah" Oh Allah, You are the Generous Oh Allah. Finally the Shari'a Law will spread and the right will come back and return. And we will remain a thorn in the neck of the Jews and Saladin will come back again and we war again with the army of Hitteen and will take the Al-Aqsa Mosque from the cursed ones."

I believe that it is important to clarify a few things before we continue to discuss the linguistic aspects of the poem. One clarification I would like to make is that the Shari'a law is the Islamic Law that was revealed in both the Quran and the Hadith (Collection of Prophetic Sayings). The reference to the "thorn remaining in the neck of the Jews" is a popular saying throughout the Arab world, as there has been a great deal of hatred aimed against the nation of Israel that came with the loss of the ancestral Arab Palestinian homeland. When Muhammad Morsi was elected in the first elections after the fall of Mubarak, he promised that Egypt would remain as such, a thorn in the neck of the Jews, and in doing so, was able to endear millions of supporters not only in Egypt, but all across the Arab World.

The last item that I want to clarify is the phrase, "Take back the Al-Aqsa Mosque from the cursed ones." Perhaps it is clear that the description "the cursed ones" is yet another reference to the Jews, whom are considered a cursed people in the Islamic Arab world. This belief, although having some theological basis in Islamic scripture, is more so the natural result of the ongoing Arab struggle against Israel.

Over the passage of time, such hatred is taught from generation to generation and is absorbed and the whole process is repeated. The poet reflects on different times in his life. He begins his poem speaking in more general terms about his life and the utter lack of opportunities that he and his generation faced from their earliest memories in Egypt to the eve of the presidential elections in 2012. The poet sets up this poem to show both the Egyptian people's excitement that they felt in the wave of the revolution, as well as their great disappointment and even feelings of betrayal by Mohammad Morsi.

Another important development of Arabic Poetry that came about in and around the Arab Spring is the rise of blatant sectarianism and accusations against certain minority religious groups, in particular, Shi'ite Muslims. The rise of sectarianism is an unfortunate but natural reaction of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring led to the fall of long established governments that opened up the flood gates of sectarian hatred and violence, which was reflected quite clearly in some of the revolutionary poetry.

Even though there has been a history of low level sectarian violence that existed between different religious groups in Egypt, it was only after the rise of the Arab Spring and the uprisings that took place throughout Egypt during the January 25th revolution that violence truly appeared. The violence that came about in the wave of the mass uprisings across Egypt were social and political phenomenons that had never been witnessed before in the modern history of Egypt.

There was a sharp increase in both sectarian violence and violence contained within the same religious community. As we will see shortly, a new wave of particularly vicious attacks were aimed at Egypt's very small Shi'a community, who were targeted as part of a new wave of extremist Sunni Islam that has been spreading across the Arab world with disturbing speed. This new wave of extremism coming from several nations in the Arabian peninsula, in particular, Saudi Arabia is based on Wahhabist and Salafist ideologies, which are extremely fundamental and militant. The main target of this new wave of extremism have been minority Shi'a communities.

The poet states,

فين الشرع يا رئيس قول و الشيعة يا رئيس و الشيعة يا رئيس دول مش شرع دول خلفون في اصل و  
فرع  
سبوا الصحابة في كل الاذان. مش بس ده  
حرفوا في القرآن سبوا حبيبة خير الناس و إنت شايهم فوق الراس

“Where is the Shari’a oh President tell!! And the Shi’a they are not legitimate, they are a backward branch. They curse the followers of the Prophet in every call to prayer. Not just this, they have distorted and misrepresented the Qur’an and cursed the love of the greatest creation and you are carrying them above your head.”

As in previous paragraphs, there are certain images in these lines that need to be explained to a greater extent, not only to make it clearer to readers, but to show how incendiary these lines truly are. The first thing that I would like to explain is the poet’s reference to the Shari’ah Law. The Shari’ah Law is Islamic sacred law that Muslims believe to be direct orders from God.

The Shari’ah according to fundamental Islamic creed is the final and complete code of laws that was revealed from God to Muhammad, and if implemented correctly and truthfully, would solve all of the world’s modern problems, from adultery to the consumption of alcohol, to theft, etc. The poet stated earlier that the president (Muhammad Morsi) promised the people that, “I will rule by the book of Allah,” which is a reference to Islamic Shari’ah or holy law. The poet is attacking the President directly challenging him to answer his blunt question, “Where is the Shari’ah?”

I would like to pay close attention to the next line in this section of the poem, because it contains within it yet another literary phenomenon that seems to be a natural reaction to the political climate of the Middle East in the first years following the Arab Spring.

The world has witnessed an ugly increase in sectarian violence between the Shi'a and Sunni, the two main factions of the Islamic faith. Even though sectarian violence between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in the Arab world is a very old narrative that certainly predates the Arab Spring, it has increased in the last few years with the Arab uprisings. The poet is bluntly and outrightly accusing the world's Shi'a population of being unbelievers.

The language that the poet is using is extremely offensive to the world's Shi'a population, although it is clear that the poet, an Egyptian, does not have to worry so much about sectarian retribution in Egypt, as the Shi'a population in Egypt is marginal at best. In recent days, the flood gates have been opened to outright violence that surpasses national and doctrinal barriers, and what the poet is doing in this statement is nothing short of openly accusing the Shi'a of heretical and anti-Islamic beliefs. There exists a myriad collection of religion texts from the Sunni Islamic world that tackle the subject of the Shi'a/Sunni divide, but these were academic debates between the scholars of Islam in a much less direct and accusatory manner, which pales in comparison to the open hostility of the poet's accusations and language.

This direct attack on the followers of Shi'ite Islam can be considered not only unique to the political poetry of the Arab Spring, but also quite controversial at the same time, devoid of allusion or metaphor, the poet simply states that Shi'a are unbelievers, belonging to a group that does not represent Islam. The poet's accusations do not stop there. There is certainly a possibility that such inflammatory language could have led to increased hatred for the very small Shi'a population in Egypt.

The rise of the Arab Spring certainly led to an increase in violence against Shi'a in Egypt. According to human rights statistics, on June 23, 2013, four Shi'a were lynched in the village of Muslim in Greater Cairo. It suffices to say that even though such inflammatory poetry does not lead directly to violence, it can certainly provide the pretext for such behavior.

He goes on to say, "They curse the followers of the Prophet in every call to prayer. Not just this, they have distorted and misrepresented the Qur'an and cursed the love of the greatest creation."

The poet here is making a reference to Aisha, the wife of the prophet Muhammad. There is a popular belief within Sunni Islam that Shi'a curse the followers and wives of the prophet Muhammad, the same historical characters held in honor and esteem by Sunni Muslims.

It is certainly true that there are some Shi'a who curse the wives and followers of the prophet Muhammad, but there are certainly groups of extremist or politically inclined groups of Shi'a Muslims that have brought accusations against Aisha and other members of the first prophetic generation, meaning those who had lived alongside the prophet Muhammad.

Regardless of the historical, political, or social differences that exist between different groups in the Middle East following the rise of the Arab Spring, it is important to understand that the use of political poetry in this manner; poetry used to accuse, split, divide and transgress the boundaries of political correctness is another literary phenomenon unique to the Arab Spring.

After the poet makes sweeping accusations against the followers of Shi'a Islam, he makes a personal attack against the president telling him:

يا رئيس مرسي انا كافر بك يا تسبينا و تمشي الله يخليك

This is a very powerful passage or line, that translates into, "Oh President Morsi, I am a disbeliever in you, leave us and walk away may God keep you." Because the poet is speaking directly to the president and saying that I am anon-believer in you.

The cultural, historical, and social meanings that have been attached to the word, كافر (kafir) are quite myriad, and in Arab culture, calling someone an infidel or unbeliever would be grounds for physical confrontation, as this word regardless of its context wounds very deeply. The poet skillfully steers himself outside of the direct line of fire, by stating that he is an "unbeliever" in the president.

This literary arrangement of words allows the poet to use the very strong Quranic language of “infidel” against the president while at the same time, remaining free of involving himself in a direct confrontation with the president. He simply states that he is personally an “infidel” in the president.

We would be quite remiss if we did not discuss another unique development that occurred in Arabic poetry, and that is the conversion of poetry into music, which took the form of music videos that spread across the Arab world via-YouTube and other media outlets. The addition of music added an extra dimension to the dynamic of poetry that came about in the Arab Spring.

I would like to add here that such a conversion of written poetry into music is not totally unique to the Arab Spring. One of the the most well known collection of such poems later performed as songs are those of the late Syrian Poet, Nizar Al-Qabbani. Some of his most popular poems were performed by famous Arab singers, such as Abdel Halim Hafez and Kathim Al-Sahir.

As we have stated, even though such a transfusion of poetry and music was not unique to the Arab Spring, the spread of such poems and songs across modern media outlets such as Arab poetry contests and YouTube are new developments to poetry produced in the Arab Spring.



## El-General - Defiance and Music

We will now look at a rap song by a popular Tunisian performer called, “El General.” His rap entitled, “The President of the Nation” which he recorded in December, 2010 later became the “national anthem” of the Tunisian revolution, even though it was recorded prior to the actual uprising. El General has proved to be an extremely popular artist whose songs spread across the internet boasting nearly half a million hits on several songs posted on YouTube. As I have stated earlier, I do not believe that a rap about the social problems in Tunisia falls outside of what could be considered poetry, because rap, like other forms of art, can be considered poetry in motion.

One important thing that we have to remember is that even though there were several revolutions that began nearly simultaneously across certain countries in the Arab world, I do not believe that these revolutions were related by some great notion of Arab brotherhood, but rather, they were nationalistic movements that reflected the local and homegrown colors of their respective nations.

This means that even though these revolutions were taking place or going on at the same time, it would be quite irresponsible of us to claim that Tunisian citizens had some invested interest in Egyptian politics, or that Egyptian protestors were concerned with events in Syria. These simultaneous revolutions began due to mounting social and economic problems in specific nations, and I believe that by looking more closely at “El General” we can see exactly what this means.

El General begins by saying:

رئيس البلاد  
هاني اليوم نحكي معاك باسمي وباسم الشعب  
الكل اللي عايش في العذاب  
مازال تم شكون يموت بالجوع 2011  
حابب يخدم باش يعيش لكن صوتوا موش مسموع

This translates into, “President of the country I am here today to speak with you in my name and in the name of the people, all who have lived in torture. It is 2011 and there are still those who die from hunger willing to work in order to live but their voice is not heard.”

The first thing that we notice about this line, is that the poet makes it clear that he is speaking directly on the pressing social and economic issues that would prove to be the spark of the Arab Spring in 2011. The poet is speaking directly to the Tunisian president and I believe that it is very interesting that even though the poet will end up saying some very disparaging things about the president, he still refers to the leader as, “President of the Country.”

I believe that this is a mockery of the president whom El-General sees as the root of all problems, not only the president but all of the ruling class who lives comfortably while, “Those who die from hunger.” As we have seen in the previous poem that we have examined, poetry and other forms of artwork of a political nature took on a new form, for the first time poets were aiming their messages at specific political figures, especially the president.

As we have seen in the previous poem, El-General challenges the president directly. I found it very interesting that in the beginning of the YouTube video of El-General's rap song, "President of the Country", there were claims that shortly after the release of this song, El-General was arrested and "has not been heard from since." This was certainly an attempt at some sort of political controversy, because he was released after three days, after signing a promissory note that he would cease making, "politically charged songs."

The artist is speaking on behalf of the Tunisian people, thus became his nickname, "Tunisia's Voice." He brings attention to the economic and social struggles that were faced by many Tunisians in pre-revolutionary Tunisia. Stating, "Willing to work in order to live but their voice is not heard."

This is a strong statement that seems to be echoed through a lot of different Arab Spring poetry that I have read. Much of the poetry speaks from the perspective of view of the people, frustrated from never quite being able to keep up. They are kept behind by social confines and a strict yet invisible social stratum in which the rich remain wealthy, while the vast majority of middle and lower class people barely have enough to feed themselves and their children, let alone begin to have any preconceptions of upward mobility.

The Tunisian rap artist El General came from humble beginnings, starting his rap career in 2008 at the age of 18. According to an interview that El General did with "Time Magazine" in which he was voted one of the top 100 most influential people of 2011, his main goal was not to become famous and make a steady living for himself.

He stated, “When I became a rapper, I wasn't looking for love. I was looking to rap for the good of the people” (El General, 2011.) El General got exactly what he was looking for after his songs began growing in popularity he was forbidden by the Tunisian government from producing cds, performing at concerts and appearing in public spaces as an artist. He states;

“Whenever someone applied to hold a concert,” he recalls of the censorship during and the government saw my name on the program, they would forbid it. They would say 'this guy is singing about politics, and has a bad reputation. So there is no permission.” (El-General, Time Magazine)

I will now analyze some more of the very emotional words that helped move an entire generation and nation into revolution. The poet states;

زعمة ترضاها لبنتك، عارف كلامي بيكي العين  
عارف ما دامك بو ( أب) ما ترضاش الشر لصغارك  
هذا ميساج عبارة واحد من صغارك يحكي معاك  
رانا عايشين كالكلاب

“Is farce what you want for your daughter? I know that my words may the eye weep and I know that as long as you are a father you would not accept this evil for your little ones. This message is like one from your small ones speaking with you and we are living like dogs.”

In this passage El General is speaking to the president in the metaphor of one of his children. He makes an emotional plea to the president to hear the words of his suffering children. In this manner the artist's approach to his song is considerably different from the previous poems that we have studied, in the manner in which the poet speaks to the leader.

As we will see later on in El General's rap, there are accusations made against the president. I found it very interesting that El General brought forth new emotions that we have not seen thus far in our study of the rise of political poetry in the Arab Spring. Mark LeVine describes the nature of El General's style,

"Leader of the Country" by Tunisian rapper El Général. The dissonant, minor mode of this song's melody, the often spitfire delivery of angry lyrics, and the starkness of his video, all made it a perfect reflection of a generation about to explode. When El Général, born Hamada Ben Amor, was arrested after the song's release, his fame was secured as was hip-hop's role in capturing the mood of his generation" (Levine)

This is the first time that we have seen a political work reflecting the age old notion that citizens of a nation are in fact the children of that nation, and the government or rulers of the nation assume the role of a parent.

The poet states,

“نص الشعب عايشين الذل وذاقوا من كأس العذاب”

“Half of the people are living in darkness and have tasted from the cup of agony”

I think that there is an interesting parallel that we can draw between this line and the line that we read in the poem, “What’s Your Opinion.” As we have seen in the previous poem, the Egyptian poet, Alaa Alasharee stated, “Every time that I think that the disaster will pass, I come back and taste bitterness.”

There is a very interesting linguistic link between both of these poems, and that is both poets are trying to convey a sense of loss or frustration. The difference between the two lines are really the words that the two poets choose in order to show their disgust with the current situation in their particular nations.

Whereas Alasharee uses the word, “المر” which translates into, “the bitterness” El General uses the word, “العذاب” which translates into “the agony or the torture.” From a surface analysis, we might come to believe that both of the authors mean the same thing, and in a way they do. Both are expressing their discontent with the way in which things are going in their perspective nations, but I believe that El General’s use of the word, “Agony” gives the entire passage an air of desperation that we have not seen in any of the previous poems.

I believe his sense of urgency is a unique mark of El General as an Arabic artist. This sets his work apart from his contemporaries whom we are looking at in this paper, both in his unusual use of American style rap music and his aggressive style.

The final line that I would like to look at in El General’s rap is,

رئيس البلاد ، شعبك مات وبرشة عباد من الزبيلة كلات  
هاك تشوف أش قاعد صاير في البلاد  
مآسي باردو والناس ما لقاتش وين تبات

هاني نحكي باسم الشعب  
اللي انظلموا واللي نداسو بالصباط

This translates into, “President of the nation, your people have died. Many people eat from the garbage and you are seated as you see what is going on in the country misery everywhere and people have not found a place to sleep. I am speaking in the name of the people who have been victimized and trampled over.”

El General’s song, “President of the Nation” became far more than a simply rap song or a cry of defiance against a corrupt regime, but grew into a cultural phenomenon that in itself came the artistic and cultural representation of the Tunisian uprising that was the spark that lit the flame of the Arab Spring.

Before we continue to discuss the next poems on our list, I would like to take some time to discuss the manner in which popular slogans turned into nationalistic songs. As I mentioned at the beginning of my dissertation, the slogan, “The people want the fall of the regime” or “الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام” was first used during the Tunisian uprising very early on in the Arab Spring. This slogan was used before a great deal of the bloodshed of the Arab Spring began.

This political slogan was adopted by the Egyptian people who stood up to the Egyptian government in the revolt of the January 25th Revolution. The popular Egyptian singer Rami Essam took the original political slogan developed in Tunisia, “الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام” and turned it into a revolutionary song that he performed in front of very large crowds during the days of the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square.

The transformation of this political slogan which by itself, brings forth powerful emotion from protestors, seems to have even more of an effect when put to music. This creates in a way a contagious and electric atmosphere for the listeners and participators.

Let us take a brief look at the words to the song Rami Essam created through his use of the popular Arab Spring political slogan, “The People Want the Fall of the Regime.” We are analyzing this small portion of the song because I believe that it falls within the realm of revolutionary poetry that was born of the Arab Spring. The song states;

كلنا إيد واحدة و طلبنا حاجة واحدة مدنية مدنية  
الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام  
المجلس يمشي و مش هنمشي  
يسقط يسقط حكم العسكر

This translates into, “We are all one hand and we demanded one thing, civilization, civilization. The people want the fall of the regime. The ruling body will walk away but we will not walk away. Fall fall military rule.”

As we see a political slogan coined by the protesters in Tunisia was adopted by an Egyptian singer and given a uniquely Egyptian flavor, dialect, and focus. Such linguistic adaptations and cross cultural borrowing is yet another wonderful example of how Arabic poetry has been affected by the rise of the Arab Spring.



The very nature of music revolutionary music that came out of the Arab Spring has a certain spontaneous nature that made it both unpredictable, exciting, and emotional. Ted Swedenburg states,

“The protest music at Tahrir was not a soundtrack, not a reflection, not a commentary or a report on events, but something integrally tied to and embedded within the social movement. Musicians on the square for the most part performed a repertoire that the crowds could sing along with, a body of songs that connected the artists and their audience to a history of struggle” (Swedenburg.)

## Abd Al-Rahman Al-Abnudi - Poet for the People

The next poem that we will analyze will be, “صوت الحرية” which translates into “The Voice of Freedom”, a poem that was penned by the very well known Egyptian poet Abd Al-Rahman Al-Abnudi. This poem was turned into a very popular song and music video by the Egyptian singer, Hany Adel. Al-Abnudi is one of the most famous of Al-Abnudi’s recent poems. Of course, this is not the first time that a work of Al-Abnudi’s poetry was turned into a song, in fact many of his poems have been performed by famous artists like Abdel Halim Hafiz, Warda Al-Jazairia, and others.

According to Noha Radwan, Al-Abnudi who long ago established himself as one of the great Egyptian poets, is not looking for fame which he found decades ago, rather he wrote “The Voice of Freedom” for the people of Egypt to show his solidarity. Radwan states,

“At the time when Al-Abdnudi is reaching the harvest stage, the time when he can enjoy the affection of his audience, the popularity of his poems, and the belated government recognition of his contributions” (Radwan, 146.)

This poem, “The Voice of Freedom” was perhaps the poet’s most famous work as it concerned the Egyptian revolution. This poem differs slightly from the previous poems that we have reviewed, in so far as the original delivery of the poem was simply the written word. The poet wrote this poem in the traditional form and did not do so intending it to become a popular revolutionary song adopted by thousands of Egyptians gathering around Tahrir Square, and furthermore spread across the entirety of the Arab World via-YouTube and other social media outlets.

The poet states,

نزلت و قلت انا مش راجع و كتبت بدمي كل شارع

سمعنا اللي مكنش سامع

و إتكسرت كل الموانع

سلاحنا كان احلامنا

و بكرنا واضح قدامنا

من زمان بنسناني

”بنور مش لاقيين مكاننا

The translation is, “I came down to say I am not going back. I wrote with my blood all of the streets. Our voices reached even those who weren’t listening, and all of the barriers have been broken. Our weapons were our dreams and tomorrow is clear in front of us. From a long time we have been waiting looking and not finding our place.”

Of all the poems that we have analyzed thus far, not a single poem has been overly positive, quite the contrary, they have all be extremely negative; from Al-Jokh’s poem about the loss of his childhood dream of an Arab world that he could travel through and visit, to the poem from Alasharee who stated quite boldly that he was in fact a disbeliever in the now toppled Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi, to El General’s rap that was aimed at the president of Tunisia, describing living conditions as sub human, with strong visuals of people eating out of garbage piles, living like dogs, while the wealthy simply looked away.

The tone of this poem, turned into a song is echoed in the music video, in which singer Hany Adel and the camera crew walk across Tahrir Square singing and recording the protesters gathered together in the downtown area. Throughout the video, the protestors are holding up signs above their heads with the words of the song on them.

The nature of both the poem and video give the viewer an immediate feeling of optimism for the future of the Egyptian people. The different demographics represented in the video were in fact a cross section of the entire Egyptian society, from the very wealthy, to small children, women, men, and the impoverished.

The music and rhythm is very uplifting for the listener as well. This poem is a very peaceful and optimistic poem, and the poet is calling for change by means of non-violence. The poet makes the statement, "Our weapons were our dreams." In this statement the poet draws a wonderful paradigm between two seemingly diametrically opposed symbols; weapons and dreams. These two words go together very well as their opposite meanings compliment one another. The peaceful and uplifting nature of the poem turned song could be one reason for the grand success that the song had, attracting more than 2.5 million views on YouTube alone, as it was viewed across the entire Arab world and Arabic speaking online audience.

Whereas the word "weapons" might conjure up ideas of killing, chaos and the loss of innocent life, the word dreams, at least from my point of view, inspires thoughts of peaceful protest, progress, and finally, a life in which all members of society can have the right and opportunity to better themselves and the future generations.

Because the vast majority of protestors that participated in the revolutions across the Arab world were the youth, they were filled with goals and dreams of a more just and peaceful society.

The poet states,”

”رفعنا راسنا في السماء و الجوع ما بئاش يهمنها  
اهم حاجة حقنا و نكتب تاريخنا بدمنا  
لو كنت واحد مننا بلاش ترغي و تقولنا  
نمشي و نسيب حلمنا  
بطلت اقول كلمة انا  
”في كل شارع في بلادي صوت الحرية بينادي

The translation is, “We raised our heads up to the sky and hunger no longer concerns us. The most important thing for us is our right and we will write our history in our blood. If you were one of us there is no reason to tell us. Walk away and leave our dreams? I stopped saying the word “me” in every street in my nation the voice of freedom is calling.”

The last sentence is actually the title of this piece of poetry and the main refrain of the song. These last lines show that the author was trying to create a revolutionary piece of poetry that was very inclusive and not exclusive. This is very evident by both the linguistic word choice and the nature of the audience that the poet is speaking to.

This poem is quite unique to the previous poems and poets that we have considered thus far. The reason for this is that the poem is not aimed against any individual group of people as we have seen in previous poems. Al-Jokh spoke against the Arab rulers and accused them of brainwashing the youth of the Arab world. Alasharee made bold statements in his poem saying that he was indeed an “infidel” of the ex-Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi and accuses not only the president but the Shi’a population of adhering to false beliefs. El General viciously attacked the now toppled Tunisian president accusing him of ignoring the plight of the Tunisian people.

This poem is one that uplifts the listener and makes more personal statements that have less to do with the actual politics of the revolution and more to do with the future of the Egyptian people. The author states, “I stopped saying the word “me.” This is a wonderful example of how the poet is showing his audience that the path to a better future is one based on cooperation and mutual acceptance.

The language used in this poem is not only very simple, but the manner in which the poem was delivered to a national audience in the very streets of downtown Cairo was the ultimate display of the use of modern technology broadcasting a new message to a revolutionary audience.

The music video works perfectly not only with the words of the song, but the social concerns and hopes contained within. I believe that it is a very good example of revolutionary Egyptian poetry, always ebbing and flowing, changing and adapting. Robyn Creswell states about the nature of such art,

“ Along with the chanting, there has been much baladi music — a catchy, popular style, heavy on hooks and reverb — as well as poetry recitations and effigy hanging. This is Egypt’s folk culture: profane, bawdy, politically sophisticated. It stands as a direct challenge to the version of culture propagated by the Mubarak regime and its predecessors” (Creswell.)

This poem speaks to every single Egyptian citizen from every place and walk of life, and the optimistic feeling of the people implies not only a hope for the future, but a hope that the Egyptian people have been waiting for a very long time. This is evident in the poem when the poet states, “From a long time we have been waiting looking and not finding our place.”

## Tamim Al-Barghouthi - Elegant Revolution

The last poem that we will analyze in this work is a poem called, “يا شعب مصر” which translates into, “Oh People of Egypt.” This poem was written by the very well known poet Tamim al-Barghouthi in 2013. Al-Barghouthi is a renowned poet, social critic, writer and political scientist. He is unique among the poets analyzed in this work, in the fact that he comes from a very diverse background. His father was well known Palestinian poet Moored Al-Barghouti and his mother was Egyptian novelist Radwa Ashour.

Being of a mixed background allowed Al-Barghouthi to see the Arab world through different pairs of eyes. Even though he is most well known across the Arab world for his poetry on Palestine and the Palestinian struggle for freedom, his poem, “Oh People of Egypt” is not only a wonderful example of revolutionary Arabic poetry, but also Al-Barghouthi’s use of the Egyptian dialect.

Al-Barghouthi’s poem that we will analyze is quite long. When he performed it on Egyptian television on a program called, “آخر كلام” or “final words.” The actual recitation of the poem took approximately twenty-two minutes. I will not cover the entirety of this very complicated poem, but I will do my best to pick out parts that I consider pertinent not only to this poem but to our research topic of Arabic Poetry in the Arab Spring.

The poet states:

يا شعب مصر اللي سابقه ضحكته غضبه  
ما يطلع الصبح إلا وصحبتك سبيه  
يا مخلص الأرض من وحشتها فى الأكوان



يا حجة الشمس تفضل طالعة ساعة كمان  
مستأذنة وهي مش عادتھا الاستئذان  
”متونسة بالميدان وبعشرته ونسبه

يا شعب يا مصلى قدام العساكر صف  
يجرى الجريح من ورا لقدام لا خاف ولا خف  
تدوس عليه العربية تحوله لميت ألف  
ياللعجب يقتلوه ويتوقعوا هربه  
ياللعجب يقتلوه ويتوقعوا غيابه  
اللى اتقتل لسه واقف هو وأصحابه  
ما بهدل الأمن غير من ماتوا واتصابوا  
والصبح ما نور إلا أماً الشموس غربوا

اضرب عليا أنا مش جارى يا قناص  
من امتى خوفنا يا ابن الكلب ضرب رصاص  
كل اللى شاف الشهيد بقى تاره تاره الخاص  
الدم صاحى وعنيد ولا تقبلوش ترابه

The translation is, "Oh people of Egypt whose laughter comes before anger. He does not come out in the morning, except your friendship is the reason. Oh savior of the ground from the ugliness of creation you are the excuse that allows the sun to rise an extra hour. Asking permission and it is not her custom to do so. Having fun in the square the love is part of it. Oh people who pray in front of soldiers in a line injured ones running to be in the front of the line are neither afraid nor intimidated. A car runs him over and transforms one dead to a thousand. How strange it is that they kill and expect the people ran away how strange it is that they kill and expect people to desert.

The one who is killed is still standing with his friends. No one defeated the security forces other than those who were killed and injured. And the morning was not lighted except by these setting suns. Shoot me not my neighbor oh sniper since when has your gunfire scared us you son of a dog everyone who saw a martyr saw it as their own personal vendetta the blood is pure and stubborn and you must take vengeance for the dead."

The poet is speaking directly to the Egyptian people, but his tone is not a lighthearted one, rather the serious nature of this poem I believe helps to carry the poet's message, to show the great wrongs being done against the people of Egypt.

The people of Egypt are not one to go down without a fight. He makes a reference to the kind nature of the Egyptian people. Having lived in Egypt for a few years, I understand what the poet means and I believe that his choice of words to begin the poem are not only appropriate, but rather exquisite.

There is a saying about Egyptians in the Arabic Language and it is, “الشعب المصري” دمہ خفیف” which translates into, “the Egyptian people have light blood.” Now this is a literal translation of this folk saying, but it less literally translates into, “the Egyptian people are easy going.”

I heard this saying many times during the years that I spent in Egypt as a student. El-Barghouthi plays the role of a bard in this poem, speaking his praises to his beloved Egypt saying that she is in fact the reason that the sun rises for an extra hour, stating the importance of Egypt even in modern times. He speaks of Egypt as a young girl who plays in the square and does not have to ask permission to do so, or at the very least it is not in her nature to ask permission to walk to and frolic in her own streets carefree and happy.

Almost immediately, the entire tone of the poem changes from a more light hearted tone to a much darker tone. The poet quickly does away with his talk of the playfulness and femininity of Egypt and replaces this speech with visions of killing, martyrdom, and death. He speaks to the death that takes place so easily in the same square in which his beloved Egypt played in as a girl. A square now filled with a growing number of martyrs, men not afraid to give up their lives in the path of freedom and justice, rather, “In a line injured ones running to be in the front of the line are neither afraid or intimidated.”

A cry of defiance bellows from the heart of the poet, who has now become a speaker on behalf of the Egyptian people. The poet challenges directly all those who attacked protestors and other innocent people during the Egyptian uprising. The poet states, "Shoot me not my neighbor oh sniper since when has your gunfire scared us you son of a dog everyone who saw a martyr saw it as their own personal vendetta the blood is pure and stubborn and you must take vengeance for the dead."

This is I believe the strongest and most defiant language that we have yet to hear in all of the poems that we have analyzed so far. The poet directly challenges those individuals in Egypt that are killing innocent people and spreading destruction and corruption in the land, calling them "sons of dogs."

This is the first time that we have seen this use of such strong and reactionary street language. Even in previous poems that we read that were accusatory in nature such as El-General's "President of the Nation" or Alasharee's "What's Your Opinion," the accusations brought against government figures, dissident religious groups, or those who held differing political views, the poets did not come close to calling these opponents "sons of dogs." This fiery language employed by Al-Barghouthi is his most powerful weapon and tool that he uses to convey his language.

The poet is speaking from a position that was given to him through his Egyptian bloodline. I truly believe that this poem, if written by a non-Egyptian poet would not have had nearly the same effect, because not only is this poem written and performed in the Egyptian dialect, but it is performed for an Egyptian audience through an Egyptian heart. The poet's anger is shown clearly in his fiery words.

The poet states:

يا شعب ياللى دفع تمن الشوارع دم“  
احفظ أسامى اللى ماتوا فى الشوارع صم  
الشارع اللى اصطفى وقصر الاماره لم  
ملوك قليلة الرباية ركبوا واتركبوا

شعب بغزالة اتخفق قلب التاريخ فى يومين  
لابس عباية جحا وهو صلاح الدين  
بيكرم الأنبيا ويهزأ السلاطين  
والفجر خيله وحبات الرمال عربيه

يا شعب مصر أكم فرعون وفرعون  
ضربتهم ضرب سجادة فى بلكونة  
ضرب الملوك تربية سالحة ومضمونة  
ما يبقوا بنى آدمين إلا إذا انضربوا

The translation says, “Oh people who have paid the price of the streets in blood memorize the names of those who died in silent streets the street that was chosen and the emirate palace kings with little upbringing rode and were put in place. The people of the gazelle argued and history was flipped over in two days. Wearing an ‘abaya and he is Salah El-Deen honoring the prophets and humiliating the sultans. The dawn is his horse and the specs of sands are his Arabs. Oh people of Egypt how many Pharaohs have you beaten with the strike of a carpet on a balcony. The beating of kings is upright and guaranteed lesson in manners for they will not remain human beings except if they are beaten.”

This section of the poem speaks to many different poetic and historical allusions all having to deal specifically with the Egyptian people. The poet speaks directly to the hearts of the people honoring them for they have, “paid the price of the streets in blood.” This is a reference to the young men and woman who were martyred across Egypt during the revolution of January 25th and more recently the massacre of Rabiaa Square, on August 13th, 2013.

Unlike some of the revolutions that took place outside of Egypt in the Arab world, the Egyptian Revolution was fairly peaceful compared with the Libyan and Syrian revolutions which soon transformed into full scale civil wars. When I say revolution I refer to the very revolution itself, not the loss of security and safety in the days and months following the fall of Hosni Mubarak.

The concept of martyrdom is one deeply embedded in Arab culture, and it was the Arab Spring that brought to center stage ideas of martyrdom. Although the paradigms of martyrdom I believe changed significantly. The “martyrs” of the Arab Spring were not conveyed as martyrs in a religious capacity, but rather martyrs who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom from oppressive regimes.

Halverson states;

“The most prominent names and faces of the historic “Arab Spring” in Tunisia and Egypt were not those of politicians or military commanders. Nor were they the logos of Twitter and Facebook, as some zealous media pundits would suggest. Instead, they belonged to two young men who never lived to see it. Khaled Saeed, a 28-year-old from Alexandria, Egypt, and Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old from Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, died carrying out individual acts of defiance against corrupt autocratic state regimes that would later fall to protests that arose in their names. These two young men could not have known, nor likely imagined, that they would become the patron martyrs at the heart of nationalist revolutions that would forever change the face of the region” (Halverson, 312.)

I believe that this author is right in saying that the leaders of the Arab Spring were in fact the youth and not prominent military or political leaders. The very nature of the Arab Spring and the significant roles played by the youth who had so much at stake when they took to the streets is reflected beautifully in El-Barghouthi’s poem. Let us continue to see more keen examples and search for the revolutionary voice within this poem.

The poet states,

بعدين مبارك سادات فاروق محدش دام  
هو احنا شعب كده مبيعش لنناش حكام  
عقبال جيرانا وحبائينا كمان يا سلام  
لو كل من له رئيس نصحي نلاقه قلبه

يا مصر لسه ولسه الثورة بلة ريق  
ما ينتهى لك طريق إلا ويبدأ طريق  
يا شعب مصر تعالى نتفق يا شقيق  
رج الملك قبل ما تنعم عليه بلقبه  
رجه كده شوفه إن كان شغال  
واسأل عليه المكوجى واسأل عليه البقال  
أهم حاجة فى صفاته إنه يكون يتشال  
متربى عال لما يمشى يلتزم أدبه

The translation is, "And afterward Mubarak, Sadat, Farouq no one remains. It is us the people like this leaders don't live for us, wishing for our neighbors and loved ones again peace. If every one had his own president we would wake up and find that he had flipped him. Oh Egypt, not yet, not yet the revolution is still in the beginning the road does not end for you except another road begins. Oh Egyptian people come and let us agree oh brother. Shake the king before your bless him with a nickname shake him like this see that he is working and ask about him the launderer and ask the grocer about him as well. The most important thing in his descriptions is that he can be removed, well raised, and when he leaves he sticks to his character."

These lines I find relevant, because the author is not only speaking about the present political situation in Egypt, but also speaking to the past. In a few simple lines, the poet is able to unite past and present.



In a somber manner, the author makes it clear that no matter who were to rule the nation, there would still be something lacking. The poet pokes fun at the popular opinions and public show of support for different presidential candidates, saying, "If everyone had his own president we would wake up and find that he had flipped him." This is a clear criticism not only of the lack of knowledge from the point of the people, but I believe a deep criticism of the political figures themselves.

Something very interesting that we must give some attention to is the way the poet draws a very glaring comparison between the king or president and a child's toy, saying that the people must "shake" the king to make sure that he works, very similar to a child who shakes a plaything or toy to make sure that it is in fact in working order before a purchase or decision is made.

The poet goes on to say, "The most important thing is that he can be removed" referring to the president or ruler of the country. This statement is far from a bode of confidence for the rulers of Egypt, as if the poet, through his criticism is saying that it is simply a manner of time before one ruler is overthrown and another is put in his place, as the cycle of instability continues to go around and around.

We will now look at the end of the poem and see the power of the final lines. The poet states:

”ما تحسيوش الشهيد اداكوا بس حياة  
ما موتوش هو وحده اللي برصاصة رماه  
ده طخ ابنه اللي لسه ما اتولدش معاه  
وطخ أولاد ولاده لآخر الأيام

موت معاه بشرية كاملة محتملة  
عدّوا كان فيها كام شاعر وكام رسام  
وكام طبيب عبقرى بين الأظبا إمام  
وفيلسوف له على حكم الليالى كلام  
وبنت نظرتها تشفى القلب من داؤه

فى شعب كامل رحل ما عرفش أسماؤه  
في جسم كل شهيد فيه مصر مكتملة  
فخلوا مصر اللي فاضلة تعيش كما شاؤوا“

The translation is, “Do not determine that they only demolished the martyr’s life. They did not kill him alone thrown by the bullets. This one shot his son that has yet to be born and they shot the children of his children to the last days. They killed with him all of potential humanity. Count in this humanity how many poets, painters, doctors, and geniuses of future physicians and philosophers who had judgment over the nights speech. And a girl whose glance heals the heart from its disease. An entire people left and I don’t know their names in the body of every martyr is Egypt in her completeness so let Egypt continue living as they willed.”

The final lines of Al-Barghouthi’s poem are compelling. The poet magnifies a truth about the Arab Spring, and that is the fact that the youth who participated in the Arab Spring and were killed represented so much more than young individuals who gave their lives in the cause of freedom.

As the poet stated, each individual who was killed was not only robbed of their life, but of the lives of their future children, accomplishments and possible societal achievements that will never come to fruition. Of course it is only within the knowledge of God what might have come from the youth who were killed during the initial Arab uprisings, but nonetheless this poem is incredibly thought provoking.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the coming of the Arab Spring led to the rise of a new form of revolutionary Arabic poetry that is thought provoking, powerful, and deeply intertwined with the youth across much of the Arab world. This new wave of Arabic poetry is filled with exciting new linguistic developments that touch on new subjects of politics, religion, and social problems deeply embedded throughout much of the Arab world. The new revolutionary poetry is rash, filled with bold accusations against various governments and extremely emotional in form and rhythm.

What does all of this mean for the future of the revolutionary genre in general? I believe that as we have witnessed through our analysis of several Arabic poems that were written during the Arab Spring, the very nature of the Arabic political poem has changed dramatically and continues to do so. Religious, political, and regional conflicts have come to the forefront of Arabic poetry, and this new form of poetry is often aggressive and accusatory in nature. As we have seen, the tone of the Arabic poetry that we have analyzed produced during the rise of the Arab Spring is overwhelmingly antagonistic in its outlook. I believe that this is a natural reflection of the nature of the Arab Spring, which has yet to produce positive results long hoped for by the Arab youth. This poetry is a reflection of the Arab Spring itself, sadness and loss marked briefly with moments of joy and a hope for the future generations to come.

## YouTube Links to Poems

- 1) "The Visa" by Hisham Al-Jokh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVOrnjc6bg8>

- 2) "What is Your Opinion" by Alaa Alasharee

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4n3nzkkC\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4n3nzkkC_U)

- 3) "President of the Nation" by El General

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leGIJ7OouR0>

- 4) "Voice of Freedom" And Al-Rahman Alabdnoudi (Performed by Hany Adel)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw\\_zfLLvh8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8)

- 5) "People of Egypt" by Tamim Al-Barghouthi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaeC83g1zZU>

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