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Dystopian Themes in Contemporary Muslim Arab Women's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

As technology advanced and industrial societies began to emerge, it was anticipated that humanity—relying on scientific achievements—would realize its long-standing aspiration of building a better world. However, despite benefiting from the manifestations of modernity, many Third World societies failed to bring prosperity and well-being to their nations. This study examines the anti-utopian (dystopian) perspective in the poetry of contemporary Muslim Arab women. Unlike utopian studies, anti-utopian literature critiques existing socio-political realities and inspires transformative thought toward a more just society. This interdisciplinary research—rooted in the emerging field of dystopian poetics—explores the expression of social and existential crises through poetic discourse. Adopting a descriptive-analytical methodology, this article investigates how Arab women poets portray dystopian themes as a response to oppression, war, and the absence of fundamental freedoms. The findings suggest that, across various national contexts, themes such as war, injustice, and the suppression of freedoms are central to the construction of an “Arab dystopia” in the poetic imagination of Arab women writers.

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1. Introduction

The human mind has always aspired to fulfill its deepest desires amidst the vast landscape of thought. Over time and through accumulated experience, it became evident that achieving an ideal life and escaping unrest is possible only through the guidance of wisdom. Thus, the aspiration to construct an ideal city has long been a central concern in human intellectual history.

In literature, the concept of the *ideal* is inherently interdisciplinary and has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry across various genres, particularly within critical and comparative studies. The notion of the ideal first gained prominence in the philosophical works of influential thinkers such as Plato in *The Republic*, Thomas More in *Utopia*, Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, Francis Bacon in *New Atlantis*, and Etienne Cabet in *Voyage to Icaria*. These figures, disillusioned by the political realities of their times, envisioned alternative societies that challenged existing structures.

Over time, definitions of the ideal evolved, ranging from visions grounded in practical reform to those regarded as purely imaginative or even illusory. Some ideals were considered attainable and realistic, while others were viewed as aspirational yet ultimately unreachable (Mannheim, 2001: 257).

The conception of an ideal society varies across cultures and is shaped by the beliefs, values, and socio-political conditions unique to each context. In Iran, the philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, drawing upon Platonic thought, articulated a religious utopia during the 3rd and 4th centuries AH. Farabi's vision of utopia was not a paradisiacal realm, but a realizable model grounded in justice and rational governance (Germann, 2021). In his framework, a just society led by virtuous rulers could attain harmony and flourishing, whereas tyranny would inevitably result in moral and social degeneration.

For centuries, the discourse around utopia remained largely gender-neutral, with little attention paid to the role of women or the impact of gender-based discrimination. However, with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s, new paradigms such as the "feminine ideal" emerged, challenging the patriarchal assumptions of classical utopian models. These developments broadened the discussion to include the lived realities of women and their exclusion from many visions of the ideal society.

By the early 20th century—following the decline of social realism, which had dominated 19th-century literature—writers began to adopt more bitter and disillusioned tones in critiquing societal dysfunction. As human struggles became increasingly complex, utopian literature gradually gave way to its counterpart: dystopian literature. In this genre, ideals are subverted, perfection collapses into contradiction, and anti-values rise to the surface, stripping goals of their moral significance (Rovin, 2006: 270).

The obstacles that prevent the realization of utopia often give rise to dystopia—a concept that describes a society marked by oppression, fear, and disintegration. Living in such conditions is universally undesirable, yet these realities are especially acute in many Third World societies, particularly those in the Arab world that have been ravaged by war, authoritarianism, and systemic injustice.

The unsettled political, economic, and social conditions prevalent in many Arab societies have not only hindered progress and development but have also contributed to the marginalization and demoralization of women. In such environments, there is little space for critical thinking, personal growth, or freedom. These systemic conditions foster a process in which the possibility of happiness is steadily eroded and replaced by despair.

This article seeks to explore the manifestation of dystopia through the lens of contemporary Arab women's poetry, with the aim of highlighting how these poetic voices articulate lived experiences shaped by oppression and loss. By uncovering the mechanisms of dystopian reality in these societies, the study ultimately aspires to open pathways toward imagining and achieving a more just and ideal

future. The theoretical framework of this research draws on sociological studies grounded in dystopian thought.

2-1. Necessity of Research

This study seeks to explore the foundations, conditions, and obstacles that shape the realization of the ideal within the intellectual and poetic discourse of contemporary Arab women. To this end, a wide selection of poetic works by modern Arab female poets has been revisited and analyzed through close literary reading. The aim is to uncover the poetic representations of dystopia as conceived by these writers and to shed light on the critical consciousness embedded in their verse.

Rather than limiting the analysis to a single poet or region, this research adopts a broader scope by examining poets from various Arab countries across the Middle East. It is important to note that identifying the root causes of dystopian expression in these works can serve as a foundation for addressing broader socio-cultural challenges. By understanding and confronting the underlying factors that give rise to dystopian realities, this research aspires to contribute to the empowerment and organization of women's societies throughout the Arab world.

3-1. Research Background

A considerable body of research has been conducted on the concepts of **utopia** and **dystopia** across various academic fields. In Persian literature, the volume of research on utopian themes significantly outweighs that on dystopian or anti-utopian topics, largely due to the relative novelty of dystopian studies in the region.

However, within the specific realm of dystopian themes in Arabic poetry, only a limited number of scholarly works have been identified:

- The essay *"The Struggle of Despair and Hope"*, focusing on Nima Yooshij and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, analyzes two poems—*"Towards a Silent City"* and *"A City without Rain"*—by Mustafā Javānrūdī. Published in *Journal of Research in World Contemporary Literature*, (Javanroodi, 2022, p. 160)
- , the study concludes that both poets portray dystopia as a product of evil governance, corruption, and societal collapse, while still emphasizing the persistence of hope amid despair.
- In their article titled *"Symptoms of Dystopia by Khalil Havi"*, Heidarian Shahri and Sedighi (2011) explore dystopian elements in the poetry of Khalil Havi, identifying key social and political factors contributing to the dystopian imagination (Heydariyān-e Shahrī & Şediqī, 2011).
- Another relevant study is *"The Manifestations of Dystopia and Its Features in the Poetry of Ali Kan'an"* by Ayad Neissi et al. (2020), published in Issue 40 of the journal *Critical Illuminations*. This article focuses on the notion of the counter-ideal in the work of Syrian poet Ali Kan'an, analyzing the recurring dystopian motifs and imagery in his poetry.

4-1. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following core research questions:

1. What literary devices and thematic strategies are employed in contemporary Muslim Arabic women's poetry to depict dystopian realities?
2. From the perspective of contemporary Muslim Arab women poets, what are the key components that constitute a dystopian vision?

2. Concept of "Utopia" and "Dystopia"

The term *utopia* was first introduced by Thomas More in his 1516 book *Utopia*, where he described an ideal political system inspired by the philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle (Aşil, 1992, p. 16). The word *utopia* or *"Outopos"* derives from the Greek terms *ou* (meaning "not") and *topos*

(meaning "place"), and is commonly translated as "no place" or "nowhere" (Shaffer et al. 2010: 368). In the English language, *utopia* has come to signify an idealized, fictional, and often unattainable society (Nowroozi Khiabani 2004, 315).

Conceptually, the *ideal* refers to an abstract vision characterized by wisdom, virtue, and moral perfection. In Islamic philosophy, the equivalent of utopia was formulated by Farabi, who envisioned a virtuous city governed by reason and divine law. His philosophical utopia was later absorbed into literary discourse, eventually giving rise to its thematic opposite: dystopia. The term *dystopia*, as the antonym of utopia, denotes a "reverse ideal" or a "bad place" (Daad 2003, 20). In Persian, it has been translated into phrases such as *pan-ideal*, *ruined city*, *devil's city*, *desolate city*, and *dilapidated city*. In Arabic, equivalents include *wicked city* or *stray city*, conveying imagery of corruption, filth, and moral decay. Dystopian literature typically portrays a future society plagued by oppression, fear, and dehumanization—an inversion of the values upheld in utopian thought. In such works, the noble traits of humanity are corrupted, replaced by vice and injustice, until wickedness becomes the prevailing order (Mirsadeghi and Sadeghi 1998, 8).

In Arabic poetry, the concept of *utopia* was notably invoked by Nazik al-Malaika, a pioneering Arab poet widely recognized as the founder of modern Arabic free verse (Almalika 1994, vol. 2, pp. 5, 40, 155, 157; vol. 1, p. 255). In her poem "*City of Love*", from the collection *Night Lover*, the title initially evokes a romanticized vision of an ideal city. However, beneath its lyrical surface, the poem ultimately reveals a counter-utopian or dystopian reality (ibid., vol. 1, p. 558).

The *City of Love* is a fictional construct—a mirage envisioned by the poet—situated in the barren desert of life, between hills and mountains. At its center runs a river whose shimmering waves are laced with deadly poison. From a distance, the city appears idyllic, but upon closer encounter, it offers only thorns, thistles, and corpses. The poem concludes with the poet's somber counsel: this city is uninhabitable and should be swiftly abandoned. She expresses a preference for the harshness of the desert over the deceptive allure of this imagined place.

It is important to note that Nazik al-Malaika, in "*City of Love*", writes from within the Romantic tradition, and her vision of utopia is not aligned with the political or philosophical ideals found in the works of Thomas More. Consequently, in this study, dystopia is explored through poems rooted in realist literary schools, rather than romantic or symbolic interpretations.

3. Dystopian Components in Feminine Poetry

3-1. War

The word *war* immediately conjures images of relentless explosions, ruined buildings, streets strewn with debris and corpses, the cries of the wounded, and scenes of widespread devastation—images that collectively evoke the vision of a ruined city filled with suffering and despair. Like many other nations in the region, Iraq has not been exempt from such horrors.

In her poem "*Andalusian Wounds of Iraq*", Iraqi poet Bushrā al-Bustānī offers a powerful thirty-part meditation on the anguish of war and the enduring trauma it inflicts on the Iraqi people. She portrays a landscape scarred by ongoing conflict and social disintegration in the post-war era. The repetition of imagery in the poem is striking, with recurring lines such as: "*Tanks... (invasion)... rotating; tanks (hatred)... rotating; tanks... (looting)... rotating; tanks... (death)... spinning; tanks... (killing)... spinning.*"

These verses emphasize the cyclical nature of violence and its numbing persistence in daily life.

The poet's grief leads her to figuratively kneel before the remnants of Baghdad and Ashur, venerable cities once at the heart of Mesopotamian civilization: "*Kneeling on the treasures of Baghdad and Ashur*" (Al-Bustānī, 2012, 109). These ancient treasures symbolize a shared heritage wounded by modern devastation. Al-Bustānī draws connections between historical centers of Islamic and Arab civilization—Samarkand, Granada, and Palestine—suggesting that destruction has long haunted the Arab world, regardless of geography:

“Baghdad, Samarkand, and Granada sigh / and the heart of the night bleeds another Andalusia / and Palestine” (Al-Bustānī 2012, 110).¹

Throughout history, power struggles and conflicts have repeatedly brought nothing but sorrow and misery to ordinary people. Al-Bustānī extends this historical lament in deeply symbolic language:

“And Granada gallops in nightgowns / pursued by the Tatar wolf / reaches Basra / stopped by the American on barbed wire / creeps in Dhu al-Qar / between the roots of the palm tree stretching from the strings of sadness in Sumer to the heart of fire / and the veins of the galleries are bleeding in the shackles” (Al- Bustānī 2012, 111)².

In these lines, Granada, once a flourishing capital of Islamic Spain, becomes a metaphor for cultural decline and loss. Its fall to Christian forces is mirrored by modern invasions—Basra’s suffering under American occupation is likened to Tatar cruelty. The poet’s reference to Dhu al-Qar, the historic site of a major Arab victory, is now recontextualized as a site of renewed defeat and subjugation. Sumer, a cradle of civilization, is portrayed as bleeding and shackled, its greatness extinguished by contemporary violence.

By using the metaphor of Granada and the use of code, the poet tries to depict scenes of war suffering. Granada, which was the beautiful capital of Islam in Andalucía (current Spain) for eight years, fell into the hands of Christians which was a disaster. A while later, Basra got stuck in this sadness by American soldiers who were like Tatars in terms of cruelty and take over Dhi Qar, a place that witnessed the first impressive triumph of Arabs on Iranians (Burū 2001, 228).

The incursion continues as American forces advance from Dhi Qar toward Sumer, placing Iraq in metaphorical chains. This occupation narrative extends further, reaching Baghdad, home to the tombs of the Abbasid Caliphs—a symbol of one of the most powerful Islamic civilizations in history. In a poignant line, the poet writes: *“The crawling of chariots on the ground had made the Abbasids’ graves weary as well”* (Al-Bustānī 2012, 113). These historical sites, once glorious, now serve as silent witnesses to the nation’s decline and desecration.

The poet’s lament underscores that war is not always waged for the explicit purpose of regime change. Often, its underlying aims include the seizure of a nation’s natural resources and the erasure of its cultural heritage. One such example is the looting of the Iraqi National Museum, where the poet sorrowfully notes: *“Sumerian guitars were playing sounds of sadness around the museum.”* The theft and plunder of cultural artifacts transform once-proud cities into sites of pain and humiliation.

The city of Mosul, once a tranquil cradle of poets and intellectuals, is similarly portrayed as wounded—its historical dignity tarnished by both foreign aggression and internal discord. The poet criticizes the way local gossip and domestic disunity deepen the scars inflicted by outside forces. Through such reflections, the poetry reveals how formerly prosperous and culturally rich cities have been transformed into sorrowful ruins—victims of both avarice and, at times, the negligence or complicity of their own people.

2-3-Feeling of Loneliness and Anxiety

In the poetic vision of Pan-Arabism, there is neither peace nor safety. The feeling of anxiety—often rooted in loneliness—leads to a state of panic and emotional unrest. The poetry of Ms. Bushrā al-Bustānī reflects this emotional turbulence, portraying loneliness and anxiety as consequences of the post-war condition. In one of her poems, she writes:

¹ Translated: Baghdad, Samarkand, and Granada sigh and heart of night caused another Andalusian to bleed and Palestine.

² Translated: Granada runs through the cloth of the night and Tatarian wolf follows it to arrive to Basra. Americans are stopped by barbed wires and creep to “Dhi Qar”, among the roots of palm tree in Sumer, which extends from the strings of sadness to the heart of fire and blood drips from happy porticos, which are chained and shackled.

"Dancing all the night / loneliness / while my blood is dripping / trees are emerging by my blood and sway away ... / a bitter fruit is hung ... / blood drips from the trees. / Finally, we feel dizzy and return back together at the end of the night" ((al-Bustānī, 2000, p.5)

Here, the poet emphasizes the persistence of tragedy by using the present tense. Her solitude suggests a concealed form of deprivation. The dance she describes is not one of joy, but of despair—a dance of grief, rooted in the sorrow of homeland, in the enduring pain caused by successive wars, hunger, illness, and oppression. The "bitter fruit" and the "blood-dripping trees" are symbolic paradoxes that encapsulate the devastation of war. The first paradox lies in the trees: instead of bearing fruit that symbolizes hope and renewal, they produce bitterness and suffering—a metaphor for the climax of human agony. The second paradox is the dance itself, which results not in celebration but in bloodshed.

Elsewhere, al-Bustānī portrays the deep anxiety and fear experienced by children in war-torn Iraq: *"The child said: Mom, this sound scares me ... / His mother told him: 'Close your eyes' / Practice to sleep / This music is your time ... in Arab Homeland ..."* (al-Bustānī, 2011, p. 11-12).

The phrase *"music of your time"* is a striking metaphor for the sounds of gunfire and explosions, representing how violence becomes normalized in the life of a child. Through such haunting imagery, al-Bustānī illustrates a world where beauty is perverted, innocence is shattered, and anxiety becomes the dominant rhythm of daily life.

3-3. Non-Democratic Government

A non-democratic government is an autocratic regime established without the consent of the people, fundamentally opposed to democratic principles. Rather than serving the public, such a government pursues its own interests and desires, often resorting to cruelty and manipulation to maintain control. It attempts to obscure its oppressive nature and present a false image of benevolence to the public.

Souad al-Sabah, a distinguished Kuwaiti poet and intellectual, sharply critiques authoritarian regimes. In her collection *My Woman Crumbs* (al-Ṣabbāḥ, 1992, p119).

She writes:

"Whenever I found that an Arab army shoots at people, I cried. Whenever the governor spoke to me about the people's love for him, the love of the council... and freedom of opinion, I cried..."

From her perspective, the abuse of power, lack of public trust, absence of consultation in governance, and suppression of free speech are all hallmarks of societal corruption and collective deprivation. Addressing the illegitimacy of such rule, she writes: *"Mr! Hey Mr. / You who rule me without law or ethics!"* (ibid.).

In such governance, it is impossible to force people to obey by putting sanctions on them. To express this concept, the poet compares the people to water in that the possibility of staying in the fist is so low and it runs away among the fingers in a short time. *"Oh, you who hold me between your fingers like water!"* (ibid.).

Similarly, Yemeni poet Ibtesam al-Mutawakkil captures the emotional toll of living under non-representative and oppressive regimes in her ode *The Fifth Destination* (Al-Mutawakkil, 1998, p. 5): *"There is no ray of hope, neither on the right nor on the left. All malevolent voices declare me their enemy. At present, the fifth destination shines. I struggle with my wishes and passions and overcome them; I triumph in the color of exile, in the hue of non-existence. My soul screams from the depth of failure and loss. Where do loneliness and exile lead me? To what devastated land?"*

The poet presumed that nostalgia for loneliness is due to immigration. He looking for her fragmented nature under another's domination, which encircles her from four directions hostilely and the fifth direction is a low brightness which persists the estrangement and domination instead of happiness. Therefore, the stranger, himself, shouts the deep of failure bitterly, and finally roving and loneliness take him to the unknown dystopia. The poet believes that alien or non-people governance is the

reason for the destruction and corruption of society. Ultimately, both al-Ṣabbāḥ and al-Mutawakkil portray non-democratic governance as the root of societal decay, alienation, and spiritual collapse.

4-3. Occupation and Exploitation

Throughout history, countries endowed with natural resources and strategic geographic locations have often been subjected to exploitation and foreign domination. This pattern is especially evident in many Arab nations, most notably Palestine, which has endured long-standing occupation and systemic exploitation. In her poignant poem *I Will Not Cry*, Fadwa Ṭūqān articulates the anguish and sorrow of displacement experienced by Palestinians under occupation. She writes:

"O, my beloved, I stood by the gate of Yafa, among the ruined houses, debris, and prickles, and told my eyes: O eyes! Stop and cry over the ruins of the land of the departed beloveds. The houses call out to their builders; the houses inform the builders of death. Indeed, hearts were broken. And the heart asked: What has happened to you over time? Where are the inhabitants? Did you receive the news after your departure and exile?" (Ṭūqān, 2000, p.511).

Here, Ṭūqān laments the loss of her homeland—specifically the city of Yafa, now occupied by Jews—and evokes the helplessness of those forced into exile. Her sorrow is deepened by the fact that she can do nothing but mourn, standing among the ruins like a helpless observer. The past tense she employs—"they were here / they dreamed here / dreamed of the future that would come"—highlights the devastation of a stolen future and the erasure of a once-vibrant community. Her rhetorical questions—"Where is the dream of the future? Where are they?"—underscore the pain of irreversible loss and enforced displacement.

Ṭūqān further critiques exploitation through symbolic language. In another poem, she uses the metaphor of a *plague* to represent colonial and oppressive forces that consume and corrupt the land and its people. This metaphor moves beyond physical destruction to encompass cultural and psychological devastation, portraying occupation as a contagious affliction that infects the soul of the nation. Her vivid imagery and layered symbolism offer a powerful testament to the suffering of occupied peoples—especially Palestinians—and the enduring scars left by historical exploitation and forced exile.

In one evocative piece, Ṭūqān writes:

"On the day the plague spread to my city, I went to the open space. I turned to the sky and called out to the winds in my sorrow: O winds, blow and bring clouds to me. Unload them to clean the air of the city, to wash the houses, the mountains, and the trees. O winds, blow and steer the clouds to us. Let them rain. Let them rain. Let them rain!" (Ṭūqān, 2000, pp. 483–484).

Here, the poet personifies the *winds* and uses repetition to create an internal musical rhythm. She compares the Zionist occupation to a deadly plague and appeals to divine forces to purify her homeland. The rain becomes a symbolic request for renewal, cleansing, and liberation—a hope to wash away the suffering of the Palestinian people and restore independence.

In another moment of emotional depth, Ṭūqān recalls a visit to her cousin following the bombardment of his home by the occupiers. She quotes him: *"Be steadfast and do not despair, my cousin. This land, devastated by crime—this land, so heavy with grief and silence—will endure. The betrayed heart is still alive and never dies"* (Ṭūqān, 2000, p. 542).

Despite the horror, Ṭūqān finds a note of hope in her cousin's resilience. The land, although wounded, holds the promise of restoration and peace.

Souad al-Sabah, another prominent Arab poet, echoes this theme of erasure and resistance. In *Fragments of a woman* (al-Ṣabbāḥ, 1992, p120), she addresses the occupier directly: *"O you who seized my homeland inch by inch; O you who erased all my signs."*

The phrase *"erased all my signs"* alludes to both physical and cultural destruction—the systematic dismantling of identity, history, and roots. In another poem, al-Ṣabbāḥ employs the term *"holocaust"*

to describe the suffocating plight of Arabs: *"Not only birds and fish, but also Arab human beings are suffocating in a great holocaust"* (ibid.).

The imagery of birds choking in the air and fish drowning in water is paradoxical and unsettling, emphasizing the total and unnatural suffocation inflicted by colonialism and war.

Many Western secular thinkers have rationalized such conflict and domination as part of the natural struggle for survival. However, in the dreamscapes of Arab poets like Ṭūqān, such a reality is not only bitter but fundamentally unjust. She directly condemns the greed of colonial powers that plunder natural resources and exploit human lives: *"Ah, my humanity is destroyed; my bitter blood is dripping—it is poison and fire. (Arabs, riot, dogs!)"* (Ṭūqān 2000, p. 476).

This line is brief yet heavy with meaning, employing poetic brevity to intensify the emotional and political charge. The word *"dogs"* functions as a symbol for the Zionist regime, suggesting dehumanization and brutal force. For Ṭūqān, the occupied land becomes alien, and its people are overwhelmed by poverty, anger, grief, hatred, and despair—emotions that slowly erode their sense of humanity. Such territories become the very embodiment of dystopia: spaces marked by loss, injustice, and the collapse of moral and social order.

5-3. Natural Disasters

In her poem titled "Outside the Day", Ms. Monirah Sa'ad Khalkhal, the Algerian poet, expresses her regret about the tears of the people and physical casualties caused while describing Algeria city and the "Valley Gate" quarter, which got stuck in the flood. (Tililānī, 2015, p. 103). In this regard she says, why the sea seeks to show punishment and curse? Why the rain tends to troop of misery? The poet conveys her surprise at the change of manner in nature using questioning and repetition of the word (why). The rain and the sea, which have constantly been a symbol of blessing and goodness for a human being, have started to destroy cruelly and they have nothing left except tears and moan for the people of this land. Anger of nature, in fact, can turn a beautiful city into reprovved ruin in the blink of an eye.

6-3. Lack of Freedom

One of the most fundamental and indisputable human rights is freedom. A society deprived of freedom becomes lifeless and ineffective, unable to thrive or uphold the dignity of its members. In the school of Islam, liberty—defined as freedom from all forms of servitude except submission to God—is considered a key condition for human liberation. Throughout history, the realization of freedom has been a central aspiration for freethinkers and reformers, and this concept holds a prominent place in Islamic governance.

A profound example of this is seen in the conduct of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (PBUH) toward the Khawarij during his caliphate. Despite being their political leader and having the authority to suppress dissent, Ali chose a path of exceptional tolerance and democratic ethics. As Martyr

Murtaḍā Mutahhari explains:

"Ali ibn Abi Talib (PBUH) treated the Khawarij with the highest level of freedom and democracy. He was the caliph, and they were his subjects. He could have taken any political action, but he neither imprisoned them nor flogged them, and he did not even cut off their shares from the public treasury. He treated them like any other citizens. They were free to express their views publicly, and he and his companions engaged in open dialogue with them. Such a degree of freedom may be unprecedented in the history of governance—where a ruling authority extended this level of democracy to its own political opponents" (Muṭahhari, 2011, p.123).

This historical example reflects the Islamic ideal that political authority should not be an instrument of oppression but a framework that upholds justice, dignity, and the free expression of thought—even when those thoughts challenge the ruling power.

Despite the remarkable intellectual and scientific advancements achieved by humanity, the concept of freedom remains an unattained aspiration for many in today's world—particularly in several Arab

societies. This longing for liberty often finds expression in the writings of Arab poets, especially women who use powerful imagery to expose the oppressive realities they endure.

In her poignant poem *My Body is Similar to a Palm Tree that Drinks from the Arab Sea*, the renowned Kuwaiti poet Souadal Şabbāḥ mourns the absence of freedom in her homeland. She writes: “I cry when I see a sparrow in Rome or Paris which sings without feeling fear” (al-Şabbāḥ, 1992, p.119). Here, the “sparrow” symbolizes the free citizen, while the act of singing represents freedom of speech. Through this image, the poet contrasts the freedom she observes in the West with the censorship and fear pervasive in many Arab countries. The metaphor of the bird singing without fear evokes an ideal of expressive liberty that remains elusive in her own society.

In another poem, al-Şabbāḥ intensifies this lament in *Take Me to the Edge of the Sun*, where she writes: “I try to explore an isle whose trees are not hung on the charge of working / and its butterflies are not seized on the charge of singing / thus, I fail” (al-Şabbāḥ, 2005, p.125).

Through these lines, she constructs a surreal metaphor for a place where work, creativity, and expression are not criminalized. The imagery of trees and butterflies being punished for natural acts—working and singing—reflects a broader critique of totalitarian regimes that suppress even the most basic forms of individuality and livelihood. The horse, traditionally a symbol of freedom, is absent here, reinforcing the sense of suffocation and captivity.

Al-Sabah also touches on the issue of restricted mobility and the psychological burden of national borders. She writes:

“Whenever the police of an Arab country investigated me / on the details of my passport / I came back from where I came from” (ibid.).

This verse highlights how arbitrary political boundaries and excessive scrutiny can alienate even one's sense of belonging. For al-Sabah, who lived in London, this comparison between freedom abroad and repression at home becomes all the more poignant. As recorded in *al-Babtin Dictionary* (al-Bābiṭīn, n.d., p. 436).

), her experiences resonate with many Arabs who face limitations on movement and self-expression, especially in countries affected by occupation or conflict.

Similarly, Syrian poet Sania Şāliḥ explores the painful distance from freedom in her poem *Warm Blood*. She writes:

“You, my freedom, you have hit my heart like a spear / so that we look at each other from a thousand miles of darkness” (Şāliḥ, 2008, p. 70).

In this piece, Şāliḥ personifies freedom, portraying it as a piercing force that wounds yet remains painfully distant. The “spear” signifies the intensity of her longing, while “a thousand miles” suggests both emotional and political separation. The “darkness” symbolizes the oppressive regimes that deprive individuals of basic liberties.

Together, these poets offer a deeply personal and politically charged depiction of freedom—not as a lived reality, but as a distant, almost mythical ideal. Through metaphors, personification, and symbolic imagery, they critique the authoritarian conditions in their societies while expressing a shared yearning for liberation and dignity.

7-3. Underestimation of Women’s Dignity

Souad al-Sabah, a prominent Kuwaiti poet and outspoken advocate for women’s rights in Arab societies, addresses the oppression of women with striking candor and poetic force. In her collection *Take Me to the Edge of the Sun*, she writes:

‘it is a country...where the poem is circumcised because of its femininity... and the sun is hung when rising to protect the safety of the family and woman is slaughtered if she speaks..., or she writes or falls in love to clean infamy of the family... this is a country that does not need inconsistent woman, doesn’t need an angry woman, doesn’t need a riot woman against the family’s customs; this is a country that doesn’t want a woman who walks in front of the caravan, this is the country that

swallowed its women, this is country of woof ... woof, which seizes the thoughts and sacrifices women on the wedding bed Like camel) (al-Şabbāḥ, 2005, pp.83-85).

In these haunting lines, al Şabbāḥ exposes the brutal realities of patriarchal societies that suppress female expression, autonomy, and identity. Her metaphors—of mutilated poetry, silenced suns, and women sacrificed like livestock—depict a society that reduces women to symbols of honor to be controlled, rather than individuals to be respected. The “country of woof... woof” evokes a dystopian land ruled by primal forces that devour intellect and dignity, especially that of women.

The violation of women's dignity contradicts fundamental Islamic principles. The Qur'an affirms in Surah al-Isra (17:70): *“And We have certainly honored the children of Adam.”* This verse asserts the divine gift of dignity granted to all human beings, irrespective of gender. Thus, the systemic denial of women's rights and status in certain Arab societies not only perpetuates injustice but also stands in contradiction to the spiritual and ethical foundation of Islam.

A society that fails to protect the dignity and rights of women becomes emotionally and morally fractured. It breeds frustration, misery, and alienation—both for women and for the broader community. Such neglect distorts the natural balance of human relationships and undermines the health and progress of the nation as a whole.

8-3. Media Influence and the Manipulation of Minds

In contemporary society, media holds immense power in shaping public perception—especially among impressionable audiences such as children. When media operates without ethical commitment or responsibility, it can foster miseducation, promote violence, and instill hatred. Souad al-Sabah, a prominent Kuwaiti poet and cultural critic, powerfully critiques this misuse of media in her collection, *My Woman Crumbs: “I cried whenever I saw an Arab child / who hatred breastfed by media (i.e., milk of hatred) (al-Şabbāḥ, 1992, p119).”*

Through striking metaphorical imagery—such as “breastfeeding hatred”—al-Sabah conveys her sorrow over the normalization of hostility in children's early development, where media functions like a surrogate mother, but one that nourishes with hate rather than love or knowledge. This critique highlights the profound and often dangerous role media plays in shaping the psychological and moral landscape of future generations.

Beyond its social implications, media is also a powerful tool in the political arena. In many cases, it becomes a mechanism for distorting reality, reversing facts, and manipulating public opinion. Egyptian poet Jalilah Reza emphasizes the resilience of an informed and socially conscious public in resisting such manipulation. She writes: *“I started to change the channel; I was the only one who accepted the invitation to fight. They supposed the audience would listen to their radios for a while. For this reason, they broadcasted their poisonous propaganda. But against whom? Against scorners.”*

Reza's poem critiques foreign or opposition media that disseminate propaganda with the hope of undermining national or revolutionary spirit. However, she suggests that when citizens possess a high level of political awareness and social maturity, they are less susceptible to manipulation. Her act of “changing the channel” becomes a metaphor for conscious resistance—rejecting toxic narratives and preserving the integrity of one's beliefs (Riḍā, n.d., p. 14).

Together, both al Şabbāḥ and Reza portray the media as a battleground: while it can be a force for education and truth, in the hands of the uncommitted or the politically motivated, it becomes a tool for indoctrination and deceit. Their poetry urges vigilance, critical awareness, and the nurturing of discernment—especially in a world where ideological and cultural warfare often unfolds through screens and airwaves.

9-3. Lack of Justice

In verse 25 of Surah al-Hadid, the Qur'an affirms the divine mission of the prophets as fundamentally rooted in the establishment of justice. As translated by Elahi Ghomshehei: *"Indeed, We sent Our messengers with clear proofs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that the people may uphold justice."* This verse underscores that the realization of justice is not only a prophetic objective but a societal responsibility. According to *Tafsir Noor*, true justice can only be exercised when a government and legal system are founded upon divine principles—where leadership is guided by revelation and law, not by human whims or class interests (Qarā'atī, 2004, p.488-489)..

This theme of justice—or its absence—resonates in modern Arabic poetry as well. In her poem *Cry of Injustice*, Iraqi poet Atika al-Khazrajī critiques socioeconomic inequality as a form of deep cruelty. Employing the rhetorical device of self-address and interrogative introspection, she juxtaposes her own ego with the plight of the impoverished. She then turns her attention to the wealthy elite who revel in luxury while turning a blind eye to injustice. She writes:

"The voluptuary is immersed in blessings, inside the palace rooms, soothed by the soft sound of the minstrel and exulted by his pleasure. He built the walls of tyranny's mansion from the abundance of his wealth. But will time preserve this towering mansion?"

In this passage, al-Khazrajī uses rich metaphor and irony to expose the transient nature of material power. The "walls of tyranny" symbolize the structural inequality built upon exploitation and indulgence. The poet questions the permanence of such grandeur, warning that the passage of time inevitably dismantles unjust regimes. Her critique aligns with the Qur'anic worldview that justice is not merely an ethical preference but a divine imperative—neglecting it leads to both spiritual and societal downfall.

Thus, both scripture and poetry converge to affirm a shared truth: justice is not a passive ideal but an active duty, and its violation—especially through systemic inequality—invites divine and historical reckoning.

In the view of Iraqi poet Atika al-Khazrajī, a nation afflicted by class inequality is metaphorically "sick," its social fabric ruptured by injustice and internal decay. Addressing the Arab world directly, she laments:

"O Arab nation! Your land has become sick. I hope that everything will improve, yet healing seems unimaginable. How can it heal when its pain pierces its heart and its own children now try to kill it?" (al-Khazrajī, 1950, p. 80).

In this emotionally charged verse, al-Khazrajī employs a series of metaphorical and rhetorical techniques. The nation is personified as a suffering body, with pain described as penetrating the heart—symbolizing the betrayal from within. The imagery intensifies with the portrayal of citizens, likened to children, turning against their own homeland. This fusion of metaphor and exclamatory appeal creates a vivid and sorrowful picture of a self-destructive society. The poet's use of declarative and interrogative forms in tandem reflects both despair and a plea for awakening.

Al-Khazrajī does not stop at diagnosis; she also proposes a cure. Her remedy lies in a return to authentic Islamic values and leadership. She expresses longing for the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), seeing him as a divine savior capable of restoring justice and unity: *"I wish Muhammad (PBUH), the Prophet, would come back to us, so that he would guide us surely if we perverted."* (ibid.).

This line reveals her utopian hope that the dystopia of social division and corruption could be transformed through prophetic leadership and divine justice.

In another ode titled *O, My World, How Far?*, al-Khazrajī mourns the injustice she faces in a world that appears indifferent to moral order. She writes: *"Do you pay the rights of enemies and companions alike, and continue to oppress and spoil my rights?"* (ibid., p. 106).

Here, the poet addresses the world directly, using personification to turn an abstract concept into a subject capable of action—and injustice. The rhetorical question serves both as a critique and as a

device to provoke reflection, suggesting the poet's internal anguish and her condemnation of a world that has reversed the moral compass.

Through her poetry, al-Khazrajī constructs a powerful critique of class disparity, internal betrayal, and spiritual estrangement in Arab societies. Yet, she does not abandon hope. Her longing for prophetic justice and divine guidance becomes a recurring motif, expressing her belief that the path to societal healing and moral restoration lies in returning to Islamic ideals.

In the view of Palestinian poet Fadwa Ṭūqān, widespread deprivation and poverty are symptomatic of a deeper moral collapse—what she refers to as the *cruelty of humanity*. This moral failure, in her perspective, stems from a lack of social justice. She writes: *"Beyond the space, mysterious forces of fate whispered from beyond the atmosphere: Who sends blessings to the rich? And who denies them to the poor? Perhaps the miserable, hungry, and impoverished—those who labor endlessly—gain nothing but more misery. Meanwhile, the wealthy revelers, immersed in luxury, are captivated by the sounds of their fates. But in truth, the sky has not withheld blessings from the poor—their misfortune is the result of human cruelty and oppression." ?* (Ṭūqān, 2000, p. 32).

Through a blend of cosmic questioning and stark realism, Ṭūqān deconstructs the illusion that poverty is divinely ordained. Instead, she insists that injustice on earth—not divine will—is the root of suffering. Her poetic discourse aligns with the Islamic principle that justice is essential to the health of any society. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (PBUH) asserts in *Ghurar al-Hikam* (al-Āmidī, 1989/1990, p. 344): *"Justice is the foundation of governance."* Without justice, a society becomes fractured by class disparities, social instability, and moral decline.

Iraqi poet Lamia Abbās 'Imārah offers a parallel vision, shaped by her experience of war and witnessing the enduring poverty of her people. She praises the dignity of working women who sustain others through honest labor:

"I wish my poem were like your oven—its words, like loaves of bread, would feed the miserable and hungry who wander the sidewalks. Alas! My poem is but words flowing from the lips of the luxurious." (al-'Imārah, 1971, p.33).

Here, the poet contrasts the substance of labor with the impotence of words. The female baker, who nourishes the poor, stands in moral superiority over the poet herself, whose verses, she laments, serve only the elite. This stark image underscores the poet's deep awareness of class division, and her yearning for a more equitable society where art and labor both serve justice.

This critique of inequality is echoed by Souadal Ṣabbāḥin her poem *Gray Symphony*, where she exposes the grotesque underside of modern civilization. She mourns the forgotten victims of injustice—particularly intellectuals and thinkers whose lives were extinguished because of their ideas:

"Nobody knows the grave of Hallaj... half of those who were murdered on the path of thought remain anonymous." (al-Sabah, *Take Me to the Edge of the Sun*, p. 125).

Referring to the legendary Sufi mystic Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj—executed in the 3rd/4th century AH under accusations of heresy by Zandaqah —al-Sabah turns him into a symbol of suppressed truth and martyred intellect. The anonymity of those "killed on the path of thought" signals a society that not only rejects justice but actively silences those who strive for enlightenment.

Together, Ṭūqān, Abbas Amara, and al Ṣabbāḥ weave a common thread: that without justice, society degenerates into a dystopia where the poor suffer, thought is criminalized, and genuine joy becomes unattainable. In such lands, the poets imply, there can be no true *felicity*, only the hollow echo of *misery* masked by fleeting luxury.

3-10. Cultural Neglect and the Decline of Intellectual Life

Inattention to culture is one of the most detrimental forces in the formation of a disordered and incomplete society. When the spirit of creativity and art departs from public life, society becomes hollow—deprived of meaning, identity, and inner vitality. Literature, music, and all forms of artistic expression offer a sanctuary for the human soul burdened by the pressures of daily existence. They gently summon the wandering heart back to compassion, reflection, and truth.

Egyptian poet Jalilah Reza captures the transformative power of poetry in a single line: *“You are entitled to grab hearts, and he is entitled to be a rebel”* (Reza, n.d., p. 118). This succinct verse acknowledges both the emotive power of poetry and its rebellious, truth-speaking function in society.

Atika al-Khazrajī, reflecting on cultural stagnation, mourns the silencing of intellectual and artistic expression:

“And those are my pens—what happened to them, drowned in silence, unable to speak? They have lost their sensitivity and become mute among the talkers. What has happened to my books, now pale, sad, and weary?” (al-Khazrajī, p. 20).

Here, she personifies her pens and books, once vibrant symbols of thought and creativity, now reduced to lifeless objects. The imagery reflects a society where intellectual culture has withered, and expression is muted by apathy or repression.

Souadal Şabbāḥ offers a more confrontational critique, asserting that the world no longer recognizes the value of poetry. In *Take Me to the Edge of the Sun*, she laments: *“I wanted to introduce you to the era of poetry, but the world has turned into savage beasts that hunt poetry.”*

In this metaphor, poetry is prey—pursued and annihilated by a world that values aggression and materialism over sensitivity and thought. In a particularly haunting passage, she illustrates the cultural restrictions placed on women and their intellectual freedom: *“It is said that writing is a great sin—so, do not write. / Praying is prohibited before words—so, stay away. / The ink of poetry is poison—so, do not drink it. so, be careful of drinking it”* (al-Şabbāḥ, 2005, p.123).

These verses sharply critique the patriarchal codes that deem female creativity dangerous and subversive. Through metaphor and prohibition, al-Şabbāḥ exposes how societal norms marginalize women’s voices and stifle their artistic agency.

Fadwa Ṭūqān, who was forbidden from attending school at the age of thirteen, echoes similar sentiments in her autobiographical reflections. As cited in *al-Şabbāḥ* (al-Şabbāḥ, 1996, p. 24), she writes:

“I was a recluse, and sorrow crushed my ambitious and deprived soul, while the world of freedom and beauty called out to me from behind the walls.”

Ṭūqān captures the ache of confinement—both physical and intellectual. Her longing for education and knowledge becomes a metaphor for broader societal oppression against women's enlightenment and liberation.

Collectively, these poets reveal how cultural neglect—especially when intertwined with gender-based repression—leads not only to artistic decline but to societal impoverishment. Through their verse, they demand a reawakening of the human spirit through art, thought, and justice.

4. Conclusion

Human beings have long sought to achieve a better life and realize their dreams. With industrialization and the advancement of nations, it was once expected that this dream would soon come true. However, over the past few decades, several tragic events across the Arab world have undermined this hope. Devastation, captivity, suppression of freedom, exploitation of natural resources in poorer countries, and widespread injustice have contributed to the emergence of

dystopian realities in many societies. These historical disruptions and socio-economic dislocations have significantly influenced the rise of dystopian literature—particularly in the poetry of Arab women.

This essay examined selected poems by contemporary Arab women poets, including Ibtisam Al-Mutawakkil (Yemen), Saniyah Ṣāliḥ (Syria), Monirah Sa'ad Khalkhal (Algeria), Fadwa Ṭūqān (Palestine), Bushrā al-Bustānī and Lamī'ah 'Abbās al-'Imārah (Iraq), Su'ād al-Ṣabbāḥ, (Kuwait), and Jalīlah Riḍā (Egypt). Their poetry collectively reveals that ideals such as peacebuilding, poverty eradication, and justice cannot be realized without wise governance grounded in the principle of social justice. Indeed, the establishment of security and social stability depends on the equitable distribution of rights and the protection of human dignity. Without these, even the most physically beautiful cities devolve into dystopian spaces—void of meaning, emotion, and humanity.

Among the poets studied, Bushrā al-Bustānī and Su'ād al-Ṣabbāḥ most vividly portray dystopian themes, often highlighting the trauma of war and its psychological and societal consequences. Fadwa Ṭūqān's poetry frequently centers on poverty and social oppression, articulated in both subtle and direct narrative forms. Meanwhile, al-Ṣabbāḥ and al-Bustānī explore the long-term effects of war, displacement, and injustice through rich dystopian imagery.

The poems discussed in this study reflect the profound impact of recent wars and unrest in the Middle East on Muslim Arab women's literary expression. Despite the darkness they portray, these poets nurture a shared hope for change and renewal. Their use of metaphor, symbolism, and free verse (white poetry) illustrates a poetic resistance that transcends despair. Compared to the poetry of women in other regions, these themes are more prominent in Arab women's poetry—whereas in other cultures, such motifs appear less frequently and are often limited to a few scattered lines.

In sum, Muslim Arab women poets have responded to historical tragedies and socio-political crises with powerful literary voices that illuminate the dystopian dimensions of their societies while preserving a thread of hope for a just and humane future.

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