

## The Phenomenon of Ambiguity in Contemporary Algerian Poetry within the Algerian Critical Experience

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### Abstract

*The phenomenon of ambiguity has become a defining feature of contemporary Arabic poetry, creating a significant gap between the poet and the reader. This has led to ongoing debates among poets, readers, and critics regarding the language of this poetry, as well as whether this ambiguity is intentional or spontaneous, a mere stylistic choice or an act of creativity. Contemporary Algerian poetry has not been exempt from this trend, as it has undergone numerous transformations, both artistic and aesthetic. These changes have expanded its intellectual and epistemological vision, opening its semantic horizon to diverse readings and interpretations. The text now presents symbolic images that challenge the reader's understanding, encouraging multiple interpretations. Against this backdrop, our research, titled "The Phenomenon of Ambiguity in Contemporary Algerian Poetry in the Algerian Critical Experience," falls under the first axis (modern Algerian poets and critics). The study aims to address the following question: How does the Algerian critic interpret the ambiguous Algerian poetic text? Is this a local reading, or is there an external authority shaping it? The research further seeks to explore the aesthetics of the contemporary Algerian poem as presented to the attentive reader.*

**Keywords:** *Ambiguity Phenomenon, Contemporary Algerian Poetry, Critical Experience, Transformations, Interpretation, Aesthetics Of The Poem.*

*Received: 21/04/2025 ; Accepted : 23/12/2025 ; Published : 22/02/2026*

### Introduction

The contemporary Algerian poetic text has undergone significant changes in both artistic and aesthetic dimensions. Its intellectual and cognitive vision has expanded, contributing to the broadening of its semantic horizon. This shift has opened the door for multiple readings and interpretations of the text. Today, the poetic text has become a coded space, rich in symbolic meanings, reflecting the poet's ability to create and innovate artistically. Rather than offering a straightforward text for immediate understanding, the poet introduces semantic symbols that invite the reader to engage with the potential meanings of the poem. These symbols can evolve and regenerate, depending on the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical subtleties embedded in the text and its circumstances. One of the phenomena that has significantly contributed to these changes—both artistic and aesthetic—is ambiguity, a feature that has existed since the early days of Arabic poetry. Poets often resort to ambiguity because it stimulates intellectual engagement from the reader. Ambiguity does not merely belong to the text but is also dependent on the interaction between the text and the reader. Modern critical theories, especially those in the deconstructive tradition, have empowered the reader, making them an active participant in the process of reading. This approach treats the text as a living material that evolves through the reader's experience, transforming the poem into a collaborative creation between poet and audience.

#### *1. The Critical Position of Ambiguity in Contemporary Arabic Poetry:*

Ambiguity has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary Arabic poetry. It is no longer confined to the realms of realism or rationality. The reasons for this ambiguity are diverse, involving both the poet and the text itself. Additionally, ambiguity often stems from the reader's own interpretative process (Al-Atawi, 1999). In contemporary poetry, the reliance on clarity is not favored; instead, ambiguity serves as a key element of the poetic experience. This phenomenon cannot merely be attributed to the poet's personal desire for complexity, nor should it be seen as a mere preference for artistic self-expression. It is, rather, a

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result of the poet's life experiences and cultural influences, which deeply affect the poems they write. These cultural elements contribute to creating an atmosphere of pleasant yet complex ambiguity in the text.

Poets often employ ambiguity in their work to keep up with the changing world around them. They feel the need to innovate, to be at the forefront of artistic expression. However, the very nature of this challenge can contradict the expectations of the audience, who may be surprised or confused by unfamiliar forms and themes. This leads to a negative impact on the perceived value of the text at times (Helmy, 2010). Therefore, ambiguity is not merely a stylistic choice; it reflects a deeper level of poetic thought. It is "a characteristic of poetic thinking, not just a feature of poetic expression," suggesting that ambiguity goes beyond linguistic structures or the formal aspects of the poem (Ismail, 1994).

Contemporary critics have not viewed the ambiguity in modern poetry as a temporary or accidental phenomenon that disappears once its causes are removed. Instead, they recognize it as an essential feature of the poetry itself. Poets have shifted from one style to another, from direct and declarative language to a more nuanced, subtle form of expression. Ambiguity is seen as carrying expressive power that reflects the nature and significance of contemporary poetry. As Ahmed Mohamed Al-Matouq explains, ambiguity is "one of the most important sources of inspiration, attraction, and influence" (Al-Matouq, 2006, p. 83). Some critics have sought to understand why contemporary poetry is ambiguous and justify its existence. Ezzedin Ismail argues that ambiguity is not a unique feature of modern poetry, but rather a quality shared by both old and new poetry, with the relationship between them growing deeper over time.

William Ambson, in his book *Seven Patterns of Ambiguity*, defines ambiguity as "the possibility that a phrase has many meanings," explaining that ambiguity can result from hesitation or uncertainty about meaning. Ambson further differentiates between ambiguity and vagueness. While ambiguity adds layers of meaning, vagueness can obscure the creative process and hinder understanding (Ambson, 2000, p. 24). According to Khalil Musa, ambiguity in contemporary poetry adds meaning rather than diminishing it, as it allows for the multiplicity of interpretations without hindering the creative process (Musa, 1994).

The structure of modern poetry inherently calls for ambiguity. Traditional poetic forms, with their clear and direct meanings, are no longer sufficient to capture the complexities of modern life. Words themselves have evolved, becoming outdated and failing to keep pace with the times. Contemporary poets are no longer bound to external realities such as description, praise, or boasting. Instead, they choose not to define a singular direction or purpose for their poems, leaving the meaning and interpretation open-ended. In doing so, the poem's structure becomes fluid, and its connotations are not fixed, allowing for a more dynamic and multifaceted experience.

While many critics have seen ambiguity as enriching poetic experiences and enhancing creativity, not all appreciate this shift. Some, such as Ibrahim al-Samarrai, argue that ambiguity stems from a poet's inability to fully express their poetic experience, a lack of maturity, or an intentional effort to complicate the meaning. Al-Samarrai criticizes the complexity of modern poetry, suggesting that many readers, unfamiliar with the intricacies of contemporary language, fail to grasp the meaning behind ambiguous expressions. As he notes, "Most of them did not suffer in the company of the word, and did not suffer from the fact that the linguistic material is closely related to the souls of its owners, because it discloses them" (Al-Samarrai, 1992, p. 21).

In any case, we cannot blame the poet for creating ambiguity in their work, as the circumstances of their time or society often push them toward it. As Adonis states, "Poetry is a picture of our contemporary life in its absurdity and dysfunction; it is a picture of cracks in the contemporary being" (Adonis, 1979, p. 124). He also defines poetry as "pure and clear," which makes the poem "a shallow surface," while, conversely, it can also be "the opposite of the thumb that makes the poem a closed cave" (Adonis, 1979, p. 124). This reflects the suffering and bitterness of life, which forces the poet to embrace ambiguity. The poet often finds himself confronting a mix of knowledge in science, history, mythology, religion, and philosophy, addressing them all together. This results in a semantic crowd that can confuse the reader (Boudraa, 1999). Critics agree that the text must express human, social, psychological, and existential relations and evolve its components and techniques to reflect contemporary experiences.

Many scholars and critics argue that ambiguity in contemporary Arabic poetry has several causes, including:

1. *Ambiguity of the Idea*

Modern poetry often relies on visions and dreams, which contribute to its mysterious quality. Since the origins of the ideas are unclear, the results are often ambiguous. Ghali Shoukry suggests, "It is not the manipulation of weights, language, or image that is the secret behind this mystery, but rather tragic visions in their deep essence that formulate this poetry on a guide of ambiguity and complexity" (Shoukry, 1996, p. 12). The connection between will, reality, and psychological disorder leads to moderate ambiguity, requiring the reader to search for deeper meaning.

2. *The Poem is Out of the Ordinary*

Modern poetry did not develop in a linear fashion. Poets were influenced by various schools, such as surrealism and symbolism, which moved away from traditional Arabic forms. Some poets, like Nazik al-Malaika and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, tried to merge authenticity with contemporary approaches.

3. *The Paradox of the Old and New Contexts*

Western influence played a significant role in shaping modern poetry. This shift created a gap between the poet and the reader. As the concepts and artistic landmarks of modern poetry began to emerge, the reader was required to engage in deeper thought, something that was not necessary in classical poetry (Al-Nuwaihi, 1990, p. 139).

4. *The Scarcity of Constructive Integrative Models*

Modern poetry lacked a clear model to follow, which resulted in varied outcomes that didn't adhere to a cohesive structure. Modernity, with its inherent ambiguity, undermined traditional artistic conventions, such as rhetorical images, standard language, and musicality. As a result, modern poetry often resembled artistic prose (Al-Atawi, 1999, p. 169).

5. *Combining Currents of Thought*

The fusion of diverse intellectual currents has influenced the mental and emotional state of the individual. This mix of contemporary culture, with its influence on the poet's thought process, creates ambiguity. The reader's understanding may be affected by their own cultural and intellectual background, which may differ from that of the poet.

6. *Relying on the Correspondence of the Senses*

The use of sensory correspondences—such as associating taste with touch—intensifies the blurring effect in modern poetry. Poets frequently employ ancient myths, which, through time and reinterpretation, have evolved. Some of these myths are from non-Arabic cultures, further expanding the poet's awareness and leading to more complex layers of meaning (Radwan, 1989, p. 14).

Contemporary critics argue that the modern poetic text is a collaborative effort. The poet contributes by summarizing the experiences they have lived, while language adds its suggestive meanings. The reader also plays a role, bringing their artistic experience and aesthetic taste to the text. The relationship between these elements forms a hierarchical structure, with the text at its apex, surrounded by language, data, and a critical and receptive base. The reader must enhance their tools and mechanisms before engaging with texts that may challenge them with hidden meanings and symbolism (Abdul Wahid, 1996, p. 95). The reader can be likened to a fisherman, choosing and refining their tools to gather more insights from the sea of creativity. However, not all insights are attainable, and some may remain elusive. This process becomes a psychological reward for the reader, who tests their ability to navigate the complexities of creative fields. These challenges are considered one of the primary aesthetic qualities of ambiguity in contemporary Arabic poetry.

The national crisis that the Algerian people endured produced a tragic sensibility, leading poets to search for a conscious and refined form of art by discovering the "self." This self was seen as imperfect, and poets returned to the beginnings of things, seeking their purest sources. These sources were believed to contain intellectual and artistic qualities that could embody the national and ideological constants. As a result, the language of poetry became unfamiliar to the reader, crafted in a manner that adhered to a dynamic tradition (Saadallah, 1977, p. 25).

However, despite this awareness, we observe in the 1990s contradictory visions. Poets began to view classical Arabic as insufficient for expression and revelation, prompting them to turn to colloquial language, believing it would bring the necessary modernity to the text. Yet, this shift led to a double-edged consequence: it opened the door to modernist movements that undermined traditional forms and, on the other hand, led to the destruction of the poet's own language. Moreover, the Algerian poetic text began to incorporate foreign language vocabulary, which poets believed added a layer of creativity. The poetry also expanded into new musical forms, particularly prose poetry, which remains in development, with supporters and detractors alike. Despite this, prose poetry is considered a form of experimentation in contemporary Algerian poetry. Abdul Rahman Bouzaba represents an exceptional case with his shift to prose poetry. He wrote both classical and free verse with great distinction and mastery (Ajnak, 2018, p. 137). His prose poetry stands out, especially when compared to poets who also explored this form, such as Abdelhamid Ben Heddouga, Rabiaa Jalti, and Mohamed Zetili. One example is Bouzaba's *Mumkin al-Shi'r wa Mustabil al-Ishq* [Poetry is Possible, Love is Impossible], a collection of his prose poetry.

#### *The Mystery in Contemporary Algerian Poetry:*

Critics, both old and modern, have long sought to explore the phenomenon of poetic ambiguity. The ancients linked this ambiguity to strangeness, asserting that the reader's creative act could only be achieved through imagination. The process would open up the space for artistic fantasy. As al-Jahiz (1998) put it, "The more something is removed from its origin, the stranger it becomes; and the stranger it is, the more distant it is in the imagination, and the more distant it is, the more entertaining, and the more entertaining, the more wondrous" (p. 89).

In contrast, the critic Azeddine Ismail suggests that ambiguity in contemporary Arabic poetry is rooted in the essence of poetry itself, rather than merely its expression. According to Ismail (1998), "It is deeply connected to the thinking behind the poetry and not just its outward expression. Therefore, it is more connected to the core of poetry and its origins, and we must analyze the nature of this ambiguity to understand its essential aesthetic value" (p. 188-189).

These differing perspectives on the definition of ambiguity in poetry reveal various interpretations within the modernist movement. Each poet offers their own explanation and justification for this phenomenon, shaped by the individual poet's foundational influences and Western cultural backgrounds that significantly impacted their poetic construction.

The modernist poet no longer limits himself to what is familiar, to his own subjectivity and immediate surroundings. Instead, he extends his exploration to philosophical, mystical, mythological, and historical realms, among others. According to Abdul Rahman Muhammad al-Qud, "These various forms of knowledge do not merely provide news and information; they are presented in the form of questions at times, judgments at other times, and cognitive generation at still other times" (2002, p. 24-25). These elements are harmonized in a singular aesthetic form. Therefore, there are two primary reasons behind the ambiguity in modern poetry: external and internal factors.

The external reason pertains to the poets' backgrounds and their exposure to Western cultural and literary movements, particularly the Symbolist and Surrealist schools, which heavily influenced modern poetry. These poets also drew from ancient Arabic texts saturated with ambiguity, such as mystical and philosophical writings that leaned toward estrangement. The internal reason, however, is tied to the poetic text itself — the language, the imagery, and the symbolism, among other components. As Adonis (1982) explains, "Ambiguity is a description used by the reader for a text they cannot fully comprehend, cannot

control, and cannot integrate into their knowledge base. Modernity here stretches on with its elements and structure. Such discontinuity leads to the loss of the reader, whose only resources are memory and tradition" (p. 208).

The ambiguity in the vision often stems from the novelty of the situation being expressed by the poet, a situation that the reader is not accustomed to, and thus the text and its vision are perceived as ambiguous.

This transformation in Arabic poetry was also evident in Algerian poetry, especially from the 1990s onward. When one looks at the trajectory of modernity in Algerian poetry during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s and the following decade, a turning point in the development of the modern poem becomes clear. Poets had to move beyond traditional modes of expression and seek out a new poetic language that could reflect their emotional experiences, their poetic stances, and reveal their unique visions of life. As Bashir Taweriret (2010) asserts, "The subject of the modern text is born anew after the writing, and with the contemporary reader, the text is reborn with fertility and growth. Therefore, the reading of modern texts is an uncovering process that seeks to recreate the text, whereas traditional reading is merely a superficial engagement with existing meanings" (p. 421).

Modern Algerian poets do not use limited or everyday vocabulary that fits ordinary communicative language. As Azeddine Ismail (1998) notes, these poets move beyond simple communicative language to create their own distinct poetic language (p. 165). Thus, during this period, the poem no longer follows a straightforward, linear structure. As the poet Akhdar Flous expresses in his poem:

"Yesterday she came to complain,

Her hands feeling the pulse of the newspaper,

Your poetry is difficult... Its meanings are far from me,

I said: 'Oh, lady, don't read it...

For you, alone, are the most beautiful poem" (Flous, 2002, p. 11).

On another note, poet Omar Azrag clarifies that he seeks ambiguity in his poetry to build his own personal world, but the reader can enter it by decoding the symbols in his verses. He says, "Ambiguity is my garden, And the surface is their vineyard, Nothing proceeds like this... Unravel the symbols, and you will see my clarity starkly" (Azrag, 1985, p. 51).

The poetic language through which contemporary Algerian poets express their experiences varies in its degree of ambiguity from one poet to another. This variance can be attributed to differences in the depth of their experiences, their linguistic proficiency, and generational changes. For example, in one of his revolutionary poems, Abou El Kacem Saadallah states:

"Let the years pass / The evenings of sobs,

And days of hatred, teeth bared,

Nights stained with blood / And hills of shame and chains,

Crushing our bodies / Their hammers care not if they strike

Our ribs or our bones."

Despite the dominance of a direct style, there are scattered expressions that evoke the condition of Algerians under colonialism, such as "days of hatred" and "stained nights." Furthermore, the symbolic meanings imbued in certain words reflect the poet's political engagement and emotional depth.

Among the more ambiguous examples is the poetry of Mohamed Salah Baouia, whose *Songs of Struggle* is filled with numerous symbols. These symbols intensify the meaning and heighten the poetic effectiveness by layering new dimensions into the text. Similarly, the poet Abdelali Razaki, in his poem *Sailing Through the Maze of Zero*, employs language that deviates from the standard linguistic norm to convey his psychological state, which is colored by despair and loss of hope.

In the poetry of Hamri Bahri, especially in his collection *What Is the Guilt of the Nail, O Wood?*, the title itself contains an inherent paradox that signals the poet's extraordinary linguistic efforts, transcending the usual conventions of language. This innovative approach to language is a hallmark of the 1990s and beyond, when the new poem drowned in ambiguity, mirroring the prevailing atmosphere of the time—an era defined by fear, uncertainty about the future, and the rejection of oppressive new political realities.

As Azeddine Mihoubi (1999) noted, "The literary works that emerged in the 1990s were characterized by the use of language laden with pessimism, darkness, and an overabundance of ambiguity and the unknown... since the creator does not accept the answers of politics, but rather the practices of the human being" (p. 22). This shift is evident in collections such as *The Palm Tree and the Oar*, *The Curse and Forgiveness*, and *Globalization of Love, Globalization of Fire*.

Thus, ambiguity as a feature of contemporary Algerian poetry does not merely reflect an artistic frivolity, but rather it expresses the poets' deep, symbolic engagement with the unfolding events of their lives and the complex realities of the time. It represents their distinctive vision of life, making them stand apart from others in how they articulate their experiences.

#### 4. *The Manifestations of Ambiguity in Contemporary Algerian Poetry:*

##### 1. *The Multiplicity of Sources of Vision:*

Ambiguity arises in poetry when the vision is expansive and scattered. A clear example of this is found in Abdelilah Hamadi's poem "*The Chauffeur*", where the poet flips through the pages of Arab and Berber history, taking the reader to distant places and figures from the past. This complexity demands interpretation and deep reading to satisfy the reader's curiosity. Similarly, we find ambiguity when the poet delves into Sufism and its symbols, as seen in Abdelillah Al-Ashi's poem "*Awakening of the Clouds*". Despite the distance between the reader and the vision in the poem, the more ambiguity it introduces, the more it stimulates curiosity and the desire to decipher its mysteries.

##### 2. *The Use of Symbolism:*

Symbolism in contemporary Algerian poetry varies in its success. Some poets employ symbols effectively, while others may overuse them, leading to a strain in the text. One successful example of symbol usage is found in the poem "*The Mahdi*" by Osman Loussef, where the phoenix and Sindbad are used as symbols, forming a metaphorical image that enhances the meaning of the text:

"Just as the Phoenix shakes off the ashes,  
The Mahdi, with a heart burning with zeal,  
Rises, sending forth guidance,  
Between the valleys and the hills,  
Like Sindbad, he wounds the sea,

And sweeps away the darkness"

(Osman Loussef, *Zanjabil*, Homa Press, Algeria, 1999, p. 40)

In this case, the poet uses the symbols of the phoenix and Sindbad not in isolation but integrates them into the broader context, enriching the poem's imagery.

### 3. *The Dream and Abstraction:*

Algerian poets often use abstraction or dreams to form their visions, which result in a sense of "strangeness" due to the abandonment of reason, the suspension of logic, the breaking of objective constants, and the exploration of unconventional realms. As Ibrahim Ramani (1991) explains, this leads to "a new rhetorical system that challenges the traditional" (p. 382). The dream world allows for the dismantling of logical boundaries and opens up imaginative and symbolic possibilities. In the poem by Akhdar Barka, "*You Are Here in the White Darkness*", the poet creates a dreamlike reality that blurs the lines between sleep, death, and rebirth:

"Here you are in the white darkness,

Seeing your body, connected to the unseen,

Your awakening on my land is mixed with sleep,

A possibility, another writing,

Flying for a moment like a butterfly,

The clay pulls you back"

(Akhdar Barka, *Poetic Works*, Drassim, Algeria, 2013, p. 110-111)

In this passage, the poet builds a world that shifts between the real and the imagined, where sleep is seen as a minor death, and the soul begins a new journey. The vision is intertwined with modern knowledge, uniting the sensory world and transcending the boundaries of earthly existence.

### 4. *Omissions and the Use of Ellipsis:*

Omissions, or "ellipsis," have also become a favored technique for Algerian poets. They leave spaces and incomplete phrases that provoke the reader to think deeply. One of the poets who has mastered this technique is Abdelillah Al-Ashi, especially in his collection "*The Place of Confession*". The use of ellipsis and the suspension of meaning create a tension in the text, compelling the reader to actively engage in interpretation. Another technique that has expanded the space of ambiguity is the manipulation of word order and the disruption of syntactical norms, which can sometimes seem like a violation of grammatical standards.

## Conclusion:

In contemporary Algerian poetry, ambiguity compels the poetic language to become a creative, imaginative tool based on metaphor, paradox, and deviance from standard logic. It provides a fitting means of expressing the poet's innermost self and the depths of their soul. Consequently, the language of poetry should differ from everyday communication, which relies on logic and clarity. Ambiguity emerges from the shift from ordinary linguistic norms to the rules of poetic language, which follow modernist ideals with complex conditions. When ambiguity exists in a text without clear subjectivity, it leads to increased confusion for the reader, who finds themselves struggling with a myriad of symbols and myths.

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