

MARCIN MIETEN
(Warsaw, Poland)
ORCID: 0009-0009-7196-4628

Political Themes in the Late Poetry of Nāzik al-Malā'ika

Abstract

The life of the Iraqi poet Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1923–2007) coincided with a period of significant changes and disturbances on the Middle Eastern political scene. This was a time of political upheavals in Iraq and the whole Middle East. In this paper, I will present political themes in the late poetry of Nāzik al-Malā'ika. It will focus on the selected works from the last three volumes of poetry by the Iraqi author, more precisely from *Šağarat al-qamar* (Eng. *The Moon Tree*), *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr* (Eng. *The Sea Changes its Colors*) and *Aş-Şalāt wa at-tawra* (Eng. *Prayer and Revolution*) created over the years 1968–1978. The historical events which directly impacted the written works will be listed. The form of their portrayal created by the Iraqi poet will also be analyzed, often balancing on the verge of realism and myth, and even bearing hagiographic features. A significant part of the paper will focus on reconstructing Nāzik al-Malā'ika's position on selected issues of world politics on the basis of her biography, previously discussed poems, and other additional sources.

Keywords: Iraqi Poetry, Nāzik al-Malā'ika, Iraq, Modern Poetry, Politics

Introduction

Nāzik al-Malā'ika is one of the people who changed poetry not only of the Middle East, but of the entire world. In her works, she dealt with various topics, but in this paper, I am going to focus on the political themes present in her latest work,

more precisely, from her last three volumes – *Šağarat al-qamar*¹ (*The Moon Tree*), *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr*² (*The Sea Changes Its Colors*) and *Aş-Şalāt wa-aṭ-tawra*³ (*Prayer and Revolution*). Prior to this, however, I would like to write a few words about the life of the poet herself. The vast majority of information about her life comes from her own writings, such as the introduction to the volume *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr*, which is already an attempt to create a myth around herself.

Short biography

Nāzik al-Malā'ika was born on the 23rd of August 1923 into a rather influential Iraqi family of intellectuals. Her father, Šādiq al-Malā'ika, taught Arabic grammar at one of Baghdad's high schools. He left behind many works, the most important being the twenty-volume encyclopedia titled *Dā'irat ma'ārif an-nās* (*The Encyclopedia of People*). He also wrote poetry. Nāzik's mother was Arabic *Salmā al-Malā'ika* – a renowned poet who frequently published her works in many Iraqi magazines and newspapers under the pseudonym *Umm Nizār al-Malā'ika*.⁴

Nāzik al-Malā'ika developed an interest in poetry at a young age, having written her first poem when she was only 10 years old. However, the first time she shared her work with a wider audience was while she was studying at the *Dār al-Mu'allimīn al-'Ulyā* (*Teachers College*). It was there that political themes first started to emerge in her work. Together with her mother, she composed poems in honor of Rašid 'Alī al-Kaylānī, who had carried out a coup d'état on April the 1st, 1941, overthrowing the pro-British Prime Minister Nūrī as-Sa'id and 'Abd al-Ilāh. Unfortunately for us, these poems of hers did not survive.⁵

In 1947, the poet published her first complete collection of poems, titled *'Āšiqat al-layl* (*Mistress of the Night*). Shortly after, she wrote her most famous work, titled *Al-Kūlirā* (*Cholera*),⁶ which, as she claimed, made her the first to have written a work in free verse. The dispute over who wrote the first poem of this type still continues.

In 1952, she was awarded a scholarship to attend the prestigious Princeton University in New Jersey. She returned to the US in the late 1950s. In 1959, she

¹ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Dīwān. Al-Muğallad aṭ-ṭānī*, Bayrūt 1997.

² Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr*, Al-Qāhira 1998.

³ Poems in: Emily Drumsta, *Revolt Against the Sun. The Selected Poetry of Nāzik Al-Malā'ikah*, London 2020.

⁴ Al-Malā'ika, *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr*, pp. 6–9.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Dīwān. Al-Muğallad aṭ-ṭānī*, pp. 138–142.

obtained a master's degree in Comparative Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Wisconsin (USA).⁷

After returning to the country, she worked at different Iraqi universities, but after the takeover of power by the Al-Ba'ṭ Party (*Ḥizb al-Ba'ṭ al-'Arabī al-İstirākī*) she decided to move to the neighboring Kuwait with her family. After Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's invasion of the country, the family moved to Cairo.⁸

At the end of her life, the poet suffered from Parkinson's disease. She passed away at the age of 84 in a hospital in Cairo on June the 20th, 2007. She was laid to rest in one of the suburbs of Cairo, next to her beloved husband.⁹

Nāzik al-Malā'ika's Poetry – an Overview

The early work of Nāzik al-Malā'ika is considered to be part of the end of Arab Romanticism. Romanticism emerged in Arabic literature approximately a century after it did in Europe. The first literary works in this style were written at the start of the 20th century. Romantic works were often characterized by themes of feelings and emotions. In contrast to the Romantic European works, there were hardly any themes of national liberation present.

Works written later in the poet's career are more aligned with the modernist movement, particularly in terms of form.¹⁰ Nāzik al-Malā'ika's poetry frequently explored themes of religion and politics, as well as emotions and emotional experiences. However, they are dominated by pessimism and fear. The key motif in her work is nature, which the poet employs to evoke an atmosphere of darkness and gloom.

The poet's most important and most appreciated work is the poem *Al-Kūlirā* from the volume *Ṣaḏāyā wa-ramād*. To this day, there is an ongoing dispute among Arab literary scholars and critics as to who was the first poet to write an Arabic free verse work. Some point to Nāzik al-Malā'ika and her aforementioned poem, while others point to another Iraqi poet, *Badr Ṣākīr as-Sayyāb* and his poem *Hal kāna ḥubban?* (*Was It Love?*) from the volume *Azhār dābila* (in *Withered Flowers*), which

⁷ Emily Drumsta, 'Must-read Classics by Women: Two New Translations of Nazik al-Malaika (1923–2007)', Viewed 22 August 2023, <https://arablit.org/2017/08/23/must-read-classics-by-women-two-new-translations-of-nazik-al-malaika/>.

⁸ Simone Stevens, 'Nazik al-Malaika (1923–2007) Iraqi Woman's Journey Changes Map of Arabic Poetry', Viewed 31 August 2023, <https://www.aljadid.com/content/nazik-al-malaika-1923-2007-iraqi-woman's-journey-changes-map-arabic-poetry>.

⁹ Allisa Rubin, 'Nazik al-Malaika, 83, Poet Widely Known in Arab World, Is Dead', Viewed 31 August 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/27/arts/27malaika.html>.

¹⁰ Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Qaḏāyā aš-ši'r al-mu'āṣir*, Bayrūt 1981.

was published a year earlier on November the 29th, 1946. Nāzik al-Malā'ika said that she had written her poem two weeks before *Hal kāna ḥubban?*. I do not think anyone will be able to settle this dispute. One thing is certain – both figures had an invaluable influence on the development of not only Iraqī, but all Arabic poetry.

Political topics in Nāzik al-Malā'ika's late works

The volume titled *Šağarat al-qamar* was published in 1968, 11 years after the publication of the previous volume, titled *Qirarat al-mawğa* (*At the Bottom of the Wave*). This is a period of turbulent events on the political scene of Iraq and in the entire Middle East. This idea also resonated in the works of Nāzik al-Malā'ika.

On July 14th, 1958, the Free Officers organization, which was inspired by the Egyptian group led by Nasser, carried out a coup d'état. It was led by 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim and 'Abd as-Salām Muḥammad 'Ārif. As a result of the revolution, King Faisal II and many members of his family members were killed. The former Prime Minister Nūrī as-Sa'īd also lost his life. Iraq was overthrown and a new regime was introduced in this way. A republic was declared.¹¹

After the revolution, the Arab Federation – a short-lived federation between Iraq and Jordan, whose head of state was Faisal II – also ceased to exist. It had only existed for half a year.

The power in Iraq was taken over by Qāsim, who became the prime minister, although he referred to himself as the supreme leader or chief (Ar. *za'īm*). He ruled Iraq until another coup d'état in 1963, which led to his assassination.¹²

In honor of the July 1958 revolution, Nāzik al-Malā'ika wrote the poem *Taḥiyyat li-Ġumhūriyyat al-'Irāq* (*Greeting to the Republic of Iraq*).¹³ The author herself admitted that she wrote this poem on the occasion of the revolution. Most likely, it was created immediately after the events described.

The poem appears to be a form of propaganda. It is difficult to say whether the views expressed in it are true. Perhaps the poet wanted to keep her job at one of the Iraqī universities by writing a flattering poem, or she did it out of fear of being considered an American agent. The coup d'état occurred during her scholarship trips to the USA. On the other hand, the poet developed an interest in politics at a young age. In earlier volumes, clear references to pan-Arab ideas and a general aversion to British colonial policy and US interference in Middle East policy can be found.

¹¹ Nikshoy C. Chatterji, *A History of Modern Middle East*, New Delhi 1987, pp. 104.

¹² Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1989, s. 59.

¹³ Al-Malā'ika, *Dīwān. Al-Muğallad at-tānī*, pp. 445–450.

Al-Malā'ika makes use of a series of comparisons to depict the newly established republic. She compares it to a little smiling girl, a rose or coolness on a hot day. For her, the new system is primarily a small creature that must be taken care of by the taken-over and happy citizens.

However, there are many dangers that threaten the republic. The poet is afraid that the threat may come from Iraq as well as other countries. She mentions here the recently formed State of Israel and the USA. The establishment of the State of Israel was still a new development at that time, as its independence had been declared on May the 14th, 1948. Everyone was aware that another armed conflict between Israel and other Arab states could break out at any moment. This can also be thought of as a fear caused by the Cold War era. There loomed a threat of a war even more devastating than the Second World War – a nuclear war. On the other hand, Iraqis could feel threatened by Israel. No one knew how far the Israelis would go in their plans to conquer lands in the Middle East.

After the revolution, there was a lot of social unrest, which was mainly caused by left-wing political parties. The Iraqi Communist Party (*Al-Hizb aš-Šuyū'ī al-'Irāqī*) was the leading political party in Iraq. The bloodiest clashes took place in Kirkuk, in Kurdistan (in northern Iraq), in 1959. Their victims were mainly the Turkmen population. Dozens of people were killed and over 100 were injured.¹⁴

These events inspired Al-Malā'ika to write *Talāt uġniyyāt šuyū'īyya* (*Three Communist Songs*).¹⁵ In them, she portrays communists as savage beasts who mercilessly prey on their victims. They look for conspiracies everywhere, even in the most absurd situations. The poet often uses the color red in her poems. Not only is it the color of blood, but it is also a symbol of communism itself. The flag of the Iraqi Communist Party features a pigeon with three red stars and the party's name on a white oval, all on a red background.

Talāt uġniyyāt šuyū'īyya is also an attempt to explore the role of Arab states during the Cold War. Badr Šākir as-Sayyāb also wrote works with similar themes. In 1959, the Iraqi daily *Al-Hurriyya* published a series of short texts titled *Kuntu šuyū'īyyann* (*I was a communist*). They appeared over the course of seventeen weeks. In these poems, the poet describes his involvement in the development of the Iraqi Communist Party until his decision to leave its ranks in 1954.¹⁶ For this reason,

¹⁴ Sarah Balter, 'Iraq's Kirkuk remembers Turkmen massacre', Viewed 31 August 08 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/video/social-videos/iraqs-kirkuk-remembers-turkmen-massacre/5f0e1a973e5d6b00171212b5>.

¹⁵ Al-Malā'ika, *Dīwān. Al-Muġallad aṭ-ṭānī*, pp. 566–572.

¹⁶ Elliott Colla, *Badr Šākir al-Sayyāb, Cold War Poet*, 'Middle Eastern Literatures' 18/3 (2015), pp. 247–263.

according to Emily Drumsta, Nāzik al-Malā'ika should be considered, along with Badr Šākīr as-Sayyāb, as one of the poets of the Cold War era.¹⁷

Another political poem from the collection *Šağarat al-qamar is Uğniyya ilà al-aṭlāl al-'arabiyya* (*Song About Traces of Arab Encampments*).¹⁸ For the first time in her entire career, Al-Malā'ika clearly drew upon the Arab poetic tradition. It must be remembered, however, that the theme of ruins was also extremely popular during the lifetime of Iraqi women. The poem *Al-Aṭlāl* (*Ruins*) by the Egyptian poet Ibrāhīm Nāğī is worth recalling here. The poem was included in the repertoire of the legendary Arab music icon, Umm Kulṭūm.¹⁹

In the poem, Al-Malā'ika reminisces about the Arab golden age, when some of the most outstanding poetry was created. This poetry later became a stylistic benchmark for future authors. At the beginning of the poem, she recalls the names of several places that were mentioned in the works considered to be the most talented poets of the pre-Muslim period, such as Imru' al-Qays, Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā or Ṭarafa Ibn al-'Abd. All three authors were known for their contributions to the *mu'allaqas*. These works were regarded as exemplars of perfection and poetic craftsmanship.²⁰

Al-Malā'ika criticizes the Arabs' passivity towards the political situation in the region. The main theme presented in the work is the depiction of Tel Aviv, which was written in the former lands of the Arabs' forefathers – Nizār, Bakr and Wā'il. Tel Aviv was founded as a Jewish settlement in the early 20th century, located near the port of Jaffa. The poet emphasizes that the lands where Israel currently exists hold great importance to the Arab people. She mentions Nizār Ibn Ma'ad, who is believed to be the ancestor of many Arab tribes, as well as the ancient tribe of Bakr Ibn Wā'il. In all of the discussed works, there is also a common theme of pan-Arabism, an idea that was dear to the poet's heart.

The collection *Yuğayyir alwānahu al-baħr* was published in 1977, when the poet moved to Kuwait. She left her homeland in 1970 due to the rise to power of the Al-Ba'ṭ party. This volume differs from the others because, for the first time, the role of God is clearly emphasized. Previously, religion and faith were only mentioned as secondary topics, not as the main focus.

¹⁷ Drumsta, *Revolt against the Sun*, pp. XXVIII–XXIX.

¹⁸ Al-Malā'ika, *Dīwān. Al-Muğallad aṭ-ṭānī*, pp. 465–469.

¹⁹ 'Al-Aṭlāl', Umm Kulṭūm, Viewed 25 August 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z8LvG5tfOE&t=5s>.

²⁰ The most popular *mu'allaqa* collection includes seven poems. The term itself comes from the verb "to hang" (in Arabic *'allaqa*), because according to one legend, the text of the qasida was to be embroidered with gold thread on silk cloth and hung on the Al-Ka'ba in Mecca, which later became the most important place for Muslims.

In the song titled *Al-Mā' wa-al-bārūd (Water and Ashes)*²¹ Al-Malā'ika talks about the event she described in the introduction. The event occurred during the October War in the Sinai Peninsula, where Egyptian troops were stationed. The October War broke out in October 1973 and ended after 20 days, on October 26th of the same year. It began with a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights, which Israel had occupied since the Six-Day War in 1967, during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Initially, the combined forces of the two Arab states had a decisive advantage, but then Israel began to gain victories. The UN Security Council urged for an immediate end of hostilities. In Egypt, despite not always winning skirmishes, the war was considered a victory. The war lasted throughout the month of Ramadan, requiring the soldiers to fulfill their Muslim duty of fasting.²² However, they lacked water, so they could not break their fast and begin eating iftar. They began to pray for water. Moments later, Israeli planes appeared in the sky and bombed the area. An underground water pipe was also hit, causing water to gush out. This enabled the Egyptian soldiers to break their fast.

The refrain *Allāhu akbar* appears in the poem; meaning *God is the greatest*, it is also known as *takbīr*. It is also a part of the *adān*, a call to prayer. During fasting, the call to prayer at sunset (in Arabic *ṣalāt al-maḡrib*) is a signal that the fast is over. Traditionally, an odd number of dates is eaten and washed down with water or milk. In this poem, the repetitive wording precisely indicates the moment when the Egyptian soldiers might start their meal.

In this work, Al-Malā'ika also alludes to Sufi poetry. In the text, she mentions that God waters her roses. This has rich symbolism, rooted mainly in Sufi poetry. Muslim mystics believed that love was a divine grace bestowed by God.

In the book *Yuḡayyir alwānahu al-baḥr*, attention is drawn to the dual dating of the works. For the first time in her works, Nāzik al-Malā'ika included dates in the Muslim system alongside the dates written in the Gregorian calendar. It is difficult to determine why the author chose to take such an action. Perhaps this form of dating was more popular in Kuwait, where she lived. It is also possible that religion began to play a greater role in her life, which can also be noted in her works. I am intentionally avoiding the use of the word “conversion” because we have very little information about her religious beliefs. It is only known that she came from a Shia family.²³

²¹ Al-Malā'ika, *Yuḡayyir alwānahu al-baḥr*, pp. 45–71.

²² Mohamed Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy, *The October War: Memoirs of Field Marshal El-Gamasy of Egypt*, Cairo 1993, p. 181.

²³ Shabana Nazar, 'Nazik Al-Malaika: Her Poetic Themes and Contribution towards Identity Crisis of Arab Woman', *Tahdhīb al Afkār* July–December (2021).

The last volume of Nāzik al-Malā'ika's work is perhaps the least popular.²⁴ As indicated by the title of the volume, it contains a mixture of two themes that frequently preoccupied the poet: the spiritual and the social spheres. Both themes have evolved into different forms over the years. Regarding the spirit, Al-Malā'ika primarily described her emotions towards people, but also towards God. Regarding the social issues, she discussed the intersection of poverty and politics.

In the book "Prayer and Revolution," the poem *Anāwīn wa-i'lān fī ġarīda 'arabiyya (Headlines and Advertisements from an Arab Newspaper)*²⁵ garners the most attention regarding political issues. I believe that this is one of the most captivating poems of the Al-Malā'ika's entire career. It is surprising not only in terms of its subject matter, but also in its form.

The poem, as the title suggests, is a collection of headlines and advertisements that could be found in Arab newspapers of the time. It was created in August 1973, before the Yom Kippur War, which she wrote about in the previous volume. At the beginning of each verse, political headlines are intertwined with advertisements for clothing and a disorderly and disruptive lifestyle. There are rhetorical questions that are intended to stimulate the readers' imagination. They are concerned with their clothing and playing. Here, one can find a critique of the Western lifestyle, in which, as the poet argues, superficiality, alcohol consumption, and constant pursuit of pleasure are prioritized.

On the other hand, later in the poem, Al-Malā'ika also references Arab popular culture by mentioning the singer Najat. She probably means Nağāt aš-Şağīra, who was at the height of her fame in the 1960s and 1970s. There are also belly dancers who perform while intoxicated. Among the politicians named are Leonid Brezhnev and Richard Nixon, who were the most significant figures in the political landscape of the 1970s. This was particularly true as it was the height of the Cold War. The poet also mentions Golda Meir, who was the Prime Minister of Israel at the time and one of the most influential figures in the Middle East. Meir was nicknamed the "Iron Lady" and often compared to Margaret Thatcher, even though she served as a leader several years before Thatcher. The song also makes references to Palestine. Once again, the poet criticizes the passive attitude of the Arabs who, in her opinion, do not fight hard enough to defend their land. Instead of taking action, they prefer to weep over a lost country and praise it through songs and other forms of art. Despite the lack of hope and concrete action, they persist in repeating their desire to expel the Jews and reclaim their lost homeland. The poet's presentation of the migration of Jews to the Middle East, particularly the terminology she uses, is also unexpected. What

²⁴ Drumsta, *Revolt Against the Sun*, pp. 155–181.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 172–179.

I mean here is the word used for Jerusalem. In Arabic, Jerusalem is called Al-Quds. Here, however, Al-Malā'ika uses a much rarer name for this place, which refers to its Hebrew name (in Arabic *Ūrušalīm*). In this work, the poet criticizes the attitude of Arabs who neglect their rich history and show little interest in their homeland and its affairs. They instead prefer, according to her, to deal with trivial matters.

Summary

Writing about politics sometimes takes courage, but writing poems about politics also takes talent. Nāzik al-Malā'ika had both. Through her works, she reinforced the sense of Arab nationality, often referring to pan-Arabism and religion. However, as I presented in my reflections, she did not always write about Arabs only in a positive way. She also had the courage to criticize the conduct and passivity of others.

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