

Revolution and Political Opposition in Contemporary Arabic Poetry: A Thematic Study of Two Poems by Muzaffar Al-Nawwab

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Abstract : Muzaffar al-Nawwab (1934--) is a modern Iraqi poet, critic, and painter, well-known to Arab youth of the second half of the 20th century for his revolutionary spirit and political activism. For the greater part of his relatively long life, al-Nawwab was wanted 'dead or alive,' so to speak, by most of the Arab regimes and authorities due to his scathing, and at times unsparingly obscene attacks on them. Hence it is that the Arab masses found in his poetry the rebellious expression of their own anger and frustration, stifled by fear for their physical safety. Thus, al-Nawwab's contemporary Arab audience loved and embraced him both as an Arab exile and as a poet. They memorized and celebrated his poems and transmitted them secretly by word of mouth and on compact cassette tapes. He himself recited his own poetry and had it recorded on compact cassette tapes for fans to smuggle from one Arab country to the other. The themes of al-Nawwab's poems are varied, but the most predominant among them is political opposition. In most of his poems, al-Nawwab takes up politics as the major theme. Yet, he often represents it coupled with the leitmotifs of women and wine. Indeed he oscillates almost systematically between political commitment to the revolutionary cause of the masses of his nation and homeland on the one hand and love for women and wine on the other. For the persona in al-Nawwab's poetry, love-longing for the woman and devotion to the cause of revolution and Pan-Arabism are interrelated; each of them readily evokes the other. In this paper, an attempt is made at investigating the treatment and representation of the theme of revolution and political opposition in some of al-Nawwab's poems. This investigation will be conducted through close reading and textual analysis of representative sections of the poetic texts under consideration in the paper. The primary texts for the study are selected passages from two representative poems, namely, 'The Night Song of the Bow Strings' (Watariyyaat Layliyyah) and 'In Wine and Sorrow My Heart [Is Immersed]' (bil-khamri wa bil-huzni fu'aady). Other poems and extracts from al-Nawwab's poetic works will be drawn upon as secondary texts to clarify the arguments in the paper and support its thesis. The discussions and textual analysis of the texts under consideration are meant to show that revolution and undaunted political opposition is a predominant theme in al-Nawwab's poetry, often represented through the use of the leitmotifs of women and wine.

Keywords : Arabic poetry, Muzaffar al-Nawwab, politics, revolution

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