



SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE POETRY OF NÂZIK AL-MALÂ'IKÂ WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO QARÂRA AL-MAWJA

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ABSTRACT

Nâzik al-Malâ'ika (1923–2007), one of the pioneers of modern Arabic free verse, occupies a distinguished place in contemporary Arabic literature for combining poetic innovation with profound social commitment. Her poetry transcends personal emotion to address the moral, political, and humanitarian crises of the modern Arab world. This paper examines the major social issues reflected in her poetic collection Qarâra al-Mawja (The Depth of the Wave), highlighting her vision of society through a humanistic and reformative lens. Using a qualitative textual and thematic approach, the study analyses selected poems that portray the suffering of marginalized individuals, particularly women, the injustice of honour killings, the sanctity of martyrdom, the tyranny of oppressive rulers, political deception, and the collective struggle for freedom as represented in the Algerian Revolution. The study argues that al-Malâ'ika transforms poetry into an instrument of social criticism, exposing moral decay, inequality, violence, and political oppression while advocating justice, compassion, and human dignity. Her symbolic language, emotional intensity, and innovative free-verse technique enable her to merge personal experience with collective consciousness, making her poetry both aesthetically significant and socially transformative. The paper further demonstrates that Qarâra al-Mawja reflects the socio-political realities of the twentieth-century Arab world and establishes al-Malâ'ika as a poet of humanitarian concern whose literary vision transcends national boundaries. Ultimately, the study concludes that her poetry serves not merely as artistic expression but as a powerful moral discourse that challenges injustice, affirms universal human values, and continues to inspire readers and scholars in the fields of modern Arabic literature, feminism, and social criticism.

KEYWORDS: *Nâzik al-Malâ'ika, Qarâra al-Mawja, Modern Arabic Poetry, Social Issues, Feminism and Humanism, Political and Social Criticism, etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern Arabic poetry underwent a profound transformation during the twentieth century as poets sought to redefine both the form and function of poetic expression in response to rapidly changing political, social, and cultural realities. The collapse of traditional social structures, the impact of colonialism, the rise of nationalism, two World Wars, and the emergence of new intellectual movements compelled Arab poets to move beyond the conventions of classical poetry and engage more directly with the complexities of modern life. Poetry gradually evolved from being a medium of lyrical expression into a powerful instrument of social criticism, political resistance, and humanitarian advocacy. Within this literary renaissance, free verse (*al-shi'r al-hurr*) emerged as a revolutionary poetic form that liberated Arabic poetry from the constraints of traditional metres and rhyme, enabling poets to express modern experiences with greater flexibility and emotional intensity. Among the pioneers of this movement, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika occupies a pre-eminent position for her remarkable contribution to both the formal innovation and thematic expansion of modern Arabic poetry. Nâzik al-Malâ'ika

Born in Baghdad in 1923, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika emerged as one of the foremost literary figures of the Arab world whose poetic career coincided with a period of profound social and

political upheaval. Although she is widely celebrated as one of the founders of Arabic free verse through her celebrated poem *al-Kûlîrâ* ("Cholera"), her literary significance extends far beyond technical innovation. Her poetry reflects an extraordinary fusion of artistic creativity, philosophical reflection, psychological insight, and social commitment. Throughout her literary career, she remained deeply concerned with the moral condition of society and the suffering of humanity. Rather than limiting herself to romantic themes or subjective emotions, she employed poetry as a medium through which the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten could be heard. Her works consistently reveal a profound sensitivity toward injustice, alienation, poverty, violence, and the spiritual crisis of modern civilization.

Among her poetic collections, *Qarâra al-Mawja (The Depth of the Wave)* occupies a distinctive place because it presents a mature synthesis of her artistic vision and social consciousness. The collection mirrors the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of twentieth-century Arab society, portraying individuals who struggle against oppression, moral corruption, political tyranny, and social inequality. Through vivid symbolism, emotional intensity, and philosophical depth, Nâzik transforms personal experiences into universal reflections on the human condition. The "wave" in the title itself functions as an



important metaphor, suggesting both the turbulence of external reality and the profound depths of human consciousness where suffering, hope, and resistance coexist. The collection therefore represents not merely a personal poetic experience but also a comprehensive social document reflecting the historical realities of the Arab world.

One of the most remarkable features of *Qarâra al-Mawja* is its persistent concern with social issues that affect ordinary people. Nâzik al-Malâ'ika portrays women as victims of patriarchal oppression while simultaneously affirming their dignity, individuality, and intellectual capacity. Poems such as *Marthiyyat Imra'ah Lâ Qîmata Lahâ* ("Elegy for a Worthless Woman") and *Ghaslan lil-'Âr* ("Washing Away the Shame") expose the cruelty of social customs that reduce women's identity to concepts of honour and reputation. Through these poems, she condemns honour killings, gender discrimination, and the emotional neglect imposed upon women by patriarchal societies. Her feminist vision, however, is not confrontational alone; it is fundamentally humanitarian, seeking to restore compassion, justice, and equality within society. In doing so, she establishes herself as one of the earliest Arab women poets to articulate female consciousness through modern poetic discourse.

The collection also addresses broader political and humanitarian concerns. The poet reflects upon the tragedy of martyrdom, the brutality of war, colonial oppression, authoritarian rule, and the betrayal of political leadership. Her poems reveal deep sympathy for those who sacrifice their lives for justice and freedom while simultaneously exposing the hypocrisy of oppressive rulers whose false promises perpetuate poverty and social misery. Likewise, her poetic response to the Algerian Revolution demonstrates her pan-Arab consciousness and unwavering commitment to anti-colonial resistance. These themes illustrate that Nâzik's poetry transcends national boundaries, presenting universal ideals of freedom, dignity, justice, and human solidarity. Her poetic vision combines emotional sensitivity with ethical responsibility, transforming literature into a powerful vehicle for social awakening and moral reform.

From a literary perspective, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's treatment of social issues is distinguished by its sophisticated use of symbolism, imagery, irony, and psychological realism. Rather than presenting direct political slogans or ideological statements, she allows symbols, metaphors, and emotionally charged images to communicate the hidden realities of oppression and suffering. Her poems invite readers to contemplate the moral consequences of social injustice and encourage critical reflection on prevailing customs and political systems. Consequently, her poetry occupies an important position within the tradition of socially committed literature, where aesthetic beauty is harmoniously combined with ethical purpose.

The present study seeks to examine the major social issues portrayed in *Qarâra al-Mawja*, focusing particularly on the representation of women, honour killings, martyrdom, political tyranny, false promises of authoritarian rulers, and the Algerian Revolution. By employing textual and thematic analysis, the paper explores how Nâzik al-Malâ'ika integrates literary artistry

with social criticism to articulate a vision of justice, compassion, and human dignity. It further argues that her poetry serves not merely as an artistic achievement but also as a moral and intellectual intervention in the social realities of the modern Arab world. Through her innovative poetic language and profound humanitarian outlook, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika transformed modern Arabic poetry into a powerful medium of resistance, social reform, and universal human expression, ensuring her enduring place among the most influential voices in twentieth-century Arabic literature.

Life and Works of Nâzik al-Malâ'ika: A Brief Introduction

Nâzik al-Malâ'ika (1923–2007), one of the foremost pioneers of modern Arabic poetry, was born in Baghdad into a distinguished literary family that profoundly influenced her intellectual and artistic development. Her mother, Salmâ 'Abd al-Razzâq al-Malâ'ika (Umm Nizâr al-Malâ'ika), was a poet and feminist writer, while her father, Şâdiq al-Malâ'ika, was a poet, editor, and teacher. Growing up in such a cultured environment, Nâzik developed a passion for literature from an early age and began writing poetry at the age of seven, initially in the Iraqi colloquial dialect before gradually mastering classical Arabic. Alongside her literary interests, she studied music, learning to play the *oud*, and later pursued formal education in theatre and poetry at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad, which enriched both her artistic and critical abilities.¹

Nâzik belonged to a large and intellectually vibrant family that included several siblings and relatives actively engaged in literature and public life. She married 'Abd al-Hâdî Maḥbûba, a colleague in the Department of Arabic who later became the first President of the University of Basra, and they had a son named Al-Burâq Maḥbûba. Her extended family also included prominent literary and political figures, notably her maternal uncle Muḥammad Maḥdî Kubba, a renowned thinker and politician, and her uncle 'Abd al-Şâhib al-Malâ'ika, a poet. These familial and academic associations exposed her to literary scholarship, political thought, and public discourse, all of which significantly shaped her poetic vision.²

The combination of a literary upbringing, rigorous academic training, and close association with intellectual and political circles greatly influenced Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's creative and critical writings. Her poetry reflects humanitarian values, feminist consciousness, social commitment, and concern for Arab national issues. Consequently, her pioneering contributions to Arabic free verse and modern literary criticism may be understood not only as expressions of individual genius but also as the outcome of an intellectually rich and culturally engaged family environment that nurtured her artistic voice and enduring legacy.³

After completing her secondary education, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika pursued higher studies at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad, graduating with distinction in 1944. She later earned a diploma from the Institute of Fine Arts (1949), studied English language and literature in the United States, and obtained a Master's degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1959. Upon returning to Iraq, she



taught at the University of Basra and later served as a professor at the University of Baghdad and Kuwait University. Fluent in Arabic, English, French, German, and Latin, her multilingual scholarship significantly enriched her literary and critical contributions.⁴

Nâzik spent the final years of her life in Cairo, where she lived in voluntary seclusion from 1990 until her death on 20 June 2007 at the age of 83. She was buried in her family cemetery in western Cairo. Widely recognized as one of the pioneers of modern Arabic poetry, she is credited with introducing Arabic free verse through her celebrated poem *Al-Kûlîrâ* (The Cholera) in 1947. Alongside Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb, Shâdhil Tâqa, and ‘Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayâtî, she played a pioneering role in establishing modern Arabic free verse, despite later debates concerning its first practitioner.⁵

Nâzik al-Malâ’ika shared her life with her husband, Abdul Hadi Mahbuba, a colleague in the Department of Arabic. She later taught at Kuwait University, but the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis in 1990 forced her to leave Kuwait and settle in Cairo, Egypt, where she lived in voluntary seclusion until her death. During her final years, deteriorating health kept her away from public life, although her literary influence remained profound. An unusual incident in 1993, when the Arab press mistakenly announced her death, earned her the epithet “the poet who died twice,” reflecting both her seclusion and the immense respect she commanded throughout the Arab literary world.⁶

Nâzik al-Malâ’ika passed away in Cairo on 20 June 2007 after prolonged illness and age-related health complications and was buried in her family cemetery in western Cairo. Her death marked the end of an era in modern Arabic poetry. Widely regarded as one of the founders of Arabic free verse, she revolutionized Arabic poetry through her landmark poem *Al-Kûlîrâ* (The Cholera) (1947), alongside Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb. Throughout her distinguished career, she taught at the University of Baghdad, the University of Basra, and Kuwait University, while her critical work, particularly *Qadâyâ al-Shi’r al-Mu’âsir* (Issues of Modern Poetry, 1962), profoundly influenced modern Arabic literary criticism. Her passing was mourned across the Arab world, and she continues to be remembered as a pioneering poet, critic, and intellectual whose contributions permanently transformed modern Arabic literature.⁷

Nâzik al-Malâ’ika occupies a distinguished position in the history of modern Arabic literature as one of the foremost pioneers of Arabic free verse (*al-Shi’r al-Hurr*). Her greatest literary contribution was the introduction of a new poetic form that liberated Arabic poetry from the rigid conventions of traditional metre and monorhyme. Her celebrated poem *Al-Kûlîrâ* (The Cholera), published in 1947, is widely regarded as one of the earliest examples of Arabic free verse and marked the beginning of a new era in modern Arabic poetry. Together with Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb, Shâdhil Tâqa, and ‘Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayâtî, she revolutionized Arabic poetic expression by introducing greater rhythmic flexibility, symbolic imagery, and psychological depth.

Beyond her formal innovations, Nâzik enriched Arabic literature through numerous poetry collections that explored

existential concerns, social injustice, political oppression, women's rights, nationalism, and humanitarian values. Her major poetic works include *‘Âshiqat al-Layl* (Lover of the Night, 1947), *Shazâyâ al-Ramâd* (Splinters of Ashes, 1949), *Qarâra al-Mawja* (The Depth of the Wave, 1957), *Shajarat al-Qamar* (The Moon Tree, 1968), *Yuğayyiru al-Baħr Alwânah* (The Sea Changes Its Colours, 1970), *Ma’sât al-Hayâh wa Ughniyyat li al-Insân* (The Tragedy of Life and a Song for Humanity, 1977), *Al-Şalâh wa al-Thawrah* (Prayer and Revolution, 1978), and her collected *Complete Works*. These collections reflect her commitment to portraying the realities of modern Arab society while maintaining a profound philosophical and artistic vision.

Nâzik al-Malâ’ika also made significant contributions to Arabic literary criticism. Her landmark critical work *Qadâyâ al-Shi’r al-Mu’âsir* (Issues of Modern Poetry, 1962) laid the theoretical foundation for modern Arabic free verse by explaining its principles, structure, rhythm, and aesthetic values. Other important critical works, including *Al-Tajzi ‘iyyah fî al-Mujtama’ al-‘Arabî* (Fragmentation in Arab Society), *Al-Şawma ‘ah wa al-Shurfah al-Hamrâ’* (The Hermitage and the Red Balcony), and *Sikûlûjiyyat al-Shi’r* (Psychology of Poetry), further established her reputation as one of the leading literary critics of the Arab world. Her scholarly writings significantly influenced the development of modern Arabic literary criticism and inspired subsequent generations of poets and researchers.

As a poet of strong social commitment, Nâzik employed poetry as a vehicle for moral reflection and social reform. She addressed numerous contemporary issues, including the oppression of women, honour killings, poverty, social inequality, political corruption, colonialism, war, martyrdom, and human suffering. Her poems consistently advocate justice, compassion, and human dignity, reflecting both feminist consciousness and humanitarian ideals. Through her sensitive portrayal of marginalized individuals and oppressed communities, she transformed poetry into an instrument of social criticism and ethical awakening.

In addition to her achievements as a poet and critic, Nâzik enjoyed a distinguished academic career. She taught at the University of Basra, the University of Baghdad, and Kuwait University, where she contributed to the advancement of Arabic language and literature. Her studies in comparative literature at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and her command of Arabic, English, French, German, and Latin enabled her to bridge Arabic literary traditions with world literature, enriching both her creative and critical writings.

Nâzik also demonstrated her literary versatility through prose, publishing the short-story collection *Al-Shams allatî Warâ’ al-Qimmah* (The Sun Behind the Summit) in 1997 while living in Cairo. Although primarily celebrated as a poet, this work further illustrates the breadth of her literary talent.⁸

The enduring significance of Nâzik al-Malâ’ika lies in her successful integration of poetic innovation, critical scholarship, social engagement, and humanitarian vision. She transformed the language, form, and function of modern Arabic poetry while providing an intellectual framework for its development. Her pioneering contributions continue to shape contemporary Arabic



literature, securing her legacy as one of the greatest poets, critics, and literary reformers of the twentieth century.

An Introduction to *Qarâra al-Mawja* (The Depth of the Wave):

Qarâra al-Mawja is one of the most significant poetry collections by the pioneering Iraqi poet Nâzik al-Malâ'ika (1923–2007), one of the founders of modern Arabic free verse (*al-shi'r al-hurr*). The poems included in this collection were composed between 1947 and 1953, a period marked by profound intellectual and psychological transformation in the poet's life. In the introduction to the third edition, Nâzik explains that she wrote an analytical dialogue in 1957 to illustrate the evolution of her philosophical outlook and poetic consciousness between the period in which these poems were written and her later intellectual maturity. She ultimately published this dialogue because it helps readers understand the philosophical foundations and psychological development reflected in the collection.

The title *Qarâra al-Mawja* ("The Depth of the Wave") carries deep symbolic significance. Nâzik al-Malâ'ika interprets the wave as a metaphor for the continuous movement of human life between moments of ascent and decline. The crest of the wave represents achievement and emotional intensity, whereas its depth symbolizes reflection, renewal, and preparation for a new ascent. She rejects the idea that the depth signifies pessimism; rather, she presents it as a stage of repose containing the seeds of future growth and creative rebirth. This symbolic interpretation reveals her dynamic philosophy of life, in which progress occurs through an endless cycle of struggle, contemplation, and renewal.

The collection reflects Nâzik's deep engagement with existential questions, including time, identity, memory, alienation, death, hope, and the search for meaning. Through an imaginative dialogue between her "former self" and her "present self" in the preface, she explores the changing nature of artistic vision and human personality. This self-critical dialogue demonstrates her awareness that both the poet and the interpretation of poetry evolve with time, making *Qarâra al-Mawja* not only a collection of poems but also a meditation on the creative process itself.

Many poems in the collection, such as *Ṭarîq al-'Awdah* (The Road Back), *La'nat al-Zamân* (The Curse of Time), *Sukhriyyat al-Ramâd* (The Mockery of Ashes), and *Al-Shakhṣ al-Thâni* (The Second Self), reveal the poet's concern with the passage of time, the fragility of human relationships, and the psychological tensions between aspiration and reality. These works portray the inner struggles of the modern individual while employing rich symbolism and innovative poetic techniques that distinguish Nâzik's contribution to contemporary Arabic literature.

Stylistically, *Qarâra al-Mawja* demonstrates Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's mastery of free verse, a form she helped establish in modern Arabic poetry. While preserving the musical qualities of Arabic poetic language, she broke away from the rigid structure of the traditional *qaṣîdah*, introducing greater rhythmic flexibility, symbolic imagery, psychological depth, and philosophical reflection. Her language is refined and lyrical, yet

capable of expressing complex emotional and intellectual experiences with remarkable clarity.

The collection also reveals the poet's strong humanitarian and social consciousness. Alongside introspective poems, it includes works that address poverty, injustice, suffering, and the dignity of ordinary people. Through these themes, Nâzik expands poetry beyond personal emotion to encompass broader human concerns, demonstrating that modern Arabic poetry can serve as a medium of ethical reflection and social awareness.

Briefly noting that *Qarâra al-Mawja* stands as one of the masterpieces of modern Arabic poetry. It marks an important stage in Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's artistic and philosophical development and illustrates her pioneering role in the evolution of Arabic free verse. The collection's profound symbolism, psychological insight, existential reflection, and innovative poetic style have secured its enduring place in modern Arabic literary history. More than a collection of poems, *Qarâra al-Mawja* is a philosophical exploration of the human condition, affirming that life's moments of decline are not endings but necessary stages in the continual journey toward renewal, creativity, and hope.⁹

Social Issues in *Qarâra al-Mawja*:

Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poetic collection *Qarâra al-Mawja* (*The Depth of the Wave*) presents a profound exploration of a wide range of social issues that occupy a central place in her poetic vision. Her poems reveal a keen awareness of the human condition in a society marked by moral decline, alienation, and the erosion of personal and collective identity. The principal social themes reflected in this collection may be discussed as follows:

(a) Issues of Women

Women have occupied an important place in Arabic poetry throughout its history, but their representation underwent a significant transformation in the modern era. While classical poetry often portrayed women as symbols of beauty, love, or desire, modern poets began to address their social, psychological, and existential realities. Influenced by reformist and feminist thought, they depicted women as individuals deserving freedom, dignity, and equality, while also using them as symbols of the homeland, resilience, and human suffering.

Among the pioneers of this perspective is Nâzik al-Malâ'ika, whose poetry reflects deep compassion for marginalized and oppressed women. In her poem *Marthiyyat Imra'ah Lâ Qîmata Lahâ* (Elegy for a Worthless Woman), she mourns a poor and neglected woman whose death passes unnoticed by society. Rather than lamenting an individual alone, the poem condemns a social order that measures a woman's worth by wealth, beauty, or status instead of her humanity.

Through this powerful elegy, al-Malâ'ika criticizes social indifference and patriarchal injustice while affirming the dignity of every human being. Her poetry transforms the suffering of women into a broader call for compassion, social reform, and moral responsibility. Thus, her portrayal of women represents a remarkable fusion of humanism, social consciousness, and



feminist thought, making her one of the most influential voices in modern Arabic poetry.

In this connection, the following verses may be quoted for elucidating the women's issues:

Wa al-laylu aslama nafsahu dūna ihtimāmin liṣ-ṣabāhi
Wa atā aḍ-ḍiyā'u biṣawti bā'i'ati al-ḥalībi wa biṣ-ṣiyāmi
Bi-muwā'i qittin jā'i in lam tabqa minhu siwā 'izāmin
Bi-mushājarāti al-bā'i'ina wa bil-marārati wal-kifāhi
Bi-tarāshuqi aṣ-ṣibyāni bil-aḥjāri fī 'arḍi at-ṭarīqi
Bi-masāribi al-mā'i al-mulawwathi fī al-aziqqati wa bir-riyāhi
Talhū bi-abwābi as-suṭūhi bilā rafīqin
Fī shibhi nisyānin 'amīqin.¹⁰

(And the night surrendered itself,

Unconcerned with the coming of the dawn.

Then daylight arrived with the voice of the milkmaid

And with the call to fasting;

With the mewing of a starving cat,

Nothing left of it but skin and bones;

With the quarrels of the street vendors,

With bitterness and relentless struggle;

With children hurling stones

Across the middle of the road;

With polluted streams of water

Running through the narrow alleys, and with the wind

Playing aimlessly among the rooftop doors,

Without a companion,

As though lost in a deep forgetfulness.)

The above-mentioned verses by Nâzik al-Malâ'ika vividly portray the harsh realities of urban life through powerful images of poverty, hunger, pollution, and social conflict. The poet depicts a bleak morning filled with the cries of a milk seller, the mewing of a starving cat, the quarrels of street vendors, children throwing stones, and polluted alleyways. Through this realistic imagery, she exposes the suffering of ordinary people and criticises the social conditions that breed misery and neglect. The poem reflects her deep humanitarian concern and demonstrates how modern Arabic poetry can serve as a voice for the oppressed and a critique of social injustice.

(b) Issue of Killing

One of the most disturbing social issues addressed in modern Arabic literature is the practice commonly referred to as "honour killing." For generations, this custom has persisted in certain parts of the Arab world, where women or girls have been killed by members of their own families over alleged violations of family honour. In many cases, these acts are based not on verified facts but on suspicion, rumours, or assumptions concerning a woman's behaviour, relationships, or personal choices. The victim is often denied the opportunity to defend herself, while her death is wrongly perceived as a means of restoring the family's reputation.

This practice reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and unequal gender norms, in which a woman's dignity and life are subordinated to a distorted concept of honour. Rather than upholding justice, such acts reinforce discrimination, violence, and the denial of fundamental human rights. Modern

Arab poets and writers have frequently condemned this social injustice, portraying it as a tragic consequence of ignorance, prejudice, and the misuse of cultural traditions. In this dimension, the following verses may be exemplified:

"Ammâh!" wa ḥashrajatun wa dumû'un wa sawâd
Wa inbajasa ad-damu wa ikhtalaja al-jismu al-maṭ'ûn
Wa ash-sha'ru al-mutamawwiju 'ashsha sha fîhi at-ṭîn
"Ammâh!" wa lam yasma'hâ illâ al-jallâd
Wa ghadan sayajî'u al-fajru wa taṣḥû al-awrâd
Wa al-'ishrûna tunâdî, wa al-amalu al-maftûn
Fatujîbu al-marjah wa al-azhâr
Raḥalat 'annâ... ghaslan lil-'âr
Wa ya 'ûdu al-jallâdu al-waḥshiyyu wa yalqâ an-nâs
"Al-'âr!" wa yamsaḥu madiyyatahu: "Mazzaqnâ al-'âr."
"Wa raja'nâ fuḍalâ'a, bîḍa as-sum'ati aḥrâr."
"Yâ rabba al-ḥanah, ayna al-khamru? Wa ayna al-ka's?"
"Nâdi al-ghâniyata al-kaslâ al-'âtirata al-anfâs."
"Ufaddî 'aynayhâ bil-Qur'âni wa bil-aqdâr."

Imla' ka'sâtaka yâ jazzâr,

Wa 'alâ al-maqtûlâti ghaslu al-'âr.¹¹

("Mother!", a choking cry, tears, and darkness.

Blood gushed forth, and the wounded body convulsed.

Her flowing hair became entangled with the mud.

"Mother!", yet no one heard her except the executioner.

Tomorrow, dawn will come, and the flowers will awaken.

The twenty voices will call, and hope, still enchanted, will answer.

The meadow and the blossoms will reply:

"She has departed from us... to wash away the shame."

The savage executioner will return and meet the people,

Declaring, "The shame is gone!" while wiping his dagger.

"We have torn shame to pieces;

We have returned as honourable men, with spotless reputations and freedom."

"O keeper of the tavern! Where is the wine? Where is the cup?"

"Call the languid singing girl with her fragrant breath."

"I would swear by the Qur'ân and by destiny for the beauty of her eyes."

Fill your cups, O butcher,

For upon the murdered woman rests the burden of washing away the shame.)

These powerful verses by Nâzik al-Malâ'ika constitute a scathing condemnation of the practice of honour killing. The poem portrays the final moments of a young woman murdered in the name of family honour, exposing the brutality and hypocrisy of a society that celebrates violence while claiming to preserve virtue. The repeated cry of "Mother!" heightens the emotional intensity and emphasises the victim's helplessness. At the same time, the executioner's triumphant return with his bloodstained dagger reveals the moral corruption underlying the concept of "washing away shame."

Through bitter irony, al-Malâ'ika exposes the contradiction between the killers' claims of honour and their inhuman actions. By juxtaposing the sacred references to the Qur'ân with scenes of murder, drinking, and self-congratulation, she denounces the misuse of religion and cultural traditions to



justify violence against women. The poem stands as a powerful protest against patriarchal oppression and affirms the poet's commitment to justice, human dignity, and the protection of innocent lives. It remains one of the most compelling examples of social criticism in modern Arabic poetry.

(c) Issues of Martyrdom

The theme of martyrdom has occupied a prominent place in modern Arabic poetry, reflecting the Arab world's long history of wars, resistance, and struggles for freedom. Arab poets have portrayed the martyr as a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and national dignity, whose death becomes a source of hope, renewal, and liberation. Through their poetry, they honour those who sacrificed their lives while inspiring unity and resistance against oppression.

Among the leading poets who addressed this theme is Nâzik al-Malâ'ika. In her poem *Al-Shahîd* (The Martyr), she presents the martyr not merely as a national hero but as a profoundly human figure whose sacrifice embodies both suffering and moral triumph. Rather than glorifying death itself, she highlights the loneliness of the martyr and society's indifference towards its fallen heroes, while affirming the eternal value of their sacrifice.

Through vivid imagery and emotional depth, al-Malâ'ika transforms the martyr into a symbol of truth, justice, and spiritual immortality. Her treatment of martyrdom combines personal grief with national consciousness, demonstrating how poetry can preserve the memory of sacrifice and inspire future generations to uphold the values of freedom, dignity, and humanity. In this context, the following verses from her poem *Al-Shahîd* (The Martyr) illustrate her profound poetic vision.

Fî dujâ al-layli al-'amûq

Ra'sahu an-nashwâna alqawhu hashîman

Wa arâqû damahu aş-şâfi al-karîmâ

Fawqa ahjâri at-tarîq

Wa 'aqâbîla al-jarîmah

Ĥammalû a'bâ'ahâ zahra al-'amûd

Thumma alqawhu ta'âman lil-luhûd

Wa matâ'an wa ghanîmah.¹²

(In the depths of the night,

They cast down his proud head, shattered and broken,

And spilled his pure and noble blood

Upon the stones of the road.

Then, to conceal the consequences of their crime,

They laid its burden upon the gallows,

And afterwards threw him away

As food for the graves,

As though he were nothing more than spoil and plunder.”)

These verses from Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poem *Al-Shahîd* (The Martyr) present a powerful condemnation of political violence and injustice. The poet depicts the martyr as an innocent victim whose pure blood is shed upon the streets, symbolising the suffering of those who sacrifice their lives for truth, justice, and freedom. The darkness of the night intensifies the atmosphere of secrecy and oppression, while the imagery of the broken body and blood-stained road evokes profound sympathy for the fallen hero.

Al-Malâ'ika further criticises the brutality and hypocrisy of oppressive authorities by portraying the martyr's body as something discarded “as food for the graves” and treated like booty or plunder. This dehumanisation exposes the moral bankruptcy of those who commit such crimes. Yet despite the martyr's physical destruction, the poem affirms the enduring significance of sacrifice. Through vivid imagery and emotional intensity, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika transforms the martyr into a timeless symbol of courage, resistance, and the struggle for justice, reflecting her deep humanitarian and national consciousness.

(d) Tyrannical Rulers and Their False Promises:

One of the recurring concerns in modern Arabic poetry is the exposure of despotic rulers and the deceptive promises they make to their people. Throughout the history of Arabic literature, poets have used their works to criticise political oppression, condemn injustice, and reveal the gap between the rulers' lofty rhetoric and the harsh realities experienced by ordinary citizens. Such poetry serves not only as a form of protest but also as a call to awaken public consciousness, urging people to reject tyranny and to defend their fundamental rights to justice, freedom, and human dignity.

Among the poets who addressed this issue with remarkable courage was Nâzik al-Malâ'ika. In her poem *al-Ard al-Muĥajjaba* (“The Veiled Land”), she portrays the suffering of a nation burdened by authoritarian rule and broken political promises. Through powerful symbolism and vivid imagery, she exposes the hypocrisy of rulers who claim to serve their people while perpetuating oppression and injustice. The poem reflects her deep concern for social and political reform and affirms poetry's role as a voice of truth and resistance against tyranny. In this regard, the following verses from *al-Ard al-Muĥajjaba* aptly illustrate her criticism of oppressive rulers and their false promises. As for the socio-political issues found, the following verses may be exemplified:

Ĥaddithûnâ 'an rakhâ'in nâ'imîn,

Fa-wajadnâ darbanâ jû'an wa 'uryâ.

Wa sami'nâ 'an naqâ'in wa shadhâ,

Fa-ra'aynâ ĥawlanâ qubĥan wa khizyâ.

Wa rata'nâ fî shaqâ'in qâtîlin,

Wa kafânâ bu'sunâ shiba'an wa riyyâ.

Wa 'arinâ wa kasawnâ ghayranâ,

Wa kasabnâ al-qayda wa ad-dam'a as-sakhiyyâ.¹³

(They spoke to us of gentle prosperity,

Yet we found our path strewn with hunger and nakedness.

They spoke of purity and sweet fragrance,

But all around us we saw ugliness and disgrace.

We have lived amid a deadly misery,

Until our own wretchedness became our only fullness and refreshment.

We went unclothed while clothing others,

And all we gained were chains and abundant tears.)

These verses from Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poem *Al-Ard al-Muĥajjaba* (The Veiled Land) present a powerful denunciation of tyrannical rulers and their empty promises. The poet contrasts the rulers' optimistic rhetoric of prosperity, purity, and well-being



with the harsh reality of hunger, poverty, humiliation, and oppression endured by ordinary people. This contrast exposes the hypocrisy of political leaders who proclaim progress while failing to improve the lives of their citizens.

The imagery of hunger, nakedness, chains, and tears symbolises the social and political suffering inflicted by authoritarian rule. Particularly striking is the line, *"We went unclothed while clothing others,"* which highlights the exploitation and self-sacrifice of the people, who labour for the benefit of others yet remain deprived of their own basic rights. Through these poignant verses, al-Malâ'ika condemns injustice, exposes the false promises of oppressive governments, and calls for truth, freedom, and human dignity. The poem exemplifies her commitment to using poetry as a powerful medium of social criticism and political awakening.

(e) The Algerian Revolution

The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962) occupies a distinguished place in modern Arab history as one of the greatest struggles against colonialism. Its courage, sacrifice, and determination inspired not only the Algerian people but also the entire Arab world, symbolising the collective aspiration for freedom, justice, and national dignity. The revolution became a powerful source of inspiration for Arab writers and poets, who expressed their solidarity through literature and poetry.

Among these poets was Nâzik al-Malâ'ika, who responded to the Algerian cause with deep humanitarian and national feeling. In her poem *Al-Râqīṣah al-Madhbūḥah* (The Slaughtered Dancer), she transforms the suffering of an individual woman into a symbol of the wounded yet resilient Algerian nation. Through vivid imagery and emotional depth, she honours the sacrifices of the Algerian people and affirms the unity of the Arab world in its struggle against oppression. Her poem demonstrates how poetry can serve as both a form of resistance and a lasting tribute to those who sacrifice their lives for freedom and human dignity. In fact, the above issues are demonstrated in the following verses:

Irquṣī madhbūḥata al-qalbi wa ghannī,
Wa-ḍhakī fa al-jurḥu raqṣun wa ibtisām.
Is'alī al-mawtā aḍ-ḍaḥyā an yanāmū,
Warquṣī anti wa ghannī wa iṭma'innī.¹⁴

(Dance, O you whose heart has been slaughtered, and sing;
Smile, for the wound itself has become a dance and a smile.
Ask the dead, the martyrs, to sleep in peace;
And you, dance, sing, and be at peace.)

These poignant verses are taken from Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poem *Al-Râqīṣah al-Madhbūḥah* (The Slaughtered Dancer), composed in response to the Algerian Revolution. The "slaughtered dancer" is a powerful symbol of Algeria, a nation wounded by colonial violence yet refusing to surrender its dignity and hope. The poet transforms the dancer's pain into an act of resistance, where dancing and singing become symbols of courage, perseverance, and spiritual defiance rather than joy.

The paradoxical imagery of a wounded heart dancing and smiling highlights the resilience of a people who continue to struggle despite immense suffering. The reference to the martyrs' honours those who sacrificed their lives for national liberation,

suggesting that their sacrifice should inspire the living to continue the struggle with confidence and hope. Through these symbolic and emotionally charged lines, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika celebrates the indomitable spirit of the Algerian people while affirming that freedom is achieved through endurance, sacrifice, and unwavering faith in the future.

(f) Poverty and Deprivation

Poverty and deprivation constitute one of the most significant social themes in the poetry of Nâzik al-Malâ'ika. Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, she witnessed the widespread suffering caused by poverty, political instability, and social inequality in Iraq and the wider Arab world. Her poetry reflects profound sympathy for the poor, the homeless, and the marginalised, portraying their hardships with realism and emotional depth.

A striking example is her poem *Al-Nâ'imah fī al-Shâri'* (The Sleeping Girl in the Street), in which she depicts the tragic image of a homeless child exposed to hunger, cold, and loneliness. The sleeping girl becomes a powerful symbol of a society that has neglected its most vulnerable members. Through this moving portrayal, al-Malâ'ika condemns social injustice and human indifference while calling for compassion, moral responsibility, and social reform.

Thus, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika transforms individual suffering into a universal humanitarian message, demonstrating that poetry can serve as a powerful voice for the oppressed and an appeal for justice, dignity, and empathy.

Fī al-Karrâdah, fī laylatin amṭârin wa riyâḥ,
Wa aẓ-ẓulmatu saqfun madda wa sitrun laysa yuzâḥ.
Wa sukûnun raṭbun yaṣrukhu fīhi al-i'ṣâr,
Ash-shâri' u mahjûrun ta'ûlu fīhi ar-riyâḥ.
Wa al-ḥârisu ya'buru jahman murta'ida al-khuṭuwât,
Yakshifuhu al-barqu wa taḥjubu haykalahu aẓ-ẓulumât.
Tantafīḍu aẓ-ẓulmatu fīhi wa yarta'ishu ar-ra'd,
Ḥarasat ẓulmatuhu shurfata baytin mahjûr.
Kâna al-barqu yamurru wa yakshifu jisma ṣabiyyatin,
Al-iḥdâ 'ashrata nâṭiqatan fī khaddayhâ,
Fī riqqati haykalihâ wa barâ'ati 'aynayhâ.¹⁵
(In al-Karrâdah, on a night of rain and wind,
Darkness stretched above like an unlifted roof and curtain.
A damp silence was shattered by the raging storm,
While the deserted street echoed by the wailing wind.
The watchman passed by, grim-faced, his footsteps trembling;
Lightning revealed him, while darkness concealed his form.
The darkness quivered around him, and the thunder shook.
Its shadow guarded the balcony of an abandoned house.
Then the lightning flashed, revealing the body of a young girl,
About eleven years of age,
Her tender frame and the innocence shining in her eyes.)

These verses are taken from Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poem *Al-Nâ'imah fī al-Shâri'* (The Sleeping Girl in the Street), one of her most moving poems on poverty and social deprivation. The poet creates a haunting atmosphere through images of darkness, rain, wind, thunder, and deserted streets, all of which reflect the harsh conditions endured by the poor. The sudden appearance of the



homeless young girl, illuminated only by flashes of lightning, forms the emotional centre of the poem.

The eleven-year-old child symbolises the countless innocent victims of poverty, homelessness, and social neglect. Her fragile body and innocent eyes contrast sharply with the cruel environment surrounding her, intensifying the reader's sense of compassion. Through vivid imagery and emotional realism, al-Malâ'ika condemns a society that allows its most vulnerable children to suffer in silence. The poem serves not only as a portrayal of human misery but also as a moral appeal for justice, compassion, and social responsibility, reflecting the poet's profound humanitarian vision.

(g) Issues of Childhood

Childhood is an important theme in modern Arabic poetry, symbolising innocence, hope, and the vulnerability of human life. While classical poets often portrayed childhood as a period of joy and purity, modern poets increasingly focused on the hardships faced by children, reflecting the social and historical realities of their times. Thus, the child became a symbol of both personal emotion and collective human suffering.

Among the leading poets who explored this theme is Nâzik al-Malâ'ika. In her poem *Al-Nâ'imah fî al-Shâri'* (The Sleeping Girl in the Street), she depicts the tragic condition of a homeless and impoverished child, exposing the neglect and injustice suffered by society's most vulnerable members. Through this poignant portrayal, al-Malâ'ika transforms the child's suffering into a powerful appeal for compassion, social responsibility, and the protection of childhood, making the poem a significant expression of her humanitarian vision.

Ayyâmu tufûlatihâ marrat fî al-aḥzân,
Tashrîdun, jû'un, a'wâmun min ḥirmân.

Iḥdâ 'ashrata kânat ḥuznan lâ yantafî',

Wa aṭ-ṭiflatu jû'un azalîyyun, ta'abun, ḡama'.¹⁶

(The days of her childhood passed in sorrow;

Homelessness, hunger, and years of deprivation.

At the age of eleven, she was a grief that never faded,

And the child herself was nothing but endless hunger, weariness, and thirst.)

These poignant lines from Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's poem *Al-Nâ'imah fî al-Shâri'* (The Sleeping Girl in the Street) portray the harsh reality of a childhood overshadowed by poverty and neglect. Rather than presenting childhood as a period of innocence and happiness, the poet depicts it as a life marked by homelessness, hunger, exhaustion, and continuous suffering. The image of the eleven-year-old girl symbolises countless children whose formative years are stolen by social injustice and economic hardship.

By reducing the child's existence to "endless hunger, weariness, and thirst," al-Malâ'ika exposes the devastating effects of deprivation on childhood and condemns a society that fails to protect its most vulnerable members. The poem transcends the experience of a single child and becomes a universal appeal for compassion, social responsibility, and the recognition of every child's right to a life of dignity, security, and hope.

Critical Views on the Poetry of Nâzik al-Malâ'ika

Nâzik al-Malâ'ika occupies a unique position in modern Arabic literature as both a pioneering poet and an influential literary critic. Beyond introducing free verse, she provided its theoretical foundation through works such as *Qadhâyâ al-Shi'r al-Mu'âṣir* (Issues of Contemporary Poetry), arguing that poetic innovation must combine artistic freedom with structural discipline. She regarded modernism as a renewal of the classical tradition rather than a rejection of it.¹⁷

Her reformist ideas, however, met with strong opposition from conservative critics. Dr. Muḥammad al-Nuwayḥî, in *al-Shi'r al-Jadîd* (The New Poetry), acknowledged her pioneering role but criticised her theories, questioning their consistency and attempting to undermine her terminology and critical authority. Al-Malâ'ika responded with scholarly objectivity, viewing criticism as intellectual dialogue while firmly defending her literary principles.¹⁸

Similarly, Dr. Salma Khadra al-Jayyûsî underestimated al-Malâ'ika's contribution by treating her as one among several contemporary poets rather than recognising her foundational role in the emergence of free verse. Her inaccurate dating of the movement and her tendency to classify al-Malâ'ika primarily as a "woman poet" diminished the significance of her theoretical and artistic achievements.¹⁹

Other critics, including Sa'îd Zâ'id and 'Abd al-Jabbâr al-Baṣrî, interpreted her poetry through linguistic or psychological perspectives, often overlooking its literary and aesthetic dimensions. Al-Malâ'ika rejected such reductive readings and insisted that poetry should be understood through its artistic structure, symbolism, and intellectual purpose rather than through biographical speculation.²⁰

Although some critics accused her of inconsistency, these criticisms largely resulted from misunderstandings of her theory of free verse, which emphasised organic unity and disciplined innovation rather than unrestricted freedom.²¹

Despite criticism, gender bias, and marginalisation, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika remained one of the most influential voices of modern Arabic literature. Her poetic innovations, critical writings, and balanced vision of modernism secured her lasting reputation as a pioneer of Arabic free verse and one of the foremost poet-critics of the twentieth century.²²

Findings of the Study

The present study reveals that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's *Qarâra al-Mawja* is not merely a collection of poems but a profound social and humanitarian document that reflects the political, moral, and cultural realities of the modern Arab world. The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. The collection demonstrates that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika successfully transformed modern Arabic poetry into an instrument of social criticism and humanitarian reform, transcending purely personal or romantic themes.
2. The study finds that women's issues occupy a central position in her poetry. Through poems such as *Marthiyyat Imra'ah Lâ Qîmata Lahâ* and *Ghaslan lil-Âr*, she condemns patriarchal oppression, honour-based



violence, and the marginalisation of women while affirming their dignity and humanity.

3. The research reveals that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika presents honour killing as one of the gravest social evils, exposing its cruelty, hypocrisy, and the misuse of religion and tradition to justify violence against women.
4. The study establishes that the poet redefines martyrdom as a symbol of justice, sacrifice, and moral courage, portraying the martyr as both a national hero and a universal representative of human dignity.
5. It further demonstrates that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika strongly criticises tyrannical rulers and their false promises, exposing political oppression, poverty, exploitation, and the widening gap between official rhetoric and social reality.
6. The analysis confirms that her treatment of the Algerian Revolution reflects a deep sense of Arab solidarity, presenting resistance against colonialism as a collective moral responsibility shared by the entire Arab nation.
7. The study highlights that poverty, deprivation, and homelessness are portrayed with exceptional realism and compassion. Poems such as *Al-Nâ'imah fî al-Shâri'* transform individual suffering into a universal appeal for justice, empathy, and social responsibility.
8. The research also reveals that childhood is presented not merely as a stage of innocence but as a powerful symbol of vulnerability, social neglect, and the devastating consequences of poverty and inequality.
9. From a literary perspective, the study finds that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika combines symbolism, psychological insight, free-verse technique, and humanitarian thought to produce poetry that is both aesthetically innovative and socially transformative.
10. Finally, the study confirms that despite criticism and opposition from several literary critics, Nâzik al-Malâ'ika remains one of the foremost pioneers of modern Arabic free verse, whose theoretical writings and poetic innovations continue to shape contemporary Arabic literary criticism and creative expression.

CONCLUSION

Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's *Qarâra al-Mawja* stands as one of the most significant poetic achievements of modern Arabic literature, reflecting a remarkable synthesis of artistic innovation and profound social consciousness. This study has demonstrated that the collection extends far beyond the boundaries of personal lyricism, serving instead as a powerful critique of the moral, political, and social crises that affected the Arab world during the twentieth century. Through her pioneering use of free verse, rich symbolism, psychological depth, and humanitarian vision, al-Malâ'ika transformed poetry into an effective medium for exposing injustice and advocating reform.

The analysis of selected poems reveals that the poet consistently addresses major social issues, including the oppression of women, honour killings, martyrdom, political tyranny, colonial resistance, poverty, deprivation, and the

suffering of children. Rather than presenting these themes as isolated incidents, she integrates them into a comprehensive moral vision centred on justice, compassion, freedom, and human dignity. Her poetry demonstrates that literature possesses the power not only to mirror social realities but also to challenge injustice and inspire ethical transformation.

Furthermore, the study confirms that Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's contribution extends beyond her poetic compositions to her theoretical defence of modern Arabic free verse. Her critical writings established the intellectual foundations of the free-verse movement and continue to influence scholars, poets, and critics throughout the Arab world. Although her ideas encountered resistance from conservative critics, her balanced vision of innovation rooted in classical tradition secured her lasting place among the foremost literary reformers of the twentieth century.

Briefly noting that *Qarâra al-Mawja* emerges as both a literary masterpiece and a humanitarian manifesto. It affirms Nâzik al-Malâ'ika's enduring legacy as a pioneering poet, an influential critic, and a courageous intellectual whose works continue to illuminate the relationship between literature and society. Her poetry remains a timeless testimony to the enduring values of justice, freedom, equality, and compassion, ensuring her permanent place among the greatest voices of modern Arabic literature.

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