

The artistic image in Amal Dunqul’s Poetry between “The Stone Cake” and “Against Whom?”

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Abstract---Poetry is a mirror reflecting reality and life; it breathes its air and is nourished by its renewal. The poet is the strong driving force of the wheel of creativity, attempting to create a more beautiful life and a rich literature that pulses with hope and optimism. The poet cannot achieve this goal without employing artistic tools through which he constructs his poems, most notably the artistic image—an effective device that turns the poet into a painter who creates artistic scenes enriched with imagination and poetic language. Amal Dunqul is one of the contemporary poets who renewed the structure and content of poetry. He realized the importance of the artistic image in intensifying meaning and expressing emotional flow with artistic sincerity. His poems thus became expressive of his personality and positions. He was known as the poet of rejection and prophecy, and his poetry reflected a life journey—despite its shortness—based on struggle and refusal of humiliation: a struggle between oppressor and oppressed, freedom and slavery, pride and submission. This appears clearly in his political poetry. Another unequal struggle also emerges, through which he delved into human existence, but this struggle was between the sick poet and the malignant disease that led to his death—hence the difference between the two struggles: life and death. This research focuses on the poem “The Stone Cake and Against Whom?” as an applied model to highlight levels of conflict.

Keywords---Amal Dunqul, artistic image, The Stone Cake, Against Whom?, strength, weakness.

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Introduction

Critics have addressed various artistic tools of poetry, most notably the poetic image, which reflects the emotional flow of poets and reveals what lies within their hearts: love, hope, despair, strength, weakness... experiences lived by our poet Amal Dunqul. So what is the artistic image, and what developments has it undergone? Do Amal Dunqul's images reflect the reality of the conflicts he experienced throughout his life stages?

1. Definition of the Artistic Image

1. Linguistic and terminological meaning of the artistic image

We begin with the term "image." This word has been known since pre-Islamic times. In *Lisan al-Arab*, "sura" (image) is one of the names of God. Al-Musawwir is the One who shapes all beings, arranging them and giving each thing its specific form and distinct appearance... "Tasawwartu al-shay" means I imagined its form, so it appeared to me. "Al-tasawir" refers to statues... Ibn al-Athir stated that "image" in Arabic may refer to the outward form, the essence of a thing, or its attribute...¹

The second part of the term, "artistic," is a feminine adjective derived from "art," meaning a creative work in painting, sculpture, music, and other fields². The term "art" refers to types, forms, or categories of things³. It is also defined as skill in mastering and producing something⁴.

Thus, the combination "artistic image" linguistically means: that which gives a thing its uniqueness and distinction from others.

The development witnessed in the Arab world across various fields has influenced literature and its artistic tools, especially the artistic image, which has acquired new meanings and expanded its connotations. To clarify these differences, we first present the concept of the artistic image among ancient Arab critics, then among modern Western and Arab critics, in order to reach the nature of the rhetorical image in critical heritage and its modern transformations.

2. The Artistic Image in the Rhetorical Heritage

The researcher of the artistic image encounters two opposing views: the first affirms its authenticity in ancient Arabic criticism, while the second denies its existence in the rhetorical heritage, considering it a modern Western import.

The first view is supported by Al-Jahiz, who says: "Meanings are placed on the road, known to the Bedouin and the urban, the Arab and the non-Arab; what matters is the construction of expression..."⁵ From this statement, Al-Jahiz brings poetry close to depiction, even if their tools differ.

As for Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, the image is a mental construction produced by imagination and intellect. He says: "The term 'image' is only a comparison between what we perceive intellectually and what we see with our eyes..."⁶

Thus, al-Jurjani emphasizes the psychological dimension of poetic experience, where the image is not merely visual but a mental and emotional translation of ideas and feelings.

Despite this, the image remains within the limits of sensory imagination and does not exceed them.⁷

¹ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. 7, entry (SWR), pp. 403–404.

² Ahmad Mukhtar Abdul Hamid Omar, *Dictionary of Contemporary Arabic Language*, Alam al-Kutub, 1st ed., 2008, Vol. 3, Cairo, p. 1746.

³ Ibn Manzur, previous source, Vol. 10, entry (FNN), p. 322.

⁴ Muhammad Mahdi Sharif, *Dictionary of Arabic Poetic Terminology*, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1st ed., 2004, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 123.

⁵ Al-Jahiz, *Al-Hayawan*, edited by Abdul Salam Haroun, 3rd ed., Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, Vol. 3, 1969, Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 131–132.

⁶ Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, *Dala'il al-I'jaz*, edited and commented by Muhammad Mahmoud Shakir, Al-Khanji Library, no edition, 1984, Cairo, p. 355.

⁷ Kamal Abu Deeb, *Dialectic of Concealment and Manifestation: Structural Studies in Poetry*, Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayan, 3rd ed., 1984, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 19.

3. The Artistic Image in Western Criticism

I.A. Richards states: "The effectiveness of the image lies not in its vividness" but in its quality as a mental event linked to sensation."⁸

Ezra Pound defines it as: "An intellectual and emotional complex presented in an instant of time."⁹

Van explains it as: "A strongly charged verbal structure composed of sensory elements such as lines, colors, movement, and shadows..."¹⁰

This leads to a key modern critical idea: meaning is no longer fixed or stable, but rather exists in movement and transformation. It is not rooted in permanence but in change and flux. Language itself is not a closed system; it remains open and evolving, and reading does not reach a final endpoint as long as the text continues to engage with reality while simultaneously transcending it.¹¹

Thus, the artistic image combines intellectual and emotional dimensions.

4. The Artistic Image in Modern Arab Criticism

Contact between Arab and Western cultures—through migration, missions, and translation—allowed Western critical ideas to influence Arab literary thought.

Al-Aqqad emphasizes imagination as a core source of poetic imagery: "If the poet possesses deep feeling and active imagination, he can transform natural symbols into living images..."¹²

Romanticism played a major role in developing this concept, where poetry was seen as "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"¹³.

This gave the artistic image greater freedom and symbolic depth¹⁴.

Zaki Mubarak defines it as: "An¹⁵ effect of the poet that makes the reader feel as if he is witnessing a scene rather than reading a poem."¹⁶

Tzvetan Todorov adds: "The image does not aim to make meaning clearer, but to create a new perception of reality."

Adnan Ghazwan defines the image as: "A precise artistic expression of experience that rises above literal reality toward metaphor."¹⁷

Abd al-Qadir al-Qatt sees it as: "The artistic form of words organized within a poetic structure..."¹⁸

Salah Fadl considers it: "A concrete way of expressing visions."¹⁹

Thus, the artistic image becomes a central aesthetic element in poetic language.

Abd al-Qadir al-Ruba'i defines it as: "A creative product of imagination that unifies elements into an integrated artistic work."²⁰

⁸ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, trans. Muhyiddin Subhi and Hussam Al-Khatib, Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, no edition, 1987, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 194.

⁹ Izz al-Din Ismail, *Contemporary Arabic Poetry: Issues and Phenomena*, Dar al-Awda and Dar al-Thaqafa, 3rd ed., 1981, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 13, quoted from: Whalley (G), *Poetic Process*, p. 176.

¹⁰ Ahmad Ali Fallahi, *The Image in Arabic Poetry: Theoretical and Applied Study in the Poetry of Sari' al-Ghawani (Muslim ibn al-Walid)*, Dar Ghidaa for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2013, Jordan, p. 22.

¹¹ Issam Shartah, *Motivations of Modernist Discourse: Textual Readings in Poetic Modernity*, p. 105.

¹² Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad, *Ibn al-Rumi: His Life and Poetry*, Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 6th ed., 1967, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 306.

¹³ Ihsan Abbas, *The Art of Poetry*, Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1959, p. 28.

¹⁴ Fayez Al-Daya, *Aesthetics of Artistic Image Style in Arabic Literature*, Dar al-Fikr al-Mu'asir, 2nd ed., 1996, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 3.

¹⁵ Zaki Mubarak, *The Comparison Between Poets*, Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi for Printing and Publishing, 2nd ed., 1968, Cairo, p. 62.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Critique of Criticism*, trans. Sami Swidan, National Development Center Publications, 1st ed., 1986, Beirut, p. 32.

¹⁷ Anwar Ghazwan, *Arab Horizons Magazine*, Issue 5, Year 9, Interview with Anwar Ghazwan, pp. 116–117.

¹⁸ Abdul Qadir Al-Qatt, *The Emotional Trend in Contemporary Arabic Poetry*, Youth Library, 1992, Cairo, p. 391.

¹⁹ Salah Fadl, *The Image of Reading and Forms of Imagination*, Lebanese Book House / Egyptian Book House, Vols. 1–2, 1st ed., 2007, Cairo, p. 210.

²⁰ Abdul Qadir Al-Ruba'i, *The Artistic Image in Poetic Criticism*, Dar Jarir for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2009, Amman, p. 69.

5. Manifestations of the Artistic Image in the Poetry of Amal Dunqul

Amal Dunqul (1940–1983) is one of the committed contemporary Arab poets who witnessed political and social events experienced by the Arab nation as a whole, and Egypt—his homeland—in particular. These were successive historical setbacks that struck the Arab world. He became known for his firm positions rejecting all forms of unjust policies, and for his bold nationalist poetry—much of which was banned from publication—most notably “Do Not Reconcile,” “Weeping at the Feet of Zarqa al-Yamama,” and “The Last Words of Spartacus,” among others. He was among the committed poets who devoted their pens to the causes of their peoples, sharing their wounds and suffering despite media blackout and restrictions imposed on many of them.

Returning to the poetry of Amal Dunqul and his life journey excluding his early youth—the poet experienced intense struggles reflected in most of his collections, which demonstrate his artistic completeness through the development of technical tools such as the use of historical and heritage symbols, precise selection of both external and internal rhythm, and the intensification of poetic imagery, because “the true poet does not transmit his experience to us, but rather transports us into it.”

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Generally, Amal Dunqul’s poetry can be divided into two parts:

The first part is characterized by a strong and intense struggle, in which the poet expressed unwavering positions that rejected all forms of oppression regardless of its source or the power of the opposing side. He lived through major historical events in Egypt and the Arab world, including the final phase of British occupation in Egypt, the change of political regime, followed by the 1956 Tripartite Aggression, the 1967 defeat, the 1973 October victory, and the Camp David Accords, among others.

The second part represents another type of struggle, in which the poet shifts from strength and defiance to reconciliation, patience, and even submission to divine fate. It is the stage of illness, which embodies a struggle between a weak body and a deadly disease.

The poet excelled in portraying each of these stages through poetic language and total artistic imagery that embodied and personified events and situations, since “language that does not break familiar structures, does not deviate from established norms, does not evoke distant meanings, and does not astonish with extraordinary images does not deserve to be called poetic language.”²²

To reveal this, we examine selected passages from Amal Dunqul’s poem “The Stone Cake Song or The Exodus Journey” from the collection *The Coming Covenant*.²³

Chapter One

O you standing on the edge of the massacre
 Raise your weapons!
 Death has fallen... and the heart scattered like prayer beads
 And blood flowed over the scarf!
 Houses are graves
 Prisons are graves
 The horizon... graves
 Raise your weapons
 And follow me!
 I am the regret of tomorrow and yesterday
 My banner: two bones... and a skull
 My slogan: the morning!
 Chapter Two
 The tired clock struck

²¹ Hani Al-Khair, Mahmoud Darwish: A Life Journey in the Paths of Poetry, Dar Feltes Publishing, 1st ed., Algeria, 2008, p. 19.

²² Abdelmalek Boumenjel, *The Experience of Poetic Criticism in Abdelmalek Mertad*, Dar Cordoba for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2015, Bab Ezzouar, Algeria, p. 70.

²³ Amal Dunqul, *The Complete Works*, Dar Al-Shorouk, 1st ed., Egypt, 2010, p. 271.

Its kind mother raised her eye
 (he was pushed by rifle butts into the vehicle!)

... ..

The tired clock struck again
 His mother sat... mending his sock
 (The investigator's eyes pierced him
 until blood and answers burst from his skin!)

These passages are part of a poem in which Amal Dunqul expresses a cry of rejection. It was written in 1972, referring to student demonstrations at Tahrir Square that were met with police bullets and arrests, resulting in violent confrontations. The demonstrators called for resistance, refusal of submission, and sacrifice.

A reader of the artistic image constructed by the poet can immediately notice the density of symbolic and emotional language. The title itself as a threshold structure (*The Stone Cake*) carries a paradox: "cake" suggests joy and celebration, while "stone" destroys this expectation, forcing the reader to dismantle the apparent meaning and search for the hidden one. The poem reflects rapid events involving students gathered around the monument in Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding liberation of occupied lands and rejecting submission.

At the beginning, the poet calls on students—after police attacks—to resist rather than surrender, presenting them in a highly charged image: "on the edge of the massacre," a scene saturated with blood and danger. Yet he simultaneously urges them to regain strength and take up weapons again.

He then slows down the narrative rhythm, using highly charged visual and auditory imagery. Police forces break the bonds uniting students, scattering them like prayer beads that have lost coherence. The result is a fully fragmented scene where everything becomes graves: (houses are graves, prisons are graves, the horizon is graves). This equivalence intensifies the sense of collective death.

Through these powerful similes, the poet highlights the suffering and injustice inflicted on the students, affirming that the price of rejection is blood and sacrifice alone. Yet he still calls them to resist and confront the enemy, using a symbolic image of danger and death: a banner of "two bones and a skull." This first scene represents a direct material conflict between oppressor and oppressed. The poet then moves to another scene depicting psychological struggle, centered on an anxious waiting mother. This is expressed through personification, where even the clock becomes tired, reflecting the long wait and emotional tension of the mother.

The poet then introduces another dimension of suffering, showing that the son has been arrested and violently pushed into a vehicle after being beaten with rifle butts.

In an even more brutal depiction, Amal Dunqul follows the interrogation process in police stations, where the investigator's eyes become needles piercing the students, causing blood and confessions to burst out. As Salah Fadl states: "We observe a clear shift toward new forms and images, dialogic and descriptive, immersed in the reality of the street and attentive to its rhythms, shaping their features from the conditions of people as they interact."²⁴

Amal Dunqul successfully intensifies his poetic imagery, producing a total picture of oppression and exposing its brutality. At the same time, he conveys the suffering of entire populations, creating in the reader a deep emotional response and a sense of direct contact with the pain of the students.

As Adonis states: "The great poem is movement, not stillness; its greatness lies not in reflecting reality, but in adding something new to the world."²⁵

The Moment of Death Scene

²⁴ Salah Fadl, previous reference, p. 64.

²⁵ Adonis, *The Time of Poetry*, p. 11.

The harsh clock struck
 They stood in dark, empty squares
 They turned around the monument steps
 Like trees made of flame
 Wind howls between its tender young leaves
 It cries: "My country... my country"
 (My distant homeland!) ²⁶

The poet depicts the moment of confrontation with death, as time becomes harsh and oppressive. In this context, the artistic image reaches a peak of condensed symbolic expression, where these images and what follows represent "the pinnacle of rhetorical art, the essence of the magnificent image, and the authentic element of rhetorical miracle, and the primary means through which poets ascend to the heavens of creativity... through metaphor, the abstract becomes tangible, touched by the hand, seen by the eye, and smelled by the nose; and through metaphor, inanimate objects speak, stones breathe, and the manifestations of life flow within them"²⁷.

On another level, the poet moves into a deeper dimension, portraying the state of shock that followed the attack on the students, turning Tahrir Square into an empty space that reflects void and trauma after violence.

He then returns once again to depict the anger that characterized the protesters, while the wind becomes a symbol of the Egyptian youth, whom the poet represents as fresh green leaves. Thus, the bonds that once united the youth turn into a resounding cry revealing the condition of a country burning its own children.

Overall, this poem represents the first stage of Amal Dunqul's life, in which the conflict intensified between a group of young people—including the poet himself—and authority. It was a struggle against injustice, against submission and humiliation, in defense of stolen rights and human dignity that had been violated in Egypt, Palestine, and other Arab countries.

The poet's determination in defending the oppressed, exposing truths, and confronting tyranny did not weaken. However, fate willed that he be struck by a serious illness that led him to the operating room, spending his final years in a cancer hospital, facing another opponent and entering a decisive battle whose sides shifted into a binary opposition: life versus death. It became a struggle for survival, transforming from a collective struggle into an individual existential one. He was no longer confronting a police officer or an oppressor, but rather the inevitability of extinction, where Amal's body became a battlefield against cancer cells invading him.

We highlight one aspect of this struggle through the poem (Against Whom?²⁸) from the collection *Papers of Room Eight*, written during his final days in the hospital. He says:

In operating rooms
 the surgeons' caps are white...
 the coats are white...
 the nurses' crowns are white... the robes of nuns...
 the sheets
 the color of beds... bandages of gauze and cotton
 a sleeping pill... a drip bottle...
 a cup of milk
 All of this spreads weakness in my heart

²⁶ Amal Dunqul, previous source, p. 274.

²⁷ Bakri Sheikh Amin, *Arabic Rhetoric in Its New Form: The Science of Rhetoric*, Dar Al-Ilm lil-Malayin, 2nd ed., 1984, Beirut, p. 111.

²⁸ Amal Dunqul, previous source, pp. 373–374.

All this whiteness reminds me of a shroud!
 So why, when I die, do mourners come dressed
 in the symbols of mourning?
 Is it because black...
 is the color of salvation from death?
 A charm against... time
 against whom...?
 And when does the heart—beating—feel at ease?!
 Between two colors: I receive friends
 who see my bed as a grave
 and my life as an eternity
 And I see in deep eyes
 the color of truth
 the color of homeland soil!

Looking at the first threshold of the text (the title), we find an interrogative form that opens multiple possible interpretations and reflects the poet's psychological state. The conflict is present, but the question remains: who is the other side? Thus, identifying the enemy becomes part of the map of self-defense.

A quick reading of the poem reveals the dominance of visual imagery, particularly color imagery, as "color is by nature silent poetry shaped by the rhetoric of nature"²⁹ The poet employs it to construct his artistic images and express his physical and psychological condition, as well as his unhealed wounds. The poem is dominated by white and black tones; however, whiteness here does not signify peace, purity, or optimism, but rather weakness, illness, and the imminence of death. Everything surrounding the poet in the hospital reinforces this sense: coats, sheets, gauze, and cotton—all faded, pale tones. Through this representation, the poet captures his oscillation between pessimism and optimism, between a fatal illness and a fragile hope of recovery. Yet this hope remains weak and uncertain. Thus, Amal Dunqul presents a pictorial canvas expressing his attachment to life, while at the same time blackness dominates the eyes of anxious friends. Despite all this, the poet admits defeat and the inability to resist, turning toward silence, as he stated in the poem *The Bed*, embracing the soil of the homeland he once defended, aware that death is the only absolute truth in life.

Pessimism gradually infiltrated Amal's consciousness, as he himself stated about Room Eight: "In the beginning it was like a grave... because I entered it in a spirit of surrender... I handed myself over to doctors... and entrusted myself to God's care... that was in the first months... when my condition improved it became a place of visits... and in the later period my stay turned into boredom... thus it transformed from a grave into a room and then into a prison..."³⁰

To reveal Amal Dunqul's struggle before and after illness, the following table can be observed:

Before illness	After illness
Political struggle	Internal struggle seeking immortality through poetry
Struggle aiming to change conditions for the better	Struggle documenting the final moments of Amal life
Struggle as a weapon against tyranny	Struggle revealing the infiltration of death into Amal's body

²⁹ Youssef Tariq Al-Samarrai, "Visual Image and Its Interactions in the Poetry of the Blind Poet Bashar ibn Burd," Issue 35, Vol. 10, October 2014, p. 7.

³⁰ Anas Dunqul, Amal Dunqul Interviews, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, no edition, 2012, pp. 160–161.

The poet scatters images according to the fragmentation of the scene he explodes through an accumulation of conflicting and dense images, which ultimately gives the scene depth and liberates it from the constraints of definition, framing, and categorization, in such a way that meanings float in all directions without the interpreter being able to settle on a single clear meaning through which other meanings can be inferred.³¹

Because the poetic image is a fundamental value in every high-quality artistic product, and because creative focus in poetry as a fluid and elevated art form—reaches the highest levels of transformation in its artistic effects, and since the poet is deeply engaged in stimulating his words to create their aesthetic excitement, the pleasure of this excitement lies in refined artistic transformations and continuously renewed aesthetic values.³²

Conclusion

The value of the artistic image lies in its suggestive power and condensed meanings, as it remains the aesthetic and artistic core of transforming poetic discourse from a purely communicative function into an artistic and creative one. The beauty of the image is measured by its originality and imaginative strength in surprising and astonishing the reader, despite the variety of artistic means available to Amal Dunqul.

The function of the artistic image is to convey the dimensions of the poet's vision and express his psychological reality, as the poetic image is a fundamental value in every high-quality artistic product and in poetic creative focus.

Modern and contemporary poetic imagery has moved away from direct sensory resemblance and close, literal similarity between the two elements of comparison.

We observe in Amal Dunqul's poetry strong and condensed imagery enriched by his vast cultural background.

Dunqul succeeded in portraying the Arab wound in the first phase of struggle and in expressing his pain in the second phase of his life, which became an existential struggle.

Despite the harshness of these themes, Amal succeeded through his emotional sincerity in breathing life into his poems.

His struggle shifted from an external enemy within society to an internal enemy residing within his own body.

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³¹ Issam Shartah, *Aesthetic Techniques in Contemporary Palestinian Poetry*, p. 63.

³² Issam Shartah, *Motivations of Poetic Discourse*, p. 26.

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