Jamāʿat Karkūk (The Kirkuk Group): Avant-Garde Pioneers of the Modern Iraqi Prose Poem Descriptive Study

جماعة كركوك: طليعة روّاد قصيدة النثر العراقية الحديثة
دراسة وصفية

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, Iraqi prose poetry has vied with both Arabic free verse and traditional verse for literary prominence, evolving amid turbulent political and social transformations. These conditions fostered distinct poetic generations and intensified the interplay between poetry and politics, often producing cultural and aesthetic tensions. Within this milieu, two major trends emerged: a conservative experimental trend extending the project of free verse pioneers, and an avant-garde trend defined by radical experimentation and rebellion against classical and modernist norms alike. At the forefront of the latter stood the Kirkuk Group, whose members — emerging from the city's unique multilingual and multicultural environment — synthesized Arabic heritage, Sufi poetics, and Western avant-garde influences. Their works combined prose poetry, open-text structures, and intertextual experimentation, challenging conventions while reflecting existential, social, and political realities. The study explores their aesthetic innovations, narrative-prosaic integration, and defiance of state-sanctioned aesthetics, as well as the political marginalization that exiled many of them under the Baʿthist regime yet expanded their transnational influence. Through examining figures such as Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī and Sarkūn Būluṣ, this paper argues that the Kirkuk Group's legacy redefined modern Iraqi poetry, asserting artistic autonomy and marking a decisive stage in the evolution of modern Arabic poetics.

الخلاصة

خاضت قصيدة النثر العراقية، منذ ستينيات القرن الماضي، منافسة حادّة مع كلٍّ من الشعر الحرّ والشعر العمودي على موقع الصدارة الأدبية، متطوّرةً في سياقات سياسية واجتماعية مضطربة أفرزت أجيالاً شعرية متمايزة وعمّقت التفاعل بين الشعر والسياسة، بما ولّد توتّرات ثقافية وجمالية متعدّدة. وفي خضمّ هذه التحوّلات، برز اتجاهان رئيسان: اتجاه تجريبي محافظ يمدّد مشروع روّاد الشعر الحر، واتجاه طليعي يقوم على التجريب الجذري والتمرّد على المعايير الكلاسيكية والحداثية معاً. وفي مقدّمة هذا الاتجاه الأخير جاءت "جماعة كركوك" التي انبثق أعضاؤها من بيئة المدينة المتعدّدة اللغات والثقافات، فصاغوا رؤية شعرية تمزج بين التراث العربي، والروحانيات الصوفية، ومؤثّرات الطليعة الغربية .

مزجت أعمالهم بين قصيدة النثر، والبنى المفتوحة للنص، والتجريب التناصي، التي تتحدّى الأشكال الموروثة وتعكس في الوقت نفسه هواجس الوجود والواقعين الاجتماعي والسياسي. ويتناول هذا البحث ابتكارات "جماعة كركوك" الجمالية، وآليات دمج السردي بالنثري، وموقعهم المناهض للجماليات الرسمية التي تبنّاها النظام السياسي، إضافةً إلى أثر التهميش السياسي الذي دفع بكثير منهم إلى المنافي إبّان حقبة البعث، لكنه في المقابل وسّع حضورهم العابر للحدود. ومن خلال دراسة نماذج لشعراء مثل فاضل العزّاوي وسركون بولص، يجادل البحث بأن إرث جماعة كركوك أعاد صياغة ملامح الشعر العراقي الحديث، ورسّخ مفهوم الاستقلالية الفنية، ورسم مرحلة حاسمة في تطوّر الشعرية العربية الحديثة.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Even before seizing power in Iraq on July 17, 1968, the Ba'th Party sought to portray itself as a revolutionary entity aiming to build a new Iraqi society based on the Pan-Arabism vision. Ba'thist ideology centered on the belief that Arabs constituted a single nation with a distinct history and civilization, destined to rise again through inspiring an authentic Arab spirit and achieving unity, freedom, and socialism. According to Ba'th ideology, Arab literature was defined as "the literature of Arab unity, the literature of Arab socialism, the literature of Arab liberation" (Faraḥ: 1987: 201). The Ba'th Party viewed literature primarily as a tool to serve its ideology and objectives, often disregarding the artistic and aesthetic elements inherent in the work.

Consequently, any new literary ideas not rooted in the Ba'th's definition of Arab nationalism were dismissed as counter-ideas. This hardline stance persisted after the 1968 coup, evident in the party's rejection of innovations in ideas, literary forms, and social changes that did not align with its Arab nationalist doctrine. From the late 1960s onward, Ba'th ideology fundamentally directed cultural production, especially poetry, making it essential for achieving political goals. This study, however, examines the crucial role and significant contribution of the Kirkuk Group or *Jamā'at Karkūk* جماعة كركوك in establishing the modern Iraqi prose poem. The Kirkuk Group's impact was evident in the development of Iraqi poetry's form and content outside the ideological positions of the Ba'th, initiating new poetic experimentation in style, techniques, and vision.

This research also analyzes how literary genre and form become integrated into the struggles of opposing ideologies, demonstrating how a poetic form is either rejected or accepted based on specific ideological conditions. The Iraqi prose poem and its poetic transformations are significant subjects because they reflect broader changes in literary form and genre, as well as their complex relationship with political and social shifts. This study argues that these transformations stem from both the inherent nature of the poetic form and genre and from external political and social pressures. Understanding this interaction between form, content, and ideology is crucial for tracing the emergence and consolidation of the modern Iraqi prose poem.

Since the 1960s, Iraqi prose poems have competed with Arabic free verse and traditional poetry for recognition in the literary scene. This rivalry was directly influenced by political and social trends, which often favored one form over the others. This competition between forms spurred the emergence of distinct literary cohorts, a rivalry that sometimes escalated into intense literary, political, and social struggles. Political authorities often attempted to manipulate these rivalries and exploit the political dimensions within literary and social domains. This manipulation led to cultural, artistic, and political conflicts within poetic cohorts, occasionally resulting in a specific poetic type becoming strongly identified with a particular political trend. Indeed, when the state interferes with the direction of literature to benefit specific individuals, parties, or institutions, this interference inevitably impairs and restricts literary production. While the Ba'th regime presented its policies regarding literature, culture, and the arts as serving Arab Nationalism, its actions primarily benefitted the Ba'th Party and its literary and poetic members.

Literary genre is not merely a discursive form; it also functions as a social and aesthetic discourse. Hans Robert Jauss and Tzvetan Todorov conceptualize genres as models of writing that reflect readers' expectations. Todorov identifies two aspects of genres' historical existence: as "an institution that functions as a 'horizon of expectation' for readers, and as a 'model of writing' for authors" (Todorov 1976: 163). This observation underscores how genres both guide and constrain literary production, shaping the way authors compose their works while framing readers' anticipations. It also highlights the reciprocal relationship between text and audience, which becomes crucial when considering the reception of innovative or experimental literary forms. A pre-social agreement exists between writers and readers, influencing the reception of new texts or genres. Jauss similarly notes that a new text "evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed, or just reproduced" (Jauss and Benzinger 1970: 13). This insight emphasizes the dynamic interaction between literary tradition and innovation, showing that new works are understood considering prior conventions, even as they may seek to challenge or transform them. It also provides a conceptual framework for analyzing how experimental Iraqi prose poetry negotiated established literary norms.

Fredric Jameson extends this understanding by defining genres as "essentially literary institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (Jameson 1983: 92). This definition highlights the dual role of genres as both artistic frameworks and socially regulated practices, showing that literary forms are shaped by communal expectations as well as authorial choices. It also provides a lens for analyzing how literary innovation interacts with established norms and public reception. Despite the freedom of poets and writers to choose genres and themes, their work remains largely shaped by readers' expectations, which in turn reflect societal characteristics. Genres "communicate with the society in which they flourish by means of institutionalization" (Todorov 1976: 163). Such a perspective emphasizes that genres are not neutral forms but socially situated, responding to ideological and institutional pressures. Applying this framework to Iraq clarifies how political and social forces influenced

the reception, adaptation, and evolution of the prose poem, highlighting the constraints and opportunities for literary experimentation.

Gerard Genette emphasizes that no genre is inherently more theoretical than another; all are "empirical classes, established by observation of the historical facts" (Genette 1992: 66). This observation underscores the importance of examining genres as historically situated phenomena rather than abstract constructs, highlighting the need to study literary forms in their concrete social and cultural contexts. It also provides a methodological basis for analyzing how the Iraqi prose poem emerged within specific historical and literary conditions. Similarly, Jonathan Culler views literary study as an analysis of social institutions, scientific practices, and procedures for acquiring knowledge (Culler 2009: 880). Such a perspective emphasizes that literature functions within broader societal and institutional frameworks, allowing scholars to understand both constraints and possibilities for innovation. Applied to Iraq, it clarifies how political, social, and institutional factors influenced the reception and evolution of the prose poem, alongside aesthetic experimentation. The evolution of literary genres allows scholars to trace both historical transformations and continuities within literary forms. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks help illuminate how the reception and development of the Iraqi prose poem were shaped not only by aesthetic innovation but also by the political and social conditions of the time.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN ARABICE POETRY

After centuries of adherence to the formal structures and aesthetic principles of classical Arabic poetry, the twentieth century witnessed concerted efforts to renew poetic expression across the Arab world. In Egypt during the 1920s, the *al-Dīwān* group sought to revitalize poetic content by deriving it from authentic conscience, aiming for originality in expression that eschewed imitation (Al-'Aqqād and al-Māzinī 1997: 79). Similarly, the al-Mahjar group in North America, composed mainly of Lebanese immigrant poets, criticized the rigid traditional rhythm of Arabic poetry and called for reforms in poetic music, emphasizing emotional and personal expression (Nu'aymah 2015: 84–85). These regional and diasporic innovations created a fertile intellectual environment, laying the groundwork for subsequent experimentation in other Arab contexts, including Iraq.

Individual poets also played a crucial role in pioneering literary renewal. The Iraqi poet Jamīl Sidqī al-Zahāwī (1863–1936) championed *al-shi'r al-mursal* (Blank Verse), a metrical but variable poetic form with rhymed lines, exemplified in his 1908 collection *al-Kalim al-Manẓūm* (*Versified Speech*) (Al-Zahāwī 1955). Egyptian poet Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892–1955) similarly experimented with lines of varying meter and rhyme (Abū Shādī 1977: 379). These individual innovations reflected a growing desire among Arab poets to balance tradition with expressive flexibility, opening new possibilities for poetic form.

Non-metrical Arabic poetry also emerged through the work of Lebanese poets such as Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883–1931) and Amīn al-Rīḥānī (1876–1940), Iraqi poets Ḥusayn Mardān (1927–1972) and Rafā'īl Buṭṭī (1900–1956), and Egyptian poet Luwīs 'Awaḍ (1915–1989). These efforts demonstrated a strong desire among Arab poets to innovate and rebel against the dominant traditional poetic form (*al-shi'r al-'amūdī*), governed by a prosodic system of sixteen meters based on syllabic length and monorhyme. Within this context, Iraqi poets began laying the foundations for a modern literary movement that would later culminate in the free verse poetry.

While these early attempts paved the way for Arabic free verse, they remained limited and did not culminate in a broad literary movement. In contrast, the mid-twentieth century saw a more successful free verse movement emerge in Iraq, led by poets Nāzik al-Malā'ikah, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, Buland al-Ḥaydarī, and 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī. Arabic free verse (*al-shi'r al-ḥurr*) requires adherence to meter but does not impose rhyme at the end of each line. Free verse allows for one or multiple meters and variable numbers of feet per line, offering greater structural flexibility than classical forms. Such experimentation, while still within metrical constraints, created a bridge toward fully non-metrical poetry, enabling conceptual and thematic innovation.

In the early 1960s, *Majallat Shi'r* (Poetry Magazine) in Lebanon, particularly poets Adūnīs, Yūsuf al-Khāl, Unsī al-Ḥājj, and Shawqī Abī Shaqra, promoted the *qaṣīdat al-nathr* (prose poem). [1] They argued that free verse was not entirely unrestricted, whereas the prose poem—unrhymed and non-metric—offered full poetic freedom. While the term "prose poem" is well-defined in Western studies, it remains somewhat controversial in Arab scholarship. Unlike Western non-prosodic poetry, which may take the form of free verse or prose poem, in Arabic non-metrical poetry since the 1960s has

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[1] The first issue of *Majallat Shi'r* was published in Beirut in 1957 and was suspended in 1970. The magazine was founded by the Lebanese poet Yūsuf al-Khāl, influenced by the *Poetry* magazine that was founded by Harriet Monroe and published in Chicago. *Majallat Shi'r* greatly influenced the modernity of Arabic poetry and published poems of the most important poets from various Arab countries. The magazine also published studies and translations of important Arab writers who have greatly influenced subsequent generations of modern poetry. Among these names were Yūsuf al-Khāl, Adūnīs, Unsī al-Ḥājj, Shawqī Abī Shaqra and others.

been primarily identified as the prose poem. This theoretical discussion highlights the conceptual significance of the prose poem as a medium capable of transcending inherited limitations.

Arabic prosodic poetry traditionally exists in two forms. First, traditional poetry (*al-shiʿr al-ʿamūdī*), structured by sixteen meters and monorhyme. Second, free verse (*al-shiʿr al-ḥurr*), which requires meter but not rhyme, differing from English free verse in its metrical basis. Some writers, such as Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, equated the Arabic prose poem with English free verse. Jabrā noted "I called this poetry from the beginning free verse, according to my concept of free verse, a concept in which I disagreed with many, and it is known that I reject the tendency of many of those who study poetry to call this poem a prose poem" (Jabrā 1990: 9–10). This remark illustrates the terminological confusion that accompanied the introduction of modern poetic forms into Arabic. Jabrā's insistence on using the term "free verse" reveals his attempt to reconcile Arabic innovation with Western terminology while rejecting the label "prose poem," which he considered misleading in the Arabic context.

Other poets preferred the term *qaṣīdat al-nathr* "prose poem."[1] Adūnīs was the first to use it in his article *Fī qaṣīdat al-nathr* ("In the Prose Poem"), published in *Majallat Shiʿr* on April 14, 1960. Drawing on concepts from French writer Suzanne Bernard (1959), Adūnīs argued that metrical poetry was constrained by rhythm that pleases the ear more than the mind, whereas prose poems offered greater freedom. For him, prosody is merely one method of poetic expression; poetry itself is not restricted to a single system. The prose poem, therefore, allows poets to experiment with forms, fostering a space for continuous dialogue and innovation. In Adūnīs' view, it embodies change, probability, and the creation of a new poetic language in contrast to the determinism of classical metric poetry (Adūnīs 1960: 75). This theoretical framework would later resonate with Iraqi poets seeking similar liberation from prosodic conventions, directly influencing the emergence of the modern Iraqi prose poem.

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE MODERN IRAQI PROSE POEM

The attempts to write non-prosodic poetry in Iraq date back to the early twentieth century, influenced by Lebanese poets such as Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883–1931) and Amīn al-Rīḥānī (1876–1940). Among the earliest Iraqi experiments in this poetic form was that of Rafāʾīl Buṭṭī (1901–1956), widely regarded as a pioneer of *al-shiʿr al-manthūr* (non-prosodic poetry). His collection *al-Rabīʿīāt* (*The Springs*), considered the first of its kind in Iraq, was published in 1925 by *al-Ḥurrīyah* magazine, which Buṭṭī himself edited. The collection comprises fourteen poems in short segments, spanning approximately 100 pages, written between 1920 and 1925.

The Egyptian journal Al-Muqtataf described al-Rabīʿīāt as "a book of literature and philosophical sublime thoughts written in concise Arabic sentences. This kind of writing is a modern replacement of poetry and is not restricted to meter and rhyme. Every word is full of meaning" (Al-Muqtaṭaf 1925: 448). Similarly, Lebanese critic ʿAfīfah Findī Ṣaʿb, writing in *al-Khuddar* magazine, observed: "The style of al-Rabīʿīāt is the *al-shiʿr al-manthūr* that increases each day in Arabic literature. The prevailing spirit in the book is the spirit of a sensitive young man who is suffering but is full of hope and aspires for greatness" (Buṭṭī 2000: 214). Ṣaʿb noted that although *al-shiʿr al-manthūr* attracted some attention during the first quarter of the twentieth century, its influence remained confined to the personal experimentation of individual poets and did not develop into a widespread literary trend in Iraq. Consequently, it could not yet function as a substantial alternative to traditional poetry.

By the 1950s, Ḥusayn Mardān (1927–1972) emerged as a prominent figure in Iraqi *al-shiʿr al-manthūr*. Known for his rebellious sensibilities since the publication of his first collection in 1949, Mardān was inspired by Charles Baudelaire, whose poetic struggles and confrontations with authority left a marked influence on him (al-Khayyāt 1987: 147). His work consistently challenged societal conventions, foregrounding personal and emotional themes over overt political or moral commentary. As noted, his collections "contained poems of love that do not mix with the public atmosphere politically and morally" (Ḥammūdī 2006: 11). This observation underscores Mardān's innovative approach in prioritizing individual expression over societal expectations. It also highlights his pioneering role in developing the early framework of modern Iraqi prose poetry, setting a precedent for subsequent writers in the genre.

In the 1951, Mardān published *Suwar Murʿibah* (Terrifying Pictures), a collection he termed *al-Nathr al-Murakkaz* (intensive prose), marking the beginning of his distinctive poetic style. He continued this trajectory with *ʿAzīzatī Fulanah* (My Unknown Beloved) in 1952 and *Nashīd al-anshād* (Song of Songs) in 1955, drawing inspiration from Old Testament motifs. In 1958, he published *al-Urjūḥah hādiʾat al-Ḥibāl* (The Slow Swing), explicitly advocating the abandonment of traditional meter and rhyme in poetry (ʿAbbās 2006: 10). Despite his innovations, Mardān did not cultivate a following for his intensive prose approach, which closely resembled the modern prose poem, as the contemporary prominence of free verse largely overshadowed his contributions, limiting both critical recognition and public engagement.

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[1] In this study, I use literary terms according to Arabic literary scholars and trends. This may contradict the meaning of terms in English or Western literary concepts.

In the early 1960s, the Iraqi poet Yūsuf al-Ṣā'igh published the long prose poem *Shammat Afyūn* ("Sniff of Opium") in *Poetry* magazine, which he had written in 1956 (Al-Ṣā'igh 1962: 59–77). This publication positioned al-Ṣā'igh among the first Iraqis to contribute a prose poem to *Poetry* magazine—a fact largely overlooked in studies of the Iraqi prose poem. Al-Ṣā'igh noted that he sought to write poetry "closer to what was then called prose poetry," achieving this most notably in *Shammat Afyūn*, submitted at the request of the magazine's editor (Al-Jubūrī 1992: 86). This statement emphasizes al-Ṣā'igh's deliberate engagement with an emerging poetic form and his role in shaping the early contours of Iraqi prose poetry. It also shows how his experimentation bridged traditional poetic conventions with innovative narrative structures, marking him as a key figure in the genre's formative period.

Importantly, al-Ṣā'igh's work predates the avant-garde experiments of the 1960s and the Kirkuk Group, whose poetry is commonly recognized as defining the modern Iraqi prose poem. His contributions, therefore, establish an early precedent for the emergence of this poetic form in Iraq, bridging individual innovation and the later collective movement, and highlighting the gradual evolution of prose poetry from isolated experiments to a defining feature of modern Iraqi literary identity.

Building on the broader developments in modern Arabic poetry, the early Iraqi experiments in non-prosodic forms demonstrate how local poets selectively adapted and transformed these innovations. While influenced by Lebanese and Western models, Iraqi writers like Rafā'īl Buṭṭī, Ḥusayn Mardān, and Yūsuf al-Ṣā'igh tailored these approaches to reflect their own cultural, social, and personal realities, laying the groundwork for the distinct trajectory that would culminate in the 1960s avant-garde and the modern Iraqi prose poem.

4. THE 1960s COHORT: INNOVATIONS AND TRENDS IN IRAQI POETRY

The 1960s marked the emergence of a significant cohort of Iraqi poets who embraced experimentation in both form and content. Unlike previous generations, these poets sought not only formal innovation but also the renewal of poetic themes. They criticized the achievements of earlier pioneers for their "stagnation, backwardness and falling into romance, and their refusal to open the door towards further experimentation, innovation, and transgression" (Thāmir 2012: 94). This critique underscores the new generation's commitment to breaking with established conventions and advancing both the form and substance of Iraqi poetry. It also situates their experimentation within a broader cultural and social awakening, reflecting the interplay between literary innovation and the transformative forces shaping Iraq at the time. The poetic experimentation of this cohort coincided with avant-garde movements in other artistic domains — storytelling, the novel, visual arts, and theater — highlighting the broader dynamism of ideas and social consciousness in Iraq at the time. Changes in Iraqi society following the July 14, 1958 revolution, combined with global liberation movements and a shift toward socialist ideas, fostered new awareness among youth and poets in particular (Al-Jazā'irī 1974: 51).

Both local and international events shaped the crystallization of this 1960s cohort. Domestically, the pioneers of free verse challenged traditional Arabic poetry, laying a foundation for continued innovation. Many members of this cohort had witnessed the July 14, 1958 revolution and aspired to a more equitable political and social reality. The February 8, 1963 coup and the violent actions of the Ba'thist *Al-Haras al-Qawmī* (National Guard) against communists and other dissenters, however, had severe repercussions: numerous poets faced arrest and torture (Tripp 2007: 165). Internationally, the defeat of the Arab armies in the June 1967 War with Israel prompted writers and intellectuals to engage with themes of resistance and national commitment. Broader global movements — including student revolutions in Europe, existentialism, and Surrealism — also influenced Iraqi poets, contributing to political divisions reflected in literary output and affecting the thematic and formal choices of 1960s poetry (Al-Jazā'irī 1974: 51). This period was marked by intense conflicts between two primary factions: nationalists (including Ba'thists) and leftists (including Marxists).

Among the 1960s generation of Iraqi poets, poetic experimentation took two distinctive directions: a conservative experimental trend and an avant-garde trend, each representing a different vision of poetic renewal.

4.1 The Conservative Experimental Trend

The conservative experimental trend in modern Iraqi poetry drew heavily on the pioneering work of Free Verse poets, emphasizing the refinement of poetic diction, structure, and metaphorical expression. Significantly, this trend "did not declare a rupture with the Arab heritage, but kept its channels open to it" (Mahdī: 1994: 251). This observation highlights the careful balance these poets maintained between innovation and tradition, showing that their experimentation was not a rejection of cultural roots. It also underscores the continuity in literary heritage, revealing how formal and metaphorical innovations could coexist with respect for established Arabic poetic conventions. Key formal developments included the partial or total abandonment of rhyme, a preference for stanzas over continuous lines, and innovative uses of metaphor (Mahdī: 1994: 252). Prominent representatives included Ḥasab al-Shaykh Ja'far, Sāmī Mahdī, Fawzī Karīm, Ḥamīd Sa'īd, Ḥusayn 'Abd al-Laṭīf, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Tuhmāzī, and 'Alī Ja'far 'Allāq (Thāmir 2012: 95).

Most poets in this trend were affiliated with or close to the Ba'th Party, often occupying influential positions in cultural and media institutions. Ḥamīd Sa'īd, for example, held multiple high-ranking posts, including chief of the Department of

Authorship and Publishing (1969), press adviser at Iraqi embassies, editor-in-chief of *al-Aqlām magazine*, and president of the General Organization for Radio and Television (Mahdī 1994: 62). Sāmī Mahdī likewise directed *Alif Bā' magazine*, the Iraqi Cultural Center in Paris, the House of the Masses for Journalism, and major newspapers such as *al-Jumhūrīyah* and *al-Thawrah* (Mahdī 1994: 65-66). These roles illustrate the intersection of conservative literary practice and state-controlled cultural production, with loyalty to Ba'thist ideology shaping both their administrative and poetic activity.

Yet, the trend also included leftist poets, notably members of the Iraqi Communist Party such as Ḥasab al-Shaykh Ja'far and Yūsuf al-Ṣā'igh, who sought to navigate creative freedom within a restrictive political environment. Following the collapse of the National Front alliance in the 1970s, many leftist intellectuals faced exile or coercion. Those who remained often compromised politically to continue their work, sometimes producing panegyric poetry celebrating Saddam Hussein, as Ḥasab al-Shaykh Ja'far did. Despite these pressures, Ja'far maintained his poetic commitment within metered free verse, introducing innovations such as the *madūrah* (circular poem), in which rhythmic units flow continuously without terminal rhyme, producing a seamless line. As Nāzik al-Malā'ikah notes, this form "derived from the phenomenon of tadwīr (enjambment) in classical Arabic poetry…tadwīr was known to earlier critics, who defined it as the sharing of a single word between the two hemistiches of a verse" (al-Malā'ikah 1978: 20). This explanation situates Ja'far's innovation within a broader historical and literary context, showing how he adapted classical techniques to modern forms. It also emphasizes his ability to transform inherited conventions into experimental structures, thereby enriching the development of Iraqi metered free verse.

It is worth noting that the years 1973 to 1978 witnessed a temporary presence of Marxist ideology alongside Ba'thist nationalism, following the declaration of the National Patriotic Front between the Ba'th Party and the Iraqi Communist Party in 1973. During this brief period, some ideological tensions were mitigated, allowing limited cooperation within certain cultural and literary spheres. However, outside this interval, the Ba'th Party imposed its ideology across all government institutions, including those controlling the means of cultural production, ensuring the predominance of Ba'thist principles over literary and artistic life.

Conservative poets such as Ḥamīd Sa'īd and Sāmī Mahdī exemplify how literary practice intertwined with political positioning. Their orientation reflects a cautious engagement with modernist experiments, preserving Arab poetic heritage while responding selectively to avant-garde trends. As Mahdī explained, Ba'thist poets were "more immune than others to these ideas and more prudent in dealing with them because of the nationalist instinct aroused by the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party and the soil in which the love of the nation planted the pride of its heritage and faith in its renewed message" (Mahdī 1994: 24). Through this balance of artistic innovation and political conformity, these poets negotiated both aesthetic and ideological pressures, reinforcing the conservative strand within Iraq's modern poetic landscape.

4.2 The Avant-Garde Trend in 1960s Iraqi Poetry

In contrast to the conservative experimental trend discussed in the previous section, the avant-garde poets of the 1960s pursued a radically different path of poetic experimentation and ideological rebellion. This trend represents the most adventurous and rebellious side of the 1960s cohort. It is defined by radical poetic experimentation and a direct challenge to the values of both classical and pioneer poetry. Their choice of experimentation was deliberately designed to contrast with the pioneer generation and venture outside traditional poetic models (Ṣāliḥ and al-Ṭā'ī 2017: 39). This remark highlights the intentional divergence of the avant-garde from established norms, illustrating their commitment to breaking with both classical structures and earlier modernist approaches. It also underscores the ideological and aesthetic radicalism that characterized this group, situating their experimentation within both local and global currents of literary innovation. This group drew inspiration from the Arabic prose poem, particularly the model popularized by the Lebanese journal *Majallat Shi'r*, and from the experiments of international movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism. Many poets were also influenced by the American Beat Cohort, including poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac (Thāmir 2012: 193). The avant-garde efforts are considered foundational for modern Iraqi prose poetry. Beyond producing prose poems and free verse, these poets distinguished themselves through theoretical reflections on their practice. In 1969, Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī drafted a manifesto outlining key principles of modern Arabic poetry, which was co-signed by several poets, notably including Sāmī Mahdī — a representative of the conservative experimental trend — thus demonstrating a rare moment of cross-ideological engagement. [1] The manifesto articulated several foundational guidelines:

(1) Avoid traditional poetic patterns and allow the poem to create itself within its own words and form.
(2) Compose open-ended poems with multiple, rather than singular, meanings.
(3) Integrate metric poetry and prose to extract poetic qualities from prose.

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[1] The poets who signed this statement are Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, Sāmī Mahdī, Khālid 'Alī Muṣṭafá, and Fawzī Karīm. The Manifesto was published in the first issue of *Shi'r* 69 magazine "Poetry 69" in Iraq in 1969, where the focus was on the poetic image and the statement of the problematic relationship between the intellectual and the writer with power.

(4) Unify different forms of artistic expression — poetry, narrative, painting, photography, posters, cinema, and theater — toward achieving an "open text" (Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 217, 223–224).

This document exemplified the avant-garde commitment to experimentation, while also indicating how even a conservative figure like Sāmī Mahdī could engage with broader theoretical innovations in the poetic field.

This vision sought a convergence of artistic forms without rigid boundaries between media, emphasizing the integration of poetry, narrative, visual arts, and performance into a unified aesthetic experience. By advocating for open-ended compositions and multiple layers of meaning, the avant-garde poets challenged traditional notions of poetic form and audience expectation, fostering a more dynamic interaction between creator and reader. Leading figures of this trend include Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, Jalīl Ḥaydar, Ṣādiq al-Ṣāyig, Ṣalāḥ Fā'iq, Jān Damū, Qaḥṭān al-Madfa'ī, among others (Al-Kubaysī 1975: 92–93). Many of these poets later coalesced into what became known as the Kirkuk Group, who emerged as pioneers of the modern Iraqi prose poem, leaving a lasting impact on poetic experimentation and shaping the trajectory of Iraqi poetry in the 1960s and beyond.

While the 1960s cohort displayed varying levels of experimentation and faced intellectual, social, and political challenges, these differences did not diminish the significance of their work. On the contrary, the diversity of approaches and the tensions among them catalyzed the advancement of experimental poetry in Iraq, laying the foundation for the emergence of groups like the Kirkuk Group. Their pioneering efforts not only expanded the technical and thematic possibilities of Iraqi poetry but also redefined the relationship between poetry, politics, and society, influencing subsequent generations of poets and shaping the trajectory of modern Arabic literature.

Many of the leading figures of the 1960s avant-garde trend, whose experimentation and theoretical reflections on poetry challenged traditional norms, would later coalesce into a more cohesive and identifiable entity known as the Kirkuk Group. This transition marks a shift from the broader, loosely connected avant-garde activities of the decade to a concentrated intellectual and poetic project centered in the city of Kirkuk, which became the focal point for innovative prose poetry in Iraq. The following section examines the origins, multi-cultural foundations, and enduring contributions of this group in shaping modern Iraqi poetry.

5. Jamā'at Karkūk (THE KIRKUK GROUP): CONTEXTS AND CONRIBUTIONS

The fifth section examines *Jamā'at Karkūk* (the Kirkuk Group) as one of the most innovative and intellectually influential literary movements in modern Iraqi poetry. Emerging during a period of profound political transformation and artistic experimentation, the group represents both a culmination of earlier avant-garde tendencies and a bold reconfiguration of poetic form and cultural identity. Their contributions cannot be separated from the broader debates that defined the Iraqi literary field in the 1960s — between traditionalism and modernism, national commitment and individual freedom, and between the ideological control of art and the pursuit of creative autonomy. The Kirkuk Group's work thus provides a compelling lens through which to explore the intersections of politics, culture, and aesthetics in modern Arabic literature.

By situating the group within its socio-historical and multilingual environment, this section investigates how the poets of Kirkuk redefined Iraqi modernism through experimentation, translation, and cross-cultural dialogue. It analyzes their engagement with both Western avant-garde poetics and indigenous literary traditions, as well as their negotiation of political repression under the Ba'thist regime. Furthermore, the section explores the group's legacy within Iraqi and Arab literary modernity, highlighting how their radical approach to poetic form, language, and identity continues to influence contemporary poetic sensibilities.

5.1 Origins, Context, and Multi-Cultural Foundations

The genesis of the modern Iraqi prose poem is intimately linked to the 1960s avant-garde poets, particularly the formation of *Jamā'at Karkūk* (the Kirkuk Group) in the northern city of Kirkuk, 150 miles from Baghdad. Kirkuk's unique position — economically vital due to oil production since 1927 and culturally diverse, housing Arabs, Turkmen, Kurds, Assyrians, and English expatriates — created an environment unusually receptive to new literary forms and Western modernist trends (Sluglett 2001: 125; Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 279). The presence of the British-controlled Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC), including its modern residential infrastructure for employees, not only introduced the group's members to Western lifestyles but also facilitated access to international literature, journals, and artistic ideas.

The group was formally founded in 1959 by Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī, and Yūsuf Al-Haydarī (Aḥmad 2007). This intellectual project was bolstered by the proliferation of libraries and diverse publications in the city. Crucially, the multi-lingual fluency of several poets — a direct result of Kirkuk's cosmopolitan nature — significantly enriched their intellectual and poetic experience, granting them direct access to global literary trends.

The group demonstrated its global openness by discussing, translating, and publishing articles and poems on contemporary literary and intellectual trends in Iraqi and Arab periodicals. Sarkūn Būluṣ was central to this effort, spearheading the translation and publication of English works from the early 1960s. His extensive translations and critical introductions to new international poetic developments were highly influential in promoting the creation of new poetry within Iraq (Al-

Janābī 1992: 76). This influence highlights Būluṣ's role as a cultural mediator, bridging Iraqi poetry with global literary innovations. It also demonstrates how his efforts facilitated the integration of new ideas and techniques into local poetic practices, fostering experimentation and modernist approaches among Iraqi poets.

Although the group encompassed a wide range of talents, including storywriters, artists, and translators, the poets achieved the greatest prominence. Key members included Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, Yūsuf Al-Haydarī, Qaḥṭān al-Hurrmuzī, Salāḥ Fā'iq, and Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī (Al-'Allāf 2010). The group organized numerous literary and cultural events in Kirkuk from the late 1950s until the mid-1960s, at which point most members relocated to Baghdad for work and studies (Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 315-317). This move was pivotal, providing them with expanded access to publishing in major literary magazines, accelerating the development of their individual poetic styles, and enabling them to shape the broader 1960s poetic cohort actively.

5.2 Literary Experimentation, Ideology, and Poetic Innovation

The Kirkuk Group was fundamentally characterized by a spirit of adventure and a relentless commitment to experimentation. Their outlook on literature, politics, and heritage was shaped by their diverse cultural backgrounds, unique personal experiences, and strong engagement with world literature. While they initially wrote free verse, their definitive adoption of the prose poem (*qaṣīdat al-nathr*) represented a truly rebellious act, signaling their rejection of the idea that traditional poetic forms were sacred or inviolable.

The members shared a unified vision: to shed ideological, religious, and social illusions and to use a language that captured the poet's clear awareness of the present. Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī articulated this perfectly: "we were inclined to concrete language that says what you want exactly and clearly, with hate of rhetorical games, wordiness, and excessive use of lyric" (Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 300). This statement underscores the group's commitment to linguistic clarity and precision as a vehicle for intellectual and artistic engagement. It also highlights how their pursuit of directness was part of a broader strategy to innovate poetically while maintaining critical and social consciousness. This commitment to directness did not equate to a simple depiction of reality; rather, the group forged an adventurous poetic language that consciously moved beyond the constraints of classical tradition. Indeed, a high degree of experimentation was a defining feature of the group's work from its inception (Būlus 1992: 38-39).

A key ideological distinction separated the Kirkuk Group from many peers: while most poets of the 1960s cohort aligned with either the Ba'th Party or the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kirkuk Group primarily comprised leftists (Būlus 1992: 42 and Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 308). This political leaning corresponded with their modernist aesthetic. In contrast, 1960s Ba'thist poets were generally conservative, prioritizing Arab cultural heritage as the sole source for renewal. Consequently, they largely rejected the prose poem, dismissing it as a Western import designed to undermine Arab literary tradition — a common Ba'thist ideological stance at the time.

The Kirkuk Group published their prose poems in influential journals, including the Lebanese magazines *Majallat Shi'r* and *Mawāqif*, and the key Iraqi magazine *al-Kalimah*.[1] Their work focused on intensification, concentration, and cultivating an inner rhythm to replace the rigidity of classical prosody. Initially influenced by the French-derived Lebanese prose poems in *Majallat Shi'r*, the Kirkuk Group quickly developed a distinct style, drawing primarily from American poetry, specifically the Beat Cohort. This influence transcended aesthetics, inspiring a broader sense of freedom in both poetry and life. As Sarkūn Būluṣ stated, "the Beat cohort is a great cohort that has undoubtedly influenced us morally, taught us to be free, and to try writing in new ways without fear" (Ḥusayn 2003). This remark emphasizes the moral and creative impact of the Beat movement on the Kirkuk Group, showing how international influences encouraged both formal experimentation and a liberated approach to poetic expression. It also illustrates how their engagement with foreign models was translated into a distinctly Iraqi literary context, shaping the group's innovative voice.

The group's engagement with modern Western trends was direct and deep, as most members could read novels and poetry in English. This immersion was highly evident in their innovative writing, which the Baghdad literary community often found "new, strange, and complex," sometimes even describing it as similar to English prose (Aḥmad 2007). This observation highlights how exposure to Western literature reshaped the group's aesthetic sensibilities and encouraged experimentation beyond traditional Arabic forms. It also shows that their innovative style was both a reflection of international influences and a deliberate effort to expand the horizons of Iraqi literary expression. Sarkūn Būluṣ's work directly cemented this link, notably through his translation of a complete anthology of Beat Cohort poets — including Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder — which was published in *Poetry* magazine (Ḥusayn 2003).

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[1] *Al-Kalimah* magazine is the most important Iraqi magazine, and perhaps the only one that has been interested in publishing prose poems since its publication in 1967. In the early 1970s, it devoted full numbers to the prose poem before it ceased publication in November 1974.

5.2.1 Dual Influences: Western and Indigenous

Although the Kirkuk Group sought freedom from the constraints of Arabic literary heritage, they did not reject tradition wholesale; instead, they selectively embraced non-traditional models that fueled their experimentation without adhering to predetermined agendas. Their unique influences included Sufism: proximity to the *takiya* (Sufi centers) in Kirkuk and familiarity with the works of Ibn ʿArabi (1165-1240 AD), al-Ḥallāj (858-922 AD), and al-Tawḥīdī (923-1023 AD) contributed significantly to their distinctive poetic ventures and their adoption of the prose poem. Furthermore, the poetic language of the Holy Book and the Qur'an provided stylistic resources that supported their use of prose poetry techniques (Al-ʿAzzāwī 2007: 5). This synthesis of indigenous literary heritage and American poetic models was crucial in liberating them from the perceived rigidity of traditional forms.

Counter to claims by conservative critics, the Kirkuk poets were indeed influenced by Arabic literary heritage, though on their own terms. Sarkūn Būlus, for example, cited a profound influence from the pre-Islamic poet Omar ibn Abi Rabi'ah (644-711 AD), whom he called "one of the greatest poets in the world and one of the rarest poets who used the temporal narrative to create a certain atmosphere of movement and energy" ('Awwād 1996: 191). This statement illustrates how Būlus selectively drew from classical Arabic sources to inform his aesthetic approach, emphasizing technique and narrative energy over ideological considerations. It also highlights the group's broader strategy of engaging with heritage creatively, transforming inherited forms to suit modern experimental poetry. Similarly, Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī acknowledged inspiration from Arabic and Islamic heritage, the Qur'an, classical Arab poetry, and *One Thousand and One Nights*. Crucially, their engagement with this heritage was spontaneous and aesthetic, standing in sharp contrast to the politically motivated and prescriptive use of heritage espoused by Ba'thist and Arab nationalist ideologies.

5.2.2 The Role of Multilingualism and the "Open Text"

The Kirkuk Group established itself as the leading force in the Iraqi prose poem in the 1960s by seeking freedom not only from the meter and musical monotony of classical poetry but also from the emerging routine patterns of free verse. A significant factor contributing to their distinctive poetic diction was the linguistic background of many members: most Kirkuk Group poets were non-native speakers of Arabic, having grown up speaking Turkmen, Assyrian, or Kurdish, and learning Arabic and English later. Poet Ṣalāḥ Fā'iq argued that this multi-lingual background enriched their expressive capabilities and gave them the confidence to break with conventional Arabic syntax and poetic language (Al-Tūnjī 2019). This cross-linguistic borrowing injected a unique, surprising stream into Arabic writing.

Predictably, this stylistic departure drew intense criticism from nationalists and Ba'thists, who accused the group of disrespecting Arab literary heritage and mere imitation of Western methods (Mahdī 1994: 22). Even some non-Ba'thist critics charged the group with violating linguistic norms in the name of experimentation, claiming their poems resembled translated European works (Al-Ḥaṭṭāb 2002: 168, Ṣāliḥ and al-Ṭā'ī 2017: 170). These critiques underscore the tension between tradition and innovation that the Kirkuk poets navigated, highlighting how their work challenged entrenched aesthetic and cultural expectations. They also reveal that the group's experimentation was not arbitrary but a conscious effort to create poetic forms capable of expressing contemporary human experience. Yet, their experimentation was driven by a deep need to find new poetic forms capable of accommodating modern human experience. The most significant of these innovations was the development of *al-naṣṣ al-maftūḥ* (open text) — a hybrid form that intentionally integrates various literary and artistic genres (such as story, novel, and visual arts) with poetry. Leading examples of this open text and prose poetry experimentation can be found in the works of Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī, and Ṣalāḥ Fā'iq.

5.2.3 Key Works and Poetic Techniques

From the mid-1960s onward, the Kirkuk Group actively advocated for a poetic movement that surpassed the achievements of the pioneer generation. In his 1965 article, "What after Romantic Poetry," Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī declared the end of the previous poetic and novelistic cohort and stressed the need to rebuild intellectual and literary foundations commensurate with the ambitions of new writers. To this end, Al-ʿAzzāwī specifically urged the search for forms beyond free verse, which he argued had become its own restrictive routine: "We have enriched traditional poetry because of its limited worlds and the monotonous music barrier, but we are once again allowing ourselves to fall into the gap of certain formal styles of free verse, which are also unable to absorb our new human experience" (Al-ʿAzzāwī 1965). Al-ʿAzzāwī's remark emphasizes the need for continuous innovation, highlighting his concern that even modern forms could become limiting if not expanded creatively. It also illustrates the Kirkuk Group's broader mission to experiment with new poetic structures capable of expressing contemporary human experience beyond the confines of established forms.

These remarks reflect a turning point in Iraqi poetry's aesthetic consciousness, as poets began to confront the exhaustion of inherited forms and the need for radical renewal. Al-ʿAzzāwī's call thus anticipated the emergence of the prose poem as

both a literary and ideological rupture, challenging not only poetic conventions but also the broader cultural hierarchies that sustained them.

In the same period, Qaḥṭān al-Madfaʿī, another Kirkuk Group poet, published the prose poem collection *Fulul* (Remnants) (Al-Madfaʿī 1965), one of the oldest and most audacious works of modern Iraqi prose poetry. *Fulul* featured poems where words were deliberately arranged on the page in geometric shapes (squares, rectangles), drawing on principles from other art forms (Ṣāliḥ and al-Ṭāʾī 2017: 44). Al-Madfaʿī, who was an architect, leveraged "concrete language" to express modern alienation, using the visual composition of words to evoke the aesthetic of building blocks (Al-Jazāʾirī 1974: 150). Following *Fulul*, other foundational prose poems emerged, including Al-ʿAzzāwī's "*Qaṣāʾid Mīkānīkyah*" ("Mechanical poems") in 1966, [1] marking a decisive movement away from common Iraqi poetic forms toward radically new methods of expression.

5.2.3.1 Sarkūn Būluṣ: Key Works and Techniques

Sarkūn Būluṣ occupies a seminal position in the development of the modern Iraqi prose poem. His work is widely recognized as foundational, bridging Arabic literary heritage with contemporary international influences, particularly American avant-garde poetry. Many critics consider him the first to establish a serious and cohesive Iraqi prose poem, providing a model that would influence subsequent generations (Mahdī 1994: 327). This evaluation underscores Būluṣ's pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic and formal principles of Iraqi prose poetry. It also highlights how his integration of international and Arabic influences created a lasting framework for innovation among subsequent poets.

Būluṣ's multilingual abilities allowed him to engage directly with global literary currents, particularly the Beat Cohort, including Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. This exposure did not only influence his stylistic choices but also shaped his thematic concerns, fostering a poetic consciousness attuned to freedom, existential reflection, and cross-cultural dialogue (Ḥusayn 2003). Such observations highlight the interplay between Būluṣ's linguistic skills and his aesthetic vision, showing how global influences enriched his thematic and formal experimentation. They also demonstrate how his grounding in Arabic and Christian heritage enabled him to create a unique synthesis of tradition and innovation, contributing to the distinctiveness of modern Iraqi prose poetry. His Christian background and knowledge of Arabic heritage — ranging from classical poetry to One Thousand and One Nights — infused his work with a mystical and narrative dimension, blending tradition and innovation seamlessly (Mahdī 1994: 323).

One of the most notable examples of Būluṣ's prose poetry is his collection *al-Wuṣūl ilá madīnat ayna* (*To Reach the City of Where*, 1985). Although written earlier, it was published in Greece decades later, exemplifying the international and diasporic dimensions of his work. This collection explores themes of displacement, memory, travel, and existential uncertainty across multiple cities, including Beirut, San Francisco, and Hollywood. The poem "Hunāka riḥlāt" ("There are Trips") vividly illustrates his approach:

<div dir="rtl">

أصلُ إلى وطني بعد أن عبرتُ
نهراً يهبط فيه المنجمون بآلات فلكية صدئة
مفتشين عن النجوم
أو لا أصل إلى وطني
بعد أن عبرت نهراً لا يهبط فيه أحد
هناك رحلات
أعود منها ساهما
نحيلاً كظل إبرة
ألتقي بالصباح وجهاً لوجه
كأنني تركتُ نفقاً ورائي قبل لحظة

</div>

Translation:
I reach my homeland after crossing a river
Where astrologers land with rusty astronomical instruments
Seeking the stars
Or I do not reach my homeland
After crossing a river where no one lands
There are trips
From which I return distracted
Thin as a needle's shadow
I face the morning, eye to eye
As if I had just left a tunnel behind me

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[1] This poem was published in *al-Naṣr* newspaper on 22 October 1966.

This poem encapsulates the tension between arrival and non-arrival, a recurrent motif in Būluṣ's work reflecting both physical and metaphysical journeys. The imagery combines mythic, scientific, and celestial references, weaving a narrative that is simultaneously personal, existential, and universal. Structurally, the poem exemplifies the principles of the prose poem: a fluid, open form that transcends traditional meter while achieving rhythmic resonance through syntactic layering and internal repetition.

Būluṣ's literary techniques reveal a sophisticated engagement with spatiality, temporality, and symbolic imagery. His manipulation of line breaks, visual arrangement, and semantic layers demonstrates a deliberate effort to extend poetic expression beyond conventional constraints. By integrating Arabic literary allusions, modernist sensibilities, and personal reflection, he transforms exile into a vehicle for broader philosophical and artistic exploration. His contributions thus represent not only a technical innovation in Iraqi poetry but also a profound rethinking of poetic identity and cultural continuity within a modern context. In relation to his pioneering role, the poem demonstrates how Būluṣ expanded the expressive potential of Iraqi prose poetry by integrating Arabic literary heritage, mythological allusion, and modernist influences from international poetry into a cohesive and visionary aesthetic that would inspire subsequent generations of Iraqi and Arabic poets.

5.2.3.2 Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī: Key Works and Techniques

Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī constitutes a foundational figure in the emergence of the modern Iraqi prose poem. While he initially experimented with free verse, by the late 1960s he had firmly established himself as a leading prose poet. His key works include *Mechanical Poems*, *Ha anadhā asrakh fī shawāri' al-Jazīrah al-'Arabīyah* ("Here I am screaming in the streets of Arabia") published in 1969, and *Ta'ālīm F. al-'Azzā ilá al-'ālam* ("F. al-Azzawi's Teachings to the World,") written in 1971 and later published in *al-Asfār (The Travels)* (1976).

Al-'Azzāwī's poetry exemplifies the concept of the open text, integrating multiple literary and artistic genres. His poem "F. al-'Azzāwī's teachings to the world" exemplifies the open text form, wherein the poet utilizes diverse literary and artistic genres to access novel poetic realms unavailable through conventional means. This expansive approach allowed him to merge poetry with elements of story, novel, photography, poster art, film, theater, and printing techniques. [1] His deliberate simplicity in language, approaching prose, coupled with a conscious rejection of classical rhetoric, meter, and traditional rhythm, allowed him to focus on conveying direct philosophical and existential inquiry, addressing humanity, history, and society from a fresh perspective.

An illustrative excerpt from *F. al-'Azzāwī's Teachings to the World* demonstrates his innovative techniques (Al-'Azzāwī 2007: 177):

<div dir="rtl">

آملُ أن أخرجَ في الليلِ الى بغداد من زجاجةِ الروحِ، أرى أشباحَها
تُعول في أروقةٍ مفتوحةٍ للحزن والعواصفِ التي تـهب من سواحل
التاريخ ـ ماذا قالت الأيامُ في نز هتها؟ أية صحراءَ تقيمُ حفلةً؟ هنا
العذابُ لغةٌ جديدةٌ تطوفُ بين قارةٍ وقارةٍ، أحاولُ الخروجَ من
وجودي الرماد. أنت وطنٌ من نعم ولا، اقترب من عنكبوتٍ تحت
١٠٠٠ قمر يزحفُ من وكرين للعواطفِ، انتبه، فإنني أرى مدينة
تنهضُ من وراء نهرٍ، من مفاصلِ القرى تصرخُ: هذا زمنٌ يُقتلُ فيه
الحبُّ، حيث يخرجُ الماموثُ من حقولِه، ملطخاً بسفلس الترابِ،
والموتُ يكون دفتراً يكتبُ فيه رجلٌ يذوبُ: لا حد لها الحياةُ
والموتُ هو الطريقُ، لا تمثْ، أنا الصديقُ يا موتُ أتيتُ، شهوتي
الى الحياةِ أضرمت دمي ...

</div>

Translation:

I hope to go out at night to Baghdad from the glass of the soul, I see its ghost wailing in open corridors to grief and storms blowing from the coasts of history - what did the days say in their outing? Which desert holds a party? Here torture is a new language that circulates between continent and a continent, I am trying to get out of my presence-ashes. You are a homeland of yes and no, approached a spider under 1000 moons crawling from two spheres of emotions, be careful, I see a city rising from behind a river, from the joints of the villages scream: This is a time when love is killed, where the mammoth comes out of its fields, stained with the syphilis of the dust, and death is a notebook in which a man dissolves writes: life has no limit and death is the way, don't die, I'm the friend, O death I come, my desire for life set my blood on fire […]

This passage functions as both a poetic and philosophical manifesto. Al-'Azzāwī dismantles conventional poetic structures — metrical, rhetorical, and thematic — in favor of a polyphonic, open-ended text. The imagery, such as "Baghdad from

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[1] The poem "F. Al-'Azzāwī's Teachings to the World" is published in al-'Azzāwī's collection *al-Asfār*, which contains the poems of al-'Azzāwī published between 1970-1971.

the glass of the soul" and "storms blowing from the coasts of history," situates the individual within a fractured temporal and spatial continuum, interweaving personal, collective, and historical memory. The motif of "torture as a new language" encapsulates the transformation of suffering into artistic innovation — a key move in al-ʻAzzāwī's poetics, which reimagines pain as linguistic and ontological creation. His invocation of mythic and surreal elements — the mammoth, the spider under a thousand moons — serves to mythologize modern experience, situating Iraq's historical trauma within a universal narrative of collapse and renewal.

Formally, the text's rhythm of incantation and interruption exemplifies the prose poem's hybrid identity: lyrical yet anti-musical, visionary yet grounded in the debris of modernity. Through such integration of philosophical reflection, surrealist imagery, and cultural memory, al-ʻAzzāwī emerges as not merely a practitioner but a theoretician of the Iraqi prose poem — one who transformed it into a vessel for modern consciousness and the crisis of being.

5.2.4 The "1960s Manifesto"

Al-ʻAzzāwī's aesthetic and political philosophy is fully captured in the "1960s Manifesto", which he authored in 1969, and which was signed by several peers. [1] This document is essential for grasping his poetic experimentation, his opposition to ruling authorities, and the overall trajectory of the 1960s avant-garde. The Manifesto centers on the intellectual's relationship with power, demanding that culture and writing never be subjugated to any state or ideological authority. It declares the poet to be a revolutionary — one who actively rejects and defies the world's suffering, engaging in a continuous struggle to instigate rebellion and create a new future. Even if politically committed, the poet's loyalty must be pure and universal, focused solely on the concerns of humanity. The Manifesto thus asserts that the new poet must be [real] and refuse to become a spokesperson or writer of selfish and exposed views. There are Tijārīyūn (commercial) poets who tried climbing the shoulders of political commitment, but such people are not real poets. A real poet refuses to make the love of others a bridge to assert selfish ends. In the past, poets spoke of what kings wanted and glorified frivolous wars, as if the king is everything in the world. Facing all misery in the world, a new poet can only write from within hell, fighting the war of freedom to the end (Al-ʻAzzāwī 1997: 330-331).

The "1960s Manifesto" serves not merely as a declarative statement but as a conceptual blueprint for understanding the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of the Iraqi avant-garde of the late 1960s. The Manifesto situates the poet as an autonomous agent whose allegiance is owed to neither state nor ideology, but to the universality of human experience. The insistence that the poet remain real and resist becoming a mouthpiece for "selfish and exposed views" establishes a rigorous moral framework that differentiates authentic artistic production from mere political opportunism. By critiquing "Tijāriyyūn (commercial) poets" who exploit political commitment for personal advancement, Al-ʻAzzāwī foregrounds the inseparability of artistic integrity and ethical responsibility. Moreover, the text's evocation of writing "from within hell" encapsulates a profoundly existential approach to literature: poetry becomes a site of confrontation with suffering, oppression, and historical injustice. Stylistically, the Manifesto combines declarative clarity with metaphorical density, linking individual creative labor to collective human struggle, thereby articulating a vision in which avant-garde experimentation is inseparable from revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, the document does not merely outline poetic strategies; it frames the very identity of the modern Iraqi poet as a mediator between personal expression, social critique, and the quest for universal emancipation, echoing the experimental and socially committed aesthetics seen in Al-ʻAzzāwī's prose poetry of the same period.

The significance of the "1960s Manifesto" lies in its uncompromising call for the poet to remain entirely free from external authority, insisting that no political, social, or ideological power should dictate the scope or direction of poetic expression. In this framework, the poet is tasked with articulating a new and conscious vision of existence, a vision that transcends conventional perceptions of life and reality. Central to this vision is the concept of the "make dream," which serves as both a methodological and philosophical tool, enabling the poet to explore and uncover the truths of the world and human experience. The Manifesto outlines several provocative paths to access this dream state, including "dreams of the sick," "mystical experience," "drugs," and "writing during sleepiness." Importantly, these methods are presented not as ends in themselves, but as instruments to reach a heightened stage of "dream consciousness," after which the poet can evoke the dream purely through focused mental effort (Al-ʻAzzāwī 1997: 330-331).

Through this cultivated consciousness, the poet gains access to a truth that is both transcendent and illuminating, a truth described as "the dream of transcendence and establishing a new consciousness that does not impose new teachings but makes us know ourselves and the world in which we live" (Al-ʻAzzāwī 1997: 327). This insight highlights the ethical and epistemic dimensions of the poet's work, showing that poetic innovation is inseparable from a responsibility to expand human understanding. It also situates the poet as a mediator between aesthetic creation and intellectual engagement, emphasizing the transformative potential of modern Iraqi poetry. The Manifesto thus positions the poet not merely as a

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[1] Four poets from the 1960s generation, Fāḍil al-ʻAzzāwī, Sāmī Mahdī, Khālid ʻAlī Muṣṭafá and Fawzī Karīm, signed the 1960s Manifesto.

creator of aesthetic forms, but as an active agent in expanding human understanding, capable of dismantling preconceived notions and social limitations. In essence, it demands the eradication of all constraints that could hinder the poet's intellectual and artistic exploration, framing poetic innovation as a form of ethical and epistemic responsibility in the pursuit of self-knowledge and a deeper engagement with the world.

5.3 Political Repression and Lasting Legacy

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Kirkuk Group, along with other poets associated with the 1960s literary movement, articulated a distinct vision of literature and life, producing prose poems that diverged significantly from the achievements of the earlier free verse pioneers. The prose poem emerged as a versatile form within their work, accommodating diverse poetic experiments and conceptual innovations while allowing the articulation of new aesthetic and philosophical perspectives.

The Kirkuk Group played a central role in shaping both Iraqi and broader Arabic literary culture during this period, consolidating new poetic ideas and disseminating them widely through newspapers and magazines. In Iraq, key outlets included *al-Thawrah al-'Arabīyah*, which published many of Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī's theoretical essays; *al-Jumhūrīyah* newspaper and *al-Liwā'* magazine, which featured leading poems by al-'Azzāwī and Qaḥṭān al-Madfa'ī; *Oil Workers* magazine, edited by Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, which showcased contributions from various Kirkuk Group members; and *al-Kalimah* magazine, a venue for avant-garde poetry by many prose poets. Beyond Iraq, the Group extended its reach to prominent Arab literary magazines, including *Mawāqif* and *Shi'r* in Beirut, which published works by al-'Azzāwī, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, and others (Al-Tūnjī 2019).

Beyond poetry, the Kirkuk Group made significant contributions across multiple literary and artistic domains. In short fiction, authors such as Jalīl al-Qaysī and Muḥyī al-Dīn Zanganah expanded narrative experimentation; in the novel, Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī produced works including The Fascinating Creatures of Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī (1969); in theater, Jalīl al-Qaysī advanced innovative dramatic forms; in the visual arts, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī and Qaḥṭān al-Madfa'ī introduced new aesthetic perspectives; and in translation, Sarkūn Būluṣ and al-'Azzāwī facilitated the cross-cultural exchange of literary ideas. Collectively, these efforts underscore the Kirkuk Group's role as a central force in the development of modern Iraqi literature and its integration within a broader Arabic avant-garde milieu.

Analyzing the trajectory of the Kirkuk Group and the wider 1960s cohort requires acknowledging the sharp ideological division between the two main rival factions: leftists and nationalists. The majority of the Kirkuk Group's avant-garde poets were aligned with the political left, advocating strongly for the renewal of poetic and literary forms, particularly through the prose poem and open text (Al-'Azzāwī 1997: 304, 309, 310). Conversely, nationalist and Ba'thist writers were aesthetically and intellectually conservative, favoring traditional verse and established free verse forms (Al-Janābī 1993: 446). Poets like Ḥamīd Sa'īd exemplified this conservative tendency, adhering closely to the pioneering generation's experiments and remaining "a conservative in his use of the Arab poetic and historical heritage" (Thāmir 1987: 194). This characterization highlights the clear ideological and aesthetic boundaries that structured Iraqi poetry during this period, illustrating how political orientation influenced both poetic form and engagement with literary tradition.

The rise of the Ba'th Party to power in Iraq initiated a severe cultural purge targeting writers who did not align with its political and ideological agenda. Avant-garde poets, particularly the Kirkuk Group, began to leave the country, while conservative members of the 1960s cohort, especially Ba'thist loyalists, remained and cultivated close ties with the ruling regime. Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, who left for Germany in 1977, contended that the Ba'thist authority systematically repressed the 1960s avant-garde to clear the cultural landscape and promote loyalist poets. Al-'Azzāwī recounts the consequences for the most prominent members of the cohort:

Removed from cultural centers and their magazines were canceled and banned from publishing. Many were arrested and prosecuted. Mercenary critics (*ma'jorīn*) emerged and entrusted with cursing leftist poets and fabricating other poets from nothing. Forgery spread to many Arab newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses to forsake names and throw poets into oblivion (Al-'Azzāwī 1993: 6).

This passage underscores not only the systematic suppression of dissenting literary voices under the Ba'th regime but also the targeted marginalization of the Kirkuk Group, which represented a progressive and avant-garde strand of Iraqi poetry. The cultural purge functioned as both an ideological and aesthetic cleansing, privileging poets aligned with Ba'thist values while erasing the visibility and legacy of those who challenged conventional norms. The enforced exile of key members of the Kirkuk Group, the closure of their magazines, and the orchestrated campaigns of denigration reflect a deliberate attempt to monopolize cultural production and control literary discourse. This environment of censorship and coercion not only stifled creative experimentation but also reshaped the trajectory of modern Iraqi literature by privileging state-sanctioned voices over independent, experimental ones. Consequently, the Kirkuk Group's displacement illustrates how political authoritarianism can profoundly influence literary evolution, generating both rupture and resilience within the poetic field. The consensus among the Iraqi 1960s avant-garde is that certain poets of their cohort, primarily Ba'thist writers, deliberately participated in the marginalization of their works. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Janābī, a Kirkuk Group member who left

for Germany in 1970, explicitly described a clear collusion between the Baʻthist regime and conservative writers to erase the avant-garde from the literary scene and elevate party loyalists. He assigned a key role to critics in this process:

Most critics were appointed by the Baʻthist authority to distort facts, in order to target hostile criticism toward Fadel Al-Azzawi, Al-Rawi, Būluṣ, and others at the forefront of poetic experimentation from 1964 to 1968. The purpose was to create a false image of the "1960s cohort" and to suggest that it is a balanced and serious cohort, as represented by Sāmī Mahdī, Ḥamīd Saʻīd, and others who wrote propaganda in favor of the regime (Al-Janābī 1993: 486).

Al-Janābī's testimony illuminates the instrumentalization of literary criticism as a tool of political power, demonstrating how the Baʻthist regime leveraged loyalist writers to manipulate perceptions of the avant-garde. By appointing critics to "distort facts," the regime effectively manufactured a narrative that validated party-aligned poets while undermining experimental voices, creating a fabricated literary consensus that served political objectives. This deliberate falsification of cultural history not only delegitimized pioneering contributions but also restructured the literary field to reflect partisan hierarchies rather than aesthetic merit. Al-Janābī's account reveals how the struggle over literary authority became inseparable from the broader struggle for political dominance, illustrating the vulnerability of artistic innovation to state-controlled narratives and highlighting the ethical tensions faced by writers navigating authoritarian environments.

This narrative of suppression is further corroborated by Ṣādiq al-Ṣāyig, another avant-garde poet. In 1970, his bold, formally innovative poem "*Nashīd al-Karkadan*" ("Rhinoceros song"), published in *al-Kalimah* Magazine, immediately provoked a backlash. Al-Ṣāyig recalled that the poem's publication triggered "a series of incitement articles against me appeared in the al-Thawrah newspaper [the official newspaper of the Baʻth Party], denouncing me personally. It was then I knew that the decision to incite against me was taken by the party's cultural leadership" (Al-Ṣāyig 1993: 417).

Ultimately, the Baʻthist regime effectively succeeded in forcing the permanent exile of the 1960s avant-garde. Leading figures, including Fāḍil al-ʻAzzāwī, Muʼayyad al-Rāwī, and Salāḥ Fāʼiq, relocated to Germany or Britain, while Sarkūn Būluṣ moved to the United States (Fāʼiq 2014). Following their departure, the Baʻthist authority and its conservative allies systematically suppressed the avant-garde movement and the prose poem model it championed. Critics continued to denigrate the prose poem as a foreign, Western-driven phenomenon intent on distorting Arabic literary heritage. This politicized environment concurrently amplified the visibility of conservative poets, some of whom critics noted had fame disproportionate to their actual achievement (Al-Jazāʼirī 1974: 70). As a result, in the mid-1970s, traditional poetic models and established free verse forms reasserted their dominance, effectively banishing the prose poem from the Iraqi poetic landscape — though it would return with significant renewed vigor after the mid-1980s.

The primary reason for the strong resurgence of the prose poem in the Arab and Iraqi literary sphere in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s can be traced to the decline of Arab nationalist ideologies in the countries that had adopted them, notably Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. This decline produced profound changes in the cultural and literary structures of these states, including a reconsideration of the values and principles governing literary practice and the state's stance toward various arts. This shift was further reinforced by a series of regional and international events that reshaped the intellectual and political framework of the region, most notably the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the end of the bipolar international system, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent international conflict — which reshaped intellectual and political frameworks throughout the region.

These events had direct implications for the cultural scene, contributing to a restructuring of Arab political systems that led to a relaxation of restrictions and censorship on certain artistic forms, literary genres, and poetic movements, including the Kirkuk Group in Iraq. In this context, the prose poem was rediscovered and revitalized, regaining prominence and influence among new generations of poets in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and other Arab countries. This transformation also reflects a relative decline in attention to classical Arabic poetry with strict meter and traditional free verse compared to the generation that began writing the prose poem in the early 1990s, highlighting the rise of the prose poem as an expressive tool capable of engaging with the complexities of political, social, and cultural realities following these major transformations.

5.4 Iraqi Literature between Politics and Social Change

This study reveals that Iraqi literature in the 1960s functioned as a vivid mirror of the country's political and social transformations, with literary debates and conflicts reflecting not only intellectual differences but also the divergent political and social orientations of writers themselves. During this period, the Iraqi literary scene was marked by a clear tension between two dominant currents: the conservative, pro-Baʻath current, which adhered closely to the official discourse and produced works aligned with the national and social values promoted by the party, exhibiting less experimentation and greater conformity to political authority; and the avant-garde, left-leaning current, characterized by a critical and experimental ethos, committed to artistic and intellectual renewal, emphasizing individual freedom and social justice, yet often facing censorship or marginalization because of its critical stance.

The interplay between loyalty and avant-gardism created a dual impact on Iraqi literature. On one hand, it fostered a vibrant literary production, encouraging the emergence of new poetic and prose forms, including prose poems and experimental practices. On the other hand, it imposed limitations on freedom of expression, particularly for writers whose works engaged in social and political critique, as publishing decisions and critical reception were frequently influenced by political alignment. This division is especially evident in poetry: the conservative current relied on traditional forms and familiar symbols to secure acceptance and maintain a recognizable aesthetic, while the avant-garde current embraced symbolism and linguistic experimentation, using poetry as a vehicle for social and political critique. This dynamic not only contributed to the development of modern poetic forms but also enriched the evolving Iraqi poetic identity.

The study further indicates that political and social transformations in 1960s Iraq were not merely external influences on literature, but active forces shaping the trajectories of literary production, compelling writers to articulate their artistic and political positions. This dynamic is evident in the experiences of the Kirkuk Group and other avant-garde writers, who faced systematic restrictions on creative freedom, including censorship of their publications, closure of literary magazines, and orchestrated critical campaigns by party-aligned writers. These pressures led many avant-garde authors, such as Fāḍil al-'Azzāwī, Mu'ayyad al-Rāwī, and Salāḥ Fā'iq, to go into exile, highlighting how political authoritarianism could profoundly influence the course of modern Iraqi literature, generating both rupture and resilience within the poetic field.

Available evidence confirms that certain pro-Ba'ath writers actively participated in the marginalization of the avant-garde, benefiting from official support to dominate the cultural field. This included the appointment of critics tasked with distorting facts to undermine experimental poets and elevate party-aligned authors, thereby manufacturing a false narrative of literary balance. The experiences of writers like Ṣādiq al-Ṣāyig illustrate that attempts to push the boundaries of formal innovation, such as publishing highly experimental poems, provoked immediate backlash and personal attacks orchestrated by the party's cultural apparatus.

Consequently, the Ba'thist regime effectively imposed forced exile on the 1960s avant-garde, while traditional poetic models and established free verse regained prominence on the Iraqi literary scene through the mid-1970s. However, this literary stagnation was eventually followed by a revival of the prose poem in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, spurred by regional and international shifts which reshaped the cultural and literary frameworks in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. These transformations allowed for the rediscovery and revitalization of the prose poem, enabling new generations of poets in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and other Arab countries to adopt it as a potent expressive tool.

In this way, the analysis underscores how the dynamics between political loyalty and avant-gardism shaped the trajectory of Iraqi literature, positioning poetry as both a medium for aesthetic innovation and a tool for social and political expression, thereby highlighting the intricate interconnections among politics, thought, and literary creativity during a pivotal period in Iraq's literary history.

6. CONCLUSION

The Kirkuk Group exerted a profound and lasting influence on the development of modern Iraqi poetry — stylistically, thematically, and conceptually. Their work marked a decisive turn toward experimentation and self-reflection, opening Iraqi poetry to universal artistic experiences and broader questions of identity, alienation, and modernity. The ideological conflict between the avant-garde poets of the 1960s and the Ba'thist literary establishment reflected not only aesthetic divergence but also a deeper struggle over cultural authority and intellectual freedom.

The Kirkuk poets and other prose poets of the period sought to liberate poetic expression from rigid ideological frameworks, emphasizing individual consciousness, interior life, and the multiplicity of human experience. In contrast, Ba'thist poets adhered to the rhetoric of collective struggle, heritage preservation, and ideological commitment, aligning literature with the party's political and social agenda. This confrontation transformed the poetic field into a site of political contestation, where aesthetic innovation was frequently interpreted through the binary of loyalty and opposition.

The accusations directed against the Kirkuk Group and other experimental poets were seldom literary in nature; rather, they reflected the regime's anxiety toward independent thought. Their engagement with Western poetics, embrace of modernist aesthetics, and rejection of inherited forms were portrayed as acts of cultural and national betrayal. The Ba'th regime's instrumentalization of poetry as political propaganda effectively marginalized avant-garde voices that insisted on art's autonomy.

Despite censorship, exile, and systematic marginalization, the legacy of the Kirkuk Group endured. Their commitment to innovation and defense of artistic freedom inspired subsequent generations of Iraqi poets who continued to explore the prose poem and other experimental forms. Thus, the aesthetic and ideological struggles of the 1960s can be viewed as a formative moment in shaping the trajectory of modern Iraqi poetry — one that revealed the intricate entanglement between politics, art, and individual freedom within a society undergoing profound transformation.

6.1. Recommendations and Future Outlook

While successful in analyzing the aesthetic and ideological impact of the Kirkuk Group, this study remains limited to texts available from the 1960s and 1970s and may not fully capture the influence of their later, translated works produced in exile. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to: (1) examine the direct impact of the Kirkuk poets' exile on the development of poetry within European and American diasporic communities; and (2) conduct a comparative analysis between the Group's "open text" experiments and contemporaneous global modernist practices in Latin America and Eastern Europe, to better assess the distinctiveness of their contribution. Ultimately, this study underscores the necessity of re-evaluating Iraqi literary modernity beyond dominant ideological narratives.

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