

# Voices from the Prison: an Analysis of Abdellatif Laâbi's 'The Poem Under Gag' as a Post-Colonial Testimony

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## Abstract

This analysis examines Abdellatif Laâbi's "The Poem Under Gag" (1978) as a major work that advances prison literature and post-colonial poetry. The poem, composed during the author's incarceration in Kénitra Central Prison in Morocco, functions both as a personal narrative and a means of political dissent. It converts physical constraints to ways of creativity by merging individual resistance with a collective resistant narrative. This paper examines how Laâbi turns his physical imprisonment to a form of creative freedom by using complex poetic techniques like metaphors, time shifts, and fragmented structures. The poem's fourteen asterisk-separated sections create a fragmented unity that illustrates the prison experience while articulating the evolving nature of consciousness. This analysis explores the challenges of translation in representing cultural and linguistic differences, with a specific emphasis on the intertextuality of "le temps des cerises." This research utilizes theoretical frameworks from Michel Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, and post-colonial criticism to place the work within the broader context of prison literature. It further highlights its unique position in the intellectual resistance of North Africa and the innovation of modernist poetry.

**Keywords:** prison literature, post-colonial poetry, political resistance, challenges of translation, fragmented narratives, cultural translation

## Introduction

Prison literature has historically presented the nature of human consciousness vis-a-vis some severe limitations. The philosophical meditations of Boethius and the revolutionary writings of Antonio Gramsci are examples to how works which are created in the context of imprisonment may carry a distinctive intensity by converting personal sufferings to reflections on freedom, dignity, and resistance (Franklin, 1978). In this tradition, Abdellatif Laâbi's "The Poem Under Gag" which is translated from the French version ("Sous le bâillon le poème") stands out as a notably important addition to both post-colonial literature and the wider body of carceral writing. Written in 1978 while Laâbi was incarcerated in Kénitra Central Prison in Morocco, this poem signifies much more than merely a personal reaction to imprisonment. Laâbi, as the founder and editor of the significant literary journal *Souffles*, suppressed by Moroccan authorities in 1972, held a vital role in the realm of North African intellectual resistance

(Sefrioui, 2013). His imprisonment should be viewed not just as a personal tragedy but as a symbol of the larger conflict between authoritarian power and intellectual freedom that defined much of the post-colonial era in North Africa and beyond (Harrison, 2016).

"The Poem Under Gag" functions on various levels at once: the personal, the political, and the philosophical. The work, with its complex formal structure and nuanced use of metaphor, reinterprets the experience of physical confinement as a profound investigation into consciousness, the nature of time, and the intricate interplay between limitation and creative expression (Laâbi, 1981). The poem carries a significant image which goes beyond its specific historical context. It engages with questions related to resistance, memory in shaping identity, and language as a means to break material constraints. This analysis studies Laâbi's poem, delving into its layers of meaning through different critical approaches. Utilizing a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Foucault's (1977) notion of counter-discourse and Bachelard's (1964) exploration of spatial poetics, alongside phenomenological inquiries into temporality as informed by Merleau-Ponty (2012) and post-colonial theories of cultural resistance as articulated by Said (1993), this study elucidates how "The Poem Under Gag" successfully merges personal testimony with universal themes.

The poem's formal innovations, characterized by a fragmented yet cohesive structure, a complex interplay of natural and political imagery, and a nuanced examination of silence as a means of resistance, situate it within the wider framework of modernist literary experimentation, all while preserving its unique voice as a piece of North African post-colonial literature (Bensmaïa, 2003). Moreover, the English translation by Allan and Guillemette Johnston has turned this work available to English-speaking audience though the difficulties and losses which arise from any process of cultural and linguistic transfer (Venuti, 1995). This analysis explores the interplay of literary theory, political philosophy, and cultural studies, illustrating how Laâbi's work surpasses the context of its creation to serve as a lasting reflection on human resilience and the transformative nature of artistic expression. The current role of Laâbi's work is reflected in the interest which is given to it by the academia as it is presented in recent conferences which focused on his literary development (Del Fiol & Lotz, 2024) and his ongoing political activism, as illustrated by his 2024 public letter concerning Palestinian literary representation (Zine, 2024).

The scholarly attention which is provided to the poem, highlights the its ability to keep communicating across different times and cultures by giving thoughts which are essential to understand the historical details of the North African post-colonial aftermaths, as well as the broader themes of resistance, creativity, and human dignity in the face of oppression. The significance of this study in the context of prison literature is profound. Benjamin Franklin (1989) affirms that confinement writings frequently uncover the sophisticated ability of physical experience to support creative expression. Laâbi's work can be taken as a prominent example of this context. It also adds its perspective to discussions which surrounds the post-colonial identity, the linguistic hybridity, and the aesthetics of resistance. The poem deserves critical attention, not only for its literary qualities, but also for its role in supporting the understanding of the artistic creation as a means of political engagement and cultural preservation within environments marked by systemic oppression.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction to the Critical Landscape**

The academic discourse concerning Laâbi's works, especially "The Poem Under Gag," arises from multiple overlapping areas of investigation such as post-colonial literary studies, criticism of prison

literature, Francophone North African studies, and translation theory. Although his presence as a prominent literary figure has gained recognition in recent decades, deep critical examination of his prison poetry is still somehow scarce in the Anglophone scholarship. This shows both opportunities and challenges for academic exploration of his writings. The critical reception of Laâbi's work has been profoundly influenced by post-colonial literary theory, especially as articulated by Said (1993) in his concept of "the literature of resistance." Researchers like Bensmaïa (2003) have situated Laâbi within the wider landscape of Maghrebi authors who surfaced in the post-independence era, highlighting his contribution to the expression of new cultural identities that both interacted with and diverged from colonial and traditional paradigms.

### **Prison Literature Studies and Theoretical Frameworks**

The wider domain of prison literature criticism offers crucial context for placing Laâbi's work within global traditions of carceral writing. Franklin's key studies of American prison literature, which were conducted in 1978 and 1989, establish essential analytical categories which are pertinent to understanding the formal and thematic innovations present in such a text. In the same context, the examination he has conducted, and which shows how confinement facilitates specific forms of literary expression, is particularly insightful. The contributions to resistance literature which Harlow conducted in 1987 and 1992, have played an important role in informing critical perspectives on Laâbi's prison poetry. Harlow's theoretical framework discusses the role of literary texts as tools of political resistance; it provides analytical ways to understand the relationship between aesthetic aims and political effectiveness in the Poem. The focus on the formal innovations in literature of resistance is significant to understand Laâbi's experienced ways in relation to structure and time (Harlow, 1986). Some studies of prison literature such as Kamran Talattof's (2000) Persian prison stories and Ferial Ghazoul's (1996, 2004) Analysis of Arabic writings about imprisonment, provide comparisons that show what makes Laâbi's approach special by situating it in the scope of resistance literature.

### **Translation Studies and Cross-Cultural Reception**

The translation of the poem to English which is done by by Allan and Guillemette Johnston, has generated its own body of critical commentary, though this remains relatively limited. Venuti's (1995, 1998) theoretical work on translation and cultural politics provides a framework for understanding the challenges faced in rendering Laâbi's culturally specific references and linguistic innovations accessible to anglophone readers. Studies by Mehrez (1992, 2007) on the translation of Maghrebi literature have established important theoretical foundations for understanding the particular challenges involved in translating works that operate simultaneously within French literary traditions and North African cultural contexts. Mehrez's analysis of linguistic hybridity in North African francophone literature proves especially relevant to understanding the translation challenges presented by Laâbi's work. The limited and significant scholarship on Johnston's translation itself, has focused on technical aspects of rendering Arabic and French cultural references to English (Johnston, 2004). Meanwhile, comprehensive analysis of the translation's success in conveying the poem's philosophical and political dimensions is to be undertaken.

### **Souffles and Literary Historical Context**

Critical scholarship on the Souffles movement provides essential background to understanding the poem which is under study in its proper literary historical context. Sefrioui's (2013) comprehensive study of the journal offers detailed analysis of its editorial policies, aesthetic innovations, and political commitments, establishing the intellectual environment from which Laâbi's prison poetry emerged. Orlando's (1999,

2003) work on Moroccan literature has provided important insights to the relationship between the Souffles generation and broader currents in North African cultural politics. Orlando's analysis particularly illuminates how literary innovation functions as a form of cultural resistance during the period of political consolidation following Moroccan independence. Recent research by Harrison (2017) and Villa-Ignacio (2015), has offered some in-depth analysis of Souffles' aesthetic innovations, particularly its synthesis of modernist literary techniques with politically engaged content. This work provides crucial context to understand how this text both continues and transforms the aesthetic commitments which characterize Laâbi's earlier editorial work.

### **Phenomenological and Philosophical Approaches**

A smaller yet notable body of scholarship has examined Laâbi's work through phenomenological and philosophical perspectives, particularly referencing the contributions of Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Levinas to shed light on the poem's investigation of consciousness, temporality, and intersubjectivity. Aboubakr (1999) has conducted some research which presents nuanced phenomenological interpretations of Laâbi's exploration of memory and temporal experience. He offers a theoretical framework which elucidates how this poem formulates its unique "prison chronotope." This scholarship is especially significant for exploring the philosophical dimensions of the poem, extending beyond its immediate political context. The emerging, yet limited body of academic research on Islamic philosophical traditions in contemporary North African literature, precisely the studies which have been conducted by Hannoum (2010), provides further insight to the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of Laâbi's work, which enhances its political themes.

### **Gaps and Opportunities in Current Scholarship**

Recent academic initiatives have continued to expand the critical conversation around Laâbi's work. The conference "Abdellatif Laâbi explorateur du continent humain" which was organized at University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (Del Fiol & Lotz, 2024) examines Laâbi's developing literary voice across genres. At the same time, new theoretical framework to understand Maghrebi literature has emerged through work in Tamazgha Studies Journal (Boudraa & Ouaras, 2024) which addresses postcolonial linguistic plurality and cultural identity formation. The continuing relevance of Laâbi's political engagement is evident in his recent public interventions, such as his 2024 letter protesting the Paris Poetry Market's cancellation of Palestinian poetry as guest of honor (Zine, 2024), demonstrating the ongoing intersection between his literary and political commitments that has characterized his work since the Souffles era. The critical literature, which surrounds the poem under study, uncovers a work of considerable complexity which continues to generate new interpretive possibilities.

## **Analysis**

### **The Aesthetics of Silence**

The title functions on different levels of significance; "Bâillon" (gag) acts as a direct reference to censorship and a metaphorical illustration of intellectual conversation at the same time. This function serves as a significant characteristic of the poem's imagery where personal experience extends to political implications. The poem is consisted of fourteen sections, each is marked by asterisks. This creates an impression of fragmented cohesion. The structure does not only reflect the fragmented reality of the prison experience, but it also emphasizes the persistent nature of consciousness despite confinement. The first expression of greeting establishes a framework which transforms constraints to opportunities, Bonjour soleil de mon pays

qu'il fait bon vivre aujourd'hui  
que de lumière que de lumière  
autour de moi

The French structure "que de" in "que de lumière" introduces a subtle ambiguity that is absent in the English translation "so much light." This expression suggests an interplay of numerical significance and a sense of awe, while maintaining a level of grammatical ambiguity. The complex characteristics of this language play a significant role in the poem's primary objective of seeking freedom within constraints.

The poem's examination of physical space reveals a complex relationship between confinement and expansion, as demonstrated by this passage,

Bonjour terrain vague de ma promenade  
tu m'es devenu familier  
je l'arpente vivement  
tu me vas comme un soulier élégant

The transformation of the prison yard, known as "terrain vague," into a space of potential through the metaphor of the "elegant shoe" illustrates what theorist Gaston Bachelard might characterize as the "poetics of space," where physical limitations provide a basis for imaginative development.

The poem uses a range of aesthetic techniques to articulate resistance, successfully converting political dissent to a form of poetic expression. This transformation does not only occur in content, but also through sophisticated formal techniques which embed resistance within the essential framework of poetic expression,

Le sourire éclôt de lui-même  
Je ne l'arrache pas à ma face  
oubliée avec tous les miroirs  
Sourire inextinguible  
c'est comme ça que je résiste

The smile can be perceived as a "technology of the self," a notion that Michel Foucault might express, in which a personal gesture evolves into a form of political action. The French term "éclôt" signifies a process of organic emergence rather than a fabricated expression, resulting in what can be characterized as a "aesthetics of natural resistance," distinct from simple opposition.

### **Bodily Imagery and Social Presence**

The poem delves in the themes of shared experience and political unity. It showcases a nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual consciousness and collective resistance. This dialectic operates through a range of poetic strategies which transform personal experience to political significance, all the while preserving the integrity of both dimensions,

Les camarades dorment  
La prison a cessé de tournoyer dans leur tête  
Ils naviguent à cœur ouvert  
en haute mer de nos passions inédites  
Ils sont beaux dans leur sommeil

The dormant companions evolve into what may be characterized as a "collective subject," whose unconscious state paradoxically indicates a heightened degree of political awareness. The expression "à cœur ouvert" in French operates on multiple dimensions, suggesting both the vulnerability associated with surgery and the openness of emotions, while creating what Mikhail Bakhtin might refer to as a



"chronotope" of shared resistance. The poem's examination of collective experience goes beyond simple solidarity,

J'ai mille raisons de vivre  
vaincre la mort quotidienne  
le bonheur de t'aimer  
marcher au pas de l'espoir

The transition from individual motivations to a unified movement illustrates what Antonio Gramsci might refer to as the "construction of collective will." The French term "pas" encompasses both military and rhythmic implications, representing a systematic form of resistance that simultaneously upholds individual autonomy. The conversion of individual emotions into shared experiences deserves significant focus. This passage demonstrates how an individual experience can serve as the foundation for a shared collective consciousness within a community. The French term "têtu," meaning stubborn, establishes a materialist metaphor that links individual perception to a collective reality. The poem explores the concept of collective memory through the use of particular imagery, as outlined below,

La nuit a lâché sa horde de colombes  
sur les forêts sensuelles du souvenir

The conversion of personal memory into a collective image suggests that individual recollections merge into a common historical awareness. The French term "horde" suggests a blend of diversity and structure, creating a context for shared experiences while maintaining individual distinctiveness. The poem delves into the concepts of revolutionary time and historical memory, creating a complex temporal framework that operates simultaneously across personal, political, and historical realms.

The recurring motif of "le temps des cerises" serves as a crucial principle in this complex temporal framework. The reference to "le temps des cerises" evokes multiple temporal dimensions. It begins by establishing a distinct link to the French revolutionary tradition, particularly the Paris Commune, through a reference to the song by Jean-Baptiste Clément. Nonetheless, this relationship is complicated by the poem's North African context which leads to a context where European and post-colonial revolutionary traditions intersect and interact with each other. The temporal structure established by this motif deserves careful attention,

C'est encore loin le temps des cerises  
mais je le sens déjà  
qui palpite et lève  
tout chaud en germe  
dans ma passion du futur

The connection between distance and immediacy creates a representation where revolutionary potential is viewed as both a promise for the future and a possibility in the present. The French phrase "en germe" (in seed) conveys a concept of organic growth and revolutionary potential; it creates a temporal framework which stands in contrast to both linear progression and simple cyclical recurrence.

The poem repeatedly explores the paradox that exists in the act of creation when faced with the limitations of confinement,

J'ai mille raisons de vivre  
vaincre la mort quotidienne  
le bonheur de t'aimer  
marcher au pas de l'espoir

The diverse "reasons to live" act as catalysts for creative energy, transforming limitations into opportunities. The term "mort quotidienne" reflects a routine of confinement and how it threatens artistic vitality. Meanwhile, "au pas de l'espoir" suggests a systematic approach which maintains creative efforts in the face of challenges. This approach to save creativity in defined boundaries aligns with the idea of tactical resistance where the constraints themselves become pathways for innovative exploration. The poem demonstrates how the constraints of physical confinement can, in a seemingly contradictory way, encourage a broader range of creative expression.

### On the Translation of the Poem

The English translation by Allan and Guillemette Johnston adeptly addresses the poem's linguistic and cultural intricacies, while also inevitably engaging with what Lawrence Venuti describes as the "translator's invisibility." The act of translation reveals the possibilities and limitations which are present in the exchange of culture and language, particularly in a text that operates on personal, political, and philosophical levels. The management of modal expressions poses significant challenges, as French modality often includes subtle implications of possibility and desire which need to be articulated more clearly in English, as demonstrated in this sequence,

qu'il fait bon vivre aujourd'hui  
que de lumière que de lumière  
autour de moi

The French construction "que de" produces an exclamatory effect that communicates both quantity and quality, while the subjunctive mood in "qu'il fait" signifies a type of conditional appreciation that the English declarative statement does not entirely capture. This exemplifies the notion of "creative transposition" as expressed by Roman Jakobson, a concept that is crucial in the field of poetic translation. The translation of idiomatic expressions adds a further dimension of complexity. Reflect on the expression, "tu me vas comme un soulier élégant," which can be translated as "you fit me like an elegant shoe." The "tu me vas" refers to physical suitability and emotional resonance. The English sentence "you fit me" does not fully encompass this nuance. This may be a good example for the situation where the individual is to navigate cultural specificity while striving to preserve the original's resonance.

The management of tense and aspect presents particular challenges, especially in segments that discuss memory and anticipation, as illustrated by the phrase "La prison a cessé de tournoyer dans leur tête," which translates to "Prison has stopped swirling in their heads." The tense "passé composé" in French denotes actions that have been completed but still bear relevance, a notion which the English present perfect seeks to express without achieving full equivalence. The temporal complexity plays a crucial role in the poem's examination of imprisonment; it serves as a contemporary experience and a historical condition.

The translation of cultural references presents various challenges. "Le temps des cerises" serves as a symbol within the context of French history that transcends its literal translation as "time of cherries." This feature encourages readers to explore further into cultural and historical contexts. The metaphorical framework of the poem embodies a blend of natural, political, and personal imagery. The imagery functions on multiple levels; it creates a complex network of meanings which extends simple symbolism to establish what might be referred to as a "carceral poetics." Nature serves as an important source of metaphorical meaning as illustrated in the following passage,

Bonjour grand palmier solitaire  
planté sur ton échasse grenue  
et t'ouvrant comme une splendide tulipe

à la cime

This image combines the notion of isolation, symbolized by "solitaire," with the idea of transformation, as the palm transitions into a tulip. This contrast employs a nature of confinement and the possibility for elevation. The French expression "échasse grenue" depicts images of height and texture; it creates a metaphorical platform which suggests constraints and aspirations.

### Consciousness and Temporality

The poem investigates philosophical questions which go beyond simple political conflict. It engages with fundamental themes of existence, consciousness and freedom. The text demonstrates a complex employment of diverse philosophical traditions which includes existentialism and phenomenology. It also expresses a perspective which is rooted in the experience of imprisonment. The poem's examination of consciousness and temporality reveals a significant philosophical complexity,

Le présent n'existe pas  
à moins d'appeler présent  
cette conscience aiguë  
de devenir  
foudroyant le passé

This passage engages with phenomenological questions concerning the nature of temporal experience, highlighting the concept of the living present while simultaneously introducing complexities to it. The French phrase "conscience aiguë" suggests an intensified awareness that is closely connected to suffering, creating a philosophical relationship between consciousness and pain that aligns with Levinas's idea of existence as fundamentally ethical. This conception of rational hope engages with the Enlightenment traditions of rational optimism alongside existentialist notions of authentic existence. The metaphor of the dowser ("sourcier") suggests a materialist view of hope that stands in contrast to religious faith and mere wishful thinking. This establishes a form of "critical optimism" that maintains hope while acknowledging inherent limitations. The poem's examination of intersubjectivity reveals a sophisticated understanding of philosophical concepts,

Les camarades dorment  
La prison a cessé de tourner dans leur tête  
Ils naviguent à cœur ouvert  
en haute mer de nos passions inédites

This passage suggests what Merleau-Ponty might describe as "intercorporeality," in which individual consciousness extends into a collective experience. The expression "à cœur ouvert" in French connotes medical and emotional meanings; it reflects a materialist viewpoint on consciousness while it acknowledges the capacity for transcendence. This formulation reflects an engagement with the ideas of authentic speech as expressed by Heidegger; it places them in concrete political experiences. The emphasis on mastering silence as a foundation for meaningful expression establishes a complex relationship between articulation and self-discipline that goes beyond simple contradiction. The frequent reference to "le temps des cerises" establishes a clear connection to the legacy of the French Revolution,

C'est encore loin le temps des cerises  
et des mains chargées d'offrandes immédiates

The mention of Jean-Baptiste Clément's song, associated with the Paris Commune, creates a revolutionary intertext that connects personal defiance with historical struggle. The way in which the poem investigates in light reveals a link to Islamic mystical traditions and French symbolist poetry, as illustrated by "que de



lumière que de lumière autour de moi." This image brings to mind the Sufi concept of "nur" (divine light;) it represents a physical occurrence and a spiritual metaphor. The recurrence establishes what may be referred to as a intertextual echo which suggests multiple traditions, not adhering to any specific one.

### Conclusion

Abdellatif Laâbi's "The Poem Under Gag" is notable for its ability to transform the most severe form of imprisonment of the individual beliefs to a powerful assertion which resists suppression. Composed in the confines of a Moroccan prison cell in 1978, this poem transcends mere documentation of suffering; the compelling nature of this work lies in Laâbi's ability to convey intimate and universal themes. The poem arises from the experience of a Moroccan intellectual who was imprisoned for establishing the literary journal Souffles. Yet, it opens up essential inquiries which are related to human dignity, resistance, and the transformative value of art. This work is a personal account that transforms to a political assertion. it maintains some unique perspective. The poem's formal structure, characterized by asterisks that separate its fragments, reflects the fragmented nature of life within prison walls, simultaneously establishing a unique sense of cohesion. The outcome can be described as a "poetry of persistence"—not a romanticized form of resistance, but rather the ongoing effort to uphold one's humanity amidst dehumanizing circumstances.

One of the most notable aspects is Laâbi's treatment of time in the poem. Time in prison does not adhere to the conventional flow; it expands and compresses, cycles back upon itself, and encapsulates past and future in an unending and oppressive present. instead of staying limited by this temporal distortion, the poem discovers ways to engage in a creative manner. The mention of "le temps des cerises" repeatedly relates the poet's confinement to a broader history of struggle; it shows that his personal suffering is part of a bigger human narrative of resistance and hope. The translation by Allan and Guillemette Johnston encounters unavoidable challenges in rendering this profoundly French-Arabic work into English; however, these challenges illuminate significant aspects of the poem's cultural intricacy. This poem is not only important as a historical piece or a work of art, but also as proof of a basic truth about people, which our awareness can't be completely limited, and that the desire to create beauty continues even when things seem impossible.

In engaging with "The Poem Under Gag," in ongoing global discussions which surround intellectual freedom and artistic expression, a piece which resonates with contemporary issues can be found. The poem refrains from providing simplistic solutions or insincere solace. Rather, it offers a more significant lesson: a demonstration of how to preserve one's humanity in a world that often appears intent on eradicating it. The enduring strength of this work is found in its candid exploration of both suffering and resilience. He illustrates that even in the most limited situations, individuals possess the capacity to create, establish connections with others, and sustain a hope that is neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic, but rather grounded in a realistic understanding of both the shadows and the potential for illumination. Ultimately, "The Poem Under Gag" serves as a profound affirmation of the inherent dignity of human consciousness. This poem, emerging from one of the most limited circumstances conceivable, intriguingly presents a perspective of profound freedom, not freedom from consequences or challenges, but rather the freedom to engage with whatever occurs with integrity, creativity, and optimism. This is a lesson that merits being carried forward.

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