

# Unveiling the Thematic Dimensions of Malhun Poetry as a Moroccan Oral Heritage

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## Abstract

*Malhun poetry is a cherished tradition within Moroccan culture, known for its deep emotional resonance and connection to both the past and present. Originating in the rural regions of Morocco, this genre of poetry has evolved into a significant cultural expression, celebrated for its lyrical beauty, rhythmic complexity, and thematic richness. Included in the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO, Malhun is performed in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, making it accessible to a broad audience while still preserving its profound poetic qualities. The poetry is frequently accompanied by traditional musical instruments, enhancing its emotional depth and creating a strong bond between performer and audience.*

*At the heart of Malhun poetry are themes that reflect the complexities of human experience, from the passions of love and longing to spiritual devotion and social reflection. Through its verses, Malhun explores universal emotions and ideas, often expressing personal struggles, desires, and reflections on life and faith.*

*This article will explore the central themes within Malhun poetry, focusing on the expressions of love, spirituality, humor, imaginary journeys, as well as political and social issues. We will examine how these themes are presented in vivid imagery and how they reflect the cultural and historical context of Morocco through providing some translated stanzas. By analyzing the ongoing significance of Malhun, this piece seeks to shed light on its role as a dynamic form of artistic expression, vital to understanding Morocco's rich cultural landscape.*

**Keyword:** -Malhun, Poem, Themes, Translation, Morocco, Poetry.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dating back to the 17th century, Malhun is a poetic and musical tradition deeply rooted in Morocco's oral heritage. Originally performed at weddings, social gatherings, and communal events by amateur poets and musicians, it has since grown into a revered cultural art form. While it has evolved over time, incorporating modern influences, Malhun continues to honor its traditional essence and remains a vibrant part of Moroccan culture. What sets Malhun apart is its unique simplicity and emotional resonance. Written in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, its verses are rich in themes of love, nature, social concerns, and the experiences of daily life. Its structured rhymes and rhythms are enhanced by the sounds of traditional instruments like the oud, guembri, flutes, and drums, creating a musical style that is both accessible and deeply moving.

Passed down through generations, Malhun thrives in both informal and formal settings, cherished for its poetic beauty and cultural significance. Today, it endures as a living legacy, bridging the past and present while reflecting the rich diversity and heritage of Moroccan society. Baskari, M. (2020).

## 2. Overview about Malhun Poetry

Malhun is one of Morocco's most cherished poetic traditions, known for its emotional depth and connection to everyday life. Emerging over 500 years ago in southern Morocco, it gradually spread to cities like Marrakech, Fez, Meknes, Errachidia, and Taroudant, which have become central to preserving this art form. At its heart, Malhun is poetry meant to be sung. Pellat (1991) describes it as a form of popular dialectal poetry performed with musical accompaniment, blending language and melody. The term Malhun comes from the Arabic word *lahn*, meaning "melody," though some interpretations link it to *lahana*, referring to informal or ungrammatical Arabic. [1]. El Fassi, however, emphasizes that Malhun's identity lies in its use of melody and colloquial language, not grammatical deviations. [2]

Chekroun (1987) highlights Malhun's rebellious nature, as it moves away from the strict rules and meters of classical Arabic poetry. Its rhythm emerges organically during performance, making it dynamic and alive. Malhun prioritizes vivid imagery and imagination, focusing less on rigid forms and more on the emotional and visual experience it creates [3].

Malhun continues to thrive as a unique blend of poetry and music, celebrating the richness of Moroccan dialect and culture. It is more than an art form; it is a living tradition that connects people through shared stories, melodies, and emotions.

Malhun, originally a regional tradition, has evolved into a cherished part of Morocco's national cultural heritage. It emerged in the Tafilalt region during the fifteenth century and gradually spread to urban artistic circles, craft guilds, and Sufi communities by the sixteenth century. This evolution set Malhun apart from other regional Moroccan art forms. Unlike any other genre, Malhun saw remarkable expansion across various regions of Morocco, gaining widespread popularity. (Jirari, 1970) [4].

By the seventeenth century, the genre had given rise to distinct regional styles, particularly in Morocco's urban centers (Al-Gansani, 1993). As Morocco's national identity solidified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Malhun began to reflect the country's growing unity. It came to symbolize Arab pride and resistance to foreign domination, including Ottoman, French, Spanish, and British influences. [5]. One notable example of Malhun's political expression is the poem *Masriya* (The Egyptian One) by Moḥammad Ali AlUmrani of Fez. The poem expresses solidarity with Egypt, particularly in response to Napoleon's 1798 invasion, showcasing how Malhun not only served as an artistic form but also as a means of political expression and unity. (Guessous, 2008) [6].

A Malhun poem is typically structured in three main parts, each serving a distinct role in the composition:

1. Al-Sarraba (Prelude): This section contains several sub-sections—*dkhiil*, *naura*, and *radma*; which set the rhythm (*iqa'*) and meter (*wazn*) of the poem, establishing the musical foundation for the rest of the piece.
2. Al-Qsida (The Poem): This is the core of the Malhun, made up of multiple *qsem* (strophes or verses). Each *qsem* is introduced by a *harba* (chorus), which is also chanted in unison by the performers to signal the start of each new strophe. The final *qsem* typically includes key details such as the poet's name and the date of composition, often encoded in the Maghribi abjad (alphabetic system).
3. Al-Dardika (The End): This is a concluding section that is usually chanted in an accelerated and rhythmic manner, signaling the end of the poem. It adds a sense of closure and energy to the performance. The *harba* is repeated several times to end the song.

Through these three parts, a Malhun poem combines rhythm, melody, and lyrical content to create a structured yet flexible form of poetic expression. (El Fassi, 1990) [7].

Although Malhun concerts typically feature complete poems, the texts that are most widely recognized and circulated in contemporary Moroccan society are usually not the full poems. Instead, they are often limited to catchy refrains and the opening stanzas. These shorter, more accessible parts of the poem are what most people know and associate with Malhun, as they are frequently performed and shared in everyday settings.

Malhun is a widely cherished poetic art form in Morocco. Traditional musical instruments such as the lute, violin, rebab, and small drums accompany its verses, often performed in dialectical Arabic. The themes explored in Malhun are rich and varied, including love, the beauty of life and nature, religious prayers and supplications, celebrations, culinary delights, imaginary voyages, political events, and pressing social issues. These poems also serve a moral purpose, delivering messages that encourage thoughtful reflection and constructive dialogue. (El Fassi, 1986) [8].

Enjoyed by people of all genders, Malhun has played a significant role in shaping Moroccan culture and collective memory for centuries. It thrives in diverse settings, from intimate family gatherings to grand performance halls and dedicated festivals. As a communal art form, Malhun fosters creativity and social harmony while serving as a living archive of Morocco's historical and social narratives. (Miller, 2017) [9].

By blending song, theatrical elements, metaphors, and symbolism with accessible language in a festive environment, Malhun transcends religious and cultural boundaries, creating a unifying experience for all Moroccans. In the past, its transmission relied on informal apprenticeships with vocalists, musicians, lyricists, and artisans who crafted the instruments and costumes. Today, Malhun is preserved and taught through organizations, music conservatories, and published collections of traditional texts. (Baskari, 2020) [10].

### 3. Malhun: The Soul of Moroccan Poetry

In Morocco, Malhun originated as a form of poetry that was deeply rooted in the urban working-class culture, particularly among artisans. It flourished in cities such as Tafilalet, its birthplace, as well as in other major urban centers like Fez, Meknes, Marrakech, and Sale. These cities became key hubs for the development and performance of Malhun poetry, with its themes often reflecting the everyday life, struggles, and joys of the working-class community. (Sahoum, 1993) [11].

Historically, Malhun was predominantly composed, performed, and passed down by men. The poets who contributed to this tradition were often from the working class, and many were skilled artisans themselves. These poets would compose verses in colloquial Arabic, which were then chanted in a melodic and rhythmic manner, often accompanied by traditional music. This made Malhun a vital part of urban gatherings, where it would be shared at social events, religious celebrations, and communal gatherings. (El Fassi, 1990) [12].

Although men were the primary creators and performers of Malhun, ethnographic studies have revealed that women also played a role in the tradition. In certain contexts, women participated in the transmission and performance of Malhun, often in more private or women-only spaces. This evidence highlights the more complex and nuanced nature of the tradition, where women contributed to the preservation and continuation of the art form, even if they were not as prominently involved in its composition or public performance. (Ennahid, 2007) [13].

Malhun poetry, like many other forms of Moroccan popular culture, was traditionally passed down orally, with very few instances of it being written down. Once composed, the poem was entrusted to the memory of a *hafid* (pl: *hoffad*), or *rawi*. They are individuals known for their exceptional ability to memorize and recite these poems. In Malhun circles, there was often a figure called the *shaykh al-huffad*, a respected authority whose expertise and memory were recognized by his peers. While most *hoffad* relied solely on their memory, some supplemented this by writing down the poems in *konash*; notebooks used to record the verses. These written records, although rare, were crucial for preserving Malhun poetry for future generations. Today, several of these

notebooks are preserved in the *Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc* as well as in private collections held by enthusiasts of the Malhun tradition or by families of the poets. These collections offer valuable insight into the preservation and continuity of Malhun as a vital part of Morocco's cultural heritage. (Hoffman, 2007) [14].

#### 4. Themes of Malhun poetry

Over the centuries, the themes explored in Malhun poetry have significantly expanded, giving rise to a diverse array of sub-genres. These include *madih* (praise poetry) and its counterpart, *hijae* (invective), as well as lyric poetry celebrating wine, love, and nature. Laments, political appeals, and narrative poems also feature prominently. Religious themes, however, remain the most performed and studied, valued for both their spiritual significance and their relative safety as topics of expression. (Magidoe, 2016) [15].

Malhun poetry intertwines classical Arabic influences with uniquely Moroccan characteristics. Like classical Arabic poetry, it includes themes such as praising patrons, expressing love, celebrating nature and spring, reveling in wine and festivities, engaging in poetic debates, and honoring the Prophet Mohammed or other spiritual figures through mystical verses. Yet, it also introduces distinctively Moroccan elements, such as sending poetic greetings to faraway loved ones or drawing inspiration from everyday objects like candles or tea trays. This harmonious blend of tradition and innovation reveals the rich and dynamic essence of Malhun poetry.

##### 4.1 The Theme of Religion in Malhun Poetry

Religious praise poems in Malhun poetry have a distinctive spiritual tone, often dedicated to praising the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) and sending blessings upon him, which is where the genre gets its name. Most of these poems begin with introductions that emphasize spirituality and reverence, highlighting the deep faith and love for the Prophet. The poet Ibn al Makki al Qurashi said in his poem "Al-Buraqiya":

للهم صلي على النبي راكب البراق محمد عين الوجود الطه

*May God send blessings on the Prophet, the rider of the Buraq Mohammed, the essence of being, the Ta-ha*

This theme has claimed a prominent position in Arabic poetry, particularly in the realm of popular poetry known as religious praise (*madih dini*). Poets in Moroccan Malhun often delved into praise, not only to highlight the virtues of the praised figure but also to embody their qualities in a profound and meaningful way. In Malhun, praise takes on a distinctly spiritual dimension, driven by deep faith and heartfelt devotion. It reflects a sincere longing for intercession, the glorification of religion, and an exalted reverence for the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. This deep-rooted connection can be traced to the profound influence of religion on poets, their environments, and the themes they explored. The religious text was an inseparable part of their lives, shaping their worldview and constantly flowing through their creative expressions. Across different stages of life, Malhun poets engaged with themes of faith and mysticism, incorporating praise for saints and blessings for the righteous into their works. Among the most celebrated examples of religious praise in Malhun poetry is the work of Al-Khadr bin Khallouf, who earned the title "The Poet of the Prophet." (Elinson, 2017) [16].

Furthermore, religious poetry holds a special prominence in Malhun, being the most frequently composed and performed due to its profound spiritual significance. Among these, mystical themes take center stage, reflecting the deep-rooted spiritual essence of the genre. One of the most renowned pieces in this category is *Ana Mani Fiyach*, often referred to as *Fiyachia*. This poem by Sidi Behloul Cherki conveys a deep reliance on Allah, illustrating tawakul, the Islamic concept of entrusting oneself entirely to God. This trust is more than just a source of bravery; it reflects a firm belief that every event, even the struggles, is part of Allah's divine plan (*qadar* or destiny). For the poet, this unwavering faith offers assurance, allowing Muslims to face the

uncertainties of life with confidence, knowing that Allah is leading them through every trial. An example of the refrain is bellow:

انا ما ني فياش اش عليا مني

نقلق من رزقي لاش و الخالق يرزقني

*I haven't got the force*

*No strength between my sides*

*Why feeling such remorse?*

*When my maker provides?*

In Malhun poetry, there is a unique form of art that serves as a medium for offering guidance and advice, aiming to inspire, educate, and enlighten its audience in an accessible and heartfelt way. This intent is evident from the very first stanza of the poem entitled Lwsaya/ Pieces of advice by Driss Ben Ali:

أَفْتَحْ سَمَاعَ الْقَلْبِ يَا السَّاهِي عَمَّا يَغْنِيكَ

*Open and listen to your heart, oh oblivious one.*

The poem emphasizes the importance of religion in the lives of Muslims, offering guidance on how to interact with others and behave in a kind and respectful manner. It delivers its religious messages in a gentle and approachable way.

As the title suggests, the poem serves as a series of heartfelt pieces of advice for individuals who may be unaware of their religious and social missteps. Offering sincere advice is a cornerstone of Islamic values, reflecting good faith and care for others. When you notice a fault or a misstep in someone, Islam encourages advising them with sincerity and kindness, aiming to help them avoid repeating it in the future. Such advice, given with genuine intentions and from the heart, embodies the essence of good faith and a sense of responsibility toward others.

This poem can be seen as a guidebook filled with valuable pieces of advice to follow. Its central theme revolves around guiding people toward the right path. Through reading or listening to the poem, one can sense a genuine tone of truthfulness and sincerity in the way advice is offered, without any hint of superiority. This is particularly meaningful, as giving advice can sometimes unintentionally convey a sense of self-importance, stemming from knowing something the other person does not. This poem, however, avoids such a tone, focusing instead on humility and heartfelt guidance:

بَادِرْ بَطْءَةَ اللَّهِ وَقْتِي زَادَكَ

اترك قيل وقال و لمزاح ايضا يلهيك

*Initiate by obeying Allah, reinforce your provisions*

*Leave the gossip and amusement and anything that can distract you*

#### 4.2 Humor Theme in Malhun Poems

Comic poems may not represent the most traditional examples of Malhun and are thus excluded from the core repertoire of widely recognized standards. However, they remain well known among Malhun enthusiasts. Comic poetry often features in Malhun concerts and festivals and is a staple at weddings, particularly in the Tafilalt region, where one or two humorous pieces are commonly performed. These poems are also accessible through CD recordings or some videos on Youtube. (Magidoe, 2013) [17].

Humorous tales often use personification and vivid characterization. Typically, they feature two opposing figures engaged in a *khṣam* (a verbal battle), creating a dialogue that contrasts different ideologies, regions, generations, or lifestyles. These poems are known for their use of imaginative and exaggerated characters, all crafted to bring out humor in the interaction. This work represents a thoughtful comparison between two distinct concepts, highlighting their respective advantages and disadvantages. This particular style of Malhun poetry is masterfully crafted by the renowned poet Salsouli, who is celebrated for his profound insight and artistic skill.

Ismail Salsouli's contributions to the Malhun poetry tradition highlight a unique blend of humor and social critique, especially relevant in contemporary Morocco. His use of *mu'araḍa*/ comparison, a classical Arabic poetic device that fosters a playful yet sophisticated competition between two entities, allows him to engage with serious issues in a light-hearted manner. This technique not only preserves traditional poetic forms but also offers a platform for Salsouli to express his views on current affairs.

Salsouli's ability to intertwine satire with topics like politics, religion, and romance makes his work resonant with modern audiences, reflecting both the local and global concerns of his time. His comedic approach to serious topics adds depth to his poetry, allowing it to remain relevant in the contemporary landscape while maintaining a link to the cultural roots of Malhun. The poetic device of *mu'araḍa*, through which he frames debates and contrasts between two ideas or figures, contributes significantly to the humor and intellectual richness of his works. This makes Salsouli a distinctive voice in the evolution of Malhun poetry.

In this first poem, Salsouli compares and contrasts a traditional landline with a mobile phone. Through these comparisons, he reflects on societal changes and the differences between generations. In his poem *l-portable*, for example, Salsouli sets up a playful debate between a cell phone and a landline, highlighting the tension between the old and the new. The poem starts with the following line:

بين الهاتف المحمول مع الثابت في الدار،

قام هاد المعيار

كنت حاضر ليهوم، تزايدو فالهضرة

*Between the cell phone and the fixed at home*

*This dispute supervenes*

*I was present while arguing*

عندنا تلفون قديم، في الركينة ثابت و سليم

شراه جدي جابو لدار

خدام هذي عام70

*We have an old phone, stable and undamaged in the corner*

*My grandfather bought and brought it home,*

*It has been working for 70 years*

Salsouli connects with his audience by telling a funny story that feels both familiar and relatable, showing how modern gadgets sometimes clash with the old, trusted technologies we once relied on. In the second stanza, the narrator casually sets his mobile phone next to the old landline and settles in to read the newspaper. As he gets lost in the World Cup on the sports page, he suddenly hears a voice, as shown in the following stanzas:

سرحت الجريدة، بديت نقرا وحدي فلبيت، و السكات مخيم حتى سهيبت،

نسمع فلحين غوات، جابد معيار

صغبوليا نحكيه، تمعنوا يا حضرة

*I took the newspaper and I started reading all in my own*

*Silence remains until I lost control*

*Suddenly, I heard a scream, a misunderstanding took place*

*Listen to me, I will narrate*

*Pay attention, oh gentlemen*

To his surprise, it's the landline phone, expressing concerns about the mobile phone—how it seems to fuel crime at night, disturb people during prayers, and cause other problems that the old phone never had to worry about.

جوامع داخل وعل المؤمنين شوشتي فصلاتهم

الناس بيك تلفات

و حوادث زايذا في الطرقات

*People are consumed by you,*

*and accidents are increasing because of you*

*You entered the mosques, and you perturbed the prays of faithful*

In the final stanza, the narrator asks his phones to make peace with each other, and in the end, they do.

د خلت بخيط بيض،

و كل واحد شديد بخاطرو، و تفاجا لغيار،

*I went through them with a white thread*

*I consoled each one of them, and the quarrel took an end*

The phones symbolize two sides of the narrator—himself as a poet and as a member of society. The poem reflects the variety of voices and opinions that shape contemporary Moroccan society, and, to some extent, even touches on global issues. Songs like this one capture the attention of young people at weddings and family events, pointing out the differences in how people see the world. It entertains by making everyone laugh at these differences, helping to bridge gaps between generations and viewpoints. In this regard, salsouli have written many poems where he compares and contrast many things. Malhun poems sometimes feature human characters, for instance we can find poems that talk about the difference between *L-Arubiya w-l-Mdiniya* (*Country Girl vs. City Girl*), which highlights the contrast between rural and urban women. Similarly, *Al-Zimniya wa-l-Aşriya* (*The Old-Fashioned Girl and the Modern Girl*) compares women with modern education to those raised with a focus on traditional domestic skills.

### 4.3 The Theme of Love in Malhun Poetry

Malhun poetry explores various themes, including praise of the Prophet Mohammed. Nevertheless, the quintessential subject of Malhun poetry is the amatory elegy (ghazal), which often carries erotic implications.

In the realm of poetic knowledge, love transcends being a mere emotion. It represents the core of the Divine, the human, and the natural principles. Poetic knowledge goes beyond merely addressing the theme of love; it functions as a means of expressing and manifesting it. (Nosheen, 2016) [18].

Love and passion are central themes in Malhun poetry, weaving through its verses as a timeless and universal expression of human emotion. The poems often revolve around the deep connection between the poet and his beloved, who is frequently depicted as a woman. Her image is carefully crafted from the depths of the poet's imagination, accentuating her beauty, charm, and allure. The poem of Dmlig Zhiro by Houssin Toulali is a great example of that, as shown below:

Names of women, such as Fatima, Tamo, Souad, Zaynab, Khadijah and Yamna, are frequently mentioned, reflecting the poet's inspiration drawn from both real and idealized figures. These names carry with them not only personal stories but also cultural and symbolic meanings, making them an integral part of Malhun's rich tapestry of love poetry. (Fekhari. (2003) [19].

There are also some poems that express deep longing and emotional anguish caused by the absence of a beloved, for instance, the famous qside/poem Fatma. The speaker pleads for mercy.

رحمي يا راحت العقل ترحامي

من جفاك طال سقامي

كيف نبقي حابر وانت مسد ليا

روفي يا لغزال فاطمة

*Have mercy on me, O comfort of my heart, have mercy,  
Your absence but deepens the wounds of my sorrow.  
How can I endure this torment while you're unaware,  
Distant, your heart sealed, untouched by my despair?  
Show kindness, O gazelle, my radiant Fatma.*



This poem expresses deep longing and emotional pain due to the absence of a beloved, referred to as "Fatma." The speaker implores for mercy and compassion, describing how their suffering is intensified by the distance and emotional detachment of the person they love. The use of metaphors like "comfort of my heart" and "graceful gazelle" highlights the beauty and idealization of the beloved, while the repetition of pleas for kindness reflects the speaker's vulnerability and desperation. Overall, the poem conveys a powerful sense of yearning, sorrow, and an intense desire for the return or attention of the loved one.

Malhun poets excel at capturing the essence of romantic longing and emotional intensity, blending vivid descriptions with metaphors that elevate the beloved to an almost mythical status. This focus on love allows Malhun poetry to resonate deeply with audiences, transcending time and geography, as it celebrates the joys, sorrows, and mysteries of human connection. We can find the poem of Lala Ghita:

قولوا للا غيثة مولاتي

جود بوصالك على شيق

يا أم الغيث

*Oh, tell Ghita, my cherished queen,  
Bestow your presence, soft and serene.  
You, the rain from clouds above,  
Heal the heart of your waiting love.*

This poem conveys a deep sense of longing and affection for a beloved named Ghita, who is described as a cherished queen. The speaker pleads for her presence, comparing her to rain descending from the clouds, a symbol of nourishment and healing. The metaphor of rain emphasizes the emotional solace the speaker seeks from her, as if her arrival would soothe and mend their heart. The poem reflects a yearning for connection, with the speaker expressing a desire for the beloved's comfort and love to end their waiting and longing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Moroccans associate Malhun with Moroccan identity specifically in large part because it occurs in particular performance contexts such as national festivals, projects sponsored by the monarchy, and political protest music. Each of these performance contexts provides a forum for voicing at least one position regarding Moroccan identity.

Overall, Malhun emerged as a poetry form that was both a reflection of the urban working class and an important part of Morocco's cultural and social fabric. Through its performance, it became a tool for expressing collective identities, struggles, and celebrations, weaving together the lives of the people in these cities and transcending gender boundaries in subtle yet significant ways.

Malhun poetry stands as a testament to Morocco's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, exploring a wide range of themes such as love, devotion, nature, social dynamics, and political reflections. These themes intertwine to celebrate both the individual and collective experiences, offering a timeless window into Moroccan identity. By addressing universal and deeply personal subjects, Malhun continues to resonate across generations, preserving its legacy as an art form that bridges tradition and modernity, spirituality and creativity.

In conclusion, Malhun poetry is a rich and vibrant tradition that blends classical Arabic influences with uniquely Moroccan expressions. Its themes are diverse, often reflecting both universal and local concerns. Common themes include love, longing, praise, nature, and spirituality, but Malhun also delves into social issues, such as the contrasts between tradition and modernity. Through its vivid imagery and emotional depth, Malhun poetry captures the essence of Moroccan culture and identity, weaving together the personal, the communal, and the

spiritual. Its enduring popularity is a testament to its ability to resonate with both past and contemporary audiences, bridging the old and the new while preserving the cultural heritage of Morocco

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