

## Critical Discourse Analysis of Abderrahman Majdoub: Sufi Poetry as Social Critique in 16th-Century Morocco

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### Abstract

This article examines the quatrains of Abderrahman Majdoub (1506–1568), the Moroccan Sufi poet whose vernacular poetry represents a distinctive intersection of mystical spirituality and socio-political criticism in early modern North Africa. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes how Majdoub employed the quatrain form—rooted in oral tradition and accessible vernacular—to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse challenging political corruption, economic inequality, and religious hypocrisy during the rise of the Saadian dynasty. Unlike contemporary Sufi figures who withdrew from society into zawiyas, Majdoub engaged directly with public affairs, using poetry as an instrument of moral accountability. The analysis reveals four primary discursive strategies: the delegitimization of unqualified authority through metaphors of natural disorder; the construction of economic justice as foundational to religious practice; the exposure of performative religiosity as social hypocrisy; and the articulation of an ascetic alternative grounded in nature and spiritual autonomy. Majdoub's poetry demonstrates how vernacular literary forms can function as vehicles for social criticism within Islamic contexts, offering insights into premodern traditions of public intellectual engagement and the relationship between Sufism and social reform.

**Keywords:** Abderrahman Majdoub, Sufi poetry, Critical Discourse Analysis, Moroccan literature, social criticism, vernacular literature, Saadian Morocco

## 1. Introduction

<sup>1</sup>The relationship between Sufism and political authority in Islamic history has long been characterized by profound complexity. While certain Sufi figures sought accommodation with ruling regimes, others maintained a critical distance or actively challenged political and social injustices. Among the latter, Sidi Abderrahman al-Majdoub (1506–1568) occupies a distinctive position within the Maghrebi literary and religious traditions. Born in Tit (near Azemmour) and buried in Meknes, al-Majdoub produced a vast corpus of vernacular quatrains (*ruba'iyat*) that have so thoroughly permeated Moroccan oral culture that many have evolved into contemporary proverbial expressions. His poetry addresses structural anxieties ranging from political corruption and economic inequality to religious hypocrisy and social exclusion—themes that retain a remarkable resonance across centuries (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

What distinguishes al-Majdoub from contemporary Sufi poets is not merely his thematic focus, but his distinct mode of socio-political engagement. Rather than isolating himself in monastic seclusion or restricting his interactions to a closed circle of disciples, biographical sources indicate that al-Majdoub immersed himself directly in the sociopolitical tumult of his era, leveraging sharp public criticism against prevailing institutional conditions. Traveling extensively throughout the Moroccan territory, he advocated for systemic moral renewal and political reform while denouncing the commodification of power, wealth, and social status. His primary instrument of critique was vernacular poetry; by utilizing Moroccan Arabic (*al-darija*) within the accessible structural framework of the quatrain, he bypassed the restrictive boundaries of literate, courtly elites to mobilize and engage the broader populace (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

Consequently, this study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to al-Majdoub's quatrains to examine how his vernacular poetry constructs and disseminates a counter-hegemonic discourse. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks developed by Fairclough (1995, 2003) and van Dijk (1993, 2008), CDA offers a robust methodology for evaluating how discourse enacts, reproduces,

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<sup>1</sup> Akyeampong, E. K., & Gates, H. L., Jr. (Eds.). (2012). *Dictionary of African biography* (Vol. 1, pp. 35–36). Oxford University Press.

and challenges asymmetrical power relations. By scrutinizing the specific linguistic strategies through which texts construct social identities, power dynamics, and epistemic systems, this framework illuminates how premodern, vernacular literary forms can function as potent vehicles for institutional critique. Furthermore, it contributes to broader historiographical debates regarding the intersections of Sufism, political authority, and grassroots social reform in the early modern Islamic world.

To demonstrate this, the analysis proceeds through four thematic sections corresponding to the primary socio-religious critiques within al-Majdoub's oeuvre: first, the deconstruction of political authority and illegitimate leadership; second, the structural intersections of economic deprivation and social marginalization; third, the exposure of religious hypocrisy and performative piety; and fourth, the articulation of an ascetic alternative predicated on natural harmony and spiritual autonomy. Each section systematically examines the specific discursive mechanisms al-Majdoub employs—such as allegory, irony, direct address, and shifting register—to dismantle hegemonic narratives and foster a critical consciousness among his audience (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

## **2. Historical and Biographical Context**

### **2.1 Morocco in the 16th Century**

<sup>1</sup>Sidi Abderrahman al-Majdoub operated during an era of profound socio-political transformation in Moroccan history. Born in 1506, his lifetime coincided with the protracted decline of the Wattasid sultanate and the subsequent ascendance of the Saadian dynasty (1510–1659), a period characterized by the centralization of Moroccan territorial sovereignty and institutionalized resistance against Portuguese maritime encroachment along the Atlantic littoral. This Saadian epoch was defined by a dialectic of state consolidation and domestic factionalism, as competing elites vied for political legitimacy and institutional hegemony. Concurrently, the eastward expansion of the Ottoman Empire into the central Maghreb generated unprecedented geopolitical pressures, forcing local actors to navigate volatile shifting alliances (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Akyeampong & Gates (2012, pp. 35–36).

This turbulent historical conjuncture serves as the essential backdrop for al-Majdoub's systematic social critique. His oeuvre captures the acute structural anxieties and collective aspirations of a society enduring the compounding shocks of political transition, external imperial threats, and internal socioeconomic dislocation. Notably, while the Saadians derived their primary ideological legitimacy from their self-fashioning as mujahidin defending Islamic lands against Iberian expansion, al-Majdoub's discourse reveals that this performative religious authority failed to manifest as equitable governance. Through his quatrains, he systematically destabilizes these state-sanctioned narratives, interrogating whether the ruling echelons possessed the requisite moral rectitude and administrative competence essential for legitimate, just leadership (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

## 2.2 Sufi Formation and Intellectual Influences

<sup>1</sup>Sidi Abderrahman al-Majdoub was socialized within a rigorous Sufi milieu that profoundly shaped his spiritual, intellectual, and ethical development. His father had trained under Ibrahim Afham al-Zarhuni, a prominent disciple of Ahmad Zarruq (d. 1493)—arguably one of the most influential Sufi theorists and reformers in the premodern Maghreb. Zarruq's formulation of "juridical sainthood" (al-walaya al-fiqhiyya) insisted on the absolute synthesis of esoteric Sufi practice with exoteric Islamic jurisprudence. This ideological inheritance appears to have fundamentally animated al-Majdoub's lifelong preoccupation with the ethical dimensions of public life. As Boum (2012) observes, Zarruq sought to reconstruct religious authority by emphasizing systematic legal frameworks and religious forms over unregulated mysticism. This imperative to harmonize inner spiritual rectitude with outer institutional praxis remains a constant thematic resonance across al-Majdoub's poetic corpus (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

Al-Majdoub's formal education further consolidated his socio-religious authority. He studied in Meknes under distinguished scholars such as Abu Ruwayin, Ahmad al-Shabih, and Umar al-Khattab al-Zarhuni, the latter of whom directed him to settle in the northern Habt region. He subsequently advanced his scholastic pursuits in the intellectual capital of Fez, where he memorized the Quran and mastered the ten canonical recitations (al-qira'at al-'ashr). This rigorous

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<sup>1</sup> Akyeampong & Gates (2012, pp. 35–36).

scholastic training provided him with the sophisticated conceptual vocabulary and normative moral framework that underpins his socio-political critiques. Crucially, however, his deliberate decision to channel these classical insights into vernacular verse (*al-darija*) rather than elite Arabic prose represents a conscious rhetorical strategy to bypass scholarly and courtly circles, thereby democratizing his counter-hegemonic discourse for the broader subaltern populace (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

This intellectual genealogy places al-Majdoub within a historically continuous tradition of critical, dialectical engagement with ruling institutions. Zarruq himself had operated during the sociopolitical volatility of the late Marinid era, actively contesting opportunistic, state-sanctioned weaponizations of jihad that sought to scapegoat specific Muslim populations to consolidate the political status of ruling factions. Furthermore, during this historical juncture of Marinid decline, a highly influential public phenomenon emerged in Fez known as the "mad holy people" or *majdoub*s. Framed within Islamic epistemic structures not as clinical insanity but as a state of divine rapture (*jadh*), these figures were understood to have their routine rational faculties suspended by an overwhelming attraction to the Divine. Far from being socially dysfunctional, the *majdoub* occupied a sanctified liminal space; their disruptive public personas and perceived thaumaturgical capacities granted them a unique socio-cultural immunity, permitting them to articulate unvarnished, dangerous truths to those in power (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

Consequently, the epithet "al-Majdoub" functioned as a vital tool of discursive positioning, endowing the poet with a recognized framework of structural legitimacy from which to launch his social critiques. Amid the Iberian maritime invasions of the Moroccan littoral and the concurrent inability of the Wattasid sultanate to arrest this military encroachment, these ecstatic Sufi networks increasingly aligned themselves with the rising Saadian dynasty and the populist Jazuliyya brotherhood. Al-Majdoub effectively synthesized these distinct currents, establishing a unique spiritual synthesis that married Zarruq's legal reformism with the ecstatic, populist authority of the *majdoub* tradition, ultimately leaning closer

to the Jazuli models of charismatic, socially active spiritual authority (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

Significantly, historical records indicate that despite his epithet, al-Majdoub did not adopt the radical ascetical isolation or antinomian lifestyle often associated with the holy madmen; instead, he married, raised a family, and remained deeply embedded within community life. In the context of Critical Discourse Analysis, this biographical detail is highly consequential. By refusing total monastic withdrawal, al-Majdoub successfully reconciled the transcendent, unassailable moral authority of the divinely rapt mystic with the practical, shared vulnerabilities of everyday social reality. This dual positioning allowed him to speak not as a detached external observer, but as an active, embedded participant in the collective struggles of his society (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012).

### 2.3 The Majdoub Phenomenon

<sup>1</sup>The epithet al-Majdoub (the divinely attracted) carries distinct, layered connotations that bridge vernacular sociology and classical Sufi epistemology. Within Moroccan popular culture, the term denotes an individual perceived as divinely inspired, completely detached from material anxieties, and indifferent to normative social conventions; thus, their non-conformist behavior is legible to the public as a sign of spiritual elevation rather than mundane pathology. Concurrently, within formal Sufi discourse, the term designates a mystic whom the Divine has directly "drawn" (jadhb) into His presence, bypassing the laborious, sequential disciplines of the traditional mystical path (suluk) to grant unmediated spiritual illumination.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this dual-layered designation performed a critical function of discursive positioning and structural immunity. By operating under the mantle of the majdoub, the poet occupied a sanctified liminal space that shielded his rhetoric from being dismissed as mere factional political opposition or self-serving grievance. Instead, his words carried the unassailable weight of transcendent insight. This moral authority was further authenticated by his performative anti-materialism, characterized by an itinerant lifestyle and a deliberate willingness to engage in menial labor. When the structural

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<sup>1</sup> Akyeampong & Gates (2012, pp. 35–36).

constraints of his contemporary society became oppressive, al-Majdoub effectively decoupled himself from institutional dependencies—metaphorically "taking to the land, transforming the sky into his ceiling and enveloping his soul in the open air." This strategic self-fashioning as a divinely rapt critic authorized him to articulate radical counter-hegemonic perspectives that would have otherwise invited immediate state repression.

Consequently, as Boum (2012) underscores, al-Majdoub transcended the archetype of the passive mystic, functioning instead as an active social reformer and a vernacular troubadour whose primary imperative was the conscientization of the subaltern masses regarding the systemic crises facing early modern Moroccan society. This synthesis of the ecstatic and the didactic positions al-Majdoub within a robust tradition of public intellectual engagement, wherein spiritual authority is not weaponized for state legitimization, but rather mobilized as an instrument of grass-roots social critique.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust epistemological and methodological framework for interrogating how al-Majdoub's poetry constructs meaning and dialectically engages with early modern structures of power. CDA proceeds from the foundational premise that discourse is not merely a passive reflection of social reality, but is dynamically constitutive of it—shaping the very parameters through which subjects conceptualize their identities, interpersonal relationships, and broader sociopolitical environments (Fairclough, 1995). Consequently, this framework prioritizes the examination of specific linguistic strategies through which texts ideologically position audiences, construct social identities, and either reproduce or subvert dominant hegemonic paradigms.

In this context, van Dijk (1993) posits that CDA must centrally concern itself with "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance." Within this critical paradigm, dominance is conceptualized as the systematic exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or dominant groups, which inevitably perpetuates structural inequalities across political, cultural, and class strata.

Operationalizing this lens against al-Majdoub's oeuvre reveals how his vernacular quatrains (*ruba'iyat*) function as deliberate discursive interventions within the power dynamics of sixteenth-century Moroccan society. His poetry actively destabilizes the legitimacy of unqualified rulers, exposes the structural mechanisms of socioeconomic exclusion, and systematically dismantles the performative authority of religious hypocrites.

To achieve this, the present study relies on several key analytical categories derived from classical CDA. First, **intertextuality** is employed to examine how texts dialogically incorporate, recontextualize, or respond to antecedent discourses (Fairclough, 2003). Al-Majdoub's poetry continuously engages with Quranic source texts, prophetic traditions (*hadith*), and classical Sufi metaphysics, strategically anchoring his vernacular critique within recognized frameworks of transcendent Islamic authority. Second, the category of **modality** is utilized to evaluate the poet's degree of affinity or epistemic commitment to his assertions—marking the analytical distinction between contingent possibilities and absolute, deontic imperatives. Al-Majdoub's recurrent use of categorical assertions and uncompromised direct address (*al-khitab*) constructs an authoritative, unassailable speaking position. Third, the scrutiny of **lexical choice and conceptual metaphor** reveals the underlying ideological frameworks and normative value systems embedded within his verses. Finally, the analysis prioritizes **register**—specifically the socio-linguistic tension between classical Arabic (*al-fusha*) and the Moroccan vernacular (*al-darija*). This choice of code carries profound social meaning, deliberately positioning the text away from elite, state-sanctioned structures of authority and embedding it within the immediate, lived realities of the subaltern public sphere.

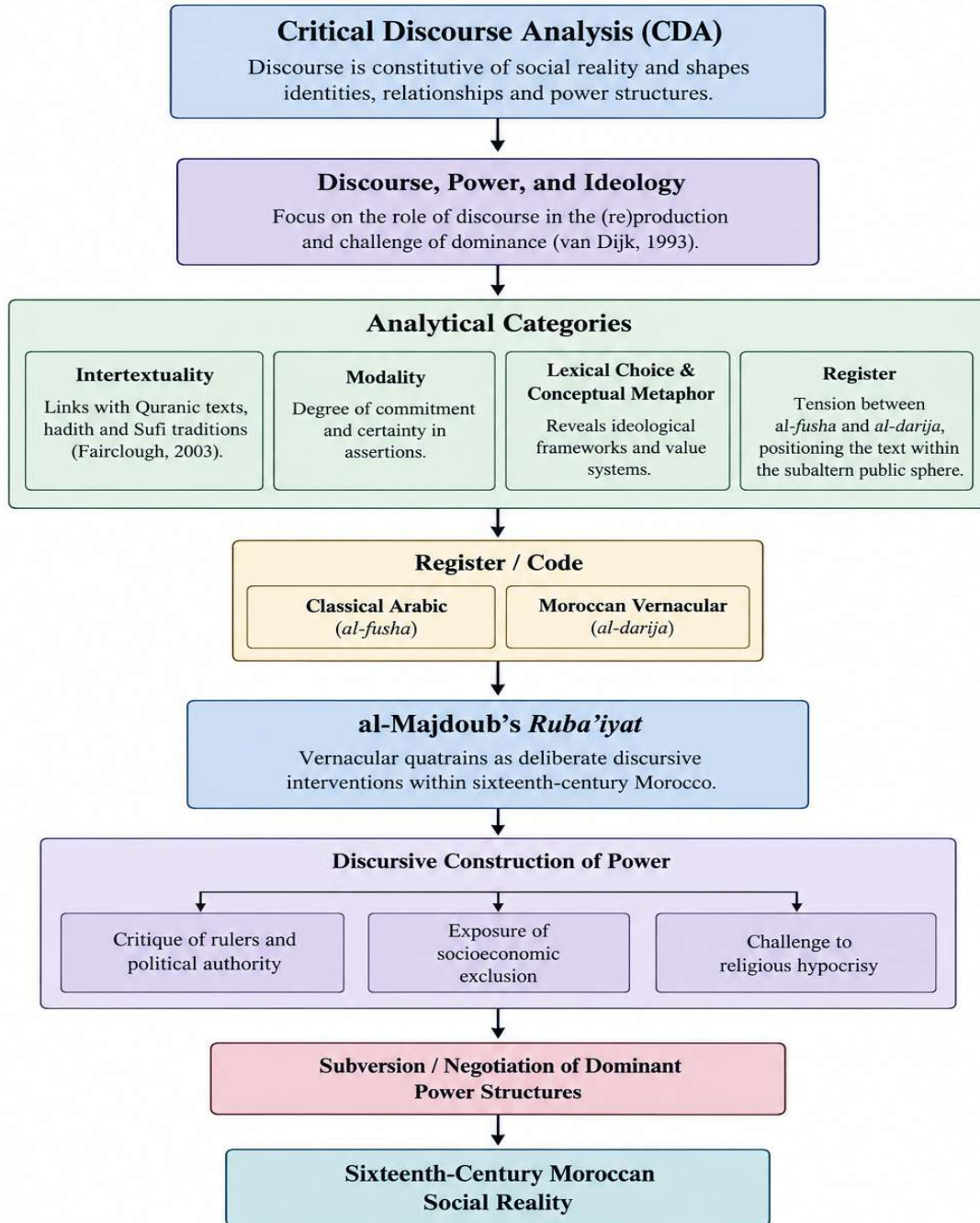


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the Critical Discourse Analysis of al-Majdoub's poetry.

## 4. Discourse of Political Authority

### 4.1 The Crisis of Unqualified Leadership

One of Majdoub's most persistent themes concerns the appointment of unqualified individuals to positions of authority. His quatrain on these subject employs vivid natural imagery to convey the disorder that results from such misassignment:

**Table 1: Quatrain on Unqualified Leadership**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration           | English Translation                               |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| تخلطت ولا بغات تصفى | Tkhalṭat walla bghat tṣfa | It has become confusing, or wants to become clear |
| ولعب خزها فوق ماها  | W l'ab khazha fōq māha    | The scum plays upon its water                     |
| رياس على غير مرتبة  | Rayyās 'ala ghayr martaba | Leaders without proper rank                       |
| هم سبب خالها        | Hamm sabab khalalha       | They are the cause of its ruin                    |

This quatrain constructs a multi-layered argument about political legitimacy. The image of water and scum evokes natural processes of purification, suggesting that healthy societies, like clean water, require the separation of substance from surface impurities. Yet this natural process has been disrupted: the scum (representing unworthy leaders) floats atop the water, preventing clarity. The term *khazha* (scum, dregs) carries strong pejorative connotations, positioning unqualified rulers as waste material that should have been removed.

The phrase *'ala ghayr martaba* (without proper rank/qualification) directly engages with Islamic political thought. The concept of *martaba* implies not merely hierarchical position but the moral and practical qualifications that legitimate authority. Majdoub's formulation echoes the famous hadith reported by al-Bukhari: "When trust is lost, await the Hour." When asked how trust is lost, the Prophet

replied: "When authority is entrusted to those unworthy of it, await the Hour" (Al Jazeera, 2018). By invoking this framework, Majdoub frames his political critique as grounded in prophetic tradition rather than mere opinion.

#### 4.2 Inversion of Social Order

Another quatrain addresses the theme of social inversion—the displacement of those properly qualified by those who should occupy subordinate positions:

**Table 2: Quatrain on Social Inversion**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration           | English Translation              |
|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| يا الزمان يا الغدار | Yā al-zamān yā al-ghaddār | O treacherous time               |
| يا كاسرني من ذراعي  | Yā kāsirnī min dhrā'ī     | O you who break my arms          |
| طيحت من كان سلطان   | Ṭayyaḥṭ min kān sulṭān    | You have brought down the sultan |
| وركبت من كان راعي   | W rakkabt min kān rā'ī    | And installed the shepherd       |

The apostrophe to al-zaman (time) as treacherous invokes a common trope in Arabic poetry, but Majdoub gives it specific political content. The shepherd (ra'ī)—a figure of humble occupation—has been elevated to rulership, while the sultan has been deposed. The force of the critique depends on the assumption that shepherds lack the qualifications necessary for governance. Yet the choice of metaphor also carries ironic possibilities: in Islamic political thought, rulers are often described as shepherds of their people, responsible for their welfare. By literalizing this metaphor, Majdoub exposes the gap between idealized discourse and actual practice.

The physical imagery of broken arms conveys personal injury and helplessness before these political reversals. The speaker positions himself as victim of al-zaman's treachery, yet the act of poetic articulation itself constitutes a form of resistance. To name injustice is already to challenge it.

## 5. Discourse of Economic Justice

### 5.1 Bread as Foundation

Perhaps Majdoub's most famous quatrain addresses the fundamental importance of material sustenance:

**Table 3: Quatrain on Bread as Foundation**

| Moroccan vernacular         | Transliteration               | English Translation                     |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| الخبز يا الخبز              | Al-khubz yā al-khubz          | Bread, O bread                          |
| والخبز هي الإفادة           | W al-khubz hiya al-ifāda      | Bread is the foundation                 |
| ولو ما كان الخبز            | W law mā kān al-khubz         | If there were no bread                  |
| ما تكون لا صلاة لا<br>عبادة | Mā tkūn lā ṣalāh lā<br>‘ibāda | There would be no prayer, no<br>worship |

This quatrain articulates a materialist critique that remains striking in its directness. The repetition of al-khubz (bread) with apostrophe (ya khubz) creates an almost incantatory effect, elevating this mundane necessity to the level of spiritual concern. The term al-ifāda carries connotations of benefit, utility, and essential foundation—bread is not merely one need among others but the precondition for all religious practice.

The logic of the quatrain challenges idealist conceptions of religion that separate spiritual devotion from material conditions. By asserting the priority of bread over prayer, Majdoub insists that religious observance cannot flourish where basic needs go unmet. This carries implicit criticism of religious authorities who concern themselves with ritual correctness while ignoring the material suffering of the poor. It also addresses rulers: a society that fails to provide for its people's basic needs cannot sustain religious life.

### 5.2 Poverty and Social Exclusion

Majdoub's analysis extends to the social consequences of poverty:

**Table 4: Quatrain on Poverty and Social Exclusion**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration               | English Translation                      |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| ضربت كفي لكفي       | Ḍrabt kaffī l-kaffī           | I struck palm to palm                    |
| وغممت في الأرض ساعة | W ghammaḍt fī al-arḍ sā'a     | And reflected upon the earth for an hour |
| صبت قلّة الشي ترشي  | Ṣabt qillat al-shay turashshī | I found that poverty weakens             |
| وتنوّض من الجماعة   | W tunawwiḍ min al-jamā'a      | And removes one from the community       |

The gesture of striking palms together suggests contemplation, a physical manifestation of the poet's engagement with this question. What he discovers (sabt) through reflection is that poverty (qillat al-shay) has two devastating effects: it weakens (turashshi) and it excludes (tunawwiḍ min al-jamā'a). The verb nawwad carries strong connotations of removal, expulsion, or being cast out.

This analysis identifies poverty not merely as material deprivation but as social death. The poor person cannot participate in community life—cannot offer hospitality, cannot present themselves with dignity, cannot reciprocate gifts or invitations. Their poverty becomes a mark of shame that excludes them from the networks of mutual obligation that constitute social existence. The quatrain thus exposes how economic inequality produces social hierarchy, regardless of any formal claims to equality.

Majdoub develops this theme further:

**Table 5: Quatrain on Wealth and Human Worth**

| Moroccan vernacular           | Transliteration                      | English Translation                              |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| الرجل بلا مال محقور           | Al-rajul bilā māl<br>maḥqūr          | The man without money is<br>despised             |
| في الدنيا ما يسوى شي          | Fī al-dunyā mā yiswā<br>shay         | In this world he is worth<br>nothing             |
| المشرّار كيف الدلو<br>المقعور | Al-mishrār kīf al-<br>dalw al-maq'ūr | The wicked one is like the<br>perforated bucket  |
| يوصل للماء ويرجع بلا<br>شي    | Yūṣal l-al-mā w<br>yirja' bilā shay  | He reaches the water and<br>returns with nothing |

The lexical choice *maḥqūr* (despised, humiliated) conveys the social contempt directed at the poor. This is not merely a matter of limited opportunity but of active degradation. The second line makes an even stronger claim: the poor person "is worth nothing" in the world's estimation. Value has been reduced to material possession.

The simile comparing the wicked (*al-mishrār*) to a perforated bucket extends the critique. Such a bucket reaches water—it makes contact with what it needs—but returns empty. This images the predicament of those who, despite effort and apparent access, cannot secure what they require. The comparison to the wicked suggests that society judges the poor as morally deficient, attributing their poverty to personal failing rather than structural conditions.

### 5.3 Material Wealth as Social Value

Majdoub's most explicit critique of wealth as the measure of human worth appears in this quatrain:

**Table 6: Quatrain on Material Wealth as Social Value**

| Moroccan vernacular   | Transliteration             | English Translation                    |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| الشاشية تطيع الرأس    | Al-shāshiyya ṭṭayya‘ al-rās | The chechia cap makes the head obeyed  |
| الوجه تضويه الحسنة    | Al-wajh ṭḍawwīh al-ḥassāna  | The face is illuminated by the barber  |
| المكسي يقعد مع الناس  | Al-miksī yiq‘ad m‘a al-nās  | The well-dressed one sits with people  |
| الريان نوضوه من حدانا | Al-‘aryān nawwḍūh min ḥdānā | The naked one they expel from among us |

Here Majdoub analyzes the semiotics of social status. The shāshiyya (traditional cap) functions as a signifier of authority, commanding obedience regardless of the wearer's intrinsic qualities. The barber's work illuminates the face—surface appearance determines social visibility. The well-dressed (al-miksī) gains access to human company, while the naked (al-‘aryān) is expelled.

The verb nawwḍūh (they expelled him) echoes the earlier tunawwid, emphasizing that exclusion is an active social process rather than merely the absence of inclusion. Society actively removes the poor from its midst, refusing them the basic human dignity of companionship. The plural subject nawwḍūh suggests collective responsibility for this exclusion.

Majdoub's conclusion from his travels reinforces this analysis:

**Table 7: Quatrain on Money as a Piece of the Heart**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration              | English Translation                     |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| حوست شعاب وعرقوب    | Ḥawwast sh‘āb w<br>‘arqūb    | I traversed valleys and rugged<br>paths |
| وحوست غرب الزناقي   | W ḥawwast gharb al-<br>znāqī | I traversed the alleys of the<br>west   |
| المال قطعة من القلب | Al-māl qaṭ‘a min al-<br>qalb | Money is a piece of the heart           |
| جربتها من أعناقني   | Jarrabtahā min a‘nāqī        | I have experienced it from<br>my neck   |

The claim that money is "a piece of the heart" (qaṭ‘a min al-qalb) represents a striking metaphor. It suggests that attachment to wealth has become so internalized that it constitutes part of one's essential being. The reference to personal experience (jarrabtahā min a‘nāqī) grounds this observation in the poet's own suffering, lending authenticity to the critique.

## **6. Discourse of Religious Hypocrisy**

### **6.1 Critique of Performative Piety**

Majdoub extended his critical gaze to those who exploited religion for social advantage:

**Table 8: Quatrain on Religious Hypocrisy**

| Moroccan vernacular         | Transliteration                    | English Translation                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| طافوا على الدين تركوه       | Ṭāfū ‘ala al-dīn<br>tarkūh         | They circled around religion<br>and abandoned it |
| وتعاونوا على شرب<br>القهاوي | W ta‘āwanū ‘ala<br>shurb al-qahāwī | They cooperated in drinking<br>coffee            |
| الثوب من فوق نقّوه          | Al-thawb min fōq<br>naqqūh         | The garment they cleaned<br>from above           |
| والجباّح من تحت خاوي        | W al-jbāḥ min taḥt<br>khāwī        | But the lining underneath is<br>empty            |

This quatrain employs the imagery of clothing to distinguish outer appearance from inner reality. The garment cleaned from above presents a respectable surface, but the lining (al-jbāḥ)—what lies beneath—is empty (khāwī). The hypocrisy of the religious elite consists in maintaining the external forms of piety while abandoning its substance.

The reference to coffee drinking carries specific social connotations. In 16th-century Morocco, coffeehouses were emerging as spaces of sociability distinct from the religious institutions controlled by scholars and Sufi orders. By associating religious hypocrites with coffee drinking, Majdoub may be suggesting that their true allegiance lies with worldly pleasures and social networks rather than with the spiritual commitments they profess.

The verb ṭāfū (they circled around) suggests a superficial engagement with religion—they approach it but do not enter; they examine it from outside but do not commit. Their cooperation (ta‘āwanū) in coffee drinking contrasts with the religious ideal of cooperation in righteousness and piety. The quatrain thus exposes the gap between religious language and actual practice.

## 6.2 The Price of Truth–Telling

Majdoub's willingness to speak truth to power came at a cost, as another quatrain makes clear:

**Table 9: Quatrain on the Price of Truth–Telling**

| Moroccan vernacular  | Transliteration               | English Translation                 |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| راح ذاك الزمان وناسو | Rāḥ dhāk al-zamān w nāsu      | That time and its people have gone  |
| وجاء ذا الزمان بفاسو | W jā' dhā al-zamān b-fāsu     | And this time has come with its axe |
| وكل من يتكلم بالحق   | W kull min yitkallam bil-ḥaqq | And whoever speaks the truth        |
| يكسروا له راسو       | Yiksrū lu rāsu                | They break his head                 |

The image of time arriving with an axe (b-fāsu) conveys violence and threat. Truth-telling (yatkallam bil-ḥaqq) has become dangerous, punished with physical violence (yiksrū lu rāsu). This quatrain functions as both observation and warning, acknowledging the risks faced by those who challenge authority.

Yet the very existence of such verses, preserved and transmitted across generations, testifies to the persistence of truth-telling despite these dangers. Majdoub's poetry became a vehicle for critical discourse that could not be suppressed, circulating through oral transmission beyond the reach of official control.

## 7. Discourse of Ascetic Withdrawal and Spiritual Autonomy

### 7.1 The Natural Alternative

Faced with social exclusion and political repression, Majdoub articulated an alternative vision of the good life grounded in nature and spiritual autonomy:

**Table 10: Quatrain on the Natural Alternative**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration              | English Translation                          |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| من الثلج عملت مطرح  | Min al-thalj 'malt<br>maṭraḥ | From snow I made a bed                       |
| بالهوا غطيت روعي    | Bil-hawā ghaṭṭīt<br>rūḥī     | With air I covered my soul                   |
| من القمر عملت مصباح | Min al-qamar 'malt<br>miṣbāḥ | From the moon I made a lamp                  |
| وبالنجوم ونست روعي  | W bil-nujūm<br>wannast rūḥī  | And with the stars I kept my<br>soul company |

This quatrain represents a striking departure from the critical mode of the earlier verses. Here Majdoub constructs a positive vision of how to live when human society proves inhospitable. The natural world provides what society denies: bedding of snow, covering of air, lamp of moon, companionship of stars.

The verbs reveal the speaker's agency: 'malt (I made), ghaṭṭīt (I covered), wannast (I kept company). Despite rejection by human community, the poet maintains his capacity to create meaning and find comfort. The natural elements offer not merely material substitutes but spiritual companionship—the stars keep his soul company (wannast rūḥī), a phrase that evokes the intimacy of friendship.

This vision resonates with Sufi conceptions of creation as reflecting divine presence. The moon as lamp recalls Quranic descriptions of the moon as reflected light, while the stars as companions evokes the cosmic order as witness to human devotion. Majdoub's withdrawal to nature is not escapism but the realization of an alternative mode of being that remains faithful to spiritual values rejected by society.

## 7.2 The Agricultural Metaphor for Human Life

A final quatrain returns to agricultural imagery to frame human existence within a cosmic perspective:

**Table 11: Quatrain on the Agricultural Metaphor for Human Life**

| Moroccan vernacular | Transliteration        | English Translation               |
|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| الأرض فدان ربّي     | Al-arḍ faddān rabbī    | The earth is the field of my Lord |
| والخلق مجموع فيها   | W al-khalq majmū‘ fīhā | And humanity is gathered in it    |
| عزرائيل حصاد فريد   | ‘Azrā’īl ḥaṣṣād farīd  | Azrael is a unique harvester      |
| مطامرو في كل جهة    | Maṭāmīru fī kull jiha  | His silos are in every direction  |

This quatrain expands the scale of analysis from social critique to eschatological reflection. The earth becomes a field (faddān) belonging to God, cultivated by divine purpose. Humanity is gathered within it, awaiting the harvest. Azrael, the angel of death, appears as a unique harvester—unique because he harvests all, sparing none. His silos (maṭāmīr)—the underground storage pits where grain is preserved—are everywhere, signifying graves that await in every location.

The metaphor carries multiple implications. For the powerful, it asserts that their authority is temporary, their lives subject to the same harvest as the poorest subject. For the oppressed, it offers hope of ultimate justice beyond this world. For all, it insists on accountability: the harvest implies a harvest-master who gathers what has been sown. The agricultural imagery that pervades Majdoub's poetry thus culminates in this vision of cosmic agriculture, where human actions are seeds that will be reaped at the appointed time.

## 8. Discussion

### 8.1 Vernacular Register and Audience

Majdoub's choice to compose in Moroccan vernacular (al-darija) rather than classical Arabic represents a significant discursive strategy. Classical Arabic carried the authority of Quranic revelation, religious scholarship, and high literary

tradition. By choosing the vernacular, Majdoub positioned his poetry outside established hierarchies of linguistic prestige, addressing an audience that extended beyond the educated elite.

This register choice also carried implications for the transmission and preservation of his work. Vernacular poetry could be memorized and transmitted by individuals with limited formal education, circulating through oral networks beyond official control. The survival of Majdoub's quatrains as popular proverbs testifies to the effectiveness of this strategy. As Boum (2011) notes, "his poetry has become the source of many of the daily proverbs used in Moroccan society."

The biographical source further emphasizes that Majdoub "is known throughout North Africa and Morocco in particular for his poetry, which was so popular that it became part of the daily proverbs of Moroccan society" (Boum, 2011). This popular transmission ensured that his critical discourse reached audiences far beyond the scholarly elite, embedding itself in the linguistic fabric of everyday life.

## 8.2 Sufism and Social Criticism

Majdoub's career illuminates possibilities for social criticism within Sufi traditions that are sometimes overlooked in scholarship focused on Sufism's accommodation with political power. While some Sufi orders cultivated close relationships with ruling elites, others maintained critical distance or actively challenged injustice. Majdoub represents a tradition of Sufi engagement with public affairs that draws on spiritual authority to legitimize social critique.

The biographical source confirms that Majdoub "was not only a mystic but a social reformer who lived the life of a troubadour whose main concern was to raise social awareness about the issues that faced his society" (Boum, 2011). His poetry "was about political, moral, and social issues," and his *Diwan Sidi Abderrahman El Majdoub* (Collected Poems) "provides his mystical views on love, death, emotions, women, science, education, religion, age, etc." This comprehensive engagement with social issues positions Majdoub within a tradition of Sufi public intellectualism that combines spiritual authority with social critique.

This tradition has antecedents and successors in Islamic history. The Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) offered counsel to rulers while maintaining critical independence. The Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235) explored themes of divine love that implicitly challenged merely conventional religiosity. In more recent periods, figures like the Somali poet Dada Masiti (d. 1919) combined Sufi spirituality with social commentary. Majdoub's distinctive contribution lies in his sustained focus on political and social conditions and his use of vernacular poetry as a vehicle for critique.

### 8.3 The Quatrain as Critical Form

The quatrain form (rubāʿī) that Majdoub employed carries specific affordances for social criticism. Its brevity demands compression and memorable formulation, facilitating oral transmission. Its rhythmic structure aids memorization and recitation. Its capacity for epigrammatic statement enables the distillation of complex observations into memorable formulations that can function as proverbs.

Majdoub exploited these affordances skillfully. His quatrains move between observation, analysis, and exhortation, constructing arguments through vivid imagery and direct address. The form enables him to address multiple themes while maintaining coherence through consistent style and perspective. The survival of individual quatrains as independent units allows them to circulate separately while contributing to an accumulated body of critical discourse.

### 8.4 Limitations and Caveats

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The attribution of individual quatrains to Majdoub remains uncertain, as oral transmission inevitably introduces variation and interpolation. The Al Jazeera source acknowledges that "beyond confirming the attribution of all the quatrains to Majdoub, it must be emphasized that his poems have been transmitted by Moroccans generation after generation" (2018). The analysis here treats the quatrains as representing a tradition

associated with Majdoub rather than as authentic texts in the modern philological sense.

Additionally, the historical record provides limited information about Majdoub's life and the reception of his work. The interpretation offered here necessarily relies on textual analysis and contextual reconstruction rather than direct evidence of authorial intention or contemporary response.

## 9. Conclusion

Abderrahman Majdoub's quatrains represent a distinctive intervention in the religious and political discourse of 16th-century Morocco. Drawing on Sufi spiritual traditions and vernacular poetic forms, Majdoub constructed a critical discourse that challenged political corruption, economic inequality, and religious hypocrisy while articulating an alternative vision of human dignity grounded in spiritual autonomy and communion with nature.

Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the strategies through which Majdoub's poetry engages with structures of power. His critique of unqualified leadership invokes prophetic tradition while employing vivid natural imagery to convey the disorder resulting from misgovernment. His analysis of poverty exposes how economic deprivation produces social exclusion, reducing human worth to material possession. His exposure of religious hypocrisy distinguishes outer appearance from inner reality, challenging those who maintain the forms of piety while abandoning its substance. His vision of withdrawal to nature constructs an alternative mode of being that preserves spiritual values in the face of social rejection.

Majdoub's significance extends beyond his historical context. His poetry demonstrates how vernacular literary forms can function as vehicles for social criticism within Islamic frameworks, offering resources for thinking about the relationship between spirituality and political engagement. His insistence on the priority of material provision for religious practice, his analysis of how wealth determines social value, and his critique of those who exploit religion for social advantage remain resonant across the centuries. In a world still marked by inequality, hypocrisy, and the exclusion of the poor, Majdoub's quatrains continue

to speak—as they have spoken for nearly five centuries—to the enduring human struggle for justice and dignity.

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to Professor Abdelkader Abbou, who instilled in us a profound love for our cultural heritage—teaching us to read our past not as a relic but as a living conversation, and to find in the voices of figures like Abderrahman Majdoub the enduring resonance of our collective memory.

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**Appendix. List of Moroccan Vernaculars Linguistic Transcriptions with their English Equivalent Used in the Article**

| No | Linguistic Transcription                                                                                        | English Equivalent (as used in the article)                                                                                                                                |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | al-majdhūb                                                                                                      | “The attracted one / the ecstatic Sufi”                                                                                                                                    |
| 2  | rubā‘iyyāt                                                                                                      | “Quatrains”                                                                                                                                                                |
| 3  | takhálṭat wallā bghāt tiṣfa<br>wa-la‘b khazhā fawq māhā<br>rayyās ‘alā ghayr martāba<br>humma sabab khalāhā     | “It has become confused, or wants to become clear<br>The scum plays upon its water<br>Leaders without proper rank<br>They are the cause of its ruin”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018) |
| 4  | yā z-zamān yā l-ghaddār<br>yā kásirnī min dhirā‘ī<br>ṭayyaḥt man kān sulṭān<br>wa-rakkabt man kān rā‘ī          | “O treacherous time<br>O you who break my arms<br>You have brought down the sultan<br>And installed the shepherd”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)                                    |
| 5  | al-khubz yā khubz<br>wa-l-khubz huwa l-ifāda<br>walaw mā kān al-khubz<br>mā takūn lā ṣalāt lā ‘ibāda            | “Bread, O bread<br>Bread is the foundation<br>If there were no bread<br>There would be no prayer, no worship”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)                                        |
| 6  | ḍarabt kiffī li-kiffī<br>wa-ghammamt fī l-arḍ sā‘a<br>ṣabt qállat sh-shī turashshī<br>wa-tunawwiḍ min al-jamā‘a | “I struck palm to palm<br>And reflected upon the earth for an hour<br>I found that poverty weakens<br>And removes one from the community”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)            |

|    |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7  | ar-rajul bi-lā māl maḥqūr<br>fī d-dunyā mā yiswā shī<br>al-mishrār kayf ad-dalw al-<br>ma'qūr<br>yūṣal li-l-mā' wa-yirja' bi-lā<br>shī | “The man without money is despised<br>In this world he is worth nothing<br>The wicked one is like the perforated<br>bucket<br>He reaches the water and returns with<br>nothing”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018) |
| 8  | ash-shāshiyya ṭayyi' ar-rās<br>al-wajh taḍawwīh al-ḥassāna<br>al-miksī yiq'ad ma' an-nās<br>al-'aryān nawwḍūh min<br>ḥadānā            | “The chechia cap makes the head<br>obeyed<br>The face is illuminated by the barber<br>The well-dressed one sits with people<br>The naked one they expel from<br>among us”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)       |
| 9  | ḥawwasht shi'āb wa-'arqūb<br>wa-ḥawwasht gharb az-<br>zanāqī<br>al-māl qiṭ'a min al-qalb<br>jarrabtahā min a'nāqī                      | “I traversed valleys and rugged paths<br>I traversed the alleys of the west<br>Money is a piece of the heart<br>I have experienced it from my neck”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)                             |
| 10 | ṭāfū 'alā d-dīn tarakūh<br>wa-ta'āwanū 'alā shurb al-<br>qahāwī<br>ath-thawb min fawq naqqūh<br>wa-l-jbāḥ min taḥt khāwī               | “They circled around religion and<br>abandoned it<br>They cooperated in drinking coffee<br>The garment they cleaned from above<br>But the lining underneath is empty”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)           |
| 11 | rāḥ dhāk az-zamān wa-nāsū<br>wa-jā' dhā z-zamān bi-fāsū<br>wa-kull man yatkallam bi-l-<br>ḥaqq<br>yiksrū lu rāsū                       | “That time and its people have gone<br>And this time has come with its axe<br>And whoever speaks the truth<br>They break his head”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)                                              |

|    |                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12 | min ath-thalj ‘malt maṭraḥ<br>bil-hawā ghaṭṭīt rūḥī<br>min al-qamar ‘malt miṣbāḥ<br>wa-bin-nujūm wannast rūḥī | “From snow I made a bed<br>With air I covered my soul<br>From the moon I made a lamp<br>And with the stars I kept my soul<br>company”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018)     |
| 13 | al-arḍ faddān rabbī<br>wa-l-khalq majmū‘ fīhā<br>‘azrā’īl ḥaṣād farīd<br>maṭāmīrū fī kull jiha                | “The earth is the field of my Lord<br>And humanity is gathered in it<br>Azrael is a unique harvester<br>His silos are in every direction”<br>(Al Jazeera, 2018) |
| 14 | Khammās                                                                                                       | “A sharecropper (one who works for a<br>fifth of the harvest)”                                                                                                  |
| 15 | siyāḥa                                                                                                        | “Travel / journeying (spiritual<br>wandering)”                                                                                                                  |
| 16 | Faqr                                                                                                          | “Poverty (also Sufi spiritual<br>neediness)”                                                                                                                    |
| 17 | riyā’                                                                                                         | “Hypocrisy / performative piety”                                                                                                                                |
| 18 | Zāwiya                                                                                                        | “Sufi lodge / retreat centre”                                                                                                                                   |

### Note on Transcription

Long vowels are represented as **ā**, **ī**, **ū**.

Consonants: **th** (ث), **dh** (ذ), **kh** (خ), **sh** (ش), **gh** (غ), ‘ (ع), **h** (ح), **ṣ** (ص), **ḍ** (ض), **ṭ** (ط).

Stress is marked by an acute accent (´) where it deviates from regular penultimate stress patterns.