

The word *zajal* has been used to define

any form of oral poetry spoken or sung in the Moroccan Arabic dialect. Originally recited in open air performances in the marketplace (often in the form of quatrains) and used for centuries in lyrics of the popular music genre known as *al-milhun*, *zajal* has also appeared as political commentary in newspapers. Recently it has been published as a literary genre in its own right, as Moroccan literature written in Arabic dialect.

The transformation of *zajal* poetry from an oral to a written form has been taking place for several decades, particularly in the press where it has functioned as a forum for political critique. In the last decade, collections of *zajal* have appeared in bookstores and in kiosques. These poetic texts create a particularly Moroccan literary genre, one with deep roots in the past yet whose branches are rapidly changing form. Indeed, few modern *zajali* poets write in rhymed quatrains anymore. Most prefer free verse, writing on themes as diverse as politics, love and Sufism. This does not negate the link with the past, however. Because of the rich use of pun, allusion and formulae taken from oral tradition, contemporary *zajal* speaks most fully to those familiar with Moroccan popular culture, past and present. In fact, *zajal* is enjoying a renaissance in public readings and festivals throughout Morocco. Its birth as written and performed literature, it should be said, does not guarantee accessibility to a large readership in the Arabic-speaking world. *Zajal* is essentially a Moroccan literary genre for Moroccan consumption.

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