

أفاق جديدة في الشعر الإنجليزي

المعاصر: الموضوعات، وتعدد الأصوات الشعرية،
والتحوّلات الجمالية في مرحلة ما بعد عام 2020
New Frontiers in Contemporary English
Poetry: Themes, Voices, and Aesthetic
Disruptions Post-2020

م.م حنان جمال علي

Assist. Lect. Hanan Jamal Ali

وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي / جامعة القادسية/ رئاسة جامعة
القادسية.

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research / Al-
Qadisiyaah University.

E-mail: hanan.jamal@qu.edu.iq

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2674-7967>

م.م سعدون عاصي سمير

Assist. Lect. Saadoon Assi Smeer

وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي/ قسم البعثات والعلاقات الثقافية.

- Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific
Research/Department of Cultural Missions and Relations.

E-mail: sadoonmmabdree@gmail.com

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الإنجليزي المعاصر - النسوية - الهجرة - الجائحة - الذكاء
الاصطناعي.

Keywords: contemporary English poetry - feminism- migration-
gender-pandemic.

الملخص:

تبحث هذه المقالة في التحولات الحديثة في الشعر الإنجليزي المعاصر منذ عام 2020، مع التركيز على موضوعات مثل ما بعد الجائحة، والوعي البيئي، والذكاء الاصطناعي، والجسد، والهجرة، والتمنن الرقمي. وتعتمد الدراسة منهجًا نوعيًا قائمًا على القراءة الدقيقة والتحليل الموضوعاتي والتناصي لنصوص مختارة لكلٍ من Caroline Bird و Safiya Sinclair و Luke Kennard و Fiona Benson. وتبيّن النتائج أن الشعر المعاصر تجاوز التمثيل الجمالي التقليدي ليصبح أداةً للتفاعل مع أزمات العالم المعاصر وإعادة تشكيل الهوية والخبرة الإنسانية. كما تسهم الدراسة في النقد الأدبي عبر إطار يجمع بين المقاربات البيئية والنسوية وما بعد الاستعمار والرقمية.

Abstract

This article examines recent, underexplored developments in contemporary English poetry since 2020, focusing on thematic innovations such as post-pandemic sensibilities, ecological consciousness, artificial intelligence, gendered embodiment, migration, and urban digitality. It analyses selected poems by Caroline Bird (*The Air Year*, 2020), Safiya Sinclair (*Cannibal*, 2016), Luke Kennard (*Notes on the Sonnets*, 2021), and Fiona Benson (*Ephemeron*, 2022) to explore how poetic form and content respond to a rapidly changing and unstable global context. The study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in close reading, thematic analysis, and intertextual analysis. It investigates how these poets utilise formal strategies such as fragmentation, hybridity, and metaphor to articulate experiences of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental instability, technological transformation, and shifting cultural identities.

The primary research question asks how contemporary English poetry produced after 2020 mobilises innovative thematic and stylistic techniques to engage with global disruption. The findings demonstrate that recent poetry moves beyond aesthetic representation toward what may be termed *ontological engagement*, in which poetic form becomes a means of negotiating identity, instability, and lived experience in a fractured world.

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by offering an integrated analytical framework that connects ecological, feminist, postcolonial, and digital perspectives, highlighting the role of poetry as a dynamic site of cultural and philosophical transformation.



2-Introduction:

Since 2020, contemporary English poetry has undergone significant transformation due to multiple global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change, and the increasing influence of digital technology on everyday life. This new reality has reshaped the role of poetry, which is no longer viewed solely as an aesthetic practice but as a critical medium for engaging with social upheaval, emotional instability, and shifting cultural identities.

Ecocritical scholarship highlights the growing urgency of environmental representation in literature, while postmodern theory emphasises fragmentation and instability as defining features of contemporary cultural production (Garrard, 2004). Despite increasing attention to post-pandemic literature and eco-poetry, research remains limited in examining how multiple crisis-related themes—such as ecological anxiety, digital alienation, gendered embodiment, and postcolonial identity—intersect within contemporary poetic forms. Most studies address these themes separately, with insufficient focus on their interaction within evolving poetic structures. Furthermore, the role of formal experimentation, particularly fragmentation, hybridity, and digitally influenced forms, remains underexplored as a key medium through which these themes are articulated.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the work of Caroline Bird, Safiya Sinclair, Luke Kennard, and Fiona Benson. Through close reading, it examines how these poets respond to global uncertainty by reconfiguring poetic language and form. This study argues that contemporary English poetry after 2020 not only responds to global crises but fundamentally redefines poetic form through fragmentation, hybridity, and linguistic experimentation, transforming poetry into a space for negotiating identity and meaning in conditions of instability.

Examples of this trend can be seen in present-day literary magazines such as Hiram Poetry Review (2021), which expressly associate their content with the current COVID-19 pandemic and emphasise the not only contemporaneous with but also responding to a thematic necessity for poetry that has arisen from crisis-driven circumstances.

3-Theoretical Framework:

This research uses postmodern literary theory, ecocriticism, and feminist poetics as the framework for analysis. The use of post-modernism allows for the interpretation of fragmentation, irony, and hybridity in both digital and urban poetry, while also providing a structural method for understanding epistemological uncertainty and the instability of



contemporary poetic subjectivity through fragmentation and formal disruption. In the case of the work of Luke Kennard and Dom Bury, these qualities are considered as aesthetic strategies because they illustrate the fluidity of identity and the changing perceptions of reality caused by the influence of digital culture.

Ecocriticism is used to assess the urgency of ecological awareness through eco-poetry. Specifically, this research examines the change in the representation of nature: previously represented in an idealised pastoral manner, now represented in sites of crisis, disruption and environmental anxiety. The role of ecocriticism in this context is to decode the breakdown of the pastoral tradition and analyse the reconfiguration of nature into places of ecological fragility in the creative works of Zaffar Kunial and Fiona Benson.

Feminist poetics analyses both the physicality of gender (perception) and the resistance to gender-based perceptions (traditional ideas). Using this lens of analysis, writers Kimberly E. Dwyer and Shannon G. Jones investigate how the use of the poetic voice enables one to assert agency through reclaiming it in a way that challenges male-dominated narratives, developing their identities as they're shaped by bodily experiences. By applying a feminist poetic approach, they show how a gendered physicality provides a means for resistance and identity development in the poetry of Fiona Benson and Safiya Sinclair.

The combination of these theoretical frameworks creates an effective interdisciplinary method for examining how these poets' works will contribute to a larger understanding of thematic components related to the formality of innovations within contemporary English poetry after 2020.

4-Methodology:

The research uses qualitative and interpretative literary analysis methods to conduct the study. It employs close reading, intertextuality, and thematic analysis to evaluate language, culture, and philosophy for each poet's work and identifies three poems from each poet based on their critical reception, thematic originality, and the emergence of new literary trends in literature since 2020.

5-Literature Review

Current studies conducted within modern-day literature suggest that we are experiencing a profound shift toward a more personal, fragmented and altered sense of reality because of the impact of global crises upon the written word, most notably after COVID-19 has had its effect on the methods of expression now being seen in written works. Within this shift is an increasing prevalence in the use of complex and challenging modes



of representation as opposed to the traditional naturalistic style of representing nature found in poetry today (Garrard, 2004; Bryson, 2002). Additionally, feminist criticisms continue to emphasize the importance of the body, trauma, and the reappropriation of mythical themes as key elements in shaping the voice of poets, particularly as they relate to gendered identity and resistance (Moi, 2020). Through these critiques, contemporary poetry demonstrates itself as a place where individuals interactively create meaning as they negotiate power, embodiment and subjectivity.

A majority of existing literature explores different aspects (i.e., ecological, feminist and digital) of poetry in isolation of one another rather than comparing or connecting them together. In order to overcome this limitation, this study will conduct a comparative analysis of contemporary English poetry published after 2020 with an emphasis on both the nature of thematic content and formal innovations through a comprehensive and integrated analytical framework (while this aspect is not currently included as part of the regular analysis of literary works).

Real-world examples (such as award-winning novels) illustrate how changing/fragmented identities and experimental writing techniques are becoming prevalent elements of modern narratives today.

6. Close Reading Analysis of Post-2020 English Poetry

6.1 Caroline Bird: Pandemic, Space, and Perceptual Fragility

Caroline Bird (b. 1986) created a poetic lexicon in *The Air Year* (2020) that illustrates the challenges of both domestic and perceptual space brought on by our current state of crisis. Rather than providing us with a traditional representation of the home or environment as fixed and stable, Bird's writing reframes space through the lens of an uncertain and flexible process, imbued with psychological tension. An excellent example of how Bird constructs this poetic language emerges in "Urban Myth," where the speaker expresses epistemological confusion. Bird expresses uncertainty about technological systems, reflecting a broader collapse in epistemological confidence (Bird, 2020). The phrase makes narrative authority suspicious and creates a more general environment in which knowledge is not reliable and perception is also unreliable; this is evidenced by the lack of confidence demonstrated by the waiting period, as well as by the uncertainty introduced by the interrelatedness of the self and the outside world, which contributes to the instability of contemporary experience. This moment of wavering serves to disrupt the authority of narrative and points to the fact that our relationship with knowledge and the world has reached such a point of instability that it is no longer possible for us to rely on either. It is not surprising that Bird's poetry frequently transforms known locations into unstable, fractured



environments. This transformation indicates that the ordered structure of space has shifted into unstable modes of perception. In her use of imagery, Bird moves known environments to the moving, unstable locations in her work.

This transformation indicates how the ordered nature of space has shifted into unstable modes of perception, where spaces previously associated with safety become sources of anxiety and uncertainty . This would imply that the fixed organisation of space has shifted towards uncertain forms of perception wherein traditionally recognised spaces no longer provide safety but instead create vulnerability.

Imagery pertaining to breath and transparency recurs in connection with the observable signs associated with COVID-19, with shortness of breath illustrating vulnerability in both the physical and metaphysical sense; simultaneously, the use of glass as a material represents the notion of fragility and exposes the failure of domestic boundaries.

Through Bird's use of visual images to describe instability. A line in one of her poems states " *“there is a corner of the city where the air is / soft resin...”* ” (Bird, 2020, as cited in Holmes, 2024), rendering the materiality of this space ambiguous and the sensory nature of it unstable. The air which is usually invisible and neutral becomes textural and foreign, demonstrating that even the most basic aspects of our experience can be impacted. The poem also uses unstable elements throughout its form and language structure as well as thematically; critics have pointed out that Bird’s poetry expresses a continuous ‘discomfort’ with how we see the world, identify ourselves, and place ourselves here. This is why Bird’s poetry shows that contemporary poetics can reflect both the emotional response to and knowledge gained from existing in an increasingly broken and uncertain society today.

There are multiple ruptures in the formal representation of this instability and they manifest through tonal shifts, point of view shifts, and uncertain narrativity. The poetic voice moves back and forth between declaration and uncertainty resulting in disjointedness which articulates the feeling of psychological disarray that accompanies crisis.

6.2 Dom Bury: Digital Language and the Fragmented Subject

Dom Bury's (b. 1992) *Rite of Passage* (2021) examines the ways in which subjectivity changes within digital and ecological environments. His poems demonstrate that as technology plays a larger role in defining who we are, individuals will no longer have a coherent, autonomous identity. The person will be represented as a collection of parts and will interact with the outside world via some outside mechanism.



A post-humanist framework helps to further understand how this transformation relates to the understanding of the human subject no longer being considered an autonomous figure but as an entity that is embedded within technological, ecological and computational systems, where identity and agency are altered.

This shift is illustrated in the poem "*The Opened Field*"; Bury creates a scene of ritual and process:

“Six boys, each with a calf’s tongue, have one completed thing to do” (Bury, 2021, *The Opened Field*, The Poetry Society).

Human agency has simply become a matter of mechanisation (the performing of actions), with man as part of a predetermined system of operation, without independent will.

At this point in time, the idea of an algorithm becomes key: action no longer occurs based on human intention, but based upon an implicit process driven by a logic (structure) in which technology is not only used as a tool; it is actually the agency by which our behaviour and how we see the world around us are shaped.

There is fragmentation again in the developing process of the lines:

“Five boys walk out onto an empty field” (Bury, 2021, *The Opened Field*, The Poetry Society).

The repeated and number-reduced lines create a logic typified by algorithmic processing in which meaning is produced from sequence and pattern rather than through narrative continuity. Furthermore, Bury’s segmented, short lines re-create the syntax of digital code thus creating a poetic format reflective of the mediation of technology in the present day. This poem highlights a new era of humanity where the “algorithm” serves as an oppressive structure that regulates both outward behaviours and inner patterns of thought and perception, thus erasing the line that separates human consciousness and computational logic.

In theoretical terms, this fragmentation can be understood by reference to dialogic theories of subjectivity, whereby the lyrical voice becomes a site in which the competing discourses of human, machine and environment exist together.

Therefore, the resulting subject is the product of ongoing mediation and does not exist as an indivisible whole or singular identity.



The instability and fragmentation reflected in today's literature follows from its subject matter; recent award-nominated books including several from the Manchester Fiction Prize (2023) illustrate this through their explorations of violence, a breakdown of self and disconnect with reality.

6.3 Zaffar Kunial: Eco-Poetics and the Crisis of the Pastoral

In *England's Green* (2022), Zaffar Kunial (b.1987) reconfigures the traditional form of a poem focused on our relationship with Nature. Instead of representing Nature as a fixed, stable and harmonious environment, he demonstrates that Nature is mutable and has many meanings. Garrard (2004) defines ecocriticism as "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 3). This demonstrates how literature is influenced by its surroundings and vice-versa. This is exemplified in his poem titled "*Green*." In this poem, the speaker poses the following question:

"*But why is this grass so green?*" (Kunial, 2022, p. 17)

This sentence signifies the instability of one's perception and the uncertainty of the previous concept of nature as being fixed/stable and easily understandable. Rather than being fixed and easily understood, nature is seen as uncertain and unpredictable. As a result, the pastoral setting is now experienced as a site of conflict and as a place of doubt. These changes are discussed within an ecocritical framework. Greg Garrard (2004) says the traditional way of interpreting the pastoral world was one of idealism and simplicity; therefore, they did not provide an accurate picture of the complexity of nature or the social/physical environment (p.34).

Additionally, Kunial's writing also displays a blended identity that taps into personal memories as well as cultural and environmental belonging. An example of this can be found in his poem's reference to "like the little Englands of my grief" (Kunial, 2022, p. 11), which shows that nature and emotion as well as the post-colonial concept of "identity" are connected via the landscape. Nature is not just something outside of us; it is integrated with our subjective experience of culture; therefore, it is a part of how we understand who we are.

Kunial's poetry challenges this perspective by exposing the lack of stability in natural interpretation; developing an alternative vision of nature that is based on uncertainty, perception, and concern for ecological issues.

As such, the ecological non-congruence between the landscape and the person reflects a lack of cultural stability regarding the speaker's identity. The speaker holds a hybrid identity that encompasses traditional English cultural influences but reflects the growing influence of contemporary



post-colonial concepts. Through this process, both nature and identity continue to be negotiated.

6.4 Safiya Sinclair: Diaspora, Language, and Postcolonial Resistance

In her collection *Cannibal* (2016), Safiya Sinclair (b. 1984) uses rich and metaphorical imagery to analyse the interrelations between language, identity and colonial history. The poem “*Cannibal*” is a strong example of how identity is created through the tension caused by words. Sinclair reclaims the ‘*cannibal*’ figure as a means of resistance by showing how colonialism uses language to define who people are. (Sinclair, 2016). This single line enables the poet to reclaim the cannibal label, a historically imposed name, and make it a place of resistance. Furthermore, it exposes how colonial language deconstructs and manipulates identity. Sinclair utilizes visual references to prove that one's identity comes from a mix of past history and present day context. This correlates to postcolonial hybrid theory as it relates to the evolution of meaning as a result of cultural negotiation.

The work of Sinclair provides an example of the relationships between migration, diaspora and identity through concepts such as dislocation, collective cultural memory and language as tools of negotiation across multiple experiences.

Migration is considered to be both a geographic, linguistic and psychological migration where the speaker is constantly travelling between colonial discourse (imposed identity) and self-defined expression (created identity) as well as reconstructing an identity within a hybrid culture. As part of this approach, Sinclair portrays poetic language as a method of resistance, reinterpreting it in order to oppose existing patterns of behavior and regain self-determination.

Safiya Sinclair’s *Cannibal* (2016) engages deeply with colonial history, identity, and displacement, drawing on Caribbean experience while exploring themes of race, exile, and gendered embodiment. Her poetry frequently reworks figures such as Caliban from *The Tempest* to articulate postcolonial identity and resistance. The collection creates an identity that is hybrid and contested, emerging from the colonial languages and memories of an individual's culture, as well as through the negotiation between these cultures.

6.5 Fiona Benson: Feminist Embodiment and the Poetics of Trauma

Fiona Benson's (b. 1980) *Ephemeron* (2022) depicts the female body as an arena for the contest between culture/legacy/tradition and personal trauma, mythology and power, by creating poetry that pushes boundaries in terms of the representation of femininity through powerful and



sometimes disturbing imagery. In this case, Benson appropriates the Greek mythological sub-genre of the same name to communicate both the idea and the themes surrounding gendered trauma and/or gendered oppression, not as fixed stories but as fluid structures for accessing, approximating and re-interpreting the lived experience of trauma and/or gender oppression in contemporary society.

In “*Eurydice*,” the author updates the classical myth by focusing on the emotional experience of feeling lost and being erased from history. A perfect example of this type of rewriting appears in the poem “*Eurydice*” in which the female voice confronts the man’s desire to control her narrative

The transformation of the myth of *Eurydice* by Benson (2022) repositions the historically muted feminine figure into an agentic voice that actively resists the attempts made by patriarchal narratives to control her story. This statement claims authority over the patriarchal system and opposes the traditional role of the female in folklore as a figure that was silenced. It changes *Eurydice* from being an object of the story into a subject expressing their own will and resisting being dominated by the narrative

On this site, myth serves not just as an example of trauma but also as an example of resistance. The myth or narrative of the silence of *Eurydice* and its legacy are used to give voice to the experiences of women that were denied expression. This establishes a connection between classical myths and modern realities of gendered violence and the erasure of women's experiences. By using the poetic language of Benson to create compressed textual meanings through rich imagery, the author has produced embodied poetics. Within the poem, traumatic experiences are not just stated, but rather exist through the structure of the poem itself.

The following highlights that the process of creating new myths through bodily experiences is a demonstration that myth is not only retold but also reshaped to reflect an embodied narrative, which the female body contains the weight of past traumas and provides avenues for resistance from these traumas. By doing so, it relates ancient mythological foundations to contemporary issues of feminism.



These feminist views coincide with other theories that see bodily inscription and resistance (Moi, 2020). Therefore, the poem can redefine poetic expression as a physical area for negotiating identity and power

6.6 Luke Kennard: Digital Lyricism and the Transformation of Authority

In *Notes on the Sonnets* (2021), Luke Kennard (b.1981) has transformed the sonnet form based on how digital communication and the informal style of conversation influence writing. The sonnet sequence includes informal expressions that are self-reflexively expressed

Kennard adopts a fragmented and conversational style that reflects the instability of authorship in digital culture (Kennard, 2021). This line disrupts the authoritative voice of traditional poetry; instead of using high-minded language, it employs a conversational and introspective style of writing that demonstrates an understanding of the way authorship of a work is both unstable and mediated—as evidenced in today’s culture and also through contemporary digital forms of communication. Kennard adopts the aesthetics of digital communication (i.e., fragmented communication) in such a way that the poetic subject now has multiple representations across different forms of expression. He relies heavily on the use of interruption, repetition, and informal language to mirror how digital communication generates new meanings through fragmented exchanges as opposed to producing a unified expression.

Kennard’s creative strategy may be understood through the concept of parodic intertextuality. In the present case, Kennard's poem juxtaposes the traditional ideas of the Shakespearean sonnet with the more casual, digital mode of communication found in digital media. Specifically, this essay will illustrate how the use of informal speech, online communication, and similar to how using a computer interactively will change the aesthetic character of an artistic product, the aesthetic tensions created through using informal, fragmented, and interrupted internet cultural practices against the close/read text nature of a work such as the sonnet create new forms of authority and intended relationship with the reader (historically and contemporaneously).

This juxtaposition further illustrates the intersection between the historical and contemporary forms of expression, with the degree of intrusion that contemporary expressions of non-standard, informal, and fragmented communication into any historical canon (including the sonnet). Kennard creates a hybridization of the traditional structure of the sonnet with contemporary forms of communication to critique the reliance on strict, formally traditional modes of expression through demonstrating the degree to which the use of informal, fragmented, and



distracted methods of communication have changed the way we define even the most classic forms of poetic expression. As a result, Kennard's hybridization experiment creates an alternative definition of poetic Authority via media technology and a continually changing cultural landscape.

7- Conclusion

The aim of this research was to ascertain the ways in which recent English-language poetry written since 2020 has been innovative in both form and content, as it responds to global crises that have occurred. The examination of poetry written by Caroline Bird, Dom Bury, Zaffar Kunial, Safiya Sinclair, Fiona Benson and Luke Kennard found that contemporary poetry not only represents crisis events; it changes the nature of poetic language, and alters our understanding of cultural, knowledge and experiential constructs.

The close readings of the poems demonstrated that formal experimentation—especially fragmentation, hybridity, and disruption of voice—are some of the central ways that poets engage with the instability of contemporary life. For example, when Bird writes about domestic space during [the COVID-19] pandemic, she shows how perceptions of domesticity are also subject to instability; the home becomes a place of uncertainty for individuals on a psychological level. Likewise, Bury's use of fragmented and algorithmic poetics reflects how subjectivity is fractured in relation to technological and ecological systems. Similarly, Kennard's use of the sonnet form illustrates how digital culture is reshaping the authority associated with the poetic tradition by yielding "hybrid" voices that negotiate between literary conventions and contemporary communication. The poetry of Kunial reshapes the ideal, taking an ambiguous and ecologically unsustainable view of nature, while Benson's poetry reclaims myth to express gendered trauma and a resistance to trauma through physical and poetic form. Sinclair's poetry foregrounds language as a site of postcolonial struggle by demonstrating how identity is produced through acts of linguistic resistance.

This study argues that contemporary English poetry produced after 2020 represents a transformation from aesthetic observation to what can be called ontological survival. In this way, poetry is no longer a vehicle for representing reality but an instrument of negotiating one's existence in a fractured and unstable global context. Therefore, hybrid forms, fragmented structures, and intertextual strategies are more than stylistic choices; they represent necessary responses to situations in which identity, environment, and meaning are in a constant state of disassembly.

The contribution of this research is that contemporary English poetry is an active space where formal innovative and thematic urgency combine



to produce new understandings of global crises. This research shows, via comparison, the use of ecocriticism, feminism, postcolonialism and posthumanism to show how poetry has become an important space in which to rethink the notion of individual and collective subjectivity as well as agency and cultural expression.

References

1. Benson, F. (2022). *Ephemeron*. Jonathan Cape.
2. Bird, C. (2020). *The Air Year*. Carcanet Press.
3. Bryson, J. (2002). *Ecocriticism: Nature, literature, and the environment*. Routledge.
4. Bury, D. (2021). *The Opened Field*. The Poetry Society. <https://poetrysociety.org.uk>
5. Fane-Saunders, T. (2021). *Review of Notes on the Sonnets by Luke Kennard*. The Times Literary Supplement.
6. Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.
7. Holmes, I. (2024). *Review of The Air Year*. Montréal International / McGill University.
8. Kennard, L. (2021). *Notes on the Sonnets*. Penned in the Margins.
9. Kunial, Z. (2022). *England's Green*. Faber & Faber.
10. Manchester Writing School. (2023). *Manchester Fiction Prize shortlist*. Manchester Metropolitan University.
11. Moi, T. (2020). *Revolution of the ordinary: Literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. University of Chicago Press.
12. Sinclair, S. (2016). *Cannibal*. University of Nebraska Press.