

Negotiating the City in Modern Iraqi Poetry

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Introduction

In “The Crisis of Language”, Richard Sheppard discusses the attitude of modernist poets toward the city. He argues:

Many of the major modernist poets had come into headlong conflict with the antipathetic institutions of the rising industrial city. This conflict is seen in “The Waste Land”, where Eliot’s New England sensibility expresses its alienation from the modern mass city” (Sheppard 2987: 330).

Like Eliot, many Arab poets have expressed their hostility toward Arab cities in general associating them with alienation, poverty, oppression and political corruption.

Salma Jayyusi in *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* points out that although “The Waste Land” is not a poem of despair it “stresses the living death of the crowd in the unreal city (Jayyusi 1977: 724). Explicitly, many Arab poets imitate or even copy Eliot’s vision of the modern city ignoring the differences between the Euro-American metropolis and the Arab cities. Others have approached the city motif from different perspectives according to their political ideologies and exilic experiences.

The city analogy in Arabic literature, has been part and parcel of the modernist tradition ever since Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab in “Jaikur and the City” poured out his invective against the city in the fifties, describing its streets as “coil of mud” which “bite into my heart,” and moaning: “my right hand: no claw to fight with on the streets of the city, no grip to raise up life from the clay”(Cited in Gohar 1998: 49). As in American poetry, “the city” has been a prominent theme in modern Arabic literature, especially in poetry, and it is the negative aspects that have been particularly stressed. Like Eliot, Arab poets have explored the city motif to express their thoughts about contemporary life presenting the Arab city in a variety of images that has changed and developed since the 1950’s until the present time. The unreal Arab city is a solid wall that cannot be penetrated, a labyrinth where the poet is lost.

Other poets have seen the city as a place of corruption and menace associating it with social squalor and political complicity. It is a cactus land, a mill, a wilderness, a bottomless sewer where the alienation of the poet is complete. This has been one of the best treated themes in Arab modernist poetry, with the personal experience of the poet at large in the forbidding city becoming merged with the communal experience of seeking a deeper interpretation of the clash between city and country. In the city poetry of Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati, the poet incorporates contemporary Baghdad as a symbol for city life. Imitating Eliot, he composed elegies for Baghdad, the historic city. In his poetry, Baghdad, “the unreal city”, lives in the awareness of the poet’s speakers mostly political prisoners, prostitutes and other victims of the city where corruption is rife. The references to victimization and corruption endemic to Baghdad symbolizes aspects of city life: The Tigris and the Euphrates sing no more because of the moral corruption of the city.

Since the 1950’s, most of the educated elite in Iraq, due to systematic dehumanization and political oppression, pursued for decades by recurrent Iraqi regimes, were forced to leave their country and live in exile and Diaspora. Therefore, the Iraqi poets in exile have revealed nostalgia for their cities in Iraq, in addition to other Arab and Islamic

cities. In the poetry of Fawzi Kareem, for example, there is nostalgia for Baghdad, the city of "forgotten alleys, bridges and taverns". For, Sarkun Boulos, the Iraqi metropolis becomes an eternal symbol of alienation harboring outcasts and prostitutes, a Babylon where Jews are inflicted with suffering and damnation. For Fadel Al-Azzawi who echoes Baudelaire's city in his poetry, the Iraqi city is haunted by ghosts and nightmares about alien invaders bathing their horses in the blood of the city people.

Further, in the poetry of Sami Mahdi, the new Iraqi cities erected in the era of oil, are different from the ancient cities of the country. The new metropolis is populated with strangers and outcasts who come from different destinations. The poet finds it difficult to identify his friends or kinsmen in these cities. The structure and shape of the city have changed like its traditions and moral systems, thus, the poet suffers from alienation and loneliness in the new Iraqi city in the post-petroleum epoch. In his poetry, Mahdi cries, "I remember that we used to have names / we used to know the names of our friends and our children / we were able to identify the owners of every house in the city/ we were familiar with every street and corner in the city / we were able to keep in our memories every story we heard / about the living and the dead in the city" (Mahdi 1968: 349¹). Like other Iraqi poets, Mahdi is possessed with such a Romantic tendency and nostalgic attitude toward the past, a tendency which is endemic in Arabic poetry dealing with the country / city dichotomy.

Mahdi describes life in the modern city lamenting the disappearance of most of the moral values associated with the past. Unlike the nostalgia of Mahdi's poetry which recalls the memories of a rural past, the language of Yasin Taha Hafez's poetry on the city is punctuated by urban references like "gases", "car waste", "cement factories", and noise of "city trucks" and machines: "A gigantic driller roars near my house, a train, a cement factory, a truck after a truck / I went faraway and started to watch the new rituals of the city" (Hafez 1974: 109). Unlike the poetry of Hafez which focuses on the problems of ecological pollution in the modern metropolis, the poetry of Hameed Said deals with the city from a political perspective. Using the city analogy as an objective correlative to fulfill his literary vision, Said incorporates cities like Grenada, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Amman, Gaza and his own city Al-Hella, in Iraq, to explore political and historical issues integral to the current political situation in the Arab world. The poet also speaks about cities that symbolize nostalgia and longing for the past like Damascus, cities signifying fragmentation and suffering like Beirut, cities emblematic of the loss of Arab glory and dignity like Grenada in addition to cities associated with resistance and heroism like Jaffa, and Gaza and.

In a related context, the Kurdish-Iraqi poet, Bulard Al-Haydari expresses his view of the opposition between the city and the country in an exaggerated way. He went to Baghdad and found the city repulsive and corrupt, however, he refused to return to his village ignoring the appeals of his rural girlfriend who warned him of the city "which would devour him". In spite of being lost in the city streets and in its blind alleys, the poet claims that he cannot return to his village simply because it has been transformed into a city. The poet proclaims that the village, like the city, is conquered by modern civilization represented through the images of the train and the electric lantern: "the winter is cutting in the pavements of the train station and there is an electric lantern in every corner" (Cited in Gohar 1998:38).

Al-Haydari claims that the type of life in the village is similar to its urban counterpart and there is no communication between people even in the village: "Nobody

¹ All the citations and quotations from Arabic prose and poetry are translated by the author of the paper unless names of other translators are mentioned in the text or the Works Cited.

knows me here / I know nobody” and the poet feels that he “is a wandering shadow” (Cited in Gohar 1998:46) . Apparently , the image of the village in the Arab world is diametrically opposed to the vision of the poet. Arab villages still suffer from lack of drinking water , electricity and illiteracy. Further , women in Arab villages are not given any human rights and they are subjected to worn-out inherited beliefs and superstitions . Abdul-Jabar Abbas, in his introduction to Al-Haydari's Anthology, *The Beat of the Mud* , argues that “the poet's exaggerated vision of the city / country dichotomy is due to the impact of T.S Eliot not to the reality of life in both Arab cities and villages” (Cited in Al-Allaq2003:148).

In a different context , the famous Iraqi poet Mudhafar Al-Nawwab , in his provocative epic , *Watariyyat Layliyya / Night Strings* , evokes the revolutionary spirit of his country imploring Iraq to save him "from cities in which human beings have been transformed into chimneys of fear and cattle waste / cities which are submerged into stagnant water / Oh, my homeland please save me from our national buffaloes , those who are chewing the remains of our dead bodies” (Al-Nawwab 1985 : 47). Lamenting the miserable conditions in the capital cities of the Arab world , dominated by disgraceful and defeated regimes who drag the Arab countries backward toward the stone age , Al-Nawwab implores his homeland to save him of what he calls “the fearful smell of human starvation”. He continues to address Iraq seeking its emotional support. The images of stagnation , horror, cattle waste, people turned into chimneys of fear and buffaloes chewing dead bodies are signifiers of the difficulty of living in the Arab city , a wasteland dominated by defeated / castrated kings and governed by repressive and tyrannical regimes .

The City Narratives in the Poetry of Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati

In an essay entitled “The Real Poet is not Hindered by Authority : Those who Surrender are Cowards not Poets”, Al-Bayati demonstrates that he attempts in his poetry to create the ideal city because “ most of the cities in the world are not cities of freedom, but cities of prisons, banks, dusty roads, insects and thieves”. People come to the city to rob each other using the law as a legal means. To Al-Bayati , many European cities are liberal cities whereas all the Arab cities are “governed by brutal regimes” (Al-Bayati1972: 3) . In “My Poetic Experience” , Al-Bayati likens the modern Arab city to the circus clown whose dress is deliberately made up of bits and pieces of multiple-colored cloths just to make people laugh at him. Al-Bayati's view is relevant to some extent particularly when it is applied to some modern cities in the rich part of the Arab world where one may encounter a Bedouin who speaks a local Arabic dialect while driving a European or Japanese car and using American money in his economic transactions. Those cartoon cities have been built randomly without prior planning(Al-Bayati1972: 24).

Unlike their counterparts in Europe and America , these Arab cities did not develop due to industrial or technological expansions , but they were created to fulfill the urgent consumptive needs of nations that suddenly became rich. The new Arab cities that were created as a result of the increase in the oil revenues , like other ancient Arab metropolises (Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad) are non-productive communities that have failed to manufacture anything except belly dancing , songs, prostitution, and political rhetoric. Both types of Arab cities have been transformed into shopping centers for goods and commodities coming from industrial / imperialistic countries , and recently from Israel. Some Arab cities , like Algeria, Tunisia and others were built during the colonial era just to fulfill the needs of European colonizers. Built in haste to satisfy temporary colonial requirements , these cities failed to respond to the urgent materialistic, industrial and technological needs of the Arab people in the twentieth- century .

In the city poetry of Al-Bayati , the central persona describes himself as being sold into slavery “in the cities of the East / ravaged by whirlwinds”. Like T.S . Eliot and Ezra Pound , Al-Bayati was against the city which is depicted in his poetry as a blind beast . Ihsan Abbas , in *Al-Bayati and Modern Iraqi Poetry*, points out that “to the poet , the city is a dirty world

and an abyss of death which devours people. The city is a horrible place which turns man into a dwarf" (Abbas1980: 23). Furthermore, in *New Aspects of Contemporary Arabic Poetry*, Abdul-Hamid Jeedah critically examines Al-Bayati's concept of the city. According to Jeedah, Al-Bayati's city is brutal, barbaric and repulsive. Al-Bayati's hostile attitude toward the city, according to Jeedah, does not stem from his nostalgia for the village or for a pre-urban past but because the city is associated with immoral values, worn-out traditions and political corruption (Jeedah1992: 286).

In his study *Vision in the Poetry of Al-Bayati*, Mohi El-Din Sobhi argues that the Iraqi poet, Al-Bayati, has spent his life running away from one exile into another. The poet was subjected to great pains as he confronts the cities of exile. Sobhi quotes some verses from Al-Bayati's poetry to illustrate his argument "The city light shocks me / and the city noise as well / my life is full of dullness and boredom" (Cited in Sobhi 1987: 40). In a related context, Salah Fadl, in *The Transformations of Arabic Poetry* analyzes the changing image of Baghdad in the poetry of Abdul Wahhab Al-Bayati since the 1950's until the present focusing on the positive sides of the poet's vision reminiscent of the Romantic trend in Arabic poetry (Fadl1987 : 36). Moreover, in his essay, "al-Majhoul wa al-Ma'loum fi Seerat al-Bayati / The Known and the Unknown in Al-Bayati's life", Mohamed Dakroub points out that Al-Bayati wrote many poems about the city because he spent his life moving from one city to another crossing all the continents of the world leaving behind him the hell of political situation in Iraq (Dakroub 2001 : 10).

In his poem "The City", Al-Bayati speaks about his experience in what he calls "the naked city", personified as a female taking off her clothes: "when the city takes off her masks and underwear / I saw in her eyes the scandals of prostitutes / the degradation of robbers and pimps / In her eyes I saw gallows, prisons and holocausts/ In her eyes I saw madness, alienation and smoke / In the city I saw people being glued in anything like postage stamp" (Diwan Al-Bayati/ The Complete Poetic Works (VII) 1972: 281). The poet associates Baghdad with immorality, political oppression and madness. Baghdad is a city which kills its people dehumanizing its individuals and castrating its revolutionaries.

In another poem from his anthology, second volume, Al-Bayati speaks about the city in general echoing Eliot's famous line: "Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria / Vienna, London". Echoing Eliot's "The Waste Land", Al-Bayati cries: "defeated and victorious cities / Babylon, Rome, Naynawa [Iraqi city] Thebes / God and Satan / Man, the heir of this world / is roaming naked all over the earth / looking for the forbidden fruits / in cities without spring / cities that are dominated by darkness" (Cited in Gohar1998: 52). Like Eliot's "The Waste Land" where sin is identified with the city and where "Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant practices sexual deviation and where "the human engine waits, like a taxi throbbing waiting" and where "the river's tent is broken" and "the nymphs are departed" and "their friends the loitering heirs of city directors / departed, have left no address", Al-Bayati associates Arab cities with darkness, corruption, suffering and engagement in sinful rituals.

In most of his city poems, Al-Bayati refers to different cities as symbols of modern life. However, he uses Babylon as an objective correlative to indicate the deplorable conditions of the Arab world after the 1967 war. The reference to Babylon evokes the suffering, gloominess and pain that haunted the collective Arab consciousness after the defeat of 1967 war: "Babylon is under the foot of time / waiting for resurrection / O Ishtar, rise and fill the jar and water the lips of this wounded lion/ and wait for salvation / O Ishtar, you are destined to stay among the wolves and the wind of mourning and lamentation / O Ishtar, you have to let the rain pour down on our wastelands" (Cited in Gohar 1998: 138). Due to the extremely difficult socio-political situation in Iraq in the 1950's and 1960's, Al-Bayati escaped from the Iraqi city, associated with coward politicians and moral corruption, to join the masses and urge them to revolt against local tyranny and hegemony the same way they protested against imperialism, during the colonial era.

Between me and death in silence and in somber resolve:

I will not die

As long as there remains in the lamp of the refugees' night

Oil and fire, beyond the graveyard of borders

Where the tattered tents (fluttering)

In the wind like a sign pointing

To the path of return, bloody, night (Trans .Khadhim 2001 : 91).

While the second poem describes “the tragedy of the loss” of Jaffa , the plight of “my subjugated people” and “the refugees’ night”, the third poem “A Letter” calls for resistance and struggle. The steadfastness of the refugees and “the children of Jaffa wandering on the boundaries of my great homeland” urge the poet to challenge death. In spite of his blood-soaked face which the speaker – in the poem- attempts to conceal from the children of Jaffa, he insists on challenging the “Israel’s night” that vomits rancor and vengeance on its victims.

O Brethren burning with desire for a morrow under the stars

Makers of the great love

And of bread and flowers

O children of Jaffa wandering

On the boundaries

I am still here, singing the sun, burning,

Singing still.

The wind, and the sparrow in the throes of death in my house,

and the shadows

Black, veiling from you my blood-soaked face

And Israel’s night vomiting hate and vengeance.

And whoremongers and informers.

I am still here, singing the sun, in silence

And in somber resolve

O brethren burning with desire

For struggle (Trans. Khadhim 2001 : 91).

Due to the Arab nationalist ideology of the post World War II era, which rejected the continuity of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine identifying the struggle with the Zionists over Palestine as a struggle for Arab existence rather than a territorial dispute , Al-Bayati’s poems on Jaffa acquired nationalist dimensions and deeper political insights . The struggle of the city of Jaffa became part of the collective act of resistance and an attempt to mobilize a nationalist response against the Zionist occupation of Palestine as a whole.

In “An Elegy to the Sun of June” (Diwan Al-Bayati 1972: 288), Al-Bayati laments the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 war which erupted on the fifth of June demonstrating that the puppet and dictatorial regimes, in the Arab world, are responsible for the defeat: “we were not defeated / the big peacocks were those who tasted the defeat / Alone, they ran away before the beginning of war / we are the dead generation / the generation of charity / dying without price” (Cited in Gohar 1998:127). In the preceding poem, the soldiers killed in war as a result of the betrayal of Arab rulers and governments are associated with Christ on the cross. In a lamentable tone, Al-Bayati says: “why did they leave us for the dogs / stagnant bodies dying without prayers / carrying a crucified homeland in one hand / and the dust of our land in the other / O God, do not chase the flies away from my wounds / since my wounds are the mouth of Job / and my split blood is looking for revenge” (Cited in Gohar 1998: 129). Moreover, in “Nine Quatrains” (Diwan Al-Bayati 1972: 265), Al-Bayati discusses the Arab defeat in the Six-Day war (1967) with Israel castigating what he calls “the donkey kings” responsible for the defeat of the Arab armies. Commenting on the tragic consequences of the war, the poet incorporates Christian symbols to emphasize his vision of the defeat: “Christ sold his blood to the donkey king / therefore, the revolutionaries are defeated / and the world sinks in mud / the masks of the clowns fell down / in the mud of shame” (Cited in Gohar 1998:169).

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, major Arab poets glorified life in the city denouncing the country associating it with illiteracy, ignorance and backwardness. Ahamd Shawqi, the poet laureate and the central neo-classical figure in the Arab literary Renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century who toured many Arab, Islamic and European cities, was sympathetic toward the city. In his poetry, there was a return to the poetic diction, images and metaphors of the Abbasid and Arab-Islamic literary traditions in Andalusia. In Shawqi's poetry, there are references to Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian and Lebanese cities associated with rivers, meadows and orchards. The poet alludes to these cities as paradise: the same metaphor which was frequently used in Abbasid poetry to describe favorite cities. The poet also honors European and Turkish cities, with their palaces, gardens, streets and natural surroundings, with the metaphor of paradise.

Likewise, ancient Arab poets such as Al-Buhturi and Al-Mutanabi who came from Bedouin communities or who descended from rural backgrounds were interested in the city of Baghdad considering it as a symbol of perfection, power, modernity, discipline and safety. Nevertheless, the disappointing experience of modern Arab poets living in the city of Baghdad such as Al-Bayati, Al-Sayyab and others (who suffered from political and religious persecution), triggers feelings of alienation and exile. This negative attitude toward the city is associated with their convulsion at what the city represents as a locale for the central government, oppressive authority and economic exploitation of the poor classes. Like other Arab cities, Baghdad is a symbol of political tyranny and despotism. According to Nahla Al-Hemsi, the Arab city is frequently associated with “different forms of oppression represented by the police apparatus, the prison system and the gallows” (Al-Hemsi 1980:55).

In the Arab city, as a whole, the masses were prevented from expressing their views due to political tyranny. Al-Bayati was one of the Arab poets who suffered from torture and pains at the hands of the political regimes that took the city of Baghdad as its center in the 1950's and 1960's. After the end of the imperialistic era the new governments in Iraq and in other Arab countries were more brutal and more barbaric than the European colonizers. The new regimes played a joke on the Arab people who were looking for freedom and democracy and instead of fulfilling the dreams of their rising nations, they manifested themselves as new forms of imperialism. Ghali Shukri points out that “Al-Bayati suffered twice from the socio-political conditions in his country – once during the colonial era and once after the Iraqi revolution in July 1958” (Shukri 1987: 214).

In Baghdad, Al-Bayati finds nothing except hunger and loss: "I was born there and learnt the meaning of loneliness on its fences/ learnt the meaning of death and poverty in its underworld" (Cited in Gohar 1998:45). The poet considers the political corruption as the basic reason for all the city problems. He attacks the ruling regime in Baghdad for suffocating people's views and opinions. He believes that the discovery of oil in Iraq as well as in other Gulf countries, is a curse because it turns the Arab cities into consuming communities living on the products of European countries. The new economic developments resulting from the oil revenues have widened the gap between the poor and the rich in the Iraqi capital city, according to the poet, turning it into a modern inferno like the other cities of the East.

Dealing with Baghdad as the center of political establishment, the city is depicted in Al-Bayati's poetry as an Arab woman ravaged twice, once by the tartars and foreign invaders and once by local tyrannical rulers who dominated everything including natural resources, national income and the lives of people. Al-Bayati attacks the city of Baghdad itself because it surrendered to the oppressive policies of its puppet rulers. Baghdad is, thus, depicted as a defeated city that failed to overthrow the dictatorial regime that sucks the blood of its people. Using feminine imagery, the poet portrays Baghdad as a sterile prostitute who surrenders her body to the ugliest and most vicious kinds of people. Baghdad is also delineated as a dirty city, full of insects, flies, pimps, whores and homosexuals. The city that has become one of the ruler's concubines may protest against tyranny for a short time, however, reveals signs of surrender and submission afterwards.

The poet apostrophizes Baghdad (Diwan Al-Bayati, Vol.(1), p 413) crying "O barren whore/ Since the beginning of creation, my city has been the mistress of all kings / She has been fornicated by all the dirty rulers / she yields her body to everyone/ and she takes nothing in return / She gives her kisses to the thief, the pimp, the traitor and the coward/ like ancient Jerusalem, Baghdad is a cursed city / full of flies and concubines / I crossed the high fences of Babylon, O city of sinners and evil / wake up and cover your pale and naked body with flowers / O evil city / Baghdad is a pregnant harlot / in her womb, she carries a baby dragon / But like ancient Jerusalem, she is a cursed city / She opens her legs to the tyrants and gets a false pregnancy everyday/ she dies when the moon disappears behind the palm-trees forest at the end of the night" (Cited in Gohar 1998:174) .

Explicitly , the city of Baghdad takes different images in Al-Bayati's poetry where it is depicted as "the song of paradise", "city of the stars" and "city of palms and tears". In addition to what critics said about the poet's attitude toward the city , Al-Bayati , in his collection of poems , *Angels and Devils* , portrays Baghdad as a city where people starve and die of poverty and hunger. The romantic portrayal of Baghdad as indicated by Salah Fadl – in his study cited above - is replaced by the horrible image of a city where holy books are being profaned. The hostile attitude toward the city is due to the poet's vision of Baghdad as a city of political corruption and oppression. Due to his views, Al-Bayati was forced to leave Baghdad for ideological reasons and his nationality was withdrawn afterwards. Obviously, Al-Bayati's vision of the city was shaped by the political and social events that took place in Iraq since the 1950's. Due to his travel and movement from one city to another, it is difficult to identify the poet with one particular city, however, Baghdad is endowed with primary importance in most of his important poems.

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