

Toward a Hybrid Poetics

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Introduction: Engaging Western Traditions in Arabic Modernism

Though literature written in indigenous languages is often concerned with the construction of national and cultural identities, the situation in the Arab world in the post WWII era pushed modernist Arab poets toward the West in an attempt to develop a poetics of hybridity able to confront the new challenges emerging in the region. Discovering that the Arabic literary heritage had nothing to offer to the Arab world in an era of national turmoil and international transformations, Muslim Arab poets such as Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab¹, Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati and others turned toward the West for cultural nourishment. Adapting Christian narratives to fulfill indigenous purposes, they were attracted to western literature particularly T.S. Eliot's critical and literary heritage. M.M. Badawi argues that "the interest of Arab poets and critics in Eliot after the Second World War made Eliot appear in Arabic literary canon as a synonym for modern English poetry" (Badawi 1975: 2). Eliot's impact on the Arabic literary scene, in the post WWII era, coincided with the emergence of political movements and military coups which aim to undermine the foundations of an old system and establish a new order. Thus, Arab poets, from different countries, were mostly interested in Eliot's narratives of death, rebirth and salvation because they found in them reflections of the socio-political situation in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Palestinian tragedy in 1948 and the rise of tyrannical regimes in the region.

Therefore, by the end of WW II, Eliot's literary heritage constituted the major source of influence of western literature on contemporary Arab poets. Being interested in Eliot's poetry, modernist Arab poets responded passionately to Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, establishing an analogy between the stagnant situation in the Arab world in the aftermath of WW II and the wasteland myth in Eliot's poem. As representative of the post-war revolutionary spirit, the modernist Arab poet seeks salvation for the Arab people in western traditions incorporating Eliot's Christian narratives and cultural myths:

The wasteland that is his society is thirsty for rain. The barrenness that is his nation is longing for fertility. But Tammuz has to be killed by the wild

boar and suffer the darkness of the underworld before he returns to the wasteland in spring, filling it with abundance and fertility. The Phoenix has to be burnt down completely before it can rise again from its own ashes. Prometheus has to suffer the sharp beak of the vulture as a price for the divine fire he has given mankind. Sinbad, like Ulysses, has to suffer loss in alien lands before he comes into his own. Only through the cross is Resurrection possible (Boullata 1976: Xii).

Like Eliot, who passed through an experience of universal implications which is the First World War, the Arab poet witnessed the catastrophic ramifications of the Palestinian tragedy and the emergence of post-colonial regimes and puppet governments responsible for the curses and defeats which inflicted the Arab world . Explicitly, Eliot's wasteland narratives fit the situation in the Arab countries during the post WWII era where an entire order of things has crumbled. The theme of the barren land waiting for rain of fertility restored through blood, death and resurrection attracted the new generation of Muslim Arab poets led by Al-Sayyab and Al-Bayati. The political upheavals in the Arab world in the aftermath of WWII which threaten to dismantle the roots of Arab culture find an echo in Eliot's wasteland narratives. Therefore, in the post WWII Arabic poetry, Eliot's discourses about a fallen civilization are appropriated and recycled to fit into local political contexts and serve indigenous interests. Arab poets incorporate Eliot's modernism and literary heritage utilizing symbols, myths and motifs integral to western thought and alien to the core of Islamic traditions. In other words, western modernism opened wide horizons for the WWII generation of Arab poets to appropriate Eliot's poetic strategies in order to fit the drastic transformations in the region.

In their attempt to share the western/Christian cultural experience and penetrate into its traditions, modernist Arab poets aesthetically appropriate narratives of crucifixion and salvation assimilated from Eliot to articulate themes rooted in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Transforming western myths of fertility, resurrection and ritual sacrifices to fit into local contexts and engaging into dialogues with western masters like Ezra Pound , T.S. Eliot, Lorca and Baudelaire ,they attempt to construct a revolutionary poetics able to confront local hegemony and challenges. Through literary and cultural entanglement with the West they aim to hybridize Arabic poetry and liberate Arab thought from the shackles of fossilized Islamic traditions and the drawbacks of the past. Therefore, modernist Arabic poetry frequently deploys narratives of protest conflated with rebellious

scholars and poets who revolt against society and question the validity of the Arabic/Islamic heritage such as Abu Nawwas, Abu Tammam, Al-Maari and Al-Hallaj (Abu Ishaq Al-Husayn Ibn Mansur) , the Persian-Muslim Sufi , who was assassinated by the Abbasid rulers in Baghdad in the eleventh century due to his religious views.

Further, modernist Arab poets, due to western impact, revolted against the classical Arab poem with its erotic introduction, its conventional themes of panegyric, deformation, vainglory, elegy and other forms which commemorate sad and happy occasions. As a result of their contacts with the western literary legacy, they developed a new poetics of more liberal types and themes. Creating an avant-garde modernism influenced by western literature, they also experiment with blank verse forms and new poetic techniques. In order to dismantle the rigid forms of classical Arabic poetry, which failed to achieve the aspirations of the post WWII era, modernist Arab poets incorporate western poetic strategies introducing vernacular language and stripping Arabic religious texts of their historical sanctity. Nevertheless, the Arab modernist poet's engagement with the West does not always aim to jeopardize Arab culture, religion or literary taste because Arab modernism, in general, is not an epistemological rejection of local heritage but an attempt to expose it to the influence of other cultures. In this context, the call for a dialogue with the West does not frequently aim to deconstruct Islamic history and culture as conservative critics argue (Baroot 1990: 66)² but it was an attempt to reinvigorate and hybridize modern Arab thought. On this basis, Muslim Arab poets in the post WWII era engage western modernism particularly the literary heritage of Eliot not necessarily to "revolt against Islamic traditions and the moral values of the Arab society" (Dabees 1992: 149) but to express their attitudes toward the geo-political situation in the region. In essence, Arab modernism encourages cultural entanglement with the West as a means of resurrecting domestic heritage, however, radical modernist poets incorporate western narratives in an attempt to subvert the foundations of Arabic-Islamic traditions.

Integrating western culture into the Arabic poetic canon, Muslim Arab poets, in the post WWII era, went to different directions. But, one could roughly identify four major categories of poets constituting the main trends of Arab modernism. The first category includes radical poets such as M. Afifi Mattar and M.M. Badawi and others who struggled to undermine Arab traditions from the roots in order to clean "the stagnant fountains" of Arab history and renew the springs of Arab culture. In their attempt to appropriate western forms and themes, Mattar and Badawi went to an extremity. Seeking to subvert Arabic syntax, Mattar, for instance, becomes an addict of western poetic forms

turning his texts into a web of stylistic riddles and introspective abstractions. Thus, Mattar's prose poems, centered around the narrative poetic self become detached from the socio-political reality of the poet. The excessive use of western oriented forms, alien to the Arab cultural context, transforms Mattar's poems into vague and ambiguous narratives, inconceivable by the average Arab reader. While Mattar's poetry is obscured by the poet's addictive use of western forms, Badawi's embodies non-conventional patterns of western cultural discourse. Imitating existentialist European thinkers, Badawi, in *Messages from London*, for example, provides a radical version of western philosophical thought viewing life as "a journey along a dusty road which leads not to a garden but to desolation and decay in the grave" (cited in Gohar 2002: 13).

Seeking to wipe out "the sacred swamps of Arab heritage" (Said 1978: 240), Mattar and Badawi distort the form and content of Arabic poetry in an attempt to narrow the gap between Arab and western culture. Instead of hybridizing Arabic poetry, through contact with the western literary legacy, they aim to undermine the foundations of Arabic rhetoric and religious traditions substituting them with western cultural paradigms which suit the sensibility of the modernist spirit. Consequently, they problematize the Arabic poetic discourse creating an aesthetic distance between the texts and the local reading community. Thus, their imitation of western modernism and their radical approach toward Arabic language and religious values are considered by conservative critics as an act of transgression aiming to uproot the genuine tradition of Islamic culture and Arabic literature. However, the shortcomings of the poetry of Mattar and Badawi, particularly its stylistic ambiguity and ideological conflict with the mainstream Islamic culture, did not obscure the powerful efforts of the poets to reconstruct the map of contemporary Arabic literature and promote a transnational dialogue with the West.

While the first category of modernist Arab poets includes figures like Mattar and Badawi who aim to transplant western modernism in contemporary Arabic literature, the second category consists of poets such as Salah Abdul-Sabur, Ali Ahmed Said, Buland Al-Haydari and Mohamed Al-Maghut who take a moderate approach transforming western/Christian traditions into a poetic dynamics to tackle local issues. Exploring the intersection between contemporary Arabic literature and the West, Ghali Shukri points out that all trends of Arab modernism, regardless of their ideological differences, are influenced by western religious and cultural heritage including theological and liberal/Marxist discourses alien to Arab culture and history (Shukri 1968: 114). In parallel lines with the preceding argument, Saad Dabees states that western-oriented

literature including the existentialist current in the poetry of Salah Abdul-Sabur, M.M. Badawi is "reminiscent of its counterpart in the literary works of Sartre, Camus, Kafka and Beckett"(Dabees 1992: 129). .

Moreover, the third category of Arab modernist poets which includes prominent figures such as Nizar Qabbani, Mahmud Darwish, Harun Hashim Rashid, Mohamed Abu-Sinna and Fadwa Tuqan also incorporate western/Christian narratives in Arabic poetry to revive local myths and indigenous traditions calling for revolution against existing regimes. Initiating a multi-cultural dialogue with their western counterparts and assimilating western strategies and poetic forms, they aim to revolutionize a stagnant tradition and a backward society. Like other modernist poets, they incorporate western cultural phenomena to develop a counter-poetics able to serve their ideological purposes and participate in the revolution against the ruling regimes.

Besides, the interaction with western traditions provides an impetus for modernist Arab poets to look for similar narratives in their own heritage. For example, the awareness of Judeo-Christian and pagan traditions and archetypal figures such as Christ, Lazarus, Judas, Cain, Samson, Sisyphus, Prometheus, Cerberus, Persephone, Oedipus, Penelope and Ulysses, triggered by western influence, leads the Arab poets to look for alternatives in their own cultural past.

Ironically, modernist Arab poets, under western impact, become more aware of Middle Eastern and pre-Islamic culture and history. For the first time in Arabic poetry, Pre-Islamic and pagan gods such as Baal and Lat in addition to Phoenician/Babylonian and ancient Egyptian deities like Tammuz, Ishtar, Osiris are utilized to address contemporary political and social issues and fulfill local perspectives. Due to western impact, holy Islamic figures, who are rarely seen in literary works, such as prophet Mohamed, and Al-Hussain³, the martyr of Karbala, are extensively utilized in sacrificial narratives serving domestic purposes integral to the critical conditions in the Arab world in the post WWII era. For example, Ali Ahmed Said, in "The Head and The River" uses Al-Hussain persona as a fertility symbol to articulate the situation in the Arab region after the 1967 war against Israel which leads to the defeat of the Arab armies and the occupation of further territories including eastern Jerusalem. Imitating Eliot's *The Waste Land* and drawing on Christian narratives of crucifixion and salvation, Said depicts Al-Hussain as a legendary hero and a fertility god who will provide salvation to the Arab world and remove the curses of the defeat. Using Islamic narratives in a

western/Christian sense, Said creates subtle analogies between Al-Hussain and Jesus Christ in order to address ideological issues rooted in the politics of the Middle East

Like other modernists and due to western influence, Salah Abdul-Sabur, incorporates Christian narratives, in his poetry, to tackle domestic themes “you who are agonizing on the cross/the cross asks you/why are you dying un-crucified?” (Diwan Abdul-Sabur 1986: 41)⁴. In a world where oppression has become an official governmental policy, the poet “drags his cross and his face is boiling with sweat” (Diwan 1986: 84). Drawing on Eliot's western traditions, Abdul-Sabur places Christian traditions at the center of his poetics: “This who lives in shadow/walks to his cross by the end of the road/crucified by his sorrow/crucified on the willow trees” (Diwan 1986: 150). Even in his existentialist poetry, Abdul-Sabur incorporates Christian imagery to articulate local issues: “I am crucified/crucified by love/I carried the sorrows of the people/in love of a false God” (Diwan 1986:124).

Likewise, in " The Shadow and the Cross", Abdul-Sabur incorporates Christian images, absorbed from western additions in addition to Eliot's technique of repetition alien to the Arabic poetic tradition: “you will crucify me, O willow trees, if I think/you will crucify me, O willow trees/if I remember/you will crucify me, O willow trees if I carry my shadow over my shoulder and go/and I am defeated” (Boullata 1976: 78). Eliot's repetition technique reaches culmination in the following lines: “I who live without dimensions/I who live without time/I who live without glories/I who live without shadow, without a cross/he who lives in his shadow walks to the cross/at the end of the road/he who is crucified by his sorrow, his eyes/are blinded/ and without brilliance (78).

Moreover, the Syrian poet, Mohamed Al-Maghut, in “From the Doorstep to Heaven”, identifies himself with Christ to describe the collective experience of suffering and pain for people living in a homeland dominated by dictatorial regimes: “All the prayers and sighs/all the laments and cries for help/springing from millions of lips and hearts/through thousands of years and centuries/must be gathered somewhere in heaven/like clouds/those words of mine are now close to/those of Jesus Christ” (Khoury 1974: 201). In a similar context, Buland Al-Haydari, in “The Disappointment of Ancient Man” identifies Christ's crucifixion with the plight of the Kurdish people deprived of a homeland and destined to live as exiles: “Life nailed the cross to each forehead / and each hour crucified Christ / each moment crucified his corpse / my pain was a life-long intoxication / with Him; his skies fell upon my dried eyes / a story of a wanderer strangled by his steps / and, sister / I bore my wandering within” (Asfour 1988: 82). In a

different context, Mohamed Abu Sinna links Christ to third world revolutionary leaders who challenge western imperialism. For example, in “Song to a Nightingale”, dedicated to the Cuban president, Fidel Castro, Mohamed Abu Sinna associates Castro with Christ, Hercules and Sisyphus: “He is a Christ, a savior, a Hercules/who comes to Cuba/he gives his smile to the dry fields/and they become green/he removes the rock of Sisyphus from/the shoulders of Cuba/in his hands, free Cuba is born/a bottle of perfume/in his hands, Cuba turns into paradise” (Diwan Abu Sinna 1985: 619)⁵.

Furthermore, in “Resurrection and Ashes”, Ali Ahmed Said envisions a second coming of Arab civilization after ages of stagnation through the image of the phoenix, which is related to the Christian myth of resurrection. In the poem, the phoenix, the legendary bird which is burnt into ashes, then resurrected from death, is identified with Christ: “O phoenix! This is the moment of your new resurrection/the semblance of ashes has become sparks/the past is awake from its slumber/and creeps into our presence” (Boullata 1976: 60). Christ is also associated with other local deities such as Baal, the pre-Islamic god and Tammuz, the Phoenician god of fertility: “Baal, that rider on clouds” and “Tammuz was like a lamp springing with spring/with flowers, fields and starry streams/Tammuz is a river of sparks in whose bottom sinks/the sky”(61). The poet depicts his vision of the second coming of Arab civilization incorporating narratives of crucifixion and scarifies: “O phoenix! Death in our growth/death in our life is threshing floors /fountains of which Christ is the banks and the cross is a hill and a vine” (58). By the end of the poem, the agonized poet identifies himself with Christ on the cross: “It is no winds of solitude/nor is the echo of tombs in its walk/yesterday, O phoenix, yesterday/one died on his cross” (59).

Further, the Palestinian poet ,Harun Hashim Rashid , symbolically identifies the crucifixion of Christ with the plight of the Palestinian refugees using narratives of torture and sacrificial death: “Palestinian I am/though to the gallows they drive me/Palestinian I am/though to the walls they bind me/Palestinian I am/though to the flames they cast me” (Khouri 1974: 233). The allusion to narratives of betrayal and treason, in the poem, “Palestinian I am/though they betrayed me and my cause/though they sell me in the market” which underlines the indifferent attitude of Arab regimes toward the Palestinian tragedy, recalls the betrayal of Jesus by Judas in the Biblical narrative. Likewise, Fadwa Tuqan expresses the plight of the Palestinian refugees associating their suffering with Christ on the cross. Using Biblical figures like Cain, Judas and "the serpent" to signify Arab rulers who betrayed the Palestinian people, Tuqan integrates Christianity in the core

of nationalist Arabic poetry. Identifying the ordeal of the Palestinian refugees with Christ's crucifixion and the fate of the Jewish people under the Nazi holocaust, Tuqan says: " since rejection turns into / a holocaust and Golgotha / the womb of this land will bear him / his fleshy parts will be recollected from the entrails of the land " (Diwan Fadwa Tuqan 1974: 590).⁶ Regardless of the fact that the holocaust is considered as the most heinous crime in modern history , Tuqan attempts to incorporate Judeo-Christian narratives in order to provide her poems with insight and universal dimensions.

Like other trends in the Arabic modernist movement, the fourth category of poets including well-known figures such as Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati and Mudhafar Al-Nawwab attempt to build bridges with western culture and liberal thought in order to narrow the gap between the Arab world and the West. For example, Al-Bayati in "Something about Happiness" incorporates Christian and Muslim traditions to describe the deplorable conditions in the Arab world after the loss of Palestine and the rise of tyrannical regimes in many Arab countries. Depicting Prophet Mohamed as a Christ figure betrayed by the Arab rulers, Al-Bayati blends Christian and Islamic narratives in order to address local political issues of great significance. Subverting the lies and political slogans of tyrannical Arab regimes , the poet addresses prophet Mohamed and Jesus Christ : "they betrayed you / they crucified you on the rope of words" (Diwan Al-Bayati 1972: 298) ⁷ . The Prophet's ambition to build a unified nation and the poet's dream of a better world are undermined by the oppressive and immoral policies of dictatorial rulers who govern the Arab world by "daggers and dogs" (Diwan 1972: 298).

Confronting rulers who speak too much and do nothing to improve the stagnant conditions of their countries "they crucify you on the cross of words" , Al-Bayati encourages the Arab people to revolt against tyranny denouncing policies of fear and submission : "what is the benefit of weeping? / I am ashamed of what happened in the Arab world / The frogs robbed us of our happiness / But I keep walking on the road of the sun / regardless of pains and wounds" (Diwan 1972: 299). The committed poet points out that only through blood and sacrifice, the Arab world will be reborn. But the state of resurrection can not be reached at the current moment because it needs a miracle just like the miracle of Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of fertility who rises from the world of the dead. Combining Christian, Phoenician, Babylonian and Ancient Egyptian symbols and myths to describe the long expected condition of resurrection in the Arab world, Al-Bayati aims to dismantle the cultural barriers between East and West.

Discussing the attempt of modernist poets to engage into dialogues with the West, Ihsan Abbas argues that modernist Arab poets like Al-Bayati and Al-Sayyab developed the habit of quoting extensively from western literature “using Christianity as a basis for their poetic discourse” (Abbas 1983: 98) and appropriating western narratives to fit into domestic cultural contexts. In “To Jerusalem”, a poem written after the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1948 war with Israel and the occupation of western Jerusalem, Al-Sayyab describes his attitude toward the holy city using Christian symbols and alluding to the crucifixion legend: “for your sake we were crucified/and nailed on the cross of pain/for your sake many thrones crumbled turning into ashes” (Diwan Al-Sayyab 1986: 575)⁸. Al-Sayyab also uses Jewish narratives blending the texts of the Old Testament and the Koran to articulate local crises: “The fire screams in the pastures, the houses and the roads / I am vegetation and resurrection/I am the Jewish god of Sinai/giving the honey of paradise/to those who live in Diaspora” (Diwan 1986: 373).

Associating the Jewish experience in Diaspora with the life of the Iraqi people in exile, Al-Sayyab aims to give universal proportions to the plight of the Iraqi people brutalized by the oppressive regime of Abdul-Karim Qasim in the post WWII era. Moreover, Al-Sayyab, in “Cerberus in Babylon”, incorporates Cerberus the mythic dog which watches the gates of hell in Greek legends, as a symbol of the repressive apparatus implementing the dictatorial policies of the Iraqi regime. The murder of Tammuz, in the poem, symbolizes the assassination of the Iraqi nationalists in the Mawsil massacre at the hands of the Marxists in the 1950’s: “Cerberus is rioting in the sad streets of Babel/the city turns into ashes/Cerberus digs the grave of Tammuz/our slain god, devouring his dead body/sucking the light of his eyes” (Diwan 1986: 483).

Known for their anti-imperialistic tendencies and hostility toward dictatorial Arab regimes and backward Islamic thought, modernist Arab poets, particularly Al-Sayyab and Al-Bayati, engage western culture and literature in order to develop a revolutionary poetics able to confront local challenges. Aiming to hybridize indigenous culture, they transform western narratives into a poetics of confrontations serving their nationalist purposes and ideological orientations. Integrating liberal western paradigms into the Arabic cultural context, these poets gained wide popularity on the academic and popular levels. In spite of incorporating Judeo-Christian narratives in their poetry, modernist Arab poets do not frequently aim to undermine the roots of Islamic traditions. Instead, they attempt to liberate Arab thought and modernize Arabic literature by

constructing a hybrid poetic dynamics capable of assimilating the cultural heritage of western civilization

Due to Eliot's influence and twentieth-century missionary and orientalist activities to transfer western civilization to the Middle East, modernist Arab poets moved toward the West initiating a new poetic mechanism, influenced by western literary traditions and cultural heritage. They replaced the conventional forms of classical Arabic poetry with more liberating western forms undermining a fossilized tradition which remained for more than fourteen centuries. Arieh Loya argues that poetry by major Arab poets, like Al-Sayyab, gained wide reputation on the academic and popular levels as a result of innovations acquired from western sources particularly the literary and critical impact of Eliot. Like other modernist poets, Al-Sayyab was interested in Eliot's artistic devices and poetic techniques:

Al-Sayyab was fascinated by his [Eliot] emphasis on form, his spare language, his use of the colloquial, his projection of fragmentary ideas and images in sudden, seemingly unrelated transition. Al-Sayyab found Eliot's method deeply revealing opening to him a new world (Loya 1971: 192).

Coming under the impact of the literary heritage of Eliot who was translated, parodied, quoted and appropriated to fulfill nationalist purposes, modernist poets, from different Arab countries, aim to hybridize Muslim Arab culture through interaction with the West. Therefore, the use of Christian narratives and Marxist/existentialist discourses, integral to Arab modernist poetry, constitutes a sophisticated cultural dynamics which aims to integrate western heritage in Islamic culture and literature. In their attempt to enhance a trans-civilizational dialogue with the West, modernist Arab poets incorporate Judeo-Christian traditions and medieval myths undergoing a long journey of cultural reorientation where they make compromises and take painful decisions transcending social, religious and political barriers that separate between East and West.

The Use of Western/Christian Narratives in Al-Sayyab's Poetry

Capturing the wounds of a nation suffering from spiritual death and political corruption, post WWII Arab poets went westward utilizing Christian and western literary

heritage, particularly the poetic tradition initiated by T.S. Eliot. Inspired by Eliot's myths and archetypal images, poets like Al-Sayyab, Al-Bayati and others struggled to liberate Arabic culture and literature from fossilized traditions and stagnant heritage. Therefore, modernist Arab poets, in the post WWII era, reshaped Christian and western legends to integrate narratives of contemporary significance in the Middle East. Explicitly, Eliot's poetry constituted the major inspiration for Arab poets who responded fervently to *The Waste Land*. Like Eliot, who composed the poem with the memory of WWI in his mind, they experienced tragedies of great ramifications particularly the developments of the Palestinian tragedy and the rise of repressive regimes, the heirs of the colonial legacy. Moreover, modernist Arab poets were attracted to Eliot's view of tradition, his conservative religious thinking, his resourceful poetic techniques and his use of myth. Exploiting Eliot's rich traditions of poetic symbolism, Arab poets incorporate western/Christian traditions and archetypal legends to articulate native issues integral to the Arab world in an era of great transformations.

As a result of integrating Eliot's theory of tradition, modernist Arab poets were able to discover their own indigenous heritage and popular figures, attributed great importance in Arab history, like Sinbad of *The Arabian Nights*, Antara, the pre-Islamic black warrior and other mythic heroes integral to the Arabic folklore heritage. Nevertheless, unprecedented attention has been given in modernist Arabic poetry to the hardships, sacrifices and martyrdom of Jesus Christ. For example, Al-Sayyab attempts to draw explicit parallels between his own suffering under the tyrannical Iraqi regime in the post WWII era and the torture of Christ on the cross. Discussing the use of Christian motifs in Arabic poetry, S. Moreh argues:

The favorite symbol is Christ to symbolize the poet who sacrifices himself for his country and people. Other symbols connected with the crucifixion are used, such as Christ bearing the cross which stands for the burden of the sacrifice on the way to Golgotha – the long path of suffering along which the poet has to pass. (Moreh 1976: 247).

Apparently, Christ is used by Muslim Arab poets, in different contexts, to articulate themes integral to the social and political situation in the Arab world in the post WWII era. For example, the Algerian revolutionaries, persecuted by the French occupation forces, are also associated with Christ on the cross. In Palestinian poetry, Christ is

associated with the Palestinian refugees and in Iraqi poetry he is associated with the Iraqi nationalists, brutalized by Abdul Karim Qasim's regime. As the most famous symbol in modernist Arabic poetry, Christ is frequently associated with Prophet Muhammad or Tammuz or any other deity from East and West. Regardless of his Muslim background, Al-Sayyab, like other modernist poets, introduced Christian and theological discourses in his poetry as a result of the literary impact of western writers particularly T.S. Eliot (Dabees 1984: 150)

Being persecuted in their own countries, the Arab poets of the WWII generation felt that their efforts to change a homeland dominated by tyrannical regimes are futile. As exiles and outcasts in their own land, they express their sense of disillusionment and despair using symbols and allusions assimilated from western culture. According to Moreh, modernist Arab poets used "Christian and Biblical symbols in order to convey their own mental and physical state" (247) and reflect their psychological mood and feelings of disappointment. Arieh Loya also argues that, Al-Sayyab uses Christ in his poetry as a symbol of universal dimensions. In his opinion, Christ constitutes one of "the most recurring symbols in Al-Sayyab's poetry but we find him constantly associated with Tammuz or even with the poet himself" (Loya 1971: 198). In Al-Sayyab's poetry, Christ is also associated with Adonis, Osiris, Orpheus and other eastern and western deities. Due to western influence, the Babylonian god, Tammuz, is identified with Christ, in Al-Sayyab's post WWII poetry, to signify the hope of the Arab people in a new world where they suffer no more from the policies of persecution enforced by the ruling regimes. In a related context, the dead Tammuz is utilized symbolically by the Iraqi poet to indicate the state of political corruption and sterility dominating the Arab world in the aftermath of the Palestinian tragedy and the collapse of the Arab dream of unity and nationalism during the postcolonial era.

In several poems, Al-Sayyab, isolated, exiled and cut off from his roots, identifies himself with Christ, while the Iraqi dictators are associated with Judas. The poet hopes that his split blood would lead to the redemption of his native land and the removal of the curse brought by Qasim's regime. In his famous poem, "Christ after Crucifixion", Al-Sayyab incorporates images of suffering and salvation related to the crucifixion narrative identifying Christ with the Iraqi political refugees, banished from their country due to their ideological views. In addition to the apparent religious overtones of the poem, it offers a vision of political metamorphosis at a crucial stage in the history of modern Iraq. From the beginning of the poem, the Iraqi poet is transformed

into a Christ figure carrying the burden of the cross. He points out that he is lonelier than Christ expressing his longing for someone to take him down from the cross, to chase away the birds of prey from his wounds and remove the crown of thorns. In spite of the great pains and suffering he passes through, the crucified poet is not yet dead: “after they brought me down I heard /the long wail of winds sweeping through the palms /and footsteps growing more distant / the wounds, therefore, on which they have kept me/nailed all through the evening have not killed me”(Bishai 2001: 53).

Furthermore, the analogy between Christ whose steaming blood brings fertility to the earth and the Iraqi poet whose sacrificial death would lead to the salvation of his country dominates the text of Al-Sayyab’s poem: “when even the darkness grows green / warmth touches my heart/and my blood courses through its soil/my heart is water and the ear of corn/whose death is resurrection” (Bishai 2001: 54). Describing his persecution under the Iraqi regime, in the post WWII era, Al-Sayyab incorporates Christian symbolism and rebirth legends to articulate a local political narrative: “I died so that bread my be eaten in my name/ with the coming of the new season/How many lives shall I live? (54). In addition to his appropriation of Eliot’s season imagery, integral to *The Waste Land*, to fulfill domestic purposes, Al-Sayyab utilizes the condition of Christ and his crucifixion to create a narrative of political salvation and resurrection: “I have become the future in every tomb/I have become the seed/I have become a generation/and one or some drops of my blood/flow through each heart” (55). In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses season imagery and Christian symbolism to articulate narratives of death, fertility, salvation and resurrection integral to his aesthetic vision: “April is the cruelest month, breeding/lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/memory and desire, stirring/dull roots with spring rain/winter kept us warm, covering/earth in forgetful snow, feeding/a little life with dried tubers/summer surprises us” (Eliot 1980: 37). While Eliot utilizes the cycle of seasons and the tale of crucifixion to express his religious perspective and moral vision, Al-Sayyab reshapes them into objective correlatives to articulate an ideological/political tale, different from Eliot’s original context.

Exploiting the ritualistic potential of the crucifixion legend as a narrative of torture, sacrifice and martyrdom, Al-Sayyab transforms Christ into a symbol of Arab nationalism and revolution against hegemony and tyrannical policies: “the eyes of suns devour my road/In which fire dreams of my crucifixion/whether made of iron or of flames/the gaze of my people is like the light/of the heavens, of memories and love/they hear my burden and moisten my cross/How small is my death and yet how great” (57).

As a cry of protest against the injustice of the political and military establishments in Iraq in the 1950's, Al-Sayyab's poem identifies the leaders of the Iraqi government with evil figures like Judas: "I came back/Judas grew pale when he saw me/for I was his secret/he was a black shadow" (55). Depicting his confrontation with the forces of darkness symbolized by Judas, Al-Sayyab speaks in the voice of Christ establishing an analogy between Christ and the Iraqi nationalists, persecuted and brutalized by the regime: "I froze in his [Judas] thought/He feared death should reveal itself in his eyes/(they are a rock behind which he hid/his grave from people)/Do you come from the world of the dead?/Death comes once/could it have been false? This is what he thought when he saw me" (55). Drawing on the myth of crucifixion, Al-Sayyab, tortured and tyrannized during Qasim's reign, identifies his suffering and sacrifices with Christ: "Did they not crucify me yesterday?/here I am in my grave/let them come – I am in my grave/who knows who I am? Who knows?/ and Judas's friends! Who will believe their claims?(Bishai2001:56). The Iraqi poet's sacrifice of self for the sake of his own people repeats what Christ did for humanity. In different parts of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, there is a recreation of this act of sacrifice and martyrdom.

The intensive use of Christian images in "Christ after Crucifixion" reflects the sweeping impact of western culture on the Muslim Arab poet [and his generation] - who attempts to introduce a new pattern of symbols and myths into Arabic literature. Evoking crucifixion as a sacrificial ritual which brings salvation to the earth, Al-Sayyab becomes a Christ-figure offering his blood for the sake of his people: "here I am naked in the darkness of my tomb/yesterday I was wrapped/like suspicion, like a blossom/beneath my icy shroud/ moistening the blood red flower" (56). Depicted as a symbol of the struggle of the Iraqi nationalists committed to die for the sake of their cause, Christ, in Al-Sayyab's poem, is transformed from a spiritual religious figure into a revolutionary rebel resembling the poet himself. Therefore, the concluding lines of the poem give an impression of political salvation achieved through the symbolic death of the poet who believes that Iraq and the Arab world are in dire need of a Christ figure to bring about the resurrection of a dead homeland : "After they had nailed me and I/had turned my eyes towards the city/I could hardly tell the plain from the wall from the tomb/there was something stretching as far as the eye could see/like flowering forest/and at every turn was a cross and a grief-stricken mother/praised be God/such is the city in labor" (Bishai 2001: 57).

Echoing Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Al-Sayyab, in "Christ after Crucifixion" depicts a vision of political salvation taking place in his cursed country. After great anguish and pains, the poet is able to see Iraqi in a state of labor which is the result of the poet's sacrificial death: "when one day I warmed the bones of children with my flesh/when I exposed my wound and dressed another/the wall between us and God was destroyed" (56). In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, salvation took place only after the collapse of the sinful cities and the destruction of London Bridge, an epitome of western civilization: "London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down" (Eliot 1980: 50). At this point in the poem, Eliot's central persona is able to "set my lands in order" and map out the way for salvation after great suffering: "to cartage then I came/burning, burning, burning / O Lord thou pluckest me out / O Lord thou pluckest / burning" (Eliot 1980: 46). Blending the pains of Christ with those of St. Augustine, Eliot expresses a splendid tale of sin, confession and resurrection rooted in his religious doctrine. However, in Al-Sayyab's poem, the redemption of Iraq and its people is only possible after the annihilation of a tyrannical government, an embodiment of injustice and brutality. Thus, the political upheaval in Iraq which inevitably culminates in the assassination of Qasim and the collapse of his government is the ultimate aim of the poet, frequently brutalized by the agents of the regime: "And soldiers came and reached/even my wounds and heartbeats/they came, all those who were not even dead/they came to me just as the palm tree/Laden with fruit bursts into view/when a flock of hungry birds/from a poor village lights on it" (Bishai 2001: 57). For the sake of the salvation of his cursed country, his wasteland, the Iraqi poet sacrifices his blood and the best years of his life dreaming of a better future for his homeland.

Al-Sayyab's vision of a free Iraq is fulfilled when the Iraqi army removes Qasim's regime from power and the dictator is inevitably assassinated. In "Ode to Revolutionary Iraq", he eloquently depicts the event: "the doctor hurried to my side / was it that he had found a cure for the disease in my body?/ the doctor hurried to my side and said :/ what is this news from Iraq?/ the army has rebelled ,Qasim is dead"(Khouri 1974:93). The exiled poet, hospitalized in a Kuwaiti medical center, expresses his feelings toward the political developments in his country: " what joyous ,health-restoring tidings / In my joy ,I almost stood up , walked, ran as if cured" (93). In his rupture, the poet who suffers from an incurable disease, feels as if he regains his health back. Utilizing sacrificial and fertility discourses appropriated from western literature, Al-Sayyab introduces a local narrative of freedom and liberation: " rejoice / what

liberation ,what release / o my brethren in God , in blood , in freedom, in Arabism, in hope / arise , for tyrants are laid down/ and light has dispelled the night / guard well the revolution / that crushed the "comrades" , cast down the oppressor / for Tammuz, his splendor once stolen by the traitor / has arisen and Iraq is reborn"(93).

In "City of Sinbad", Al-Sayyab also utilizes western/Christian narratives with emphasis on major Christian figures like Christ, Judas and Lazarus in order to reflect his political views toward the dictatorial regimes emerging in Iraq and the Arab world after WWII. The poet points out that there is no possibility of redeeming the Arab world as long as it is dominated by dictatorial regimes and repressive governments. Therefore ,in "City of Sinbad" , Christ is dead and Lazarus, who represents the Arab nation, can not be resurrected. Further, in Al-Sayyab's poem, Eliot's fertility symbols are reversed to suggest negative connotations, thus, when rain falls down it brings death and disease to the land of Iraq. Integrating Eliot's wasteland narratives and Christian legends, the poem, in its symbolic structure, embodies a state of sterility and barrenness integral to the situation in Iraq and the Arab world in the aftermath of the Palestinian tragedy and the emergence of the refugee problem.

Appropriating the rain motif, a symbol of fertility in Eliot's western/Christian paradigm , Al-Sayyab utilizes it in a different context as an emblem of curse and plague "there is death in the streets/and barrenness in the fields/all that we love is dying" (Khouri 1974: 97). In his attempt to depict the domestic political scene after the catastrophic events which brought about the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948 and the rise of tyrannical regimes in the Arab region , Al-Sayyab utilizes western myths assimilated from James Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Eliot's Christian traditions. Eliot's literary heritage is adapted to fit the Arab poet's ideological perspective portraying the Arab world as a wasteland and moral wildness. Depicting a state of barrenness and sterility integral to the post WWII era , the poet denounces a homeland where Adonis is killed and Ishtar dies of thirst: "And in the village, Ishtar is dying of thirst/there are no flowers on her forehead/and in her hands there is a basket, its fruits are stones/which she casts at every woman" (Khouri 1974: 103).

Lamenting the miserable conditions of Iraq and the Arab homeland , after the rise of oppressive regimes in the region , Al-Sayyab deploys narratives of corruption and decay to articulate his vision of a world on the verge of collapse. In his poetic vision, the fertility gods of the East are dead and Ishtar's basket is full of stones, instead of flowers and fruits. The death of Adonis and the barrenness of Ishtar , a symbol of rebirth and

resurrection, signifies the inevitable failure of the Arab dream of nationalism and unity which was expected to be fulfilled in the era of de-colonization. In its symbolic overtones, the poem indicates that the emergence of repressive regimes in the Arab world in the aftermath of WWII and the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1948 war with Israel triggered a cycle of catastrophic events culminating in the collapse of Arab aspirations and nationalist dreams. Crystallizing a state of moral bankruptcy and defeat, Al-Sayyab wonders: "Is this Adonis, this emptiness?/and this pallor, this dryness?/Adonis! Behold the defeat of heroism/death indeed has shattered every hope within you" (Khoury 1974:97). In addition to its explicit castigation of policies leading to the miserable situation in the Arab world in the post WWII era, particularly the useless war of 1948, Al-Sayyab's poetry aims to achieve social reform and prosperity in a region plagued by recurrent defeats and cursed with dictatorial rulers.

Utilizing western modernism and Eliot's literary tradition as a poetics of liberation, Al-Sayyab articulates the socio-political condition in the Middle East in a sophisticated manner. Therefore, Al-Sayyab's poems, "Christ after Crucifixion" and "City of Sinbad" are part of a transnational poetics which attempts to establish a dialogue between the Arab world and the West bridging the cultural/civilizational gap that separate peoples on both sides. Transforming western traditions and Christian narratives into a poetic dynamics written in a different language and deployed in a different cultural context, Al-Sayyab provides an example of hybridity and acculturation integral to the era of globalization. In other words, the interaction between the Muslim Arab poet and western traditions which leads to the construction of a hybrid poetics taking as its core the religious heritage of what is traditionally categorized as an alien/colonial heritage seems to be an indication of a trans-cultural dialogue rather than a clash of civilizations. Thus, the engagement of western narratives and myths in contemporary Arabic poetry opened new horizons for religious tolerance paving the way for mutual understanding between East and West in an era of global conflicts and regional ramifications.

Notes

1. The Iraqi poet, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab was born in 1926 in southern Iraq. After his graduation from the English Department in Baghdad's Teachers College, he became one of the most prominent Arab poets during the post WWII era. Since the late 1940's, Al-Sayyab pioneered the free verse movement, the backbone of Arab modernism, challenging conventional rules of poetic composition which dominated Arabic poetry for centuries. Due to his ideological commitments, Al-Sayyab

protested against the tyrannical regime of Abdul-Karim Qasim, the Iraqi president who removed the royal family during the 1958 revolution. As a result of Al-Sayyab's political doctrine, he was dismissed out of his job and put in jail. Subsequently he was banished from his country to live in exile and poverty. In spite of his revolutionary pursuits, Al-Sayyab found a liberating force in western Christianity transforming Christ into a symbol standing for Arab nationalists, victimized by their regimes. As a transnational poet, Al-Sayyab was influenced by western figures such as Lorca, Pound, Edith Sitwell but he was indebted, in particular, to Eliot's poetic legacy. In 1964, Al-Sayyab died prematurely in exile, as a result of a mysterious disease, leaving behind him seven poetic anthologies and several translations of western poets.

2. All citations from Arabic sources are translated by the author unless names of other translators are included in the text and the works cited.
3. The brutal and ritualistic murder of Al-Hussain , the prophet's grandson , by the followers of the Umayyad caliph , in Karbala, during the early Islamic era, split the Muslim nations into two parts, the Shiites and the Sunnis. The battle of Karbala where Al-Hussain was assassinated for vicious political reasons, is frequently used as a symbol of Arab-Arab conflicts while Al-Hussain is immortalized as a mythic hero who sacrifices his blood for the sake of his principles.
4. Citations from *Diwan* (The Poetic Works) of Abdul-Sabur are translated by the author.
5. Citations from *Diwan* of Abu-Sinna are translated by the author.
6. Citations from *Diwan* Fadwa Tuqan are translated by the author.
7. Citations from *Diwan* Al-Bayati are translated by the author.
8. Citations from *Diwan* Al-Sayyab are translated by the author.

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