

The Trajectories of Trauma and Pain in the Post 1967 War Poetry

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Abstract

This paper investigates the post Six-Day War (1967¹) poetry in order to reveal the tragic ramifications of the war and explore themes of trauma and defeat integral to Arabic literature at that time. Selected poetic texts, written by major figures such as Nizar Qabbani, Mohamed al-Fayturi, Mudhafar al-Nawwab, Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati and Badr Shaker al-Sayyab will be critically examined in order to underline the response of a generation of poets, who challenged the hegemonic discourses advocated by tyrannical Arab regimes, to the experience of war and defeat. In an attempt to confront a structure of political myths and cultural superstitions deployed by the defeated regimes and their official state media about the superiority of Arab armies and the inevitability of obliterating Israel, these poets introduced counter-discourses interrogation narratives perpetuated by the regimes and the establishments which sustained the war.

Keywords: defeat, trauma, oppression, war, Arab-Israeli conflict

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¹ The war erupted on the 5th of June (1967) between Israel and the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan and lasted for six days.

Introduction

The 1967 war experience and its tragic developments represent a definitive turning point in Arab history significant for study within its own literary and political boundaries. Therefore, it is noteworthy to argue that the 1967 war literature including poetry constitutes the first extensive narratives of trauma and humiliation in modern Arab culture because narratives about earlier collective traumas such as the 1948 war did not undermine the Arab dream of unity and nationalism. The Israeli stunning victory over three Arab armies in the June war² of 1967 shattered the dream of Arab nationalism and raised a wave of protest throughout the Arab world against the tyrannical regimes who failed to defend their countries in a war which they pursued and triggered its first sparks. As a result of war and defeat, a number of Arab poets, influenced by the Arab/Israeli conflict, were deeply engaged in political literature. The Palestinian tragedy in 1948 and the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 awakened their commitments to political engagement in the conflict writing revolutionary poetry, implicated in the dominant ideological and cultural scene of the 1960's. Among them, there were militant voices, a counterpart of radical pro-Zionist writers dominating the Israeli literary scene, who attempt to push the conflict to an extreme.

² In May 1967, Arab countries, particularly Egypt, Syria and Jordan, mobilized their forces in addition to an extensive media campaign against Israel threatening to drive Israel to the sea. The fear of an imminent attack as well as the withdrawal of the United Nations emergency forces located on the Egyptian-Israel borders due to Egyptian orders led the Israel government to believe that an Arab military assault war imminent. Things became worse when Jamal Abdul-Nasser, the Egyptian president at that time, announced the blockade of the straits of Tiran preventing Israel to have access to its Eilat port on the Gulf of Aqaba. Mutual defense pacts were signed between Egypt on one hand and Jordan and Iraq on the other. Anti-Israeli incendiary Arab rhetoric and daily threats in Arab media terrified the Israeli community and contributed to the pressures to go to war. The Arab call of a war of total destruction against Israel ended with their defeat. In six days and due to a successful and preemptive military operation led by the Israeli air forces on the fifth of July 1967, the Israeli army was able to capture the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank including Eastern Jerusalem in addition to Gaza strip. The war which started on the fifth of June and ended on the tenth of June changed the standards of power in the Middle East forever.

Nevertheless, there were leading poetic figures who argue that the dilemma of modern Arab history culminating in the 1967 defeat is rooted in Arab-Arab politics rather than in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, leading Arab poets such as Nizar Qabbani³, Mohamed al-Fayturi, Mudhafar al-Nawwab, Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati and others attempted to reveal the

³ Nizar Qabbani was born in Damascus in 1932 in a district famous for its struggle and resistance against the French occupation troops during the era of colonization. As a young man, he married Zahra, a Syrian lady, and had two children, Tawfiq and Zahra. Then he married an Iraqi lady, Balqis, after a great love story but Balqis was unfortunately killed in an explosion which targeted the American embassy in Beirut, where she works, during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980's. Qabbani, who descended from a well-known family, in Damascus, was appointed as an ambassador after his graduation from Damascus University in the 1950's. However, he was forced to resign from his job as a result of publishing poems attacking the Arab rulers and governments after the defeat of the 1967 war. Consequently, he left his country and spent most of his life in Lebanon and Europe where he became a professional writer and poet. Most of his poetry prior to the 1967 war was devoted to the issue of feminism and the degrading status of women in the Arab world. Originally identified as the poet of women and erotic love, his poems were censored in many Arab countries; however his poetry opened new horizons extending the boundaries of Arabic poetics and challenging conservative Arab traditions. His first anthology was published when he was a student at Damascus University and created controversy in conservative circles due to its candid treatment of the issues of sex and male/female relationship in the Arab world. His repudiation of backward and conservative Arab traditions started at an early age when he witnessed the suicide of his sister who killed herself because she was forced to be separated from her lover and marry a man she did not love. Therefore, his early poetry was a severe criticism of a male-dominated world and a challenge of the repressive policies advocated by a hegemonic patriarchal society which oppressed women. Moreover, His political poetry, particularly his famous and provocative poems "Love and Petroleum," "Bread, Hashish and Moon" and "Margins on the Notebook of the Defeat," led to the censorship of his literary works in most of the Arab countries. Qabbani's reputation and popularity in the Arab world is unprecedented particularly because most of his love and romantic poems that give credit to women are transformed into well-known popular songs performed by famous Arab singers. Qabbani died in 1998 leaving behind him large legacies of books, anthologies, songs, prose works and a history of struggle against all forms of oppression in the Arab world. His unequal poetic works stand as a testimony of a great poet and a modern warrior. Qabbani is undoubtedly one of the most famous and prominent poets in the entire history of Arabic literature from the Pre-Islamic era until the modern times.

politics of corruption and backwardness which led to the war in order to undermine the allegations of the dictatorial regimes who claimed that their strategic failure and defeat in war are the results of imperialistic intervention. These revolutionary poets, from different Arab countries, expressed their anger and frustration in a complex and multi-layered poetics smashing the cultural myths and political illusions that gave impetus to the war and brought about the defeat. Subverting the political myths, fostered by the Arab regimes, they affirm that the defeat is attributed to internal rather than external factors. In order to prevent the ruling regimes from obscuring the painful memories of war, these poets developed a poetics of confrontation, exposing the corruption and hypocrisy of Arab regimes who advocated policies of political deceit and secrecy denying the tragic outcomes of war. Engaging the politics of war and questioning the propaganda discourse which sustained it, these poets also aim to expose the hypocrisy and deception of the Arab tyrannical regimes involved in the military confrontations with Israel in 1967. In an attempt to tear away the veil of mystery attached to the 1967 war, they disrupt the myths that justify the war illustrating the mistaken strategic steps taken against Israel which led to the war particularly the closing of the Tiran straights on the Red Sea jeopardizing Israel's security.

Moreover, Qabbani, al-Fayturi⁴, al-Nawwab, al-Bayati and others denounce the vicious role played by Arab politicians and military leaders who are responsible for the defeat, in order to confront the attempts to poeticize

⁴ Al-Fayturi was born in 1930s, in a village called al-Jiniya, located in Western Sudan near the borders with Chad and Libya. His father descended from a Libyan family who escaped to Sudan after the Fascist occupation of Libya prior to the First World War. His mother was the daughter of a rich slave-trader from a famous Arabian tribe. His grandmother, Zahra, was a black slave who gained her freedom after marrying his grandfather, the Arabian slave trader. As a young poet, al-Fayturi came under the influence of Afro-American writers particularly Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in addition to other African and Caribbean scholars and poets. Due to his pioneering works, critics consider al-Fayturi as the first poet who sings for Africa and the black people in Arabic. He wrote many poetic collections dealing with the painful experience of black people in Africa and Diaspora such as "*Aghani Efriqya/African Songs*."

the war throughout state-sponsored propaganda. Apparently, these revolutionary poets attempt to condemn the official hegemonic discourse which portrays the war against Israel as a moral crusade. In other words, their poetry becomes a testimony of the policies of deception perpetuated by the official/local media and their damaging impact on the Arab collective memory of pain and humiliation. On this basis, their poetry becomes an elegy lamenting a nation battered by defeats and historical humiliation.

In a related context, these poets attempt to link the present with the past blending the 1967 war with memories of historical defeats evoking the collapse of ancient Muslim Empires and great dynasties. In other words, the defeat of 1967 war (what is called “al-Naksa-the-set-back” in Arab culture) is aesthetically articulated by coding it under analogous details of earlier Arab/Muslim defeats. Further, these poets also lament the death of thousands of soldiers and civilians in a war which aims to satisfy the ego of dictatorial regimes and intensify propaganda campaigns about Arab nationalism. Underlying the real reasons of the defeat, these poets were able to expose the hypocrisy of Arab politicians and the failure of the genocidal attitude toward Israel advocated by dictatorial regimes. Indirectly, this kind of poetic discourse, engaging the 1967 war history, participated, to some extent, in eliminating some of the myths and fallacies—created by Arab politicians—integral to the historical denial of the right of Israel to exist as a nation in the region.

Re-thinking the 1967 War Narrative

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Art” argues that writers function simultaneously as social critics and social products, as arbiters and inheritors of culture. He maintains:

No man can quite emancipate himself from his age and country, or produce a model in which the education, the religion, the politics, usages and arts of his times shall have no share. Though he were never so original, never

so willful and fantastic, he cannot wipe out of his work every trace of the thoughts amidst which it grew. The very avoidance betrays the usage he avoids. Above his will and out of his sight he is necessitated by the air he breathes and the idea on which he and his contemporaries live and toil, to share the manner of his times, without knowing what that manner is. (Emerson 1981: 290)

The Arab poets, analyzed in this paper, did not “emancipate” themselves from the stark realities of their world and they insisted on engaging the political scene in the Middle East in the post 1967 war era. They aim to render the experience of war in all its brutal sensory plentitude by presenting a poetics of terrible literary disclosure. On this basis, their poetry represents the tragic consequences of the 1967 war that altered the geo-political map of the Middle East forever. The 1967 war poetry of revolutionary Arab poets, mentioned above, aims to dismantle myths that attribute the defeat to external interference exposing the war in a more disturbing sense than its distorted image in the false reports fabricated by the state media. Writing poetry as an act of cleansing and purgation, these Arab poets revolt against the local regimes involved in wars leading to repetitive defeats and the collapse of the Arab dream of unity and nationalism.

For example, Qabbani’s famous poem “What Value has the People Whose Tongue is Tied?” written during the height of the controversy over the 1967 war identified the defeat with a pattern of backward traditions penetrating Arab culture and religion for ages. In order to denounce the policies that lead to the defeat, Qabbani views the 1967 war as a turning point in modern Arab history: “I bring you news, O my friends / that the old language is dead/so too the old books / I bring you news / that our way of thought/which led to the defeat/is dead and at an end” (Khoury 1974: 181). The poet makes a confession indicating that the collapse of the Arab dream of unity and solidarity resulting from the defeat complicates the poet’s literary taste radicalizing his poetic production: “O my sorrowing

fatherland / in a single moment you changed me / from a poet writing of love and longing / to a poet writing with a knife” (Khouri 1974:181). As an anomalous event which led to the death of thousands of soldiers particularly on the Arab sides, the 1967war is evoked from behind the veil of official denial. Sarcastically, Qabbani states that the defeat could be traced not only to strategic failure but also to political propaganda:

If we have lost the war, it is not strange
for we entered it with all an Oriental’s gifts
with empty heroism that would not kill a fly
for we entered it with the logic
of the drum and the rebab.⁵ (Khouri 1974: 183)

Being committed to opposing the war, Qabbani repudiates the misleading political propaganda used by the Arab regimes particularly in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq which kept the Arab public opinion blind to the tragic consequences of the 1967 war:

The secret of our tragedy
is that our cries are stronger than our voices
and our swords taller than our stature
the secret of the matter
summed up in a phrase:
we have donned the husk of civilization
yet our soul remains primitive
with pipe and flute no victory is won. (Khouri 1974: 183)

Qabbani identifies the strategic concealment fostered by presidential lies, particularly the war propaganda led by the Nasser regime in Egypt, with something hidden in Arab history. He associates what is hidden with Arab

⁵ Popular musical instrument—local violin—is often used by wandering popular singers to recall ancient victories in their ballads in rural regions in the Arab world.

backwardness which is repressed in favor of interest in bombast and myths of false heroism: “with pipe and flute no victory is won.” Further, Qabbani blames the Arab leaders for their failure to find solutions for the plight of the Palestinian refugees: “we have paid for our love of improvisation / with fifty thousand new tents” (Khouri 1974: 183). The poet also reminds the Arab rulers that Israel is not responsible for the defeat because the Arabs were defeated long time ago before the 1967 war: “The Jews did not cross our borders / rather they crept in like ants / through the aperture of our faults (Khouri 1974: 185).

Attempting to reveal a pattern of fallacies which paved the way for the 1967 defeat, Qabbani argues that the Arab world is still living in the camel era demolishing popular myths about Arab nationalism and unities of religion, language and destiny integral to Arab culture in the era of decolonization. Further, the Arab world was dominated for ages by stagnant traditions, decadent culture and cursed by tyrannical governments: “for five thousand years / we have been underground / our beards are long, our names unknown / our eyes harbors for the flies” (Khouri 1974: 185). Being convinced that the Arab people have been dehumanized by dictatorial regimes who drag the Arab world back to the stone age, Qabbani addresses the Arab people: “O my friends / try to break down the door / to cleanse your thoughts your clothes / try to read a book, to write a book / to sow letters like grapes and pomegranates” (Khouri 1974: 185).

Instead of being deceived by the political propaganda disseminated by the ruling regimes about the destructive role played by Israel in the Middle East, states Qabbani, the Arab people should “voyage to the land of snow and mist / for you are unknown / to those above the ground / you are thought to be / some kind of wolf” (Khouri 1974: 185). The poet advises his folks to imitate the West and acquire western values in order to be civilized: “you are thought to be / some kind of wolf.” In addition to his criticism of the state of backwardness and decadence in the Arab world that leads to recurrent Arab defeats, Qabbani warns the Arab people of the banal discourse of official double speaking, a reflection of the diabolical policy of the ruling regimes who “make heroes out of dwarves / make the noble among us vile /

improvised heroism” (Khouri 1974: 187). Besides, the Arab regimes responsible for the defeat have squandered Arab wealth while the Israeli leaders were able to build a modern state in spite of being deprived of the natural resources available to the Arab leaders:

Our oil gushing forth in the desert
might have been a dagger of flame and fire
but, O shame of the nobles of Quraysh!
O shame of the valiant men of Aws and Nizar
it flowed away under your concubines legs. (Khouri 1974: 187)

The inter-textual reference to the ancient Arab tribes of Quraysh, Aws and Nizar is an indication that policies of corruption and betrayal have been part of Arab history since the pre-Islamic era until the present. Further, the argument about the squandering of the oil money and the petro-dollars under the feet of prostitutes and concubines explicitly aims to castigate Arab dictatorial regimes denouncing the policies of the Arabian Gulf monarchies (the nobles of Quraysh) toward the plight of the Palestinian refugees.

Mocking the Arab rulers who view the Israeli enemy as an epitome of a fragmented nation consisting of conflicting groups of immigrants recruited from Zionist ghettos, Qabbani indicates that while the Israeli leaders are able to construct an advanced nation, the Arab people

sit lazy and listless in the mosques
composing verses and compiling proverbs
and begging for victory over the foe
from His Almighty presence. (Khouri 1974: 187)

Seeking a radical restructuring of the attitude toward the 1967 defeat, Qabbani aims to subvert the myths and propaganda deployed by the state-side media which attributes the defeat to external factors particularly the unlimited western military support to Israel. Instead, Qabbani attributes the defeat to a stagnant culture and rotten reactionary traditions. He also

blames inherited religious / superstitious practices: “sit lazy and listless in the mosques / begging for victory from His Almighty.” Furthermore, Qabbani ascribes the current state of deterioration in the Arab world to internal policies of tyranny and oppression, pursued by the Arab rulers for ages:

If my safety were promised me
and I could meet the Sultan
I would say to him: O Sultan, O my lord
your hunting dogs have torn my cloak
your spies pursue me without ease,
like destiny, like fate ineluctable
they interrogate my wife
write down the names of my friends. (Khouri 1974: 187)

The preceding lines portray a vivid image of the torture policies advocated by the regime's oppressive apparatus. In all Arab prisons, free voices are suppressed and political opposition leaders are dehumanized and castrated. Their sisters and wives are often raped by the regime's agents in their presence in order to force them to make false confessions. As an ex-diplomat, Qabbani has a sharp insight into the ways in which Arab rulers look at their people and has an awareness of the ways in which the 1967 war is falsely projected in popular culture and national mythology. Therefore, Qabbani's speaker in the poem finds it difficult to complain to the Sultan, a symbol of all tyrannical Arab rulers responsible for the state of backwardness and cultural decadence in the region:

O Sultan, O your majesty
because I approached your deaf walls
hoping to reveal my sadness and my plight
I was beaten with my shoes
your soldiers forced this shame upon me. (Khouri 1974: 189)

Alluding to the repetitive humiliation of the Arab intellectual at the hands of

the regime's agents, Qabbani's persona becomes the speaking voice of the collective Arab conscience affirming that the Arab armies were defeated in the 1967 war with Israel not only because of mistaken military decisions but as a result of long term policies of tyranny and oppression as well:

O Sultan O my lord
you have lost the war twice
because half our people has no tongue
and what value has the people whose tongue is tied
because half our people are imprisoned like ants and rats
enclosed in walls
you have lost the war twice
because you have abandoned the cause of man.
(Khouri 1974: 189)

In the last lines of the poem, Qabbani refers to the false political propaganda preceding the 1967 war identifying himself and his fellow intellectuals, as "the defeated generation." He points out: "we are the generation of deception and tightrope-walking / we are the generation of nausea, of Syphilis and consumption" (Khouri 1974: 191). Exploring the tragic consequences of the distorted representation of the 1967 war in public media and its crippling impact on the psyche of ordinary citizens, Qabbani engages the moral and cultural problems integral to the defeat. Denouncing the pervasive representation of war which aims to achieve dubious political purposes, Qabbani underlined local corruption castigating policies of tyranny, advocated by Arab dictators against their people, which inevitably lead to the defeat.

Integrated into a genre of witness which depicts the hypocrisy of the Arab regimes, Qabbani's war poetry provides a critique of the rulers of rich Arab countries who spend huge amounts of money on corruption and sexual pleasures while abandoning the Palestinian refugees who live in the cities of tents. Qabbani's famous poem "Love and Petroleum / al-Hub wa alBetrol" which leads to the banning of his poetry in many Arab countries creates a

poetic explosion and provides a thematic shock due to its overt political thesis which smashes the Arab myth of collective consciousness during times of crisis:

Wallow
O oil prince
in your pleasures
like a mop
wallow in your sins
yours is the petroleum
squeeze it then
at the feet of your mistresses
the night-clubs of Paris
have killed your magnanimity
so you sold Jerusalem
sold God
sold the ashes of your dead. (Boullata 1976: 49-50)

Subverting the myths of Arab nationalism and unity during times of crisis and confrontations with western imperialism and its local allies, Qabbani argues that the absent-minded monarchs who govern the Arab countries are reluctant either to confront the enemy or find peaceful solutions for the Palestinian tragedy. These rulers have other priorities which they pursue in the brothels of Paris kneeling under the feet of European whores. The revenues of the Arab oil sources are squandered everywhere to gratify the lusts of a group of corrupt rulers who completely ignore the cause of the Palestinian refugees. Written ten years after the defeat of the Arab armies in 1948 war (al-Nakba-the catastrophe) and the first exodus of the Palestinians, the poem “Love and Petroleum / al-Hub wa alBetrol” uncovers the negative policy of some Arab countries toward the plight of the Arab-Israeli conflict lampooning Arab policy-makers and the tyrannical leaders of the Arabian Gulf states describing them as “desert camels” carrying the scars of “small-box” on their faces.

Alluding to the occupation of Palestinian cities like Jaffa, Haifa, Beersheba and using Christian symbols and narratives of crucifixion, the poet refers to the 1948 war erupting in the aftermath of Arab rejection of the Partition decree advocated by the League of Nations which divided Palestine into two states. The arrogant disapproval of Arab rulers of the Partition decree paved the way for the 1948 war, nevertheless, and these rulers turned their backs on the Palestinian tragedy after the eruption of the war:

As if the lances of Israel
did not abort your sisters
and destroy our houses
and burn our Qur'ans
as if her flags were not hoisted
over the shreds of your flags
as if all who were crucified
on trees in Jaffa
in Haifa
and Beersheba
were not of your kin. (Boulleta 1976: 50)

In devastating and eloquent lines, Qabbani puts an end to the controversy over the plight of the Palestine refugees affirming that the Arab leadership is basically responsible for the Palestinian tragedy due to their policies which paved the way for war. He addresses the rulers of the rich Arab countries alluding to the occupation of Jerusalem by the Israeli army in 1967 war:

Jerusalem sinks in its blood
While you are
A victim of your passions
You sleep
As if the tragedy
Is not part of your tragedy?
When will you understand?

When will the human being wake up in your soul?

(Boulleta 1976: 50)

Criticizing the shameful behavior of some Arab rulers and policy makers who squandered the oil money on personal adventures, Qabbani reminds them of their past referring to the “she camels” and “the Bedouin tattoo in their hands” and “the holes in their desert tents.” Turning their backs on the war between Israel and the Palestinians which led to the victimization of the Palestinian refugees, politicians from Arab rich countries preferred to spend their time in the Parisian night caves squandering the petrol revenues under the feet of whores and sex workers. These politicians and leaders, says Qabbani, “have sold Jerusalem, sold God and the ashes of the dead ancestors.” In “Love and Petroleum,” Qabbani aims to reveal the indifferent and irresponsible policies of some Arab rulers and regimes toward the Palestinian tragedy addressing them in an angry tone referring to the Zionist bullets “aborting your sister” and burning Arab holy books. Due to the derogatory and inflammatory rhetoric of the poem which severely attacks Arab leaders and policy makers, Qabbani’s poetry, as a whole, was banned in the Gulf countries for decades.

After the occupation of Eastern Jerusalem in 1967 by the Israeli forces, Nizar Qabbani wrote an elegy for the fallen city utilizing Christian narratives and crucifixion discourse. In “Jerusalem,”⁶ Qabbani appeals to Christ to save the holy city from destruction and annihilation: “I cried until there were no more tears to shed / prayed until the candles melted / knelt until kneeling bored me / I searched for Mohamed and Jesus in your streets.” Identifying Jerusalem as the city of all religions, Qabbani makes allusions to The Virgin Mary, Christ’s mother, lamenting the occupation of the holy shrines: “Jerusalem is the city of prophets/the shortest road between earth and heaven / Jerusalem is a lighthouse for the ships / a beautiful girl child with burnt fingers / Your eyes are sad / O city of The Virgin Mary / city of luscious

⁶ The Arabic text is translated into English by the author of the paper. See Gohar, 1999b.

gardens where the prophets made their way” (Cited in Gohar 2001: 53). Further, the agonized poet expresses sadness and sorrow reflecting the grief overwhelming the citizens of Jerusalem: “The stones of the streets/ the minarets of the mosques are sad/ Jerusalem, a beautiful lady shrouded in black / O Jerusalem, who will ring the bells in the Church of the Resurrection on Sunday mornings? / Who will bring the toys to the children on Christmas nights? / Jerusalem is the city of grief / a flood of tears roaming under the eyelids” (Cited in Gohar 2001: 54).

Engaging Western Tradition in the 1967 War Poetry

In the post 1967 war era, famous Arab poets like Nizar Qabbani, al-Bayati, al-Nawwab, al-Fayturi and al-Sayyab engaged Western / Christian tradition transforming them into a discursive dynamics to explore socio-political issues of great ramifications on the national and regional levels. Appropriating western narratives to be used in a different language and within a different cultural context, Arab poets aim to provide more depth and insight into a fossilized tradition which fails to confront regional transformations and international challenges. Throughout their encounters with western culture, Arab poets adapt non-native forms to revolutionize local perspectives deploying narratives of confrontations and challenging the ruling regimes which they found repressive and brutal. In the post 1967 war era, Arab poets, mentioned above, were engaged in a positive interaction with western literature to overcome alienation and disappointment integral to their cultural crisis. Entangled in the labyrinth of regional political events, particularly the 1967 war and the rise of the nation-states in the region, the new generation of Arab poets was seeking salvation in the West and its cultural paradigms. Unlike post-colonial writers, in different parts of the world, who reconstruct western literature in order to subvert it, Arab poets utilize western Christian narratives to challenge local dictatorial regimes. Biblical narratives were translated, parodied, quoted and appropriated to fulfill nationalist purposes. Therefore, the use of Christian narratives and crucifixion discourses, integral to post 1967 war poetry, constitutes a

sophisticated cultural dynamics which aims to revive a stagnant tradition by integrating western heritage in Islamic culture and literature.

Incorporating Christian narratives and biblical legends to describe the catastrophic events which took place in Jerusalem in 1967 as a result of war between the Israeli forces and the Jordanian-Palestinian troops, Qabbani, in “Jerusalem”, introduces Christ as a victim chased by a pack of assassins in the streets of the holy city. The poet apostrophizes the city saying: “Who will repulse your enemies / O pearl of religions? / Who will wash the blood from the stones of the walls? / Who will save the Bible? / Who will save Christ from his assassins? / Who will rescue humanity? / Jerusalem is my city / Jerusalem is my love” (Cited in Gohar 2001: 56). Unlike other poems about Jerusalem, which are always characterized by agony and pessimism, Qabbani’s text reveals an optimistic vision of the future of the holy city. He predicts a Second Coming for Christ who will return to Jerusalem spreading peace and happiness and putting an end to suffering and pain: “Tomorrow the orange trees will bloom / and the green wheat will rejoice / and the vines and olive trees will smile / Migrating doves shall return / to the blessed rooftops / and children will come back to play / Fathers and sons will meet / on your tall hills, my country / country of peace and olive trees” (Asfour 1988: 100).

In a similar context, Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati⁷, in “Nine Quatrains,”⁸

⁷ The Iraqi poet, Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati was born in Baghdad in 1926. In 1950, he graduated from Baghdad’s Teachers College with a BA in Arabic language and literature. In the same year he published his first poetic collection, *Malaeka wa Shayatin/Angels and Devils* and in 1954 his second anthology, *Abariq Muhashama/Broken Urns* was released. He worked as a teacher from 1950 to 1953 until he was expelled from his job and his country due to his ideological attitudes toward the puppet government of Nuri Al-Said, the Iraqi prime minister who collaborated with the British occupation authorities. In 1956 his famous anthology, *Al-Majd Lil Atfal wa Al-Zaytun/Glory to Children andOlives* was published and like the rest of Al-Bayati’s works, was translated into several languages. As a political refugee, Al-Bayati lived in many countries in the Arab world and Europe and most of his works were published outside Iraq. In 1957, *Qasaed fi Al-Manfa/Poems in Exile* was released before his return to Iraq in 1958. He was appointed as a cultural attaché in the Iraqi embassy in Moscow from 1959 to 1964. In 1960, he published *Kalamat la Tamut/Words that Never Die* and

explores the Arab defeat of 1967, in the Six-Day War with Israel, castigating what he calls “the donkey kings” responsible for the defeat of the Arab armies. He argues that after the defeat of 1967 all the masks of the hypocritical rulers were torn out. Al-Bayati criticizes the corrupt rulers and kings who spread rumors and empty rhetoric about their desire to sacrifice everything for the sake of restoring the Palestinian occupied territories. Commenting on the tragic consequences of the 1967 war, al-Bayati incorporates Christian symbols to emphasize his vision of the defeat: “Christ sold his blood to the donkey king / therefore, the revolutionaries were defeated / and the world sank in despair / the masks of the clowns fell down / in the mud of shame” (Diwan 1972: 265).

Likewise, in “An Elegy for the Sun of June,”⁹ al-Bayati laments the catastrophic defeat of the Arab armies, in the Six-Day War (1967) with Israel, denouncing the internal tyrannical policies which bring about the defeat. Depicting the reasons which paved the way for the war, the poet demonstrates that the puppet and dictatorial regimes, the local allies of colonization, are responsible for the war and the defeat: “the Arab people were not defeated / the big peacocks were those who tasted the bitter flavor of the defeat / Alone, they ran away before the beginning of war / we are the dead generation / the generation of charity and death / dying without price” (Diwan 1972: 28). In a lamentable tone, al-Bayati refers to the battlefield where Arab soldiers are killed and abandoned in the desert: “why did they leave us alone / preys for the dogs / stagnant bodies dying without prayers in the desert / carrying a crucified nation in one hand / and the dust of our homeland in the other / O God, do not chase the flies away from my wounds

in 1962 his anthology *Al-Tariq ela Al-Hurriya/The Road to Freedom* came into appearance while *Al-Nar wa Al-Kalamat/Fire and Words* was published in 1964. Due to his political commitments, Al-Bayati was deprived twice from his Iraqi nationality, once during the 1960’s and once during Saddam Hussain’s regime.

⁸ The Arabic text of the poem is translated into English by the author of the paper. See Gohar, 1999a.

⁹ The text of the poem is translated by the author of the paper. See Gohar, 2001.

/ since my wounds are the mouth of Job / and my split blood is looking for revenge” (Diwan 1972: 288).

In an attempt to denounce the immoral role played by Arab politicians and military leaders which led to the war and defeat, al-Bayati captures the scene of war where great numbers of Arab soldiers were abandoned in the Sinai desert and the Golan Heights. In order to undermine the literary attempts to poetize the war, al-Bayati depicts a horrible image of the battlefield where Arab soldiers are slaughtered like sheep due to mistaken military strategies. Writing poetry which stands as testimony of the atrocities of war, al-Bayati repudiates the war and its diabolical motives subverting myths that gave rise to the Arab- Israel war and sustained it. Resisting the de-historicizing process that seeks to obscure the war and bury its atrocities beneath cultural amnesia, al-Bayati promotes a poetics of confession aiming to keep the painful memories of war alive. The poet attempts to confront the realities of war questioning its cultural myths and subjecting them to criticism and revision.

In the preceding poem “An Elegy for the Sun of June,” the Arab soldiers killed in war due to the betrayal of Arab rulers and governments, are associated with Christ on the cross. Like Qabbani and al-Bayati, the great Iraqi poet, Badr Shaker al-Sayyab¹⁰, in “For Jerusalem,”¹¹ a poem written

¹⁰ 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

after the 1948 war, 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 fell apart / turning into ashes” (Diwan 1986: 575). In his attempt to depict the political scene in the Arab region after the catastrophic events which brought about the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948 and paved the way for the 1967 war, al-Sayyab utilizes myths and Christian traditions assimilated from western heritage viewing Jerusalem through crucifixion discourse and portraying the Arab world as a wasteland and moral wildness.

Confronting the Dictatorial Regimes

In his famous poem “The Actors,” Qabbani attributes the failure of three Arab armies to confront the Israeli armed forces during the 1967 war to internal dictatorial policies advocated by repressive military regimes. Permitting detailed excursions into the policies and strategies that lead to the defeat, Qabbani states:

When a helmet becomes God in heaven
and can do what it wishes
with a citizen-crush, mash
kill and resurrect
whatever it wills,
then the state is a whorehouse,
history is a rag,
and thought is lower than boots. (Jayyusi 1987: 378)

In the preceding lines, Qabbani denounces the brutal policies advocated by oppressive military regimes using the police and army as state repressive apparatuses to crush their people. Castigating Arab rulers who, like the

behind him seven poetic anthologies and several translations of western poets.

¹¹ The Arabic text is translated by the author. See Gohar, 2001.

ancient pharaohs, play the role of God, Qabbani underlines the dangers resulting from fostering official policies of oppression: “when a breath of air / comes by decree / of the Sultan / when every grain of wheat we eat / every drop of water we drink / comes only by decree / of the Sultan / when an entire nation turns into a herd of cattle fed in the Sultan’s / shed, embryos will suffocate / in the womb , women will miscarry / and the sun will drop / a black noose over our square” (Jayyusi 1987: 379). Lamenting the miserable conditions of the Arab homeland, after the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 war Qabbani deploys narratives of corruption and decay to articulate his vision of a world on the verge of collapse. The state of barrenness and lack of rebirth and resurrection dominating the poem is an indication of the inevitable failure of the Arab dream of nationalism and unity which was expected to be fulfilled in the era of decolonization. In its symbolic overtones, the poem indicates that the emergence of tyrannical regimes in the Arab world in the aftermath of WWII and the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 war with Israel have triggered a cycle of catastrophic events culminating in the collapse of Arab aspirations and nationalist dreams.

Crystallizing a state of moral bankruptcy and defeat, the poem signifies the difficulty of achieving social reform and prosperity in a region plagued by recurrent defeats and cursed with dictatorial rulers. As a consequence of eras of tyranny and concealment of the reality about the Arab Israeli conflict, three Arab armies were defeated in six days, nevertheless, the Arab kings and presidents, responsible for the shameful defeat, did not resign or commit suicide like the rulers of free nations: “the stage is burnt / down to the pit / but the actors have not died yet” (Jayyusi 1987: 379). Moreover, Qabbani not only blames the Arab leadership for the defeat but also puts the responsibility on social and religious institutions participating in the backwardness and deterioration of the Arab world:

The June war is over.
 It is as if nothing happened.
 Faces, eyes are no different.
 The courts of Inquisition reopened

and the inspectors, the Don Quixotes,
are back with their malignant conclusions.
People laugh
because it is past crying
They laugh because
it is beyond tears.
And we are content,
content with war, with peace,
with heat, with cold,
content with sterility, with
fertility, and with everything
in the Book of Fate
in the Heavens. And all we can say is
“Unto God we shall return.” (Jayyusi 1987: 379)

Confessing that the 1967 war and its disastrous results have transformed him from a poet of love and erotica into a revolutionary poet and political activist, Qabbani attributes the defeat to Arab backwardness and ignorance lamenting what he calls “the bankruptcy of the soul” in the Arab world where people escape into “witchcraft, chess and slumber” (Khouri 1974: 185).

In a related context, “Morphine,” a poem by Qabbani, denounces the official Arab media, controlled by repressive regimes, responsible for the distorted representation of the 1967 war and its catastrophic ramifications. He also castigates the Arab people who are easily deceived by the political propaganda proliferated by the ruling regimes: “the word in the Arab world / is a bouncing ball/ the ruler throws from his balcony/ the people run after the ball/ their tongues hanging out like hungry dogs” (Al-Udhari 1986: 102). Explicitly, Qabbani protests against official attempts to contain the horrible consequences of the 1967 war and bury the painful memories of the defeat using the state-media apparatus and the religious establishment as mouthpieces for the regimes:

The word is an overworked whore

the writer has slept with her
the journalist has slept with her
the Imam of the mosque has slept with her
the word has been a shot of morphine
rulers calm their people with speeches. (Al-Udhari 1986: 103)

Apparently, Qabbani refers to the abuse of language by Arab politicians during the post 1967 war campaign which aims to achieve dubious political purposes and keep the public opinion blind to the horrible realities of the defeat. Apparently, “Morphine” deals with the plague of censorship in the Arab world during the post-colonial era. In the poem, Qabbani argues that “the word” is an injection of morphine given by the regime to its subjects keeping them submissive and blind to the realities of a defeated army. To Qabbani, the word or political propaganda after the 1967 war, was used by the regime, the journalists, the media, the hypocritical poets and the mosque preachers to hypnotize the Arab people. To Qabbani, “the word” in the Arab world has turned into a prostitute practicing sex with the Arab regimes and their followers since the seventh century—during the early Islamic era until the modern times.

Like Qabbani, the Sudanese poet, Mohamed al-Fayturi denounces the Arab rulers who have been engaged in useless wars with Israel, wars which brought nothing except defeat and humiliation:

Your enemy has fornicated your history
your enemy despised your national anthems
and your empty war songs
the wound of Palestine can not be healed
by your emotional and patriotic songs
the shame and disgrace of June 1967
can only be removed by the battle
of al-Qadesiyya. (Complete Works, Vol. II, 1979: 84)

The reference to the empty songs of Arab heroism and the humiliating defeat

of June 1967, when the Israeli forces achieved an unprecedented victory over the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, are indications of the current state of collapse dominating the Arab world. The allusion to the historical battle of al-Qadesiyya, when Arab forces, led by the historical hero, Khalid Ibn al-Walid, crushed the fearful army of the Persian Empire led by Khusru, during the early Islamic era, is a reminder of ancient Arab glories. Nevertheless, al-Fayturi expresses doubts about the possibility of achieving any contributions by the Arabs under the current condition, therefore, he addresses the rest of the poem to the future generations motivating them to change the status quo by demolishing “the thrones of defeat”:

I am singing for the coming generations
 who will crush the thrones
 of defeat
 I am singing for the coming generation
 before the banners of my generation
 fall down
 I sing and write the elegy of those
 who have fallen down on the road.
 (Complete Works, Vol. II, 1979: 84)

In a similar context, al-Fayturi denounces the Arab rulers who brought catastrophes and curses to their countries. While glorifying revolutionary leaders in Africa such as Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Ben Bella and Nelson Mandela, al-Fayturi in “I Sing and Write my Elegy / Ughani Wa Aktubu Marthiyyati” criticizes fossilized Arab rulers (the mummies), the inheritors of the imperialistic legacy, who betrayed their nations. The poet states that these dictatorial rulers who are transformed into fossils and mummies should be removed by power since Arab rulers insist on staying on their thrones until they either die or get assassinated: “The mummies who feel proud of beingdefeated / the fossils who are interested in beinghumiliated / those who are cloaked with betrayaland treason (Complete Works, Vol. II, 1979: 82).

Further, al-Fayturi condemns the mummified Arab rulers who not only robbed the wealth and natural resources of their people but also brought havoc and disaster to their countries:

I know that you are burning
the gardens and the birds
I know that you will leave nothing
for the future generations
except ashes and ruin.
(Complete Works, Vol. II, 1979: 83)

Further, the poet argues that those rulers who burn “the gardens and the birds” squandering the fortune of the coming generations are also responsible for the 1967 war. The shock of disillusionment born out of the 1967 defeat made it a war that can not be understood in traditional terms undermining a structure of narratives deployed by state-controlled media replacing myths of glorious heroism with myths of banal anguish and depression.

Like other Arab poets, Mudhafar al-Nawwab, in his famous anthology “Night Strings/Watariyyat Layliyya,” mostly devoted to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, exposes the political and military impotence of Arab governments and regimes underlying the failure of all corrupt Arab leaders to support the Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and dignity. During his life in prison, his mother sent him a letter which reached him after being kept for more than two months in the police department for investigation. Consequently, al-Nawwab¹² demonstrates: “I have to be very cautious when

¹² Mudhafar al-Nawwab descends from a well-known Shiite family that originally immigrated to Iraq from the Arabian Peninsula. As a result of engaging in revolutionary activities against the invaders during the Turkish colonization of Iraq, al-Nawwab’s family was dismissed out of the country. The family settled in India for a long time but they were banished back to Iraq by the British authorities after the British occupation of India. As a member of a revolutionary family, al-Nawwab opposed the dictatorship of the Iraqi governments in the

I speak on the telephone/ when I speak to the walls/ when I speak with children and babies” (Watariyyat 1985: 51). In Iraq as well as in many other Arab countries, school children have been frequently used as agents for the regime’s secret police, thus, the poet is afraid of talking with children in the Arab world. By using the police forces, the intelligence agencies, the prison system and other repressive instruments to subjugate their own peoples, Arab rulers have succeeded, to a great extent, in keeping the status quo and remaining in power for ages. Nevertheless, these repressive regimes have unfortunately mutilated and maimed the regenerative human power in the Arab world creating a nation of cripples and cowards unable to achieve the pan-Arabism dream of restoring occupied Arab territories and reluctant to cope up with the requirements of a post-industrial world. Maintaining systematic tyranny against their peoples, these oppressive regimes in compliance with external imperialistic forces have ironically paved the way for the birth and emergence of fundamentalist Islamic organizations which have recently brought more havoc to the Arab world and the West.

In their confrontations with the enemies of the Arab nations, Arab rulers

1950’s and 1960’s, consequently, he was brutalized by the regime’s agents. In 1963, al-Nawwab, as a result of political persecution, decided to escape from Iraq to the Soviet Union via Iranian territories. In the beginning of his journey of escape, al-Nawwab infiltrated into his hometown, Al-Ahwaz, located in the border region of Arabistan, which was annexed to Iran during the era of Western colonization. Overwhelmed by feelings of nostalgia for his hometown, the poet stayed in Al-Ahwaz for a short time before being arrested by members of the Iranian Intelligence Agency. In Iranian prisons, al-Nawwab was subjected to different forms of torture and humiliation. After his deportation to Iraq, he was convicted of serious political crimes and was consequently given a death penalty. Fortunately he was able to escape from prison, and then he found a sanctuary in the southern region of Iraq. Nevertheless, he was arrested in 1969 and was banished out of Iraq forever. As a refugee poet, al-Nawwab has stayed in different places—such as Cairo, Damascus, France, Greece, Thailand, Russia, India, Algiers, Libya, Sudan, London, Chicago, Brazil and other South American countries—moving from one exile to another carrying the pains of a wounded nation.

behave as cowards; nevertheless, they are transformed into aggressive tyrants and brutal dictators as they deal with their own peoples particularly with those who call for freedom and democracy. Al-Nawwab, therefore, criticizes the domestic policy advocated by the dictatorial and military regimes in the Arab world, a policy which advocates persecution and suppression. In most of the Arab countries people are dominated by a repressive apparatus whose main function is to tyrannize and brutalize Arab citizens. In these countries where democracy and human rights are luxuries, ethnic/religious minorities, political opposition activists and dissidents of state policy spend most of their lives either in external exile or in domestic prisons. In Arab countries where dictatorial regimes prevail, everything is subjected to police interrogation. Al-Nawwab himself was imprisoned in Iraq and Iran for political reasons.

In “Watariyyat/Night Strings,” al-Nawwab refers to the 1967 defeat intensifying his satire, sarcasm and lampooning of puppet Arab rulers who betrayed the Palestinian cause bringing shame and chaos to the Arab world. He also attacked the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) leaders who have exploited the suffering of their own people by squandering the money, initially dedicated to support the refugees, on personal pursuits. Instead of using the money raised in Arab countries and elsewhere to sponsor the liberation war against a ruthless enemy, Palestinian leaders, according to Al-Nawwab, have squandered big amounts of money on pleasures and extravagant adventures.

These Palestinian leaders who have betrayed the cause of their people and the hypocritical Arab rulers (kings and presidents) who have been contented of being THE slaves of imperialistic countries particularly The United States and Israel (according to the poet’s vision) are the real enemies of the Arab people: “These are your enemies, oh my homeland/ your enemies are those who have sold Palestine and gained the price/ your enemies are contented of being beggars / standing at the doorsteps of hypocritical rulers/ and attending the banquets of imperialistic and rich countries” (Watariyyat 1985: 49¹³). Instead of dedicating themselves to revolution and the holy war

¹³ All quotations from “Watariyyat” are translated by the author of the paper.

against the enemies of the nation, (according to the poet's vision), some Arab and Palestinian leaders have spent their time in nightclubs and five-star bars where they became drunk. While being drunk, these leaders, according to the poet, hallucinate about the Palestinian tragedy saying: "Jerusalem is the bride of the Arab Nation" (Watariyyat 1985: 49). Satirizing the Arab leaders who spend their time not in revolutionary activities but in the arms of prostitutes and criticizing all the puppet regimes in the Arab world al-Nawwab swears that all the Arab race will be inevitably eradicated by Israel and its imperialistic allies as long as Arab countries are governed by these "bastard rulers."

In the famous "Sons of a Bitch" (Awlad Al-Kahba) section of al-Nawwab's anthology (Watariyyat), the poet attacks all Arab leaders accusing them of treason and betrayal. He believes that these hypocritical rulers are responsible for the loss of Palestine, thus al-Nawwab cries in anger:

"Oh sons of a bitch, (Awlad Al-Kahba), Jerusalem is the bride of
your Arabism
why did you send all the night adulterers to her bedroom
while shrinking cowardly behind the doors
watching the rape scene
and listening to her screams and appeals for help
while her virginity is being violated, all of you start to withdraw
your swords
pretending to avenge her raped honor
instead of slaying the rapists
you start shouting at her
demanding her to be silent and conceal the scandal
you even force her to shut up her mouth to preserve Arab honor
from disgrace you are really very honorable men
shame on you, shame on all of you- sons of a bitch
How can a raped lady remain silent?" (Watariyyat 1985: 50)

Portraying Jerusalem as a virgin lady raped by an alien Zionist invader,

al-Nawwab seeks to emphasize the Arab identity of Palestine and its holy city as well as the brutality of the invaders. By depicting the Arab rulers as a group of cowards remote-controlled by imperialistic forces, the poet affirms the impossibility of liberating Palestine or establishing a Palestinian state under the current political circumstances in the region. In an angry manner, al-Nawwab addresses Arab leaders and policy makers:

sons of a bitch
I have to reveal your dirty reality
the truth is that even the most pious and virtuous among you
those who claim to be patriotic, chaste and righteous
are more disgusting than any nasty-smelling pig barn
now, it is time to expose your scandals to the public eye
now it is time to strip you of your hypocritical masks
sons of a bitch,
you have assassinated the happiness of Arab people
In all the capital cities of the Arab world. (Watariyyat 1985: 51)

By failing to defend and restore the Arab land that Israel has taken by force, the Arab rulers, according to the poet, should be killed and buried in the dunghill of history. In order to promote feelings of scorn and shame toward Arab rulers, the poet effectively visualizes a rape scene where Jerusalem, a sacred symbol for Muslims, Christians and Jews, is being abducted and ravaged by the invaders in the presence of all Arab rulers who are nothing but shameless eyewitnesses of the crime. Due to the cowardice and indifference of contemporary Arab rulers toward the rape of holy shrines, the poet calls for overthrowing them and stripping them of their powers.

Conclusion

In spite of encouraging protest against the corrupt and diabolical policies of the defeated Arab regimes, the revolutionary Arab poets, discussed in this paper, argue that protest and revolt are not sufficient to

remove the Arab dictators from power. Therefore, their anti-regime poetry is an attempt to put insight into the history of 1967 war in order to alter the collective consciousness of a nation subjected to ideological brainwash and political manipulation. The ultimate aim of their poetry is to obliterate the barriers of amnesia that the Arab regimes have erected in order to prevent people from coming to terms with the reality of the 1967 war and its consequences. Being convinced that protest is a means of resistance, yet, it is not sufficient to deter Arab regimes from burying the war memory under the veil of historical amnesia, these poets call for a poetics able to confront political myths and lies. For them, poetry should be effectively involved in politics in order to foster appropriate action able to keep the war memory alive in the collective consciousness of the Arab people. This process would activate the anguish of people toward the morally and socially destructive impact of the 1967 war on the Arab world. In addition to the loss of innocent lives, the war intensifies hostilities between the Israeli people and the Arab nations enhancing the Palestinian/Israeli hostilities and postponing the final settlement of the conflict to unknown times.

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