

Yahia As-Samawi. A Nation in Exile

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Abstract: The present paper is a critical analysis of the various aspects of a central theme in the poetry of the Iraqi contemporary poet Yahia As-Samawi; it is the theme of exile. Exile is a typical theme in As-Samawi's poetry, and the exiled figure, whether in one's own country or abroad, roams through the poet's oeuvre from the first of his many technically and thematically varied collections of poetry to the most recent of them. In this, As-Samawi is a representative poet who typically and forcibly expresses the conditions which Iraq has been going through for several decades of its modern history, during which the country and its people have witnessed the worst kind of dictatorship and totalitarian rule. As a result of this, Iraq was turned into a nation in exile, and poet Yahia As-Samawi was to become the best spokesman for the people's hopes and aspirations and the most expressive of the nation's dilemma. He thus can rightly claim a position that places him in the company of such great classical poets of modern times. He can also claim an equally important position among the innovators of modern Arabic poetry, the practitioners of the so-called free-verse movement.

يحيى السماوي. وطن في منفى

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الملخص: البحث دراسة نقدية تحليلية لأوجه متنوعة تتخذها موضوعة النفي عن الوطن في قصائد يحيى السماوي. التي سواء كانت تخص فعل النفي داخل الوطن أو خارجه، أو تخص الشخص المنفي، وهي موضوعة تحتل موقعا في أعماله منذ أن أصدر مجموعته الأولى حتى أحدث مجموعاته الشعرية على الرغم من تعدد وتنوع أساليبها وتقنياتها. بذلك يصبح السماوي معبرا عن الظروف التي مر بها العراق على مدى عقود من الحكم الدكتاتوري المستبد، استحاله بسببه الوطن إلى منفى والشعب إلى شتات هائم في منافي الغربية. فالسماوي خير معبر عن آمال وطموحات شعب يبحث عن الحرية والخلص فيكون بذلك شاعرا بارزا من الأحياء، إذ كتب القصيدة العمودية بإبداع يؤهله لاحتلال مكان بين كبار الشعراء العراقيين الذي كتبها، كما كتب الشعر الحر أو شعر التفعيلة فضلا عن النص النثري فأبدع فيها إبداعا لا يقل عن إبداعه في عمود الشعر مما يضعه في مصاف رواد الحداثة الشعرية وغيرهم من شعراء ما عرف بحركة الشعر الحر.

As-Samawi, Yahia Abbas Abboud (١٩٤٩-?) is an Iraqi poet who was born in Samawa, a city in southern Iraq. He graduated from Al-Mustansiriya University with a B.A. in Arabic language and literature. He worked after graduation as a teacher and a journalist in Iraq and Saudi Arabia before he migrated to Australia in ١٩٩٧ where he has lived ever since. His first collection of poems appeared in ١٩٧٠ under the title of *Your Eyes are a World*, and then other collections followed. The following are some titles of his collections of poems: *Poems at the Time of Captivity and Weeping* (١٩٧١), *My Heart Worries about my Country* (١٩٩٢), *Some Songs of the Tramp*(١٩٩٣), *A Wound as Wide as the Nation*(١٩٩٤), *The Choice*(١٩٩٤), *Your Eyes are my Nation and Exile*(١٩٩٥), *Quartets*(١٩٩٦), *This is My Tent...Where is My Homeland?*(١٩٩٧), *I Closed My Eyelids on You, The Horizon is My Window, Wild Lilies, Inscriptions on the Trunk of a Palm*(٢٠٠٥), *A Rosary of Words for Beads*(٢٠٠٨), *Weeping on My Homeland's Shoulder*(٢٠٠٨). As-Samawi won the Abha Prize in ١٩٩٣ and Al-Babteen Prize in ٢٠٠٨.

The first thing we notice about Yahia As-Samawi's poetry is its striking variety. It ranges from the traditional forms such as the *qasida*, that goes back to pre-Islamic times, to the most recent developments in Arabic poetry such as the so-called prose poem. His poems can be perfectly traditional, the term "traditional" being used here in the sense of "classical", in both its themes and techniques. Of course, when As-Samawi writes the *qasida*, the reader may sometimes feel there are some developments and changes that can be found here and there in the poem. Yet these are in fact slight and at the same time bound by those greater and more powerful aspects of the Arabic poetic tradition that are never easy to break from by a poet whose outlook and spirit have been immersed deeply in the most genuine Arabic culture and its literary and poetic heritage.

In most of his poems, As-Samawi represents almost every aspect of the ancient, traditional *qasida*, the basic type of classical Arabic poetry. The reader also finds those traditional features of the *qasida* in his poems that are scarcely matched by many of his contemporaries. His language, yet, does not make you feel the heavy weight of that traditional spirit often felt as accompanying the heavy poetic diction of much of the traditional poetry presently written by poets of a lesser talent than As-Samawi.

He is then one of the modern poets who can be seen as one of the true inheritors of the genuine classical poem and who remained faithful to its original techniques that have been followed over centuries. His poems clearly reveal his professional expertise, his deep and learned knowledge of all the secrets of the craft of poetry, accompanied by an undoubtedly great talent. The following statement by the critic Abdul-Lateef Al-Arna'utt sums up the basic qualities of As-Samawi the poet and the man and rightly places him as one of the great talents of Arabic poetry of modern times:

As-Samawi is rightly considered the genuine inheritor of the elegant style of classical Arabic poetry. He has comprehended and mastered the secrets of its mysterious craft and applied it to his poetry, but without being restricted by it. He took the essence of the modern movement, and those basic components of it that do not do any injustice to tradition...His poetry represents the best that can be demanded of the call for modernization. ¹

Al-Arna'utt also speaks of the poet's preoccupation with the theme of exile which is a central theme that runs through all his poetry, whether the poems written before his exile or those written after it. What characterizes Al-Samawi's poetry, the critic says, is his honesty in everything he wrote to reflect his own personal experience and suffering under the cruel rule of dictatorship, casting that experience on to a broader image of a victimized and suffering whole nation.² He chose the

hell of exile, preferring it to being enslaved and humiliated by the tyrannical regime.

In a poem significantly entitled "Captives," which is typically classical in both theme and technique, though it is included in the poet's most recent collection, the poet recalls the most famous name of a beloved in all Arabic poetry, Layla—the beloved of the greatest Arab poet/lover, Qais. He connects this symbolic name with his homeland, a connection often made in Arabic poetry all through its history, usually taking the form of an identification between the two, the beloved lady and the beloved homeland. This Layla has now been taken a captive by a "despicable bastard" who

Has crossed the seas to captivate a nation
And establish therein an emirate of feuds.
I am the martyr, for my beloved is a captive
And my cities have also been captivated.ʻ

This identification is a favorite theme in As-Samawi's poetry. It is the subject, and the title, of one of the poems of his collection, *A Little bit of you...Not much of them* (أنا وأنت). On the thematic level, as well as structurally, the poem is a series of analogies by which the poet recreates the image of the beloved lady into the beloved country:

Between you and Iraq
There is a similitude:
You both inhabit my heart, like a burning sap;
You both have declared insurgence
Against the windows of my eyes.

This paradoxical image of the burning sap effectively expresses the poet's agony at the injustices done to his beloved lady/nation, and this agony has reduced him to ashes, as the following images of death clearly show:

Here I am between you two
Like a martyred poem;

Or a corpse that love has thrown
Into the cemetery of papers.'

The poet sanctifies the two great rivers of his country, and here the Euphrates functions as a synecdoche for the whole nation:

Between you and Euphrates
There is a bond:
You both flow down my eyes
When passion overflows,
And when the soul's dove complains
Of the desert heat.

His great love for both the part and the whole, that is, the symbol of the life of the nation and the nation itself, while undergoing a death-process, has made of him a "murdered wish," a "blood-imbrued laugh" that can be read and felt as the pain that disperses through his writings. He then compares them to "a minaret besieged by invaders" and himself a "psalm waiting for prayers" to be said in "the dormant cities." Another synecdoche is used again, this time the analogy being between the beloved and another spiritual symbol that goes into the depths of the nation's historical, religious and cultural memory; it is the date-palm tree, "our mother," as it is called in a Hadith (tradition) of Prophet Mohammad. The image that combines these two beloveds is that they both, as mothers, have lost their sons because of both "dictators and invaders." In the final stanza, a thematic and structural turn takes place: the stanza does not present another analogy as expected; instead, the poet uses a semantically paradoxical image in which he asks his beloved not to wonder if the date-palm of his life gets old even before his birth begins. This is because, he justifies,

Yahia Al Samawy, *A Little bit of you ... Not much of them* (Damascus: Al-Takween Publishing House, ٢٠٠٦), p. ١٥.

(يحيى السماوي، قليلك... لا كثيرهن، دار التكوين، دمشق ٢٠٠٦)

The root is there in Baghdad
Sucking the mud of panic,
While the branches are here in Adelaide.
And here I am between you two,
A Sinbad sail,
Voyaging between death and birth.

A considerable number of Al-Samawy's poems, particularly in this collection, are variations on this theme. The title poem of the collection (it is worth noting that the title of the poem is not the same as that of the collection; it is "Are You Departing Tomorrow?," while the collection's title, *A Little bit of you ... Not much of them*, is based on one of its lines)— displays a subtler and more compact poetic diction and texture, deeper and less direct meanings, richer in their signification. The poem begins with several rhetorical questions which form its first section:

Are you departing tomorrow?
Then what use is my voice?
I will keep to my cave of silence
Until my desert blooms
With the rhythm of your returning steps,
So that I may return like a perplexed question.
How shall I get to your clouds
While I have failed
To get to your earth?
I shall lull my throat to sleep
For what use is a song
Not sung to your lute?

With this beginning the poem, which is apparently addressed to the poet's beloved, seems to move within a wide range of possible implications that point to a more generalized figure, the figure of, again, the lady as identified with the nation. These questions are in fact all "perplexed" questions, as it is stated in one of the lines; even

grammatically they are structured either as statements or as conditional sentences or as cause and effect clauses. This seems to be a linguistic device by which the poet can "generate" meaning by making these questions generate one another. By this linguistic/poetic gesture of a question generating another question, the poem, in its second and final section, will in turn generate variations, on the personal level of the poem's protagonist, on whatever answers such questions might be expected to be given:

It needs a dream
To know that I slept my night
In your absence;
Now my victory has come full circle
By the defeat of my proud trees
Before the shades of your forests;
Now I raise the banner of my heart's surrender;
So prepare my chain,
Take my morrow,
So that I can end my vagrancy by residing
Behind your door,
Like an eyebrow which, being perpetuated by darkness,
Has come to drink from your meteor;
And like a mouth that with prayer performed ablution
Hoping that your lips will utter
A welcome to me.

Another, structurally more important, linguistic/stylistic device used in the poem is a duality (or a binary opposition) that is the nucleus of many other binary oppositions, such as the following:

victory defeat
pride surrender
vagrancy residence

Or:

coal ice
little much
thirst water

As in the following lines:

There is still wood enough in my orchard for your fire
So chop my trees for your firewood,
In the hope that my coals will melt the ice of your doubts
And suspicions.

Significantly enough, this nucleus occurs almost in the middle of the second section. It is the following line, already referred to, and which is the title of the collection:

A little bit of you will satisfy me better than the much of others.

It is thus placed as the center of a linguistically realized meaning, enacted, so to speak, or performed, by the poet's use of such linguistic devices as paradox, juxtaposition or collocation by which he enhances the poem's signification:

So blame not a thirsty one who has abandoned fresh water
And come to beg you for a cup of your mirage.
But if I drop down
Imbrued with the flames of my passion
And, when the stars glitter, enshroud me
With a wedding dress of yours,
And pray God may send me
Water of forgiveness.
For though my heart has kept your secret,
My poems have betrayed you!

Al-Samawy is a vehement rebel who effectively makes use of his poetry as a tool of revolt against all the evils and vices of his times; he is a steadfast defender of the poor, the oppressed and the underprivileged, because he himself went through all these types of suffering. He believes that the poet has a sacred role to play. Like the Romantics, he often

assumes the role of the social and political reformer waging his holy war against all sorts of evil. This may sometimes tinge his poems with that propagandist spirit required when the poet's voice turns into a voice of a public speaker.

However, one of the qualities of great poetry and poets is that they win over their readers with their art even though the readers may be in disagreement with their ideas or the content of their poetry or their outlook or "philosophy of life". This is not only because of the poet's ability to provide his text with what S.T. Coleridge called, in the *Biographia Literaria*(^{١٨١٧}), as "that willing suspension of disbelief, which constitute poetic faith."^٢ (That is, you may not agree with whatever belief the poet might be expressing in his poem, yet you willingly suspend your disbelief during the act of reading in such a way that it will not affect your enjoyment, or reception, of the poem). It is also, and more importantly, because of the poet's art that wins over all your senses so that you become so fully absorbed in the aesthetic experience that anything else becomes a matter of secondary importance. This is exactly what a reader of Al-Samawy's poetry, who would not agree with his views or ideas, feels, and how he responds to the experience of the poem.

By playing this role, Al-Samawy becomes the true spokesman for millions of oppressed Iraqis who have been suffering a lot under very bad conditions, both under Saddam's tyranny and after the so-called liberation of his country which the poet sees as an American occupation. Thus his personal exile has turned into an exile of a whole nation; it is as if the whole nation were in exile. This theme is subtly dealt with in a poem addressed to the poet's friend and fellow poet Zeki Al-Jabir, entitled "Stay in Your Exile." It is one of Al-Samawy's finest poems which combines all the threads of the themes and techniques that are

S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed., H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, ١٩٨٥), p. ٣١٤.

dispersed all through the poet's *oeuvre*. The poem begins with an invocation to the addressee calling him not to set his sails and go to Iraq so as to end his exile, as the addressee seems to be intending to do. This is because the conditions there have not changed; they have become worse:

Set not the sails
The seas have got no waves,
No wind is there but sighs.⁷

Then the poet questions the possibility that his exiled friend might have believed the false speeches of "dervishes" about dignity, freedom, justice and national conformity. The bitter truth he tells his friend is that he (the poet) has already been there but found no city and no soil to which he might convey the greetings of his friends.

The poem conjures such great names of historic personages as the philosopher and thinker Al-Hassan of Basra, or the great linguist and philologist Al-Faraheedi, or the great political and religious leader Imam Ali, cousin to Prophet Mohammad.

The poet asks his friend to stay in his exile. To persuade him of the horrible state of his homeland, he draws a picture of it using the following effective images:

Had the soil been skilled in escape,
It wouldn't have stayed in a nation sentenced to death.

or

While wolves have all united,
Lambs debate over crumbs on the table of misers.

These lambs, whose blood is to be spilled as decreed by the orthodox Islamic clergy, are at one time "slaughtered" in the name of an Islamic paradise, at another time "skinned" according to the night vision of the reverend Mufti, or according to the interpretation of the

Al-Samawy, *Weeping on My Homeland's Shoulder*, p. ๐๐.⁷



holy text by his "catamite;" and still another time because they refuse to make peace with the occupier, or because they reject as unholy the liberty promised by the oppressor of nations, that is America, or when they refuse to obey

...the will-castrated courtiers,
The dolls whose strings are tied
To the reverend Rabbi.

The poem is thus a strong satiric attack upon both the occupier of the nation and those natives who subserviently succumb and accept enslavement without showing any signs of resistance. While the former are satirized with the most bitterly ironic stance on the part of the poet, the latter, who consist of the clergy and the government, are wittily lampooned and comically ridiculed:

A sparrow may be killed
If its feathers happen to be
Not of the colour of the imam's frock.
A deer by the roadside may be slapped
If it didn't let its beard grow.

The poet's ridicule is intensified by his humour as he puts it in the form of a rhetorical question:

Is it a state
That is being led from an embassy where,
If in his hiding the ambassador sneezes,
The country catches cold ?

And the poet ends his poem as he began it, with that same invocation stated in the title:

Stay in your exile
Until the darkness clears.

This poem is a metaphor for the poet's refusal to replace old Iraq with a supposedly "new" one which is in reality only a second version,

not different from the first, if not rather worse. Exile is hell and, for the poet, therefore, hell is everywhere.

This refusal to replace the old homeland with a not very different one, that is to replace dictatorship with occupation, is the subject of the opening poem of his collection *Inscriptions on the Trunk of a Palm* (٢٠٠٥) which won Al-Babteen Prize for ٢٠٠٨, one of the most important and much celebrated literary prizes in the Arab World. The poem, entitled "Get Out of My Country," is addressed to the American occupying forces. It begins as follows:

This land we love
Does not grow jasmines
For the greedy invaders...^٤

He then demands that they must get out of his country whose people, orchards, rivers and soil have all been slaughtered. This is because

We do not replace the pig with the wolf,
Nor plague with TB,
Nor death with leprosy;
So get you out of my country.

In this angry poem, the poet voices out his protest against the occupiers who, he says, have destroyed everything, and who have come with false promises which they would not keep. They are therefore opposed and rejected by the people and by the land:

The occupier's helmet cannot be a dove's nest.
Get you out of my country.
The spilled blood won't be tulips.
Get you out of my country.

Yahia Al Samawy, *Inscriptions on the Trunk of a Palm* (Damascus: Al-Takween Publishing House, 2nd Ed., ٢٠٠٥), p. ٧.

(يحيى السماوي، نقوش على جذع نخلة، ط٢، دار التكوين، دمشق ٢٠٠٥، ص٧)

And in one of the sections of the title poem of this collection, the poet states:

The pulse is in our boughs,
But death is in the roots;
We are like a windmill
Turning around ourselves,
And around us turn,
Whip in hand, the occupier, the murderer, and the hired one.
Like an oven, we
Are satisfied with the ashes
And our bread?
It is eaten by the occupier, the murderer, and the hired one.
(Section ١٢, p. ١١١)

This feeling created by the poet, as critic Abdul Aziz Al-Muqalih writes, comparing Al-Samawy in this respect with his fellow great poet Al-Jawahiri, is a "real feeling that sums up the status of thousands if not millions of Iraqi refugees all over the world....driven away from home by occupation, the vile substitute of dictatorship."° Al-Muqalih praises the poet as one of the major Arab poets of modern times. He states that in Al-Samawy's poetry there "ripple echoes of a clear language that provides the reader with a lot of grief and more of beautiful imagery."¹ Al-Muqalih finds evidence for his contention in a poem entitled "When You Are With Me" This poem is one of Al-Samawy's finest love poems written in the modern form. This is how it begins:

When you are with me,
The embers of my sighs get cool,
And spring lays

Abdul Aziz Al-Muqalih, "The Pain of Immigration As Written by the Iraqi Poet ° Yahia Al-Samawy" <http://www.iraqcp.org/members/006603makalh.htm>, April ١٥th, ٢٠٠٨.

(د. عبد العزيز المقالح، "وجع الهجرة كما كتبه الشاعر العراقي يحيى السماوي")

Al-Muqalih, op. cit.¹

Its bed for me.
Roses sprinkle their odor
Over my pillow.
The river banks weave for me
A dress from their water,
And from the silk of their grass
A bed sheet.
The morning braids its forenoon
Into a seesaw...^v

The poem is a clear evidence that, even when Al-Samawy writes about love per se, that is personal love, showing himself to be a great lover who can express the highest and most intense emotions of love, with the beloved becoming the ideal incarnation of pure Platonic love, yet the double image of the beloved lady/nation is never absent from the poet's conscious or subconscious perception. While each of the great poet/lovers of classical Arabic poetry meets his beloved, as is stated later in the poem, Al-Samawy's lover is the "twin-rivers lover" who meets his "meadows" because he, due to being in exile, lost his "date-palm childhood" and "boyhood love."

This tendency, and the techniques the poet uses in the sample poems that have been so far discussed, clearly, and typically, show the importance of two characteristic features of Al-Samawy's poetry. They are, firstly, the public role to be assumed by the poet if he seeks to have a strong impact on his audience, and, secondly, the equally important, and strongly related, role of ideas in the poems.

These two aspects often lead the poems in the direction they take , and sometimes even suggest to the poet which particular form a particular poem should take. Whether in his classical *qasida* or the poems written in the so-called free verse or those pieces which he

Al Samawy, *A Little bit of you ... Not much of them*, p. ١١٢.^v

(يحيى السماوي، قليلك... لا كثيرهن، ص ١١٢)

himself calls "prose texts," Al-Samawy lays so much emphasis on the ideas he tries to convey to his readers and on the impact of those ideas he seeks to put on their minds. A quick look at the titles of his collections as well as the single poems will make it very clear that these titles function as doors to the texts. This aspect of Al-Samawy's poetry may be seen at its clearest in a collection entitled *A Rosary with Beads for Words: Prose Texts*. In the ninety-nine (the same number of beads of a typical Islamic rosary!) pieces of this collection, thought plays an important role through taking the shape of a peculiar mixture of ideas and images, that is, through bringing together sense and sense perception. This is the opening piece of the collection:

Small, like an orange, is my heart..

Yet, there's room

Enough in it

For the whole world![^]

What characterizes these prose texts is that their language displays a fusion of poetic and prosaic elements. "Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy," editor Peter Johnson explained in the first issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, "so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels."[^] Yet, Al-Samawy's prose texts manipulate this formula in a way that has been greatly affected by the controversy in cultural and literary circles over the terminologies associated with the so-called "free-verse movement" in the Arab world. He is perfectly right in *not* calling these pieces "prose poems."

Some of these pieces are distinguished by the poetic characteristics of rhythmic, aural, and syntactic repetition; here is an example:

Everything goes its own way:

Yahia Al-Samawy, *A Rosary of Beads for Words* (Damascus: Al-Takween ^ Publishing House, ٢٠٠٨), p. ٥.

Cited in <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/٥٧٨٧>, Oct. ١٥th, ٢٠٠٨.^٩

The river to the sea;
The spike to the oven;
The sparrow to the nest;
The liar to damnation;
The pen to the paper;
The prayers to God;
The nation to the money-changers;
And my heart to you.

Some other pieces display compression of thought, sustained intensity and patterned structure, as the following piece shows:

I laid down my bow and arrows,
Raising my heart, a banner of surrender;
Be you the gallows that
Lift me to the sky,
Or
The chain that ties me to the ground..
For I will not enjoy the bread of freedom,
Unless I be
Tied to your oven
With the chain of my pulses.

Their brevity enhances the rhythmic poise and acoustic structuring, the expressive elisions and condensed imagery, normally associated with verse:

The insanity of my heart
Is evidence
To the sanity
Of my mind!
.....
.....
The river of my virility
Does not enjoy flowing

Anywhere except
Through the fields of your femininity.
Depth of philosophical thought also plays its part, as in:
I know that slaves
Are the ones who built
The Pyramids,
The Chinese Wall,
And the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

But:

Where did their sweat go?
And their screams under whip lashes -
Where did they end up?

And, last but not least, the following poem employs one of the figures of speech as a basis for its structure and meaning; it is paradox:

Between dying in your absence
And being resurrected in your presence:
I dangle,
Hanged with the rope of my questions,
Gazing
At a future that is gone..
And at a past that
Has not come yet.

Paradox is just a figure among many different and varied devices upon which is based the composition of any kind of verse that verges on the boundaries of prose, or, as in the controversial free-verse movement in modern Arabic poetry, makes use of any devices that may put up for any elements of metrical and rhymed verse that may be lost when prose becomes the medium of poetry.

Yahia Al-Samawy stands at the forefront of the march towards freedom and liberty for a nation in exile. Exile in his poetry is the center of interest, because it is the common lot of many Iraqis who have

suffered from this state of being exiled and estranged, whether in their own country which has been a large prison for decades, or in their Diaspora. In its language and method, diction and style, image and symbol, which are all put at the service of this major theme, Al-Samawy's poetry is a powerful expression of a nation's dilemma.

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