

## The influence of walt whitman in the poetry of saadi Youssef

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<p>Date of Article</p> <p>Received : 2021/12/1</p> <p>Received in revised form: 2022/5/26</p> <p>Accepted: 2022/6/5</p> <p>Available online: 2023/1/15</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Poetry, Influence , Political Views, Translation.</p>	<p>Saadi Youssef (1934-2021) is a poet, writer, and journalist whose political activities made him end up in his prison as a political prisoner (Poetry Foundation). Being a prolific poet after publishing more than 30 volumes of poetry, Saadi Youssef was actively engaged in translation, his translation of Walt Whitman is noteworthy. This paper intends to investigate the influence of Walt Whitman on Saadi Youssef's poetry from various perspectives, including and precluding politics. His poetry marked by its political aspect, which can be aspect shared elements in his poetry and Walt Whitman's political approach. It is intriguing to see that some of Youssef's poems, such as <i>America America</i>, manifest this common ground.</p>

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### Introduction

Indeed, analyzing Whitman's political views stipulates the condition to achieve the main purpose of this research, such as investigating his influence on Saadi Youssef's poetry. Walt Whitman's political agenda relied on individuality and liberation as two of the major themes of his poetry. Speaking of freedom, Whitman refuses to express his view regards certain political positions, focusing on how politics affect individuals rather than complicated political situations (Wihl 76). Therefore, it is safe to say that Whitman aspect a certain political romanticism as the fundamental principle of his political thought is far from right-winged or progressive approach, but rather a strong focus on the

subjective liberation of individuals valuing personal belonging culture (Wihl 76).

Whitman does not discuss democracy in its pure sense; however, he delves into its implication and its manifestations in literature and he emphasizes:

the origin-idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth, even from the opposite ideas. But the mass, or lump character, for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weigh'd, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them ( Whitman 373).

As it is evident for Whitman, democracy must provide individuals the right to express their individuality and self-hood. It goes against the modern principles of calling all under one banner and imposing a unified identity on them, making Whitman a pioneer of romantic politics.

Nevertheless, one must attend to the central question of the research which is about how Whitman impacts Saadi Youssef's poetry from a political perspective. One of the major qualities of characters of Whitman's poetry which is manifested in Youssef's poetry, is that literature must make political order imaginable and reflect the individual experiences (Wihl 77). Accordingly, the first poem by Youssef to be explored in is his regard "America America". The poem plays on love and hate, mostly hated it, begins by praising the country for conquering its former prison and explains the military pride in invading foreign land. Youssef also focuses on his individualistic perception of the American invasion without denying the collective experience of war.

God save America

My home sweet home!

The French general who raised his tricolour  
over Nagrat al-Salman where I was a prisoner  
thirty years ago . . .

in the middle of that U-turn

that split the back of the Iraqi army,  
the general who loved St Emilion wines  
called Nagrat al-Salman a fort . . .

Of the surface of the earth, generals know only  
two dimensions:

whatever rises is a fort

whatever spreads is a battlefield. (Youssef 1-11)

The mock praise of the foreign invasion prepares the readers for the more individualistic expression, which gets more intense as the reader goes deeper into the poem. From line 12 on, Youssef emphasizes the necessity of going beyond numbers and maps in the definition of freedom. Therefore, when he writes, "But Liberation was better versed in topography" (Youssef 14), he follows Whitman's ideas on the necessity of expressing individualism in the definition of liberation and democracy, a point which the militarized freedom operations simply neglect. As the reader goes through the poem, it becomes more evident that Youssef merges the political understanding of Whitman with a moral perspective. In fact, the expression of individual experience of war and the loss of lives, is bounded heavily to the moral consequences of war.

The Iraqi boy who conquered her front page  
sat carbonized behind a steering wheel  
on the Kuwait-Safwan highway  
while television cameras  
(the booty of the defeated and their identity)  
were safe in the truck like a storefront  
on rue Rivoli.  
The neutron bomb is highly intelligent,  
it distinguishes between  
an *îl* and an *îdentity*. (Youssef 15-24)

One take on the poet's sarcastic language saying "the neutron bomb is highly intelligent / it distinguishes between / an *îl* and an *îdentity*" (Youssef lines 22-24), could question the necessity of democracy from a Romantic philosophical standpoint. Among the political philosophers, George Kateb masterfully explains the defection of modernity in presenting the merits of

democracy in Walt Whitman's poetry. For Kateb, the primary standard of democracy is to have a moral commitment and maintain individuality (Kateb 78). Hence, it is safe to say that *America America* is a poem that questions moral responsibility and saves individuality by explaining the experience of loss because of war. For instance, Youssef clearly states that what the United States offers them, such as the oil trade, or the peaceful relations with the world's superpower, does not worth it loss of his identity and the end of indigenous, quiet life. It is then expected to see lines describing the rustic life and praised by romantics and by Whitman. Youssef says "Leave me, pilot, leave my house roofed with palm fronds and this wooden bridge/I need neither your Golden Gate nor your skyscrapers/ I need the village not New York. (Youssef 53-55)

The merit of Youssef's poetry is that he turns individuality into a weapon to protest against the mission for democracy, which is congruent with Kateb's view that the "the doctrine of the individual has the preeminent place in the theory of democracy. . . Any philosophical consideration of the individual (or the person or "subject") which does not take this contribution [of the work of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman] into account simply ignores the richest set of ideas belonging to the field" (Kateb 78).

To provide some evidence to the quote above, Youssef writes:

let us exchange your gifts.

Take your smuggled cigarettes  
and give us potatoes.

Take James Bond's golden pistol  
and give us Marilyn Monroe's giggle.

Take the heroin syringe under the tree  
and give us vaccines.

Take your blueprints for model penitentiaries  
and give us village homes.

Take the books of your missionaries  
and give us paper for poems to defame you.

Take what you do not have  
and give us what we have.(Youssef 68-80)

Hence, it is safe to conclude that the influence of Walt Whitman on Saadi Youssef's *America America* is evident in his perspective of democracy. In fact, the poet follows Witman's philosophy on the very principles of democracy and emphasizes the importance of individual experience as the neglected part of the democratic project pursued by American militarism, which replaces the unique self-experiences with unified and alienated offerings.

I intend to focus on cities in the second aspect of this paper to show how Walt Whitman influences Saadi Youssef in various ways. Whitman's perception of cities is bounded by population and people's interactions. In fact, he never considers urban nature in isolation from the towns and their inhabitants (Pannacker 43). For Whitman, a city must transcend a oneness between nature, the people, and the urban culture it represents. Saadi Youssef's poem *Koofa* considers this collectivity and bounds it to heart.

We did not name it so that it would become a city.

We came to it thirstily,  
starved

limping on blazing sands,  
blinded by sun glow.

We cut the world from Mecca to the palace of Naaman.

We cut the world with a sword  
until bone protruded through our hands and  
whitened.

When we reached water we said  
let us rest here  
and watch the bank  
where water pours, flows, and pours. (Youssef  
1-12)

The repetition of the word "we" indicates the collect effect of building a city with a historical reference to it. In fact, history shares a master narrative code that tries to put people together. Therefore, however bitter the experience of people might be, the people in the city follow each other to shape the urban experience together, or as Brand calls it, to transcended oneness which is a laudable expression of Whitman populism (Brand 185).

Another important aspect of the lines quoted in the previous paragraph is the role of nature in the poem. Like Whitman, who sees the urban life connected to nature (Pannacker 42), the setting in *Koofa*, which the poem begins, also signifies the integrated relationship between nature and people. That is not surprising to see a plethora of natural elements regarding the interaction between people and wildlife, such as the glow of the sun, and the blazing sands. It is safe to indicate that *Koofa* is a poem describing building history through nature, which accentuates Whitman's idea of unifying urban life and nature. Some of Whitman's influence on Youssef does not come from Whitman's poetry but from his novel *Franklin Evans* for writing which Whitman drew on Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791). Franklin believed in building cities from scratch through dedication and perseverance, which means there must be

a constructive relation, primarily based on the capitalist myth in the relation between humans and urban life (Franklin 1307). Walt Whitman's novel *Franklin Evans* represents such interaction in a distorted way and questions Benjamin Franklin's Utopian view as well as emphasizes the complexity of developing the urban life, representing it as a labyrinth leading to the possibility of destruction.

"It is almost unnecessary to describe the fate of this new arrival in the city; the achievements of Whitman's Franklin will not parallel those of his namesake. Novels like *Franklin Evans* provided a counternarrative for the seductive, capitalist myth of the self-made man. The city may become a utopia for the upwardly mobile, but there is an equally pervasive dystopian vision of the American city as a "labyrinth" into which innocent young people are lured and destroyed. The city is portrayed as a place from which one must ultimately escape, like Nineveh or Sodom, in order to retain one's virtues as an ideal American, who is, almost by definition, not a city-dweller. As Thomas Jefferson put it, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" (Jefferson 1984: 290). If Whitman eventually became known as a poetic celebrator of urban life, his prose writing reflects ambivalence about the city that is characteristic of nineteenth-century American culture as it transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy." (Pannacker 46-47)

Saadi Youssef is particularly interested in combining the theme of destruction with the vision of urban life, and it is evident in his poem *Koofa*. In *Koofa*, Youssef is not looking for a constructive or a positive view about

building a bright feature prdune of prosperity and success. On the other hand, he goes even further relying on Whitman's suspicion over the theme obset success and narrates the actual destruction of Koofa city. Hence, the content presented in the poem is a narration leaning toward the destruction of the collective experience and history because of war. As an illustration, Youssef denies the intention of the first inhabitants of Koofa to building a city and merely describes it as a resting place and the a natural connection between people and nature. Besides, the fate of Koofa and the escape of its inhabitants a strong representations of Whitman's fear of failure in building cities and creating progressive life.

We did not name it so that it would become a city.

We built nothing except the mosque  
the wall  
and the hut of Ali.

But the first century is no longer the first.

Here we are now leaving it

H

U

N

G

from

the gun barrels of tanks. (Youssef 16-27)

The expansion of such intense pessimism based on Whitman's understanding of urban life is also evident in Saadi's Youssef's *The New Baghdad*. The poem is a representation of the mature Whitman, who also embraced the features of American romanticism, seeking a deep connection between people and nature (Pannapacker 50). Here again, the reader faces a darker image of the relationship between nature and humans,

intertwined with the failure, which was also present in the *Koofa*. I subscribe to the notion that Youssef intelligently merges the borderlines of rural and urban space by describing people without presenting it as a form of capital with industrial progress and the significant development of civil infrastructures. *The Baghdad* setting, which is a desert, an abandoned city full of emptiness, is part of this dark image represented by the poet.

She comes to me with a bowl of soup  
when I am besieged by

fumes

of cheap arak.

She comes to me in dusty noons.

And with each sunset night snatches

she comes to me with

an evening star. (Youssef 1-8)

A critical point in *The Baghdad* is the economy of the inhabitants and it should be considered as an element fading the borders between urban and rural life. According to Walter Benjamin, Whitman's poetry de-essentializes the arbitrary, imagined distinction between urban and rural modes of existence (Benjamin 71). The economy described in *The Baghdad* is devoid of any sign of city life. Selling natural products like cheese and liver makes urban space and rural areas closer, and the effect is intensified as the whole poem is centralized around the poverty and the undeveloped condition of Baghdad, even though with no significant historical point.

In the market she sells cheese  
and buffalo livers.

She dusts her used-clothing stores,  
searching for bones in a bowl of soup,  
for milk to the lips of a child



and a glimmer in a pair of eyes  
and something a woman does not yet know  
and streets where water never greens.

At night

she roams among houses abandoned by the  
poor

and churches where a muffled mass fades  
and huts where poor girls faint.

At midnight

she returns to her enchanted shelter

behind muddy streets,

carrying the bread of the dead, (lines 10-24)

By and large, Saadi Youssef's poetry and the influence of Walt Whitman on him, follows both a direct and modified influence. As it is evident throughout the paper, the interaction between nature and human, is manifested in three different ways. *America America* points out to the direct individual experience and the necessity of considering individuality at the core of democracy, an idea which the American militarist democracy seems to be deprived of. Therefore, the democracy came to Iraq through war, destroys the individual experiences, and shatters the deep connections between individual and nature, while the poet tries to restore some of this bioinspired images in the life. On the other hand, *Koofa* and *The New Baghdad* share the modified view of human-nature relation in an urban context. However, the former intends to disrupt the modern, unified, and linear representation of urbanism in which the diligence and perseverance essentially lead to success. Both *Koofa* and *The New Baghdad* narrate a twisted idea of American romanticism, wherein the beautiful nature to which individual takes shelter, has turned to be a dark image, a piles of ruins because of war

and poverty, and an economy strange to industrialization of modernity.

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## تأثير والت ويتمان في شعر سعدي يوسف

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### الملخص:

سعدي يوسف (1934-2021) شاعر وكاتب وصحافي جعلته أنشطته السياسية في سجنه كسجين سياسي (مؤسسة الشعر). لكونه شاعراً غزير الإنتاج بعد نشر أكثر من 30 مجلداً من الشعر ، كان سعدي يوسف يعمل بنشاط الترجمة ، وترجمته لوالث ويتمان جديرة بالملاحظة. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى التحقيق في تأثير واث ويتمان على شعر سعدي يوسف من وجهات نظر مختلفة ، بما في ذلك السياسة واستبعادها. تميز شعره بجوانبها السياسية ، والتي يمكن أن تكون عناصر مشتركة في شعره ونهج واث ويتمان السياسي. من المثير للاهتمام أن نرى أن بعض قصائد يوسف ، مثل أمريكا أمريكا ، تعبر عن هذه الأرضية المشتركة. الكلمات المفتاحية: واث، ويتمان ، سعدي ، يوسف .