

Badir Shakir Al-Sayyab's Response to Edith Sitwell: A study of Rain Son and Still Falls The Rain

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Abstract

The purpose of this comparative research is to examine the parallels and differences between T. S. Eliot and Arab poet, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab. The study investigates those poets' perspectives on impersonality. It demonstrates how Eliot stresses that impersonality is essential to poetry, while Al-Sayyab, in contrast to him, makes no negative remarks on personality and impersonality. Additionally, the study investigates how similar those poets' perspectives on traditional heritage are. Additionally, it looks into the intertextuality of their works. The study concludes that Al-Sayyab and Eliot hold similar views on traditional heritages they emphasize the necessity of a positive relation between modern and traditional heritage. In this regard impersonality in poetry, Eliot contradicts himself because he

could not escape being impersonal in his poetry. On the one hand, Al-Sayyab's poems bear stamps of personality and impersonality. The study also concludes that intertextuality between Al-Sayyab on the one hand and T. S. Eliot on the other hand, is due to acculturation rather than influence and eurocentrism.

Key Word: Modern Arabic Poetry, Song of the Rain, Still Falls the Rain, Edith Sitwell, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's.

يهدف هذا البحث المقارن إلى دراسة أوجه التشابه والاختلاف بين الشاعر ت. س. إليوت والشاعر العربي بدر شاكر السياب. تتناول الدراسة منظوري هذين الشعراء حول التجريد، مُبيناً كيف يُشدد إليوت على أن التجريد جوهر في الشعر، بينما لا يُبدي السياب، على النقيض منه، أي انتقاد للشخصية أو التجريد. إضافةً إلى ذلك، تتناول الدراسة مدى تشابه منظوري الشعراء حول التراث التقليدي، فضلاً عن دراسة التناص في أعمالهما. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن السياب وإليوت يتشاركان وجهات نظر متقاربة حول التراث التقليدي، إذ يؤكدان على ضرورة وجود علاقة إيجابية بين التراث الحديث والتراث التقليدي. وفيما يتعلق بالحياد في الشعر، يتناقض إليوت مع نفسه لأنه لم يستطع التخلص من هذا الحياد في شعره. من جهة أخرى، تحمل قصائد السياب سماتٍ من الشخصية والحياد. وتخلص الدراسة أيضاً إلى أن التداخل النصي بين السياب من جهة، وت. س. إليوت من جهة أخرى، يعود إلى التقاطع لا إلى التأثير والمركزية الأوروبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر العربي الحديث، أغنية المطر، لا يزال المطر يهطل، إديث سيتويل، بدر شاكر السياب.

1. Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century. The word “influential” is used on purpose since Eliot’s concepts and poetry have played an important role in the shaping of modern poetry and modern literature. In fact, Eliot’s influence was not restricted to English or American literature alone. One of Eliot’s effects was on modern Arabic literature and poetry. Although Eliot’s works were popular in the 1920s, his effect on Arabic poets began to take place in the 1940s (Asfour 69). His free verse and free themes penetrated into Arabic poetry that followed the traditional form. Among the poets who adapted Eliot’s style is the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir As-Sayyab. As-Sayyab is argued to have been influenced by many Western writers, including William Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot (Bor Nehzami and Samimi 145). Many critics, such as Aziz Al Haj Ali Haidar, argue that As-Sayyab's reception of Eliot made him the revolutionary leader of modernism in Arabic poetry. As-Sayyab’s poetry has been known for its free verse and free themes, as similar to Eliot’s. Mythology, on the other hand, is one of the major characteristics in Eliot’s poetry. In one of his most influential works, “The Waste Land”, Eliot uses what he calls the “mythical method” which he believes is “a step toward

making the modern world possible for art” (Eliot 178). Similarly, the “mythical method” is also used by As-Sayyab in many poems, including “Rain Song” or “Unshudat Al-Matar” and “Jaikur” published in 1960. Taking into consideration Eliot’s influence on As-Sayyab, and both poets’ use of myth, this paper will conduct a comparative study between Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and As-Sayyab’s “Rain Song” proving that As-Sayyab uses the mythical method that Eliot calls for with preserving the myth of the Eastern Civilization, and adopting Eliot’s free writing.

2. Literature Review

T.S. Eliot is known for his extensive use of Myth in his poetry. Commenting on the concept of “tradition”, Eliot argues that “tradition” makes the writer “most conscious of his place and time” (Eliot 38). In other words, tradition have an important impact on the text of an author. On the one hand it gives an author a historical sense, and on the other hand it makes him more aware of his writings and surroundings. Eliot says in the same essay that writers are always conscious of what they are writing, taking into consideration that his present is affected by the past (Eliot 41). Aida Azouqa comments on the role of myth in modern poetry, and says that the use of what she calls “mythical

frame” in a poem gives it “universality” (Azouqa, 45). Comparing Azouqa’s claim with Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* which speaks of parallel myths, it can be said that Azouqa’s notion of “universality” of myths is applicable in terms of the parallelism of myths across Western and Eastern cultures. A very significant issue is brought up by John Mikhail Asfour. In his *An Anthology to Modern Arabic Poetry*, Asfour speaks about the references that modern Arabic poets relied on for mythology. Eliot, for example, as an Anglo-American writer relied on Western Mythologies found in ancient European tradition and the Christian and Jewish scriptures. Arab poets, however, and according to Asfour, did not rely on the Muslim scripture- the Koran, for mythologies; they referred to ancient Arabic legends and folk tales, in addition to some “famous wanderers and martyrs” such as (Al-Hallaj and Sinbad 63). This is true, but not to mention that many Arab poets were in fact Christians and many of them referred to Christian mythology, including some Muslim poets, as As-Sayab himself, who wrote of Christ’s crucifixion.

2.1 Contributions of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab

As the movements of Modern Arabic Poetry were shaped by social, cultural and political change, so was the poetic career of

celebrated Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. Discussing al-Sayyab's poetry necessitates a simultaneous discussion of the origin of free verse experimentation which was the movement he helped define. Al-Sayyab began to compose in the early 1940s' when the Romantic Movement was gaining visibility in Iraq. The Romantics wrote poetry that challenged the thematic limitations of Classical Arabic Poetry, but while they moved from traditional to more personal themes and offered a diverse range of imagery, they remained loyal to classical structure. The Romantic Movement was instrumental in guiding the transition to Free Verse Poetry, in which al-Sayyab's mastery is so celebrated. Al-Sayyab's first collection of poetry, *Azhar dhabila* (Withered Flowers), published in 1947, remained adhered to classical structure but reflected popular romantic themes. A single poem in this collection experiments with free verse, (Ali, 67).

He was one of the best poets in Arabic literature, and his experiments influenced the development of contemporary Arabic poetry. He started the free verse movement with Nazik al-Mala'ika at the end of the 1940s, and Abdulwahab Albayati and Shathel Taqa soon followed. His numerous excellent poems from the 1950s gave it legitimacy. Among them was the well-known "Rain Song," which had a crucial role in raising awareness of the use of myth in poetry. In addition to writing numerous personal

poems, he also created extremely engaged political and social poetry, revolutionizing every aspect of the poem. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's poetry had a significant impact on Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. One of the most important developments in modern Arabic poetry was the release of his third volume, *Song of Rain*, in 1960. He was a Marxist at the beginning of his career, although he never became radical before switching back to Arab nationalism. He passed away in poverty after developing a degenerative nervous condition while still in his forties. (Al Haj Ali Haidar 77)

The poetry of Louis Aragon, Nazim Hikmet, and Edith Sitwell—who, together with T. S. Eliot, had a significant effect on him—is included in the seven poetry collections and translations he created.

2.2 Contribution of Edith Sitwell

In the introduction to "*The Canticle of the Rose*" British poet Dame Edith Sitwell wrote: "At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us." Her early work was often experimental, creating melody, using striking conceits, new

rhythms, and confusing private allusions. Her efforts at change were resisted, but, as the *New Statesman* observed, "losing every battle, she won the campaign," and emerged the high priestess of twentieth-century poetry. The *New Statesman* has said that Sitwell's place in poetry is "roughly commensurate with that of Christina Rossetti in the previous century," and insists on the primacy of her personality. The sister of Osbert and Sacheverell was indeed not to be trifled with. Says Sacheverell: "She was always determined to be remarkable and she has succeeded." The *New Statesman* described her thus: "great rings load the fingers, the hands are fastidiously displayed, the eye-sockets have been thumbed by a master, the eyes themselves haunt, disdain, trouble indifference, and the fashions are century-old with a telling simplification." At times, and perhaps not unintentionally, she looked like a Tudor monarch. The author of a study of Elizabeth I, she once remarked: "I've always had a great affinity for Queen Elizabeth. We were born on the same day of the month and about the same hour of the day and I was extremely like her when I was young." (poetry archive).

3. Method

3.1 The Influence of Edith Sitwell on Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab

In 1926, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab was born in a village in southern Iraq close to Basra, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates. He worked as a teacher and studied Arabic and English literature at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad. However, he was fired from his position due to his membership in the Iraqi Communist Party, which he had joined in 1945 when Iraq was ruled by the pro-British monarchy that Communists had established in 1917. Ten years later, in 1954, he quit the Iraqi Communist Party. The middle stage of his poetic career, known as the "commitment period," coincides with the time he was a member of the Communist Party.

His sympathy for the oppressed and victims of social and political tyranny persisted in his poetry even after he left the Communist Party and wrote a number of articles outlining his disillusionment and disassociation from the ideology he had supported for ten years. Although his tone was arguably and less revolutionary, his solidarity with other people's battles was still strong, even though it was incorporated into more personal themes. Many of his poems, such as "The Blind Prostitute," "The Gravedigger," "Weapons and Children," and "Christ after

Crucifixion," have titles and subjects that allude to this. This was also a period in which the idea of committed literature had taken root in the Arab world. Al-Sayyab was also instrumental in translating Anglophone poetry into Arabic. He translated and was influenced by Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Yeats, Auden, Ezra Pound, Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Federico Garcia Lorca, Paul Eluard, and Aragon. (Sinan Antoon, 2010)

English romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats had an impact on Al-Sayyab. In addition to translating some of their writings and incorporating them into his own, he dedicated poems to them (Baidoun 44–45). But he was more affected by modernists like Eliot, particularly throughout his mature poetry stage. English poetry had an impact on him, and he was "an admirer of Edith Sitwell" (Haidar 8). We are not surprised by his assimilation of modernist ideas and methods as modernism was a global movement in scope, influence, and vision. His elegant use of articulate diction and (the Eliotic) free verse created the foundation for modernism in Arabic poetry. (Shadi Neimneh and Zainab, 2015)

Iraqi writer. 1926–1964 Among the seminal poets in Arabic literature, his experiments influenced the development of contemporary Arabic poetry. He co-founded the free verse movement with Nazik al-Mala'ika at the end of the 1940s, and

his numerous excellent poems from that era gave it legitimacy. Among them was the well-known "Rain Song," which had a significant role in raising awareness of the use of myth in poetry. In addition to writing numerous personal poems, he also produced highly intricate political and social poetry, revolutionizing every aspect of poetry. One of the most important developments in modern Arabic poetry was the release of his third book, *Song of Rain*, in 1960.

He was a Marxist at the beginning of his career, although he never became radical before switching back to mainstream nationalism. He passed away in poverty after developing a degenerative nervous condition while still in his forties. The poetry of Aragon, Nazim Hikmat, and Edith Sitwell—who, together with T. S. Eliot, had a significant effect on him—is included in the seven poetry collections and several translations he created. (www.adab.com/en/modules)

"At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us," British poet Dame Edith Sitwell wrote in the introduction to 'The Canticle of the Rose'. In her early work, she frequently experimented with melody, stunning conceits, novel rhythms,

and perplexing intimate allusions. Despite opposition to her attempts at reform, she emerged as the high priestess of twentieth-century poetry, "losing every battle, she won the campaign," as noted by the *New Statesman*. Sitwell's position in poetry is "roughly commensurate with that of Christina Rossetti in the previous century," according to *The New Statesman*, which also emphasizes the importance of her character. It was true that Osbert and Sacheverell's sister should not be taken lightly. Sacheverell says, "She was always determined to be remarkable and she has succeeded." *The New Statesman* characterized her as follows: "great rings load the fingers, the hands are fastidiously displayed, the eye-sockets have been thumbed by a master, the eyes themselves haunt, disdain, trouble indifference, and the fashions are century-old with a telling simplification." She occasionally, and maybe not accidentally, resembled a Tudor queen. "I've always had a great affinity for Queen Elizabeth," the author of a study on Elizabeth I once said. When I was younger, I was very similar to her because we were born on the same day of the month and around the same time of day." (Poetry Archive).

4. Discussion

4.1 Analysis of "Still Falls the Rain"

One of Sitwell's earliest serious poems after finishing *Gold Coast Customs* (1929) is "Still Falls the Rain." The start of World War II and her brother Sacheverell Sitwell's urging ended her ten years of relative quiet. rather than criticizing Germany and the other adversaries of Great Britain throughout the war, Sitwell concentrates on the more general problems of pain and forgiveness as they apply to all people. She prays for Lazarus and Dives, both the worthy and the undeserving. She recognizes that Christ endured suffering on behalf of everyone and that every year of his life—rather than just the years of war—contributed to his death on the cross. Her depiction of wartime England serves as a metaphor for humanity's ongoing desire for atonement throughout history. At the poem's conclusion, Christ is shown as having unwavering love and selflessness. The world's crimes and sorrows seem endless, yet God's love surpasses them all. This poem is therefore highly optimistic in its faith in God's capacity and readiness to intervene in a chaotic world, despite the fact that it deals with the wartime.

According to Edith Sitwell's biography and the poem's date, Still Falls the Rain is considered a war poetry, particularly one about the Second World War. According to the other source, rain is a metaphor for a bomb dropped during combat. Although the entire poem is about grief, it seems to be trying to convey that there is yet hope. Three similes are used to depict the rain: "Dark as the world of man, black as our loss, and blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails upon the cross."

Black and dark create a gloomy atmosphere that is associated with grief, mourning, and sorrow. Blindness, on the other hand, demonstrates that grief will never be indiscriminate about its victims, regardless of whether they are men, women, or even children, wealthy or privileged, educated or not, etc. The final line of the third stanza, "Under the Rain the Sore and the Gold are as one," further reinforces this. This poem has a lot of rhythm.

The emergence of rain is also described in the second line, with a sound that resembles a heartbeat that has been altered to a hammerbeat. This metaphor illustrates how the rains get more and more intense like a hammerbeat.

As a devout person, Edith Sitwell incorporated a lot of religious ideas into her poetry, including this one. She refers to The Messiah, the Christian messiah, by using the phrase "the Starved

Man hung upon the cross." Similar to the sentence ninetieth (—those of the light that died, The last faint glimmer), which implies that prayer is the only thing left for the defenseless, the Starved Man here indicates that there is yet hope for humans.

In the fourth stanza, describes a second instance of the Starved Man in line three of the fourth stanza: He carries all of His wounds inside Him. This implies that the Starved Man is the last chance for humans because war only brings suffering and crimes that the average person could not handle on their own. However, as war never chooses its victims, it may equally be said that proletarians, the weak, and the destitute are the ones who will suffer the most from it.

The scars of the sorrowful, incomprehensible gloom can be found in the self-murdered heart, much like in Lazarus and the Dives. This indicates that despite how evil the world appears to be, there is still a sense of regret within.

In the third verse, "Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us—On Dives and On Lazarus," she is modifying the reflections on Christ's wounds and applying the idea of Christ's suffering, death, and wounds. In line twelve, "Dives" refers to the rich man who, without realizing that the poor man (Lazarus) had died at his gate, sent Lazarus to paradise and Dives to hell. It informs us that war is immoral, but the final phrase

clarifies that the narrator also asks God to show mercy to both good and evil people. Since killing one another is a complex aspect of combat, it might be difficult to decide which side is superior.

The voice of someone who likes the human heart then appears in the final stanza. was once a young child who lived amid monsters. The narrator talks about a person who was once innocent and kind like a child, but because he grew up in an area with wicked people, he ended up being one of them. However, the narrator did not alter their love or faith since they continued to feel that there was something positive hidden within. "Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee" appears in the final lines and verse.

We can infer from the preceding analysis that the rain in this poem conveys a sense of misery, anguish, and sorrow. This poem's combination of visual and aural images wonderfully captures the author's desired atmosphere. This poem has a strong religious overtone, emphasizing that repentance to God is the only way to purify oneself and that violence is wicked. This rain has both positive and negative effects, much like genuine rain. that everybody who believes has hope at all times.

4.2 Analysis " Rain Song"

Al-Sayyab makes the most of his modernist literary endeavors in "The Rain Song" by relying on a fundamental fertility myth and the inevitable rebirth—without naming Adonis. According to R. Awad and Al-Sayyab (1983), this makes myth an intrinsic structural pattern in the poem rather than a decorative element. In this instance, the woman represents mother-earth, the land, and the country.

Al-Sayyab's "The Rain Song" reiterates in a ritualistic fashion the words "Rain...Rain...Rain" to quench the thirst of the soil and the hunger of people:

"Iraq will burst forth into leaf
With the rain." (Bishai, 86).

People wait for the rain that will eventually fall. However, in Al-Sayyab's "The Rain Song," rain is combined with blood and tears. There is hope for rebirth, but it may come after a brutal revolution and a great deal of pain (Shadi Neimneh et al., 190). While deliverance is difficult, overthrowing tyranny is not impossible:

In every drop of rain which falls
Yellow or red from the heart of a flower,
And every tear shed by the hungry and the naked,

And every drop spilt of the blood of serfs
 Is a smile awaiting a fresh one
 To follow in its wake, or a nipple
 Which flowers at the mouth of a babe
 In the young world of tomorrow;
 World, giver of life.

And the rain falls heavily. (ibid 98)

Death as the cause of renewal brings forth life. Al-Sayyab's system of imagery includes "similes, metaphors, allegories, literary allusions and symbols". Boullat argues that Al-Sayyab's village and its river "with their palms, waters, and shells become part of this system of symbolism of fertility; and Babel, the wicked city and its labyrinthine paths of mud, become their counterpart of barrenness, complexity, and death". Al-Sayyab found in myths lasting "archetypes that would embody man's hopes and fears, and suited them with acuteness to man's modern predicament, especially that of the modern Arab" (Boullata 80).

"Rain Song" is perhaps the most salient representation of al-Sayyab's unique flair for combining, sometimes in a single stanza, traditional Iraqi folklore, political and cultural ideology, and arresting imagery to produce intelligible yet brilliant poetry.

In referring to Thamud, a mythical pre-Islamic tribe said to have perished at the hands of God for infidelity (DeYoung, 16), al-

Sayyab draws upon myth to deepen our understanding of the present, and perhaps insinuate the cyclical nature of human history. The “villages moaning and emigrants/with oar and sail fighting the Gulf” refer to socio-cultural obstacles of occupation and oppression. In the 1960s, though plagued by illness, al-Sayyab continued to write, again adopting a new poetic mode. In a philosophical homecoming al-Sayyab seems to have arrived at a new threshold beyond which he would truly find himself. Self-analytical and reflective of his struggle with disease, the poetry of this time covers darker themes, “Mourning the withering greenness and the delay of rebirth.” Themes of despair, the ephemeral quality of happiness, and the ultimate acceptance of death dominated al-Sayyab’s work of this period. Shortly before his death in 1964, al-Sayyab writes in *Death and the River*: “I want to run out and link hands with others in the struggle/ clench my fists and strike Fate in the face/ I want to drown in my deepest blood/ that I may share with the human race its burden/ and carry it onward, giving birth to life/ My death/ shall be a victory.” Al-Sayyab was influential in the progression of the Free Verse movement and essential in its popularization. For these contributions to Modern Arabic poetry he is highly regarded in the literary world. Al-Sayyab’s principal biographer Terry DeYoung says he uses “...the power of Arabic in its magnificent

literary tradition at its most dignified and eloquent levels of expression”.

5. Conclusion

The poetry of Edith Sitwell and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab demonstrates that rebirth and resurrection are fundamental human desires. This process of transformation is required due to social, political, and cultural causes. As a result, their poetry illustrates the connections between hope and sorrow as well as between life and death. Therefore, it is not surprising that blood, water, and tears are connected in their poetry. Al-Sayyab employs strategies like archetypes and mythological symbols. By portraying Arab governments in a mythical framework, he becomes the spokesperson for the country's issues, elevating his poetry to a universal level and using popular myth to further his creative goals as an Iraqi Arab poet. Even while our comparison of Edith Sitwell and Al-Sayyab's poetry has shown some Productive intertextual relationships within a modernist setting, each poet's work is still highly significant and deserving of independent study. Additionally, the local contexts in each instance—the Eastern-Arab environment in Al-Sayyab and the Western tradition in Sitwell—can serve as an interpretive key to

the poems. The global focus of cultural studies benefits greatly from international comparative situations.

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