

On al-Sayyab's "Rain Song"

Sinan Antoon

September 7, 2010

Sinan Antoon is an Assistant Professor of Arabo-Islamic Culture and Literature at New York University-Gallatin

In the first weeks of the 2003 war in Iraq, the *Guardian* published a story about one of the American units driving through southern Iraq and heading toward Baghdad. One of the Marines told the British reporter, "I've been all the way through this desert from Basra to here and I ain't seen one shopping mall or fast food restaurant . . . These people got nothing. Even in a little town like ours of 2,500 people you got a McDonald's at one end and a Hardee's at the other." The reporter wrote that, ironically, the company was an hour away from the remains of the ancient city of Ur:

A few miles from the bridge to the south lies the ruins of the ancient city of Ur, founded 8,000 years ago, the birth place of Abraham and a flourishing metropolis at a time when the inhabitants of north-west Europe were still walking around in animal skins. Sergeant Sprague, from White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia, passed it on his way north, but he never knew it was there.¹

This anecdote crystallizes the problem at the heart of how Iraq's culture and people are predominantly represented in the collective imaginary in the United States, but also elsewhere in the "west." To say that culture and politics are intertwined and inextricable may seem banal, but, alas, one finds oneself always compelled to underline this intricate relationship and explore its implications. This complicity of culture with politics assumes an added importance in times of war. The term "Iraq" would, for a long time, conjure the image of Saddam Hussein, the vicious dictator. Iraqis were, for the most part, faceless multitudes who disappeared under his face or were morphed into his image. There were rarely any Iraqi individuals, but a monolith, first of Saddam supporters and look-alikes and later, when it was more suitable and profitable, of victims to be saved and delivered to liberal democracy. The aforementioned quotation not only reveals the ignorance, to say the least, on the part of average Americans of the rich history and culture of Iraq, a country the U.S. had bombed "back to the pre-industrial age" once before in 1991, but it also shows, on the part of the well-meaning journalist, the resilience of orientalist notions. Even when Iraq is imbued with positive cultural value, this value resides in the static past and not in the dynamic, living present; it is not the culture of *modern* and *contemporary* Iraq that has value, but of ancient Mesopotamia or other epochs.

Nowadays, the focus is predominantly and disproportionately on the last war, the moment of the fall of Baghdad, and the terrible destruction that followed. This erases, unintentionally at times, a longer process of destruction that had started much earlier, when much of the "civilized world" was, by and

large, too busy or disinterested to notice. Few at the time or since paid attention to the horrendous effects of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) and the 1991 Gulf War and the genocidal sanctions imposed by the United Nations (1990–2003), but perpetuated and prolonged by the United States and the United Kingdom. This truncated and reductive post-2003 approach restricts the discussion to the United States’ policies and actions *after* the invasion and erases the effects of its policies and responsibilities prior to the invasion. The massive material destruction unleashed in 2003 was the final (and yet still ongoing) act in a tragedy that had started much earlier.

It is beyond the scope or the space allowed here to trace the genesis and maturation of modern Iraqi cultural production in the twentieth century, but it is not exorbitant to say that by the 1950s a very rich cultural and artistic landscape existed in Iraq. Its practitioners in the fields of visual arts, theater, sculpture, and literature were at the forefront and quite influential in the Arab world and the Middle East. Increased access to education and to translations, an accumulation of experiments and experiences in previous decades, sufficient space for exchange and dissemination, together with a relative freedom of expression, had expanded the space for cultural production in Iraq.

All of this would not have been possible were it not for a very important movement which took place in the Arab east at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century and which is known as the *Nahda*, the Arab renaissance. The *Nahda* was the movement carried out by various intellectuals in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire to modernize classical Arabic and formulate what is now the modern standard Arabic used in formal speech, education, and media throughout the Arabic speaking world. This monumental process involved the publication of new dictionaries and coining of new words. It also involved establishing a canon of cultural and literary heritage whose focus was the golden age of pre-modern Baghdad under Abbasid rule when knowledge and power went hand in hand and Baghdad was the center of an empire. That was also the age in which Greek knowledge and philosophy were translated into Arabic to be later translated into Latin in Europe. This previous model of a culture open unto neighboring cultures and civilizations and keen on absorbing universal knowledge was being emulated.

If that was the cultural model of the past, the contemporary model was European enlightenment and modernity. Arab intellectuals, like many others, were translating the major works of the western canon to Arabic. The incorporation of the Ottoman Empire and its provinces into the new world economic system and the spread of print capitalism had created a new cultural space through which ideas could travel at a much faster pace. Beirut and Cairo were the major cities in which much of the activities of the *Nahda* were taking place, but Damascus in Syria and Baghdad and Mosul were vibrant nodal points. This is probably where the common Arab saying “Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads” comes from. At the dawn of the 20th century a new imagined community of Arabic speakers existed and its

intellectuals embraced different ideologies. Very few were pan-Islamic, most were secular pan-Arab, and others embraced more regional nationalisms, such as Egyptian or Iraqi. I mention this because one often hears, especially in the US, that there was no sense of Iraqi identity or nationalism before the arrival of the British in Iraq in 1914. Research by less-ideologically driven western scholars proves otherwise. The ideas of nationalism were already spreading all over the various provinces of the Ottoman empire many years before. If nationalism is always primarily a collective myth, it has at its core material interests. The three major cities in Iraq—Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra in the south—were all linked by the Tigris. Already in the 19th century, they formed a socioeconomic continuum and the elites of these cities shared interests and a sense of common political fate. The area's rich cultural heritage and shared affinities outweighed the divisions and formed strong material for a common identity. When the British invaded Iraq in 1917, it was under the pretext of ridding its people from Ottoman rule. General Stanley Maude addressed Iraqis by saying: We come not as conquerors, but liberators. The real objective of the British occupation was geopolitical. It was to secure the imperial routes to India and to guarantee control over oil. Soon thereafter, even those who had initially welcomed the British realized that the interest and wellbeing of Iraqis was not of concern to them. To the contrary, their rule in Iraq was quite brutal. Hence resistance increased and it was in the name of Iraq and Iraqis, which tells us that a coherent sense of identity had already existed. Rereading the pamphlets, newspapers and poems published back then drives the point home. On to poetry then, but it's important to set the context first and clear a few things.

While poetry is certainly not the only form of cultural expression, it is, in the Arabic context and in Iraq in particular, a highly valorized one and a primary locus of cultural symbolism and capital. It is after all the archive of the Arabs and a very rich tradition that is fourteen centuries old and boasts of a variety of genres and a rich repertoire. One important subtheme of the cultural renaissance was how to write a new and modern literature and poetry free from the shackles of the past. Poets revolted against tradition and there were new schools embracing romanticism and symbolism. Initial attempts were bold, but they didn't go all the way. The real revolution in Arabic poetry took place in the 1940s at the hands of two Iraqi poets. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), the poet we are celebrating today, and Nazik al-Mala'ika, a poet and critic who died only three years ago in Cairo. They were the first to finally break free from the traditional, classical, and neo-classical forms by writing what came to be known as free verse. They revolted against what was perceived to be an old form that was no longer suitable for the modern era (the traditional monorhyme ode with its two hemistich and its classical meters). They experimented and mixed different meters and poetic feet. Perhaps the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish crystallized the centrality and wealth of Iraq's poetic heritage, both pre-modern and modern, when he wrote, "Be an Iraqi, my friend, so you can be a poet."

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, who wrote the definitive book on modern Arabic poetry, had this to say about al-Sayyab “Among avant-garde poets, the poetry of al-Sayyab shows a more harmonious resolution of the struggle between the classical and the modern. His language is clearer, more immediate, and invested in more emotion than others. . . . His imagination derived its inspiration from the primeval elements of the Iraqi countryside, from its scenery as well as its sounds. . . . When reading his poetry [in Arabic] one is infected with the experience of this auditory sensibility.” Commenting on the role of the new Free Verse Movement, al-Sayyab himself wrote the following in 1954: “Free verse was not only a prosodical phenomenon but also a new artistic structure which embodied a new realistic attitude. It came in order to crush romantic sentimentality, classical rigidity, oratorical poetry, and the literature of ivory towers.” The last sentence speaks to al-Sayyab’s view of literature, art, and his early political affiliation.

Badr Shakir al-Sayyab was born in 1926 in a southern Iraqi village near Basra, close to where the Euphrates and Tigris meet. He studied Arabic and English literature at the Higher Teachers’ Training College in Baghdad and worked as a teacher, but was dismissed from his post for his membership in the Iraqi Communist Party, which he had joined in 1945 when Iraq was ruled by the pro-British monarchy installed by them in 1917. He left the Iraqi Communist Party ten years later in 1954. The period of his membership in the Communist Party corresponds to the middle period of his career as a poet, which is termed the “commitment period.” Although he abandoned the Communist Party and published a series of articles explaining his disenchantment and distance from the ideology he had espoused for a decade, his concern for the downtrodden and the victims of social and political oppression continued to inform his poems. His tone was perhaps softer and less revolutionary, but his solidarity with the struggles of others remained formidable, but embedded in more individual themes. The titles and themes of many of his poems speak to that: “The Blind Prostitute,” “The Gravedigger,” “Weapons and Children,” “Christ after Crucifixion.” 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 Eliott, Edith Sitwell, Yates, Auden, Ezra Pound, Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Federico Garcia Lorca, Paul Eluard, and Aragon.

The poem “Rain Song” is al-Sayyab’s most famous and most memorable. Any educated Iraqi and Arab can recite a few lines from it because it is one of the iconic poems and an integral piece in the canon of modern Arabic poetry. A careful reading of the poem will perhaps illustrate why it is still remembered and recited by speakers of Arabic today and why it continues to inspire and challenge--even half a century after its composition and publication--not only poets and musicians but also artists such as Mohammad al-Shammary. It is important to note that it accumulates new meanings and readings, perhaps because it fuses the universal and the local and, to borrow Neruda’s definition of poetry, “combines solitude with solidarity” so well. The title, being the beacon that illuminates the reading of any text, is worth a pause.

“Rain Song.” The rhythm of the rain itself and through it the cycles of nature and the set of binary oppositions they evoke are employed in the poem.

While attentive to and well-versed in world poetry and both Western and Near Eastern mythology, al-Sayyab had his ear to the local and the vernacular. In addition to peppering his poems with colloquial words, he incorporated symbols from oral culture and popular mythology. The song in the poem and its refrain “rain, rain, rain” are reminiscent of folk songs sung by fishermen and peasants and are predicated on al-Sayyab’s sympathies and political concerns. Both universal and mythical, yet viscerally material as well, rain as an organizing concept allows the poet to represent the paradox of life and nature. Rain, and by extension water, is denied to those who need it the most in the poem. “The sea is the giver of pearls, shells and death.” Individual sorrow and agony welling up in the eyes to pour down as rain echoing cosmic tears. “Do you know what sorrow the rain brings? Do you know how gutters weep when it pours down? Do you know how lost a solitary person feels in the rain?” Rain’s Mesopotamian and Islamic connotations are all linked to fertility and the renewal of life. Iraq, after all, is the land of two rivers. But the opening lines of the poem are deceptive. While it starts with serene and bucolic beauty, nature is never pure and one’s relationship to it is always conditioned and governed by power and injustice. Water, the giver of life, can also take it away. It is a song of an alienated and exiled individual who sees the fertility and riches of his country being harvested for the few. Al-Sayyab wrote the poem while in exile in Kuwait and he was hunted by the secret police for his membership in the Iraqi Communist Party.

“Your eyes are two palm groves in early light/Or two balconies from which the light recedes”

The two eyes might seem to be the eyes of a lover, but as the song grows we are not entirely sure. They could be the eyes of a deceased mother whose memory still haunts the child in the poem. The song, like its singers, always returns to the earth and the singer/poet is at pains to position himself amid a constellation of contradictions: death and life, love and loss, abundance and scarcity.

The narrator of the poem has a bird’s eye view of Iraq from his exile. He is cognizant of its harsh realities and visceral internal conflicts, but imbues his song with the hope of a better tomorrow. In gazing at Iraq’s shores he sees the lightning and thunder. “As if a dawn were about to break from them/But night pulls over them a coverlet of blood.” “I can almost hear the palm trees drinking the rain/Hear the villages moaning and emigrants/With oar and sail fighting the Gulf.” “And there is hunger in Iraq/The harvest time scatters the grain in it/That crows and locusts may gobble their fill/Granaries and stones grind on and on.” “And every year when earth turned green the hunger struck us/Not a year has passed without hunger in Iraq.” Yet there is hope because “Every tear wept by the hungry and naked people/And every spilt drop of slaves’ blood/Is a smile aimed at a new dawn/A nipple turning rosy in an infant’s lips/In the young world of tomorrow/Bringer of life.” And still the rain pours down.

Sadly it seems, al-Sayyab had more reason to inject hope into his poem back then. I'm afraid he would have much less hope today. When he wrote this poem, Iraq was still struggling under a pro-British monarchy, which kept the country's riches and power in the hands of an elite. But the regional and global climate was vibrant with emancipatory projects and struggles which gave hope to many. Al-Sayyab saluted and celebrated these struggles in his poems about the Algerian revolution. The monarchy was overthrown in 1958 and Iraq became a republic. The new regime enacted important laws that allowed more access to education to disadvantaged classes. It instituted land reform and took steps to nationalize Iraq's oil industry. Women gained impressive freedoms and the first female minister in the entire Middle East joined the cabinet. The regime was not without faults, but it only lasted for five years. A US-supported Ba`thist coup overthrew the Qassim regime and an authoritarian rule followed and led to a totalitarian state with a vicious dictator who was supported by western powers for the first decade of his rule and only became a villain when interests and alliances shifted. Three wars and genocidal sanctions took their toll in the meantime. The state and the secular society, which produced the likes of al-Sayyab, were destroyed in 2003. You all know the Frankenstein that took its place. The social fabric which was formed and enriched from the early days of the 20th century was destroyed. Iraq's middle class and secular intelligentsia are not in Iraq. There are more than one million refugees internally displaced inside Iraq and there are more than 4.5 million Iraqis living outside Iraq. Half of them left in the 1990s to escape the genocidal sanctions. The rest left after the invasion and occupation. And many of them recite al-Sayyab's poem as they look at Iraq from afar. Despite the riches, there is hunger and suffering. And when the rain pours down it is drunk by the thousands who populate the new graves. Most of them repeat al-Sayyab's words: Iraq will blossom one day. But they also see on their screens "the skeletons of miserable drowned emigrants/ Who drank death forever" that al-Sayyab mentioned in his poem. They see them as they drown on their way to Greece or Australia looking for life after death. "And in Iraq a thousand serpents drink the nectar/ From a flower the Euphrates has nourished with dew."

More and more Iraqis, especially in the diaspora, take refuge in an imagined or vanished Iraq whose fragments are preserved in art and representation. The work of Muhammad al-Shammari who inscribes himself in this genealogy of a rich and vibrant modern Iraqi culture and art, is one of the most brilliant examples of an artist who collects the fragments with Sisyphean patience and unique beauty. This talk was a prelude of sorts to help you appreciate how Muhammad salutes al-Sayyab and how his talent sings "Rain Song" once again in a new context to generate new meanings.

NOTES

1. James Meek, "Marines Losing the Battle for Hearts and Minds," *Guardian*, 25 March 2003.