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War is Herstory Home Front Women in the Poetry of Adnan Al-Sayegh

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Keywords: <i>-Al-Sayegh</i> <i>-Bamberg</i> <i>-woman</i> <i>-small stories</i> <i>-war</i> <i>-Iraq</i>	Abstract Woman characters abound in the poetry of the Iraqi poet, Adnan Al-Sayegh who is influenced, in his presentation of her, by three main factors, namely, war, political system, and patriarchal norms. Al-Sayegh's women are essentially of four types: the mother, the lover/sweetheart, the war victim, and the working class woman. Drawing on Bamberg's concept of 'small stories,' this paper is an attempt at exploring those women's small and underrepresented stories which tell a lot about social, political, and economic conditions in Iraq. The paper argues that although small and unexciting, these stories do shed light on the social status and ordeals of women in Iraq. Women's 'small stories' are then analyzed in a number of poems that best reflect the characteristics of each type of woman. It concludes that these women's stories which take place at home fronts are no less significant than the stories narrated by men. Women's stories ultimately reveal part of the unofficial and often unspoken of history of war in Iraq.
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الحرب قصتها/تاريخها
نساء الجبهة الداخلية في شعر عدنان الصائغ

أ.د. هناء خليف غني

الجامعة المستنصرية - كلية الآداب - قسم الترجمة

الكلمات الدالة:-	الخلاصة:
- الصائغ	للنساء حضورٌ لافتٌ في قصائد الشاعر العراقي عدنان الصائغ الذي
- بامبيرغ	تأثر في تقديمه لهن بثلاثة عوامل رئيسية هي: الحرب والنظام السياسي
- القصص الصغيرة	والبنية البطرياركية/الأبوية. تقع شخصيات الصائغ النسوية في أربعة
- الحرب	أنواع هي، الأم، والمعشوقة، وضحية الحرب، والمرأة العاملة. ترمي هذه
- العراق	الورقة البحثية، المبنية على مفهوم 'القصص الصغيرة' الذي قدمه
	بامبيرغ، إلى التعريف بقصص النساء العراقيات اليومية المتوارية التي
	تخبرنا الكثير عن الظروف الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية في
	العراق. وتجادل الورقة البحثية إنه على الرغم من رتبة هذه القصص
	وتقليديتها، إلا أنها مهمة من حيث دورها في الكشف عن الموقع
	الاجتماعي للنساء العراقيات ومعضلاتهن. تخضع هذه القصص
	الصغيرة، بعد ذلك لتحليل مكثف في عددٍ من القصائد التي تمثل خير
	تمثيل خصائص كل نوع من أنواع النساء الأربعة، وتختتم مباحثها
	بالتأكيد على ان قصص النساء هذه التي تقع أحداثها في الجبهة
	الداخلية لا تقل أهميةً عن القصص التي يرويها الرجال. إن هذه
	القصص تكشف عن تاريخ الحرب المسكوت عنه أو غير الرسمي في
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1. Bamberg and Al-Sayegh's Women's Small Stories: In "Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative and Identity Analysis," Bamberg and Georgakopoulou(2008, p.377) propose 'small stories' as an "antidote to canonical narrative studies." Before the introduction of these 'stories', the focus of narrative studies in general was on "non-shared, personal experience, and past events" which are often used as a practical tool in the study of the tellers' representations of past events and the way they view themselves in light of these events(ibid, pp.377-8). "The guiding assumption here," as Bamberg avers is that "stories are privileged forms/structures/systems for making sense

of self by bringing the coordinates of time, space, and personhood into a unitary frame”(ibid., p.378).

The writers, as they make clear, are not interested in the narrative/stories per se. In fact, they are more interested, in line with the general shift toward narrative as a tool of interpretation (Bamberg, de Fina, & Schiffrin, 2010), “in the social actions/functions that narratives perform in the lives of people: how people usually use stories in everyday/mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they are” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, pp.378-9). Both writers, in reality, earnestly argue for the ‘worthiness’ of stories that are still in the fringes of narrative studies. They use ‘small stories’ both in the literal sense as they are very short, and the metaphorical as they are representative of micro, fleeting aspects of a lived experience (p.379).

These stories, as Bamberg and Georgakopoulou contend, help to “explore self at the level of the talked-about, i.e., as a character within the story, and at the level of tellership in the here-and-now of a storytelling situation” (p. 380). Accordingly, ‘small stories’ can be considered an “umbrella-term that captures a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (p.381). The importance of ‘small stories’ lies in the possibility of using them as an “antidote formulation” to the tradition of ‘big stories’ or Lyotard’s ‘grand narratives’. In order not to miss out the small talk or the “fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world,” as Hynes (1996) pronounces (qtd. in ibid) in the narrative analysis which often focuses on ‘big and well-developed stories’, ‘small stories’ approach is aptly suggested.

Small stories can be about almost everything that takes place in the daily life of people. It can revolve about incidents in the immediate present, or events that are still emerging; they might consist of very monotonous details or about events that may or may not have happened in reality, or they can be about almost ‘*nothing*’. They are often used to “back up or elaborate on an argumentative point occurring in an ongoing [discussion]” (pp.381-382). Hence, they do reveal a great deal about their characters.

Bamberg, in fact, decidedly wishes to complement or supplement the historian’s interest in grand lives with what he calls the analysis of ‘small’ stories –the ones people tell in passing, in their everyday encounters with each other, which he considers the ‘*real*’ stories of their *lived* lives (Bamberg, 2004, p.367).

Adnan Al-Sayegh’s poetry, which focuses on the presentation of women, is the poetry of ‘small stories,’ of the everyday, the humdrum, and the run-of-the-mill. He is not concerned with the ‘big or grand narratives.’ He relies heavily on direct description and everyday language to present poems as close to reality as possible; to make them “closer to life and ordinary people” as Al-Sagar (1988) remarks. Considered together, Al-Sayegh’s stories tell us a lot about the gruesome and shocking life quality which the Iraqis were living in. In so doing, he indirectly contributes to completing the job of the official historians who take big and man-centered stories of wars and public life as points of focus.

Of special importance to AlSayegh’s presentation of women is Davies and Harre’s (1990, p.48) ‘positioning’ concept. Positioning is defined as a discursive practice “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (cited in Bamberg 1997, p. 336).

Al-Sayegh's stories tell us how his ordinary women/characters are positioned to one another within the reported events; how he as a speaker/narrator/poet positions himself to them; and how does he position himself to himself (ibid., 1997, p.337). As the analysis of the poems will make clear, both Al-Sayegh's women and the poet who speak on behalf of them occupy a very marginalized position. They are often downtrodden and helplessly at mercy of forces that continuously work to crush them and abort their dreams.

No doubt, Al-Sayegh's worldview has been severely affected by a number of factors that shape his presentation of Iraqi women as well. Most significant among these factors is 'war' which occupies "a central place in his poetry" (Ameen, 2003). 'War' is presented as a thief that "had already bedeviled his life for a long time." It had stolen everything: his youth, friends, joys, dreams and hopes of a better life." It had left him like "a ruined city on a distorted map... This is why all my poems talk, in one way or another, about it. In fact, I am quite obsessed with it" (ibid).

Besides war, the oppressive political system plays a significant part in shaping Al-Sayegh's life and poetic outlook. The modern history of Iraq, roughly from the late 1950s up to the present day is generally characterized by the domination of dictatorial political systems, successive wars and upheavals, political and social unrest, suffocating economic situation, and recently civil strife and a series of internal displacements after the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 (See Makiya, 1998). These conditions resulted in waves of persecutions, absence of freedom of speech and (in)voluntary immigration. Al-Sayegh himself opted for leaving his homeland and living in exile(s) since 1994 because of the oppression he had been experiencing at the hand of security forces, informers, and state agents. The abundance of the figures of policemen, the executioners, mufflers, investigators, and detectives, consequently, is not surprising in Al-Sayegh's poetry (See Al-Sayegh, 2004, pp.689-732).

Al-Sayegh's birth in Al-Najaf city in 1955 constitutes another factor that affects his poetic outlook. Al-Najaf is one of the holiest cities in the Islamic world. It hosts the shrine of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib (pbuh), the fourth of the Rightly Guided caliphs. Of his early years in this city, Al-Sayegh says: "I spent my childhood in Al-Najaf, the city of heritage, poetry and golden domes; the city of bookshelves, hospices, literary circles, houses of poetry, pulpit of Al-Hussein, and poetic debates" (Al-Sayegh, 2008, p. 487). As a result, Al-Najaf is a very traditional and conservative city. Roles are gender-based and patriarchal system dominates. Spaces are strictly divided between public spaces dedicated for men and private spaces dedicated for women. Although women are present in the public arena, they are expected to observe certain rules concerning clothes and behaviours. They usually wear 'abaya (long black garment that covers the whole body) and veil or head scarf (See Mervin & Gleave, 2017).

The poems examined in the following section best illustrate Al-Sayegh's viewpoint of life in Iraq. Through these women, the poet, first, gives vent to his agonies, fears, and feelings of alienation; second, they present as faithful as possible a picture of Iraqi women during times of war and crises; and third, they draw attention to ordinary women's 'small stories' which do supplement in the mosaic of Iraqi suffering.

2.1: The 'Sainly Mother': The first type of women that is strongly present in Al-Sayegh's poetry is the 'mother'. She can be described as the all sacrificing 'angel in the

house' (Kaplan qtd in Hanson, 2006, p.24); a "maternal figure so perfect she will sacrifice everything for the sake of her children" (Hanson, p.123). She is characterized by her willingness to suffer for her children and is often defined, by herself and others, through her role as a mother rather than as a woman with multiple demands and conflicting interests. Such a mother often achieves fame for her perfection, kindness, compassion, and altruism (Ibid.) (See also Hoffman, 2007; Rapke, 2008; Podneiks & O'Reilly, 2010).

The mother as a 'saintly figure' is nowhere clearer than in Al-Sayegh's poem "My Mother." She is a supporter, protector, pious, generous, and a life-giver figure. She is above all the well-spring of the feeling of security, calmness and joy. The poem contains references to typical Iraqi social traditions and geographical locales. It also sheds light on the political system as the mother is afraid of the policemen, the evil eyes of women, and the imaginary ghoul. Religious references to Saints and Mosques, which are abundant, tell of a very devout woman. The poem, therefore, is worth full quoting:

Night falls, my mother drapes herself in transparent
sorrows,
like sorrows strewn over gardens
as they gather in their night-fading leaves.
My mother has a prayer rug
and an ancient fear of policemen.
Whenever boots clop down our street she hides
us under it.
She fears the evil eye of women,
night ghouls,
and time's betrayal, lest they come for us.
My mother never abandoned her habits,
every dusk she burns her wild rue seeds
full of scent.
It repels the evil eye from our home, she says.
And each Tuesday she goes to the Sahla Mosque
to hand out dates and bread.
She pledges a tray of candles for Khidhr
when she gets her wish,
promising to light them that very evening
on the river-bank of Kufa.
Tears sparkle under her moistened eyelashes,
Seeping as the shivering of the candles light. (2004, p.547)

The same image is repeated in "I survived War by Mistake." Here, the mothers are living in a continuous state of waiting for the coming back of their sons and husbands from the battlefields. They keep waiting in the pavements of railways to:

...ask those who cross to the war
To take their long nights
And make out of them tearful eyes handkerchiefs that
Bandaged the wound of the distance between the bullet and the prayers.
They contend stubbornly with the suffering in their lifetimes
In front of the empty beds

In the hospitals of war.(p.297)

References to ‘absence’, ‘bullets’, ‘prayers’, ‘tears’, and ‘suffering’ forcefully emphasize the terrible states-of-minds mothers are undergoing during the war. “Christmas Text no. 3” tells of a typical war situation where men are fighting in the battlefields while women stay at home fighting loneliness, boredom, and fears of the unknown. As a result, their lives are wasted and they “grew old in the empty pots” while their children become ‘disheartened...and slept near the trash bins/To dream of ... postponed childhood”(p.4).

Making use of Greek mythology, AlSayegh, contrasts, in “Ulysses”, his status with that of the Greek mythical hero, Ulysses, for while Ulysses comes back home, the poet is hopeless, he says farewell to many things, one of them is “the clay-stove of his mother”(p.88).

Part 14 of “Papers from the Autobiography of one Who Carries his Exile under his Armpit” sheds light on another reason for the Iraqi mothers’ fears and waiting. Instead of war, the poem talks about the poignant pain that results from exile. The mother lives in a continuous state of waiting and fear as her son is living in exile. His coming back is impossible because of the oppressive political system. Even sending a letter to his mother is impossible as the security apparatus is searching “among the commas and pauses for every word or voice” that might denounce him as a political dissent. Therefore, the mother will keep sitting in front of the window, waiting for him, but her waiting is in vain, she will endlessly live in this tormenting state of the absence/presence of her son (See also Ghena, 2016).

The mothers’ plaintive and loud high-pitched cries of pain and their beseeching of holy saints to protect their sons in “Glueyness” all attest to the tormenting sense of loss they feel. A painful comparison between the living conditions of people and those of the rulers exemplified by the Kings show the unequal distribution of wealth and the grave state of misery people are living in. In the poet’s homeland:

There are no scandals except what the Kings accumulate in the banks
And what we inherit of lice-doubts,
What we bequeath of our poverty to our family...
And what is left of our stored tears is the groans of our mothers
gliding along the shrines of the holy men(p.278).

The conspicuous references to war and its tragic outcomes will unsurprisingly introduce us to the second type of women in Al-Sayegh’s women poetry, i.e., the manless women.

2-2: The Manless Woman: War usually forces women into new and unsettling situations and roles. In *Women Facing War*(2001): International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) presents an extensive report about the problems women in general suffer from in times of conflicts. The problems include issues of personal safety, health and medical care, food and water, gender-based violence, and school dropout. The image of woman in the ICRC report was consolidated by another report presented to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)(2014).The “Iraqi Women in Armed Conflict and Post Conflict Situation” report lists: domestic violence, minor girls marriage, widowhood, disabilities, gender

discrimination, clothes restrictions, personal and inheritance laws among the problems Iraqi women suffer from. Widows, single female-headed families, divorced, separated, abandoned, and single women can be included under the rubric of 'Manless Women'.

Although conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe's study (December 2011) holds true to the Iraqi society as both societies are traditional and conservative in terms of women's status. The study deals with spinsterhood a qualitatively different experience from the experience of other single women such as "widows, separated, divorced and younger never married women"(qtd. in Ntoimo, p.2). Spinsters are likely to experience stigmatization, marginalization, negative social identity (ibid., p.6), because "prolonged non-marriage is essentially disapproved in any [Iraqi] setting, and permanent non marriage for women has no place in [Iraq's] socio-cultural system"(ibid). In fact, singleness is still seen as defying the norms of femininity–marriage and motherhood (Ibid.).

Several factors contribute to increasing the number of spinsters in society. Studies usually cite modernization, individualism, education and work, high dowries, unrealistic expectations of the partners as the main causes of the spinsterhood rate increase which is often dealt with in terms of being a 'problem', 'crisis', 'ghost', and 'worry'("Unmarried Arab Women", 2014; Samya, 2012).

Spinsterhood in Al-Sayegh's poems mainly results from the successive wars Iraq had been engaged in. His "The Spinster of Mashtal," gives a summary of the ordeal of thousands of Iraqi women who are left without husbands as a result of war. The choice of Al-Mashtal district is significant as it houses a public garage from where soldiers used to leave to battlefields during Iran-Iraqi war. The daily departure of soldiers signals the termination of Iraqi women's dreams of living a normal family life. As everything else in the poet's homeland,

The lovers pass on [the spinster's] her lips like viscid...
because of their excessive acidity, she washes-each night...
the dreams of her fingers.
And she hang them-like Ahhhhhh!- on the window of deprivation.
But her hands, while she is gathering the leaves of kisses
from the burgeoning grass and the remains of cherries,
Her hands tremble in front of the mirrors of her loneliness.
She goes to the cupboard to choose a lover,
She will beg him: not to hurt-when he embraces her-the tilting branch of the
pomegranate;
Not to waste the raspberry seeds on the plate of her femininity
Not to *penetrate* further in the coral orchards.....(294)

The spinster of AlMashtal is engaged in an inner dialogue with the would-be-lover who will save her from a meaningless life. Her dream of having him, talking and enjoying time with him might be a means to compensate a dreary and boring reality. Noteworthy is the recurrent reference to 'remains', 'tremble', 'loneliness', 'beg', 'hurt', and 'waste' which, taken together, point to a wasted life and aborted dreams.

The poet here deals with 'manless' women collectively. Besides spinsters, there are widows and abandoned women whose husbands disappeared or were lost. In "A Cloud

of a Glue”, the poet makes clear that the widow is a victim of war: “When the war ends, forcefully/ Who will give back to the widow of war her fresh flower? (274). Here, one notes a clear reference to the lives of women wasted because of wars.

In “Burnings”, the poet talks expressively of the emotional deprivation by referring to beds as places of exiles for the bodies of women:

The beds are an exile of the body
And the nights...are mournfully wasted
And the women-the fingers
...Over the sands of the bed...a foam
(What the widow of war is thinking of
While she is rearranging your chaos?
What does she think of a poet made of devastation?...
A poet whose days are nothing but papers and fog (p.172).

Likewise, images of suffering and distress abound in “Pins” in which stars represent different things for different people. There are two references to woman in the poem. The stars, which the artillery man sees, are the tears of the ‘widows’ which he leaves behind after each shell, and “the stars, which the prostitute wipes, are the remnants of the quenched virilities between her thighs” (p.185).

A surreal portrait of the tragic impact of war on women is presented in “A Clothes Peg”. In a dream-like state, the woman is taking a peek at her neighbor who is hanging her black clothes on a peg. She feels terrified and hurries to her bedroom. She clings to the neck of her husband who is rubbing his eyes astoundingly after seeing his wife wearing black clothes!. It turns out that the widow unconsciously refuses to believe the death of her husband. She deliriously imagines that her husband is still alive! (p.186).

In addition to war, Al-Sayegh condemns the repressive political system as another victimizer of women in “Nightmares.” The lonely woman of the poem is panic-stricken and has recurrent nightmares in which the execution squad passes in front of her window; her heart shivers as she remembers that her husband and brother were taken a year ago by the security forces of the political regime.

“Rain for the Lady of Violet” narrates the story of the war-traumatized widows who are in the prime of their youth. The widow in the poem is busy gazing at in “the rain of the returnees from the war”, she tries to “stitch her dreams which the airplanes break through.” Her bed, like compassion, is empty. She imagines that a man rubs her bed-linen with his hand. She is beholding him from behind the curtain. He is dislodging the dust of widowhood from her outflowing dress. She laughs hysterically and steps forward to hug him. Her hands, however, will collide with his wheelchair. She feels frightened, screams and runs away (p.250). The romantic meeting is incomplete as the man she dreams of turns out to be crippled.

2-3: The Women as an Object of Desire: In her study, “The Object of Desire”, Hoyt (2013) states that “Objectification occurs when an individual is viewed as a physical object”(p.3). This state which predominantly affects women is “an omnipresent force in women’s work, school, political, and private environments (Nussbaum, 1999 qtd. in (ibid). Bartky further explains that objectification of women is closely connected to

sexuality. According to him, the sexual objectification of women means “to mentally divide [the woman’s] body and mind in order to focus on her sexual body parts” (qtd. in Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p.175). Accordingly, the woman’s “body parts and their functions are no longer associated with her personality and emotions, but instead are seen as instruments” (Ibid). She often becomes a sexual object whose main role is to satisfy the desires of the other sex, i.e., man. This results in what is termed “the male gaze” in gender studies. A ‘male gaze’ means a “look that men give women to inspect their bodies (ibid., p.176). Socialization, media, cosmetics, advertisements, and movie industries usually contribute to encouraging the objectification of women (Wolf, 1991). In fact, one standard women often conform to is the idea that the woman’s role in a relationship is to please her man sexually (Bretthauer et al., 2006, qtd. in Hoyt, 2013, p. 5). This idea puts sex before other aspects of the relationship, such as friendship, emotional connection, and equality.

In the following poems, the physical attractions of women are at the heart of the poet’s description. References to lips, breasts, thighs, hair, eyes, cheeks, and eyelashes are plenteous. Man is the one who gazes, looks, smells, covets, pinches, pats and caresses while she responds to these acts defenselessly. She is too weak and disempowered to resist them. The typology of her body parts are surveyed and put under scrutiny through the poet/male’s gaze. In “Ambiguity”, she is the fragrant woman who:

Flashes in the memory of the mirror
The forests of her attractions yawn
Under the transparent shirt of the rain
And nearby the music of her breasts
A drunken window pants....
Stealthily, through the hole of the night
And burned fingers. (286)

Again, there is this recurrent reference to wasted lives and pleasures as a result of widowhood and loneliness. Supposedly, there is a man who furtively peeps at the physical attractions of the woman while he tries to satiate his burning desire to touch and embrace her.

In “A Woman”, the poet not only focuses on the woman’s physical parts, but he clearly associates them with pleasure, lust, and hankering. He is, in fact, infatuated by and lost between:

The shirt that was slightly open and,
The orange juice that pours down
Till it blossoms into two tits
There is an opening through which the fingers descend falteringly
And with them the orange juice descends
From the Winter of madness
 to the Summer of your waist
To take a nap and flirt on the bed of my hand...
There is no alabaster except your legs
That reflect on the lust of the alabaster ladder (p.280).

The same male gaze is expressively hinted at in “Formations 18:”
While you are walking with your apricot-like cheek

In your way to me
How many lips lust for you (p.69).

In the “Second Shadow” which talks about the informer who turns into a shadow escorting the poet wherever he goes, he describes a woman who:

Gets off the bus wearing a short skirt
The suspicious looks pinch her in her thigh
So she winces (p.83)

Instead of the ‘thigh’, the ‘white legs’ of the girl, in “The Flower”, are looked at sneakily by an old man who is the personae of the poet. While he is in a visit to the university, the old man remembers his youth days. He feels that his life is tragically wasted. In front of him, there are flowers, beauties, and pleasures that are no longer his. Of special significance is his memories of the beautiful moments he spent with his sweetheart. But now in his old age, he:

Hang around without a female friend
Without memories
Looking stealthily to the white legs
And the stolen dates without Sibawaih’s [Arabic grammarian] knowledge
We smile silently...
For how long I have not put my hand on it.
I remember I have something throbbing there
In this abandoned corner of my chest (p.128).

“Burnings”, as the title tells, talks of a burning desire for the physical pleasures of life. This desire takes the form of incessantly peeing into the female body parts in places that typically make show of them:

I dawdle in the street of time, I chew time by peeing into the vitrine and the roundedness of the hip till midday, I agglutinate to the tight clothes, in the bus...Oh! Anxiety– the amber...your house is the shadow of a street, you quench your panting in a pub (no money), a seduction of a young girl (she is used to the bawdy flirtation, what? A library? (my anxiety procreates in the pages, I turn them in haste, I stare in the area between the two breasts of an adolescent, who will spend her life in haste and stare at the door.(p.172)

In “Dimensions” we see a man licking the thigh of the blonde secretary...and a young woman tidying her skirt-behind the printing machine (p.192). Even rain is covetous of the beauties offered by female physical parts. As a result, a conflict ensues between it and the lover. Both are vying for pleasing themselves by incessantly gazing at the female body parts. The rain in “The Rain Poems,” “laps up [the female] body....Ah...How could a lover not be jealous” (p.199), and “The rain drops sneak under [her] shirt...to lick [her] tits...and I am in front of the window licking the tears of rain” (p.200).

In “Varieties,” the poet reveals his inner feeling of deprivation and dispossession by repeating the word ‘hunger’ several times: “her hand is a piece of chocolate and I am hungry hungry hungry since thousands of years” (p.229). In the same poem, he pronounces: “Whenever I think of your lips, the honey flows down on the glass of my memory...I lick it, without your knowledge, drop by drop, I wonder, are your lips hurt?”(p. 235), and “Do not leave your breasts...blabber on the bed of language.... The rhetoric of your body is in brevity” (p.237).

In “Papers from an Autobiography”, the deep sense of loss and defeat makes the poet:

...loiter under the lights of the lamps,
In my pockets are wet addresses
A bar ejects me to another bar
A woman makes me crave another one
I bite the fresh tits
I bite the books
I bite the street
This mouth has to devour something
These lips have to pounce on a glass, a mouth, or a stone (p.92).

The continuous act of ‘biting’ here betokens the feeling of meaninglessness and abandonment the poet has. It seems that the poet is so desperate that there is nothing to do except ‘biting’ and ‘devouring’ everything that comes in his way. In part 12 of the same poem, the poet laments the dissipation of most of his life “In the trenches of the underdog war and cells” where he spent time trying to protect himself:

...from cold, panting and the stings of the eyes
Alone, I swallow the boredom and the remains of the forgotten glasses on the tables
Rubbing the plump buttocks of the girls in the bus stations.
I have nothing save empty seats
And ships which no one is waiting for
I have neither bread, homeland, nor mood (p.101).

The next section presents an entirely different type of woman who is often associated with innocence and beauty.

2-4 The Sweetheart or the Unattainable Ideal:

Romantic love is generally agreed upon as a “compelling emotional attraction to an idealized other” (Lindholm, 2006, p. 5). He further contends that if there is anything that is taken for granted, it is certainly “the importance – and even the necessity – of falling in love” (Ibid). It is universally acknowledged, sought after and celebrated. This aspect can be discerned in the songs, movies, and stories which “endlessly describe variations in the pain and ecstasy of love as it is found, challenged, lost, denied, thwarted, only to flare up again, carrying all before it, or else destroying the lover in a conflagration of desire” (Carey qtd. in Ibid). Love can have a positive or negative impact on those who experience it. Raffagnino and Puddu assert that besides intimacy, commitment, and affection, love is considered one of the most significant components of a satisfying relationship. These are aspects that are closely related to subjective well-being, especially in terms of happiness, life satisfaction, and the existence of more

positive past experiences. Love relationships can also be a source of stress, discomfort, struggle, pain, and negative feelings (2018, p. 308).

Reminiscent of 'courtly love' tradition, Al-Sayegh's 'sweetheart poems', so to speak, deals with the emotional feelings cherished by the speaker, who is usually a young man, to an ideal, unattainable young lady. These poems often show some of the aspects typical of lovers in this tradition. They deal with the poet's attraction to, and admiration of a lady who is disdainful of his courtship. She keeps silent and aloof throughout the relationship to an extent that one doubts whether she cares for him! Despite that, the lover keeps renewing his oaths and giving vent to his feeling in nice and expressive words (Courtly Love).

"Stanzas...to the Jasmine Flower" (p. 312), "Without you...what shall I do with my Heart"(p.327), "To the Jasmine Flower, Please" (p. 337), "Love Stanzas" (p. 339), "The Foam of the Black Eyes" (p. 341), "Who Cuts her Long Hair?"(p.343), "A Love Card" (p. 396) and "Streets...and language, and Black Eyes" (p. 398), from AlSayegh's collection *Mirrors for her Long Hair*, explicitly tell of a man who is passionately in love with his lady. But this love is thwarted because of his being detained, exiled, hounded by security police or in penury. While images of misery, hunger, yearning, thirst, dryness, and deprivation abound in relation to this man, images of 'unattainable' joy, hope, beauty, rain, flower, and innocence are associated with the girl. The girl actually reminds her lover of everything that he desired but could not get. His inability to attain her stands for his inability to achieve his dreams or to live a happy and normal life.

"Rain...for the Lady of Violet," is exclusively dedicated to the poet's sweetheart: to her mouth, her lilac spotted sleeves, the buttons of her sleeves, her childhood, to the child who is hiding behind the neck-tie of the job. He loves her and wants to do anything for her, to protect her from cold, and to buy her flowers (pp.249-250).

The same images of childhood innocence and purity thrive in "The City" in which the young man/poet wants to leave the city to the "meadows of the poem" where he finds his sweetheart in her "yellow childish dress." The girl walks barefoot on the grass of the poet/man's dreams while the butterflies are hovering around her long hair that is pouring forth into the river! (p.326).

In other poems, love stands out as a very important value in the poet's life, hence, its loss turns his life meaningless and gloomy. The poet in "Attempts", for example, addresses his 'absent' lady and tries not to remember her this day. Actually, his

...memory feigns inattention and sneaks – stealthily like a guilty boy –

To where you are sitting adjacent to the window of the heart...

To count the beats on which your name is drawn....

And to gaze at the rain;

The rain of my love while it is dabbling the memory of the yellow glass and the runaway streets and your long plaits....

How do the gardens look like without your name?

How do the streets look like without your memories...

And what shall I do without my fingers....

Without your long hair (p.335).

The images presented in these lines: remembering, longing for past days, long plaits, writing the lady's name, gardens are typical of a romantic lover who is infatuated by his lady.

Noteworthy, the same attitude is expressed by the poet in his old age. It is as if the image of the beautiful lady with her long plaits and apricot-like cheeks or breast is fixed in his memory. In "Who Cuts her Long Hair," he remembers he had:

... a sweetheart with long hair and white ribbons,
But they cut her plaits before I finish writing my poem
And they hang with her ribbons my little happiness (p.343).

The portrait the poet presents of Iraqi women cannot be complete without dealing with the working-class women who work hard to make ends meet.

2-5 Working-Class Woman: Family and social roles for women considerably change in Iraq as a result of successive wars, displacement, new life styles, and modernization of society. In its report on the women participation in the job market and the economic opportunities available to them, The International Organization for Immigrants ((IOM) delineates the normative, consequential, and practical barriers that stand in the way of women's active participation in this sector (See IOM Report, 2019). The report also surveys historical stages of this participation beginning from the 1950s to the present day. Unlike the 1960s and 1970s which witnessed a substantial increase in the female literacy working force, and the almost feminization of many work sectors in the 1980s due to man/women imbalance as a result the Iran-Iraq war, the 1990s saw the reverse as the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq contribute to forcing many women to leave government posts and return to more traditional roles (Ibid). Moreover, those women who continue working often suffer from low profiling and marginalization in work places. In general, they are denied high-ranking positions. This phenomenon is nowhere apparent than in AlSayegh's poems that take working-class women as their central characters. Those women are assigned menial jobs like barmaids, cleaners, receptionists, clerks, secretaries, and ticket vendors. Mostly, they are not educated and have no ambition to upgrade themselves in their career. They are, more often than not, leading a humdrum and unexciting life in jobs which make them vulnerable to various types of exploitation and harassment. Again, the poems reveal a noticeable focus on body parts. Some of them feel bitter about their being exploited but they are too powerless and in a dire need to revolt while others make use of these body parts to secure vocational and financial gains. Their presence serves two main functions: first, they can be considered a backdrop that constitutes part of the scenery of desolation and devastations that run havoc in the poet's homeland; and secondly, they are used by the poet as a means to give vent to his inner suffering and woes.

In "Files," everything turns to files: the houses, homeland, wars, bellies, and woman. The female office worker in the poem is passive. Her life and activities seem meaningless. She is staring impassively at her days running without being able to do anything. She is wearing black clothes because her husband was taken to the battlefields and never came back. She is pregnant but she is unhappy. She wonders what will happen to her firstborn baby. Each day, she is becoming older and older without doing anything serious. She spends her time chewing and turning the pages of the files over and over again. Her name is Khadija Mohammed. Her number is 337. She is, in one

way or another, representative of thousands of Iraqi women whose lives have been dissipated as a result of war (pp. 256-257).

“Stickiness” talks about the female newscaster who conspires with others to hide the truth. In a parrot-like manner, she repeats what the news editor tells her: “the bulletin of tiredness extends like wires, from the mouth of the editor, to the female newscaster who hides, behind her well-made smile, the last casualties, earthquakes and crimes” (p. 277). This newscaster lacks independence; she does not have an opinion of her own. Her job is to mechanically repeat what is written by others. All her qualifications are her beauty and her sticky smile that betoken superficiality and blandness. The same female newscaster shows up in “Deviance”. She is engaged in doing trivial things like bellowing in her gum a ball which the Generals fling at one another. Not only that, she is prostituting herself because: “A director followed by director bellows in her belly and make her pregnant!” Besides the newscaster, there is the lonely female cleaner of the foyer who toils in life to support herself. However, she falls victim to the male gaze; men sneakily look at her, one of them pinches her in her buttock. She is startled and cries distressfully. (p. 158)

The female waiter in the bar in “Burnings” is a woman in wreckage. Her job is to sweep “The Remains of the murdered desires of the night.” She suffers sexual exploitation as she is physically abused by the bar clients. What happens to this woman is similar to what happens to the poet’s homeland at the hand of criminals, thugs, and tyrants. In the morning:

She forgets the rubbing of her hips on your bed
While she was tidying it uppiece by piece
And she leaves quickly
Indifferent to your burning desires... (p. 171).

In “An Old Waiter’s Wisdom” which takes place in the bar, the poet/client talks about a prostitute with whom he makes a fleeting relationship. The poet is lost “between her foreign cigar”, which is a reference to her betrayal and the “long way to her lips.” He is overshadowed by her hair, and the smoke which unfolds in a street not his, a body not his, and a homeland not his!” (p. 282). He concludes by delivering an advice:

Oh! Heart! Do not be assured of the promises of short dresses,
and the coquettish laughter/The dresses that become
shorter/Their longings might become short/ And the cups that
display their waists/Their plates might spatter/Above the
garbage of the closed bar” (p. 283).

3-Conclusion: Women in AlSayegh’s Poetry: A Life in Reverse: In his eight collections of poetry, AlSayegh shows a pronounced interest in dealing with Iraqi women. This interest figures out in dedicating whole poems to them, in naming them in the titles, and in choosing them as characters in some other poems. Although those women’s stories are ‘small’ and overshadowed by the ‘big’ stories of men, they do shed light on their position and status within society. This position, which tells of marginalization, downgrading and oppression, is neither defied by the poet/man nor by the women themselves. The stories, in fact, are told from the perspective of a male living in a male-dominated society. The poet/male takes upon himself the task of talking about women, describing them, expressing their feelings and woes. As such, those

women are generally disempowered; they neither have a voice of their own nor seeking one. They keep silent all the time and seem content with performing these humdrum roles. It seems as if the feeling of being marginalized and excluded is so internalized and taken for granted that those women find defying it pointless. Paradoxically, those women are characterized by their textual visibility and invisibility at the same time. While 'visibility' refers to their conspicuous presence in the poems, their invisibility refers to their inactivity, lethargy, and submission to the dictates of socialization and patriarchal system. Within the poet/male's clear cut division of the world, they are to occupy the private not the public domain.

Except the 'mother' who seems to be asexual, the focus of AlSayegh was on the physical beauty of women. The references to hips, breasts, lips, waists, and hair abound in the poems that deal with single women, widows, lovers and working women. Again, except the 'mother', all women are subject to the male gaze. These parts are usually dealt with in a sensual and an erotic manner. The poet/male is attracted to these parts, longs for enjoying their touch but they are inaccessible mainly for political and economic reasons. In focusing on female body parts, AlSayegh apparently observes the practice of objectifying women and reducing them to objects of man's desire. In line with this, the poet/male opts for not talking about those women's educational achievement, ambitions, dreams, or attempts to change their status. They are presented as objects and tools not as subjects and beings. Worth mentioning, all AlSayegh's love poems are told from a heteronormative and heterosexual perspective according to which man and woman's roles are openly defined. Man is the one who moves, advances, speaks, offers, expresses, describes and initiates while woman is to remain silent, aloof, indifferent, and reserved. She lets the poet do everything on her behalf. Thus, gender-based division is strongly maintained. There is another clear cut division in the locales where AlSayegh's women live or work. While houses are the locales of mothers, gardens of sweethearts, bars, hotels and offices are the locales of working-class women.

Generally speaking, the poet shows a sympathetic attitude towards his women because, reading the poems meticulously, I conclude that his women's 'small' stories of loneliness, impoverishment and endlessly waiting for salvation are actually his own. Similar to them, he is morally and psychologically destroyed by forces against which he can't stand. War, oppressive political system, censorship, and poverty demoralize and disempower him. Fears and suspicions take hold of him. He projects these feelings on the women who seem more powerless and vulnerable than him because of their gender and social status.

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