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Reimagining the Romantic Hero in Al-Sayyab's "A Stranger By the Gulf"

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Abstract

This study investigates the traits of Shelley's Romantic hero in Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's poem "A Stranger by the Gulf". The research looks at the primary qualities of this character, including isolation, rebellion, internal turmoil, individuality, and deep connection with Nature, showing their portrayal within the context of modern Iraqi poetry and the socio-political Iraqi landscape. Al-Sayyab's employs a Shelleian model of heroism to address the complexities of isolation, exile and political oppression. Adopting an analytical approach of criticism, the study Draws on the differences of the Iraqi context, and contends that the speaker in this poem, who experiences loss, nostalgia, and estrangement, is an Iraqi model of the Romantic hero confronted with the agonies of Iraq's sociopolitical reality. The Study focuses on Al-Sayyab's interaction with Western literature, emphasizing the universality and flexibility of the Romantic hero and its adaptability in modern Arabic poetry.

Keywords: Shelly's Romantic hero, Al-Sayyab, Iraqi modern poetry, Exile, Romanticism

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إعادة تصور البطل الرومانتيكي في قصيدة السياب غريب على الخليج

الأستاذ المساعد الدكتور أروى حسين الدوري

كلية التربية للبنات | جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة ملامح البطل الرومانتيكي للشاعر الانكليزي شيلي كما صورته قصيدة السياب غريب على الخليج حيث تناقش هذه الدراسة توفر الملامح الاساسية لهذه الشخصية ومنها الانعزالية، الفردية، التمرد، الصراع الداخلي والارتباط العميق بالطبيعة وكيف انها تنعكس ضمن السياق الثقافي والسياسي للعراق الحديث متجسدا في شخصية الغريب. يوظف السياب نموذج البطولة كما قدمه الشاعر شيلي لتصوير التعقيدات الناجمة عن الانعزال، الاضطهاد السياسي وقضايا المنفى. تتبع الدراسة منهجا تحليليا نقديا يستخلص انه برغم الاختلافات في السياق العراقي الا ان شخصية الغريب تعد أنموذجا للبطل الرومانتيكي بما تحمله من مشاعر الاغتراب والحنين الى الوطن وتجارب الضياع على خلفية المعاناة الناجمة عن الواقع السياسي والاجتماعي المتردي للعراق. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على حقيقة اطلاع السياب على الادب الغربي والمرونة التي تتمتع بها شخصية البطل الرومانتيكي التي تتجاوز حدود الزمكان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البطل الرومانتيكي عند شيلي، السياب، الشعر العراقي الحديث، المنفى، الرومانتيكية

1. THE ROMANTIC HERO AS A LITERARY ARCHETYPE

The Romantic hero is a literary archetype represented by an individual who exudes powerful emotions, idealism, and a desire for freedom or transcendence. This character often defies social expectations and norms. It is characterized by a strong connection with nature, inner turmoil, and a pursuit of authenticity. The Romantic hero exhibits "Shelley's Promethean attitude, and the Romantic passion for liberty." (Abrams, 1975: 275) According to literary critic Northrop Frye, the Romantic hero is often "placed outside the structure of civilization and thus represents the force of physical nature, amoral or ruthless, yet with a sense of power, and often leadership, that society has impoverished itself by rejecting." (Denham:68) Usually estranged from his more grounded, realist biological family and living a rural, solitary life, the Romantic hero may have a long-suffering love interest, who is victimized by the hero's rebellious tendencies,

with their fates intertwined for decades, sometimes from their youths to their deaths. The hero's estrangement is psychological rather than physical, indicating his inner conflicts and rejection of pre-established norms and sociocultural conventions. This rebellious mood becomes both a source of victimization and transcendence as it elevates them, transforming their agonies into a quest for higher universal truths. They are emotionally aware and having a great capacity for empathy and compassion. They are able to establish deep connections with other individuals because of their emotional depth.

The Romantic poet Percy Shelley (1792- 1822) can be seen as a 'Romantic hero' himself, a rebel who rejected out-worn conventions. His poetry reflects emotional sensitivity, a love for beauty, creative search for political liberty and passionate connection with Nature. Possessing distinctive qualities of hope, love, joy and imagination, Shelley strongly believed in realization of human happiness. Shelly put up highly radical socio-political views which set him against the existing societal norms. For this reason, he did not become popular during his lifetime. However, his poetry gained better recognition following his death. In his long poem "The Mask of Anarchy" (1832), as a case in point, Shelley personifies murder, fraud, hypocrisy, various destructions, and anarchy as armed forces spreading terrorism through England, scaring its people. They reach London, where the dwellers who are by this time aware of the havoc, caused by these armed tyrants are panic-stricken and attempt to run away. Though this poem was written in response to a specific socio-political occasion in the history of England, namely the massacre at Manchester in 1819, it delivers a timeless message by condemning political tyranny everywhere. It is a protest against oppression which obliterates individuals' freedom across the globe. Shelley comments that poetry should resonate with the spirit of the age and that poets are the "makers of civilization" who blend reason with imagination in order to identify the beauty of the universe. Poets, according to him, are rebels, law-legislators and messengers who work within the medium of language:

.....They are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. (Shelley:4. www.resources.saylor.org)

The uncompromising idealism and the unconventional life of Shelley combined with his powerful defiant voice and rebellious spirit, made him a disparaged and authoritative figure in his lifetime. He became a model of an intellectual and a radical thinker for later generations of writers, including Victorian poets and poets of the Pre-Raphaelite school, for dedicating his poetic output to defy tyranny and suppressive structures. Hence; heroes in his works who manifest his own personal traits, often suffer alienation because of their defiance of social norms as seen in his work "Prometheus Unbound" whose protagonist experiences existential isolation in their quest for ideals.

The poetry of the modern Iraqi poet Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab (1926-1968), likewise, often grapples with themes of dislocation, solitude, rebellion, search for liberty, and the fragility of the human existence within the modern Iraqi context. Al-Sayyab was a

pioneer in renovating modern Arabic poetry. He is considered, along with Abd Al-Wahhab Al-Bayyati and Nazek Al-Mali'keh, one of the first to attempt writing in the modern form of Arabic poems or what has come to be known as the trochee poem, *qasidet al-taf'ileh*. Between 1945 and 1955, he joined a group of teachers called "A'bqar Brotherhood" which discussed poetry subjects in absolute freedom and was supported by the institute's dean, Matta A'qrawi. He was later expelled from the institute on 8 January 1946 due to his political activity in the Iraqi Communist Party. After the disruption of the political situation in Baghdad in 1952, Al-Sayyab feared that he might be arrested due to his political activity. Hence, he fled in disguise to Iran and then to Kuwait using a forged Iranian passport. He described this journey in his poem "Farar" (An Escape). In the winter of 1957, he got acquainted with the Lebanese magazine *Shi'r* (Poetry) and its editor Yusuf Al-Khal, when soon became one of its writers along with Adonis and Onsi Al-Haj. Al-Sayyab was arrested on 4 February 1961 and released on 20 February of the same year. In 1961, his financial situation forced him to work as a translator for the Franklin Foundation. He traveled to London to receive therapy where he tried to enroll as a student at Oxford University to obtain his PhD but was unable to do so. However, Professor Albert Horani managed to find him a position at Durham University, in the north of England. Al-Sayyab died on 24 December at the Amiri Hospital in Kuwait after a long sickness which he tried to treat in Beirut and London. (Jadaliyya Profiles, 2014, www.jadaliyya.com)

The poetry of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab effectively portrays the plight of the modern Arab intellectual, trapped between the glorious legacy of the past and a sterile present. Sayyab epitomizes the role of the Arab tragic hero, who is physically and spiritually debilitated. Al-Sayyab was confined to a hospital bed. However; he continued to believe in the dignity and future of mankind. Due to his life experiences which are marked by illness, economic strife, and fleeing resulted by political activism, themes of isolation and exile are repetitively explored in his poetry. Both themes give depth to his work as they interwove individual anguish with collective conflicts. His opposition to the suppressive, totalitarian regimes in Iraq as well as his forced diasporic experiences in the exile have further deepened his profound sense of nostalgia and alienation. This is highly represented in his poetry which fosters themes of alienation, rebellion and resilience in the midst of hardships in addition to aesthetic creativity that is indicated in his innovative employment of free verse, vivid imagery and symbolism. His adoption of the free verse structure is not merely an "aesthetic innovation", but rather evidence, emphasizing his view that poetry is a "dynamic medium" for pinpointing societal issues and that the poet is an agent of "socio-political and moral transformation." (Al-Musawi, 2006:69)

2. SHELLEAN REVELUTIONARY SPIRIT IN AL-SAYYAB's "A STRANGER BY THE GULF"

Percy B. Shelley was a revolutionist as a man and a poet. His poetry represented the firing situation that was sweeping out all over Europe. As a schoolboy, his life conditions in addition to his "girllike face" made him an object of attraction and harassment by his colleagues, which increased his sense of agony and dignity, then led him into a state of self-isolation. He grew as a hater of tyranny, a fact which created his "revolutionary doctrines" and defiant spirit against all forms of abuse and injustice, represented in a

sweeping poetic style. (Leavis, 269) Al-Sayyab's poetry, on the other hand, illustrates his financial hardships and social exclusion, which reflect the larger socioeconomic circumstances of Iraq in the middle of the 20th century. Miriam Stewart, et al (2009), argue on the way that individuals' sense of social stigmatization and isolation are impacted by sociopolitical factors as well as economic influences. This indicates that such circumstances shape their eventual defiant identity and resistance of outworn societal norms and conventions. Accordingly, Al-Sayyab's work often criticizes the stigmatization that lower class people endure, indicating that they feel more alone and less like they belong. Al-Sayyab's life experiences which resulted in social isolation, has influenced later his approach of the Romantic hero that is embodied by his poetic personas. It paralleled that of Shelley's since both poets employed personal adversity to drive their aesthetic style and criticize society standards, resulting in a strong harmony between their lives and works.

Both Al-Sayyab and Shelley exemplify the Romantic hero archetype, which is defined by their resistance of societal restraints and their pursuit of truth and beauty amid personal agony.

Their works represent a prophetic imagination, striving to inspire change and question power, thereby cementing their status as voices of resistance in their individual contexts. Their poems remain inseparable from their presence at a given space and time, wherein a social interplay takes place between the poet and the masses, creating a "unique existence" of its own. (Colla, 79) Alexander Freer, a critic, comments that bonds and unbinding are recurring motifs in Shelley's works, echoing not only in "Prometheus Unbound", but "The Revolt of Islam" and "Queen Mab". Understood as "at once personal and political." (ibid, 80) Likewise, Al-Sayyab is a patriot who is plagued by his passion for his country. He is the Iraqi unbound Prometheus, pushed into a forced journey of exile but never quits voicing out against the injustices and tyranny of the political regime in Iraq.

The protagonist in Al-Sayyab's poem "A Stranger by the Gulf" suffers a deep sense of estrangement, isolation and existential torment. In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker uses a descriptive and reflective tone, referring to a lonely man sitting by the gulf:

The poem's vivid imagery and rich emotions of exile and alienation align with the psychological implications of the Romantic hero who suffers an inability of individuation and self-confrontation. His emotional obsession and intense introspection are marked by constant psychological conflicts to redefine his being in opposition to the external forces of fate and socio-political expectations. The poem's title conveys its gloomy tone and the speaker's anguished state of mind. He is a stranger who feels both physically and spiritually alienated, an exilic person who endures yearning for a distant country:

The wind gasps with the midday heat,

like a nightmare in the late afternoon

And on the masts, it continues to fold, to spread for departure

The gulf is crowded with them—laborers roaming the seas

Barefoot, half-naked

And on the sand, by the gulf

A stranger sat—a baffled vision wanders the gulf

Destroying the pillars of light with the rising wail (Taleghani, 2003, ll:1-8)

In these lines, the speaker describes someone who is distant and detached from the outer world. He is nameless and only referred to as "a stranger," implying that he is secluded. Both the man's seclusion and his surroundings reflect the temperament of the Romantic hero, who is dissatisfied and estranged from society. The gulf's vast seas and tremendous waves, metaphorically connote freedom and solitude. This is congruent with the Romantic hero's preference for isolation and solace in Nature as sources of consolation. Being identified as a stranger, the speaker expresses his individuality and defiant spirit to adapt to societal conventions, which are characteristics of the Romantic hero. The reader notices that individual experiences and feelings of longing and separation in love are interwoven with universal themes of exile and home nostalgia. Hence; Iraq encapsulates a dual image of a distant motherland and a far-fetched beloved. The vivid images of "shattering pillars of light," "perplexed gaze," and "haunting cry" evoke a sense of upheaval and loss, reflecting Iraq's volatile sociopolitical circumstances in the mid-twentieth century.

The poet employs visual imagery to evoke the association of beauty and agony in the sight of the gulf which becomes both a metaphor of liberty but also a barrier between the lover and his beloved Iraq: **"The sea is as wide as can be, and you are as distant / The sea is between you and me: Oh Iraq"** The stranger's 'thundering' voice is heard crying "Iraq" in the next lines. Then a call and response exist between the stranger/speaker and the natural surroundings, where all yell "Iraq" in a unified voice:

A voice thunders in the abyss of my bereaved soul: Iraq

Like the crest rising, like a cloud, like tears to the eyes

The wind cries to me: Iraq.

The wave howls at me: Iraq. Iraq. Nothing but Iraq.

As a 'Romantic hero', the speaker's creative imagination is motivated by the beauty of the gulf and the vastness of its water. His sense of nostalgia can be viewed as a 'Romantic hero's' search for beauty, collective love and coherence amid a world that seems hostile and indifferent. Hence; he seeks to rise above the mundane and connect Nature with the inner depths of the self. Wail Hassan, A scholar of comparative literature and postcolonial studies, demonstrates "the extent to which anti-colonial struggles" shapes the formation of his personal and poetic identity as a poet who revolutionized against the conventions of his time. (Hassan, 52) Hassan provides insights from postcolonial studies to reassess the poetic tradition in which Al-Sayyab moves. He

affirms that the socio-political context of Al-Sayyab's time has greatly influenced his poetic output.

Passing by a café, the speaker grapples into a spiritual journey, recalling childhood memories. Hence; spatial and temporal boundaries between the past and the present dissolve. In a moment of tranquility, he recalls his "mother's face", images of the "palm trees" which "grow dim at sunset" snatching at the children who have not returned from outdoors, whispers of the old women from the neighbourhood exchanging rumors and old tales. The spin of the recorded memories signifies themes of continuity amid agony, cultural identity, rather than mere home nostalgia:

A collection of lives and times, we were in its prime

We were its two spheres—between which it rested

So, isn't that nothing but dust?

A dream and a spin of the record?

If that were all that remains, where is the consolation? (ll:38-42)

Images of past recollections show an interplay between memory, dream and imagination. They have a dual resemblance of spiritual relief and existential dread, leading the speaker to a sense of loss in a realm of nothingness, while wrestling with their weight.

The poet / speaker portrays a sensational image of a romantic encounter between two lovers, he and his beloved Iraq, in a foreign land, the land of exile, where they do not experience the joy of consummating their meeting because it does not take place in the mother land: **"If you came to me in a foreign land—the encounter would be incomplete"**. Iraq is the wonder land of perfection and the emblem of beauty: **"The sun is more beautiful in my country than any other, and darkness / Even darkness—there, is more beautiful/ for it embraces Iraq"**

Like Shelley, Al-Sayyab evokes sensational images which captivate his readers with their emotional intensity, richness and thematic depth. He employs personification, metaphor and simile to heighten the sensory effect. Longing for Iraq **"penetrates my blood, as if all of my blood is desire/ A hunger for it . . . like the hunger of the blood of the drowned for air."** Hunger is a visceral image which vividly evokes empathy, suggesting deprivation and spiritual unfulfillment. The image of penetrating blood, on the other hand, is a striking image of inescapable love for Iraq which conveys an irresistible passion for the homeland, penetrating the speaker's self in the same way that blood does.

Al-Sayyab's images of landscapes are not only backdrops but metaphorical spaces filled with sensations, suggesting Romantic sublime: **"Your summer night, gilded by your perfume, Iraq?/ Between timid villages and strange cities, my footsteps / I sang your beloved soil"** Here the olfactory imagery evokes a sense of overwhelming presence interwoven with contrast. They are suggested by the following auditory imagery of footsteps walking lonely through the villages and cities of exile. These evocative images of solitude and pain amplify sublime since they evoke a sense of awe. The dramatic

contrast of “**scorn, and rejection, and aversion . . . or pity**” suggests the speaker’s cosmic battle against the monster of exile, with “soiled feet under the foreign land and suns, where “death is easier than pity”. He is alone and pale as a beggar; however he never surrenders and insists to move on in his journey until he returns back to Iraq.

3. CONCLUSION

Shelley and Al-Sayyab portray a Romantic hero who represents the socio-political concerns of his respective time, embodying ideals of defiance against the tyranny of his time and a pursuit of social justice. Al-Sayyab introduces elements of the Romantic hero in his poetry, namely those of selflessness, alienation and rebellion. However; the cultural context is different. Shelley's Romantic hero is defined by a desire for self-loss and oneness with an idealized other, whereas Al-Sayyab's portrayal is influenced by his cultural and political setting, reflecting his own revolutionary aims. The French Revolution had an impact on Shelley's poetry, which promotes freedom and individuality while embodying a spirit of struggle against oppression and injustice. Similar to Shelley's humanitarian philosophy, Al-Sayyab is renowned for his revolutionary and zealous spirit, defying political injustice and working for a new social order.

Drawing on Western literary and philosophical conventions, Shelley's Romantic hero is firmly rooted in the Romantic aestheticism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Al-Sayyab, on the other hand, offers a unique cultural viewpoint in his work, which is influenced by his Middle Eastern upbringing and the sociopolitical concerns of his day. Due to the political despotism of post-colonial Iraq, the speaker in Al-Sayyab's "A Stranger by the Gulf" is a Prometheuan hero. He acquires the Romantic ideal attitude of resistance. His anguished state results from the political persecution and socio-political turbulence in Iraq in the middle of the 20th century.

Like Shelley who draws heavily on Greek mythology, Al-Sayyab alludes to symbolic images often rooted in Mesopotamian and Arab culture to convey themes of loss, exile and far-fetched dreams of unity and renewal. Hence, the gulf becomes a symbol of separation and reunion. This setting indicates the Romantic implications of the speaker. He is an exiled hero who seeks inspiration and solace in Nature. The waves of the sea ahead, set free his imagination that he begins a psychological journey, contemplating on existential questions of the tumultuous world he lives in. However, Shelly’s Romantic hero is endowed with a hopeful sense of renewal. Al-Sayyab’s, on the other hand embodies melancholy and loss of hope, emphasizing pain and existential despair, caused by nostalgia for the lost. This is evidenced in the last lines of the poem which portray the depressed state of the stranger who is sunk in the waves of his tears, waiting in vain the mercy of the winds and the sails to set up.

Al-Sayyab’s portrayal of the Romantic hero demonstrates the universal appeal of this archetypal character which is capable of transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. By interweaving Shelley’s Romantic hero into the fabric of modern Arabic poetry, Al-Sayyab, successfully draws attention to alienation, quest for individuality in

the face of adversity and resilience as universal human experiences as well as emphasizing the lasting impact of the Romantic hero in modern wide world poetic output.

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