

The Poetry of B.S. Al-Sayyab: Myth and the Influence of T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

This article argues that B.S. Al-Sayyab's exploitation of mythical/symbolic patterns manifests the influence of T. S. Eliot's poetry. However, Al-Sayyab revived the ancient mythology of his country and transferred this classical and Anglo-American tradition to create committed Arabic poetry that tackles the praxis of life and reflects the historical situation of the Arab region, especially that of his country Iraq. We examine Al-Sayyab's poetry in a context which reflects the socio-political disturbances in the Arab region. Al-Sayyab did not simply copy Eliot's techniques and themes. Rather, he blended them with his own mythical vision to create rich and universal poetry without sacrificing the national orientation of his work. The relationship between both poets is one of subversion and modification and not necessarily one of easy influence. Al-Sayyab improved the myths employed by Eliot and tweaked them to produce committed, yet universal, poetry. He used myth to enrich his poetry and give it a universal orientation. Importantly, he used myth as a structuring device to juxtapose the current subjects of his poems against remote and mythical ones.

Keywords: Myth, Poetry, Eliot, Al-Sayyab, Modernism, Comparative Literature.

I. Introduction: International Modernism and Influence Relations

Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab (1926-1964) was one of the prolific poets of modern Arabic poetry who brought the movement of "modernism" to Arabic literature. Modernism was an intellectual and artistic awareness that went beyond propaganda and geographical boundaries. In this part of the world, it resulted from an internal alteration in the human soul with regard to the world and the need of poets to take control over their artistic works and revolutionize them in a context that suits the social, economic, and political disturbances in the Arab world, especially in the aftermath of WWII in the Arab region. Al-Sayyab was one of the poets who were conscious of a need to make modern Arabic poetry face the challenges of modernism and revolutionize art forms and content. According to Haidar, Al-Sayyab is "a creator of the revolution in modern Arabic poetry" (7). In the mid of the twentieth century, poetic devices

were available for Arab poets who later used these devices to interact with the new trends and movements. In particular, poets were exposed to symbolism and surrealism; more importantly, the sequences of the Palestinian disaster of 1948 urged new poetic themes and devices. One group of poets resorted to prosaic poetry because of their lack of the poetic potential, and another group—to which Al-Sayyab belonged—was attracted to modernism and committed to its doctrines, thus expressing high awareness by using symbolic images with mythical forms and themes. The new Arabic poetry, Haidar argues, is characterized by the use of “abstract symbols and imaginative images rather than direct expression” (7). This modernist Arabic poetry became allusive, suggestive in nature in line with its European and Anglo-American modernist counterparts.

Al-Sayyab was influenced by the English romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. He dedicated poems to them and even translated some of their works and incorporated them in his work (Baidoun 44-45). However, modernists like Eliot influenced him more, especially in his mature poetic stage. He was influenced by English poetry and “an admirer of T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell” (Haidar 8). His internalization of modernist themes and techniques does not surprise us because modernism was an international movement in range, conception, and impact. As the most distinctive voice of Arab modernism, Al-Sayyab developed “a hybridized poetics” addressing “the new realities” emerging in the Arab region “in the post-WW II era” (Gohar “Eliot's Modernism” 42, 47). He laid down the origins of modernism in Arabic poetry through his eloquent use of articulate diction and (the Eliotic) free verse style. Azouqa acknowledges the impact of Eliot and his *The Waste Land* poem on modern Arabic poetry like that of Al-Sayyab, Al-Bayati, and Al-Mala'ikah, a poetry that breaks with the tradition of classical poems, adopts free forms of verse, uses myth, and employs metaphorical expressions using imagery and symbolism (“Metapoetry” 47-48).

This huge transition from the conventional poem of al qasidah to al-shi'r al-hurr, literally free verse, plays a significant role in affecting the poetic outcome of Arab poets; particularly, Al-Sayyab transfers his admiration of Eliot's techniques and symbolic style to go “beyond the general limitation of the romantic experience” (Badawi *Introduction* 251), which is manifested in his 1954 poetic collection “The Rain Song” “Unshudat al-Matar.” This collection would not be substantially praised and recognized only for the use of free verse, but also for the exploitation of imagery and its mythical and symbolic patterns, which Al-Sayyab took from Eliot. Al-Sayyab relied on Eliot and adopted his poetry, taking from Greek and Roman traditions and Western motifs and biblical allusions what fits the Arabic and Islamic context. He creatively transferred this tradition to produce committed poetry tackling the praxis of life and reflecting the historical dimension of the Arab region, especially that of Iraq. According to Gohar, Al-Sayyab used Eliot's poetry “as an intertext” not to “dismantle the Western literary canon but to challenge local hegemony, which is an extension of the colonial legacy” (“Eliot's Modernism” 41). In this regard, he used universally known myths to serve local contexts, thus also universalizing such local contexts and giving them a mythical status for readers across the globe.

Emran confirms influence relations, but she argues that Al-Sayyab was “highly individual and independent” as he “resorted to the rich legacy of his own homeland to revive memories of the splendor of ancient Mesopotamia” (V). So, if he presented Eliotic issues and used similar symbols and techniques or images, he used them in a different way and for different ends. He used the myths of Tammuz and Ishtar to give a different depth to his work rooted in the cultural heritage of his country. Therefore, he came to be known as the Tammuzi poet. Gohar significantly states the following: “Writing at the crossroads within western tradition and outside it, Al-Sayyab assimilates Eliot's urban motifs and modernist discourses transforming them into a poetics of confrontation to challenge local hegemony and oppression” (“City/Country” 203). Gohar argues that in the poetry of Al-Sayyab “Eliot's western narratives and poetic techniques are recycled, disseminated and developed in the form of a poetic construct probing socio-political issues of great ramifications on the national and

regional levels in the post WWII era” (“City/Country” 185). Having ascertained general influence relations, it is also our aim to examine both poets’ approach to myth (fertility myths and vegetation rites in particular) from the same comparative approach due to the insufficiency of critical scholarship on this specific issue. Saying that Al-Sayyab was influenced by Eliot’s poetry, or Western poetry in general, may not be particularly new. What is more important is a detailed discussion of the employment of myth in a broad selection from Al-Sayyab’s poems. Al-Sayyab significantly used myth to enrich his poetry and give it a universal orientation. More importantly, he used myth as a structuring device to allow him to juxtapose the current subjects of his poems against remotely suggestive and mythical ones.

As Bloom argues in his study of the relationship between tradition and individual poets, “But poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better” (7). Arguing that Eliot influenced Al-Sayyab is not necessarily saying that the former is better than the latter. Influence relations enrich literature and give it new directions. Eliot describes this influence phenomenon in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and shows the relationship between the past and present in the process of creativeness. Eliot argues that “not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (2171). A poet’s mature period of creativity is influenced by one’s ancestors, by a tradition of the past in which the writer’s personality disappears. To quote him at length, Eliot—speaking of influence relations—memorably writes:

Yet if the only form of tradition...consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (2171)

In a sense, Al-Sayyab internalized a “historical sense” that allowed him to see his poetic potential as part of a tradition of predecessors, but without sacrificing his own unique vision or poetic genius. Adopting free verse allowed Al-Sayyab to find a medium that facilitates the soft transition between prose and poetry, by using dramatic elements (Moreh 236), and other principal devices borrowed from Eliot’s poetry, such as parentheses for comparing two situations with a relevant one (Moreh 236-37) or using brackets to show the correlation in thoughts between past and present, thus showing the connection between thoughts and emotions (Moreh 237). Later, Al-Sayyab illustrated through his collection “Unshudat al-Matar,” what Eliot refers to in his essay on “Hamlet” as “objective correlative” (Moreh 237), Eliot’s doctrine that “originality of expression must rely on a correlation between external facts and emotions” so that poets avoid expressing emotions directly (Moreh 237). This way, Al-Sayyab brought his use of poetic symbols and images to a peak and gave some of his symbols a mythical status without exhausting his treatment of his themes.

In “Hamlet and His Problems”, Eliot finds in the “objective correlative” the “only way of expressing emotion in the form of art” (para. 7). He defines it as “a set of objects, a situation,

a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (para. 7). In this technique, a series of intensive images that do not seem to be related juxtapose against each other and move smoothly to cohere in the readers' minds. Eliot defines this technique as an evocation of the emotion through combining a series of objects, external facts, and situations which must end in sensory experience (Moreh 238). Using the objective correlative is part of creating symbolic and suggestive poetry within the modernist tradition. Al-Sayyab was able to express his thoughts and emotions using Eliot's objective correlative, which can be a quotation from another poem, a proverb, a folktale, or even a Qur'anic or Biblical allusion. He also employed Eliot's theory of depersonalization which proposes that art is more about transferring the subjectivism of emotions from the personal to the universal, and thus to the mythical.

Eliot's influence on Al-Sayyab was both thematic and stylistic. The elements of imagery that Al-Sayyab used enabled him to abandon his romantic subjectivism to make a distinct shift engaging his poetry in the critical issues of his age and modernize his poetry. This study tackles the use of imagery in its mythical and symbolic forms in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and how Al-Sayyab employs these elements. We set an analogy between Eliot's use of poetic devices and his critique of the city in *The Waste Land* and Al-Sayyab's occupation with the same themes and similar poetic devices. We examine Al-Sayyab's universalizing of his poetry in a context which reflects the socio-political disturbances in the Arab region, particularly in his hometown, Jaikur. The significance of this study stems from the scanty number of comparative English studies on both Eliot and Al-Sayyab and this study's focus on the employment of myth as a thematic link and a structuring device.

In a comparative study on Eliot and Al-Bayati, Azouqa writes that one analogy between the two poets is “their shared outlook on the function of poetry, particularly the importance of connecting artistic innovations to the nature of socio-political circumstances of the age” (“Defamiliarization” 192). For one critic, Eliot's poetry “changed the form and technique of Arabic poetry—as well as its contents—to an extent that has no precedent in the whole history of Arabic poetry” (Moreh 216). This included the use of myth, symbol, and legend. Such an approach would “save the poet from direct statement and add freshness to his poetry” (Moreh 246). Thus, modern Arab poets adapted Eliot's evocative techniques “to express their own problems and the problems of the Arab world: poverty, illiteracy, sickness and exploitation” (Moreh 266). For Lo'lo'ah, Al-Sayyab took from Eliot the allusive nature of images to create and convey the meaning instead of direct reporting (68-69). Therefore, he uses margin notes and explanations and even references to other poets just as Eliot does in his poem. The relationships between Eliot's images and symbols is not logical but rather emotional (Lo'lo'ah 182). This style Al-Sayyab adopted—as will see in the next section—works by suggesting and using images rather than direct reporting, which justifies the use of symbols and myth. It can be concluded from the above discussion that influence relations between Eliot and Al-Sayyab are not new; it is our comparative approach to myth that is expected to be significant.

II. The Employment of Myth in Al-Sayyab and Eliot

Myth has a strong presence in the poetry of Al-Sayyab. This should not come as a surprising fact if we consider that Al-Sayyab grew up listening to traditional stories and myths in his grandparents' houses like those of Sinbad, Antara, Abu Zaid el Hilali which later enriched his poetry (Baidoun 16). At the same time, he was a committed writer concerned with the issues of the Arab man in general (Baidoun 63). Myth is symptomatic of his universal vision, relevance, and embrace of external influences.

But why would a poet like Al-Sayyab resort to myth? Eliot in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" finds in Joyce's *Ulysses* an important expression of its age. The novel's mythical parallels serve as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Similarly, and few decades after Eliot's article, Northrop Frye's well-known work *Anatomy of Criticism* gave an account of myth and archetypes in literature as structuring devices with patterns of imagery having conceptual meaning. For Eliot, then, the need for myth is justified by cultural decline. For Baidoun, Al-Sayyab was attracted to myth due to its indirect nature and ability to evade political oppression through symbol (71). Myth dislocates social and political realities and projects them by way of juxtaposition. It is used to illustrate a worldview by explaining people's beliefs and practices. Like Eliot, Al-Sayyab finds in myth an urgent socio-political and cultural need and a means of explanatory juxtaposition. In a lecture delivered in Rome about commitment and non-commitment in modern Arabic poetry, Al-Sayyab once acknowledged the influence of Eliot as far as the issue of making poets aware of such myths other poets were not sensitive about, no more (Baidoun 71, 82). One good reason for using symbolic myth in literature is given by Al-Sayyab himself in 1957 as the dominance of matter over spirit and materialism over the soul which impacted artistic values and impoverished expression (Kilani 130). This seems logical if we consider how the use of myth is different for each poet. In Eliot, the waste land of his famous 1922 poem of that title is the land of the dead, and his mythical vision is somewhat apocalyptic. Al-Sayyab is more optimistic, and he believes in rebirth from decline. His hope differentiates him from Eliot. Moreover, manipulating myth to serve local contexts of socio-political commentary is another major difference from Eliot (although we can argue the case that Al-Sayyab was also building on Eliot's social and cultural critique of post-war Europe).

In what follows, we discuss a few aspects of Eliot's impact on Al-Sayyab; mainly, we discuss the city as a mythical theme, fertility myths and legends, and finally some scattered mythical symbols in Al-Sayyab's poetry. The analysis reveals that myth is not contingent in Al-Sayyab's poetry. It is used to build and develop poems and endow them with socio-political and cultural import. And aside from the mythical symbols used separately in each poem under discussion, Al-Sayyab built a mythical scheme in his poetry whereby myth is organic and fundamental to his poetry when examined collectively. Had Eliot's influence on Al-Sayyab been whimsical, and had the Western modernist tradition he absorbed been superficial, Al-Sayyab would not have produced such a sustained and integral mythical poetry.

A. The City as a Mythical Theme: "Jaikur and the City"

Critics of Eliot's poetry know that he used Western cities "as paradigms of a dying civilization" (Gohar "Eliot's Modernism" 43). In line with the modernist tradition he embraced, Al-Sayyab's treatment of some cities elevates them to the level of mythical ones. In "Jaikur and the City," Jaikur, the poet's village, is a mere dream and its resurrection is unattainable for the poet. He is attached to this dream although he realizes that it cannot be achieved. Hereafter, the resurrection of Jaikur represents the rebirth and liberation of the nation. When Jaikur is oppressed, it represents death and destruction, and when it is green it is a symbol of life. Jaikur becomes a mythical symbol of life, death, and rebirth:

And Jaikur is green,
 the dusk has touched
 the crests of her palm trees
 with sorrowful sun. My path
 went to her, like a lightening flash
 it showed and vanished, splendor returned, kindling the road
 until it lit the city, and under the bandages
 could be seen the wounds on my hand:

they were scorchmarks.
(Jayyusi *Modern Arabic Poetry* 432)

Jaikur for the bereaved poet is an archetypal image of innocence, simplicity, and happiness. It is also a mode of spiritual being for the speaker. Al-Sayyab begins “Jaikur and the City” with a descriptive comparison between the vile city, which he describes as if it were robes that coil around him and his village, Jaikur. He cannot get to Jaikur and its beautiful fish and breathtaking sunrise or sunset touching the palm-trees. The poem depicts feelings of loneliness and alienation of the poet who cannot bear this new life of oppression and exile. Thus, Jaikur becomes a symbol for innocence, purity, and virtue. The strong feeling of being under siege and in prison while living the appetites of life in the dystopian city is like cords that coil around the poet's neck stifling his very being.

Eliot depicts his urban and barren waste land as deprived of its values and traditions. He builds his poem in a fragmented way to communicate a sense of the urban waste land. This intensive “metropolitan imagery, adapted from Eliot's poetry,” (Jayyusi *Modern* 194) is employed by Al-Sayyab to stress the persistence of desolation that results in the “spiritual murder of both the poet and the village” (Gohar 194). Al-Sayyab employs popular folklore, telling the story of villagers who go to the city and never come back:

These are streets of which drowsy hearthside legends say:

From them no more than from the shore of death
has any traveler through night returned,
as if there
echo and silence were wings of the Sphinx,
two wings that jut from buried rock through the subsoil. (Jayyusi *Modern* 432)

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses such poetic devices along with mythology to create a vast image of his “unreal city” of death. Similarly, Al-Sayyab connects folkloric tales with myths to create a domestic image of Baghdad, the vile city, so he alludes to the Sphinx myth, an Egyptian symbol, to depict an atmosphere of death in the streets. In classical mythology, the monstrous sphinx sits on a rock outside Thebes terrorizing and killings the city's citizens who cannot solve its riddle. Using such myth allows Al-Sayyab to criticize political tyranny and corruption associated with city life in Iraq and, by implication, the Arab world. This sphinx is, according to Al-Sayyab, “a symbol of the tyrannical regimes governing Iraq in the 1950's” (Gohar 195). There is another allusion in the same line that engages the Islamic and Qur'anic heritage. Al-Sayyab alludes to the story of prophet Moses (Gohar 195), when god responds to the summons from the prophet when he prayed to Allah to provide him and his thirsty people with a spring of water in the rocky desert; Al-Sayyab draws an analogy by the rock describing the sterile and barren city (Gohar 195). In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, there is shadow under this red rock—“(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)” (*The Waste Land* L. 39)—which refers to the neglected churches of London and their religious rituals. Al-Sayyab's water or “rain” does not bring fertility, nor does it revive the earth. According to Al-Sayyab, these times can never witness any miracle, like the miracle of the prophet Moses, which is able to “restore fertility” in the sterile cities of the Arab world (Gohar 195); therefore, he depicts this city with all its bankruptcy and maliciousness as an inferno on earth.

Eliot's influence on Al-Sayyab is manifested throughout “Jaikur and the City”. In particular, Al-Sayyab uses Eliot's objective correlative in describing Baghdad, the personification of evil and corruption; he engages the Qur'anic and Biblical narratives of Adam and Eve and their temptation in paradise, as when they had to conceal their sexual organs with a few leaves of fig tree, to represent the Arab regimes and the political scandals committed by dictators unable to conceal their sins and stripped of their façade of sanctity (Gohar 196). The *Waste Land* inhabitants of Eliot are dead in life. They choose to be buried in sin rather than die and

be buried in a decent way. Likewise, Al-Sayyab's dwellers of the city, who have claws, cannot realize the value of living and have altered into beasts of prey due to lack of love, innocence, and spirituality. Using this horrifying image, Al-Sayyab wishes for these city dwellers to take off their claws and restore their innocence and mercy toward each other. Thus, fertility of Jaikur is an objective correlative of sterility and moral emptiness of the city which Al-Sayyab condemns (Gohar 196). Al-Sayyab laments the decadence of the natural world and the dominance of the metropolitan society of the city which substitute the palm trees in Jaikur.

Jaikur is juxtaposed against the vile city through a series of images of fertility and growth; by contrast, the city is associated with death and loss. Al-Sayyab portrays the condemnation of city over Jaikur by connecting the elements of reality to those of symbol, the conditions of present to tradition, and truth to dream, that is "the crop of famines of the city's double Eden" (Jayyusi *Modern* 434). A sinful city is like a paradise lost and never regained. On the other hand, Jaikur's paradise is attainable only in dreams and at night, not in the waking reality of the city. In addition, the starving of the city's dwellers is juxtaposed to millstones of flame. Al-Sayyab supports this image by alluding to heritage, the Babylonian tradition of ancient Iraq. Here the poet draws on the popular myth of Tammuz, the god of fertility and growth, and he embodies it to serve his description of the sterile vein-stocks that spread throughout the city. He sees but decadence and decline; and the foliated trees and blossoms become switched off lamps:

My path
 crossed millstones of flame,
 here are vineyards, their dead springs
 veins of Tammuz crossing the city, veins that branch
 through every home and prison, every coffee bar,
 every prison and bar and every nightclub,
 through all the insane asylums,
 every whorehouse of Ishtar,
 ignoble flowers
 bursting into bloom like lamps whose oil does not burn,
 where no flame touches,
 and in every coffeebar and prison, whorehouse and home-
 "This water is my blood, will you drink it?
 This flesh is my bread, will you eat it?"
 And the goddess Lat grieves for Tammuz. (Jayyusi *Modern* 434)

Al-Sayyab refers to Babylon in his evocation of wickedness and sin. Thus, when dancing is absent and the Babylonian dancers are asleep the world remains chaotic and discordant. The ancient city, with its associations of luxurious, decadent lifestyles, helps in the negative depiction of Al-Sayyab's city as the foil of Jaikur. The two polarities, Jaikur and the city, are not reconciled (Azouqa "Metapoetry" 52). When Al-Sayyab uses the Tammuz/Ishtar myth, he uses the death of Tammuz to allude to the decline of the Arab nation and their lack of spirituality. On the other hand, he compares the resurrection of Tammuz to the rebirth of the Arab nation and their prosperity (Badawi 225). Al-Sayyab subversively depicts Ishtar, the Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of love, war, and fertility, as a prostitute who has whorehouses, which is a very disgusting image of such goddess who must represent purity and virtue as the wife of Tammuz. Likewise, Eliot ironically depicts women in *The Waste Land* as sex machines who are involved in illicit affairs that end in boredom and dissatisfaction.

In addition to reference to the "insane asylums" and "whorehouse of Ishtar", Al-Sayyab mixes the Tammuz myth of death and resurrection with its Christian counterpart. He alludes to the Bible:

"This water is my blood, will you drink it?
This flesh is my bread, will you eat it?" (Jayyusi *Modern* 434)

This "Biblical narrative, of sacrifice and martyrdom, is merged with the mythic story of Tammuz, the son of Lat, who is, unfortunately, murdered by an electric shock" (Gohar 197). Employing electricity represents the new industrial life in the city and how this city kills its dwellers:

my son's glass blood has been smashed in his veins,
the spark of our house has struck stone,
the city wall
crushed him, scattered him, flung him down in no time. (Jayyusi *Modern* 434)

This way, Al-Sayyab's critique of an urban, industrial civilization is reminiscent of Eliot's critique of an insane and industrial post-war Europe. However, this martyr is not Tammuz, and it is not Lat who mourns the loss of her son; the poet identifies with Tammuz and becomes himself the martyr, and Jaikur is the mother mourning her son murdered by the city; therefore, this death is symbolic:

He wanted the light, wanted to disperse
Darkness ... and he was defeated.
She sends out her lament –
The voice fades, and the music. (Jayyusi *Modern* 435)

Al-Sayyab is alienated from Jaikur as the walls and gates stand between the poet and his homeland. The poet realizes that he is incapable of returning to Jaikur; he is trapped in the city, and his hands turn into clay that brings aridity. The poet "becomes the object of the city's moral paralysis and spiritual death" (Gohar "City/Country" 197). With its deceptive lights and greedy merchants and sick people, the city is a killer for the poet. And when such a city is ruled by oppressive dictators, it is even worse.

Al-Sayyab ends "Jaikur and The City" with a complete pessimism that unites the exiled poet and Jaikur. It appears from the beginning that the poet lives in the city, which he depicts as a prison and describes with a series of unrelated images that result in an objective correlative of Baghdad:

Bloody his
right hand: on every lock? And my
right hand: no claw
to fight with on the streets of the city, no grip
to raise up life from the clay, it is clay only.
Outside Jaikur a wall has been raised up,
and a gate,
and a stillness envelops her. (Jayyusi *Modern* 435)

People who live in Baghdad, the vile city, are like Londoners in *The Waste Land*, dead in life. They lack spirituality, and they abandon their prayers and their religion; thus, their life is boring, tedious, and meaningless because these dwellers are hollow. However, Al-Sayyab transfers the Eliotic atmosphere and domesticates it to fit the Arab nation, so he brings myths and allusions from the ancient tradition of the Arabic literature. He does not use the Eliotic subject only (Emran 41), but also its images, monologues, and the poetic vocabularies such as those of life, death, hollowness, and waste.

For some critics, the modernist movement is an urban one of cities like London, Prague, and Paris. Cities were used to depict the ills of a decaying civilization. Noorani attempts to

establish “the place of the city as the figure of contemporary social dissolution in the genesis of modernism” and argues that poets like Al-Sayyab and Al-Bayati use “visual autonomy” to “endow their images of femininity with communal and political meaning by linking them with the city” (103). Moreover, Noorani contends that an additional element in the appearance of modernism “is the representation of moribund and fragmented social order, as well as a hoped-for modernity, in terms of the city” (104). A separation between Jaikur and its citizen seems to have taken place in Al-Sayyab’s poem. During such time, famines have happened and the village has suffered the walls of imprisonment just like its citizen who suffered similar experiences of spiritual death away from Jaikur. Therefore, Jaikur the village is an extended symbol for (lost) fertility and innocence while the city is a symbol of spiritual aridity, sin, and secularism. Jaikur the victim is like a dead Tammuz, and a dead Tammuz is like a declining city. The poet is son of Jaikur just as Tammuz is son of Lat. The juxtaposition between Jaikur and the city highlights the symbolic value of Al-Sayyab’s analogy and serves to resurrect Jaikur. This mythical unity between the poet and his village will find a counterpart in the unity between the poet and his country in Al-Sayyab’s poem “The Rain Song” in terms of common deprivation, pain, and hunger.

As far as the mythical theme of the relationship between people and socio-political systems is concerned, one is reminded of the Fisher King of the Arthurian legend who is sexually wounded in the thigh, just as the vegetation gods Attis and Adonis and Osiris were wounded. Unless he can be healed, the land he rules is not healthy and cannot be fruitful. Apparently, the Arthurian legends have associations with the fertility rituals of paganism James Frazer discusses in *The Golden Bough*, which will be discussed in the next section. Al-Sayyab seems to link the fate of the poet with that of his barren city. Alternatively, the exiled poet and his village Jaikur suffer the consequences of their separation and depravity of their surroundings.

B. Fertility Myths: A Sampling of Al-Sayyab's Poetry in the Light of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*

Azouqa in “Metapoetry” argues that “the modern use of myth allows the poet to connect the present to a mythical counterpart while the poet maintains aesthetic distance. At the same time, the mythical frame provides the modern poem with universality through connecting the present to a mythical counterpart” (44). For Awad, myth in poetry is not only a pattered story but rather a symbol and a structural principle (10). Awad also argues that myth is an organic feature in a poem that unifies the private and the public and the abstract and the concrete as well as an artistic parallel to rituals concerning shifts in natural seasons and phases in human life (20). Awad contends that Al-Sayyab used myth symbolically to express a cultural issue which is the rebirth of Arab civilization after its death in times of degeneration (22). It is no wonder then that he also used mythical symbols of his land and culture like Babylonian ones known by Arabs through history because of their expressive nature (Awad 23). This confirms our assertion that Al-Sayyab used myth consciously not simply to copy Western traditions or show his familiarity with English literature. Rather, he honed them to serve local socio-political contexts. The use of myth throughout Al-Sayyab’s poetry is an indication that it is an organizing device and a thematic link worthy of consideration in his other poems as well.

One mythical theme “clearly inspired by T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ is that of aridity and its effect on the land” (Bishai 9). Rain “is conspicuous by its absence” or its associations with blood and tears as in “The River and Death” (Bishai 9). In “The River and Death” the speaker apostrophizes the sad river Buwayb and imagines carrying longing to the river as if he would carry “pledges of wheat and flower” to it (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 29). The poem treats the mythical theme of fertility and makes of Buwayb a Tammuzy symbol of vegetation. Unlike Eliot’s Thames that ironically “bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights” (*The Waste Land*, 43-44, ls. 176-179), Al-Sayyab’s river is a symbol of life. Although the river is depicted as sad

like rain, it is the object of the poet's longing and the site of natural beauty. The poem ends with a wish that if the poet should drown in his blood to be able to carry the burden of humanity: "To bear the burden with mankind, / To bring forth life: / In my death is victory" (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 31). Death brings forth life in a ritualistic way. In this poem, tears mix with blood and rain and fill a sad world. There is a death wish since death can yield new and purer forms of life:

The bells of the dead sound a knell in my veins,
 And my blood darkens with longing
 For a bullet to rend my breast
 With the coldness of death,
 Like hell fires setting bones a blaze. (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 30).

The poet draws on the myth of Tammuz and uses Biblical allusions to death as the cause of salvation. A river is a traditional symbol of life, fertility, and civilization. However, traditional mythology makes of rivers sacred receivers of offerings. It is through life sacrificed that rivers give forth life. Such an understanding of the power of life over death, despite the necessity of sacrifice, is essential to Al-Sayyab's conception of possible political and social change rejuvenating life. Under political oppression and social injustice, Al-Sayyab seems to argue, rivers and lands lose fertility and death becomes an essential aspect of life.

In "Christ After the Crucifixion" the speaker Christ speaking from the position of death becomes a vegetation god. Reading the poem, we encounter something like: "I died so that bread may be eaten in my name/With the coming of the new season." (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 46). The speaker becomes the seed for life, and his blood a life source for others. Juxtaposed against this image is that of distant Jaikur blooming green and giving warmth for the speaker and making his blood run through its soil:

My heart is like the sun when its pulse beats with light,
 Like the earth when it beats with grain,
 Flowers and translucent water.
 My heart is the water and the ear of corn
 Whose death is resurrection,
 Feeding on whoever it finds
 In the dough rounded and moulded
 Like a small breast,
 Like the breast of life. (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 45-46).

It is as if the whole city is in labor giving birth to life through death. The poem ends with something like: "Praised be God! / Such is the city in labour" (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 48). The fate of Christ becomes attached to that of Jaikur, and the poet uses fertility and life as a counter to aridness and death. At one with Jaikur, Christ becomes the savior of life (its sun, water, and earth). In this sense, Christ is an alternative version of the Tammuz myth Al-Sayyab uses as a recurring mythical symbol. The identification between Jaikur and the poet in one poem and between Christ and the poet in this poem give Jaikur sanctity beyond question as a spiritual alternative to secularism and corruption.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* is essential to understanding Al-Sayyab's mythical vision. The poem treats the same themes of aridity and barrenness. The whole poem integrates fertility myths by way of commenting on cultural decline and evoking death. Readers of the poem encounter the following lines:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. (*The Waste Land*, 38-39, ls. 19-24)

London, as the “Unreal City” (*The Waste Land* 40, l. 60), is foggy, with winter “frost” killing or threatening to different forms of life (*The Waste Land* 40, l. 73). This city is like Al-Sayyab’s vile city, but it is unlike his village Jaikur. The poem, in a manner reminding us of Chaucer, begins with April as a cruel month, with spring as cold and arid compared with a winter that “kept us warm” (*The Waste Land* 38, l. 5) and fed “A little life with dried tubers” (*The Waste Land* 38, l. 7). The poem, therefore, begins with an image of death and sterility:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain. (*The Waste Land* 38, ls.1-4)

Among the dead crowds crossing London Bridge as somnambulists, the speaker finds a familiar face and asks him questions about a potential life out of deadly surroundings:

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
 Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
 Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?” (*The Waste Land*, ls. 71-73)

After this first section entitled “The Burial of the Dead,” we have section two called “A Game of Chess,” in which frivolous city life is depicted and an atmosphere of ennui is communicated. There is a reference to the myth of Philomela, the daughter of an Athenian King. King Tereus of Thrace had an illicit love for Philomela and raped her; and then he cut her tongue and imprisoned her so that she could tell about his crime. However, Philomela wove a tapestry which revealed the facts of her violation and mutilation to her sister Procne. In order to get revenge, Procne killed her son from Tereus and cooked him, so that Tereus ate his own son for dinner. When Tereus discovered the ghastly trick, he tried to kill the two sisters. Before the story could end, all three were turned into birds, with Philomela into a nightingale. This myth of illicit passion is juxtaposed against similar love scenes in modern life. In Eliot, sex is sterile and pills get used to abort pregnancy. After a typist has a meal and is “bored and tired” her guest “assaults at once” without receiving any resistance (*The Waste Land*, 45, ls. 236, 239). This sexual ennui is expressed in these lines:

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said. (*The Waste Land*, 43, ls. 157-8)

The sterile sexual scenes of Eliot are in line with the aridity and death of Al-Sayyab’s poems. Actually, both poets seem to have consulted an important source on comparative religion, folklore, and mythology, namely Sir James Frazer’s book *The Golden Bough*. For example, Al-Sayyab used mythical symbols like Christ and Tammuz and incorporated ideas of sacrifice and fertility because myth for him is a teleological, etiological end of commentary and not an imposition on his poetry.

In fact, Eliot—in a note after the poem—acknowledges the influence of Jessie Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* on the Grail legend and James Frazer’s book. Frazer in his study of myth, folktales, and religious rites across different world cultures and centuries argues particular fertility rites and universal religious patterns in remote cultures across the world. He states that “the King of the Wood was regarded as an incarnation of the tree-spirit or of the spirit of vegetation, and that as such he would be endowed, in the belief of his worshippers, with a supernatural power of making the trees to bear fruit, the crops to grow, and so on” (240). Killing the King of the Wood before he gets weak or impaired, Frazer contends, would

transfer the divine spirit in him to a stronger and vigorous successor so that the vital and natural force he represents does not fail (240). Such a process has the potential to "promote and quicken the growth of vegetation" (248). Frazer dedicates one chapter to the vegetation deity in Semitic and Phoenician mythology Adonis or Thammuz. Adonis was worshipped in Egypt and Syria and festivals celebrating his death and rebirth were conducted in spring. The legend of Adonis is often associated with "the decay and revival of vegetation" (281), his mother being a "myrrh-tree" (281) in the account given by Frazer. According to Frazer, Babylonian legends show Istar (Aphrodite/Adonis's lover) descending to the underworld to bring water to revive him (287) after he is killed by a boar. Adonis is the western version of this eastern counterpart. Anemones were said to have sprung from the blood of Adonis as a vegetation god (*The Golden Bough* 297, 280). Other vegetation gods Frazer includes in his study are Attis, whose death and resurrection were also mourned and celebrated in at spring festivals and sacred rites in Western Asia (*The Golden Bough* 296) conceived as a tree-spirit and a corn-spirit (*The Golden Bough* 298-99). The Greek Dionysus is another vegetation god. In such myths, the main pattern is life/rebirth after death, which could be applied to life in the Arab world after cultural decline, political losses, and division.

In Eliot, water is associated with death rather than life. For example, section four is entitled "Death by Water". In section five entitled "What the Thunder Said" we have thunder but no rain in this waste land. We have "dry sterile thunder without rain" (*The Waste Land* 49, l. 342). Within Eliot's gloomy mythical vision, death is rampant. People expect neither water nor life-giving rain:

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience
Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road. (*The Waste Land* 48, ls. 329-333)

The repetition of words like "water" and "drop" in section five is juxtaposed against words like "dry". Rain fails to come, religion is not efficacious, and salvation in Eliot's poem seems individual:

Chapels are empty, dark clouds gather, but no rain falls.
I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order? (*The Waste Land* 51, ls. 424-426)

In this Eliotic picture, the fertility myths of Frazer are invoked to be frustrated through death and decay. There is no redemption people can wait for or expect. All traditional values and assumptions, religious or otherwise, are falling apart in Eliot.

By contrast, Al-Sayyab's mythical vision is different. In "The Rain Song" Al-Sayyab gives the best of his modernist poetic attempts whereby he relies on a basic fertility myth and the inevitable rebirth—without specifying Adonis by name (Awad 33). This makes myth an inherent structural pattern in the poem and not an irrelevant addition. Here the woman is a symbol for the land and the homeland, for mother-earth (Awad 34). 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." (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 27).

People wait for rain that will ultimately come. But rain is mixed with tears and blood in Al-Sayyab in "The Rain Song". Hope in rebirth is there, but it might come after a bloody

revolution and abundant suffering. Deliverance is not easy, but it is not impossible to overthrow tyranny:

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. (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 28)

This hopeful vision counters Eliot's pessimism and shows belief in a better future for Iraq and the Arab world despite temporal oppression. The rain "falls heavily" in Al-Sayyab's poem, washing historical guilt and ushering a fresh start. This hopeful vision reminds us of that of Jaikur standing as a healthy counterpart for the wicked metropolis (although a gloomy one due to exile and separation from its inhabitants of city dwellers). In "Jaikur and the Trees of the City" we have Jaikur as a city with evergreen trees and sleepless nights. Unlike Eliot's London, this mythical city becomes the site of the fertility of rain:

And tonight there is rain in Jaikur
 Showering shadows—
 Night stealing over Jaikur. (Al-Sayyab, Bishai 38-39)

Death as the cause of renewal brings forth life. Al-Sayyab's system of imagery includes "similes, metaphors, allegories, literary allusions and symbols" (Boullata 235). Boullata 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" (237). 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 242). He used myth as a unifying political and social symbol. El-Azma argues that Eliot's *Waste Land* helped Al-Sayyab shed light on "the loss of his civilization, and the decay of the Arab culture and Islamic people" (219). Baghdad substitutes London. However, there is more hope for resurrection in Al-Sayyab's poetry and water is an enduring symbol of fertility. Al-Sayyab used myth "as an 'objective correlative' in order to express the new dimensions of his vision, which assured not only its universality but also struck its roots deeper in the soil of the fatherland" (El-Azma 225). Kadhim argues that al-Sayyab's employment of the Tammuz myth in his "Fi al-Maghrib al-Arabi" allows him to "transcend the *WL*'s vision and ultimately to repudiate that vision" (137). The relationship between Eliot and Al-Sayyab is one of subversion and modification and not necessarily a simple one of influence relations. Al-Sayyab uses myth as a mini-narrative for local socio-political contexts. In turn, he endows such local contexts with deep, universal vision.

Asfour notes that among the characteristics of the Arabic poem "since the middle of the century is an increasing use of myth, symbol and legend, reshaped to incorporate themes of contemporary significance" (48). Asfour contends that one "notable discrepancy between Eliot's wasteland and Sayyab's is that in Sayyab, the land generally continues to replenish its wealth year after year" (58). In other words, the decline of civilization Eliot depicted is not mirrored by infertility in the land in Al-Sayyab's poetry. Therefore, Al-Sayyab builds on and modifies Eliot's myths.

Mythical symbols are scattered throughout Al-Sayyab's mature poetry, especially during the Tammuzi stage (as opposed to the romantic stage, the realistic one, or the individual one his critics often refer to). In some cases, myth is used in a negative, pessimistic light. For example, in a poem entitled "In the Dark Village" "Fi al Karyati el Dalmaa" the dead awaken as if they were asleep thinking that there is a resurrection, but they find out that this is not the case in their dark village with deserted paths. They listen to the winds and tree leaves, see the crescent moon and ultimately return to their graves wondering about the time of resurrection (Al-Sayyab, Awad 31-32). No matter how late this resurrection is, it will ultimately come. Although this poem is more pessimistic than other poems we have discussed, resurrection as rebirth from darkness and death is never negated by the poem. Its exact time is just not specified. At least, the apocalyptic tone of the poem suggests a "second coming", to draw on W. B. Yeats's poetry, of some sort, which indicates Al-Sayyab's belief in the necessity of change in the form of life after death.

III. Conclusion

Like Eliot, Al-Sayyab employs historical and traditional myths; he includes the myth of Tammuz and Ishtar to symbolize the cycle of death and resurrection. He also uses the Babylonian myth and the Sphinx myth to represent tyranny and oppression. His poetry expresses a deep connection between man on the one hand and the earth and life on the other. Al-Sayyab's poetry proves that resurrection and renewal are elemental and constant human needs. It is social, political, and cultural factors that necessitate this process of change. Therefore, his poetry reveals how life and death are intertwined, how hope and sadness are interrelated. It is no wonder, therefore, that in his poetry blood, water, and tears are linked. Al-Sayyab uses devices such as mythical symbols and archetypes. He becomes the speaker for the national concern by representing Arab regimes in a mythical frame, thus carrying his poetry to a universal level while revising popular myth to serve his poetic ends as an Iraqi Arab poet. Although our comparative approach to the poetry of Eliot and Al-Sayyab has revealed some productive influence relations within a modernist context, the poems of each poet remain richly significant and worthy of analysis on their own. Moreover, local contexts in each case can be used as an interpretive key to the poems, i.e. the Western tradition in Eliot and the Eastern-Arab context in Al-Sayyab. International comparative contexts are particularly useful for the global orientation of cultural studies.

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