

CHAPTER ONE

BADR SHAKIR AL-SAYYAB AND SALAH ABD AL-SABUR: PIONEERS OF ARABIC MODERNISM

1.1. Socio-Political Background

In his book *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun says “The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and his other conditions and customs.”¹¹ In the medieval ages specifically in the period between 749 and 1258 Arabic literature was dominant and has influenced Western literatures. According to Susan Friedman, borrowings from other cultures were the foremost reasons behind the rise of the West after 1500.¹² In her book *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, Maria Rosa Menocal argues that Arabic culture played a vital role in shaping medieval literature in Europe. However, Westerners, though greatly influenced by medieval Arabic literature, are stubborn to acknowledge the role of Arabic literature. In his book *The Making of Humanity*, Robert Briffault says:

Arabian knowledge began at an early date to percolate into Christian Europe. . . . “All the young Christians who distinguish themselves by their talent, know the language and literature of the Arabs, read and study passionately the Arab books, gather at great expense great libraries of these, and everywhere proclaim with a loud voice how admirable is that literature.”¹³

¹¹Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans, Franz Rosenthal, ed, N. J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University, 1967) 116.

¹²Susan Stanford Friedman, “Unthinking Manifest Destiny: Muslim Modernities on Three Continents” *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed, Wai-Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007) 70.

¹³Robert Briffault, *The Making of Humanity* (London: George Allen, 1919) 198.

After the invasion of Baghdad in 1258, the domination of the Arabic culture diminished. From 1515 up to 1914, the Ottomans ruled Arab world. Imperialist countries, especially Britain and France planned to occupy the Arab world, but before doing that, they had to demolish the Ottoman *Khilafah* which represented the unity of the Arab world and Turkey. Britain and France triggered the issue of Arab and Turkish Nationalism by supporting secret political groups in Turkey such as the “Committee of Union and Progress” and the “Young Turkey” on one hand and simultaneously supporting and encouraging Arabs to revolt against the Ottoman state on the other hand. In 1916, the ruler of Mecca, Al-Sharif Hussein declared the Great Arab Revolt against Ottomans with the help of the British Empire. In the meantime, there was a secret agreement between UK and France known as Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 which stipulated the partition of Ottoman-ruled Arab lands between them¹⁴. Britain not only betrayed the Arabs, but also made Palestine the national homeland for Jews. The Arab world was divided into twenty countries all of which were colonized by Britain, France and Italy except Saudi Arabia and north of Yemen.

In the first half of the 20th century, major events occurred in the Arab world, in the aftermath the World War I. For instance, in 1924, Ottoman *Khilafah* was abolished and Western colonization replaced it; Islamic, leftist and nationalist parties were founded to oppose the hegemony of the Western imperialism and to call for Arab unity. Moreover, some Arab countries became semi-independent, such as Egypt and Iraq; others obtained full independence, such as Lebanon and Syria. The worst event to occur in the Arab world was the tragedy of Palestine and the establishment of Israel after the defeat of the

¹⁴Arthur Goldschmidt Jr and Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 8th edition (Colorado: Westview, 2006) 213.

Arab armies in 1948. Other crucial events also occurred in the first half of the 20th century at the international level such as the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the rise of the Fascist and Nazi regimes, and World War II.

In the first two decades of the second half of the 20th century, most of the Arab states obtained independence. Moreover, the Arab regimes which connived with colonization, were overthrown. The conflict between the Western Imperialism and USSR Communism made many of the Arab intellectuals and poets incline to socialism as it resisted imperialism and colonization. In his book *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, M. M. Badawi says:

Because Russia was an ally, Russian literature and the Soviet regime were given some publicity in the Arab world as part of the war propaganda effort, with the result that young Arab intellectuals, especially in Egypt, become increasingly interested in Marxist thought. . . . Poets with Marxist leanings, particularly the Iraqis Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, had a large following in the Arab world, especially as their names were linked with the new free verse form, even though that form was not confined to Marxist poets. (Badawi 53, 55)

The British mandate lasted in Iraq from 1914 to 1932; then the oligarchic monarchy was from 1932 up to the 1958 revolution. King Faisal I, who came to the throne with the help of Britain, ruled from 1921 up to 1933, King Ghazi from 1933 to 1939, then King Faisal II from 1939 up to 1958. The political opposition in Iraq was strong as it had three parties: the National Democratic Party, the *Baath* and the Iraqi Communist Party. The opposition, especially the Iraqi Communist Party was behind the

uprising in the 1940s and 1950s. The Iraqi Communist Party supported Abd Al-Karim Qasim, the first president of Iraq after the revolution of 1957. After the Baathist coup of 1963 against Qasim, the leaders of the Iraqi Communist Party were executed because of their alliance with Abd Al-Karim Qasim.

Like other poets and intellectuals of his generation, Al-Sayyab admired Communism and became a member of the Iraqi Communist Party. The Iraqi nationalist parties and the Communist party were in a conflict due to the Communist party's attitude towards the Palestinian issue. This matter was also among the points of dispute between Al-Sayyab and his comrades in the Communist party. Al-Sayyab was more a poet than a politician, therefore he approached Western poetry of Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot in spite of the conflict between Arab peoples and the Western powers, and the conflict between Communism and Imperialism. Al-Sayyab suffered a lot from the political disorder in Iraq. He criticized the miserable socio-political situation in Iraq and the Arab world through poetry. Al-Sayyab's poetry of the last phase of his life reveals how introspective, subjective and hopeless a poet he was. As Al-Sayyab lived in a period of turmoil and nationalist movements. He liberated Arabic poetry from monorhyme and the monometer that represented the conventional Arabic poem (*Qasida*). Such violation of Arabic traditional rules (metric rules and rhyme scheme) is considered a significant movement in the history of Arabic poetry. Al-Sayyab's "Rain Song" is regarded one of the most significant poems in Arabic modernist poetry composed in free verse, using a new diction with strong and rhetorical words which gave credibility to Arabic free verse movement. Al-Sayyab utilized the modernist techniques of allusions, myths, monologue, dialogue, irony, unconventional metaphor, and imagery. He also dealt with the modernist

themes of alienation, city and death. In her essay “Modernist Poetry in Arabic”¹⁵ Salma Jayyusi states that Al-Sayyab is “the first major modernist who established, through a fine poetic contribution unrivalled in the fifties, some of the basic tenets” of Arabic literary modernism.

In Egypt, the socio-political situation was similar to the case in Iraq. In 1517, Egypt came under the Ottoman rule. In 1798, France invaded Egypt and withdrew in 1801 under the pressure of the Anglo-Ottoman forces. Mohammed Ali Pasha ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848. He was an important figure who modernized Egypt. He began the process of acculturation with the West by sending educational missions to Europe, particularly to France. Many Western textbooks were translated into Arabic and were printed by Arabic printing press for use of the students. Thus, Mohammed Ali Pasha established a bridge of communication with the West through these ‘missions’. In 1882, British troops occupied Egypt in order to control over the Suez Canal, while the Ottoman state retreated. During the World War I, Egypt served as a base for the Allied Powers.

The Egyptian resistance against the Ottomans began with a revolt by Ahmed Urabi in 1879. This revolution sowed the seeds of Egyptian national parties such as the *Wafd Party* [Delegation Party] which was formed in 1918 and led a revolution against the British in 1919. This revolution enabled Egypt to obtain its political independence in 1922. Other political parties were established aftermath the World War I, such as the Egyptian Communist Party in 1922, *Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn* [The Muslim Brotherhood] in 1928. Egyptians did not have entire sovereignty over Egypt because Britain maintained its control over the Suez Canal until 1952 when the ‘Free Officers’ led a revolution

¹⁵Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Modernist Poetry in Arabic”, M. M. Badawi, ed, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 156 -157.

against the Egyptian monarchy which was similar to the Iraqi monarchy. Consequently, the evacuation treaty between Egypt and UK was signed in 1954; the British troops completely evacuated Egypt by 1956. In the same year, there was a military attack on Egypt known as “Tripartite Aggression” by Britain, France and Israel. This was due to an attempt to nationalize Suez Canal that was announced by president Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Nasser’s nationalist activities and efforts to unify the Arab states made him a prominent figure in the Arab world. In 1958, Abd al-Nasser formed a federation union with Syria by the name of United Arab Republic, but this union broke up in 1962. Abd al-Nasser was chosen the president of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1964. Abd al-Nasser lost his popularity in the Arab world as a hero after his defeat in the six-day war with Israel in 1967 and the fall of *Sina'a* into Israeli hands. In Egypt, Abd al-Nasser’s popularity was less compared to other Arab countries because Egyptians were aware that Abd al-Nasser toppled Mohammed Najeeb, the first president of Egypt after the 1952 revolution to replace him without an election. His repressive administration and his cruel attitude towards those who opposed him especially leaders and members of the ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ made him the first dictator in Egypt in modern Arab history. Although Abd al-Nasser boasted about democracy and freedom of speech, he outlawed opposition parties such as the *Wafd* Party, the Communist Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. After his death in 1970, Anwar al-Sadat became the third president of Egypt. After the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel, he signed peace treaties with Israel in 1977 and 1978 known as “Camp David Accords”. In 1981, al-Sadat was assassinated during an annual victory parade in Cairo.

Abd al-Sabur was born in 1931 and lived in the political upheavals of Egypt and Arab world. He witnessed the Egyptians struggle against British colonialism and against the oligarchic regime. He also witnessed the conflicts between the nationalist parties, in Syria and Iraq on one hand and in Egypt on the other. He saw the oppression of the intellectuals in Egypt by those who advocated freedom and democracy. All these events shaped his philosophy towards life and poetry. He contributed to the modernist Arabic poetry by not only writing in a language that sprang from the heart of everyday experience, but also by his discontinuity with the past. Abd al-Sabur also followed the poetic renewal in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. In her essay “Modernist Poetry in Arabic”, Salma Jayyusi states:

It was Salah Abd al-Sabur, Egypt’s foremost poet until his premature death in 1981, who best conquered the powerful hold of classical poetry on the subconscious of poets. He wrote in modern language, with not only a vocabulary, a syntax, intonations and rhythms that were part of the auditory consciousness of contemporary Arabs, but also with a new modernist spirit permeating the whole work where a noticeable but subtle dislocation of structures and a toning down of address are effected. . . . He wrestled with words and meanings, creating new paths and a new sensibility by raising the ordinary language.¹⁶

Al-Sayyab wanted to rehabilitate Arabic poetry and to keep pace with European literature. In his book *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800 -1970*, S. Moreh argues that Arab poets “felt the need for radical changes in Arabic metrics, rhyme schemes, themes, style

¹⁶Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Modernist Poetry in Arabic”, M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 160-161.

and diction.”¹⁷ However, the role of Western modernist poetry in the renewal of Arabic poetry remains an inescapable factor due to many reasons: i) Western colonization of the Arab world; ii) influence of the Arab scholars who studied in Europe and in the American University in Beirut, which was founded in 1866; iii) the impact of the Arab Christian poets who emigrated to north and South America who facilitated hybridity and acculturation.

1.2. Pioneers and Proponents of Arabic Modernism

Adonis believes that modernity is a timeless concept. Therefore, he does not confine Arabic modernism to a specific period. He attributes the pioneering of Arabic modernism to some Arab poets in the eighth century. Adonis places Bashir Ibn Burd (714-784), Abu Tammam (788-845), and Abu Nuwas (757-814) as well as the Sufi poets like Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Jabbar Al-Niffari (d. 965), and Abu Hayyan Al-Tawhidi (d. 1010) in the first category of modernist poets. For Adonis, Arabic modernism sprang up early due to the conflict between conservative and liberal poets during the Abbasid period. He argues that there were two trends of modernisms in Arab world: the first is political/intellectual and the second is artistic. The revival [*Ihyaiyyah*] in the Arab world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked as a period of Western colonization and acculturation with the West. For Adonis, a modernist poet neither criticizes Arabic religious and historical past nor denies the Western colonization, but his poetry is artistically new. Therefore, Adonis considers the Iraqi poet, Ma'ruf Al-Rasafi not as the modernist poets despite criticizing Arabic tradition and denying the Western colonization. Adonis argues that *Diwan* poets (Abbas Mahmud Al-Aqqad, Abd al-Qadir

¹⁷S. Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800- 1970* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976) 313.

Al-Mazini, and Abd Al-Rahman Shukri) had a pioneering role in modern Arabic poetry because they crossed the boundaries of Arabic traditional aesthetics. He regards the Syrian poet, Mutran Khalil Mutran one of the most successful poets in the first half of the twentieth century because he harmonized the traditional with the contemporary on one hand and on the other hand reconciled originality and development. Adonis points out that *Apollo* poets (Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi, Ibrahim Naji, Ali Mahmud Taha and Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi) paved the way for structural and conceptual change in Arabic poetry. Adonis labels the Lebanese poet and writer Gibran Khalil Gibran, who initiated new Arabic poetry¹⁸ as an apocalyptic writer. For the Palestinian critic and writer Salma Khadra Jayyusi, the Arabic modernist period is categorized into three phases¹⁹: the first is the phase of pioneers which was between 1948 and 1967, the second is the phase of seventies, and the third is the phase of eighties. For her, these three phases are ‘the generation of pioneers’ which represented the great poets such as the Iraqi poets Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Nazik Al-Mala'ika, Abd Al-Wahab Al-Bayyati, Buland Al-Haydari, Yusuf Al-Sa'igh, the Egyptian poets Salah Abd al-Sabur, Amal Dunqul, Yusuf Idris, Lewis Awad, the Syrian poets Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), Muhammad al-Maghut, Yusuf al-Khal, Nizar Qabbani, the Lebanese poets Khalil Hawi, Unsi al-Haj, the Palestinian poets Tawfiq Sayigh, Mahmud Darwish, Samih Al-Qasim, and other poets from the Arabic Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean such as the Sudanese novelist Tayyeb Salih and the Sudanese poet Muhammad Al-Faituri, the Bahraini poet Qasim Haddad, the Moroccan poet Mohammad Bennis, the Yemeni poet Abd al-Aziz Al-Maqalih, the Saudi Arabian

¹⁸Adonis, *Al-Thabit wa Al-Mutahawwil: Sadmat Al-Hadathah* [The Static and The Changing: The Shock of Modernity] vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Odah, 1978).

¹⁹Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Modernist Poetry in Arabic”, ed, M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 132-179.

poet and novelist Ghazi al-Gosaibi, the Kuwaiti poet Su'ad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah.

1.3. Literary life of Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab (1926 -1964)

In Jaikur, a small village in Basra, south of Iraq, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab was born and brought up to become one of the leaders of Arabic free verse movement and a pioneer of Arabic Modernism. Although he died at the age of thirty-eight, his poetry occupies a prominent place in modern Arabic poetry. His birthplace, i.e. Jaikur, figures significantly in his literary career. Therefore, it is no surprise that his poems immortalize Jaikur. His mother passed away when he was six-year this began his journey of suffering and sorrow.

Al-Sayyab began his schooling in Bab Sulaiman village until the fourth grade, and then he was transferred to Abu Al-Khasib. When he completed his elementary schooling, he shifted to al-Basra city to join Al-Basra secondary school. After his graduation from the secondary school in 1942, he left for Baghdad and joined the 'Higher Teacher Training College' in 1943. There he joined the Department of Arabic and studied Arabic literature for two years, when he was stopped from college in 1946 for seven months on charge of being a follower of the communist party. Later, he was arrested for participating in a demonstration against the British policy in Palestine. After his release, he returned to the college, but changed his course from Arabic literature to English literature. In 1948, Al-Sayyab graduated from college and joined as an English language teacher in al-Ramadi High School. At the High School, Al-Sayyab got an opportunity to restart his political activities. In other words, he propagated the tenets of communism to students to convince them of its promise of a class-less society. There he spent three months in teaching, but due to his communist leanings, he was fired from the job, and

was arrested again. After spending three months in prison, he was released. He went back to his village disappointingly as an unemployed person. Later on, Al-Sayyab found a job at the Oil Company in al-Basra city and worked for a year, and then left for Baghdad. Al-Sayyab realized that Baghdad was the right place for him to gain literary reputation and obtain satisfying job and experience. In Baghdad, Al-Sayyab became involved in political activities again. In 1952, Al-Sayyab was accused of inciting violence and disorder in Baghdad which triggered the burning of a police station and the death of many people. Consequently, the authorities began to track and chase those who rampaged the city of Baghdad: vandalizing, ravaging, and murdering and destroying. These smoking-out operations forced him to disguise himself as a Bedouin so that he could escape to Iran and then to Kuwait where he stayed for six months and met some other members of the Iraqi Communist party who had fled from Iraq.

Al-Sayyab, as a poet, had an aversion to accepting imposed restrictions and blind submission to the policy of the party. The dispute between Al-Sayyab and the communist comrades began because of Al-Sayyab's preference to read Eliot and Shakespeare over the Russian communist writers. For the comrades, Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot are 'reactionary' writers while the communist poets are liberal, progressive and radical. Therefore, Al-Sayyab was denounced and was accused of disloyalty to the communist party. When he was in Kuwait, he wrote great poems such as *Arms and Children*, *The Blind Harlot*, *A Stranger on the Gulf* and his masterpiece *The Rain Song* which was later published in his collection *Unshudat Al-Matar (The Rain Song)*. Six months later, Al-Sayyab returned to Baghdad from Kuwait. He showed the poems which were composed in Kuwait to the comrades in Baghdad, hoping to win their support and get them

published, but the comrades neglected him and delayed the publication of his poems. Al-Sayyab noticed that the communist comrades willfully ignored and disregarded his contributions and struggles for the party, while his contemporary Abd al-Wahab al-Bayyati enjoyed a prestigious status among the comrades in Baghdad. They supported and encouraged him to publish his first collection *Abariq Muhashamah* [Smashed Pitchers]. Feeling marginalized amongst the communist comrades, chased and ostracized by the Iraqi government, Al-Sayyab thought of breaking away from the party. In addition, Al-Sayyab had an admiration for Arab nationalism. These reasons altogether led him to sever all relations with the Iraqi communist party that showed no sympathy to the key concerns, such as the Palestinian issue. In 1954, Al-Sayyab abandoned the Iraqi Communist party which was founded by some Arab intellectuals as a liberal system against imperialism and colonialism to join the Arab nationalist party, replacing communism by nationalism.

In 1955, Al-Sayyab married Iqbal, a lady from his city, Al-Basra, and they had two daughters, Ghaida and Ala'a and a boy, Ghailan. The period in which Al-Sayyab lived was characterized by political disorder. He was born during the British mandate of Iraq and witnessed the Second World War, the foundation of Israel, and many other turbulent events that occurred in the forties, fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century. Al-Sayyab led a miserable life during the political upheavals between the Iraqi oligarchic monarchy and its opposition. Even after the revolution of 1958, Al-Sayyab was imprisoned and was dismissed from his job. In 1961, Al-Sayyab left for Rome via Beirut to participate in a conference held during 16-20 October 1961, as he was invited to be

among the speakers on modern Arabic literature. When he returned to Baghdad, Al-Sayyab began his journey of anguish and began to lament his fate:

أهكذا السنون تذهب
 أهكذا الحياة تنضب ؟
 أحس أنني أذوب ، أتعب ،
 أموت كالشجر .

Like that, do the years go by?

Like that, does the life dry out?

I feel I am wasting away

Getting fatigued

Dying like trees²⁰.

Al-Sayyab's health began to worsen dramatically and he used crutches to walk. In 1962, Al-Sayyab was admitted to a hospital in Beirut, and there he made a will requested his wife, Iqbal to forgive him and asked her to be caring, kind-hearted and sympathetic to his son Ghailan:

من مرضي ،
 من السرير الأبيض

 من حلمي الذي يمدّ لي طريقه للمقبرة

 أكتبها وصيّة لزوجتي المنتظرة
 وطفلي الصارخ في رقاده : " أبي ، أبي " ،

²⁰From Al-Sayyab's poem "Dar Jaddi" [Home of My Grandfather], my translation.

إقبال يا زوجتي الحبيبة
لا تعذليني ما المنايا بيدي
ولست لو نجوت بالمخآد
كوني لغيلان رضى وطيبه
كوني له أبا و أما و ارحمي نحيبه

From my illness,

From the white bed,

.....

From my dream, that prolongs the graveyard path

.....

A will I am writing to my awaiting wife

And to my child in his cot, crying: "Dad, Dad".

.....

Oh, Iqbal, my beloved wife

Chide me not; never is death in my hand

And I am not, if saved, immortal

Be for Ghailan solicitousness and kindness

Be for him a father and a mother

And have mercy on his wailing²¹.

At the end of 1962, Al-Sayyab was granted a fellowship to Durham University, London by the Representative of the International Association for Cultural Freedom, to study and receive medical treatment. He was admitted to St. Mary's Hospital in London where his illness was diagnosed. Unfortunately, the doctor reported that Al-Sayyab had a

²¹From Al-Sayyab's poem "Al-Wasiyah" [The Will], my translation.

serious illness. In 1963, he traveled to Paris where he was informed that he had an incurable disease. As a result, he returned to Iraq and began to lament:

كسيح أنا اليوم كالميتين
 أنادي فتعوي ذناب الصدى في القفار :
 "كسيح
 كسيح و ما من مسيح"

 وبالييتي مت . . .

Crippled I am today like the dead
 I yell out, and the wolves of echo howl back in the wilderness:
 Crippled, crippled, but no Messiah (can be found)

 Oh, I wish I had died²². . .

In his poem "Before the Gate of Allah", Al-Sayyab, in an earnest supplication, begs the Almighty Allah to take back his life. His ultimate wish was to die and get relieved from the nagging and burning aches and pains:

Cast down before your great gate
 I cry out, in the darkness, for asylum
 O you who guide the ants in the sand
 And hear the pebbles on the streambed
 I cry out like thunder in a mountain cave
 Like the sigh of the noonday heat. (Khouri 83)

In the following lines he recites his surrender to the will of God and praises Him

²²From Al-Sayyab's poem "Louis MacNeice", 1964, my translation.

for the illness. Al-Sayyab confesses that he had committed sins and asks forgiveness:

I want to sleep in your holy shrine
 Beneath a blanket of sin and error
 Cradled in whores' convulsions
 So your hands would disdain to touch me. (Khouri 85)

Al-Sayyab left the hospital in Beirut and headed towards Al Basra, and then to Kuwait for treatment. He was admitted to the Prince Hospital in Kuwait in July 1964. The illness was diagnosed as ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) and his condition was found hopeless. Al-Sayyab became bedridden and suffered because of his brittle bones. Day by day, Al-Sayyab became more anxious and disappointed because he lost the hope of cure and recovery. Although he was disabled and could not use any parts of his body, his mind was still active and brilliant. He composed a number of great poems, best of which are "Louis MacNeice"²³ and "In the Forest of Darkness". Eventually, Al-Sayyab died on 24 December 1964, leaving behind, his wife, a son and a daughter. He passed away at the age of 38, bequeathing splendid collections of poems. Al-Sayyab's poems do not only express and tackle his own personal problem, but also often deal with the problems of Iraq and other Arab countries such as the occupied Palestine, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, which were under Western colonization. Due to the traumatic events during his time, Al-Sayyab dealt with the social and political themes in Iraq and the Arab world.

Al-Sayyab began his literary career as a poet at a very early age. When he was in the first grade at an elementary school, he wrote his first poem in colloquial language. He composed his first poem in standard Arabic when he was in the fifth grade. His poetic

²³This poem is a lament for the Irish poet Louis MacNeice.

and artistic abilities flourished during the adolescent period and he began his literary career as a romantic poet. Al-Sayyab's romantic poetry began when he was in secondary school. He was highly influenced by the breathtaking beauty of the countryside especially his village, Jaikur, which he repeatedly commemorated in his poetry as the most prominent village in modern Arabic literature. While he was attending secondary school, Al-Sayyab fell in love with a shepherd lady in his village, but his love story, as observed by some writers, was unrequited kind of love. In his book *Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab: Dirasah Fi Hayatih Wa Shi'reh* [Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab: A Study of his Life and Poetry], Ihsan Abbas states that Al-Sayyab portrays himself as a shepherd who croons a melancholy melody over and over again:

لأجلك أطوي الربى شاردا أردد أنغامي الضائعة
وأسكب في الناي قلبي الكئيب فتغمره النشوة الخادعة

For thy sake, I traverse over the hilly terrains absent-minded,

Humming along my lost tunes

And pouring in the flute my melancholy heart

And so (my heart) overflowed with the false ecstasy.²⁴ (Abbas 28)

During his study in Baghdad, Al-Sayyab completed his first collection *Azhar Thabilah* [Wilted Flowers] in 1947. He was criticized by his fellow poets for giving his first collection such a pessimistic name, though he was in the full bloom of his youth. In response to those who blamed him for his cheerless title, he wished they had lived with him and realized that the whole universe – earth, sky, soil, water, rock, and air – is withered for him. Throughout his literary life, Al-Sayyab composed ten collections:

²⁴ According to Ihsan Abbas, these lines are taken from Al-Sayyab's poem "Mizmar Al-Rae" [Pipe of the Shepherd], my translation.

Azhar Thabilah [Wilted Flowers, 1947], *Assateer* [Myths, 1950], *Haffar Al-Qubur* [The Gravedigger, 1951], *Al-Mumis Al-Amya* [The Blind Harlot, 1954], *Al-Aslihah wa-al-Atfal* [Weapons and Children, 1955], *Unshudat Al-Matar* [The Rain Song, 1960], *Al-Mabad Al-Ghareeq* [The Sunken Temple, 1962], *Mansil al-Aqnan* [The House of Slaves, 1963], *Shanasheel Ibnat Al-Jalabi* [The Balcony of the Nobleman's Daughter, 1964] and *Iqbal* [1965]. All of Al-Sayyab's poems were published in two volumes. The first volume contains five collections: *Azhar wa Asateer* [Flowers and Myths], *Al-Mabad Al-Ghareeq* [The Sunken Temple], *Manzil al-Aqnan* [The House of Slaves], *Unshudat Al-Matar* [The Rain Song] which contains the three long poems: "The Gravedigger", "The Blind Harlot and "Weapons and Children" and *The Balcony of the Nobleman's Daughter*. The second volume contains four collections: *Bawakeer* [First Fruits], *Qitharat Al-Rih* [Aeolian Harp], *A'aasseer* [Storms] and *Al-Hadaya* [The Gifts] as well as his long poem "Fajr Al-Salaam" [Dawn of Peace]. Most poems of Al-Sayyab's second volume were composed during the years between 1941 and 1944.

Al-Sayyab nourished his poetic talent by reading about the Arabic traditional heritage, the Iraqi mythologies, and the Bible. He read the ancient Arab poets like Al-Mutanabi, Abu Tammam and Al-Buhturi and the modern Arabic literature especially the *Mahjar* poetry (poetry of Arab emigrant poets). Al-Sayyab was interested in romantic poetry and was highly fond of two Arab romantic poets: the Lebanese poet Ilyas Abu Shabakah and the Egyptian poet Ali Mahmud Taha. While he was a student of English literature, Al-Sayyab studied Shakespeare, Milton, Victorian and romantic poets. He was also interested in Shelley. Nevertheless, he deeply admired the English modernist poets like Thomas Stearns Eliot and Edith Sitwell. He read French literature in Arabic

translation, particularly the poems of Charles Baudelaire. According to Najj Allush, Al-Sayyab read Arabic, Russian and English literatures and studied the Quran, the Torah, and the Bible as well as Marxist thoughts and some of the Western doctrines. Al-Sayyab established his reputation as a talented poet among his colleagues while he was a student in Baghdad. However, he was not satisfied with himself and his life:

ماذا جنيت من الزمان سوى الكآبة والنحول
 أو أراقب الليل الطويل يذوب في الصبح الطويل
 وأتابع الشمس المرنحة الشعاع إلى الأفول
 وأشيع البدر السؤوم يغيب ما بين النخيل
 لا مأمل لي بالكثير ولا رجاء بالقليل
 وأعد أيامي لأسلمها إلى الهم الثقيل

Oh, what I gained from time, but melancholy and emaciation.

Or I observe the long night dissolves into the long morning

And I attend to the swaying beam of the sun to its final dissipation

And I escort the monotonous (full) moon, vanishes in the palm trees.

Neither much hope nor little plea do I have

And I count my days to hand them over to the heavy grief.²⁵ (Abbas 55)

Al-Sayyab's second collection *Assateer* [Myths] was composed in the penultimate year of his study at college which appeared in 1950. This collection reveals the duality of the poet's nature where he juxtaposed images of love and death, light and dark. In this collection, the poet's dual personality is presented sometimes as a struggler and striver and at some other times as retrogressive and introverted. In the introduction to this

²⁵According to Ihsan Abbas, these lines are taken from Al-Sayyab's poem "Fi Yaomon Abis" [In a Glowered Day, 1946], my translation.

collection, Al-Sayyab stated that he intended to conceal his love affairs in his poetry therefore; some poems in his collections appear vague and obscure. He enjoyed a positive attitude towards the woman and this is revealed in the early bereavement of his mother. Yearning for the motherly love and affection he lost in his childhood, he spent his life seeking for the love and kindness of a woman instead.

Al-Sayyab's collection *Unshudat Al-Matar* [The Rain Song] represents a new phase of modern Arabic poetry because of its new themes and techniques, especially the use of symbols, images, and myths. This collection contains thirty-two poems among which his distinguished poem "Unshudat Al-Matar" [The Rain Song] stands magnificent. Many poems in this collection were translated into English, for example, "Gharib Ala Al-Khalij" [A Stranger by the Gulf], "Al-Nahr wa Al-Mawt" [The River and Death], "Madinat Al-Sindibad" [City of Sindibad], "Al-Masih Bad Al-Salb" [Christ after Crucifixion], "Fi Al-Maghrib Al-Arabi" [In the Arab Maghrib], "Al-Mukhbir" [The Informer], "Ughniya fi Shahr Aab" [Song in August], "Al-Awdah li Jaikur" [The Return to Jaikur], "Garcia Lorca", "Jaikur wa Al-Madinah" [Jaikur and the City], "Risalah min Maqbarah" [A Message from the Graveyard], "Al-Mabgha" [The Whorehouse], "Tha'lab al-Mawt" [The Fox of Death] as well as the three long poems: "Haffar Al-Qubur" [The Gravedigger], "Al-Mumis Al-Amya" [The Blind Harlot], "Al-Aslihah wa-Al-Atfal" [Weapons and Children].

Al-Sayyab's masterpiece in this collection is "The Rain Song" composed in 1953, when he was in Kuwait as an exile. This celebrated poem was translated into English fourteen times; even its title has been rendered into English in various ways like "Hymn to Rain", "Hymn of Rain", "Rain Song" and "The Rain Song". When "The Rain Song"

was published in *Al-Adab* magazine in 1954 for the first time, it established the pioneering role of Al-Sayyab's poetry among his contemporaries because of its new technique and its strong diction. The poem played a key role in strengthening Arabic free verse as a new form in Arabic poetry. Critics and writers have analyzed Al-Sayyab's "The Rain Song" more than his other poems because of its new poetic image. Al-Sayyab's poem "The Rain Song" is much more than a song or a hymn which celebrates rainfall or a revelation of the poet's feelings of happiness when he beholds the drops of rain. Actually, the poem has a different dimension. Here, rain does not refer to a rebirth of nature, of life among barren and infertile lands; rather it has a political dimension. On the one hand, it articulates the writer's opposition to the regime of Nuri al-Said. On the other, the poem reveals the poet's deep anguish, rather than gladness and pleasure. Therefore, the drops of tears are metaphorically associated with the drops of rain. The polarity between image of rain in the title of the poem and what it actually communicates in the content emphasizes the contradictory life of Arabs who suffer greatly from untold misery and economic depression in spite of the enormous and substantial resources of wealth in the Arab world. The word 'rain' is symbolic of life, fertility and resurrection; and the word 'song' or 'hymn' denotes joyfulness and exultation. However, Al-Sayyab's lexical choice of the word 'rain' is significant. It symbolizes tears (lamenting), death, hunger, poverty, immigration and the misery of the Iraqi people. 'The Rain Cry' would have been an appropriate translation of the title. Al-Sayyab ironically called it "The Rain Song", crows and locusts feed and destroy the harvest of rain while Iraqi people suffer a misery life despite the huge natural resources and wealth in the country:

I cry to the Gulf, "O Gulf,

O giver of pearls, shells and death”.

The echo comes back

Like sobs,

“O Gulf,

O giver of shells and death”

I can almost hear Iraq gathering thunder

And storing up lightning in mountains and plains

.....

And there is hunger in Iraq!

The harvest season scatters the crops in it

So that ravens and locusts have their full

While a millstone in the fields surrounded by human beings

Grinds the granaries and the stones.²⁶

Naji Allush²⁷ points out that Al-Sayyab’s literary life has gone through four phases: Romanticism from 1934 to 1948, Realism from 1949 to 1955, and the Tammuzian phase from 1956 to 1960, and finally the Subjectivity or Personality phase from 1961 to 1964. He wrote national poems which express and demonstrate his solidarity with the Arab issues such as “Ila Jamila Bouhired” [To Jamila Bouhired], “Risalah min Maqbarah” [A Message from Graveyard], “Fi al-Maghrib al-Arabi” [In the Arab Maghrib], “Rabie Al-Jaza’er” [Algeria’s Spring], “Bur Said” [Port Said]. He also wrote political poems such as “Haffar al-Qubur” [The Gravedigger], “Al-Mumis al-Amya” [The Blind Harlot], “Al-Aslihah wa Al-Atfal” [Weapons and Children], “Min

²⁶Issa J. Boullata, trans and ed, *Modern Arab Poets 1950 1975* (London: Heinemann, 1976) 8.

²⁷Allush’s preface to Al-Sayyab’s Collection, vol. I.

Ru'ya Fukai" [From Fukai's Vision], "Garcia Lorca", "Al-Mabgha" [The Whorehouse], "Ruya fi Aam 1956" [Vision in 1956] and "Al-Awdah li Jaikur" [Return to Jaikur]. Another significant aspect of his literary career is that he read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and wrote many poems that dealt with mythology such as "Al-Masih Bad al-Salb" [Christ after Crucifixion], "Jaikur wa Al-Madinah" [Jaikur and the City], "Cerberus in Babel", "Madinat Al-Sindibad" [The City of Sindibad], "Unshudat Al-Matar" [The Rain Song]. In the last phase of his life, Al-Sayyab's poetry turned to be very personal and emotional due to his illness and his deep anguish at the emphatic, inevitable, final and tearful farewell to his wife and children. From his childhood till his death, Al-Sayyab's life was an agonizing journey. He was orphaned in his childhood, was persecuted in his youth, suffered poverty, imprisonment, and eventually he was struck by fatal illness.

1.4. Literary Life of Salah Abd al-Sabur (1931-1981)

In the countryside of Al-Zaqaziq a city in Egypt, the Arab modernist poet and playwright Salah Abd al-Sabur was born. He grew up in Cairo when Egypt was a semi-independent country and under the British colonization. He completed his secondary school in 1947 and then joined the Department of Arabic in the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University. He graduated in 1951 and commenced his career as a teacher in secondary institutes till 1958. Abd al-Sabur evinced a serious interest in journalism; therefore, he resigned from teaching for the sake of his new job as an editor of *Rose al-Yusuf*, a weekly magazine, from 1959 to 1962 and of *Al-Ahram* newspaper from 1962 to 1967. He was also appointed director of the Egyptian Publishing House for Composition and Translation. From 1969 to 1970, he worked as the chief editor of *Al-Masrah* magazine

and as chief editor of *Al-Katib* magazine from 1974 to 1975. He also worked as cultural attaché of the Egyptian Embassy in New Delhi from 1976 to 1979. Eventually, his final career was as director of General Egyptian Institute for Book. In 1958, Abd al-Sabur married a presenter whose name was Nabila Yaseen, but they separated in 1963. Then, he married Samiha Ghaleb in 1964 who was also working as a presenter. He had two daughters from his second wife, the elder was named Mai and the younger one was Mu'taza. In 1981, Abd al-Sabur died due to cardiac arrest.

Abd al-Sabur displayed a tendency to write poetry at an early age. His poetic talent flourished in adolescence. He started writing poetry in the traditional style; later, he discarded the techniques of traditional poetry in favour of new poetic techniques, adopting a new form and content for his poetry. Abd al-Sabur was fond of philosophy, history, mythology, psychology, sociology and anthropology. He is among the pioneers and one of the pillars of Arabic modernism in Egypt and one of the founders of Arabic free verse movement along with Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and Nazik al-Malaika. Arab critics dispute the pioneering of Arabic free verse movement: Iraqi critics assert that “Al-Kulira” poem by the Iraqi poetess Nazik al-Malaika along with Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab’s poem “Hal Kana Hubban” are the first Arabic poems written in free verse. The Egyptian critics argue that Luis Awad is the first Arab poet wrote in free verse and the Yemeni poet and critic Abd Al-Aziz Al-Maqalih asserts that Ali Ahmed Bakatheer is the first poet who wrote a poem in free verse. However, the pioneering of Arabic free verse movement is a collective pioneering rather than an individual contribution. According to M. M. Badawi, Abd al-Sabur is “the leading Egyptian poet of his generation when he turned to

writing poetic drama.”²⁸ Badawi also maintains that Abd al-Sabur’s work “marks the most serious and accomplished development of Arabic poetic drama to date.”²⁹

Like Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur began his literary career as a romantic poet who recoiled from Romanticism to Modernism. Abd al-Sabur’s first collection of poetry is *Al-Nas fi Biladi* [The People in My Country, 1957] was written while he was passionately in reading the philosophy of materialism. According to the poet himself, this collection adopts his ideology in that period of his life. Abd al-Sabur was optimistic and broadminded in spite of his sadness. The touch of sorrow is apparent in his collection *Aqulu Lakum* [I Say unto You]. The poems of this collection portray Abd al-Sabur’s philosophy of life. The first poem in his collection *Aqulu Lakum* [I Say unto You] is “Al-Shaye al-Hazeen” [The Sad Object]. The notable poem of this collection bears the title of the collection and contains eight sections: “Mn Ana” [Who Am I], “Al-Hobb” [The Love], “Al-Huriyyah wa al-Maut”, [Freedom and Death], “Al-Kalimat” [The Words], “Al-Qiddees” [The Saint], “Al-Suq wa Al-Suqah” [The Market and the Rabble], “Maut Al-Insan” [The Death of Man], and “Ujafikom Li A'arifukom” [I Abandon You to Know You]. Abd al-Sabur is also a leading dramatist of modern Arabic literature due to his contribution to the Arabic poetic drama. The first work of his poetic drama was *Masat Al-Hallaj* [The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj, 1965] which depicts the public trial of the historical and controversial figure al-Husain Ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj and his execution and crucifixion in Baghdad in 922. This poetic drama has political dimensions because Abd al-Sabur composed it to protest against the dictatorship of the president of Egypt, Jamal Abd al-Nasir. Al-Hallaj stands for the Arab intelligentsia who face oppression from the

²⁸M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 220.

²⁹*Ibid*, 227-228.

Arabic regimes. Abd al-Sabur presents Al-Hallaj as a hero who speaks on behalf of the poor and the oppressed:

Hallaj: Me? Suspect me? Of What?

Ibrahim: They say,

“This man slanders the Sultan

And stirs up the people to hatred.

The judge asks me to convey his plea to you

That you should be discreet.

Hallaj: What have they against me? What am I being blamed for?

For talking with my friends,

And saying, the heart of the nation is the king,

Its righteousness depends upon his own righteousness?

Talking with my friends, and saying,

If you are put in power, do not neglect to pour the

Wine of authority into the cups of justice?

Or am I blamed at crying out for those

Whom I see walking towards death,

Whose path to death leads them away from God

Who rules over death?

Ibrahim: They claim that you have sent some secret word

To Abi Bakr Al-Madhirra'I, Tuluni, Hamad al-Qana'l

And to others, too who hope to seize power.

Hallaji: The men you name are leaders of the nation;

They are also my friends, and have my love.
 They promised me if they should come to power
 They will live righteously and not do ill;
 They will grant the people their rights,
 And the people will render them theirs.
 They are my prime hope in this world, my dear Ibrahim,
 Therefore, I quench their thirst with thought,
 Refresh them with gentle words³⁰. (Semaan 16)

Abd al-Sabur's poetry was published in six collections: *Al-Nas fi Biladi* [The People in My Country, 1957], *Aqulu Lakum* [I Say unto You, 1961], *AhIam Al-Faris Al-Qadeem* [Dreams of the Old Knight, 1964], *Ta'ammulat fi Zaman Jarjih* [Contemplations in an Injured Time, 1970], *Al-Ibhar fi Al-Dhakira* [Sailing in Memory, 1977] and *Shajar al-Layl* [Trees of Night, 1973]. His poetic dramas were published in five collections: *Al-Ameerah Tantazir* [The Princess Waits, 1971], *Masat Al-Hallaj* [Tragedy of al-Hallaj, 1965], *Musafir Layl* [A Night Traveller, 1969], *Layla wa'l-Majnun* [Layla and The Madman, 1970] and *Ba'd an Yamut al-Malik* [When the King Dies, 1975]. Like Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur globalizes his poetic career through his writing about poets from other cultures such as Lorca and Baudelaire.

In his book *Hayati fi Al-Sh'ir* [My Life in Poetry] Abd al-Sabur points out that his innovation was due to his interest in reading a considerable variety of Arabic and Western literary works. From the Arabic cultural and poetic heritage, he admired the pre-Islamic poets such as *Al-Sa'alik* (brigand-poets who lived in pre-Islamic period), Al-

³⁰Khalil I. Semaan, trans, *Murder in Baghdad* (Ma'sat Al-Hallaj), Salah Abd al-Sabur (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 16.

A'sha, Imru' Al-Qais and Tarafah Ibn Al-Abd and the Abbasid poets like Bashar Ibn Burd, *Abu-al-Ala Al-Marri*, Abu Nuwas, Ibn Al-Rumi, and Al-Mutanabbi. He also had avid interest in Hameed Bin Thawr al-Hilaly, Umar Ibn Abi Rabi'ah, and Waddah al-Yaman. He read much of Arabic poetic heritage including wisdom poetry and Sufi poetry. From Western literary works, he read the French poet Baudelaire and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke as well as the English poets John Donne, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Abd al-Sabur does not consider Arabic modernism as a separation of the past or a breakaway from the cultural heritage; he advocates the national heritage of Arabs. He considers poetry as a genuine work only when it is purely self-communion. Abd al-Sabur was infatuated with Marxism at the beginning and his poem “Al-Nas fi Biladi” [People in my Country] tells the story of a village oppressed by religious precepts:

People in my country are ferocious like falcons
 Their singing is like a winter tremor in the top of tress
 Their laughing sizzles like fire in the wood
 Their footsteps want to sink in the earth
 They kill, steal, drink and belch
 But they are men
 And are good-hearted when they have a handful of coins
 And they are believers in Destiny.³¹

After one decade of admiration for Marxism, Abd al-Sabur turned to existentialism. He left community to think of the individual world. Eventually, he returned to the religious shelter and said, “Now I am in peace with Allah”. “I do believe that every addition to humanity is a step forward to perfection; to God proper”. Abd al-

³¹Issa J. Boullata, trans and ed, *Modern Arab Poets 1950-1975* (London: Heinemann, 1976) 71.

Sabur, apart from his contribution to Arabic free verse movement, which appeared in the 1940s; also had significant influence was over modern Arabic poetic drama.