

Poetics of Exile and Identity The Case of Modern Iraqi Poetry *

Abdulla Al-Dabbagh
United Arab Emirates University

Abstract: *In contrast to the postmodernist and postcolonialist glorification of “hybridity” and “loss of identity”, which in effect often serves only to bolster existing lines of demarcation guarding both literary being and literary expression, modern Iraqi poets, who played a vital role in the formation and rejuvenation of Arabic poetry in the twentieth century, while formed by the experience of exile that helped to bring them closer to world literary heritage, remained very much bound both to the rich, national, cultural heritage and to the contemporary social circumstances that affected the lives of the Iraqi people. Far from wanting to escape national identity into a vague “in-between” state of postmodernist “unbelonging”, these poets were, in fact, instrumental in the very formation of a modern Iraqi national identity; an identity, furthermore, that far from the connotations of narrowness or xenophobia it may sometimes acquire, was truly cosmopolitan and open to the rich heritage both of world culture and of international literary practice.*

On the question of exile, contrasting, and even conflicting, estimates have tended to exist side by side. Exile has been regarded in the same breath as both a universal human condition and a unique state of suffering and hardship that befalls certain unfortunate individuals and groups. Similarly, while the condition of exile and unbelonging to a native place, or indeed to any place, has been celebrated by some postcolonial writers and critics, the traditional view of exile from Socrates and Ovid down to the varieties of political exile in modern times has usually been negative. And while, at certain times and in certain cases, writers and intellectuals have voluntarily chosen exile, as in the two famous examples of the “lost generation” of American writers in the early twentieth century and the postcolonial writers and critics of our era, and have defended, indeed enjoyed and celebrated, their condition of self-exile, the majority of modern writers and intellectuals have tended to be forced under circumstances of political oppression to go into exile against their will.

In parallel with this process, writers and intellectuals have been able to create a poetics of exile through which they have been able to overthrow the condition of exile and the state of unbelonging *imaginatively* and, indeed, to transform it into a positive force through which the experience of alienation produced by exile becomes one of belonging to a wider community. This is the great achievement of exiled poets and writers from Dante down to our modern

times. Feeling at home, so to speak, in the universe as a whole, after having been exiled from one's native town, or country, is an experience that extends from the Sufis, saints, and travelers of the medieval times to the multicultural writers of our own globalist era. Thus the experience of exile, painful as it no doubt is, has been able to serve as a magically imaginative adventure for the poet. The journey that it entails, of new spaces, new discoveries and new perspectives, is precisely what the poet needs to trigger his creativity. Exile becomes the perfect setting for the defamiliarization necessary to initiate the artistic process.

Certain trends in postcolonial discourse, however, that derive ultimately from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), in jubilation over the liberating experience of unbelonging that seems to come with exile, have wanted to dispense altogether with the whole idea of a national identity and a national culture. Based on the wrong assumption, perhaps embedded in the very term postcolonial, that we live in an era in which colonialism (and by implication also imperialism) have ceased to exist, the central argument of these writers has been that we should also do away with all nations and national identities as parts of a polarity that is no longer meaningful. In an oddly misconstrued and utopian conception, all frontiers are said to have disappeared and all nations, because they are hybrid and heterogeneous, are deemed to be non-existent.

Uniquely, both in the regional and the global contexts, modern Iraqi poetry was formed through the experience of exile and through the varieties of movement in space that it entailed. The major poets of the twentieth-century, Al-Jawahiry, Al-Bayaty, Buland Al-Haydary and Al-Sayyab, who played such a crucial role in the formation of modern Iraqi poetry, as well as Arabic poetry generally, all lived for long periods of their lives outside their country, and all, in fact, died in exile.

In stark contrast to the postmodernist and postcolonialist celebration and glorification of "hybridity" and "loss of identity", which in effect serves ultimately only to bolster the lines of demarcation, guarding both literary being and literary expression, established by the powers that dominate the world system, modern Iraqi poets who played a vital role in the formation and rejuvenation of Arabic poetry in the twentieth century, while formed by the experience of exile that helped to bring them closer to world literary heritage, remained intimately bound both to the rich cultural heritage and to the contemporary social circumstances that affected the lives of the Iraqis. Far from wanting to escape a national identity into a vague "in-between" state of "unbelonging", these poets were, in fact, instrumental in the very formation of a modern Iraqi identity; an identity, furthermore, that far from the usual connotations of narrowness or xenophobia it may sometimes acquire, was truly cosmopolitan and open to the rich heritage both of world culture and of international literary practice

The spaces of the Iraqi poets' exile extend from the neighbouring Arab countries (The Kuwait of Al-Sayyab, the Syria of Al-Jawahiry, the Cairo and Amman of Al-Bayaty, and so on) to European countries (the Prague of Al-Jawahiry, the Moscow and Madrid of Al-Bayaty, the London of Al-Haydary,

and recently of Saady Yousef and others). The inner spaces from which the elements of the new poetics of exile and identity are formed, however, are no less significant. These cover geography (Tigris and the Euphrates, palm trees, and other distinctly Iraqi features), cultural history and Arab/Islamic heritage (the classical poets in the case of Al-Jawahiry and the heritage of Sufism in the case of Al-Bayaty stand out as two prominent examples), ancient mythology (particularly Mesopotamian mythology), modernity (largely through English literature, as in Al-Sayyab, Al-Bayaty and Al-Haydary), and internationalism (largely through world literature, as in Al-Jawahiry and Al-Bayaty), giving rise to a new and distinctive poetic voice that can be characterized by the following features: It is a populist voice, in the sense that it is first and foremost the voice of the people of Iraq against their oppressors, in the various epochs and eras. At the same time, it is not a narrowly nationalist, and certainly not a chauvinist, or racist, voice. It is also definitely not fundamentalist; indeed, not even religious in a strict sense of the word, although it can be quite spiritual in the broadest way. It is a basically progressive and democratic voice that can be described as leftist, and indeed even Marxist at times, in its general tendency. It is a voice that represents the two major nations of Iraq, the Arabs and the Kurds, and successfully embodies the unifying elements in modern Iraqi culture as well as ancient Mesopotamian civilization. Above all, it is a radical and a revolutionary voice, one that contains the vision of a new identity and a new, more just and more happy, society. Lastly, it is a voice that echoes the old cultural and mythological resources of Iraq and, at the same time, also blends very successfully into the rich heritage of the world at large.

In addition, however, this Iraqi expression of poetic exile, particularly in its second phase, covering the eighties and the nineties, acquires a very bitter satirical tone and a very deep sense of the complexities of human alienation in the so-called postmodernist, globalist, era. While a romantic, almost sentimental, yearning for the homeland, often metaphorically depicted as the beloved, dominated a strain in the poetry of the first phase, covering especially the fifties, sixties and seventies, an equally strong sense of an internal alienation dominated the second phase, as the realization dawned upon the poets that there would be no return to the homeland, and that going forward and coming to terms with the conditions of exile and inner alienation were the only options.

Al-Sayyab's lines from his well-known poem, "A Stranger on the Gulf", probably epitomizes this romanticism of the first phase:

I loved in you the Iraq of my soul,
And I was inspired by you in it.

...

If you came to me in the strange land, it would be no meeting,
Only meeting you in Iraq would be a meeting.
My blood yearns for you, as if my blood is all my desire,
Hungers for you, like the hunger of the drowned for air,
Like the yearning of the foetus to be born.
I am amazed how traitors can betray,
If one betrays what it means to be, then how can he be?

. . .
 The sun is more beautiful in my country than elsewhere, and the darkness
 -even the darkness- there is more beautiful, because it embraces Iraq.

This romantic celebration of the homeland achieves its greatest expression, perhaps, in Al-Sayyab's famous Unshudat Al Matar (Rainsong) which, although not written in a condition of exile, reaches that supreme artistic state of becoming universally applicable to all conditions:

Your eyes are two forests of palm trees at the hour of dawn
 Or two balconies gradually distanced from the moon.
 Your eyes when they smile make the grapes ripen
 And the lights dance . . .like the moons in a river
 Disturbed by the oars, and here at the hour of dawn,
 As if the stars have come alive in their depths.

These eyes that seem to be those of the beloved turn out to be, of course, those of the homeland:

And they sweat in a fog of creeping sadness,
 Like the sea held in the palms of the evening,
 The warmth of winter and the shiver of autumn,
 And death and birth, and darkness, and light,
 There wakes, filling my soul, the shiver of weeping,
 And a savage ecstasy embracing the sky
 Like the ecstasy of the child fearful of the moon !
 As if the rainbows are drinking the clouds
 And drop by drop melting in the rain . . .
 Drowning the laughter of the children in the vineyard,
 And playing with the silence of the sparrows on the trees
 Rain song . . .
 Rain . . .
 Rain . . .
 Rain . . .
 The evening yawned, and the clouds are still there,
 Sweeping what it can sweep of its heavy tears,
 Like a child who has started to blabber before falling asleep:
 His mother—whom he did not find when he woke up,
 A year ago, and when he insisted on asking,
 They said to him "She will return the day after tomorrow . . ."
 She must come back
 Even though the comrades whispered that she is there
 By the hillside sleeping the sleep of death
 Eating of its soil and drinking of its rain
 Like a sad fisherman collecting his net
 And cursing the waters and fate
 And spreading song when the moon is down.
 Rain . . .
 Rain . . .
 Do you know what sadness is sent by the rain?
 And how the drain pipes weep when it pours?

And how the lonely feels lost in it?
Endlessly—like spilt blood, like the hungry,
Like love, like children, like the dead—this is rain !
And your eyes take me round with the rain,
And across the waves of the Gulf lightning sweeps
The banks of Iraq with stars and shells,
As if wanting to rise,
But the night keeps covering it under a blanket of blood.
I cry to the Gulf: “O Gulf
O provider of pearls, and shells, and death!”
And the echo comes back
Like the a weeping song:
“O Gulf
“O provider of shells and death . . .”

I seem to hear Iraq hoarding thunder and lightning
In the plains and in the mountains
So that when it is over
The winds leave no trace of the old city in the valley.
I seem to hear the palm trees drinking rain,
And the villages crying in pain, and the migrants
Struggling with oars and axes
Against the storms of the Gulf, and the lightning, singing:
“Rain . . .
“Rain . . .
“Rain . . .”
And in Iraq there is hunger
And in Iraq there is plenty in harvest time
To feed the crows and the grasshoppers
And the mills turn
In the fields, surrounded by men
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
How we wept the night we left
Till we got sick from the rain
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
And ever since we were small
The sky used to darken in winter
And rain poured
And every year—when earth got covered with grass—we got hungry
Not a year passed when Iraq did not go hungry
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
In every drop of rain
Red or yellow from the paradise of flowers
In every tear of the hungry and the naked

In every drop of blood spilled from the slaves
 There is a smile awaiting a new dawn
 And a dimple brightening the face of the newly born
 In the young world of tomorrow, the giver of life !
 Rain . . .
 Rain . . .
 Rain . . .
 Iraq will be green with Rain . . .”

The move from this essentially romantic expression to a more modern one appears first, perhaps, in the many poems and anthologies of Al-Bayaty, who spent a much longer stretch of his life (from the fifties, in fact, through the nineties, to his death in 1999) far from the Kuwait of Al-Sayyab’s short exile (and life) in several Arab and European countries:

We die in our exiled alienation
 But we are born anew
 We love anew
 Refuse anew
 Rebel anew.

This voice is heard across four decades, as in the 1960 poem, “Why Are We in Exile?” subtitled, “The Refugees Ask”:

Why are we in silence
 Dying?
 And I had a house,
 My own house,
 And there you are
 Without a heart
 Without a voice
 Crying, and saying
 Why are we in exile
 Dying?
 Dying in silence.
 Why don’t we cry?
 Over fire
 Over thorn
 We walked,
 And my people walked,
 Why are we, My God,
 Without a homeland, without love,
 Dying?
 Dying in fear.
 Why are we in exile,
 Why are we, My God?

And in this short poem, one of his last, written shortly before his death in the late nineties:

Who owns the homeland?

Is it the hired gun and the jailer, my lady,
Or is it the rainmaker?
Nazik, Al-Sayyab and Al-Jawahiry?
Or those who steal the bread, the medicine,
And the homeland?

The same two phases appear clearly in the poetry of Buland Al-Haydary. The first is represented by his anthology, "Steps in Exile", published in Beirut in 1956, in protest against the "homeland" that had driven him to hopeless escape and exile, and the second is represented by his last anthology, "The Doors of the Narrow House", published in London in 1990, in which he says:

The border guards of the homeland—so hated
Have stripped me even of my skin and blood,
Even of the dream of being born again in my wound.

They have cut off all my ten fingers,
And as a precaution,
They have cut off all my ten toes too.

Buland's poem, "Shall I Go Back—But to Who?" is, perhaps, the most representative of the second phase:

How overwhelming is the humiliation
Of exiled alienation.
How sad it is not to know yourself as a human being
Except in alienation.

Buland, however, like many of the Iraqi poets of exile, never wallowed in his despair, but kept on dreaming, however seemingly hopelessly, of a new and brighter dawn:

Baghdad

Who says that the dead are not alive
In the memory of the young, in the memory of the grandchildren?
Who says that those who died for you are dead?
They will come back tomorrow,
And in them we shall recognize the candles of our joys.

Al-Jawahiry, too, who represents a more classical embodiment of the poet of rebellion and militant political exile, is reconciled, towards the end, to the permanence of his condition, although again expressed in his typical mode of revolutionary optimism:

I am Iraq
My tongue is its heart,
My blood its Euphrates,
And my being its splintered parts.

And in a more nostalgic mood, he writes in one of his loveliest and best known poems of exile, "O Tigris of Plenty":