

# Job in Modern Arabic Poetry: A Semantic and Comparative Approach to Two Poems Referring to the Poet Al-Sayyab

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**Abstract**—The use of legendary, folkloric and religious symbols is one of the most important phenomena in modern Arabic poetry. Interestingly enough, most of the modern Arabic poetry's pioneers were so fascinated by the biblical symbols and they managed to use many modern techniques to make these symbols adequate for their personal life from one side and fit to their Islamic beliefs from the other. One of the most famous poets to do so was al-Sayyab. The way he employed one of these symbols 'job', the new features he adds to this character and the link between this character and his personal life will be discussed in this study. Besides, the study will examine the influence of al-Sayyab on another modern poet Saadi Yusuf, who, following al-Sayyab, used the character of Job in a special way, by mixing its features with al-Sayyab's personal features and in this way creating a new mixed character. A semantic, cultural and comparative analysis of the poems written by al-Sayyab himself and the other poets who evoked the mixed image of al-Sayyab-Job, can reveal the changes Arab poets made to the original biblical figure of Job to bring it closer to Islamic culture. The paper will make an intensive use of intertextuality idioms in order to shed light on the network of relations between three kinds of texts (indeed three 'palimpsests': 1- biblical- the primary text; 2- poetic- al-Sayyab's secondary version; 3- re-poetic- Sa'di Yusuf's tertiary version). The bottom line in this paper is that al-Sayyab was directly influenced by the dramatic biblical story of Job more than the brief Quranic version of the story. In fact, the 'new' character of Job designed by al-Sayyab himself differs from the original one in many aspects that we can safely say it is the Sayyabian-Job that cannot be found in the poems of any other poets, unless they are evoking the own tragedy of al-Sayyab himself, like what Saadi Yusuf did.

**Keywords**—Arabic poetry, intertextuality, job, meter, modernism, symbolism.

## I. INTRODUCTION- AL-SAYYAB

**B**ADR Shakir Al-Sayyab (1926-1964) was certainly one of the most wretched and unfortunate practitioners of the poet's art, certainly in modern times. His mother died when he was six years old, in the prime of life he was jailed because of his socialist political views but more recently he suffered constant harassment from his former comrades in the Communist Party, and he suffered from a rare ailment which sapped his strength and eventually brought about his death at the age of 38 years [1]-[4].

Al-Sayyab used Job's name to refer to his own misfortunes in two poems, entitled 'Sifr Ayyu:b' (= 'The book of Job') and 'Qa:lu li-Ayyu:b' (= 'They said to Job'), both published in his

poetry collection *Manzil al-Aqna:n* (= *House of Slaves*) (1963). Following his death, a number of poets in elegies to al-Sayyab alluded to Job in order to evoke his suffering, among them Saadi Yusuf (b. 1934) in the poem 'Marthiyya' (= 'Elegy') (*Qasa'id Mar'iyya* (= *Visible Poems*), 1965).

## II. AL-SAYYAB'S JOB

Al-Sayyab's collection *Manzil al-Aqna:n* (= *House of Slaves*) was published in 1963, a year before his death. In it, most scholars agree, he returned to the romanticism which characterized his earlier poetry, although with a difference. Towards the end of his life al-Sayyab suffered greatly, and the poems in this collection provide a faithful reflection of his tormented and broken self, which would dream of recuperation but soon sink back into despair. His pain caused him to withdraw into himself, to see nothing but his own suffering and his impending death. His romanticism was therefore not focused on nature, the beauty of creation and feelings of desire; rather, it centered on the sufferings of the present and a hoped-for cure, eventually turning to address the metaphysical powers which could perhaps grant him the deliverance which his doctors could not provide. The poetry he produced during this period characterized by gentle monologues filled with an admixture of hope and despair. Some poems are prayers in which he praises God and asks Him for mercy and a cure. Many poems of this period contain repetitions and reminiscences, as if he was taking leave of the events of his life by means of a quick review [2], [5]-[7].

In view of his suffering it is thus not surprising to find al-Sayyab in the forefront of canonical poets who evoke the figure of Job, in a way unparalleled by anyone else. In the poetry collection mentioned above two poems have a mention of Job in their titles. One is a rather lengthy poem, consisting of ten numbered stanzas, which al-Sayyab named 'Sifr Ayyu:b' (= 'The book of Job'). The poem was written over a period of nearly two months (December 1962 – January 1963). The second poem, entitled 'Qa:lu li-Ayyu:b' (= 'They said to Job'), is dated January 6, 1963. Note that both poems were written at about the same time. This was a period in which al-Sayyab's output increased considerably; he sometimes finished writing two or three poems in one day. In the analysis below, we shall discuss the second of the aforementioned poems, since the first is more complex and needs more time, what makes it irrelevant to this lecture.

The poem's title, 'Qa:lu li-Ayyu:b' (= 'They said to Job'), already indicates a dialogue between 'them' and 'him' and

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also tells the reader what the perspective in the poem will be: the poet appears to treat the figure of Job as an entity separate from himself, his use of the third person deluding the reader into believing in the poem's objectivity. We say 'delude' because in fact the poem, in contrast to what the poet would have us believe, is purely subjective, dealing with the suffering of the poet himself. The poem thus presents two aspects: a superficial level supported by the method of presentation and the poet's perspective, and a deeper level, supported by the facts which the reader knows about the poet and the details provided by the latter in the poem, which appear to be inconsistent with the personality of Job. The poem's title imposes itself on the reader at the very beginning; it informs the reader that what he or she is about to read in the text will concern the sufferings of Job, that Job may in fact be the hero of the text. The title thus jogs the reader's memory of cultural facts about Job and prepares it for interacting with the text. After the reader's memory has been prompted, the stories, descriptions and folk beliefs about Job which it contains make a deeper understanding of the text possible. Here is the poem:

They said to Job: 'God has treated you harshly!' (1)  
 But he answered: 'He does not treat harshly  
 One steadfast in his faith, whose hands will not  
 Slacken nor his eyelids doze off'.  
 They said to him: 'And the disease, who cast it (5)  
 Into your frail body and who made it stay?'  
 He said: 'It is the thought of the crime  
 Of Cain and the seller of his Paradise in vain.  
 The disease shall be defeated: tomorrow I'll doze off  
 Then my eye shall awaken from its slumber  
 I shall drag my thigh to a secluded place  
 Where I shall ask God for forgiveness  
 My crutch I shall cast into the water  
 And knock at the door for my family  
 If they open the door then woe unto me (15)  
 What a scream, what joy, it was hit  
 By the whirlpool of sadness ... and this Job?  
 Or a desire  
 Which my heart emitted, and I find it  
 Standing before my eyes, alive? (20)  
 Ghayla:n, oh Ghayla:n, embrace your father!' [8].

The reference to Job in the poem can be divided into two parts. In the first (lines 1-8), it is the scriptural and folkloristic Job which we encounter, the man beset by suffering and scolded by friends, family, and even his wife, who tries to persuade him to turn his back on his faith and in the God who has brought him so much pain [9]. His patience and faith were sorely tested, but he persevered, blessed God, and eventually God gave him back twice what he had lost. Al-Sayya:b hopes that after all his suffering he will also end up like Job, that he will be cured and compensated for his many years of deprivation. For this reason he chose this aspect of Job's story, as if to tell God that he has kept the faith nonetheless and that he still hopes God will have mercy on him and heal his injuries. The poet uses the dialogue form, 'they said' – 'he said', to tell this part of Job's story. The tale is told from a

distant perspective, as if the reader is presented with a poetic version of it, so that it runs parallel to the story of the poet himself. The reader can thus follow the story of Job without losing sight of the poet's, and compare the two. Here, the influence of the biblical style on al-Sayya:b is obvious. In the biblical account Job maintains a dialogue with his wife, on the one hand, and with some of his relatives and friends, on the other. They all try to persuade him to turn his back on his faith in God [9]. This kind of dialogue is neither available in the Quran nor in the *Qisas al-Anbiya*:', where the story of Job is narrated in the form of indirect speech transmitted by a series of people [10], [11].

The second part of the poem's reference to Job begins in line 9. Here the parallelism stops and the poet is represented as being fed up with the mask he wears and with his indirect speech. He feels an urgent need to give a frank description of his deteriorating state. For this reason, the poet begins the process of *dropping the mask*. He gives the evoked figure his own features and ascribes to it his own suffering, so that Job the folk hero now becomes 'al-Sayya:b's Job', who in addition to Job's traditional burdens also bears al-Sayya:b's own. The result is a new figure consisting of an admixture of both private and public suffering, dreams and emotions, providing the poet with a powerful, even exaggerated, means for expressing his pain. Dropping the mask brings about a meeting of the parallel figures of the poet and Job; the two voices which until line 8 were perceived separately have now joined together. Al-Sayya:b thus uses the associations evoked by the figure of Job to depict the intensity of his own suffering, but the more he delves into his own self, the further away he moves from the personality of Job. The descriptions contain more and more details which obviously refer only to the poet himself, so that the reader is automatically led to separate the two figures again. This happens especially from line 13 to the end of the quote, where we perceive just a single voice, that of al-Sayya:b. The poet would appear to have entered such a stage of agitation that he forgets the folk-heroic figure of Job entirely and is unable to speak of any pain but his own: 'my crutch' (al-Sayya:b did indeed walk with a crutch), 'my family', 'Ghayla:n (the name of his son) embrace your father'. The two parallel lines, united for a time, now separate again: one ceases and the other continues on its course alone. It is only towards the end of the poem (not included in the quote above) that the two figures unite once more in a Job-like prayer of in which he accepts God's will and begs for mercy and a cure [9]. Then, in the poem's last four lines, al-Sayya:b once again detaches himself from Job and goes back into his own private world.

Al-Sayya:b's poem is based on the Old Testament story of Job, parts of which the poet retells dramatically in dialogue form to conform to his own personal situation. The poet's experience fuses with Job's, lending the poem greater credibility and making it less obviously lyrical. This fusion enriches the poem and introduces variety into the modes of expression, narrative and dialogue, dream and reality, questions, wishes and prayer, etc. Perhaps more important still is the unification which al-Sayya:b effects between himself

and the figure of Job so that his own private suffering takes on a more public and general character, enabling the reader to empathize more clearly with the poet's suffering.

### III. AL-SAYYAB-JOB OF SAADI YUSUF

Two years earlier Saadi Yusuf (1934-) wrote an elegy on al-Sayya:b entitled 'Marthiyya' (= 'Elegy'), giving the poem an atmosphere which is very similar to the one found in al-Sayya:b's own last poems:

Jayku:r in the humid evening lights a lamp which does not cast its light

- The orphan has died and left a wife and orphans behind [...]

Job wanders through hospitals, preceded by his crutch [...]

Jayku:r is extinguished as if the night embraced its inhabitants

The mulberry trees do not sink into the canals, nor is the sky reflected in them (5)

The stars and fish are no longer gardens for the evening

Gates to the valleys of Najd

Ghayla:n climbs it towards me, from the soil of my father and grandfather

And I see my start in my finish

.....(10)

Job in Jayku:r cast his crutch by a bridge

And for two moments the water surged in the depths of his eyes

The white meadow, and the willow trees,

His eyes closed in on the dispersed treasure [...]

Oh house of my grandfather in the gloom of Jayku:r(15)

Oh date palms of Iraq

My grave behind the hill tries to outrun the Day of Judgment

In the solitude of the last exile, a dove seeks shade by it

And the cold makes me shudder:

Iraq ... Iraq ... there is nothing but Iraq(20)

I am Iraq or the Day of Judgment [12].

If one reads this poem without knowing who wrote it, one may for a moment get the impression that it is one of al-Sayya:b's, so successfully does the poet imitate the latter's voice and style. This he does in a number of ways: 1. He mentions a number of motifs which are common in al-Sayya:b's poetry (some the author has underlined above): Jayku:r (which is mentioned five times in the poem), Ghayla:n (al-Sayya:b's son), orphans, the crutch, hospitals, etc.; 2. He uses the first person, as if al-Sayya:b himself were speaking (see, for example, lines 8-9, 15 to the end); 3. He takes over, with some changes, lines which al-Sayya:b himself wrote (for example, lines 19-20), as pointed out by Saadi Yusuf himself in a footnote to the poem; 4. He uses the name of Job, a name which al-Sayya:b called himself in his last poems. The poem thus contains a multiplicity of styles, whose evocation enhances it artistically and semantically. The figure of al-

Sayya:b in this case turns out to be a dominant intertext which evokes numerous events, special places related to al-Sayya:b's life and words, idioms and poems which belong specifically to al-Sayya:b. It is quite interesting to see how al-Sayya:b, who used Job as a symbol of pain and patience, has become himself a symbol which carries the same meanings and is used as an intertext.

The poet adopts a narrative style in the poem, moving from the third to the first person. The allusions to Job are in the third person, just as they are in al-Sayya:b's poems, followed by a spontaneous transition to the first person, as if 'Job' himself in a monologue evokes the images of his son, his wife, and his village. The use of more than one person gives the poem flexibility and makes the reader feel as if there were two voices: the voice of the narrator who relates the events in the third person, and the voice of the hero who soliloquizes from time to time in the first person. The seamless way in which al-Sayya:b's own expressions are introduced into the text give the entire poem the look of an integrated whole in which al-Sayya:b's voice comes through loud and clear. The three voices come together here: al-Sayya:b's, the poet's and Job's. Such a situation is unique in Arabic poetry: the poet puts the *mask* of Job on al-Sayya:b so that the two are combined into a single figure, and then he himself puts on the integrated double mask, so to speak, and speaks in its name. This truly advanced artistic technique helps the poet express his complete identification with and empathy for al-Sayya:b, and freely describe the latter's sufferings as if they were his own. The text, then, 'loses its individuality and gets objectified, especially when poetic voices dramatize modern consciousness' [13].

Job's inspiration here continues throughout the entire poem, so that it imposes itself, and its entire contents in folk culture, on the text. Job's figure gives the poem new dimensions, especially in view of the fact that the poet adds to it certain characteristics of al-Sayya:b's personality and biography. Yusuf thus weaves the story of al-Sayya:b using two kinds of thread: the threads of reality as reflected in actual facts and events connected with the life of al-Sayya:b (as in lines 1-3, for example), and the threads of his own mind's imagination (lines 11-14, for example). Reality and imagination together weave the fabric of the story of 'al-Sayya:b's Job' in this poem, its precise realistic description and fertile, profoundly alive imaginings brought together by the poet's talent. His descriptive abilities are particularly in evidence in lines 11-14 of the excerpt given above, where the poet imagines Job (= al-Sayya:b) casting away his crutch next to a bridge in Jayku:r, then taking a look at the landscape around him, the landscape which al-Sayya:b extolled and for which he yearned when he was abroad. Then he shuts his eyes so that the views of Jayku:r are the last things he sees before his death. Here the poet succeeds in delving into the very depths of al-Sayya:b's soul in the latter's last moments; he can do this thanks to his previous acquaintance with al-Sayya:b, and his certainty that Jayku:r and Iraq would certainly be the subject of his very last thoughts before passing away. In addition to the esthetically pleasing and logical representations in this passage, the poet

also does a very good job of narrating and imagining events: he starts by describing the hero (Job), then the place where he is, and the actions which he performs (cast his crutch, surged in the depths of his eyes, his eyes closed). These actions enhance the poem's dramatic character and increase the presentation's mobility and vitality.

In the poem's next passage, not quoted here, the poet's language makes a transition from evocation and allusion to direct speech and from the dramatic to the lyrical; now he describes the world he sees around him, a cruel, backward world of guns, in which prophets and poets are killed and then mourned. His violent criticism testifies to the rage he feels at the contempt and indifference with which artists are treated in the Arab world. In this stanza the level of artistry drops and the poem takes on the features of dry reporting, until the poet once more becomes merged into the figure of al-Sayya:b and imagines him remembering his grandfather's house, where he spent his childhood, then crying out and calling on Iraq.

The poem thus possesses a multiplicity of styles, the most dynamical of which is the narrative, which enables the poet to present living pictures of his main hero, 'al-Sayya:b's Job', with no untoward lyricism. As a result, the text is flexible and full of vitality and various voices. We should mention here that poetic narrative is the style favored by Saadi Yusuf, whom critics consider one of its best practitioners among modern poets; his ability to turn narrative into poetry led him to prose stories as well [14].

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