Toward a Dialogue with the West: The use of Eliot's Modernism in Al-Sayyab's City Poetry

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The paper critically examines the city analogy in the poetry of the Iraqi poet Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab and T.S. Eliot in order to explore the Arab poet’s attempt to integrate Western modernism into contemporary Arabic literature. The paper argues that in Al-Sayyab’s poetry, Eliot’s urban modernism is appropriated to articulate social and political issues integral to the Arab world in the post-WW II era. Unlike post-colonial poets who reconstruct Western texts in order to dismantle them, Al-Sayyab transforms Eliot’s city discourse into a poetics of protest to confront local predicaments and challenge tyrannical regimes, the heirs of colonial hegemony. Such a process of adaptation which includes recollection, intertextuality, rephrasing and re-writing of Western legacies to fulfill indigenous purposes, is part of the issue of hybridity and interculturalization which characterizes the contemporary experience of political and cultural globalization. By assimilating Western modernism and literary traditions into Arabic poetry, Al-Sayyab ironically rediscovers nationalist myths and recalls ancient narratives which shaped the cultural history of the Middle East and the Arab world.

Introduction
Exploring the tremendous impact of T.S. Eliot on Arabic poetry after the Second World War, Terri De Young argues that while the British poets of the 1930’s denounced Eliot’s poetry, particularly *The Waste Land*, which they considered as “the most devastating critique of the entire project of modern Western civilization” (De Young 2000: 4), poets from the Arab world found salvation, solace and insight in Eliot’s literary and critical heritage. Undoubtedly, poets from different Arab countries were attracted to Eliot’s poetry for a variety of reasons, finding in his modernist narratives reflections of the state of death and fragmentation which characterized life in the Arab wasteland in the post-WWII era. In spite of being engaged in intercultural dialogues with other Western masters like Lorca and Baudelaire, Arab poets, particularly the Iraqi poet Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, and others were greatly indebted to the poetic traditions of Eliot. Illustrating the enormous impact of Eliot on Arabic poetry, Arieh Loya points out:
Little is known in the West of Eliot's impact upon modern Arabic poetry and the veritable revolution it brought to it. While English poetry developed in a more or less steady pace, the leap made by Arabic poetry through Eliot's influence was unprecedented (Loya 1971: 187).

Due to the drastic ramifications that followed the Second World War, the Arab world passed through a period of social upheaval and political turmoil. The new challenges included the Palestinian tragedy resulting from the defeat of the Arab armies in war with Israel in 1948 and the emergence of dictatorial governments in the Arab world which inherited the colonial legacy.

Since the end of World War II, the Arab region has suffered from a state of decadence and deterioration attributed to internal corruption and external interference. Looking for a new poetics able to confront the new realities emerging in the area, Al-Sayyab and the young generation of Arab poets who dominated the literary scene after the war found a refuge in European modernism, particularly the poetry of the French symbolists and T.S. Eliot. However, they were fascinated with Eliot's theories and views, particularly his denouncement of a dying civilization. Discussing the sweeping influence of Eliot on modernist Arabic poetry, Jabra I. Jabra argues that "the leading young writers and poets of the new generation" were actually "the people who read him and translated him" (Jabra 1980:12). For example, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, the most brilliant representative of Arab modernism, and other Arab poets engaged into dialogues with Eliot's literary heritage. This process included textual adaptations of modernist narratives and other shapes of literary impact.

Being convinced that traditional Arabic poetry is deeply rooted in a fossilized genre, characterized by old-fashioned rules and worn-out techniques, Al-Sayyab struggled to develop an expressive poetics to embody the aspirations of the Arab people after WWII. Violating the classical tradition of Arabic poetry, Al-Sayyab created a poetic achievement by developing devices, themes, techniques and narrative style essential to the modern spirit. Using Eliot's poetry as an intertext, Al-Sayyab does not aim to dismantle the Western literary canon but to challenge local hegemony, which is an extension of the colonial legacy. In this context, Al-Sayyab's poetry cannot be categorized as indigenous because it incorporates Western narratives and techniques; however, it is not subservient to the Western literary tradition. In Al-Sayyab's poet-
ry Eliot's modernism and Western thought are appropriated and recy-
cled to depict a local experience, which is anti-colonial in essence.

Unlike post-colonial poets who undermine Western narratives by
negating them, Al-Sayyab does not identify Western colonial texts with
authority or colonial hegemony. Instead, he assimilates them into the
Arabic literary tradition creating a hybridized poetics able to address the
aspirations of the Arab people in the post-World War II era. Therefore,
models of literary influence such as those set out by Harold Bloom in
*The Anxiety of Influence* are inadequate to Al-Sayyab, who attempts to
develop a multicultural poetics appropriating modernist techniques to
aesthetically articulate the contemporary situation of the Arab world.
Engaging into dialogues with Western writers and blending the overlap-
ping legacies of the colonized and the colonizer, Al-Sayyab attempts to
underline the pain and agony of a people devastated by tyrannical
regimes and enslaved by an oppressive culture. Therefore, an intertex-
tual reading of Al-Sayyab's poetry reveals at first sight an extensive use
of allusions and references adapted from Eliot. However, Al-Sayyab
transcends Eliot's Western narrative, transforming it into a poetic
dynamics that fits the ideological vision of the Arab poet.

One of the basic narratives integral to Eliot's modernist poetry is
the city motif, which reflects Eliot's vision of a deteriorating civiliza-
tion. As a sensitive chronicler of the First World War era, Eliot con-
fronts the wide ramifications of the war and its consequences, which
swept Europe and the Western cities. Developing a new poetics of
anger and outrage against a deteriorating civilization, Eliot emerges as
the greatest city poet; he enriches the English literary scene with a spec-
trum of urban poetics. Criticizing the modern morality associated with
the industrial city, and breaking with a mechanized culture that dehu-
manizes people, Eliot's city poetry is taken as an example by other poets
and writers:

Eliot's vision is taken up, more and more slackly, by the writers of the
last half-century, charting, mourning, and then, it is unavoidable,
delectating in *The Waste Land*. Life in the city is shackled to images
of sickness and sterility, with a repugnance authentic or adorned; and
what seems finally at the base of this tradition is a worldview we
might designate as remorse over civilization (Howe 1973: 53).

In spite of his ignorance of Arabic literature and culture, Eliot had
an unlimited influence upon modernist Arab poets who found in his
image of the modern city as inferno reflections of local crises and polit-
ical predicaments integral to the Arab world in the aftermath of the Second World War. In addition to their admiration of Eliot’s cities as paradigms of a dying civilization, poets from different Arab countries were drawn to the English poet because they found in his “implicit use of the fertility myth an expression of ultimate love and an emphasis on the potential of self-sacrifice. It was the idea of the cycle of sacrificial death that leads to rebirth which attracted them most” (Jayyasi 1977: 724).

In *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, F.O. Matthiessen discusses Eliot’s utilization of fertility myths and rituals, pointing out that Eliot succeeds in discovering that the recurring patterns in various legends are basically the same and that “the vegetation myths of the rebirth of the year, the fertility myths of the rebirth of the potency of man, the Christian story of Resurrection and the Grail legend of purification are basically the same” (Matthiessen 1958: 36). In addition to admiration of Eliot’s fertility rituals and myths, Al-Sayyab and other Arab poets were attracted to other aspects of Eliot’s modernism. Appropriating Eliot’s modernist techniques and poetic strategies to fulfill local political purposes, different from Eliot’s Christian vision, Arab poets since the mid-forties have integrated Eliot’s Western thought into the Arabic literary canon. Instead of attempting to disrupt Eliot’s works as a symbol of Western Christian hegemony and colonial discourse,

Arab poets repeatedly drew the analogy between the aridity of Arab life after the 1948 disaster in Palestine and the aridity of the land in the fertility myth saved from complete waste only by death and the spilling of blood, analogies to the falling of rain over a parched land (Jayyusi 1977: 724).

In this context, Al-Sayyab, utilized Eliot’s modernist narrative not only to depict the moral bankruptcy of the Arab world in the post-war era but also to criticize aspects of life in capital Arab cities dominated by injustice and political corruption. Appropriating Eliot’s vision of the modern city as a wasteland, he utilizes Eliot’s poetic strategies incorporating allusions, symbols, myths and other forms of literary influence to articulate Arab-Arab conflicts and internal dilemmas.

While Eliot’s pessimistic vision of the modern metropolis is due to an existential crisis resulting from the confrontation between the poet and a mechanized culture, the attitude of the Arab poet toward the city is formulated in a different epistemological and cultural context. Trapped in a world characterized by political corruption, tyranny, injust-
tice and ignorance, the Arab poet attempts to challenge the dehumanizing impact of living in cities dominated by poverty and governed by repressive traditions inherited from eras characterized by religious stagnation and backwardness.

Whereas Eliot's city suffers from a collapse of human relationship and a loss of faith attributed to the intervention of the machine, the Arab cities are plagued with tyrannical regimes and oppressive rulers who turn them into webs of prisons, mass graves and madhouses dragging the entire region to the Stone Age. In his poetry, Eliot's revulsion against the city is the result of hostility toward a post-industrial civilization which turns its back on genuine human values and moral traditions. Unlike Eliot's vision, Al-Sayyab's attitude toward the city is ironically originated in a poetics which views the Arab metropolis as a pre-industrial and pre-historic world, tyrannized by repressive establishments and brutalized by puppet regimes. Therefore, Al-Sayyab found solace in Eliot's fertility myths, assimilated from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, using them in different contexts to express a longing for change and political transformation in the "Unreal Cities" of repression and sin governed by tyrannical regimes and oppressive rulers.

**Eliot's Poetic City: An Overview**

Born out of the difficulties and complications that confront poets living in a highly industrialized metropolis, Eliot's urban poetics is a reflection of the experience he undergoes in London during the WWI era. Therefore, Eliot's urban poetry is integral to Western modernism where the city is simultaneously approached as a central symbol of Europe's industrial advancement and moral crisis. As an elegy over the deterioration of moral values in modern London, a symbol of cities which lost a sense of tradition and heritage, *The Waste Land* is considered as the crowning achievement of Eliot's urban poetry where his poetic talent reached its highest peak. Exploring *The Waste Land* as a representation of the spirit and consciousness of the modern city, Richard Sheppard states that major modernist poets came into "conflict with the antipathetic institutions of the rising industrial city" (330) for different reasons. This conflict, according to Sheppard, could be seen at its highest point in *The Waste Land*,

where Eliot's New England sensibility expresses its alienation from the modern mass city, yet seeks to discover places there which, because they retain conflict with 'more authentic' institutions of the past, permit the encrustation of the city to be breached (Sheppard 1987: 330).
In *The Waste Land*, the city is used mainly as a backdrop for the social and moral themes, explored by Eliot. Being engaged in the chaos of city life, Eliot presents a tableau of sordidness, boredom and neurosis reflective of fragmented human relationships:


The poet expresses his anxiety over life in the Western city where physical proximity does not lead to meaningful communication: “Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing?” (237), says one of Eliot’s psychotic city dwellers who fails to achieve positive communication with the other urban inhabitants who live in “rats’ alley/where the dead men lost their bones” (237). Further, in “Choruses from the Rock”, Eliot’s persona also denounces the city underlying Baudelaire’s idea that “multitude” and “solitude” are terms which have the same meaning in urban poetics:

When the Stranger says: “What is the Meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you Love each other?”

What will you answer? ‘We all dwell together To make money from each other’? or ‘This is a community’? (Eliot 1963: 171).

The critical questions raised above by Eliot’s persona reflect the isolation and alienation of city dwellers and the banality and depravity of the modern metropolis. Caught up in the industrial web of unlocalized cities, Eliot’s urban dwellers symbolize the predicament of life in the twentieth century. In this context, the wasteland is not only London or New York or Athens but any other modern metropolis. The lamentations, shouting and crying of the crowds in “What the Thunder Said?” the last section of *The Waste Land*, not only comes from the people of Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion but are the voices of protest and anger that could be heard in other cities all over the world. Even the Christ figure who paves the way for salvation in *The Waste Land* is blended with Adonis, Osiris, Orpheus and other mythic and vegetation gods from worldwide cultures and traditions.

The amalgamation of ritualistic and sacrificial deities from Eastern and Western cultures obviously signifies the global message of the
Therefore, Eliot’s city of the dead harbors homeless figures and dispossessed aliens who come from different destinations constituting a variety of ethnological chaos, including the Russian, the Lithuanian, the German, the Turkish “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant”, the Phoenician sailor, the displaced lover in the Hyacinth garden, Tiresias, the Theben prophet, Ferdinand of Naples, the British war veteran, Albert and the WWI soldier, Stetson: “There I saw one I knew, and stopped him crying: Stetson/ you who were with me in the ships at Mylae!” (Eliot 1973: 236).

Eliot’s city not only harbors aliens and outcasts but it is also dominated by death and fear. References to death and decay characterize the text of The Waste Land: “Unreal City / under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 1973: 236). Further, the daily life of the city dwellers is haunted by horror and fear. In part one, “The Burial of the Dead, Marie was scared during the picnic with her cousin in the mountains: “He took me out on a sled / And I was frightened. He said, Marie/ Marie, hold on tight. And down we went/ in the mountains, there you feel free” (Eliot 1973: 235). Moreover, feelings of horror and fear haunt the multitudes of soldiers over London Bridge on their way to die in war.

In addition to death and fear, Eliot’s city is depicted as a modern alternative to Sodom, the Biblical city, dominated by sin and moral corruption. The poet’s central persona travels on the periphery of the city witnessing different kinds of moral depravity and sexual corruption: “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/turn upward from the desk/when the human engine waits/ like a taxi throbbing waiting” (Eliot 1973: 240). In Eliot’s city, women turn into sex machines like the London typist in the preceding scene who is involved in illicit sexual affair with “the young man carbuncular” who works as “a small house agent’s clerk”. The sexual meeting happens in the typist’s flat in an atmosphere of boredom and indifference:

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference (Eliot 1973: 240)

The sexual affair between the dirty-looking house agent’s clerk and
the female typist is apparently part of the sinful life of a city which harbors “the loitering heirs” who have casual sex on the banks of the Thames then disappear in the big city. The Thames river which carries the remains of the sinful meetings “silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes cigarette ends/ or other testimony of summer nights” (239) unfortunately becomes part and parcel of an atmosphere of pollution dominating the city: “the sound of horns and motors” (239).

In Eliot’s poem, environmental pollution and moral corruption turn London, the historic city, into an inferno identifying it with other vile cities particularly Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of ancient Israel which were burnt by fire because they harbored sinful people. The transformation of the city into an anti-Jerusalem, an inferno, emphasizes the motif of decay integral to Eliot’s vision of the modern metropolis. Replete with urban images of city life, The Waste Land provides an impetus for poets from different cultures, particularly from the Arab world, who adapted Eliot’s urban modernism to fulfill local purposes. Using Eliot’s city poetry as an intertext, Al-Sayyab, the most distinctive voice of Arab modernism, develops a hybridized poetics that serves as a mechanism of confrontations with the new realities emerging in the Arab region in the post-WWII era.

**Integrating Eliot’s Urban Modernism in Al-Sayyab’s City Poetry**

Incorporating Eliot’s resources and symbols about the ugly and sinister facts of the machine-age city, Al-Sayyab’s poetry turns into an intertextual fabric which incorporates significant allusions and references to Western culture and literature. Nevertheless, Al-Sayyab transcends Eliot’s tradition by bringing politics and ideology to the forefront, thwarting the Christian expectations of Eliot’s narrative. In other words, Eliot’s city poetry is adapted to serve Al-Sayyab’s political ideology, particularly his hostility toward the post-WW II Iraqi regimes located in the city of Baghdad. Eliot’s poetry also provides further insights into the Arabic poetic tradition, opening new horizons for the revolutionary discourse of a committed poet who is determined to uncover the brutalities of an oppressive regime.

In his urban poetics, Al-Sayyab uses the city motif, assimilated from Eliot, as an expressive voice, representative of his political ideology toward Arab regimes in the post-WWII era, especially the Marxist Iraqi government of Abdul-Karim Qasim. Grounded in the tradition of city literature in the twentieth century, Al-Sayyab’s poetry is a unique expression of contemporary attitudes toward the urban landscape of the
Arab city and its inhabitants.

Functioning as a central poetic image in Al-Sayyab’s anthologies, the city is negatively used as a symbol of political corruption, persecution, stagnation and spiritual death. His antagonistic approach to the city does not change considerably over time due to the continuity of the state of corruption and stagnation it stands for. Therefore, the unfavorable image of the city which frequently occurs in Al-Sayyab’s poetry is not only reflection of the poet’s romantic tendencies toward the country but also a representation of his hostile attitude toward what the city symbolizes in the Arab world -- political hegemony and tyranny.

Unlike Eliot who pays close attention to the city’s topography, as indicated in *The Waste Land*, providing details about London’s districts, its streets, rivers, churches and banks, Al-Sayyab is not interested in Baghdad’s architectural or structural monuments but he depicts its alien residents who inhabit its brothels, coffee houses, mental hospitals and prisons. As a physical entity, the city is compared with the country only to expose its distress, vulgarity, sterility and the entrapment of the poet in the urban squalor.

The hostility toward the city and the interest in the country is not a motif integral to Arabic poetry but a trend that could be traced in the writing of Eliot as well. In spite of being the most prominent city poet in the first half of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot expresses a sense of nostalgia for a pre-industrial America. In a lecture delivered at the University of Virginia in 1933, Eliot laments the New England landscape which is polluted by industrialization. He states that his emotions are “stirred very sadly” at the sight of New England and “the desolate country of Vermont.” In a lamentative tone, he points out:

Those hills had once, I suppose, been covered with primaeval forest;  
the forest was razed to make sheep pastures for the English settlers;  
now the sheep are gone and most of the descendents of the settlers.  
You descend to the sordor of the half-dead mill towns of Southern  
New Hampshire and Massachusetts. (Cited in Gohar 1999: 43)

In his poem “City of Sinbad,” Al-Sayyab, like Eliot, expresses a deep sense of nostalgia for his birthplace village, Jaikur, depicting it as a paradise that can never be regained. Due to his dissatisfaction with the situation in Iraq in the post-WWII era, he explores the city motif, in an unparalleled intensity, confronting the ugliness of Baghdad which is used as a metaphor for political and moral corruption. Lamenting the loss of the city’s distinguished history as the ancient capital of the

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Muslim Empire, the poet draws an analogy between the urban landscape and his rural background, juxtaposing the sordidness of Baghdad to the purity of Jaikur, located in southern Iraq. In Al-Sayyab’s masterpiece, Baghdad is depicted as a nightmarish city where Christ is not able to bring Lazarus back alive from his grave and where the Iraqi rulers, “The Tatars,” turn into monsters brutally slaughtering their own people and bringing havoc to the city. In Al-Sayyab’s vile city, one can only see blood, bones and dead bodies in the streets. The dogs of “Judas,” a symbol of the Iraqi police apparatus, chase Iraqi women and children in order to slaughter them, bringing curse to the city. Therefore, when the poet prays for God to save the sinful land of Iraq from the current state of sterility, rain comes only in the form of blood. Further, in Al-Sayyab’s city, Christ and Prophet Muhammad are crucified, thus, green fields become barren and heroism is defeated.

Using Christian symbols obtained from Eliot, Al-Sayyab modifies Eliot’s vision about the possibility of salvation in the modern wasteland by suggesting that redemption is not possible in Iraq and the Arab world as long as dictatorial regimes are left in power. In this context, Christ is not resurrected and the Arab city cannot be redeemed simply because it is fully dominated by Judas who epitomizes betrayal, treachery and deception. Due to current circumstances, the Arab Lazarus is not reborn and his dried flesh is sold in the city of the sinners. Apparently, Al-Sayyab’s pessimistic poem problematizes the political situation of the Arab world in the post-WWII era, denouncing the Arab oppressive regimes and blaming the Arab masses represented by the Lazarus analogy because of their reluctance to confront the hegemonic powers which tyrannize them. The failure of the Arab people to overthrow the tyrannical rulers who oppress them leads to chaos and anarchy, turning the Arab world into a wasteland and moral wilderness.

Like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Al-Sayyab uses the rain motif to explore local issues, particularly the state of sterility which characterizes Arab life in the post-war era. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses rain metaphorically as a symbol of salvation and fertility. In part one, “The Burial of the Dead,” the wasteland residents avoid rain because they are involved in sin, and are unprepared for redemption: “With a shower of rain, we stopped in colonnade” (Eliot 1973: 235). Further, the lack of rain is associated with the state of barrenness that dominates *The Waste Land*: “Here is no water but only rock/ rock and no water and the sandy road / the road winding above among the mountains / which are mountains of rock without water/ if there were water we should stop and

Reversing Eliot’s modernist techniques and fertility motifs, Al-Sayyab utilizes rain as a mythic symbol to generate suggestions integral to the Arab poet’s local context and political ideology, viewing Baghdad as a sterile wasteland in dire need of resurrection. Appealing to the god of rain, the poet expresses his desire that fertility may be restored to his vile city:

I cried out in winter:
Bestir, o rain,
Make the seeds grow, let the flowers open,
And set the sterile threshing floors
On fire with lightning (Khouri 1974: 93).

Nevertheless, the poet’s prayer for resurrection is not fulfilled and rain comes in the form of blood. Even the Euphrates River which provides Iraqi soil with fertility flows with the dead bodies of the regime’s victims. Due to the tyranny and brutality of the Iraqi governments in the 1950’s, the river’s bloody flood sweeps the land, revealing the hidden mass graves of the enemies of the regime:

And, flowing over with your gifts,
The Euphrates muddy turned
The tombs moved, their dead
And their bones cried out;
Blessed be the god who grants us
Blood in the form of rain (Khouri 1974: 95).

Adapting Eliot’s modernist discourse and Christian symbols to serve ideological purposes, Al-Sayyab alludes to the myth of Lazarus using it in a different context. In the Biblical narrative, the resurrection of Lazarus from the world of the dead by Christ signifies rebirth and return to life. In Al-Sayyab’s poem the death of Lazarus and his desire not to be resurrected is used as a symbol of the state of stagnation and moral emptiness that characterized life in the Arab world and Iraq after WWII. Al-Sayyab hopes that the Arab Lazarus may be resurrected “from his long sleep” to provide the spark for revolution and change: “Who awakened Lazarus from his long sleep? / that he might know the morning and evening /and summer and winter/ that he might be hungry or feel / the burning coal of thirst” (Khouri 1974: 95). However, Lazarus does not want to be revived or come back from his tomb because the Arab wasteland is not ready for salvation. Utilizing Eliot’s resurrection myths and Christian narratives to connote reverse sugges-
tions, Al-Sayyab incorporates Lazarus as a symbol suggesting the current state of sterility and barrenness integral to the Arab world.

Engaging Eliot's gods of resurrection to indicate reverse suggestions, Al-Sayyab refers to Adonis associating him not with fertility but with sterility and moral bankruptcy: “Is this Adonis, this emptiness? / And this pallor, this dryness?” (95). Al-Sayyab’s city which is dominated by the Iraqi dictators turns into a wasteland therefore, “the sickles are not reaping / the flowers are not blooming / the black fields have no water” (Khoury 1974: 97). Like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Al-Sayyab’s sinful city suffers from lack of water and fertility. Even Adonis is not able to live in Baghdad anymore as a result of its barrenness: “Is this Adonis? Where is the glow? / and where is the harvest?” (97).

Incorporating Eliot’s mythic motifs, Al-Sayyab employs the city of Baghdad as an objective correlative through which he denounces the inhuman practices of the Iraqi regimes and the dictatorial Arab rulers in the post-WWII era. Borrowing Eliot’s vision of a dying civilization, Al-Sayyab’s city is viewed as a wasteland where women became barren and men lost their potency and manhood: “Is this the shout of manhood? / Is this the moan of women? / Adonis! Behold the defeat of heroism!” (Khouri 1973: 97). In Al-Sayyab’s ghastly city, women moan, Adonis is defeated and his sickle “reaps nothing” except “bones and blood”. The poet obviously laments the state of sterility in Iraq and the Arab world during the 1950’s, epitomized by the impotency and death of Adonis: “Death indeed has shattered every hope within you” (97).

Exploring new intertextual spaces which challenge contemporary hegemony and tyranny, Al-Sayyab revises the myth of Baghdad as the ancient capital of the Muslim empire. In this context, the poem does not implicitly incorporate legends about the miraculous history of the city or the great rulers who governed it in the era of Arab glory. Instead, Baghdad is depicted as an inferno, a harbor for prostitutes, outcasts and fallen politicians. Like Eliot who compares a contemporary London with the historic city of the Elizabethan era, Al-Sayyab denounces modern Baghdad, alluding to the glorious past of the city. The miserable representation of contemporary Baghdad, in Al-Sayyab’s poem, is a manifestation of life in Iraq and the Arab world in the aftermath of the 1948 war with Israel which resulted into “the defeat of heroism” and the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees.

Moreover, Al-Sayyab combines Christian symbols assimilated from Eliot with Islamic narratives, to express his vision of the conditions in Iraq and the Arab world after the Second World War: “There is
death in the streets/ and barrenness in the fields/ and all that we love is dying” (Khouri 1974: 987). The Iraqi dictators, according to the poem, “have bound up the water in the houses / and brooks are panting in the drought” (97). The atrocities committed by the Iraqi regime against the people reached a climax when the poet refers to the murder of Prophet Muhammad at the hands of the dictators: “They have burned Muhammad, the orphan, /And the evening glows from his fire” (Khouri 1974: 97).

Recalling the massacres and brutalities perpetrated by the barbaric army of the Tatars against the inhabitants of Baghdad in long past times, Al-Sayyab reveals the similarity between contemporary Iraqi regimes and the Tatar invaders who came from central Asia and occupied Baghdad after turning the historic city into ashes:

Behold, the Tatars have advanced,
Their knives are bleeding,
And our sun is blood, our food
Is blood upon the platter (Khouri 1974: 97).

Like Eliot’s wasteland, Al-Sayyab’s city is dominated by an atmosphere of death, fear, barrenness and drought. The barbaric Iraqi rulers not only murdered Prophet Muhammad but also crucified Christ in the streets of Baghdad: “Tomorrow Christ will be crucified in Iraq” (99).

Using season imagery, Al-Sayyab describes a spring without rain or flowers alluding to Eliot’s wasteland discourse: “O spring what has affected you? / you have come without rain/ you have come without fruit/ and your end was like your beginning” (Khouri 1974: 99). Moreover, in Al-Sayyab’s metropolis, Adonis lacks sexual potency, death haunts the city and spring comes without rain. While rain in Eliot’s wasteland is a symbol of resurrection, Al-Sayyab’s rain does not bring fertility to the city but it brings disease and plague.

In addition to the use of rain to suggest curse and disease, Al-Sayyab alludes to the Biblical narrative of Cain and Abel to affirm the existence of evil in the Arab city: “Cain is being born in order to tear out life/from the womb of earth” (101). In Al-Sayyab’s vicious city, “Christ will perish before Lazarus” and “women are aborting in slaughterhouses” (101). The city of Baghdad, governed by dictators and tyrants, is viewed as an unheroic spot where women are killed by its rulers. Appropriating Christian symbols and narratives to articulate a local political context, Al-Sayyab refers to the victimization of Lazarus and Christ in the Arab city: “His flesh is cut into strips” to be sold in “the
city of sinners / the city of bullets and boulders.” (Khourì 1974: 101).

Modelled on Eliot’s wasteland, Al-Sayyab’s city becomes a location for the isolated, the persecuted and the victimized. In spite of imitating his Western forebear, the Iraqi poet creates a city where people are not subjected to the impact of a mercantile, industrial culture but to the tyranny of dictatorial governments. In his city poetry, Al-Sayyab used Western myths and Eastern legends as well as Muslim, Christian and Hebraic religious symbols “introduced under the influence of Eliot and through the medium of Frazer’s Golden Bough” (Moreh 1976: 246) to articulate his vision of the Arab world in the 1950’s. Linking Christian and Muslim religious traditions, Al-Sayyab introduces Christ and Prophet Muhammad as sacrificial figures crushed by the Iraqi tyrants. Further, in Al-Sayyab’s vile city, rain turns into a plague and Arab dictators continued the murder and persecution of their people in a merciless and ritualistic manner. Therefore, Baghdad is depicted as a slaughterhouse and a modern Babylon:

As if walled, ancient Babylon
Had returned once again!
With its high domes of iron
Where a bell is ringing, as if a cemetery
Were moaning in it, and the heavens
The courtyard of a slaughterhouse (Khourì 1974: 101).

Evoking the painful experience of the Israelites in the city of Babylon, Al-Sayyab links the Jewish tragic history of exile and dispossession with the fate of the Iraqi people under the tyrannical regimes of the post-WW II era. Appropriating narratives of persecution and Diaspora from Western culture, Al-Sayyab depicts Baghdad as a modern Babylon where streets turn into mass graves: “Its hanging gardens are sown/With heads cut off by sharp axes, / With the blood of its slain?” (Khourì 1974: 103). Being astounded by the scene of the blood of the slain citizens, Al-Sayyab cries out: “Is this my city? / Is there no god in that place?” Using Eliot’s repetition technique, introduced into Arabic poetry by Al-Sayyab and other poets in the modernist movement, the poet repeats the question “Is this my city?” many times to express his disillusionment and lamentation of a city where people’s fate is controlled by fire and sword.

Like other Arab cities, Baghdad is dominated by repressive regimes and political corruption: “Is this my city? Daggers of the Tatars/Sheathed above its gate” (Khourì 1974: 103). The poet’s sense of disappointment and awe as he confronts the horrible reality of the
city reaches a climax when he discovers that the streets of the city have turned into a sterile wilderness “and the desert pants/ with thirst around its streets”. As in Eliot’s poem, Al-Sayyab’s city is transformed into a desert because the Iraqi dictators have committed all kinds of crimes and sins turning their country into wasteland. Due to their crimes, Baghdad, the capital city of the Islamic empire in the golden era of Muslim glory, is metamorphosed into an inferno where death, corruption, prostitution and treachery prevail.

Appropriating Eliot’s symbols to emphasize the image of Baghdad as a wasteland, Al-Sayyab incorporates Biblical figures to articulate the painful realities of the Arab city: “Is this my city? With injured domes, /In which red-robed Judas/Set the dogs on the cradles/Of my little brothers and the houses, /They eat of their flesh” (Khouri 1974: 103). Alluding to the political intrigues and military conspiracies that tore Iraq apart in the post-WW II era, Al-Sayyab uses Judas as a symbol of betrayal to reflect the situation in Iraq at that time. The references to the city with “injured domes” and wailing palm trees underline the miserable life of the Iraqi people under the totalizing regimes of the post-war era. The brutal dictators in Iraq are viewed through the image of “red-robed Judas” due to the horrible crimes and atrocities they committed against their people.

Combining symbols and myths absorbed from Eliot’s modernist heritage and Middle Eastern sources, Al-Sayyab depicts a catastrophic image of life in the Arab world in the post-WW II era. Engaging Western modernism and Eliot’s literary heritage, Al-Sayyab’s poem becomes the center of an intertextual web that contains strands from a variety of works and traditions. Regardless of the fact that the Arab world and the West are divided along religious and cultural lines, Al-Sayyab struggles to implement a poetics capable of engaging Western and Eastern cultures. In his city poetry he creates a verse form and an allusional matrix, which is neither Western nor Eastern. In other words, Al-Sayyab develops a cross-cultural poetics inspired by Eliot which involves a process in which something is created in the Arab world that is neither indigenous to the region nor identical with its Western counterpart.

Works Cited
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