

Re-defining The Image of Beirut in Modern Arabic Literature.

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Abstract

Subverting the conspiracy theory advocated by some Arab critics who claim that the establishment of modern Arab cities was threatening to the Euro-American project of cultural, political, economic and military colonization in the Middle East, the paper explores the image of Beirut in contemporary Arabic literature – particularly in the poetry of Khalil Hawi, Nizar Qabbani and Mahmoud Darwish – in order to investigate several issues of trans-cultural and geo-political significance. The paper argues that there is no similarity between the Arab city and its western counterpart, where human relationships are disrupted by the intervention of the machine and where the poet witnesses the collapse of human relationships. It is obvious that the Arab city does not have the complicated technology or industrial infrastructure which would dehumanize the poet or put pressure on his psyche and consciousness as in the West . Therefore, it is significant to argue that in Arabic literature, there are no city poets in the western sense because Arab cities unfortunately failed to create poets like Eliot, Baudelaire, Pound, Whitman, Ginsberg, and others. However, the Arab city has other oppression mechanisms such as persecution, torture and denial of human rights. These elements are sufficient to generate hostility on the part of the poet toward the city and its dwellers.

Introduction

In **The Culture of Cities**, Lewis Mumford states that "cities cause men and women to behave in various patterns, not always to their betterment (Mumford 1969: 34¹). For this reason, people, for a time long, have been suspicious of the city. Moreover, Gerald Leinward argues:

It was on the farm and in the joys of rural life that the good life, and good men, were to be found. Yet it was in search of the good life that men, almost without willing it, built cities, and from cities – at least as often as from farms – great men have risen. (Leinward 1981: 28²)

Apparently, the city / village dialectics is a diverse controversial theme in western and Arabic literature and culture. For example, the positive attitude toward the village in Arabic literature, prior to the twentieth-century, does not lead to hostility toward the

city . In the poetry of Ahmed Shawqi and the neo-classicists ,the city was still an ideal place, a paradise of God on earth even when the poor suffer from starvation in its streets. The deplorable circumstances of the Iraqi women in Baghdad does not urge Ma'ruf Al-Rusafi (1877 – 1945), an Iraqi poet, to attack the city. In his narrative poems, he depicts the miserable conditions of children and orphans as well as the distress and the plight of widows and women in Baghdad . Despite their poverty and suffering, the poet does not condemn the city. In spite of the indifference of the urban society of Baghdad to its poor community, the poem ends in a naïve manner, with the poet preaching the readers to provide charity and relief for the poor of the city³.

Explicitly , the difference between city and country life in Arabic culture, goes back to the pre-Islamic era . At that time, there was distinction between the urban and the Bedouin way of existence. In pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry, there was an attitude to praise the simple / traditional way of life advocated by the Arab desert communities affirming the wisdom, intelligence and superiority of the Bedouins . In this kind of poetry, the superiority of the Arab Bedouin's gifts of eloquence are emphasized . The Bedouin was portrayed as a liberal / egalitarian person antagonistic to the urban standards of hierarchy and status. However, the urban or anti-Bedouin poetry, in the early Islamic era, viewed the Bedouin as wild and savage (even ignorant ,vicious and evil) unable to be assimilated in the luxurious way of living available in urban communities.

Thus, the Arab Bedouin is delineated in this kind of poetry as a boorish person who should be redeemed and civilized by urban life. This anti-Bedouin trend reached a culmination in the poetry of the Abbasid poet of Persian origin, Abu-Nuwas who ridiculed the pre-Islamic / Bedouin culture in the Arabian Peninsula exalting the Persian and South Arabian / Qahtani urban civilization. On this basis, Abu-Nuwas denounces the Bedouin way of living as backward and obsolete praising the city life in Baghdad which is associated with entertainment, drinking, slave-girls and taverns . With the process of urbanization and the gradual disappearance of Bedouin communities, the dichotomy between city and country life has become one of the basic motifs in Arabic poetry reflecting the conflict between the rural way of living and its urban counterpart.

Historically, the city is associated with social values, social structures and class references as well as racial and ethnic attitudes in addition to other issues of pressing contemporary immediacy. For example, the Lebanese city, Zahla, unlike Beirut, is depicted in a favorable way in the poetry of the neoclassical poet Ahmed Shawqi. In a poem entitled “Zahla”, Shawqi, the prince of Arab poets, incorporates the metaphor of a beloved woman to describe the natural beauty of this resort city. The poet’s passion for his beloved Zahla is virtuous: “I subdued all desires and forgot all reproof or complaint”. Zahla, the city, is portrayed as a “beautiful bride”, the cedar’s bride, tenderly embraced by the twin mountains of Sinnin and Haramún, which are themselves described as “the arms of nature” (Shawqi 2960: 226⁴). Shawqi’s marvelous image of Zahla stands in sharp contrast to the violent and sexual image of Baghdad in Abú Nuwas’s poetry as he describes an orchard of palms surrounding a palace.

To Abu-Nuwas, the Abbasid poet of Persian origin, this palm with its ripe dates, would be more delicious than “a bride in her underwear” if only he could kiss and hug her. The fruitful palm is a symbol of Baghdad or a symbol of the delightful life of the city as opposed to Abu Nuwas’s description in the following line of sterile Bedouin environment which he ridicules in his poetry. In order to reveal his criticism of the Bedouin way of living and of the Bedouin community where Bedouin poets shed tears on its ruins, Abu Nuwas uses symbolic images of sterility. While the city of Baghdad is depicted as “a bride in her underwear”, the Bedouin community is portrayed as a location where “a viper fucking a lizard in its hole in a barren abyss” (Abu-Nuwas 1979: 502⁵).

While the first urban image of the city as a bride is associated with sexual intercourse leading to pregnancy and fertility, the second image reveals a scene of sterile homosexuality peculiar to Abu Nuwas’s poetry⁶. This drawing of an image of nature to describe a beloved paves the way for the feminine personification of the city as a beloved or a bride or even a prostitute (in later poetry). In other words, the development of sexual imagery in Arabic poetry, in which the metaphor of the palm tree is applied to the beloved lady, then the palm tree bearing ripe dates applied to a bride, then the likening of figs to the breasts of a maiden (Shawqi) and finally the

metaphor of woman applied to a city add a great impact on later Arab poets who depicted the modern, crowded and industrialized city (like Beirut) as a prostitute.

Historically, “the origins of cities go back to the very dawn of civilization. The word "city" itself comes from the Latin “civitas” from which the word civilization also stems. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations citizens were the property owners and the tax payers of the city. The first cities known to western man began to appear in the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates in ancient Mesopotamia, of the Nile in ancient Egypt, of the Ganges in India, and the Yangtze in China. Mankind learned to live in established communities where the duties of food gathering and growing, hunting, and manufacturing tools and weapons were shared and structured to meet the needs of the entire community. These early communities became the first cities.

In every era, the city as a literary image has engaged one or another set of oppositions ; bipolarity is, in fact, one of the city’s most consistent traits. Of course, evoking the image of the city can easily recall the city’s most obvious opposite and set it in contrast to the country. From this opposition, one easily extrapolates any number of thematic oppositions – the artificial opposes the natural, a heightened pace opposes a calm ritualistic progression of seasons, a creation of man opposes the creation of God and many of these come into play at different points in the development of the city myth. Yet, specially from the nineteenth century forward, one finds a complex of oppositions even within the image of the city itself, and these are particularly interesting because they create distinct paradoxes – paradoxes of particular importance for the twentieth century. These oppositions lead to a peculiarly modernist presentation of the city as a symbol of fragmentation .

The roots of the nineteenth century oppositions lie in an ancient dichotomy that reveals man’s struggle to define the inherent nature of the city. The split can easily be seen in the symbolic cities of the Bible, for example, Holy Jerusalem and Dissolute Babylon. This ancient opposition reveals man’s ambivalent assessment of his cities, another enduring feature in this context. As a representation of the Heavenly City (paradise), the earthly city could be seen as “city revered” (Jerusalem). Yet cities also represented man’s civilization, and thus, the city might also be seen as

“city reviled” (Babylon). While the city was first judged simply as either good or evil, the “Romantic” city is more often perceived as “city reviled,” a location of vice not to be trusted.

Under the influence of Rousseau, the Romantics saw the city dweller as “isolated not only from his fellows, but from those forms of nature that might lead him to a transcendent sense of unity with the universe”. It became increasingly common for writers and philosophers to feel that the city was locus of chaos, and therefore the city was often viewed with suspicion. Still, though the majority of Romantic thinking involved a rejection of the city, occasionally the Romantics perceived a seed of utopian hope in the city. As Burton Pike put it, “the city is inherently un-poetic to the Romantic (except when Wordsworth catches it off-guard).” In this way, Wordsworth was able to look at London at dawn and see beauty in the “sleeping giant” in “Written upon Westminster Bridge”. In addition, the city was to some extent necessary in order for the romantic poet to underscore the sublime quality of nature. Thus, Wordsworth views the city itself as gloomy, dirty, and unnatural, but he often sees the city as a foil against which acts of truth or integrity or objects of beauty are more meaningful or inspiring.

As cities grew – not only in population and geographical size, but also in social complexity and topological variety – the city dweller experienced a greater and greater loss of individuality, underscoring the conflict between community and the individual, and emphasizing a rift between the city of the ideal, a “utopia” (and the city of real life) (a “dystopia”). Certainly “the Romantic fear of the masses”, according to Burton Pike, also helped to undermine the original concept of “the city as a community”; the somewhat “neutral opposition of individual versus community becomes the semantically charged one of individual versus masses, isolating the individual even further” (Pike 1981: 116⁷). In addition, Georg Simmel argues that the growth of cities made it more difficult to conceptualize them as unified wholes, and this also caused the inhabitants’ image of a city to become more and more fragmented. Not only was the ability for the city to maintain a cohesive community crumbling, but the converse was also true”: Simmel believed that “the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his experience in the face of overwhelming social

forces of historical change, or external culture, and the technique of life” (Simmel 1969: 47⁸).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a trend in Arabic city traditions which could be seen in literature dealing with the exploration of the naivety of the peasants visiting the big city for the first time . Moreover, the Arabic literature of the city elaborates on major themes such as the aberration of the individual in the city and other themes of dispossession / displacement, ethnic diversity, the grandeur of the city and visions of future cities. Great cities of the Arab world like Beirut, Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus and other urban / industrial centers are used by writers to provide historical background information about the origin, development and function of the city and emphasize the creative and destructive forces of the city in literature and history. In Arabic literature, major cities are used as locations for cultural, political and economic diversity. Here, the city is manipulated to examine political conflicts such as the Arab –Israeli dispute, the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and issues such as the problems of poverty and prostitution, corruption, oppression and tyranny.

The Representation of Beirut in Arabic Poetry

Advocating the conspiracy theory, Saleh Al-Razzouk in “The Concept of Defeat in Contemporary Arabic Poetry” claims that the establishment of Arab cities such as Beirut, Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad was threatening to the western project of cultural, political, economic and military colonization in the Arab region because these cities are considered as bases for what he calls “an Arab civilization”. The Arab city, according to Al-Razzouk, “is the harbor of revolutionaries, intellectuals and the masses”. He illustrates that " the factories and the economy are associated with urbanization, thus, the existence of a modern industrialized city in the Arab world is considered as a threat to the colonial hegemony and the imperialistic policies in the region” (Cited in Gohar 1998: 77⁹).

* All citations / quotations from Arabic prose or poetry written by Arab poets are translated by the author of the paper unless names of other translators are mentioned in the text or / and the works cited.

Contrary to the preceding viewpoint, the Arab cities do not represent any threat to the western project of domination in the Middle East due to the wide industrial gap between the Arab city – where people are toiling day and night for the sake of earning their modest living - and its western counterpart. For example, the ordinary Arab citizen in Beirut is frequently depicted in Arabic literature as a Sisyphus figure, condemned by eternal suffering. In the same context, the city people of Beirut are destined to die slowly in the city's taverns, brothels and bars: "In Beirut there is toiling and slow death / and an enchanted tavern, wine, beds of fragrance for / those who have been lost in the mazes of the desert / in the damned alleys and brothels of the city" (Hawi 1979: 24¹⁰).

Beirut was the first Arab capital to be occupied by the Israeli army. The occupation and devastation of Beirut has a tremendously damaging impact on Arab culture and literature. Therefore, Beirut is one of the most significant Arab cities that appears in the poetry of Arab poets in different shapes. The personification of Beirut city as fruitful woman is an ancient tradition in Arabic poetry whereas her impotence or barrenness is the corollary of a general state of civil distress. In the poetry of Khalid al-Khazraji, (a young Iraqi poet, traveling between Baghdad and Beirut and writing about both cities with compassion and insight) Beirut is figured out as a woman victimized by evil forces. During the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s, he exhorts the war-torn city to heal and regenerate itself alluding to oriental mythic figures associated with rebirth, fertility and resurrection like Tammuz.

The feminine mythic figure, expected to provide salvation to Beirut, is a counterpart of the savior-Tammuz who appears in al-Khazraji's poetry as the sacrifice and hope of the city. In "Beirut My Love", the poet expresses his sadness over the city which has been torn by civil war. The city of olive forests, orange gardens and migrating seagulls has become a ghost city whose forests and shores are on fire while the moon disappears every night: "I ask the orange gardens / and the migrating seagulls / about my love, / I ask the olive forest – / Has my lover's shadow / passed over you soil? / I ask about a country / whose forests are on fire, / whose shores are on fire, / while the moon / disappears every night / and the trees wither. / I ask about the noble face / which vanished in the avenues of darkness, / about the young girl / who dreams every hour / of water and a loaf of bread "(Asfour 1988: 123¹¹).

Personifying Beirut as a beautiful lady (the poet's beloved), the poet laments what happened to the city of poetry where young girls dream of water and bread: "Beirut, my love, / I know that your face, which greeted the light,/ is pale / and blood washes the green windows / my love,/ City of poetry and dreams:/ death crouches in the gardens./ in the houses / and seas;/ every drop of blood / is a star./ and every pulse repeats / that surely your noble face / will one day return" (Asfour 1988: 124¹²)

The poet adds that the city, like him, should resist all barbaric attempts to torn it apart rendering it into a heap of ruins: "You know that I / resist the winds / the pullets and the thieves / Rebellion explodes in my heart/ like a flame,/ and on the floor of the ocean / rests whatever the ocean hides" (Asfour 1988: 124¹³).

Finally, the poet reveals his desire to see the end of the civil war which will lead to the city's rebirth . He dreams of a savior, a Christ-figure who will return to the sinful city and bring resurrection and salvation to its injured churches and protect her children from death: "Beirut,/ would the light awaken / over your barren doors,/ would He who was crucified return / to your beseeched roads,/ would you listen to the metal ringing in the soldiers' ditches / and the cries of the children in cribs –/ would you listen, my love, would you / listen?" (Asfour 1988: 124¹⁴). In the post WWII era and prior to the civil war, Beirut suggested a symbolic spectrum of paradoxes to the Arab collective memory. Looking upon Beirut one could hear all the passionate voices of the city. Beirut's unique cultural triumphs make the city a symbol of the new nation's pride in its artistic accomplishments in the aftermath of WWII . The city also seemed appealing to men of creative imagination particularly artists, poets and novelists.

In the twentieth century, Pearce Roy Harvey argues that "the role of the poet has always been to reveal the quality and character of that which is human in his community" (Harvey 1961: 289¹⁵). During the Beirut Literary Renaissance – the post WWII era - the city owed its achievements in part to the work of poets like Khalil Hawi and Nizar Qabbani who affirmed life against death, art against artifice, man against the city and its diseases . Populist by faith and agrarian in sympathies, these poets add fascinating strains to the song of revolt against the city of beauty, corruption

and vice . They not only celebrate individual freedom and social democracy but record the angst of the Romantic singer in Arab cities. The subject of their urban poetry is the search for the idealistic city, the possibility of order and well-being within a community that earns for man his legitimate place.

As poets, they concerned themselves with possibilities of achieving human life in the middle of war and racial scramble in the cursed city by nurturing their ideal city the set of principles whereby the idea of man might be made consonant with the idea of society . In different poems, these Arab poets describe the city of Beirut as a prostitution house, “wicked” and “brutal ” rife with whores / “painted women” and “gun men who kill” and are “free to kill again” and hungry faces of women and children. The tension between the destructive and generative powers of the city in this kind of poetry reverberates throughout Arabic Literature as a whole . Another major paradox of the Beirut city is the fact that people may live in physical proximity, but be socially miles apart due to class and social distinctions.

Like the Iraqi poet Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayyati whose city “is raped by the gypsies”, Hawi’s city – Beirut - is a whore who is engaged in sin and vice day and night. Beirut, in Hawi’s poetry is a city which takes “deception” as a profession. It is described as the city of opium, stones and caves which robs the poet of his innocence. Beirut is the city of sinners, taverns, brothels and moral corruption which must be eliminated like the Biblical city of “Sodom”. Hawi, the famous Lebanese poet, believes that the only way of dealing with the evils of the modern city – Beirut - is to destroy it completely because the poet has lost his innocence “in the deserts of its nights”.

Beirut is also described as a city which crushes human relationships and emotions because it turns into a jungle: “you could see jungles coming to the city / crossing its ancient walls / You could see stones drifting in its roads/ you could see crowds and multitudes of herds getting out of its caves / only destruction and fire would gratify their hunger and thirst” (Hawi1979: 238¹⁶). As a modern city, Beirut, according to Hawi, does not create civilization but it takes people back to the cave era, and to the laws of the jungle where the stronger hunts the weaker . In Hawi’s city, people turn into herds of animals and stones that have no feelings and no emotions.

Dealing with the city motif, most Arab poets – in the post WWII era - sought order, each according to his dire need and potency of vision. The modern city, they felt, stood out there: a thing to be wondered at rather than desired, its otherness maintained by conscious will, its strangeness reinforced by poetic fancy. Qabbani and Hawi were perhaps alone among the modern Arab poets to view the city – Beirut – from within. Full of ideals and dreams, Qabbani went to Beirut escaping from the suffocating atmosphere of Damascus, the city which he both loves and abhors. Qabbani alone seems to have made a reliant effort to perceive the modern city – Beirut - as an essentially democratic institution that is supposed to have a supreme and legitimate function in modern life . Humanizing the city without idealizing it, Qabbani claims that if women could be a proper subject his poetry of love and erotica, the city could as well be a subject of no less significance . The city of Qabbani's early poetry lives as intensely as spiritedly as its prostitutes and fighting factions .

In his poem “Beirut: My Beloved”, written during the Lebanese civil war, Qabbani personifies Beirut city as a beautiful lady, victimized by a catastrophic war. He condemns the war and its tragic consequences in his address to the city: “Please forgive us because we let you die alone / We watched your blood running in rivers / and we remained silent / We were watching your body being raped and we did nothing / We had sold you in the prostitution market.” Furthermore, Hawi in “The Magi in Europe” says: “We are from Beirut / Don't you know? We are born with borrowed faces. We are born with / borrowed minds / we are a tragedy / Thinking is born a whore in our markets / and spends its life inventing virginity” (Jayyusi 1987: 259¹⁷). Moreover, in the poetry of Hawi, Beirut, associated with famous western cities – London and Paris in particular – is a wasteland, a human mill and a great prison.

Like other modern Arab cities, Beirut is depicted as "the belly of a whale", a dehumanized "enclave" dominated by tyrants and their stooges during the day and by pimps and whores at night. Moreover, Hawi's criticism of the city is also an assault on Arab culture and western civilization . The city of Beirut simultaneously symbolizes the evils and horrible destiny of both civilizations. While western

civilization suffers from greed and adventurism, Eastern civilization is associated with lethargy and dependency . To Hawi, both of these two civilizations have contributed to the downfall of modern humanity. Beirut, Hawi's city is a false meeting place of East and West where everything including language is borrowed and adulterated. Hawi's unique and sophisticated vision of the modern city has no equal in Arabic poetry. Unlike the Iraqi poet, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab who is the ultimate victim of the city of impenetrable walls, Hawi refuses to become its victim stressing the stance of the hero and sage who suffers for humanity without himself being dragged into the gutter.

Furthermore, in "The Death of the Shoemaker", Beirut is emblematic of violence, death and treason . In the poem, mentioned above, Ahmad Dahbur describes the death of his friend Najeeb Abu Rayya who was killed in an explosion which destroyed a nine-storey building in Beirut. Abu Rayya was killed along with his wife and eight children: "His eight children and their mother blew up together / He flew up with them to the second frontier, the sky / the stunned trees considered it the work of an unknown / while the stooges laughter echoed throughout the city" (Jayyusi 1987: 199¹⁸).

Narrating Beirut after the Israeli Invasion (1982)

The victory of the Egyptian and Syrian armies in the Arab-Israeli war of October, 1973 and the successful attempt to cross the Suez Canal and the demolition of the Israeli army in Sinai gave new credibility to Arab rulers, particularly after the Gulf Countries' initiative to stop sending oil supplies to pro-Israeli countries. The October victory evoked a sense of a unified Arab identity and momentarily renewed the hopes of Arabs to restore Palestine from the hands of colonizers. Nevertheless, the optimistic feelings born out of the October war victory in 1973 were lost after the failure of Arab rulers to put an end to the Lebanese Civil War.

Many Arab governments considered Beirut, the only democratic spot in the Arab world, as a threat to their existence. These oppressive and tyrannical regimes which have sold the false promises of Arab unity and nationalism to their people via misleading propaganda campaigns were afraid of the poetic voices coming out of

Beirut that always say the truth about the misery and suffering of the Arab people. In this socio-political context, writing poetry in the Arab world becomes a dangerous task involving jeopardy and risk. Therefore, the fall of Beirut, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was a significantly dramatic event for all Arab poets because the city has been the center of Arab intellectual and cultural activities for decades.

Historically, poets and artists from all over the Arab world seek refuge in Beirut where they could safely publish their revolutionary works without fear of censorship. Dictatorial Arab regimes have considered Beirut as a threat to their existence, thus, they ironically turned deaf ears to the Israeli invasion of the city, an invasion which was expected to lead to the murder of all revolutionary poets living there as tyrannical Arab rulers wish . Further, the Arab rulers also did not interfere to stop the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon which reached a climax after the occupation of the city of Beirut and the slaughter of thousands of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps massacre in 1982.

The Israeli occupation of Beirut led to the inevitable exodus of Palestinian refugees from their Lebanese exile. They went to another exile in Yemen, Tunisia, Cyprus and Greece. After the Palestinian leaders were forced to leave Lebanon as a result of the Israeli invasion, Mahmoud Darwish wrote some poems criticizing PLO leaders for selling false hopes to their people. The successful Israeli military operation in Beirut, according to Darwish revealed a lack of ideological direction and an absence of political agenda on the part of the Palestinian leadership and its militias. Explicitly, Darwish's Beirut poems are war poems, written under the shadow of a wasteful war. These poems take the readers around the city that harbors the beasts of war, the phantasmal figures that shuttle between different Arab cities trading death. In his poetry of the Beirut experience, Darwish uses the sea imagery to signify the temporary home of Palestinians in the Diaspora.

Many Arab poets lament the fall and destruction of Beirut blaming the Arab rulers, the United Nations and western Imperialistic countries for allowing the Zionist invaders to eliminate the beautiful and historical city of Beirut. Three patterns of imagery evolved out of the Beirut invasion poetry: the street image, the desert image

and the sea image. While the Iraqi poet, Saadi Yusuf, describes the deserted streets of a city under siege, the Syrian poet Ali Ahmad Said (Adonis) describes a historic and modern city being turned into ashes. In his poem “The Desert”, Adonis points out that the annihilation of the civilized city of Beirut results in the return of the desert which becomes within the symbolic structure of the poem, a signifier of the return to the Arab roots.

Lamenting the tragic consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its dramatic consequences, represented by the destruction of its capital city, Beirut, the centre of Arab culture and art in addition to the slaughtering of thousands of Palestinian exiles living in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by the Israeli army and its allies in Lebanon, Hawi says: “We were walls facing walls / It was painful to talk / It was painful to feel the distance / choked by the tragedy / It was painful to talk” (Al-Udhari 1986: 119¹⁹). In a related context, the great Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, in “Beirut”, describes the city as a woman, who “smells of early mist”, a flower, and a butterfly. He associates Beirut with other Islamic / Arabic cities “Beirut is built of gold and fatigue / of Andalusia and Damascus”. Then he depicts Beirut as a place of Palestinian exile, of Palestinian refugee camps: “Beirut our tent / Beirut our star, Beirut shape of shade” (Jayyusi 1987: 205²⁰). Then he compares between the heroic city of Beirut who confronts the brutal invaders with other defeated cities, governed by castrated kings and corrupted rulers.

To Darwish these Arab cities are made of papers and dominated by impotent armies. These cities opened their doors to foreign invaders while crucifying its free people: “I see armed cities of paper that bristle with kings and khaki / I see cities crowning their conquerors / I see cities that hang their lovers over branches of iron / and drive away the names at dawn”. Darwish denounces capital Arab cities which are transformed into a network of prisons and detention camps. The rulers of these cities have sold / exported the blood of the Arab martyrs in order to import whisky and prostitutes. In other words, the frustrated poet speaks of cities that have scaffolds and prisons. Further, “I see cities crowning their conquerors / Exporting martyrs in order to import whiskey / And the latest fashion in sex and torture” (Jayyusi 1987: 205²¹).

Furthermore, Mahmoud Darwish wrote a historical poem “Brief Reflections on an Ancient and Beautiful City on the Coast of the Mediterranean Sea” after the second exodus of the Palestinian refugees from Beirut in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion in 1982. In this great poem, he laments the fate of the Palestinian refugees in the city. In other words, Darwish speaks about the Palestinian experience in the city of Beirut during the Israeli invasion of the city resulting into the mass murder of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps and the subsequent evacuation of the PLO forces from the city to a new exile. The poem is pervaded by a sense of wretchedness reflective of the Palestinian condition. Darwish attacks the Arab rulers and the leaders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization for their failure to stop the destruction of Beirut and the subsequent genocide of Palestinian refugees.

In the poem, Darwish uses both the city and the sea as symbols of the Palestinian experience in Diaspora: “Let this city be / The mother of this sea or the sea’s first cry / Let this city be / The grandmother of the world or whatever she likes/ Let the one who named this city be / A knight, a lover or no one.” Displaced from their homeland, the Palestinian refugees have lived in exile in Lebanon since 1948. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Palestinian refugees were forced to leave their camps in Lebanon and move to a new place of exile: “We have to sing for the sea’s defeat within us / or for our dead lying by the sea / and wear salt and revolt to every port / before oblivion sucks us dry”, writes Darwish (Al-Udhari 1986:130²²).

In this long poem, the poet describes the Palestinian refugees, who were evacuated by sea, as follows: “We are the leaves of tree / the words of a shattered time we are the moon light sonata / we are the other river bank that lies / between the voice and the stone / we are what we produced / in the land that was ours / we are what’s left of us in exile/ we are what’s left of us in exile / we are the plants of broken vase / we are what we are but who are we? (Al-Udhari 1986: 130²³). Using the sea as an image of the Palestinian exile, Darwish continues: “Greetings oh ancient sea / You, sea that have saved us from the loneliness of the forests / you, sea of all beginnings (the sea disappears) our blue body, our happiness,/ our soul tired of stretching from Jaffa to Carthage / our broken pitcher, tablets of lost stories, we looked for the legends of / civilizations but only could find the skull of man by the sea ” (Al-Udhari 1986: 134²⁴).

In the same poem, Darwish highlights the duration of Palestinian suffering. Palestinians were forced to leave their country twice, in 1948 and in 1967, after the occupation of all the Palestinian territories. In their third exodus in 1982, the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were subjected to more suffering: “The sea cannot take another immigration / oh, the sea has no room for us”. The remaining Palestinian refugees who survived the genocide of the camps and whom Darwish calls “the generation of the massacre” (Al-Udhari 1986: 136²⁵) are doomed to move from one exile to another just to be killed: “Every land I long for as a bed / dangles as a gallows” (Al-Udhari 1986: 136²⁶). Even in the Arab countries where Palestinians live in exile “a knight stabs his brother in the chest” and there “my dream leaves me only to make me laugh / or make people laugh at someone leading a dream like a camel in a market of whores” (Al-Udhari 1986: 136²⁷).

In their exiles, located in neighboring Arab countries, the Palestinian refugees have been slaughtered by Arabs such as the Lebanese, the Syrians and the Jordanians, just as they were massacred by the Zionists in Israel: “We walk from one massacre to another massacre”, says Darwish, (Al-Udhari 1986:138²⁸). Thus, Darwish expresses his sympathy with the Palestinian people and he apologizes to what he calls “the land / victim”, for all the atrocities inflicted upon the Palestinians and their homeland: “Whenever a prophet rises from our victims / we slaughter him with our own hands / I have the right to speak / and the priest has the right to kill / I have the right to dream / and the executioner must listen to me / or open the door to let my dream escape ” (Al-Udhari 1986: 138²⁹).

Explicitly, the Arab and the Palestinian leaderships react to the Beirut tragedy not with action but with empty rhetoric and lamentable statements: “we have a country of words. Speak, speak so we may know the end of this travel.” The end of the Palestinian journey of suffering and pain cannot be predicted particularly after the destruction of Beirut, an emblem of Arab cultural unity. According to Darwish Beirut was not only the home of Palestinian refugees (kicked out of their land after the Israeli occupation of most of Palestinian land in 1948 and of the West bank and East Jerusalem in 1967) but it provided a sanctuary for Arab political refugees particularly poets and writers. Darwish attacks oppressive Arab governments that remained silent during the rape of Beirut. He refers to

the hostile attitude of oppressive Arab regimes toward all the poets and artists exiled in Beirut, who revealed the political corruption and impotence of these regimes.

In a poem entitled “A River of Blood”, collected in his anthology **Returning to Ancient Places / Al-awda Ela Al –Amaken Al-Qadima**, the Saudi poet, Ghazi Al-Qusaibi speaks about the city of Beirut after the Sabra and Shatila massacres during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 . The poem is addressed to a submissive nation and its coward / impotent rulers: “walk and wash in the river of Palestinian blood and clean yourselves of impurity after having sex with the enemy / O shameless nation, O disgraceful rulers / You have lost your honor and dignity / Now look at the eyes of the dead bodies of Palestinian children as they curse you / Look at the eyes of the dead bodies of old people and burn with shame and disgrace” (Al-Qusaibi 1983: 76³⁰). After the mass-murder of the Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refugees camps in Beirut, the Arab nation, according to the poet, has become “the laughing stock of all nations”. The Saudi poet attacks the impotent and castrated rulers of all Arab countries who did not interfere to save the armless Palestinian refugees in Beirut.

Al-Qusaibi illustrated that in every Arab country there is a ruler whose mission is to tyrannize his people, suffocate them and cut the throats of those who dare to oppose him or his policies. The poet also pokes fun at the false concepts of heroism adopted by all Arab rulers. In spite of recurrent Arab defeats and catastrophes, “at every inch in the Arab world / there is a ruler raising a banner and a flag of his own claiming that / he is the only savior of the Arab nation.” The poet advises the Palestinians to depend on themselves and expect nothing from rulers who tyrannize their own people. The poet also laments the absence of democracy in the Arab world and the impossibility of removing any Arab ruler from his position – they leave their positions only when they die or get assassinated.

In Beirut, “the Sabra children / drink the smoke of the missiles”, says, Saadi Yusuf. In a poem, entitled “Guns”, Yusuf describes the city of Beirut during the Israeli invasions: “The guns roar at dawn / And the sea enfolds the city like smoke /

The guns roar at dawn/ And the birds are frightened/ Have the planes come?" (Al-Udhari 1986: 123³¹). While birds are frightened, due to the havoc created by war planes, refugee children are victimized by the same war machine: "In an unlit hospital / A little boy died of thirst / They buried him quickly / And left confused". Speaking of Al-Hamra district – in Beirut- during the Israeli offensive against the city, the poet presents an image of a chattered city deprived of electricity supplies as a result of war: "A candle for a woman doctor watching over patients / A candle for the wounded / A candle for a hotel packed with refugees / A candle for two lovers in a naked flat / A candle for the fallen sky / A candle for the last communiqué / A candle for conscience" (Al-Udhari 1986: 124³²). The repetition of the word "candle" suggests the miserable conditions of citizens under military siege. They appeal to the conscience of the world and to God to rescue them from the hell of war. They are looking forward to reach light at the other end of the dark tunnel of the war in the crucified city of Beirut .

Conclusion

Ignoring the wide industrial gap between the Arab cities and their western counterparts, modern Arab poets who built their image of the city on western models have created literary cities out of their imagination. In other words, there is a big difference between the Arab city in reality and its image in poetry. Ironically, most of the Arab poets who criticized the city during the (1950's/1960's) a period which witnessed the emergence of nationalistic independence movements became silent in the last quarter of the twentieth century when major Arab cities in Palestine and Lebanon were destroyed by the Israeli air forces . Surprisingly, most of the Arab city poets stop writing about the city at a time in which all the Iraqi cities are being brutally and viciously eradicated by the American war machine in 2003 .

Nevertheless, the Arab poet's response to the city of Beirut was an intensive one which would influence his entire life. It was also to be an ambivalent one. For example the Arab poet loved Beirut, walking its long streets, falling in love with its seductive ladies, however, he hated the city too – its suffering poor, its civil war, its brothels, its exploitation and its misery. At times, he could not accept the city's brutal reality, so he romanticized its scenes or rejected them completely and vehemently.

Yet this very rejection would be the energizing agent in his poetic works. The beautiful city, on the seaside, was the primary factor in the stimulation and nourishment of the poetic narratives of Beirut in Arabic literature .

Scrutinizing the Arab poet's response to his city experience, one slowly begins to realize that there are certain people or objects that tend to recur in his poetic limelight. Attention is focused on them so frequently that they become recurring refrains or leitmotifs. For example, the theme of the innocent girl, the victimized maiden / mother, fertility- sterility narratives and the deferred dream discourse are some of the more important motifs that could be isolated. One of these motifs is the recurring appearance of the innocent young girls in the city . At a particular point, the girl would lose her innocence and all its accompanying virtues because she would become a victim of the wicked and depraved city society that would destroy her goodness. The guilt for this fall from innocence stems not from the individual but from society, in this case, the city. In many of his poems, the Arab poet portrays the cruel and stifling city depriving the innocent girl of her innocence and virginity . For example, Qabbani, as an ardent socialist and idealist, believed that all the pathetic dilemmas in the city could be avoided and even eliminated via sufficient social legislation governing the living conditions.

Closely related to this motif of the innocent girl and stemming from the same romantic tradition, is the idea of the victimized maiden . In many poems, the Arab poet depicts the plight of the naïve Arab woman as she encounters the dazzling city. She soon finds herself in servitude to blind and uncontrollable forces which chatters her dreams and destroy her talents. She comes to the city full of expectations, but her ideals are destroyed as she is exploited and victimized. Some girls are fortunate but others are less fortunate and they become helpless victims of the city . In the city, there are other women who become completely victimized and yield not only their spirit, but also their bodies. For example Qabbani and other poets wrote many poems about prostitutes without moralizing or criticizing the women. They are usually portrayed sympathetically as helpless martyrs that have been beaten down by the evils of the city – Beirut - and its environment. The Arab poet feels that some women in the city are being forced into such a life style by the strictures of the environmental conditions, hence they are not guilty or responsible for their actions.

The women, in Qabbani's poetry for instance, become an object of pity, not of scorn. The city has sucked the entire fruit and left merely a shell behind. "Painted", "haunted" and "hungry" are the adjectives that describe Qabbani's prostitutes. They are hollow on the inside with a façade attempting to conceal that fact from the world. The formula of the basically innocent girl corrupted by the evils of the city or the society is frequently repeated in Qabbani's city poetry - never is the individual responsible for his own actions. Further, Qabbani believes that these conditions could be improved if the appropriate social actions were demanded by the people and undertaken by those in authority.

It is to be expected that such motifs as the innocent girl and the victimized maiden will at the same time be expressed in images of fertility and sterility, adapted by Arab poets from Eliot's The Waste Land. The same formula, as portrayed by the Arab city poet, is a simplistic one. The city is industrial, mechanical, commercial ignorant of and aloof to man's plight. Hence, it is a symbol of sterility and emptiness. Qabbani, Hawi and Darwish appear almost as prophets crying in the wilderness of chaotic city streets heavily infused with images of sterility and barrenness .

Apparently, the urban poetics of Hawi and Darwish reveal them as sympathetic witnesses to difficult times (civil war and the Israeli invasion) and to a complex city struggling with its own bulk and teeming humanity. These fierce rejections of the city, were they verbal or actual, also invested the Arab poet with a special kind of moral energy that allowed him to continue in his search for aesthetic ideals and truth. He wanted to keep his romantic ideas alive and strong – he never yielded the hope of a better future. To be sure, the criticism he lashed out against the city of Beirut was a reverse energy – a kind of negative energy – but it gave him the strength to go on, at a time when it was depressing and difficult to do so. It persuaded him to continue to write poetry challenging him to attempt new possibilities in all areas at a time when many other poets were afraid to do so. For example, the city of Beirut offered Hawi variety, complexity and contradiction, options, and above all, the possibilities of growth and change.

Moreover, the attitude frequently expressed toward the city of Beirut – in Qabbani's poetry - is also indicative of the poet's attempt to achieve and adapt to the complexity of full maturity. Living in the beautiful metropolis – Beirut - acquainted him with an endless variety of social classes and different ethnic groups as well as with their values, customs and traditions . Further, the human misery and suffering he saw in the city compelled him to write about their plight. Actually, this was his main reason for writing at all. Finally, Beirut also taught him what it really meant to be a poet. Beirut showered its favorite poet with dreams, which, as it has been already discussed, are vital and necessary for artistic inspiration and stimulus. Beirut never faltered in its ability to attract him to fill him with awe. Occasionally, the city of Beirut beckoned with illusionary veils.

Scrutinizing the city discourse in Arabic history and culture, Arab critics – advocates of the conspiracy theory- claim that the West has indirectly participated in the formulation of an antagonistic Arab attitude toward the modern city by emphasizing the dominance of tribal and Bedouin values in Arab culture and literature. According to this critical perspective, the cultural machine in the West has sought to consolidate the image of the city as an evil thing in order to deter the Arabs from achieving progress and undermine the relentless spirit toward modernization which was emerging in the Arab cities in the 1950's and 1960'. Contrary to the preceding argument, it is clear that the city as a concept and motif exceeds such limited and chauvinistic perspectives.

Notes

¹ Mumford, Lewis. The Culture of Cities. London: Seeker, 1969. P.34.

² Leinward, Gerald, ed. The City as a Community. New York: Washington Square. 1981. P.28.

³ See Shmuel Moreh . Studies in Modern Arabic Prose and Poetry. Leiden: Brill, 1988.

⁴ Shawqi, Ahmad. Al-Shawqiyyat. Cairo: Dar-Al-Ma'ref, 1960. P.226.

⁵ Abu-Nuwas. Diwan Abu-Nuwas. Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1979. P.502

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- ⁶ For more details on this topic see Shmuel Moreh . *Studies in Modern Arabic Prose and Poetry*. Leiden: Brill, 1988.
- ⁷ Pike, Burton. *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. P.116.
- ⁸ Simmal, Georg. "The Metropolis and Modern Life". *Classical Essays on the Culture of the Cities*, ed. Richard Sennett. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969. P.47.
- ⁹ Gohar, Saddik . *The Map of Modern Arabic Poetry And Western Influence*: Oyun Press, 1998. P.77.
- ¹⁰ Hawi, Khalil. *The Complete Poetic Works*. Beirut: Dar Alawda, 1979. P.24. The poem was originally translated by Shmuel Moreh.
- ¹¹ Asfour, John, ed. and Trans. *When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry (1945-1987)*. Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1988. P.123.
- ¹² Ibid, p.124.
- ¹³ Ibid, p.124.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.124.
- ¹⁵ Harvey, Roy. *The Continuity of American Poetry*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961. P.289.
- ¹⁶ Hawi, Khalil. *The Complete Poetic Works*. Beirut: Dar Alawda, 1979. P.238. The poem was originally translated by Shmuel Moreh.
- ¹⁷ Jayyusi, Salma, ed. *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. P.259.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p.199.
- ¹⁹ Al-Udhari, Abdullah, ed. and trans. *Modern Poetry of the Arab World*. London: Penguin Books, 1986. P.119.
- ²⁰ Jayyusi, Salma, ed. *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. P.259.
- ²¹ Ibid, p.205.
- ²² Al-Udhari, Abdullah, ed. and trans. *Modern Poetry of the Arab World*. London: Penguin Books, 1986. P.130.
- ²³ Ibid, p.130.
- ²⁴ ²⁴ Ibid, p.134.
- ²⁵ Ibid, p.136.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p.136.
- ²⁷ Ibid, p.136.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p.138.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p.138.
- ³⁰ Al-Qusaibi, Ghazi. *Al-Awda Lil Amaken Al-Qadima/Return to the Ancient Places*. Manama: Dar Al-Saqr, 1983. P.76. The poems of this collection are translated by Saddik Gohar, author of the paper.
- ³¹ Al-Udhari, Abdullah, ed. and trans. *Modern Poetry of the Arab World*. London: Penguin Books, 1986. P.123.
- ³² Ibid, p.124.