

# A REVIEW OF STUDIES ON BADR SHAKIR AL-SAYYAB'S LIFE AND POETRY

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Received: 14 March 2020 Revised and Accepted: 8 July 2020

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is a review of literature of the researches and readings that are related to my study of the celebrated Iraqi poet Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab (1926-1964) and his attitude towards women. Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab is the most studied poet and a lot of studies, books and article in various languages dealt with his life and poetry. Researchers followed various approaches to examine his social status, his political stands and even his psychological condition. However, only a limited number of researches studied his poetry in terms of language and linguistics. Besides, and as far as it is related to our study, researchers did not state whether Al-Sayyab's ideological and political stands influence his attitude toward the women.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Iraq is documented in its poetry since the Mesopotamians invented writing and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab is the predecessor of a long chain of poets who believed that the word is mightier than the sword to resist the unjust and to make changes. Al-Sayyab is widely celebrated for being the pioneer who introduced the first amendments on the form and themes of classical Arabic poems (Thompson, 2017).

For political reasons and occasionally for social reasons, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab integrated the personal with the general situation of Iraq in the early twentieth century (Thompson, 2017). The period was the most complicated in the modern history of Iraq which was then occupied by the British colonialism. Al-Sayyab believed, as most of his fellow poets, that the only hope for Iraq to develop is in its liberation and called persistently for a revolution against the ruthless occupation and the corrupted regime (Boullata, Abdel-Malek, & Hallaq, 2000; Al-Musawi, 2006).

The majority of Alsayyab's critics agreed on categorizing his poetry into four chapters (however they might adopt different labels for these chapters);

- i: The romantic, his early years as a poet in which he was still writing in the form of classical Arabic poem,
- ii: The realistic (1949-1954), when he was a communist and most of his poetry was realistic, socialistic and revolutionary,
- iii: The nationalistic, after his break out with the Iraqi Communist Party and attracted to the Arab Nationalists standpoints, and
- iv: The existential, due to the drastic collapse in his health three years before his death he turned to be more idiosyncratic and existential, (Colla, 2015; Jones, 2013; O'Rourke, 2009; Asfour, 1986; Karim 1985; al-Abtal, 1965).

In all the stages of his life and the chapters of his work, Al-Sayyab addressed the women persistently in his poems as the mother, the beloved the wife and the companion (Obaid, 2020; Karim 1985). Even when he was talking about his homeland or nation Al-Sayyab symbolically addressed them as females (Abood, 2018; Boezar, 2017; Jones, 2013). Critics argued that this goes back to the early years of his childhood because he lost his mother at an early age to be raised by his grandmother who also died shortly after. Additionally, Al-Sayyab's illness and being not in a good shape led young women to reject him and that drove him to a continuous pursuit for the ideal women (Ghadamyari, 2016; Noorani, 2010; Karim, 1985; Boullata, 1970).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Al-Sayyab's copious literary work and short life attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers let alone translators in various languages.

The purposes behind this literature review is to inspect comprehensively the former studies that investigated Al-Sayyab's life and poetry to highpoint their procedures of analyses, their methods of discussions and their conclusions. This will support a better understanding of the context of Al-Sayyab's life, help in analysing the poetic text and to specify the gap of the current study.

The query ended up with enormous number of studies, researches and books in addition to a good amount of articles, which necessitated a filtering procedure. To begin with, only the studies in English and Arabic were selected. However, the number of the studies in Arabic exceeded the English ones, which made it reasonable to exclude those which were published before 2015 (except for the translated studies). Furthermore, it was clear that the studies in English were published in intermittent periods, and since they have a considerable value they were all included in the literature review.

Researchers and critics of Al-Sayyab used various procedures and methods to study his life and poetry. With the thorough reading of the previous studies the researchers of this study found that they can be categorized into three main types; studies of the context, studies of the text and comparative studies.

### 2.1 Studies of Context

A creative poet like Al-Sayyab, who lived a tough life in one of the most controversial periods, must have attracted many researchers to scrutinize the context of his poetry. Many studies investigated his personal, social, cultural and even the psychological background by means of different methods of analysis, these include;

#### 2.2.1 Social Criticism

Sociological critics believe that the value of literature is in its reflection of society (Wasik & Liliani, 2019). This was a principle in many studies that examined Al-Sayyab's work which considered his poetry as a manifestation of the social situation of Iraq then. Al-Basri, argued that Al-Sayyab's work was a document of reality of the political, social, environmental and historical conditions of Iraq (Al-Basri, 2014). After the Second World War Iraq was dominated by a corrupted monarchy whose loyalty was to the British occupation and not to the country and the prosperity of its people (Noorani, 2010). In such a condition a group of elites and educated poets started the free-verse movement with the aim of confronting the corrupted regime, liberate their country and modernize it (Noorani, 2010). Boulata (1970) wrote His PhD about Al-Sayyab life conditions and poetry and it is considered the most comprehensive study. In his research Boulata asserts that the young poets' inclination to liberate poetry from the tough guidelines of the classical Arabic poem was a revolt against the conservatives and tendency to modernize their society (Boulata, 1969). Nevertheless, Bahaora (2010) declares that the tendency towards modernity in Al-Sayyab's poetry was related to the new material condition in the era after the discovery of the petroleum and the effect it had on the aesthetic mood in general.

As he was dissatisfied with the social, political and economic situation of Iraq under the British colonialism, Al-Sayyab was a great supporter of the 1958 revolution. However, he was disappointed with the consequences which led him to symbolize the capital city, the household of the dictatorial regime, as a prostitute that trades her flesh to anyone (Gohar, 2012). On the other hand, Bashkin (2008) sees the fusion of the women with the nation as a symbolic image of the abuse of the weaker by the powerful on all levels. In addition, Dhyaf and Musa (2018) argued that the corrupted women in Al-Sayyab's poetry was a representative image of the social and economic conditions of Iraq.

Noorani, (2010) believes that Al-Sayyab's representation of the city as a prostitute in his poem "*The Blind Prostitute*" may belong to his longing to his birth place Jaykor, the peaceful small village. Bahaora (2015) presented a different perspective by arguing that Arab men writers wanted to depict the decent portray of the middle-class women by using the figure of the prostitute in their work. For Bahaora this is typically masculine as prostitutes are the excluded, the marginal and the weaker because they are women. However, Bahaora restricted his argument about the image of women in modern Iraqi literature to the dialectical relation between the city and the countryside with concerning economic, cultural and social conditions. Some researchers think that the city/country interaction in Al-Sayyab's poetry is adapted from the English poet T.S. Eliot (Gohar ,2008). This hybrid genre in poetry enabled Al-Sayyab to express his political stands and criticize the social situations in an era loaded with challenges for the Arab countries after the Second World War (Gohar ,2008). By

the comparison between the city and the country Al-Sayyab respondent the corrupted regime of pulling Iraq to the dark ages (Gohar ,2008).

Another point of view went to relate Al-Sayyab's romanticism to his dissatisfaction with the unfair social conditions and the corrupted political regime when he wrote *The Grave Digger* (Jaderi & Molavi 2015). This epic poem was measured as the most depressing poem in Al-Sayyab's work and was seen as a reproduction of the social, economic and political situation of Iraq rather being a reflection of the poet's individual anguishes (Salama; 2006).

### 2.2.2 New Historical Criticism

Examining Al-Sayyab's poetry from a historical point of view aimed to approach the growth of his historical awareness as his discourse is considered a document of an acute eye witness of the age. The New Historical critics see every literary text as a produce of its age, however, their goal is to uncover how a writer recreates the events and not to track their successions (Brizee, Tompkins, Chernousk, & Boyle, 2018).

In a significant study, Jayysi (1977) asserted that modern Arabic poetry, in the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, was not studied within its context as an artistic action that belongs to a certain moment of history. Jayysi also stated that although the study of Al-Sayyab's poetry individually can give an idea about his creative progress and the transformations in his attitudes, it is not preferred to decontextualize his work from its historical circumstances (Jayysi, 1977).

Following the historical approach, Badawi (1975) wrote his important study about Al-Sayyab, in which he reasoned the poet's conversion from romanticism to socialism to his engagement with the Iraqi Communist Party. As an enthusiastic Marxist, Al-Sayyab preferred writing to the people to be the voice of the marginal in their looking for a better future in Iraq (Badawi ,1975). In addition, Al-Sayyab's new trend was a rebel against the timeworn forms and themes of classical Arabic poetry which restricted his freedom to express his new profound thoughts (Badawi ,1975). In fact, a lot of scholars agreed that Al-Sayyab reflected his political stances in his poetry. Asfour (1984) explained that the novel symbolic images with the representational new forms in Al-Sayyab's work mirrored the political and social changes in the region. Colla (2016) claimed that the Cold War era brought an obvious influence on the world's literature, including Arabic poetry. Colla added that Al-Sayyab's artistic tendencies were influenced by the Cold War too and the evidence to that is his memoir *"I used to be a communist"* in which he turned his back to communism willingly and declared himself as anti-communist (Colla ,2016).

Jabr (2018) studied modern Iraqi poetry historically from a new angle by classifying modern poetry into eight generations. He argued that since Al-Sayyab's free-verses innovator movement, every generation of poets added a novel impact to distinguish themselves. Al-Sayyab, for instance, used symbols, myths and historical or religious figures to reflect his criticism and revolt over the reality (Jabr, 2018). In the other hand, researchers like Yardy and Mizel (1996) classified Arabic literature itself into stages; the new-classical, the romantic, the social and national and the existential realistic stage. They believe that Al-Sayyab was writing in accordance to the style of the stage, for example his employment of the ancient Iraqi myths was a marker of his national spirit (Yardy and Mizel,1996).

De Young's (1993) point of view was that the use of the myth in Al-Sayyab's poetry was not only to express his nationalism or patriotism, instead it was a technique to integrate the personal with the political. In here opinion, Al-Sayyab expressed his nationalism in his legendary poem *'Hymn of the Rain'*, when he followed the method of the traditional Arab poets by connecting the beloved and the mother to the homeland (De Young ,1993). While scholars like Friederike, Khalil and Albers, (2017) highlighted the use of mythical images by Al-Sayyab and Arab poets at that period as the indication of the rebirth of their national spirit, some explained his leaning later towards the existentialism as a reaction to fill the gap of the nationalism as an antagonist of the Marxism (Haugbolle, 2017). However, Al-Sayyab was always using symbols from the national history of Iraq and the Islamic and Arabic heritage. He also kept on supporting the cause of the working classes, condemned the abuse of the marginal people and called for the freedom of Iraq and its people. Therefore, it is not true to think that his nationalism or patriotism was simply a response to his abandonment of the Communist Party (Al-Masaudi, 2017).

Al-Sayyab believed that poetry is not far from politics anyway, particularly when it calls for the wellbeing of the people. He assumed that poets have duties towards their people and countries, however that doesn't mean a poet is obliged to write propaganda (Ubaid, 2017).

### 2.2.3 Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonial studies focus on the literature produced during the colonialism era and question power relations between the colonizer and the colonized (Hartley, 2019). Some researchers who studied Al-Sayyab's poetry from a postcolonial point of view (Majeed, 2018; Jones, 2013; Samarrai 2014), argued that his employment of the Mesopotamian symbols was a kind of resistance to the occupier and to prove that Iraqis were always and will be forever the owners of their land (Majeed, 2018). Jones (2013) assumed that Al-Sayyab's repeated reference of his place of birth, 'Jakour' village, belonged to the longing to the times of freedom before the colonization. He also considered Al-Sayyab a popular poet who was close to the mass and capable of mobilizing them, and that his poetry is a record of the popular history of Iraq (Jones, 2013).

Samarrai (2014) scrutinized the impact of western literature on Al-Sayyab from different points of view, this belongs mainly to the fact that Iraq was under the British occupation from 1914 to 1932 and the contact with the English culture must have come about. Also, Al-Sayyab studied English literature academically and was particularly interested in English poets. Samarrai (2014) revealed that Al-Sayyab was influenced by the English poet T.S. Eliot in general and his poem 'The Waste Land' particularly when he wrote 'The Rain Hymn'. However, we must not think of Al-Sayyab's poem as a duplication of Eliot's, it is rather an antithesis to it (Samarrai, 2014). Eliot took a doubtful pessimistic stand, while Al-Sayyab's association of the female with the earth referred to his faith in the nation's rebirth (Samarrai, 2014).

### 2.2.4 Psychological Criticism

To gain a better understanding of the literary text, analysts, scholars, and critics have extensively used psychological theories. Post-modern literary critics, in particular, were eager to explain the writers' feelings, emotional state, reactions and intuitions (Rezaei & Seyyedrezaei, 2013; Jacobs, 2017).

Abood and Ali (2018) ascribed Al-Sayyab's employment of the symbols of the Babylonian myth to psychological motives. They believe that the myths were not merely masks that reserved him from the eyes of the dictator regime, rather they were his innovative method to talk about his hidden feelings, struggles and anticipations in a rapidly changing world (Abood & Ali 2018). Al-Sayyab used mythical symbols and religious figures to tell his inner feelings and express his dissatisfactions with the situation in his country by merging the personal with the general (Abood & Ali, 2018). Al-Saqar (20014) approved that Al-Sayyab's use of the ancient Iraqi Symbols was a sign of distrustful in his destiny or the future of his country. The village of Jaykour, his past homeland, is the womb of the mother to which he desired to go back to be buried when he is dead (Al-Saqar, 20014).

### 2.3 Text-related Studies

Textual analysis, which aims to examine the content of a text, is of two major types, qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative analysis is involved with the meanings of a literary text and how they are conveyed, while quantitative analysis is more concerned with the number of appearances and it is more systematic, however some researchers mix between the two types for accurate analysis (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Poetic text analysis could be thematic analysis, content analysis or discourse analysis and aims to examine structures related to rhyme meters, lexical choices, context of situation or even the impact of the text on the targeted audience (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003).

In a textual analysis of Al-Sayyab's 'The Rain Song' Ayassrah and Azmia (2019) analysed the poem intertextually to see how far he was influenced by Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. The researchers examined conceptual metaphors, the objective correlative, the symbolic and mythical images and irony in a quest for the shared patterns in the two long poems. Ayassrah and Azmia detected that though both poets rebel against the restrictions of the old schools of poetry, they both value their national cultures and their poems are an appreciation of the local heritage. They determined that Eliot's impact is clear specifically in the used expressions and the implemented techniques. However, the researchers concluded that Al-Sayyab was not a copier of Eliot and he was creative when he originated the use of the ancient Iraqi Myth in poetry (Ayassrah & Azmia, 2019).

Semantic studies are attracted to examine the meanings of the frequently used words in poetry. Pourabed and Bushehr (2016) argued that Al-Sayyab recurrently used the word 'door' in his poems which led to an expansion of the word's semantic field. His explanation was that words improve emotional meanings when are connected to personal sensitive experience or associated with valued national heritage. Pourabed (2016) concluded that Al-Sayyab's repetition of the word 'door' in his poems discloses his restless soul in a life the least that can be described is eventful (Pourabed & Bushehr, 2016).

Saifuldeen (2018) conducted a semantic study of al-Sayyab's poetry from translation view point arguing that polysemous expressions inflict huge difficulty in translation. Saifuldeen chose to focus on the '*Rain Song*' as being one of the repetitively translated poem. In his discussion, he asserted that one of the reasons behind the difficulty in translation is that Arabic and English are two different languages in nature. The researcher suggested that the escape from this inflexibility is not to stick to the lexical and syntactic descriptions and to take into consideration the context of the poem to come out with a better understanding of the hidden meanings of the polysemous expressions (Saifuldeen, 2018).

Shureth (2005) examined semantically two translated poems of Al-Sayyab; '*Rain Song*' and '*Death and River*' with the aim of investigating how effective the translator was in interpreting the thematic and rhetorical meanings in the two poems. The conclusion was that without being familiar with the historical back ground of the poem and the personal biography of the poet it is not possible to translate his work efficiently (Shureth ,2005).

#### 2.4 Comparative Studies

Neimnehand al Qaisi (2015) asserted that comparative studies are advantageous for those who intend to do cultural studies with a global orientation, for this reason, it is recommended to conduct the comparative study of literary texts within their historical, social, cultural and political contexts. They attributed the romantic mood in Al-Sayyab's early poems to his influence by the romantic English movement and its poets. They also argued that it is undisputable that Eliot's poetry inspired Al-Sayyab to use symbolic myth in his poetry. However, Al-Sayyab amended the employment of myths by using symbols from his Arabic and Iraqi heritage with universal indications to prove that he is a universal citizen though committed to his local cases (Neimnehand al Qaisi, 2015).

Rihan (2015) investigated in his study Eliot's influence on Al-Sayyab and argued that the influence expanded from the western to the Arab writers and extended from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1960s (Rihan ,2015). Rihan's (2015) comparative study explored Al-Sayyab's influence by Eliot's poem '*The West Land*', particularly in the noticeable use of myths and the use of free form in composing his poems, Rihan (2015), for example, focused on two poems; "*The Rain Song*" and "*Jaikur and the City*". The study aimed to inspect how myth was used in the poetry of two different cultures, and the conclusion was that the political situation in Iraq was motive to Make Al-Sayyab use the myth as a new theme and that the free form enabled him to express the complex concerns of the age with fewer restrictions (Rihan ,2015).

Alhusami (2017) prepared a twofold comparative study, between Al-Sayyab and the Arab poet Salah Abdal-Sabur from one side, and between them and Eliot in the other. The argument in the study was that Al-Sayyab always adopted a personal attitude unlike Eliot, while Abdal-Sabur was successful in mingling between the personal and the impersonal. Al-Sayyab was a rebellion by nature and wanted to change everything eagerly from poetry to the depressed situations of Iraq (Alhusami ,2017). Grounded on analysing selected poems, the study concluded that all the three poets celebrated their national heritage and emphasised its significance (Alhusami ,2017). In addition, the study the asserted that the influence of Eliot on bothe, Al-Sayyab and Adal-Sabour, was due to acculturation reasons and it is not the consequence of Eurocentric impact, for both lived in the period on which Arab countries were colonised and it was normal to know the western culture and its writers (Alhusami ,2017).

### III. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine al-Sayyab's attitude towards women from a Critical Discourse Analysis viewpoint. It was required to identify the gap of literature in the previous studies that dealt with Al-Sayyab work and life. In general, the researchers found that the previous studies may be categorised into three major approaches; i: studies about the context, ii: studies about the poetic text, iii: comparative studies. It was, also, found that the studies which are related to the context outnumbered the other two types and that only a few studies analysed Al-Sayyab poetry linguistically let alone analysing by means of Critical Discourse Analysis perspective.

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