

Iraqi Poets in Western Exile



Selected Poems with an Overview

SALIH J. ALTOMA

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the tragic consequences of the 1991 Gulf War, the sanctions imposed on Iraq, and the country's repressive political system, but scant attention has been paid to the predicament of countless Iraqi poets who have been forced to live in exile in different parts of the world. This is in spite of the fact that these poets, who represent diverse ideological orientations, have much to offer in terms of their views about Iraq's tribulations in recent years.

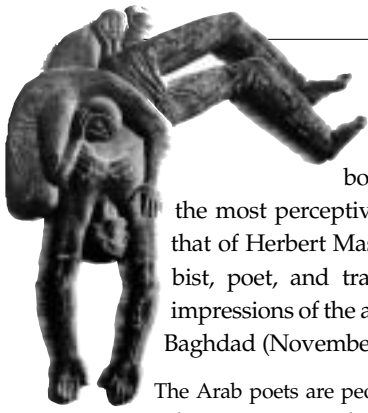
It is difficult to provide a reliable figure regarding Iraqi poets living in exile. According to a report issued by the Associated Press, "An old saying has it that Arab poetry was born in Iraq. Now, with hundreds of Iraqi writers and other intellectuals in exile, it appears to have all but died out there" (1997). While the report unduly overstates the demise of poetry within Iraq, it does serve to underline two significant facts: first, the leading and pioneering role that Iraqi poets have historically exercised, whether in modern times or earlier periods; second, the unprecedented number of poets who have left Iraq during the last two or three decades. This is by no means the first time in Iraq's modern history that Iraqi poets have sought exile because of political considerations. Regrettably, the repressive state controls under different regimes have always forced Iraqi dissidents, poets, writers, artists, and other professionals to

seek refuge in other countries. What is perhaps unique about the current wave of Iraqi exiles, however, is the fact that, in numerical terms, they surpass earlier waves by far in terms of their global dispersion.

Many Iraqi poets have sought sanctuary within their own cultural milieus in other Arab countries. Others, perhaps more numerous, have found refuge in the West: in Europe, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere. Needless to say, those who have ended up in the West suffer the most in coping with their new life in exile. For apart from the obviously difficult condition of being uprooted or banished from their familiar world, these poets find themselves deprived of the most essential needs that sustain their survival as poets: the national source of their inspiration, the daily interaction with the sounds and rhythms of their native language, and the largely receptive audience they have left behind. This is in addition to their disappointment in realizing that poetry in their host countries does not matter as much as it does in their native culture.

To appreciate more fully the predicament of Iraqi poets in Western exile, consider the strong bond between the poet and his audience that has been solidly maintained in Arabic poetry for the past fourteen centuries. There are only a few accounts by Americans who earnestly seek to understand or show an

Sadiq Toma, *Hurricane* (1996). According to Toma, who currently lives in London, "One never knows when it will be possible to return to one's homeland" (*Strokes of Genius*, 146). Courtesy: Sadiq Toma / iNCIA



appreciation of this poet-audience bond within the Arab context. One of the most perceptive comments I have seen thus far is that of Herbert Mason, a noted American scholar, Arabist, poet, and translator. Writing in 1988 about his impressions of the annual Mirbad Poetry Festival held in Baghdad (November 1987), Mason states the following:

The Arab poets are people of theatre in a tradition that was until recent times without actors or playwrights. The poets stand alone on stage with only the wellsprings of their own souls of memory, imagination, and skill to draw on, and the audience's hunger and applause to prompt them. They live and die on the big stage by what they can raise up in their people's hearts beyond their personal [point of view].¹

Professor Mason's impressions include the obvious distinction he makes between Western and Arab attitudes toward the role of poetry. He points out that "the European or American poet, who is conditioned to regard poetry as academic or confessional, private and non-commercial, and virtually unperformable and audience-free, could analyze the Festival as 'traditional,' for personal refuge."

Like earlier generations of Arab writers—in both North and South America in particular—exiled Iraqi poets have faced the onerous task of re-creating or inventing a semblance of their lost world. They continue to write in their native language while trying to communicate, at the same time, in the languages of their host countries. To mitigate in part the hardships of their isolation and their sense of alienation, they have established, in cooperation with other writers, a number of literary circles or clubs, journals, and small presses, which serve to sustain their creative efforts. By initiating such publications and the other measures cited above, Iraqi poets in exile demonstrate their relative success in re-creating or restoring at least some of the basic conditions of their familiar, but lost, world.

Two additional factors appear to have contributed toward the success of Iraqi poets in this regard. First, they have means of electronic communication, which enables them to reach their readers wherever they are or to retrieve pertinent material without the fear of censorship. Second, their exile in the West provides them with the opportunity to address, more openly and freely, a wide range of themes, including their opposition to the Iraqi regime and to Saddam Hussein in particular.

For the purpose of illustrating such themes, I have chosen six poems by Iraqi exiles currently living in Australia, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Aside from their literary merits, the selected poems provide an overview of the intensity with which Iraqi poets address their concerns, their feelings, and their thoughts as they strive to pursue their life and role as exiles in the West.

The twin themes of lamenting the physical separation from the homeland and the illusion of being haunted by it is noted in a number of poems. This is particularly true in the case of the two selections by al-Samawi and al-Sayigh, who emigrated

recently to Australia and Sweden, respectively. Both bemoan in a highly agonized tone their separation from the homeland, conjuring up elusive dreams about their return. Both offer a brief narrative of their memories and of their country's troubled time under an oppressive regime. Whether the exiled Iraqis recall their happy memories or lament Iraq's present calamitous conditions, they seem to be resigned to the fact that they have no other option: they are powerless in the face of a homeland that relentlessly pursues them or inhabits their minds and hearts.

As noted in the texts below, exiled poets draw extensively on relevant symbols and allusions, which span Iraq's long history (Assyrian/Babylonian/Sumerian/Arab-Islamic) and its landscape. What is more noteworthy or striking is the mournful, angry, and highly sentimental tone that permeates many of the exilic poems. At times, these poets seem to be overtaken by a sense of resignation that their homeland will not survive as they knew it: it is, in a sense, like a lost paradise. This gloomy vision is aptly conveyed by Sa'di Yusuf's poem, "A Vision."

With such an intense tone, these poets, and many other Iraqi writers in exile, seek to express not only their personal anguish and sense of loss but also, and perhaps more importantly, the ordeals, the humiliations, and the inhumane treatment to which Iraq and their fellow citizens have been subjected in recent decades. The most recent war against Iraq has generated a highly negative reaction among Iraqi and other Arab poets. What has been published thus far reveals a radicalized, angry tone that is critical not only of the war and the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, but also of both Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime and other Arab governments or institutions. As Jasper Mortimer of the Associated Press noted in his report of May 19, 2003, the war is seen by Arab poets, artists, and writers as "the biggest shock to their world since Israel defeated three Arab armies in 1967."² While it is too early to assess in definite terms the future orientation of Iraqi poetry in general, there is ample evidence, borne by a deeply rooted poetic tradition, that suggests it will be largely preoccupied with themes of national liberation and resistance to foreign-imposed solutions. Iraqi poets in exile in particular have expressed their misgivings about terminating their exile to return to a homeland under occupation. They seem to be torn between conflicting feelings of relief and disbelief for obvious reasons: Iraq is at last free from Saddam Hussein's rule, but it has fallen victim to what they regard as a new form of colonial oppression. Al-Juburi, for example, in a poem entitled "Baghdad," declares: "Your people have showered you / with a barbaric love / and exchanged the tyrant's departure for your death." In his poem "A Personal Song," Yusuf projects a gloomy picture of Iraq's future (perhaps as a sequel to his poem "A Vision" included in this essay): "Restaurants and hotels will be our roadmaps / and our home in the paradise of shelter: McDonald's / KFC / Holiday Inn / And we will be drowned / Like your name, oh Iraq / 'Iraq, Iraq, nothing but Iraq.'"



Naman Hadi, *Le Déraciné* (1984). Hadi notes that the concept of the painting was “born from the personal suffering of exile” (*Strokes of Genius*, 100).
Courtesy: Naman Hadi / iNCIA

ABD AL-LATIF ATAYMISH

A Homeland without Friends

Fates have wronged you
When you were born, oh my homeland
In the age of calamities
Oh land of fertility and water
(Between two rivers or two swords)
You suffer thirst
You suffer hunger
As your Euphrates and Tigris
Turned into blood
For how long, oh my homeland,
Should you suffer?
Scattered are your innocent people
Oh cities of this earth
Stretch your arms
Oh roads of mourning
Branch off
As the heart is torn
By friends' betrayal
Oh frontiers let your open spaces
Embrace them
As they pitch a tent for weeping!

The Dead Know No Fear

I went out like a sleepwalker
Aroused by nightmares
I began searching for my homeland
In all continents
On earth and in heavens
Praying
Reciting every supplication
Carrying shrines on my shoulders
And a generation of orphaned martyrs
And a generation of veteran martyrs
And another awaiting the massacre

All the martyrs and the massacred
Are resurrected
Standing as tombstones above the graves
Fearless as death
The children of death
Are waking up
In their shrouds
With their heads shaven
Crying out:
Oh homeland of the innocent
Were you for us a graveyard?
Or a homeland?

ABD AL-LATIF ATAYMISH (born 1948) received a B.A. in Arabic literature from the University of Baghdad and a Ph.D. from London University. The poems here have been selected from his third collection, *Embers on the Heart's Edge* (1993). His two earlier collections include *Good Words* (1969) and *Cities and Poems* (1982). He currently lives in London.

AMAL AL-JUBURI

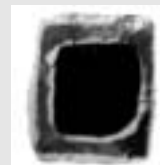
Enheduanna

Oh Towers:
It's time to leave this Mesopotamian soil
This land of sighs
Too many dead you have buried
While brooding your conspiracies
Your rotten days
Time for emptiness
To fill my veins
Bleeding with remorse
As I lament what escaped my heart
Left forsaken in the Bavarians' temple
Like a moon obscured by fleeting mists
Oh Towers, who can defend us
Save my silence and your deceitful desert
Abandon me
Do what you like
Plant me at the wind's whims
Disperse my joy
Across the map of gossips and clouds
Say what you like
Here she went, there she rested
Out of her conscience rises the jinn's cry
On her lips rest Uruk's borders, Akkad's secrets
And in her body bloom all the tormented gardens
On the crown of ruins
She was Sargon's jewel
And the priestess of dispersion
Forget not to mention
In your cursed tablets:
Enheduanna's heart was greater than
The tyrants' gospels.

YAHYA AL-SAMAWI

My Love Humiliated Me

My love humiliated me
So did my wound that extends from the palm tree's
braids
To the people's bread
And when the Tartars one night besieged me
I crossed the wall of the massacred homeland
Anxiety was my provision
Terror was my water
I roamed the fires of the East
The gardens of the West
With no companions
Except residues of my home's ashes
The clay of the Euphrates and Tigris
Splattered on my clothes
I searched for my childhood
In the memory of days
In the refuse of oppressive wars
Seeking my city
Looking for my beloved among this age's captives
Uncovering my roots
A sweet enchanting Euphrates
Suddenly I saw a palm tree on a sidewalk
I shook it
Tears flowed down over my face
And when I shook the earth's trunk
Oh God
Iraq surges in my heart.³



YAHYA AL-SAMAWI (born 1949) has been living as a political refugee in Australia. The author of more than eight collections, he has been largely concerned in his latest works with political themes, which address, among other issues, Iraq's predicament in the years following the Gulf War and his opposition to the regime. Note his reference to the "massacred homeland" and the "Tartars" (a symbol used primarily for "external" invaders).

The earliest known author in world literature, ENHEDUANNA (ca. 2300 B.C.) was a Sumerian princess, priestess, and poetess noted for her cycle of hymns to the goddess Inanna as well as her brief experience in exile (see William W. Hallo and J.J.A. Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Innana* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968]). Other adaptations of her poetry have appeared in several American anthologies, including Aliko Barnstone and Willis Barnstone, *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now* (1981); *Women on War*, ed. Daniela Gioseffi (1988); and *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, ed. Jane Hirshfield (1994).

AMAL AL-JUBURI (born 1965) is an Iraqi poet, journalist, and translator now living in Germany. She received her B.A. in English in 1987 from the University of Baghdad and has published three collections, including *This Body Is Yours: I Have No Fear* (1999).

ADNAN AL-SAYIGH

Ulysses

On Malmö's bridge
I saw the Euphrates
extending its hands
and leading me—
Where to? I said.
The dream was hardly over
when I saw the Umayyad soldiers
besieging me from every direction.

Farewell to a window
in the land of ruins
Farewell to a palm tree, bombed, stripped of its greenness
Farewell to my mother's clay oven
Farewell to our jaded history piled up on racks
Farewell to a bitter homeland that we leave behind
but where to?
bitterness of exile?

Nothing is left of the palm trees that shaded me
except pale images
empty benches
and trunks of gallows
that demand our heads
And the Euphrates, which baptized me with its pains,
still meanders, coursing with the sorrows of listless
villages

Oh Ulysses
if only you had not arrived
if only the road to Malmö were longer
longer
longer

Oh stranger
who has not seen
a moment of joy?
How does every exile turn into a prison without walls?



ADNAN AL-SAYIGH (also spelled al-Sa'igh) was born in Kufa, Iraq, in 1955. He has published more than ten collections, including his most recent work, *Ta'abbata Manfa* (2001). The title (literally "Carrying Exile under His Arm"), which may be translated as "Bearing Exile," refers to a pre-Islamic renegade poet widely known by his nickname, "Ta'abbata Sharran" (He put a mischief under his armpit). Sayigh's reference in this poem to "the Umayyad soldiers" serves as a double allusion associating the martyrdom of Husayn in Karbala (A.D. 680) at the hands of the Umayyad soldiers with the Iraqi regime's persecution or martyrdom of Shiite dissidents.

SA'DI YUSUF

a Vision

This Iraq will go to the end of the graveyard
It will bury its citizens in open country
Generation after generation
And will forgive its executioner.
Iraq, as was known, will never come back
And the larks will never sing
So go on—if you wish—for a long time
Beseech—if you wish—all the angels
All the demons of this universe
Beseech the bulls of Assyria,
A soaring Phoenix,
Beseech them all
And, through the smoke of nightmares,
Wait for the censer's miracle.⁴

SA'DI YUSUF (born 1934, Basrah), one of the most prolific and greatest contemporary Arab poets, has published more than thirty works of poetry and prose, including translations of selected poems by Walt Whitman, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Yannis Ritsos, and Constantine Cavafy. Yusuf (known in American poetry journals as Saadi Youssef) has lived for decades in Arab and European exile due to his uncompromising leftist stance. He stands out, in the words of a leading critic, as a poet who has been associated with the Arabic political poem, devoting himself to a political and aesthetic vision. A collection of Yusuf's poetry translated by the poet-translator Khaled Mattawa was recently published under the title *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face* (Graywolf, 2002). [WLT](#)

Indiana University

Translations from the Arabic
By Salih J. Altoma

Editorial note: Special thanks to Iraqi artists Naman Hadi (Paris), Sadiq Toma (London), and Maysaloun Faraj of iNCiA, the International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists (London), for granting permission to reproduce *Le Déraciné* and *Hurricane*, which appeared in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (Saqi Books, 2001). Additional illustration details from the *Monument of Freedom*, designed by Iraqi artist Jewad Salim (1919–61). One of the most impressive and elaborate works of art in the Arab world, the *Monument of Freedom* represents the artist's vision—in a sculpture mural of fourteen bronze castings—of Iraq's long history and struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.



¹ Hebert Mason, William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of History and Religious Thought, Boston University, published his "Impressions of an Arabic Poetry Festival" in *Religion & Literature* 20, no. 1 (1988): 157–61.

² For more recently published translations and accounts, see Sinan Antoon, "Iraqi Poetry," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 634 (April 17–23, 2003); Mackenzie Carpenter, "Arab Poetry Speaks Volumes through the Sands of Time," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 8, 2003, and "Writers and Poets Ponder a Return to Iraq," *Scripps-Howard News Service*, May 11, 2003; John Kenyon, "Iraqi Poet Speaks for Exiled Iraqis," *Iowa City Gazette*, May 15, 2003; and Jasper Mortimer, "Arabs Pour out Their Views of Iraq War in Poems, Cartoons, Pictures," Associated Press, May 19, 2003.

³ Allusion to the Quranic verse "And shake toward thyself / The trunk of the palm tree, it will let fall ripe dates upon thee" (Mary 19:25).

⁴ Yusuf's poem "A Vision" appeared in the winter 2002 issue of the online journal *Free Verse: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry & Poetics* as part of the special feature "Exilic Voices: Four Iraqi Poets in Translation." Reprinted by permission.

SALIH J. ALTOMA is Professor Emeritus of Arabic and Comparative Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the author of several books on modern Arabic literature, including a comparative study of classical and Iraqi Arabic, and contributed to a 1997 special issue of *Arab Studies Quarterly* on modern Iraqi literature in translation. His recent translations of works by such poets as Amal al-Juburi, Salam al-Asadi, and Hamid Sa'id have appeared in *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), *Poets against the War* (2003), and the spring 2002 issue of *Literary Review*, respectively. His introductory essay and the poems presented here are part of a larger anthology of Iraqi (Arabic) poetry that focuses on the 1991 Gulf War and its ramifications. Apart from exile as a theme, the anthology covers a wide range of issues dealing with the ordeal of the Iraqi people as they endured twelve years of most gruesome tyrannical rule, U.S.-led military strikes, and an unprecedented regime of draconian sanctions.



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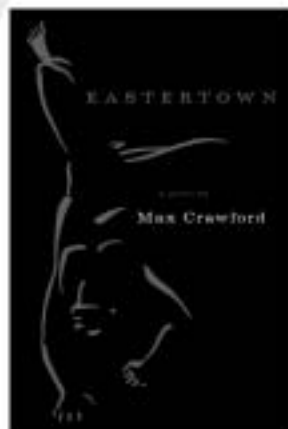


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