

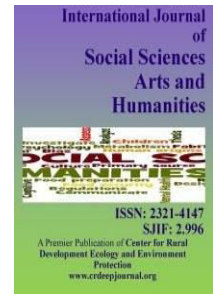
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Review Paper

Saying the Unsaid in the War Poetry of Nizar Qabbani

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the post 1967 war poetry of the prominent Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani in order to re-historicize the Six-Day War and dismantle some of the myths that provided the sparks for the war. Charged with the need to bear witness and bear the responsibility for war, the poems, analyzed in this paper, constitute one of the first extensive narratives of trauma and defeat in modern Arabic literature. As a suppressed tradition of poetic texts production representing the consciousness of the contemporary Arab intellectual, Qabbani's poetic discourse provided emotional support for the individual against the tyranny and persecution perpetuated by tyrannical Arab governments. Denouncing a network of stagnant institutions that gave rise to the war, Qabbani criticized the Arab official system questioning Arab culture and traditions. Due to its challenge of the hegemonic narratives disseminated by the defeated regimes, Qabbani's counter war rhetoric was censored and excluded from school curricula and Arab press. Undermining narratives which enhanced the rationale of amnesia and castigating military regimes who conspired to obscure the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, Qabbani's counter-poetics underlined the crippling impact of the 1967 war on the collective memory of a nation shattered by recurrent defeats and cursed by successive dictatorial regimes.

Nizar Qabbani : A biographical Entry

In addition to witnessing a series of Arab defeats -particularly in 1948 and 1967- Qabbani lived an eventful life punctuated with occasional sadness and despair . He was born in Damascus in 1932 in a district famous for its struggle and resistance against the French occupation troops during the era of colonization. As a young man, he married Zahra, a Syrian lady, had two children, and then he married an Iraqi lady, Balqis, after a great love story. Unfortunately, Balqis was brutally killed in an explosion, which targeted the American embassy in Beirut, where she works, during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980's. Qabbani, who descended from a well-known family, in Damascus, was appointed as an ambassador after his graduation from Damascus University in the 1950s. However, he was forced to resign from his job as a result of publishing poems attacking the Arab rulers and governments after the defeat of the 1967 war.

Consequently, he left his country and spent most of his life in exile –in Lebanon and Europe- where he became a professional writer and poet. Most of his poetry prior to the 1967 war was devoted to the issue of feminism and the degrading status of women in the Arab world. Originally identified as the poet of women and erotic love, his poems were censored in many Arab countries; however his poetry opened new horizons extending the boundaries of Arabic poetics and challenging conservative Arab traditions. His first anthology was published when he was a student at Damascus University and created controversy in conservative circles due to its candid treatment of the issues of sex and male / female relationship in the Arab world. His repudiation of backward and conservative Arab traditions started at an early age when he witnessed the suicide of his sister who killed herself because she was forced to be separated from her lover and marry a man she did not love. Therefore, his early poetry was a severe criticism of a male-dominated world

and a challenge of the repressive policies advocated by a hegemonic patriarchal society that oppressed women.

Moreover, his political poetry, particularly his famous and provocative poems “Love and Petroleum”, “Bread, Hashish and Moon” and “Margins on the Notebook of the Defeat”, led to the censorship of his literary works in most of the Arab countries. Qabbani’s reputation and popularity in the Arab world is unprecedented particularly because most of his love and romantic poems that give credit to women are transformed into well – known popular songs performed by famous Arab singers. Qabbani died in 1998 leaving behind him large legacies of books, anthologies, songs, prose works and a history of struggle against all forms of oppression in the Arab world. His unequal poetic works stand as a testimony of a great poet and a modern warrior. Qabbani is undoubtedly one of the most famous and prominent poets in the entire history of Arabic literature from the Pre-Islamic era until the modern times.

Toward a Poetics of Disclosure: Re-narrating the 1967 War Tale

In May 1967 Arab countries particularly Egypt, Syria and Jordan mobilized their forces in addition to an extensive media campaign¹ against Israel threatening to drive Israel to the sea. The fear of an imminent attack as well as the withdrawal of the United Nations emergency forces located on the Egyptian-Israel borders due to Egyptian orders led the Israel government to believe that an Arab military assault war imminent. Things became worse when Jamal Abdul-Nasser, the Egyptian president at that time, announced the blockade of the straits of Tiran preventing Israel to have access to its Eilat port on the Gulf of Aqaba². Mutual defense pacts were signed between Egypt on one hand and Jordan and Iraq on the other. Anti-Israeli incendiary Arab rhetoric and daily threats in Arab media terrified the Israeli community and contributed to the pressures to go to war. The Arab call of a war of total destruction against Israel ended with their defeat. In six days and due to a successful and preemptive military operation led by the Israeli air forces on the fifth of July 1967, the Israeli army was able to capture the Sinai peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank including Eastern Jerusalem in addition to Gaza strip. The war which started on the fifth of June and ended on the tenth of June changed the standards of power in the Middle East forever.

The 1967 war experience and its tragic developments represent a definitive turning point in Arab history significant for study within its own literary and political boundaries. The Israeli stunning victory over three Arab armies in the June war of 1967 shattered the dream of Arab nationalism and raised a wave of protest throughout the Arab world against the tyrannical regimes who failed to defend their countries in a war which they

¹ See Saddik Gohar. “Exile and Revolt: Arab and Afro-American Poets in Dialogue”. In *Creativity in Exile*, Ed. M. Hanne. New York: Rodopi, 2004. 159-181.

² See Saddik Gohar. “The Poetics of Resistance”. *International Journal of Arabic and English Studies* Vol.7 (2006): 5-28.

pursued and triggered its first sparks. The defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 war and its catastrophic ramifications introduced into the study of Arabic literature an awareness of the impact of mass trauma on the collective memory of the nation, an awareness minimally confronted in the Arab world even during the era of colonization. In other words, it is significant to point out that the 1967 war literature including poetry constitutes the first extensive narratives of disappointment and defeat in modern Arab culture because narratives about earlier collective traumas such as the 1948 war did not undermine the Arab dream of unity and nationalism. Experiencing war and its traumatic memories, the great Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani was transformed from a poet of love and erotica into a revolutionary activist with a new politicized awareness.

In “The Function of War Literature”, Catharine, Brosman, observes that modern war literature aims to “shape a sense of national purpose and inspire a bellicose spirit by acting on the imagination of young people” (Brosman 1992: 86). Contrary to Brosman’s argument, the 1967 war poetry of Nizar Qabbani, is not an expression of the same heroic mode. Instead, the poems, discussed in the paper, aim to denounce and deglamorize the war experience. Undermining the political myths, fostered by the Arab regimes, he affirms that the defeat is attributed to internal rather than external factors. In order to prevent the ruling regimes from obscuring the painful memories of war, Qabbani developed a poetics of confrontation exposing the corruption and hypocrisy of the Arab regimes who advocated policies of political deceit and secrecy denying the tragic outcomes of war. Engaging the politics of war and questioning the propaganda discourse which sustained it, Qabbani also aims to expose the hypocrisy and deception of the Arab tyrannical regimes involved in the military confrontations with Israel in 1967. In an attempt to tear away the veil of mystery attached to the 1967 war, he disrupts the myths that justify the war illustrating the mistaken strategic steps taken against Israel which led to the war particularly the closing of the Tiran straits on the Red Sea jeopardizing Israel’s security.

Qabbani’s growing sense of despair after the defeat and his feelings of exile in his homeland led to his interrogation of Arab cultural traditions based on destructive images that justify a history of false heroism and empty rhetoric. Qabbani’s war poetry is a reflection of the frustrated aspirations of Arab intellectuals and an epitome of the sense of alienation of a nation deceived by the political slogans of the Arab regimes in the aftermath of WW II. Therefore, Qabbani’s poetry is an assault on contemporary Arab policies with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict condemning the Arab rulers and still turn their backs to the plight of the Palestinian refugees. Dedicated to a revolutionary aesthetic, Qabbani’s poetry aims to expose the brutalities of the regimes – particularly in Egypt, Syria and the Arabian Gulf states - and the backwardness of the Arab society. In his post 1967 war poetry, Qabbani does not condemn the Israeli army or elevate the sacrifices of Arab soldiers or attempt to sentimentalize the relationship between the Arab people and their defeated regimes. As a literary figure who has a great impact on generations of Arab readers since the 1950’s, Qabbani introduced a counter-poetics, a personal elegy lamenting a nation plagued by tyrannical regimes and battered by endless defeats.

As a representative of the rebellious spirit of a generation traumatized by oppressive governments, Qabbani disparagingly castigates the Arab regimes responsible for the defeat of the 1967 war. Unlike official discourse which simplifies the representation of war imposing an illusion of collectivity within a dictatorial system based on hypocrisy and corruption, Qabbani's poetry rewrites the 1967 war narrative denouncing the culture machine which paves the way for the war.

Contrary to the war myths, promoted by the official propaganda apparatus, Qabbani's poetry does not valorize those who fight in the war. Instead he denounces political corruption expressing a profound anger against the dictatorial leaders responsible for the war and the subsequent defeat. In his poem "What Value has the People Whose Tongue is Tied?", written during the height of the controversy over the 1967 war, Qabbani says: "for five thousand years / we have been underground / our beards are long, our names unknown / our eyes harbors for the flies" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 185). Being convinced that the Arab people have been dehumanized by dictatorial regimes who drag the Arab world back to the stone age, Qabbani addresses the Arab people: "O my friends / try to break down the door / to cleanse your thoughts your clothes / try to read a book, to write a book / to sow letters like grapes and pomegranates" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 185).

By creating an analogy between defeat and internal corruption, Qabbani attempts to redefine the concepts of "war" and "enemy"³. The hidden agenda in Qabbani's poetry indicates that in 1967, the Arabs were simultaneously engaged into two wars: one against local dictatorial regimes and one against a small country defending its existence. He redefines the enemy not as Israeli soldiers equipped with a western / sophisticated, arsenal of weapons but as Arab dictators who strike the first sparks of war. In other words, Qabbani's poetry reconstructs the enemy and resituates the locus of war emphasizing that the real battles and conflicts are fought both within the hearts of the Arab people and on the ground of political and cultural struggle. In several poems Qabbani reconstructs war as a complex tissue of meaning and signification where the battlefield exists simultaneously on the war fronts and inside the Arab communities. As a matter of fact, the poet attempts to narrow the gap between "military" and "civil", between "soldier" and "civilian" in order to de-construct a web of deeply rooted myths about war and heroism. Denouncing the war image popularized by the regimes' propaganda machines, Qabbani composes poetry which becomes a testimony of the failure of the myth of Arabism and Arab nationalism.

While his poems explore the trauma and feelings of alienation integral to the defeat, they give expression to the less visible but no less dangerous defeat which the Arab people experience under dictatorial regimes. Furthermore, Qabbani denounces the attempt of state-side writers and poets who seek to distort the 1967 war displacing its site and meaning transforming it into a

civil struggle fought on the terrain of Arab-Arab local politics. Unlike nationalist Arab poets who attempt to overcome the defeat by looking back longingly on previous victories and myths rooted in early Islamic history. As the most significant Arab poet in the post 1967 era, Qabbani glorifies the revolutionary voices of his generation as the best intellectuals in the Arab nation. In his frenzied pursuit of the truth, Qabbani criticizes the hypocritical poets who replicate the 1967 war narrative according to the ideological agenda of the defeated regimes crying in anger and protest against all forms of tyranny and hegemony in the Arab region. Driven to struggle and resist as a result of being subjected to the feeling of defeat and humiliation, Qabbani's poetic voice rises out of the junk heap of Arab culture protesting against a web of stagnant traditions that kept the Arab world lagging behind other nations for years.

In his post 1967 war poetry, particularly in "Bread, Hashish and Moonlight", Qabbani exposes a dirty and miserable world where disillusioned people escape in sex but their attempt to evade the world of reality proved to be fertile. Though they are capable of transcending physical time and space, they are driven to perform rituals of ignorance and backwardness. Caught up in the labyrinth of shame and defeat, Arab people became the victims of ruthless regimes that struggle to dehumanize them. The tragedy of the Arab people, as depicted in the poem, is that they never come back from their journey of illusion. The cause of Arab catastrophes could be traced to a dictatorial system which refuses to recognize the humanity of the people enforcing and imposing an oppressive policy on them. In the poem Qabbani attributes the defeat to domestic rather than external reasons. He views a world which is already defeated even before the beginning of the war: "When the moon is born in the East people leave their shops and / March forth in groups to meet the moon / carrying bread and a radio, to the mountain tops / and their narcotics / there, they buy and sell fantasies" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 175).

Depicting a society living in the ages of darkness, brutalized by evil regimes that transform it into a network of prisons and graveyards, Qabbani refers to the spirit of defeat overwhelming his people who live in "the land of the prophets, the land of the simple". Due to ages of tyranny and lack of freedom, the Arab people become "chewers of tobacco" and "dealers in drugs" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 175). They not only escape in drugs and narcotics but also pursue their fixed beliefs in superstitions: "When the moon comes to life they are changed into corpses / and shake the tombs of the saints / hoping to be granted some rice, some children /they spread out their fine and elegant rugs /and console themselves with an opium / we call fate and destiny" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 175).

Apparently, the poetic response to the experience of war revealed a long overdue self-critical reevaluation of the chauvinistic myths of Arab unity and nationalism⁴ which gave

³ See Saddik Gohar. "The Use of T.S. Eliot's Literary Traditions in Contemporary Arabic Poetry". In *Chewing Over the West: Occidental Narratives in Non-Western Readings*, Ed. Doris Jedamski. New York: Rodopi, 2009. 127-160.

⁴ See Saddik Gohar. "The Discourse of Exile and Displacement in Arabic and Palestinian Poetry". *Hyphen: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Art and Culture* Vol. 2 (2011): 30-41.

rise to the 1967 war. Further, the defeat provided a gateway for the poet to expose the social ills endemic of Arab culture. Qabbani speaks about a world where “millions go barefoot” and “believe in four wives /and the day of judgment” while spending “the night in houses built of coughs” because “we have never set eyes on medicine” (Khouri / Algar 1974 :179). To Qabbani, the most destructive thing for the Arab people is their addiction to dubious historical narratives and false tales of ancient heroism achieved by their ancestors: “In the land of the simple / when we slowly chew on our unending songs / a form of consumption destroying the East / our East chewing on its history / its lethargic dreams, its empty legends / our East that sees the sum of all heroism / in picaresque Abu Zayed Al-Hilali “(Khouri / Algar 1974 : 179). Linking the political propaganda, deployed by the ruling regimes about the superiority of Arab armies, to ancient folkloric epics dominated by fictional figures like Abu Zayed Al-Hilali who achieved heroism only in legends and popular culture myths, Qabbani aims to expose the lies and deception of the Arab rulers who took the decision of war against Israel.

Historically, the defeat of the 1967 war smashed all Arab dreams of unity and led to a state of spiritual impotence and total disillusionment. All the promises of the Arab regimes to their people turned into illusions and the hopes to regain Arab glory ended in smoke. Therefore, revolutionary poetic voices in the Arab world, particularly Qabbani, expressed resentment and frustration questioning the policies which paved the way for the defeat. In an attempt to subvert the myths that preceded the war, Qabbani denounces the official hegemonic discourse which portrays the war against Israel as a moral crusade. As an act of purgation, his poetry becomes a critical reassessment of cultural mythology which leads to defeat interrogating narratives of political propaganda integral to the pre-war scene⁵.

In “I am the Train of Sadness,” Qabbani protests against hegemonic practices, pursued by the ruling regimes, which transformed the Arab citizen into an exile and a wandering Jew: “The inspector asks for my ticket / and my destination / is there a destination? No hotel on earth knows me / nor the addresses of my lovers” (al-Udhari 1986: 102). Lamenting the exilic and Diasporic experience forced upon the Arab intellectual by repressive regimes who turn their backs on human rights and consider issues of democracy and freedom as luxuries, Qabbani skillfully ends his poem with a note of frustration and anger : “I am the train of sadness / there are no platforms / where I could stop / in all my journeys / my platforms slip away / my station slip away from me” (al-Udhari 1986:102).

In a poem titled “The Speech / al-Khetab,” Qabbani sarcastically explores the phenomenon of censorship and the doctrine of silencing the voices of opposition in the Arab world. The speaker in the poem was arrested by the regime’s secret agents because he laughs during the speech of an Arab ruler probably because the dictator utters political slogans about maintaining freedom, democracy and human rights in the Arab world. Because the ruler’s speech was interrupted due to the

loud laughter of one of his subjects, “strict measures were taken and a state of emergency was declared in the country “, says the poet . Consequently, Qabbani’s persona, due to orders from the embarrassing ruler, spent ten years in jail: “the laugh costs him ten years in prison ” (Qabbani 1993: 2611).

In “The Speech”, the poet apparently ridicules the brutal interrogation apparatus which forced the innocent victim to make false confessions under torture. Qabbani sarcastically reveals the absurd nature of state-police investigation in the Arab world: “when the soldiers arrested me / they said that I participated in a conspiracy to overthrow the government / I did not know that the act of laughter required a permission from the regime / I did not know that laughing required fees and stamps / I did not know anything about brain- wash and the chopping of fingers” (Qabbani 1993: 263). Describing the interrogation rituals and alluding to the emphasis on the conspiracy theory in Arabic culture , Qabbani sarcastically points out that the police officers asked the victim “about the names of the people who urged him to burst into laughter” during the speech of “the leader” and about those who sponsored the operation “the act of laughing” (Qabbani 1993 : 262). Here, Qabbani depicts the police system, the Arab regime’s oppressive apparatus, as the destructive force of the political establishment which feeds on the sacrifices of human blood and suffering⁶.

In a related context and as a result of his painful experience in the regime’s jails, the victim becomes convinced that in “my homeland, it is easy to insult God but it is a taboo to say anything that might make the ruler angry” (Qabbani 1993: 264). After hearing “millions of slogans” about the achievements of dictatorial Arab regimes, Qabbani’s speaker went to visit the ruler of his country: “when I reached the door steps of the caliph to ask him about the destiny of Sharm al-Sheikh, Haifa, Ramallah and the Golan Heights / he delivered an eloquent speech / when I reminded him of the June defeat and the Six-Day war which turns into narcotics (hashish) taken by the Arab leaders in the morning and the evening / He showed me the military medals and badges / hanging on his chest / when I told him that the sword of the enemy is plunged in our neck / He threw me to the dogs” (Qabbani 1993 : 276 – 277).

Explicitly, the allusions to Sharm al-Sheikh, Haifa, Ramallah and the Golan Heights refer to the Arab territories occupied by the Israeli forces during the Six-Day war and a reminder of the failure of Arab regimes to restore the usurped lands. In “Speech,” Qabbani delineates a world which is forced to experience defeat and humiliation and a community driven to cultural suicide by the mistaken policies of its rulers. Qabbani also argues that after the June 1967 defeat, life turns into a nightmare in the Arab countries describing a hellish world where intellectuals are brutalized and traumatized by the forces of tyranny controlled by the regimes. The poet attributes all

⁶ Saddik Gohar. "The Integration of Western Modernism in Postcolonial Arabic Literature". *Third World Quarterly* Vol.29.2 (2008): 375-390.

⁵ Saddik Gohar. "Rethinking *Watariyyat Layliyya / Night Strings*." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* Vol.3.4 (2011): 443-480.

violence, wickedness and injustice to the Arab political system lamenting a society which completely suppressed and destroyed its intellectual and productive energies.

In "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts", Qabbani cries: "My homeland has lost its virginity / and nobody cares /our emasculated tribes failed to arrest the criminal" (Qabbani 1993: 729). Using discourse submerged in traditional Arab concepts of "honor / dignity" and imagery about "the violation of virginity" incorporating analogies rooted in the tribal Arab culture, Qabbani introduces the theme of invasion of one's homeland through feminine metaphors. In the same poem, Qabbani utilizes T.S. Eliot's concept of 'juxtaposition' (as an aesthetic device) evoking the image of Antara Ibn Shaddad al-Absi², the famous Arabian warrior-hero, in order to link the past with the present and tackle contemporary Arab issues. Engaging this technique, Qabbani argues that unlike the pre-Islamic Antara, well-known in Arabic folklore culture, the modern Antara, a symbol of Arab rulers, is a defeated figure who sold his homeland to the enemies: "when they (the enemies) invaded our lands / Antara was selling his horse / and the price was two tobacco packets, fancy dresses / and a new shaving paste / when they attacked us, the uncles of the murdered lady / were drinking gin mixed with lemon / They were spending the summer vacation in Lebanon / Recreating and relaxing in Aswan / Purchasing rings and bangles from Khan al-Khalili" (Qabbani 1993 : 230).

Clearly, Qabbani, in the preceding lines, aims to condemn the shameful policies advocated by contemporary Arab leaders and politicians toward great national issues particularly the Question of Palestine, by comparing them with the heroic sacrifices of a glorious Arab past. In Qabbani's poetry, since 1948, Palestine and / or Jerusalem "the murdered lady" is/are often viewed through feminine imagery, therefore Qabbani introduces Palestine as an Arab woman ravaged by the invaders. Whereas Antara, in ancient times, was introduced in Arabic culture as a courageous warrior who defended his land and honor, the modern Antara - a symbol of emasculated Arab leaders-unfortunately fails to perform this mission abandoning his beloved homeland. In this context, Palestine is associated with Abla, Antara's mistress who is immortalized in his poetry. It is noteworthy to argue here that the link between one's homeland and one's beloved is integral to Arabic literature because both of them are associated with the concepts of honor and dignity in Arabic culture and religion⁷.

One could ascertain, therefore, that the references to "the uncles of the murdered lady" allude to Arab rulers who gave no attention to the rape of Palestine. The allusion to summer and winter resorts in the Arab world - in Beirut and Aswan- where Arab rulers and policy makers spend their holidays ignoring the plight of the Palestinian refugees is an indictment of a corrupt Arab system that should be eradicated from the roots. Further, the image of Arab politicians and decision makers purchasing souvenirs from the bazaars of Khan al-Khalili in the old city of Cairo, a district mostly frequented by foreign tourists,

underlines the distance separating the regimes from their people. Instead of being committed to achieve the interests and aspirations of their nations, the Arab rulers are viewed as strangers and/or foreigners visiting touristic places and shopping at Khan al-Khalili during a time of crisis and defeat.

Discovering that the Arabic folklore literature and literary heritage had nothing to offer to the Arab world in an era of national turmoil and international transformations, Qabbani, like other Arab poets, turned toward the West for cultural nourishment. Adapting sophisticated / modernist techniques to fulfill indigenous purposes, he was attracted to western literature particularly T.S. Eliot's critical and literary heritage. Though literature written in indigenous languages is often concerned with the construction of national and cultural identities, the situation in the Arab world in the post WWII era pushed Qabbani toward the West in an attempt to develop a poetics of hybridity able to confront the new challenges emerging in the region.

For a variety of reasons, Qabbani was attracted to Eliot's poetic and critical heritage. Eliot's impact on Qabbani, in the post WWII era, coincided with the emergence of political movements and military coups which aim to undermine the foundations of an old system and establish a new order. Thus, Qabbani was mostly interested in Eliot's narratives of death, rebirth and salvation because he found in them reflections of the socio-political situation in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Palestinian tragedy in 1948 and the rise of tyrannical regimes in the region. Being interested in Eliot's poetry, Qabbani responded passionately to Eliot's masterpiece, "The Waste Land", establishing an analogy between the stagnant situation in the Arab world in the aftermath of WW II and the wasteland myth in Eliot's poem. As representative of the post-war revolutionary spirit, the modernist Qabbani seeks salvation for the Arab people in western traditions incorporating Eliot's narratives and cultural myths:

The wasteland that is his society is thirsty for rain. The barrenness that is his nation is longing for fertility. But Tammuz has to be killed by the wild boar and suffer the darkness of the underworld before he returns to the wasteland in spring, filling it with abundance and fertility. The Phoenix has to be burnt down completely before it can rise again from its own ashes. Prometheus has to suffer the sharp beak of the vulture as a price for the divine fire he has given mankind. Sinbad, like Ulysses, has to suffer loss in alien lands before he comes into his own. Only through the cross is Resurrection possible (Boullata 1976: Xii).

Like Eliot, who passed through an experience of universal implications which is the First World War, the Arab poet witnessed the catastrophic ramifications of the Palestinian tragedy and the emergence of post-colonial regimes and puppet governments responsible for the curses and defeats which inflicted the Arab world. Explicitly, Eliot's wasteland narratives fit the situation in the Arab countries during the post WWII era where an entire order of things has crumbled. The theme of the barren land waiting for rain of fertility restored through blood, death and resurrection attracted Qabbani and his generation of revolutionary Arab poets. The political upheavals

⁷ Saddik Gohar. "Rewriting Islamic History in Contemporary Arabic Poetry". *Romano-Arabica* Vol. 8 (2011): 54-93.

in the Arab world in the aftermath of WWII which threaten to dismantle the roots of Arab culture find an echo in Eliot's wasteland narratives. Therefore, in the post WWII Arabic poetry, Eliot's discourses about a fallen civilization are appropriated and recycled - by Qabbani - to fit into local political contexts and serve indigenous interests. Qabbani incorporates Eliot's modernism and literary heritage utilizing symbols, myths and motifs integral to western thought particularly Eliot's theory of tradition⁸.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T.S. Eliot explores the relationship between writers and texts from different ages and cultures. Illustrating his concept of tradition, Eliot affirms that "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his [the poet's] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order", therefore, "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it" (Eliot 1960: 49). Discussing the issue of tradition and its relationship to the past/present dialectics, Hugh Kenner also states: "All that we know of the past is part of our experience now. And it follows that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (Kenner 1959: 58). Recognizing the importance tradition and the inseparable relationship between the past and present, Qabbani incorporates Eliot's theory of tradition in his war poetry revivifying significant episodes and events from early Islamic history in order to explore contemporary Arab issues.

Engaging the 1967 defeat, Qabbani in "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts" evokes the figure of Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah³, the famous Arab lover of Leila al-Aameriyya in the historical love epic. In the original story, Qays is ready to sacrifice his life and split his blood for the sake of Leila al-Aameriyya, his beloved. In a modern context, and through using the juxtaposition technique, Qabbani portrays an image of a modern Qays, a symbol of contemporary Arab intellectuals who escape in illusions ignoring the miserable realities of the Arab world after the 1967 defeat. Like modern Antara who fails to defend his honor (Abla-Palestine), the modern Qays is a cuckold and a coward isolated in his ivory tower abandoning his beloved (Leila-Palestine).

While his beloved homeland (Leila-Palestine) was raped "Qays was involved in writing Platonic poetry: "while the Zionists were infiltrating into the bed-room of Leila al-Aameriyya / even the Arab dogs did not bark / and no bullet was fired at the adulterer" (Qabbani 1993: 231). In his disillusionment, Qabbani points out that "we committed adultery with the invaders three times / And lost our chastity three times / afterwards, we altered our testimonies denying our attachment to the enemies / then, we burnt the files of the (Palestinian) cause" (Qabbani 1993: 231). Reconstructing the Arab-Israeli conflict, Qabbani resurrects the history of war between Arabs and Israel. The

reference to the three occasions, "three times", where Arabs committed adultery with the invaders⁹ signifies the three major wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967 between the two sides which ended in humiliating Arab defeats. The allusions to the burning of "the files of the cause" indicate the negative approach of the Arab rulers toward the Palestinian issue.

In his post 1967 war poetry Qabbani criticizes not only the Arab official situation toward the war but also the negative response of the Arab people in the aftermath of the severe defeat, commenting on the absurd reality of living in a post-war Arab world where "people stay in coffee shops speaking nonsense" uttering "Islamic Sharia slogans" and misreading the real reasons of the 1967 defeat. In a dramatic fashion, Qabbani takes his readers to different destinations and locations inside the Arab world capturing ordinary people's attitudes toward the 1967 war and the defeat. In one of the coffee shop scenes, people were listening to the official media report in the radio: "Dear ladies and gentleman, the entire conspiracy was originally masterminded in the USA" and sponsored by "the petro-dollars" obtained from "the oil-producing countries" in the Arabian Gulf. In the preceding lines, Qabbani refers to the claims of Jamal Abdul-Nasser the Egyptian president, who promoted the idea that the Saudi regime in 1960s supported the 1967 war against Egypt in an attempt to remove Nasser from power due to the interference of the Egyptian army in the military operations in Yemen on the borders with Saudi Arabia.

Afterwards, Qabbani takes the readers to another location in the Arab world where people articulate hallucinatory remarks and disintegrated utterances: "fuck politics / we want whisky with ice cubes / we love foreign perfumes / All women are narrow-minded / And Islamic Sharia is against the victims" (Qabbani 1993: 236). The shift from the conspiracy theory rhetoric to hallucinations about politics, women and Islamic laws (Sharia) is a manifestation of the disappointment and disillusionment of Arab intellectuals who experienced the crippling consequences of the defeat. The escapist attitude, embedded in the preceding lines, reflects the destructive impact of the war and defeat on the collective Arab consciousness during the late sixties. The most dangerous result of the June 1967 war is the fragmentation of the Arab nation and the failure of the Arab rulers to draw the moral lessons and become united: "June comes and goes / and al-Farazdaq plunges his knife in the lungs of Jareer / the Arab countries look like chess pieces, scattered stones / and flying papers" (Qabbani 1993 : 235).

Integrating Eliot's concept that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot 1960: 50), Qabbani engages ancient Arab history in order to deal with the catastrophe of war and defeat indicating that the current situation in the Arab world is an extension of a history of inner conflicts and tribal hostilities. Juxtaposing the past to the present and recalling the verbal hostility between al-Farazdaq and Jareer (two famous ancient Arab poets and the voices of conflicting Arab tribes)⁵, Qabbani underlines the

⁸ Saddik Gohar. "Re-historicizing the Six-Day War: The Counter Poetics of Nizar Qabbani". *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* Vol.3.1- (2011): 97-116.

⁹ Saddik Gohar. "Engaging British Modernist Traditions into Contemporary Arabic Poetry". In *Reflections on World Literature*, Ed. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal. New Delhi, 2009. 51-62.

continuation of the spirit of tribal differences and antagonism which dominated the Arab scene in the past. Tribal hostilities integral to the Arab world during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras are recaptured in contemporary Arab history and politics. The preceding lines, which allude to the mutual poems of ridicule and lampooning of al-Farazdaq and Jareer, are used as a synecdoche signifying the mutual campaigns of accusation in Arab media in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat.

In the last section of "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts" and in a sarcastic tone, Qabbani uses inter-textuality and juxtapositions as a medium to reveal his absurd vision of a nation devastated by recurrent defeats. In this poem, written in the 1960's, Qabbani skillfully prophesied the massive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 when the Israeli army occupied Beirut¹⁰. The poet metaphorically takes his readers to a coffee-shop where people are watching the news bulletin in television: "the official announcer declares: "The invaders were drinking tea in Beirut / they took some rest in Beirut's hotels and came back safely" (Qabbani 1993: 236). The poet indicates that the entire Arab world, after the 1967 defeat, became an open territory for potential Zionist military adventures. Further, Qabbani sarcastically reveals the indifferent reactions of Arab leaders and policy-makers to foreign intervention and aggressions. While military operations and activities on the military fronts including Beirut reached a climax, some Arab rulers were engaged in a different type of action. In a private conversation, one of them said: "there is nothing more tasteful at the time of war- than drinking gin mixed with lemon / and licking the full and round breasts of women" (Qabbani 1993: 237). Nevertheless, the conversation between Arab leaders is interrupted by another newsbreak: "The official announcer declares that the Zionists made a tour across the city (Beirut)¹¹ markets / and bought newspapers and apples". Because the invaders felt jealous and "were jerking with grudge "as they confronted the nightlife in Beirut, "they massacred all the belly dancers in the city" (Qabbani 1993: 237). The sarcastic reference to the murder of the Beirut belly dancers signifies that the central pleasure spot in the region (Beirut) which attracts corrupt Arab politicians and hypocritical leaders was almost devastated and there were no more prostitutes or belly dancers to entertain the Arab elite .

Regardless of the violence committed by the enemy forces in different parts in the Arab world including Lebanon, the Arab leaders and politicians, argues the poet, are still isolated in their ivory towers. Instead of solving the complicated situation in the occupied territory and soothing the pains of the Palestinian refugees who live in tents, some Arab rulers are involved in sex talks: "Swedish girls are the best in sex / in Sweden, sex, like

wine, could be obtained at the bar table". Nevertheless the sex conversation between Arab rulers and policy makers is cut short by "the official announcer [who] declares that the Zionists were married to our wives / and took them away / to live in happiness and give birth to baby boys and baby girls" (Qabbani 1993: 237). Using angry rhetoric and obscene language Qabbani reflects his feelings of anger and frustration as he contemplates the absurd realities of contemporary Arab life. Apparently Qabbani uses artistic obscenity in his poetry to reveal an obscene reality.

Metaphorically portraying the Arab homeland as "a professional prostitute" fornicated by successive foreign invaders after being neglected by its corrupt rulers, Qabbani creates a frustrated persona who decides "to assassinate my homeland" and pursuing exile, therefore "I will get my ticket / I will pay farewell to the spikes of the corn / to the brooks and the trees / I will put in my pockets the pictures of the fields / I will take the signature of the moon / I will take the picture of my beloved / and the smell of the rain" (Qabbani 1993: 238). Determined to leave his homeland and live in Diaspora after the painful experience he undergoes in the land of tyranny and defeats, Qabbani's persona justifies his departure on the ground that the Arab world is no longer a political reality or a geographical location. To him, the Arab world is transformed into an entity which only exists "in poems, in plays, in touristic cards / in textbook and maps and school songs" (Qabbani 1993: 239). Unlike hypocritical Arab poets who "put false eyelashes to please the Sultans" Qabbani prefers to live in exile because it is impossible for him to play the role of "the Sultan's clown" (Qabbani 1993: 240).

Conclusion

Apparently, Qabbani's war poetry is born out of a desire to demystify a tradition that centuries of history have glorified. Attempting to tear away the veil of idealism and heroism attached to war, Qabbani's war poetry seeks to disrupt the rationale of war and the conventional myths that surround it and justify its atrocities. Characterized by outrage and a sense of betrayal, Qabbani's war poetry represents an immediate and personal insight into the war and its dramatic consequences. In an attempt to bear witness and tell a tale, denied by Arab politicians, Qabbani challenges the lies of the Arab regimes which attribute the defeat to the intervention of imperialistic powers and its local allies. In his counter-poetics, Qabbani argues that the Arab defeat in 1967 is not only attributed to military or political reasons but also to social, historical and cultural diseases endemic to the Arab community.

Discussing WW I, Paul Fussel points out that the shock of disillusionment born out of the technological modernization of weapons during the First World War made it a war that "will not be understood in traditional terms and shifted the structure of myths by which war has been conventionally understood replacing myths of glorious heroism with myths of banal anguish and even of victimization" (Fussel 1975: 154). In WW I, the starkness of the disillusioned shift of myths was intensified by the close proximity of England to the front. In a related context- and regardless of the geographical proximity between Israel and the Arab countries involved in war- the Arab poets exploring the 1967 war and its damaging consequences

¹⁰ Saddik Gohar. "Redefining the Image of Beirut in Modern Arabic Literature". *Nebula: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship* Vol.8.1 (2011): 116-136.

¹¹ Saddik Gohar. "Engaging the Cities of Exile in Modern Arabic / Palestinian Poetry". *Folia Linguistica et Litteraria* Vol. 314 (2011): 201-2012.

have to break through cultural boundaries and ideological distances which removed them outside the war zone. In other words, revolutionary Arab poets, like Nizar Qabbani and others, have to disrupt political and propaganda myths deployed by the dictatorial Arab governments to keep the public opinion blind to the realities of war. The crossing of such cultural distances to shatter conventional political myths about the enemy was achieved poetically by intellectual Arab poets writing about their disillusionment and repudiations of the policies advocated by local regimes.

Notes

1. All the extracts and citations from Nizar Qabbani, *The Complete Political Works* (Beirut: Nizar Qabbani Press, 1993) are translated by the author of the paper.
2. Antara, the black son of a noble tribesman from Arabia was subjugated to different forms of humiliation including the betrayal of his father who denies his paternity and considers him as a slave living in his household. As a young man, Antara was famous for his poetic talent and war adventures. He was a talented poet who composed famous epics dealing with tribal life. He was also a great warrior who defended his tribe against the invasions of the enemies. Due to his kindness and heroism, Abla, the most beautiful girl of the noble tribe of Abs, fell in love with him in spite of being a black slave.
3. Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah al-Aameri (545-688), the famous Platonic love poet titled as "Majnoon Leila", lived in Najed in the Arabian Peninsula during the Umayyad dynasty. He fell madly in love with Leila, thus, he was known as the madman (al-Majnoon). His unprecedented love story for Leila ended in frustration and tears. After his marriage proposal – to Leila – was turned down by Leila's folks, Qays spent the rest of his life in sadness and depression roaming the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant region writing Platonic love poems for Lila, an epitome of an idealistic and unfulfilled love epic immortalized in Arab history. Qays died alone in his desert exile after sacrificing his life for a love relationship that brought him nothing except pain and suffering.
4. The military government in Egypt claimed that the 1967 defeat was the result of an American-Saudi conspiracy. According to this hypothesis, the Saudis participated in the war in retaliation for Nasser's military intervention in Yemen against the Imam Ahmad government, a long-term ally to the Saudi royal family. Historically, the Egyptian army, during Nasser's reign, interfered militarily in the civil war in Yemen during the mid sixties and succeeded in overthrowing the Imam Ahmad's monarchy replacing it with a revolutionary anti-Saudi regime led by Abdullah-al-Sallal.
5. Qabbani refers here to the historical hostility between two rival poets representing tribal conflicts in ancient Arab culture. The first one is Abu Herzah Jareer (653-732) a poet from the Kulayb tribe who lived in Yamama in the Arabian Peninsula. Jareer was a talented poet but he descended from a very poor family and a modest social background. The second poet was titled al-Farazdaq, - which means in Arabic "the burnt loaf of bread" - and his name was Homam Bin Ghaleb al-Tamimi (658-728) who came from noble origins and lived in Najd in the Arabian Peninsula. During the Umayyad era, Jareer and al-Farazdaq exchanged satirical poems attacking and lampooning each other. For fifty years, each one of them composed tens of poems glorifying the traditions and glorious contributions of his

own tribe. As the speaking voices of their tribal communities, they mutually attack each other's tribe using obscene rhetoric and humiliating polemics.

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