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Adnan Al-Sayegh's Anti-War Poetry: A Cry Against Inhumanity

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the impact of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) in the poetry of Adnan Al-Sayegh whose participation in this war makes him a firsthand witness to the atrocities of the trenches and fight in the frontlines. This war did not only change Al-Sayegh's life and worldview for good, it changes the nature of his poetry as well. As a result, war becomes a central issue not only in the poetry Al-Sayegh wrote in the 1980s and 1990s in Iraq, but also in the exile. The study is divided into three sections of various lengths. While section one sheds lights on the most important aspects of Al-Sayegh's life, the second is a critical analysis of some of his anti-war poems. The conclusion states the main findings of the study.

[Keywords: War, Al-Sayegh, Poetry]

I: "What Remains of my country Iraq": The homeland as a battlefield:

Adnan Al-Sayegh's (1955-) was 25 years old when he participated in the Iran Iraq war (1980-1988) and saw his country devastated by the havoc of war. He was 36 when a more destructive war broke out between Iraq and the United States of America and its allies in 1991 followed by 12 years of heavy economic sanctions that affected all aspects of life. Al-Sayegh was 48 when the third war broke out between Iraq and the United States of America. In these three wars, "not a single Iraqi family was left untouched," as Al-Athari (2008,3). As a poet, Al-Sayegh belonged to what is called "The 1980s War Generation" which included a number of Iraqi poets who, one can safely say, wrote about nothing but war (Jabr, 2011,363). In 1987, poets prepared a special issue in *Huras al-Watan* journal, in the literary section of this military magazine, headed and edited by poet Adnan Al-Sayegh. Fourteen poets wrote of their personal experiences and philosophies concerning war. It was in this issue's introduction, considered a manifesto, that the eighties generation named themselves "the War Generation," although knowing that this name would most likely anger the authorities. Like the other Iraqi anti-war poets, Al-Sayegh had to "create tools to survive the various fronts: the war itself, their own stance on the war, and their fear of falling into the war's propaganda machine" (Ibid,374).

Al-Sayegh's poetical talent began to manifest itself at an early stage of his life. However, an untimely poem of protest against the managerial officials of the Club of the Institution of Agriculture which was grossly misunderstood as a provocation against the State resulted in Al-Sayegh's dismissal from the Institution. Besides this, there is another incidents that rubbed salt into Al-Sayegh's wound. As a result of accusing Al-Sayegh of having some banned books, he was arrested, transported, and then detained in a stable with a number of soldiers for two years. There he lived amidst the animals' excrement, bombing, scorpions, boxes of ammunitions, and the hallucination of Said Hirz; a soldier who was suffering from schizophrenia (Al-Sayegh, 2008).

These two years Al-Sayegh spent in the stable left an indelible impact in his morale and psyche. As Ismael meaningfully remarks, this stable becomes, metaphorically speaking, "his own country in miniature". In other words, what Al-Sayegh witnessed in the stable, represented what "THEY wanted to do with the country" (Ismael, 2002). In the stable, Al-Sayegh tried to write poetry, but all his efforts were in vain. In a desperate attempt to overcome his feelings of alienation and frustration, Al-Sayegh launched, as Ali Haider points out, "a poetic counterattack on war itself". Whether consciously or unconsciously, this poetic act of war resistance made Al-Sayegh a "war poet par excellence" (qtd. in Ibid).

II-Al-Sayegh's Poetry of Trauma and Resistance:

In critically reading Al-Sayegh's poetry which he wrote in Iraq, one must take into consideration that he was living in what he called "The Homeland of Wars". This description is not surprising since, in less than three decades, the Iraqis have been experiencing continuous wars that wreaked havoc in all aspects of life. Like other Iraqis, Al-Sayegh had had a firsthand experience of war atrocities and its tragic consequences. No doubt, these successive wars and their catastrophic occurrences left an indelible mark in the psyche of the Iraqis. However, nowhere this impact is clearer than in the poetry of Al-Sayegh which Al-Shabinder (2004) asserts:

[R]ises the curtain on a more dangerous death than the physical; it is the moral and psychological death with which Al-Sayegh is concerned. This death reigns supreme over all aspects of life. His poetry displays images of physical death, killing boredom, deadly routine. There is no attempt at hiding or beautifying what is already condemned in the war. But there is one subtle aspect which we must look for: the moral [and psychological] death.

During the war, poetry for Al-Sayegh helped to alleviate the feelings of loss and frustration amidst the sounds of shelling and the overwhelming smell of death. Al-Sayegh's depiction of daily life in the trenches and front lines was realistic to the marrow. The images of the helpless and powerless soldiers who were forced to act deadly parts in the massive drama of war were vivid and quite impressive. His poetry photographically captured the grotesque and gruesome experiences of war. He relied heavily on the direct description, everyday language, and all the figures of speech available to him, to present a war poem as close to reality as possible. This enabled Al-Sayegh, Al-Sagar (1988) remarks,

to "meet the war in the middle of the distance between the poem as a literary construction and himself as a poet/soldier. He did this deliberately to make his poems closer to life and ordinary people".

In his narration of his war experience, the soldier/poet, Al-Sayegh(2004,404) assured his readers that "He had seen trenches, camps, huts, and cannons more than [them] / He had carried dozens of corpses away from the battlefields". At the age of 26, Al-Sayegh found himself in a situation where "the absurdity of death intermingles with the absurdity of life".(Ibid, 496)

Al-Sayegh's poems photographically portrayed the soldiers' daily life in the trenches and the frontlines ramparts; among the blown bodies of his friends and the smell of death. By making war his central cause and poetic concern, Al-Sayegh was able to acquire a socio-political vision that made his poetry quite unique. Using poetry to denounce war and to defend his humanness made Al-Sayegh's war poem "the closest to the spirit of the age and the most honest in translating his life experiences in all their varieties and dimensions".(Al-Sudani, 2013)

For Al-Sayegh, nothing is more real than the bombs, shells, and swollen corpses of the dead soldiers. Therefore, he admits in his poem 'Searching for an Address' that "bombs do not lie/ as do the military communiques and leaders/ Then take all the bombs and describe the war/ Take all the bleedings of war/... And describe the peace in my country". (370 L19-21)(All subsequent quotations are from Al-Sayegh, 2004, unless otherwise indicated)

Al-Sayegh's treatment of war acquired new dimension in "Flowers For ..The New Morning". In this poem, he addressed the war directly. He was hopeful that sooner or later peace would come. He says: "O war / The swollen womb of life/ We planted everything inside you / Our childhood and wishes, our poems, fears, and our anxious lifetimes / So that a dewy morning, You could beget / the future child of peace".(394-5 L17-22)

Al-Sayegh acknowledged his inability to forget his war experience which accompanied him like his shadow. In the same poem, he wondered: "How many bombs you have to count / To declare the end of war / How many flowers you have to pluck out / To shout 'O Spring!' / O My heart! / O the sparrowless city... / How much sorrow you have to endure / To write a poem of happiness" (394 L8-16)

In his first diwan *Wait For Me Under The Statue Of Liberty* (1984), the realistic portrayal of war atrocities remained its most predominant theme. The opening lines of Al-Sayegh's "Good Morning O Camp!" are evocative and at the same time deceptive. They are talking about the "rising of the sun and the spread of its rays;" images, which Al-Kubaisi(1985) believes, are one of the most beautiful and memorable in the war poetry.

The image of a group of ordinary soldiers who are busy in unbinding "The plaits of [their] sweeti-sun"(638 L5), and, then, scattering them "plait..by plait / into the wind", (638 L7-8) contrasts sharply with the image of the 'gun' that preceded it in the

opening line. In this sense, the calmness of these lines is disrupted by the presence of one of the most conspicuous tools of war: the gun. Al-Sayegh writes:

The guns rise..
 early before the sparrows.
 We ran
 over the dews and deliriums.
 We unbind the plaits of our sweeti-sun-
 We scatter them..
 Plait..by plait
 into the wind
 And when the corporal pours... the Morning milk into the cups
 We share the bread..
 and the cozy laughter (638 L1-11)

In his article, "Good Morning, O Poet!", Dhayab points out that usually:

the guns resound and do not wake up early. They are the soldiers who wake up before the sparrows not the guns. The bread stands for the fate or the present situation which all of the soldiers share as they share the warm laughter. (qtd in Al-Sayegh, 2004, 688)

Here, Al-Sayegh makes use of the natural landscape in general, and of the sparrows in particular. The sparrows here are symbol of freedom, of the poets whose voices were muffled by the loud sounds of guns. In this way, Al-Sayegh juxtaposes romantic images of Nature with ghastly images of war to emphasize the beautiful and the wonderful that is lost for good during the war.

As a matter of fact, the war is conspicuously present even in the poems which were dedicated to his anonymous sweetheart 'M'. In these poems, the language of war mingles with the language of love and courtship:

It is the Earth...
 A Rebellious bullet
 A homeland ... for the sparrows and the poor
 A homeland whose pain and suffering ..the poets (share)
 ('M.. And The Poem of the Earth' 655 L1,11-13)

The spatial and environmental impact of war is crystal clear in Al-Sayegh's love poems. In "A Song on Khalifan's Versants", in which Al-Sayegh expresses his deep love for his sweetheart, he reflected on the various stages of his life in which he geographically moves from the south of Iraq, i.e., Al-Kufa, his birth place, to the cataracts in the north where the front lines he was fighting in were situated. Once again, the vocabularies of war paradoxically mingle with the vocabularies of love:

I imagine her...
 leaning... on the terrace now,
 And the light that infiltrates... through the branches of the bitter orange

As pearls falls
 on her plaits,
 She was reading about Khalifan versant.
 In my anthology,
 About Al-Zab river..
 ... She lets her tearful eyes
 Run in Shaqlawah resorts.
 She forget her rose... and bag
 InBikhal
 And hasten ... to meet me
 O Al-Zab River!...slow down
 And carry to my sweetheart-in kufa- mylonging
 and my salaam (greeting) (654 L27-42)

In consequence of that, the war for Al-Sayegh was not a transitory or accidental occurrence. It was, indeed, a daily recurrent event that hounded the mind and the soul of the poet. It penetrated into his memory and chased him whenever he went, from the versants of the mountains and the waterfalls in the north, to the marshes in the south. His romantic interest in the natural landscapes and lovely human feelings can not be separated from his interest in the particulars of the daily life in the camps and battle fields. The poems of Al-Sayegh's second anthology *Songs At Al-Kufa Bridge* (1986) echoed the themes, concerns, and connotations of the first anthology which glowed with the fires of the battles and then died away with the expectation of death by the next shot bullet.

Al-Sayegh's poetry at this stage of his poetic career was characterized, generally speaking, by heavy reliance on "prosaic narrativity that makes use of dialogue and monologue besides the frequent references to specific persons and events". (Al-Janabi, 1990) Those persons who were either martyrs, prisoners-of-war, ordinary soldiers, or missing became the pivotal axis around which the poems revolved.

In "Two Stanzas from the Martyr Fadhel Al-Najafi's Life" , Al-Sayegh lodged a complaint and gave a vent to his sorrows and concerns. He addressed his friends, reminding them of the happy moments in their lives. He says:

Do you remember ?
 You would feel absolutely desolate
 If your sweetheart ever quarrel with you.
 You dream of her hair scattered
 In the stations,
 And along the ramparts,

But you are now nearby the ramparts
 (Motionless, widower, and lonely discarded)
 You are deeply resentful of the bullet
 That disappointed you..
 That faded away without a glimmer!(562 L37-47)

Noteworthy here is Al-Sayegh's tendency to interlace the images of love and craving with the images of the insensitive and savage war. Amidst the scenes of death and desperation, the motionless, discarded corpse of his comrade-in-arms came to the fore to remind the readers of the ugliness and ghastliness of war.

In his third anthology *The Sparrows Do Not Love Bullets* (1986), al-Sayegh made use of the same images and techniques. The opening lines described the beauty and splendour of the forest where a nightingale flew and sang tunefully by night as well as by day. A shot mercilessly assassinated this nightingale, turning it into a corpse. This incessant emphasis on sparrows and nightingales is purposeful since they stand for the beauty of nature, freedom, and inner peace which were slowly drained away from the poet's life. Interlacing these symbols with the fearful symbols of war such as shot, corpse and bullet might betoken Al-Sayegh's deep and repressed desire to free himself from the shackles of war that put constraint on his ability to express himself freely. The last lines of his short poem 'A shot' inform us of the death of all the nightingales. They were silenced for good. The metaphoric use of these nightingales opens the poem for various interpretations. They might stand for all the poets who, like Al-Sayegh, strongly objected to the war, the soldiers, or the Iraqis who were all forced to participate in it war. Al-Sayegh says: "Swaying, the nightingale is busy singing tunefully/ a shot / a corpse.../ the branch stands still...trembling / For a moment / Then falls motionless /All the nightingales / Are put to silence in the Forest." [465 L3-10]

In the other poems of the anthology which is famous for its reference to quiet landscapes, and forests, Al-Sayegh mocks the war and challenges it to kill the beauty in his heart. In spite of the cruelty and the destructive nature of war, there is still enough room for love and poetry in Al-Sayegh's heart. In "Death Of A Shot", he writes:

I know quite well
 The bullet is so damn cruel.
 It shows no mercy.
 But I challenge it.
 I wrench away of my heart
 The love poem,
 Born this morning
 At the door of the military post.
 I challenge it
 To silence the twittering of the
 Sparrows of dawn
 In the forest of my soul. [484-5 L1...34]

Al-Sayegh insists on the use of the vocabularies of love, beauty and hopefulness side by side with the vocabularies of war even in his poetry. In spite of heavy fighting, he is always in search of the flowers that bloom in the mornings. He is always looking forward to the future, for a new life full of peace, joy and prospects.

In the same poem Al-Sayegh hopes that flowers will germinate in the versants which was a site of military operation. Probably, he writes this poem after a heavy shelling on the military post he was in. This was Al-Sayegh's chosen method to overcome the violence and cruelty of life in the battlefields: to hope for a better future, to have flowers instead of shells and bullets. This is a well-known method which people often resort to in time of crises. In this way, Al-Sayegh seems to look for a way to psychologically treat his war traumas and his heart-breaks caused by the arbitrary death of people in the war.

In fact, Al-Sayegh can not help but extensively employ images of war, death, and frustration side by side with the images of friendship, love, family life, and intimate chats. War becomes part and parcel of the Iraqis' daily life. As Al-Masri (2002) explains:

War, as an event that is rooted in reality, never sets [Al-Sayegh's] mind at ease or at rest. It never relieves his worries and fears. To the contrary, it always makes him worried, restless, confused, and ill at ease. It always puts him in front of a new set of problems and complexities which pave the way for new and contradictory possibilities such as victory and defeat, the death in its active or negative forms, i.e., either to kill or be killed, the physical and psychological wounds, blood shedding, and a series of other dreary and tenebrous images.

he describes himself in "The Bombs' Mail" as

Wait[ing] the returning dead in the death carriages
The shells
Distribute themselves among
The friends. ['The Bombs' Mail' 435 L26, 32-34]

Al-Sayegh goes further to seek the assistance of the homeland, the safe house from which he was forcibly pulled out. Once again, he compares himself, and by extension other soldiers, to the birds that were coercively taken away from their rests. He deeply regrets his country which was lost to war and destruction. In "War has no Name", Al-Sayegh is fully aware of the destructive and savage nature of war:

The war will cut the hand of our childhood
It starves us to death.
But we contend with stubbornly
For the sake of our homeland.
It disperses and breaks up
Our days.
But we spend its days in
Entertaining hopes.
And we, the birds of longing
And love,
Seek the help of our sorrows' rests.
We shall cry over a (homeland)
Which THEY ruin.
So are we [452 L21- 34]

The words in Al-Sayegh's poem becomes tears that betoken the deep sorrow the poet feels for his homeland which was ruined as a result of war. In the same poem, he says:

There, where the soldiers sleep on
The coverlets of the wetted
Nostalgia,
That fragments our expectations
Of a new day. [452 L5-9]

This feeling of hope and nostalgia was Al-Sayegh's main means to escape the pressures of daily life in the trenches. The juxtaposition of flagrant contradictions in the poem such as 'new day' which connotes hope and zealotry for life, and the 'menstruation' which implies blood shedding and death, is indicative of the poet's psyche which is torn to shreds between his desire to survive the war and his realization of its mocking absurdity. The bread and the tea which are "essential ingredients in the Iraqi traditional meals" are indicative of Al-Sayegh's tendency to put the contraries together: images of survival side by side with images of death, images of desperation with images of hope, the dark color of blood with the color of shining sun. This conjoining of oppositions to spotlight what Al-Sayegh has already lost as a result of war is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes him from other war poets.

The reader may wonder why Al-Sayegh chooses to make the bread which the soldiers "divide among [themselves]" 'pierced'. In fact, the adjectives 'pierced', 'punctured' and 'perforated', recurrently appear in Al-Sayegh's poetry, particularly in this *divan* in which they acquire great significance. The image of the 'pierced bread' is borrowed from the holes which the shots cause in the bodies of the soldiers.

The opening lines of the anthology tell of a hole in the soldier/poet's lung which is a miniature and metaphorical hole which stands for all the holes in the fabric of his own country. In "Preliminary Prologue," Al-Sayegh writes:

A helmet falls down...
I grope for the hole it makes in my lungs.
My palm was full of ashes.
A helmet falls down...
I grope for the hole it makes in my homeland.
I and it (my homeland)
Became choked with the
Gushing blood. [423 L 7-14]

The 'pierced helmet' here stands for the poet's homeland which is, likewise, pierced and destroyed. The holes in both the helmet and the poet's lung become like windows through which Al-Sayegh looks at both the sky and his country. In *A Sky in a Helmet* (1988), he addresses the sky saying: "O Sky of Iraq.../ Is there no air / The sky of Iraq was pierced with splinters". Even the sky of his homeland was pierced! [431-2 L44-46]

The poet cannot breathe not because of the hole in his lung, but because of the deep sorrow he feels for his country. He compares himself to a bird which, in spite of the

spaciousness of the sky, cannot fly or move freely. The seven years of war which he spent in the battle fields are also full of holes. In "The Last Stations...The Beginning Of Madness", he says:

Sit down, pending my tears could catch breath
 Pending my life could restore its
 lost years
 (as if those years were seven minutes
 not seven long years pierced with the madness
 of my waiting) [428 L97-104]

The series of 'holes' continues to appear in the poem which the anthology is named after. In the same poem, Al-Sayegh tells:

The corporal says:
 It is death
 Which neither accepts
 Subtraction nor addition.
 So choose a hole for your head
 As wide as your hopes
 It is the time of holes... [430 L18-24]

In this last line, Al-Sayegh sums up his idea of the war time in which his people are enduring. It is not only a 'hole' made by a shot. As a result, losing one's hopes of leading a normal life or enjoying it causes little surprise. His hopes now center on his desire to physically survive the successive bullets shot at him and other soldiers. In this sense, the

hole in Al-Sayegh's divan performs an essential functional task. It is an expression of the time downfall. It is the opposite of unity, coherence, repletion, and harmony. It is, in other words, a raped and violated time. There is neither peace nor hope. There are only horrendous holes through which we see, by which we breathe, and in which we live. (Al-Shabinder, 2004)

The title of the anthology is the first thing that draws the attention of the reader. *A Sky in a Helmet* includes two similar and at the same time two different things. Just as the sky envelopes the earth completely, the helmet envelopes the soldier/poet's head to protect it from possible injuries. However, this small helmet with its limited area has the ability to take in a whole sky. In other words, it became large or wide enough for the sky. In this sense, the wide and large is forcibly inserted into the small and narrow. This is, Al-Shabinder believes, is not normal or even familiar. To the contrary, it is a portent of terrible things to come. This is exactly what Al-Sayegh wants to say. The war, in his poetry, is a great catastrophic and disruptive force. (Ibid)

In this sense, his remarkable combination of two quite strikingly different things is a sign of his awareness of the terrible affliction and suffering which his people are enduring. The sky as a symbol of hope, mercy, and giving is, Al-Shabinder continues, sharply contrasted with the helmet as a symbol of war, distress, death, and servitude of the soldier who is whining under its weight. The relationship between them becomes a

relationship of life and death, war and peace. The wide sky fades away in the hole and is lost in the time of war.(Ibid)Like the sky which becomes smaller and smaller until it disappears, everything in Al-Sayegh's life, who was spatially fettered to the trench, the camp, and the battlefield, become narrower and narrower. In "The Last Stations...The Beginning Of Madness", he announces:

Here I am, looking through a window's slot
 To the street
 Which become
 Narrower ...
 Narrower
 Narrower[427 L67-71]

Commenting on this state of actual and metaphorical narrowness, Al-Sagar (1988) explains, "In reading this poem, one finds a self not a subject matter, a sensitive feeling not a superficial outward description, a deep personal wound not a military epic. Here, everything in the poet's life becomes one thing: a hole".

Being psychologically destroyed as a result of the protracted war, the poet wants something that helps him to forget his painful and traumatic war experiences. He longs for the country he wishes it to be. He metaphorically compares it to a woman with whom he falls passionately in love. Like his country, he can not forget her nor replace her with another woman. But the poet is fully aware that there is no escape from the terrible situation he finds himself in however vast the earth is. In the form of command, he addresses himself

Or ...
 Run away
 Now ..
 From your impossible death
 There is no gateway, no escape ...
 It is earth that becomes smaller than I imagine...
 Smaller than the palm of a miser old man... ['A Sky In A Helmet' 431 L23-29]

In spite of this portentous atmosphere, the poet decides to challenge this 'impossible death'. However, he is given a terrible shock upon realizing that he has only one helmet and that he has to choose to use it in the protection of either his country or his head, which are, both, already pierced:

So my country gathers me up...
 We run together to the first rampart in
 Defiance of our death..
 But O my country!who is to shelter his head?
 Me or you?
 Since we have one helmet only.['A Sky In A Helmet' 432-435 L 63-68]

The act of defiance here implies some sense of hope and positive expectation. In spite of the large number of holes which nourish the rivers of death with the soldiers' blood in Al-

Sayegh's sky, self, life, and anthology, he is able to turn them, metaphorically speaking, into small windows through which he looks forward to more promising and beautiful things, like hopes and life desires.

In "A Preliminary Prologue", Al-Sayegh puts the helmet to another use. The fall of the helmets stand for the fall of his friends/comrades-in-arms one by one. He consciously lets the helmet of his 'postponed' death fall to allow himself to sleep soundly, dream, and hope:

A helmet fell down...
 Then another...
 Then another...
 Then another...
 I looked at my postponed death..
 Coldly staring at me
 It put off its helmet..
 And slept ['First Inaugurated' 423 L15-22]

Here the poet wonders about the reason that makes the war unable, unlike death, to put off its helmet and sleep quietly.

By the act of 'falling down' which stands for death, the natural or inevitable companion of soldiers in the battle fields, Al-Sayegh was able to create a kind of an outlet, though poetic, to give a full psychological vent to his feelings of frustration and disappointment. In a series of impassioned images, he talks about the postponement of death which gives him some hope. By personifying death, i.e., treating it as if it is a soldier who could let his helmet drop also, Al-Sayegh gives the impression that even death fall asleep and let the soldier, by mistake, survive.

In the opening lines of the same poem, the artillery is personified. The soldiers are busy in preparing the abominable breakfast for the artillery which stands for the continuation of war that demand more and more casualties. The use of adjectives such as 'abominable', 'loathsome', and 'detested', stands for Al-Sayegh deep abhorrence and hatred of war. While the poet's country keeps counting its "splinters and martyrs" [L4], the poet himself tries to create an optimistic atmosphere to heal his psychological wounds. So he adds saying that just as he is eager to put an end to this war, so are his friends/fellow soldiers who want to put an end to the bombardment of the artillery:

.. The poem does not consent to me.
 The homeland was
 On the front rampart...
 Busy in counting his splinters and martyrs.
 And my friends are preparing
 Some abominable breakfast
 For the artillery,
 And waiting to put an end..
 For the banquet of war [423 L 1-9]

Al-Sayegh keeps on personifying the weapons of war, which are performing a number of human activities like 'passing by', 'counting', and 'failing to love' ['A Train' 467 L29,31,36]. Paradoxically, he accuses the artillery of insensitivity, of being unable to enumerate its victims. Being famous for mingling the vocabularies of love with the vocabularies of war, Al-Sayegh wonders if the artillery were good at falling in love. He bitterly wishes that it would stop killing the soldiers and instead busy itself with loving them.

In his poems, Al-Sayegh often questions the nature of war and its impact on people. He often questions the ability of love to thrive under the threatening bombs of war. He usually senses the frightening presence of all accidental shots lurking somewhere in the frontlines in wait for the next chance to end his life. In "Train", in his divan *Birds Don't Love Bullets* (1986) he gives full vent to his inner fears:

In the last evening of the shrapnel...,
I shall gather up-Like the poems-
The years of my life span
I shall classify them...
May be, I shall- in a moment-
Write off half of them
May be, an accidental shot
Will strike off the other half [466 L 7-14]

Al-Sayegh used to closely tie the number of his years to the number of his poems. He is afraid of losing the remaining years of his life by an accidental shot. Therefore, he is determined to protect them by writing poems, and indirectly using their words as shields to protect him from the abyss of mortality. In "Train", he compares himself to a 'loaf of bread'. He says:

Like a loaf of bread...
The shrapnel are divided into the
Cells of my blood.
I shall sit on the bench in a station,
Waiting for
A shot!
Night watchmen
Or women ['Train' 467-468 L 41-48]

The choice of the sources of threat and oppression is significant here as shot is a symbol of war and death; night watchman is a symbol of intellectual terror and close surveillance; and women is a symbol of normal peace time and family life which the poet is deprived of. In fact, feelings of panic and dismay took hold of the poet since the moment he arrived at the battle field. He is afraid of killing someone else or else be killed. He is alarmed by the prospects of losing his darlings and friends, of having a physical disability or experiencing other types of disruptive and paralyzing events.

This tendency on the part of Al-Sayegh to deal with the familiar and ordinary in the soldiers' daily life for the purpose of spotlighting the tragic and heart-rending is what distinguishes the poet and makes him a "real poet who has the ability to prove that the every day poem is worthy of life, love, and admiration".(Al-Basri, 1985)

This draws our attention to "Ticket Girl" which tells of another pretty mundane occurrence. The girl of the poem deals, as part of her job, with different sorts of hands that are "dusty, usurious/ indifferent... / pugnacious .../ and rough". [436 L11-14]

The window that separate her from the theatre or cinema goers is again a small window that towers over the wider world; but the girl can see nothing of this world except what the window allows her to: the 'fingers and the palm of the hands. The fingers and the palms are as important for the ticket girl as for the soldiers who use them to hold the guns to protect their lives. They are always afraid of losing some of their fingers, , a hand, a leg, or all of them. Here the chopped fingers are symbol of everything that war represents, of its pitilessness, and inhumanity. The soldier whose three fingers had been chopped in an offensive against the enemy lines is afraid of the ticket girl's reaction when stretching his hand to get the ticket:

... He will walk to the booth
 Perturbed, at a loss,
 He thinks "she may gasp in astonishment
 For seeing my chopped fingers,
 My severed branches"
 The shells may teach her
 That fingers -in the war-
 Are just like tickets. [437 L33-40]

As Al-Masri (2002) points out, the whole anthology is a "testimony to Al-Sayegh's tendency to deal with the ordinary and mundane as a pivotal cause and concern; to link the ordinary occurrences and make them a sign of general, moral important ones. He may go further as to aggrandize the ordinary, make it equal in importance or perhaps more important than the general".

In this anthology, Al-Sayegh often talks about the streets, buses, friends, women, newspapers, telephones, branches, cities and about the war as a daily event that people become accustomed to during the long years of fighting. Like the resources of his country that were geared to war time needs, these places and things are geared to emphasize the ugliness and unsightliness of war. In "The Last Stations...The Beginning Of Madness", he is determined to tell his anonymous beloved about

..... the spittle of
 The city
 About the daily newspapers, and
 The war,
 About the lonely benches like me... [428 L 110-114]

Reading carefully Al-Sayegh's anthologies, one gets the impression that he is always "wholly engaged in shedding light on the dark hidden corners whether they are related to one's feeling or the daily rhythms of one's life".(Al-Rubae'I, 1996) In this sense, Al-Sayegh's poetry can not be read unless taken into consideration the general context in which they are being written: the war, which continues to haunt his life and writings even after its end and his movement away from the battle fields.

In *A Cloud Of Glue*(1993), which he wrote after the end of the war, the war atrocities and repercussions loomed large in the poems. In truth, Al-Sayegh sensed the painful presence of war long after the end of the military operations and his discharge from the army. The bitter and shocking memories of war kept haunting him and deeply affecting the nature of his longing to his beloveds and friends. It affected his relationship to Nature itself. As Sha'alan (1998) points out, the vocabularies of war "forcibly imposed themselves on the poet's life and poetry. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Al-Sayegh can not escape them".

III: Conclusion:

Al-Sayegh's poetry was a mirror that reflected the multilayered psychological conditions under which he was living in each stage of his life. This made his poetry as diverse as life itself. However, the most noticeable feature of this poetry was the overwhelming presence of war as a theme and metaphor. In its importance and ramifications, it surpassed all other themes. Al-Sayegh used vocabularies of war even in his courtship of his sweetheart. In this sense, war becomes a ghost-like figure that keeps haunting the poet in peace and war times.

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