



The Image of the City in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot and Salah Abdel-Sabour. The Waste Land & Winter Song

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Abstract:

In twentieth-century's poetry, the *city* has become an important and complex theme because when writing about cities, poets tend to re-formulate and re-define their relation with literary and cultural traditions. The city poses a particular challenge for the modern poet who – because of his commitment to social and cultural traditions – feels that his role has been fused to simply responding to the social, moral, cultural and psychological transformations that the city symbolizes. In dealing with the poetry of the city, I intend to establish a contextual reference framework, within which two poems by T. S. Eliot and Salah Abdel Sabour can be compared and analyzed in order to explore the Arab poetic attempt to integrate western modernism into Arab poetic canon. Two approaches were adopted in this study: the biographical and the new critical approaches. The paper concluded that Abdel Sabour and other modernist Arab poets, due to the great influence of Eliot's poetry, which was marked by a smear of loneliness, alienation, frustration, and lack of inner peace, considerably turn to similar imaging of the "City" for their own use of symbolism. The modern city has given rise to new and unusual poetic images and experiences, and thus had their direct impact on the poetic form.

Keywords: City – isolation – alienation – modern life

المخلص :

أضحى موضوع "المدينة" في شعر القرن العشرين من الموضوعات المهمة والمعقدة في ذات الوقت، لأن من طبيعة الكتابة عن المدن أنها تجعل الشعراء يعيدون صياغة وتعريف علاقتهم بالتقاليد الأدبية والثقافية. والواقع أن المدينة تشكل تحدياً للشاعر الحديث على وجه الخصوص، فهو الذي يشعر - بسبب التزامه بالتقاليد الاجتماعية والثقافية - بأن دوره قد انصهر إلى مجرد الاستجابة للتحويلات الاجتماعية والأخلاقية والثقافية والنفسية التي ترمز إليها المدينة. وعند التعامل مع شعر المدينة، فإن هذه الورقة تهدف لإنشاء إطار مرجعي سياقي يمكن من خلاله مقارنة قصيدتين للشاعر الإنجليزي ت. س. إليوت والمصري صلاح عبد الصبور وتحليلهما من أجل استكشاف محاولة الشاعر العربي دمج الحداثة الغربية في الثقافة الشعرية العربية. وقد جرى توظيف أسلوبان للبحث هما أسلوب فحص السيرة الذاتية والأسلوب النقدي الحديث. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن عبد الصبور وغيره من الشعراء العرب الحداثيين، وبسبب تأثرهم بالبالغ بشعر إليوت، والذي اتسم بمسحة من الوحدة، والاعتراب، والإحباط، وغياب السلام الداخلي، فقد تحوّل بشكل كبير إلى تصوير مماثل لـ "المدينة"، مع الحفاظ على توظيفه للرمزية الأدبية توظيفاً مختلفاً. لقد أدت المدينة الحديثة إلى ظهور صور وتجارب شعرية جديدة وغير عادية، وبالتالي كان لها تأثير مباشر على الشكل الشعري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المدينة - العزلة - الغربة - الحداثة

1- Introduction

The modern city is meant to be a place of commerce, progress, culture and order—a place where industry revolution has brought its rewards to the human population and where the advancements of society have taken root and produced flowering populations that live in harmony. The city is meant to be full of material comforts—transportation, convenience food, entertainment, sociality, the arts. And yet, the poetry of the city—for two very different poets from two very different backgrounds—tells a startlingly different story: a story of alienation, displacement, indifference and death. For T. S. Eliot, the modern city was a place where life was stymied—where evening skies were spread out, “*like a patient etherized upon a table*” as the poet states in “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.” In other words, the life of the city for Eliot is dead, and provokes images of death, unconsciousness, and detachment.



In “*The Waste Land*”, Eliot calls London the *unreal city* before describing a scene in which the ancient Tiresias of Thebes witnesses an unromantic seduction in a London flat where man and woman hardly care about the other’s existence beyond the momentary stimulus that sex brings.

Salah Abdel-Sabour, likewise, associates the city with the image of death and in “*Winter Song*” describes the city as a “*torrential rush*,” wherein he might “*Die, none knowing me...none weeping for me*”. As stated by (Abdullah Kurraz, 2011, p. 2770), “Both poets show common human thematic interests and concerns of modern life, its predicaments and aspirations, mainly through evoking a web of such mythical allusions or mythopoetic” (Kurraz, p. 2773). This particular usage of mythopoetic enables the two poets of two different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to arrive at the same poetic destination: a warning to the reader of the perilous nature of the modern city. The images put forward by these poets stand in stark contrast to the modern conception of the glories and grandeurs of the metropolis.

Indeed, along the English literary tradition, there are many references to the city, but the city in modern British and Arabic poetry in particular has not been yet given sufficient critical attention. In this paper I seek to present a close reading of some poetic conceptions regarding the theme of the *city*, which have not been given adequate examination and reflection.

2- Aim of the Study :

The aim of this study is to answer the following three questions:

- 1- How has the modern city given rise to new poetic images and experiences?
- 2- How do Eliot and Abdel Sabour as modern poets use the city as a technical, literary device in order to respond to the problems posed by the city? And,
- 3- How do their experiences of city life impact their poetic form?



The significance of answering these questions is that they will help students of literature to better understand how the signs and symbols of poets are impacted by modern lifestyles. Poetry is an art form that has existed for thousands of years in virtually every culture throughout recorded history. Understanding how the city and the poet interact can help people to better understand the city itself, as well as the usefulness of boning up poetic images and experiences.

3- Methodology

Because the source of all poetry is the person—the individual out of whom the poetry flows—this study will adopt a biographical research approach. Many streams may contribute to the overall source—i.e., the variables that inform the individual, such as education, beliefs, ideas, experiences, environment, and so on. However, the best way to understand the interaction of these variables with the source—the person—is through biographical research. Therefore, in order to answer the research questions described above, a biographical study will be conducted.

(Jens Zinn, 2004, p.3) states that

“biographical research on action modes emphasizes content analysis and it is mostly concerned with specific issues”, so a substantial amount of content analysis of the authors’ works will have to be conducted in order to help illuminate the biographical research and to achieve the research goals. Zinn describes this method in the following terms: “biographical action research is more concerned with action modes in specific societal areas or how individuals respond to certain problems than with the reconstruction of the whole identity” (Zinn: 9).

How the authors’ response to their experience with the modern city is embodied in their poetry will be the focus of the current adopted methodology. The data to be analyzed will include the poetry of the authors as well as biographical information that helps to inform the authors’ narrative. There is a considerable foundation for this methodology, as Brian Roberts (2002) points out:



"The study of biographical research rests on a view of individuals as creators of meanings which form the basis of their everyday lives. Individuals act according to meanings through which they make sense of social existence. Interpretive, subjective or qualitative approaches to the study of lives have been inspired by Weber's verstehen," (Roberts: 6-7)

What Roberts illustrates is that the biographical research method can be a helpful way to understand just how individuals respond to phenomenon. In this case, the impact of the city on the poetry of Eliot and Abdel Sabour can be understood through an examination of the lives of the artists as well as their works.

Moreover, the New Critical Approach will be adopted in this study too. The meaning of the poetic texts, according to (Fedorova, 2004, p. 176) is ambiguous; that is, it may have more than one meaning, so the reader will concentrate on the interpretation of the literary text to resolve the vagueness of the meaning.

4. The image of city in *The Waste Land* & *Winter Song*

Examining the manuscript of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's portrayal of London reveals that this portrayal is inseparable from Eliot's vision of the decline of Western civilization. London in *The Waste Land* is not merely a geographical setting but a medium through which Eliot uncovers the social and cultural life of the British metropolis. Assessing Eliot's early poems in conjunction with *The Waste Land*, It seems clear that the city in *The Waste Land* acquires wider connotations where the realistic, physical city is transformed into a symbolic, metaphorical space. It's argued that ways of reading *The Waste Land* inform Eliot's conception of the poem as a city poem. This is hoped to be achieved through *The Waste Land's* spatial form. Eliot's technique of juxtaposing images of the city amounts to a spatial form that causes the poem to diverge from habitual modes of reading and comprehension.

Similar to Eliot, Salah Abdel-Sabour, in many of his poems, uses dreary and downcast poetic images to portray the city in which he has chosen to reside.



Abdel-Sabour cites an example of the poetically linguistic boldness that attracts his attention in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where there are common words such as "tea," "canned food," "socks," "slippers" and "washings," familiar to all readers of poetry. According to Moody (1980), Eliot's poem expresses primarily the individual poet's anguish, amplified by those aspects of the poem that best characterize it, namely: the variety of voices, the references to different historic moments, and the abundance of literary allusions. Nevertheless, Abdel-Sabour indicates that he has emerged from the mantle of Arabic school of romanticism to find himself "a prisoner of the Arab poetic tradition," which favors a special and distinct poetic diction that is a true reflection of daily life" (Abdel-Sabour, 1981, p.123). It seems that Eliot's linguistic and poetic boldness makes Abdel-Sabour and his contemporaries realize that poetry has no "fixed dictionary" Modern Arab poets' task is to express common human concerns and realities through employing a new web of mythical allusions and mythopoetic to overpass the common and traditional poetic dictionary.

4.1 Image for Isolation and Alienation

"The epic poem by T.S. Eliot titled '*The Waste Land*' teems with rich and remarkable images" (Dwivedi, 2003, p. 33). "It incorporates gloomy lyrics translating a symphony of drifting and loss, mental collapse, self-existential dissipation, and estrangement owing to corrosion of human values in general and the Arab world's degradation, in particular, from repetitive defeat and false values" (Kurraz, p. 2776). According to (Lozano, 2018, p. 117), the poem is set after the First World War (WW-I), though it affords a familiar image of individual and youth isolation in war within modern society.

For his part, Abdel-Sabour claims our present world is nothing more than a wasteland, destroyed by spiritual and moral injury adversely impacting its creative and reproductive mechanisms. Thematically, he sympathizes with disadvantaged populations, namely, the needy and subjugated. In Moreh's (1988) view, Abdel-Sabour perceives a huge disparity between the reality of poverty and the highly abstracted socialist philosophy, together with offending and ruin, common to rural as well as urban places.



On the other hand, Abdel-Sabour claims to be portraying the troubles, concerns, isolation, unproductiveness, gloom, and deprivation of Egypt's rural population as representative of the rural population of the entire Arab world (Kurraz, p. 2783).

In his poem, *Winter Song*, he meditates on that no one will know about his death nor weep for him; due to brokenness and isolation that resulted from the modern life in the city.

*In the torrential rush of the city
Die, none knowing me
Die, none weeping for me*

4.2 Image for materialism and capitalism

Eliot, in "*The Waste Land*" warns the faithless contemporary society of its impending misery with an authoritative voice. He reminds it of the physical, social, and mental wilderness stemming from materialism. Every materialistic benefit will soon be destroyed. "Eliot stresses on humankind's urgent need to turn to God without whom our world will turn into a wilderness of nothing but conceit. If one seeks refuge, it will be below the great rock's shade; a place where humankind will find salvation" (AbdulAmeer, 2008, p. 129-130). Further, it affords a clearer image of the evolving relationships and indifference of contemporary 20th century society. "Such relationships are highly lethal, outlets of continuous warring and disturbances, indicating the need to dominate crookedly with resources like capitalism and imperialism". (Jaleel, 2014, p. 57)

Further, Abdel-Sabour defends his mythopoetic manner, claiming he has resorted to myths for determining relevant themes and reflecting on personal experience for affording them a significant objective element. His inspiration is his mythicized self-migration – a bid to escape the clutches of materialism and his bodily prison, stemming divinely from the human world. Hence, his city is nothing but his dense self,



Dumped in a city of illumination in which “the sun does not leave the afternoon” – a euphemism for complete freedom from delusions (Kurraz, p. 2791).

4.3 Image for death (dryness)

The poem’s first part, titled *'The Burial of the Dead'* suggests the entire section’s central theme is death. All imagery may be separated into that depicting nature’s death and that depicting human deaths. The New Critical theory, as stated by (Fedorova, p. 197) claims thematic oppositions must be used to explain images. The initial episode depicts changing seasons. The picture of nature’s death, unable to regenerate following winter, extends to the subsequent episode via a terrible image of “stony rubbish,” in which plants are incapable of growth. Concerning the subject of the death of humanity, no explicit thematic oppositions may be established. Instead, a few parallels exist between pictures of a dead nature and an unreal desolated city whose sole inhabitants are ghosts.

In Eliot's poem, there is no water, the essence of life, and its absence affects the whole land. The lack of water leads to drought and death. The poem is set in a place that is unfruitful, dry, and sterile where nothing can flourish.

*A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),*

In the *'Winter Song'* the poet’s fear of dying a lonely death is apparent in the following words:

*“The winter tells me I shall die alone. . .
One winter just like this one winter. . .”*



This is the poet's fear, which has been related to winter, as wintry nights are often thought to be dull and depressing. Their quietness brings feelings of detachment and loneliness.

The poet highlights the reality of city life, which teems with chaos and busy people, with nobody caring about anybody else. One lives alone and dies alone, with none at one's side. He indicates there is dryness and emptiness even in people's hearts like the dropped leaves in autumn.

*"The winter tells me that my soul
Shivers with the cold
That my heart died last autumn
Faded with the first fading leaves
And dropped with the first drops of rain"*

5. Conclusion

Throughout the previous discussion of the postwar theme of the "City" in the works by Eliot and Abdel-Sabour, it might be concluded that Abdel-Sabour and other modernist Arab poets, due to the great influence of Eliot's poetry, which was marked by a smear of loneliness, alienation, disillusionment, and lack of inner peace, considerably turn to similar imaging of the "City" for their own use of symbolism. The modern city has given rise to new and unusual poetic images and experiences, and thus had their direct impact on the poetic form. In addition, the current paper aimed to elucidate the way Eliot and Abdel-Sabour as modern poets use the *city* as a technical, literary device in order to respond to the problems posed by the city.



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