

**This Land (Iraq) was no Longer Suitable for
Anything”**

**The Cult of Personality in Adnan Al-
Sayegh’s ‘Dictator Poems’**

هذه الأرض العراق لم تعد صالحة لشيء
عبادة الشخصية في قصائد الدكتاتور للشاعر
العراقي عدنان الصائغ

Assist. Prof. Dr. Hana Khlaif Ghena
College of Arts/Department of Translation
Al-Mustansiriya University

h.horizons2013@gmail.com

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Abstract

Being politically and socially engaged, the Iraqi poet Adnan Al-Sayegh wrote a number of what might be termed 'The Dictator Poems' in which he sheds light on the nature of the Cult of Personality that can be considered a natural outcome of the political system in modern Iraq. These poems present very gruesome and ghastly pictures of life dominated by a ruthless and bloodthirsty dictatorial system that kept on violating human rights and abusing power. The paper aims at exploring the manifestations of the 'Cult of Personality' in a number of Al-Sayegh's poems. First, it introduces dictatorship as a political system that runs contrary to the values of freedom, humanity and civilized life; it also focuses on the tyrannical and totalitarian regime that reigned Iraq for about forty years. Having established the theoretical background, the paper then presents a critical analysis of some of Al-Sayegh's poems that deal with Cult of Personality . The conclusion argues that the aim of Al-Sayegh is not only to criticize and protest against the offenses and law-breakings of dictators, but also to warn them that they are the big losers who are to live and die alone and isolated from others.

Key Words: Cult of Personality, Al-Sayegh, dictator, Iraq, violation.

ملخص البحث

كتب الشاعر العراقي عدنان الصائغ، الذي كرس الجزء الأكبر من أعماله الشعرية للحديث عن مشكلات بلده الاجتماعية والسياسية، مجموعة من القصائد يمكن تسميتها بـ (قصائد الدكتاتور) سلط فيها الضوء على -عبادة الشخصية- التي يمكن عدها نتاجاً طبيعياً للنظام السياسي في العراق الحديث. تقدم هذه القصائد صورةً قاتمةً ومفجعةً للحياة التي هيمن عليها نظام دكتاتوري متعسف ومتعطش للدماء ما برح ينتهك حقوق الإنسان ويسيء استعمال السلطة. يرمي البحث الى جلاء ظهورات -عبادة الشخصية- في عددٍ من قصائد الصائغ. يتناول البحث بالشرح الدكتاتورية بوصفها نظاماً سياسياً يقف على الضد من قيم الحرية والإنسانية والحياة المتحضرة مؤكداً في أثناء ذلك على النظام الشمولي الدكتاتوري الذي حكم العراق لأكثر من ثلاثة عقود ليتنقل بعد ذلك إلى تقديم تحليل نقدي لبعضٍ من قصائد الصائغ التي تناولت ثيمة -عبادة الشخصية-. إن غاية الصائغ في هذه القصائد لم تكن نقد انتهاكات الدكتاتور وفضح ممارساته القمعية فحسب، مثلما تبين الخاتمة، بل تحذير الدكتاتوريين من خسارتهم المؤكدة لكل شيء بعد حياة قضاها وحيدين ومعزولين عن الآخرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصائغ، عبادة الشخصية، الدكتاتور، العراق، والانتهاك.

I. Since the overthrowing of the monarchy in 1958, Iraq has never known a genuine and real stability. The post-1958 period was marked by internal political and social unrests, regional rivalries and successive coup d'états. It culminated in another coup d'état in 1968 by the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party after a "long history of political instability and repression"(Lewis, qtd in Al-Athari,2008, p.2), in which politics in Iraq was "bathed in bullets and blood... [and] had evolved into a Darwinian struggle to survive"(Anderson and Stanfield, 2004,p.49). Immediately after its seizure of power, the Party embarked on a massive campaign to subjugate and "re-shape Iraqi society in the image of Saddam Hussein[its sole leader] and his regime" (Dodge, 2003,p.57). In order to achieve this goal, the Party adapted a number of aspects typical of the totalitarian systems which can be grouped around five closely linked clusters of characteristic features. They are first, an official ideology that covers all vital aspects of man's existence; second, a single mass party consisting of a small percentage of the population; third, a technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control of all means of effective armed combat; fourth, a similarly technologically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control of all means of effective mass communication; and fifth, a system of terroristic police control, depending for its effectiveness on the third and fourth points(Friedrich, 1953,pp.52-3). Besides these aspects, the Party extensively depended on propaganda, indoctrination, sectarian discrimination, surveillance, terror practiced through its security agencies, and rewriting of history to "discipline the population and to destroy autonomous social structures" and to ensure the survival of the regime (Rohde, 2010, p.11). This comes in accordance with what Nalepka and Sassoon state about the oppressive nature of the Ba'ath's rule of Iraq. In her seminal study "Saddam is Iraq and Iraq is Saddam: Saddam Hussain's Cult of Personality and the Perception of his Life and Legacy", Nalepka blatantly states: "There was a single party at the center of power in [Iraq], with its tentacles extending into every aspect of society and politics and into the lives of its members, backed up by incessant spying, and never hesitating to kill, imprison or torture anyone suspected of disloyalty".(2014, p.13)

In fact, the tendency of the Ba’ath Party to dominate all aspects of life is made crystal clear in the following official declaration: We [the Party] have to emphasize that this society is led by a party, and that party is the Arab Ba’ath Socialist Party...which leads [the people] in its values, its organizations, and also leads it in its ideas and its policies....Thus it is necessary that the party’s values and ideologies are at the forefront of these activities, and throughout the country’s decision-making apparatus. (qtd in Sassoon, 2011,p.34)

More dangerous and alarming is the rise of what is widely-known in the modern Iraq studies as ‘Saddamism’-reminiscent of Stalinism and Maoism- which typically means the reduction not only of the Party, but also of Iraq itself to the figure of its ‘One and Only’ or the ‘necessity’ leader, Saddam Hussain. In fact, after his taking over of the presidency in 1979 until his overthrowing in 2003, the Party, Sassoon (2011, p.39) remarks “devoted an enormous amount of energy and resources to building up the image of its leader, and from the mid-1980s the Ba’th’s philosophy and political education came to embody a cult rather than a political ideology.” This implies a gradual and menacing movement from the one Party rule to the one man rule (Anderson and Stanfield,2004, p.58) and ushers into the emergence of what is called a “Shadow State” in which Saddam, the “dictator and his narrow inner circle” became the sole political, economic and social movers’ in the Ba’thist Iraq (Rohde, 2010,p.3). In this State, “Autonomous collective social structures beyond the control of the state simply do not exist.”(Ibid) As such, it is not strange to hear people talk of Iraq as “Saddam’s Iraq.” Iraq as a country was sacrificed on the altar of Saddam’s despotism and thirst for absolute power.

This gives rise to what is called Saddam’s ‘Cult of Personality,’ or self-promotion. Nalepka defines the cult of personality as the “use of mass media, propaganda or other methods to create an idealized, heroic, and at times, worshipful image, often through unquestioning flattery and praise”(2014, p.6). The systemic idolization of Saddam was expressed through every medium, projecting him as a superhuman capable of doing all things perfectly. His cult of personality immediately invaded Iraqi society, as thousands of portraits, posters, statues and murals were erected in his honor all over Iraq.

His face could be seen on the sides of office buildings, schools, airports and shops, as well as on all denominations of Iraqi currency (Sassoon, 2011, 174).

In his study, "Saddam Hussein's Iraq: A political psychology profile," Post (5-6) delineates the psychological characteristics of Saddam as a dictator. According to him, Saddam is known for his malignant narcissism, exalted self-concept, no constraint of conscience, unconstrained aggression in pursuit of his goals, and paranoid orientation. Moreover, Saddam's monopoly of the authority, his single-handedness, reckless and repressive policies, and his ceaseless efforts at self-aggrandizing resulted in embroiling Iraq into two successive wars: Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) commonly known as the First Gulf War and The Second Gulf War (1990-1991) after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, followed by twelve year sanctions that depleted the economic and human resources and rendered Iraq more divided and worn out than ever. No doubt, these wars and unsettling circumstances caused incalculable damage—human, material, social, and environmental—to Iraq whose people fell victims to various forms of displacements, ordeals, and shocks. Al-Sayegh's devotes a considerable number of his poems to the delineation of the totalitarian system and condemnation of the cult of personality in Iraq. The following section is a critical analysis of his 'dictator poems'.

II. Al-Sayegh (1955) was thirteen years old when the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party assumed power in Iraq in a bloody coup d'état. His first confrontation with this despotic ruling Party took place when he was dismissed from The Institution of Agriculture in 1976 because of a poem he recited and was considered provocative and anti-authorities (Al-Sayegh, 2004, p.706). In the prime of his youth, when Al-Sayegh was twenty five years old, he was forcibly conscripted, like hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and taken to battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Al-Sayegh rapidly growing poetic talent underwent another test during the years of war. As usual with dictatorial and domineering systems, poetry was employed by the political regime to serve its propagandistic projects. In fact, literary productions, in general, were highly and perniciously affected by the dictates of autocratic regime that was intent on submitting it to a severe censorship and to its rigorous official ideology. Like other fields

of life, poetry become state-controlled and the poets were divided into two groups: the panegyrists who used to glorify the wisdom of the ‘Necessity’ leader and its ‘reckless’ actions and ally themselves with the despotic system and resisting or anti-war poets who stood against the war and its atrocities and refuse to praise it. Due to the terrorizing and oppressive atmosphere they were living in, the resisting poet, like Al-Sayegh were compelled to resort to various poetic means like symbolization, equivocation, circumlocution, myths, pun and periphrasis. This may account for Al-Sayegh’s resembling writing unconcealed anti-war poems as “walking in a minefield”(qtd in Aryn,2003). Intimidated by arbitrary murdering, forced disappearance, imprisonment and day and night surveillance, Al-Sayegh was sure that the stifling climate in Iraq where freedom of expression was absent was not conducive for free and conscientious poets like him. Reflecting on these horrible circumstances, Al-Sayegh(2010, p.694) wonders: “How can freedom be snatched from the claws of the dictator. How can you go on in your life and your creativity is under threat amid minefields, barbed wires, guards and contrabands”.

The second confrontation with the authorities took place when Al-Sayegh caught red-handed with a number of books that are categorized as ‘banned.’ Not only the books were confiscated, but Al-Sayegh himself was imprisoned in a stable for two years amidst the animals’ excrement, bombing, scorpions, boxes of ammunitions, and the hallucination of Said Hirz; a soldier who was suffering from schizophrenia (qtd in Lateef, 2008).

With the third confrontation which took place in 1993, Al-Sayegh became sure that Iraq was no longer safe for living. After presenting the play “The One who has been Awake in his Hallucination” in Al-Rasheed theatre which was adapted from Al-Sayegh’s poem “Hallucinations inside a Bleu Skull with which Adnan Al-Sayegh has Nothing to do.” Abood, the mouthpiece of the poet and the main character in the poem/play, severely criticizes the political system and its socially, economically, and psychologically damaging policies. Abood says “I was riven by my thirst in the land of waters”(Al-Sayegh,2004, p.706). Immediately after the presentation of this play, Al-Sayegh was blacklisted and marked as ‘renegade’ in the then Uday Saddam Hussain-controlled newspapers Babel and Al-Zwra’. Al-Sayegh

decides “see off the homeland of famines and oil,”(Ibid) and go to another place that offers him integrity of being and space of creativity. He chose self-exile rather than continue living in a country that oppressed its people and abort their dreams.

Al-Sayegh’s writing of poetry can be roughly divided into two phases. The first phase extends from the mid-1970s when his poetic genius began to blossom to the early 1990s when he left Iraq. The poems Al-Sayegh wrote in this phase might be termed the ‘pre-exile’ poems. In this phase, Al-Sayegh was offered very few options, namely; to leave Iraq which he could not afford because of financial and family circumstances; to pay lip service to the authorities which is an unthought-of option for him; to risk his life; and to resort to the art of ‘overt discourse’ (2004,p.707). He found the last option the lesser of the four evils since it enabled him to overcome many prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the apparatuses of the police state. This may explicate the absence of direct references to the ‘dictator’ in his pre-exile poems. Instead Al-Sayegh was satirizing the damaging socio-political consequences of oppressing people and applying the rules of totalitarianism. As such, the pervasiveness of lifeless images of alienation, abandonment, frustration, fear, death, hunger, hopeless waiting for change, and suffering is quite natural and expected. In an answer to a question about the possibility of evading the political issues when writing poetry, Al-Sayegh answers:

The moment an Iraqi is born, a long list of debts, aborted dreams and political losses is put in his mouth. The contents of this list would keep hounding him till the last moment in his life which he spends either as a homeless exile outside his homeland or as a grumbling and frustrated person inside the red-hot furnace.(Al-Zareebi, 2008, p.12)

Living independently and writing freely is not possible for a poet who believes in the values of liberty, freedom and human rights. Al-Sayegh painfully looks back at Iraq and could see nothing except “windmills and waterwheels of blood that keep rotating throughout our lives and history...It begins with a coup d’etat and ends with a coup d’etat and with these devastating upheavals, the land and its keep jerkily rotating. The movement is always from bad to worse”

(Ibid). The Iraqis, among them Al-Sayegh, never taste the pleasures of inner security, real happiness, freedom of speech and sense of belonging.

Al-Sayegh wrote six collections of poetry in the pre-exile phase. They are “Wait for me under the Monument of Liberty (1984), Song over the Kuffa Bridge(1986), The Sparrows don not like Bullets (1986), A Sky in a Helmet (1988), Mirrors for her Long Hair (1992), and A Cloud of Glue (1993). Most of the poems in these collection talk about the eerie atmosphere that the Iraqis were living in. Without hope of realizing their dreams, they were leading a monotonous and a spirit-draining life in the battlefields and home fronts where they either fell preys to the devastating claws of war, or hounded down by the police, security agencies, and informers who invaded all fields of life. In ‘Files’, Al-Sayegh gives a very dreary picture of life in Iraq in which everything, ‘the houses, the land, the wars, the potbellies, women’ are turned into ‘files.’ In the early morning, the woman/persona of the poems opens the first file to see only disappointments. She is passively watching the quick movement of the various portentous files in her life. There is the file of her husband who is reported missing in the war, the file of her sill unborn and fatherless file, the file of her lonely bed, the file of her black dress and deep sense of failure in front of mirrors. The poet concludes the poem by asserting that all Iraqis become mere ‘files’. This points at the systemic policy of dehumanizing Iraqis and turning them into tools in the grand project of aggrandizing and upholding the dictatorial system 2004, p.256-8).

In “The South,” the poet is a passenger in a war train that was running fast. From the window of the train, the poet kept watching the death of the streets and his own “death crammed-like orphans-in a bomb envelope. He watched a bare-headed and disheveled woman who was running quickly and stumbling into mud and martyrs. Following a series of painful images of deprivation and poverty that were juxtaposed with images of high buildings, banknotes, war profiteering, the poet concludes his poem by addressing Baghdad saying: “Oh City! How could you forget our lifespan half of which was stolen by war/How could you forget our sorrows/and the faces that were lost to sight by trenches/Not like that, Oh City! We are the

food of battles” (Al-Sayegh, 2004, p.259-62).

The central theme in “The Cloud of the Glue,” “I Survived War by Mistake,” “This Pain that Shines,” “A Stone and Stanzas and Your Hand”, “Search for an Address,” “Thus, I Said Everything to her,” “Homeland is A Sun, Mail Stamps, and You,” “From the Ashes of War to your Long Hair,” and “A Sun on the Edge of War,” and “Waiting for You,” is the devastating effect of war as a life-changing and heart-rending experience and the prevalence of death-in-life state. In the first poem, Al-Sayegh dreams of having the ability of stretching his body on “the spacious daylight/overshadowed by clouds not airplanes.” He searches for the leftovers of his age and friends amidst the mud and bombs. He dreams of inhaling a pure air and coming back home without hearing the military communiques. Of course, the poet’s dream was in vain since it was broken into fears and corpses. The same sense of disillusionment and discouragement is repeated and further stressed in the last poem which begins with:

In the long nights of war,

The sky, sometimes, seems without stars, without memories.

We throw the nets of sleeplessness

In the lake of artificial dreams

We stay tuned to what they would catch

The fish were hopping around in front of you

The minutes, the cities, the women, the friends, the barracks, “the wires”, the poems, the trees, the roads, and “mines”,

All of them were hopping around.

Nothing was there in your empty nets.

The sea never relinquishes his indifference

And the nets never have mercy on your hunger. (2004,p.385)

This sense of alienation continues in the poems Al-Sayegh has been writing in the second phase which extends from the beginning of his exile in 1994 to the present time. These poems can be

safely called ‘post-exile poems. Besides the dominant sense of social, psychological and cultural dislocation and disconnection which Al-Sayegh experiences in his actual and metaphorical exile(s), the central theme in these poems is Iraq; its ordeals, history, people, wars, and suffering. He keeps remembering Iraq nostalgically and painfully reflecting on the tragic impact of the successive disasters that befell it. More important is the sense of freedom Al-Sayegh enjoys in his exile, especially the European. For the first time, he can express his opinions freely without fearing the scissors of the official censor, the malice of the security informer, the policeman, and the direct physical and psychological intimidation. In exile, Al-Sayegh was offered the chance to directly talk about the totalitarian political system that had been wreaking havoc in Iraq. However, rather than criticizing Saddam Hussain by name, Al-Sayegh chooses to criticize all the dictators, despots and oppressors in the history of mankind. His aim is to condemn and criminalize those tyrants, to expose their wrong doings and to draw their attention to the importance of learning from past events which tell us of the tragic and sorrowful death of many tyrants.

Al-Sayegh wrote seven collections of poems in this phase. They are: *The Cloud of the Glue* (1994), *Under a Strange Sky*(1994), *Formations* (1996), *The Anthem of Uruk* (1996), *The One who Puts his Exile under his Armpit*(2006), *And*(2011), and *I Walk Captivated by my Wonder as if fly by the Wings of a Feathered Poem*(2015). In the poems of these collections, one notices a gradual movement from the expositions of the ordeals, catastrophes, and various forms of repression suffered by the Iraqis without directly referring to the real causes to direct attack and condemnation of the prime cause, i.e., the tyrannical and corrupted political regime. The references to the apparatuses of oppression such as police centers, terror, police dogs, informers, officers, investigation rooms, cells, guillotines, and equipment of torture abound in these poems. The personae of these poems, like the Iraqis, were powerless and ineffective. They were afraid all the time of those who were lying in wait of them. The dominance of fear and terror is made clear in almost all the poems of these collections.

In “Apprehensions,” the poet describes the state of fear and distress

he is living in. He cannot lead a normal life as he is threatened day and night by the agents of the totalitarian regime. His inner anxiety grows bigger and deeper until it becomes hallucinatory. Those agents look like ghosts that haunt his mind. He is sure that one day 'They' would come to take away and destroy the most precious thing in his life: his poems. He says:

As soon as I hear the softest knock on the door,
I quickly and-perplexed- hide my poems in the drawers.
However, the knock almost always turns out to be
An echo of the police patrols that turn around
in the street of my head.
In spite of this, I am certain
One day, THEY will knock on the door,
Their hands, trained like police dogs, will stretch
Into the drawers of my heart
To snatch my poems
And.....
My life
Then they will leave quietly. (2004, p.11)

In "Iraq", Al-Sayegh points directly to cause of his country's calamities: it was ruled by a series of despots that sucked its energies and potentials and destroyed its people. Although they have various names like Sultan, General, King, Lord, Tyrant, Mr. President, Fascist, they have many things in common like their aggressive nature, reliance on ruthless security apparatus whose main aim is to keep the status quo, and assuming a god-like character that is self-centered. In "Three stanzas for Perplexity," a father told his son not to narrate his dreams to anyone because "the street is booby-trapped with ears(informers)/Each ear is linked to another by a secret wire/Till it reaches the Sultan."(p.16) The Sultan of the poem is a self-inter-

ested man; he cares for nothing except his self-gratification and aggrandizement. These two last qualities are translated into multitude of statues are forcibly implanted in every nook and cranny of the poet's homeland. In the third stanza, the images of vain grandeur and unproductive hugeness are juxtaposed with images of filth and poverty. The more the sultan/dictator is glorified, the more his subjects suffer and feel pain. Evocatively, the poet says

Sitting under the shadow of their statues

Clipping my dirty nails

And thinking of their sumptuous glories

Those who are erected in the squares

Releasing their high giggles and laugh

On people who grind their teeth out of hunger

To build monuments of gold and prayers for them(2004.p.17)

It is clear that the people are living in a state of servitude in which all their human rights are sacrificed on the altar of dictatorship. However, these unlimited powers and authorities fail to save the dictator when he is confronted a coup d'etat. In “A Homeland Board”, the King is frightened, perplexed, and forsaken the closest people like his minister, soldiers and wife. For the first time he asks about his kind people whom he never heard of for years. He expects them to support him, but they forsake him as he did long time ago. They mockingly and meaningfully inform him “Oh! Lord, you have been late in remembering/And now we can do nothing except wholeheartedly welcoming the new victor.”(p.18) Although stated in different names, the dictator whether he is a king or a sultan, follows a typical pattern in rule; i.e., oppressing his people and detaching himself from them.

The same is true of the leaders who abandon their responsibilities and forsake their people. They fail in the first test of patriotism they participate in. they are just like the Sultans and Kings in their vanity, selfishness and meanness. In “Leaders,” Al-Sayegh explicates:



You will know them from the shoes they had left
....before they ran away from the battlefield
Certainly, you will know them
Those who fill the platforms of the city
With the drums of their heroisms
I wonder where are they now?(p.20)

These lines point at the irresponsibility and selfishness of the leaders who turn out to be self-centered. They are busy all the time with their sham heroisms which more often than not result in catastrophes for the people.

In “The Martyrs of Intifada (Uprising)”, Al-Sayegh illuminates an essential aspect in any dictatorial regime: the repression of any opposition and the ruthless crushing of uprising and revolutions. Following the Second Gulf War (1991) which Saddam’s regime tragically lost, Iraqi people in the southern provinces revolted against his disastrous and risky internal and external policies. The poem points out the fate of such uprisings under dictatorial regimes. One of the means of killing not only the dreams and aspirations of people but the people themselves is Saddam’s ‘Republican Guards’ which is a very oppressive security apparatus whose job is to protect the regime and oppress people.

Those who fall down in heaps
In front of the Guard’s cannons
.....
Those who on their gravestones
The cactus of forgetfulness grow abundantly
Those whose news was eroded bit by bit
In the crush of the city(2004, 19)

In “A Lesson in History 3”, Al-Sayegh evocatively compare people



to the bridges who are used by the leaders and generals to cross to other sides and achieve their goals. Architecturally similar to the bridges, people humiliatingly stoop to let others pass:

We who are bent forever

Like the wooden bridges of the country sides

The buffalos,

The political Parties,

The Generals

Cross us.

The hurried vehicles

And the yawning dreams

Cross us

In these lines the immobility of the bridges is contrasted with the mobility of things around them. People, like those bridges will remain the same without any real or positive changes in their lives under the dictatorial systems.

In “A Homeland’s Tale,” Al-Sayegh moves a step forward in his delineation of the character of the dictator and the impact of dictatorial regimes on people. The poem contains a clear reference to the ‘cult of Personality’ as it ironically talks about the statues of the president Saddam Hussain who fight each other. It also alludes to one of the most humiliating and obnoxious slogans that recited by people whenever and wherever he goes. This slogan turns Iraqi people into slave whose sole goal in life is to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the dictator:

The statue of the president felt bored

So he descended from his gold pedestal

Leaving the delegations, flowers, and the children’s chants

He starts walking among people who burst forth clapping their hands

Shouting:

“Our souls, blood, and livesat your disposal...”

“ We sacrifice them for you”

The statue feels delighted

And when the president’s other statues know of this

They too descended from their gold pedestals

To the squares

And they began to fight each other.

The people kept watching

They did not know

Who is Mr. President!

In “A Poet: To the Martyr Poet Ali Al-Rimahi,” Al-Sayegh describes what happens to the poets under the totalitarian ruling systems. Due to the absence of the freedom of expression, the poets are not allowed to give vent to their inner feeling to criticize the status quo. The only kind of poetry they are allowed to write is the eulogistic and laudatory. Poetry, like the other literary and artistic expressions, becomes a propagandistic tool in the hand of the authorities. Al-Sayegh strongly condemns such poets who succumb and contribute to the perpetuation and sham glorification of the despots. Moreover, the dedication to Al-Rimahi is significant here. Ali, as Al-Sayegh introduces him, is “a close friend, a sensitive poet, famous for his provoking and confrontational poems in the late 1970s. He was executed by the Iraqi regime in 1979.”(2004, 703) There are very few options available to the Iraqi poets: either to lose his life, to collaborate with the regime, or to go into exile. In clear contrast to Al-Sayegh, those subservient and lowly poets live like rats:

In the time of despots

The eunuch poets- like the rats-

Shrink away into the Sultan’s burrow

The keep on singing
The glories of his majesty
And his bounty
And the letters of your poems are still
-In all places and times-
Walking carrying the Crosses on their shoulders

Another reference to the Sultan’s oppressive policies is included in “Pawn.” The poem talks about the misuse of power and the dangerous consequences of launching bloody and costly wars. The persona who is persecuted because he refuses to participate in the war warns others that they will endure the same fate. All of them are mere pawns in the chessboard whose pieces are haphazardly used by despots and tyrants. The formers become mere puppets whose strings are moved by the latters.

The Sultan pawns me
As a soldier in a war I do not understand
To defend a chessboard? I do not know-
Or a homeland or an arena?
Therefore, I declared disobedience
But the eunuch soldiers
Lead me blindfolded to the guillotine
They point the nozzles of their guns at me
I shout: stop
You will be dragged on this chessboard
Ram by ram
To raise the crowns on the stairs of your remains. (2004, 75)

The dictators invade even the dreams of their people. They spare no means to terrify and repress them. In "I and Hulagu Khan," Al-Sayegh narrates a nightmare he had in which he met the Mongol king Hulagu whose army conquered the last Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, Al-Musta'sm, and destroyed and sacked the capital of the Islamic empire, Baghdad. Al-Sayegh's Hulagu is a typical tyrant. He expects the poets to praise him all the time. The poet's refusal to do so subjects him to investigation and persecution. Death is the fate of all those who refuse to fulfill the whimsical and capricious desires of Hulagu. Again the manifestations of police state are pervasive like the security Guards, the executioner, terror, horses, castles, and blood shedding:

The guards escort me to Hulagu,

He was seated on his huge throne

And with him a throng of ministers, poets, and female slaves.

He asks me; "why didn't you praise me?"

Scared stiff and frightened, I shivered: Oh! My Lord, I am a poet of prosaic poems.

Confidently and awesomely, he smiles: "It doesn't matter..."

He points to his black executioner lightheartedly:

So, teach him how to write a rhymed poetry by splitting his head into

The first hemistich and the second hemistich

And be careful not to disturb the meter

And be watchful of consonants and vowels.

The black executioner holds me tightly by my trembling collar

He swoops down with his huge sword

On my neck

So my head begins to roll

And it runs into the window that spreads out because of the gravity of the shock.

Terrified, the poet awakes dry-throated. His neck is covered with sweat. The book of the famous Arabic historian Al-Tabari was still lying heavily on his chest. The pages of the books were destroyed under the toes of the hoofs of Hulagu’s horses which wreak havoc with the kingdoms and castles. Here a clear connection is made between Hulagu, the Mongol ruthless emperor and Saddam, the former president of Iraq. Although Saddam is not mentioned by name, the reference to his televised speech which usually runs for hours and hours and more often than not is broadcasted later makes the connection gain in more significance. The implication is that just like Hulagu, Saddam wreaks havoc with Iraq and its people. Iraqis were not compelled to continue listening to Saddam as they were tightly besieged by his pervasive presence in their daily lives; in the streets, work places, insides houses, on the pages of newspapers, in the curricula, radio and TV. As the person who is reported disparaging risks death or sever retaliation in Iraq, people under the rule of Hulagu endure the same risks. The poem ends by Hulagu kicking the poet in his testicles because he had slept before finishing reading his biography in Al-Tabari’s book.

“The Second Shadow” again deals with the devastating impact of the dictatorial systems on people. Though it is primarily about the government agent or ‘informer,’ there are many details that point at the real cause of the suffering of people, i.e., the dictator. Again, the presence of the president’s pictures is blatant and suggestive at the same time. The poet feels sorry for the ‘informer’ because he, the poet believes, is one of the victims of the exploitive and tyrannical regime. The poet imagines that he shakes hand with the informer in a bar. Upon doing this, he notes that the informer’s hand was cut off by war splinters. The informer points at to the picture of his mockingly smiling executioner which occupied the newspaper front page. The president, as usual, was ornamented by eye-catching medals and decorations. He accuses the mass media like T.V., radio, and newspapers of aggrandizing and baselessly magnifying the president as he is followed by ‘mealy-mouthed, hypocrite throng, and cameras.’(2004, p.84) However, the more pictures are hanged and presented, as the poem clearly illustrates, the more people sink down in poverty, desperation and destruction.

Nowhere is the 'cult of Personality' clearer than in Al-Sayegh's poem "Crossing to Exile." As the title suggests, the poet makes a daring movement from his homeland in which he was suffering internal exile and chronic alienation to another place in which he hopes to find everything that is lacking in his original homeland; namely, freedom, dignity and good living condition. In the poem, Al-Sayegh states the reasons behind the choice of exile on the part of many Iraqis. In a series of images dribbling with pain and lamentation, Al-Sayegh tells of a homeland that is stolen by a group of criminals that is intent on destroying all manifestations of life. In an answer to a question by a girl about the reasons behind the raggedness of his hands, the poet tells her of his "homeland, the banners, the colonization, and the glories of the Nation." These things and others make the poet's homeland "Sadder than it ought to be." In his host country, i.e., Europe, the poet is determined to expose the hideous and shocking crimes committed in his dictator-controlled homeland. He says

I shall lie down on the first pavement I see in Europe
I shall raise my legs in front of bystanders
To show them the bastinados of the schools and detention camps
Which drive me to exile
What I carry in my pockets is not a passport
But a history of oppression
In which for fifty years, we regurgitate nothing but fodder
And orations....
And the rolled cigarettes
In which we stand in front of the scaffold
Watching our endlessly shaking corpses
And we salute and applaud for the rulers
Filled with fear on files of the members of our families
Stored in the vaults of the Security.



“This Land (Iraq) was no Longer Suitable for Anything”

It is crystal clear that conditions of life are far from being humane and civilized in Iraq where all methods of systematic persecution and intimidation are extensively used by the authorities. The last part of the poem underlines the prima cause of the ordeals of Iraq: he is the President who dominates and confiscates everything for his own self-interest. Iraq becomes the President and the President becomes Iraq, as one of the very well-known and often quoted slogans in Iraq states. Iraq is, virtually speaking, obliterated; nothing can be found in in safe the President. In an incantatory manner, Al-Sayegh explains how his homeland

Begins with the speech of the president

...and ends with his speech

Passing through the streets of the President, the songs of the President, the museums of the President, the reward of the President, the trees of the President, the factories of the President, the journals of the President, the stable of the of the President, the clouds of the President, the camps of the President, the statues of the President, the kilns of the President, medals of the President, the concubine of the President, the schools of the President, the farms of the President, the weather of the President, the instructions of the President.....

Practically nothing is left for the ordinary Iraqis of their homeland. Of course, the list is longer as it is open-ended. It is left to the reader to imagine to what extent life was suffocating and bleak in Iraq. The poet believes that the question he is often asked, “From which country you came.....?” is silly since the poem states very clearly that he came from the land of death and wholesale destruction.

The poet, however, dreams of a ‘Revolution’ that will help to overthrow the president and free the Iraqis of the shackles of dictatorship. In “A Revolution,” the poet wonders

What were the servants of the palace thinking of?

When they were wiping with their peacocked tails

The atoms of the time fastened to his luminous beard!

I wonder what were the belles of the palace dreaming of?

When they were caressing with their hands his dead castles?
I wonder what was the laureate poet writing
In his elegant style?
When the door of the presidential toilet
Bang on the fold of his long coat?
I wonder what was the milk woman of the Emperor's cows thinking?
While she was scattering the fodder of her life in corners of the stable.
I wonder on which spot in the terrains of the emperor's face
The mercurial looks of his ministers will slide?
In the moment when
All of them overhear
The sound of the first shots that smash the crystals of the palace!!
And force its way
-In the corridors grafted with guards and mosaic-
In front of the clashing banners!!!

The "revolution" ultimately takes place although in a very weird and unexpected way. In 2003, the United States-led Coalition overthrew Saddam ending about forty years of dictatorial rule and thirteen years of heavy economic sanctions. It is generally agreed upon that Saddam could not have been deposed except if an external power intervenes. The Saddam-led Ba'ath regime was so ruthless and inhumane that no Iraqi ever thinks of deposing it or putting an end to its crimes even in his dreams.

The post-2003 era in Iraq, however, results in new chronic ordeals for the Iraqis most of whom were highly disillusioned as they see their own homeland further falls apart and endures a new state of disintegration and fragmentation. The era is characterized by sectarian divisions and violence, insecurity, waves of exodus, blood shed-

ding and various kinds of corruption. The poet’s homeland becomes a battlefield in which self-interested and unscrupulous political and denominational parties are fighting and competing with each other to get control of the economic resources. More important is the tendency of these parties to repeat the process of dictator-making as each party tries to aggrandize and idolatrize their leaders. Thus, instead of one dictator, the new Iraq has countless dictators. In “Naivety”, he tells

Whenever a dictator falls down
From the throne of history studded with our tears
My hands are burned by clapping
But as soon as I come back home
And turn on TV.

Another dictator spills over
From the mouths of the multitude which are a flamed with whistling and applauses
Hysterically, I begin to laugh
Of my ‘naivety.’ (2004,190)

In ‘Parties,’ the poet comments on the wrangling among the political parties in Iraq. Iraq and its people are the biggest losers in this internal fight:

Banners are moving forward
In a forest of slogans
They disagree
Who is to proceed first?
Who is to be in the forefront?
Then they fight with their hands
Then by clubs
Then....the banners fall down

We, the members of the crowd, on both sides of the road
Saw nothing except
A forest of rifles

Interlacingly moving forward towards us....(2004, p.29)

Regardless of their allegedly patriotic slogans and claims, those parties are self-interested. Their only goal is to serve their own aims and interests. In spite of their claims to democracy and freedom, they are not different from the dictatorial system they revolted against. Both are two sides of the same coin.

To conclude, it is crystal clear that as a human being and poet, Al-Sayegh is very sensitive to the ordeals of his fellow citizens who fall prey, like him, to the clutches of the tyrannical system that wreaked havoc in all aspects of life. Al-Sayegh's 'dictator poems' do not represent a mere desire on his part to criticize and denounce the authoritative and despotic systems, but they are an attempt to resist and fight back the feeling of alienation he often feels when thinking of his homeland. The 'dictator' in these poems turns out to be a pathetic person who is in a constant need of others to support him and aggrandize his image. The implied irony in the poems is that people never truly digest and comprehend the lessons of history as they allow the latent 'tyrannical' urges to control them, and ultimately turn them into dictators in an ongoing process of dividing the world into oppressors and oppressed.

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