

## Impersonality, Traditional Heritage and Intertextuality: A Comparative Study between Salah Abd al-Sabur, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and T.S.Eliot

Mohammed A. A. Hizabr Alhusami\*

Department of English, Faculty of Science and Arts, Sharurah, Najran University, Najran, KSA

**Corresponding Author:** Mohammed A. A. Hizabr Alhusami, Email: md.alhusami@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

This comparative study aims to investigate the similarities and differences between the two Arab poets, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab and Salah Abd al-Sabur from one hand and T. S. Eliot from the other. The study attempts to investigate the attitudes of those poets towards impersonality. It shows how impersonality from the perspective of Abd al-Sabur is not like Eliot's, who emphasizes that impersonality is critical to poetry while Abd al-Sabur argues that personality and impersonality together form a perfect work. Unlike them, Al-Sayyab does not have critical comments on the terms of personality and impersonality. The study also aims to investigate the resemblance between those poets, regarding their attitudes towards traditional heritage. It also attempts to investigate intertextuality between their texts. The analysis is comparatively based on some selected poems composed by the three above-mentioned poets. The study concludes that Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur and Eliot hold similar views on traditional heritage as they emphasize the necessity of a positive relation between modern and traditional heritage. In regards to impersonality in poetry, Eliot contradicts himself because he could not escape being impersonal in his poetry. On the other hand, Abd al-Sabur's and Al-Sayyab's poems bear stamps of personality and impersonality. The study also concludes that intertextuality between Al-Sayyab and Abd al-Sabur, from one hand and T. S. Eliot from the other, is due to acculturation rather than influence and eurocentrism.

**Key words:** impersonality, Traditional Heritage, Intertextuality, Acculturation

### INTRODUCTION

The seeds of comparative studies in the Arab world go back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century when Abu Al-Qasim Al-Hasan Ibn Bishr Al-Amidi (d. 987) composed his book, *Al-Muwazanah Bayna Shir Abi Tammam wa Al-Buhturi* [Balanced comparison between the poetry of Abu Tammam and Al-Buhturi] in which he compares between the poetry of Abu Tammam<sup>1</sup> and Al-Buhturi.<sup>2</sup> As comparative literature, in the strict sense, means "the examination and analysis of the relationships and similarities of the literatures of different peoples and nations"<sup>3</sup>; this comparison is not considered as a comparative study because both Abu Tammam and Al-Buhturi are Arabs and belong to the same culture. However, such attempts indicate that comparative literature began early in Arab world. But in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comparative literature became more significant in the Arab academia.

This comparative study discusses the relationship between the two Arab poets, Al-Sayyab and Abd al-Sabur, with T. S. Eliot from different perspective. Eliot emphasizes the importance of impersonality in poetry while Abd al-Sabur emphasizes both personality and impersonality in poetry. Abd al-Sabur, therefore, differs from Eliot's views; he mentions that personality and impersonality are misused in the

field of art because some writers allege that impersonality is the standard of a perfect literary work. For Abd al-Sabur, every perfect literary work is characterized by personality and impersonality at the same time. Unlike them, Al-Sayyab does not have critical comments on the issue of personality and impersonality and most of his poems are personal.

Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur and Eliot hold similar views on traditional heritage. Eliot asserts that the historical sense of the traditional heritage is crucial to the poet. In their poetry, Al-Sayyab and Eliot link between the past and present by using ancient myths and by alluding to other works. Abd al-Sabur also links the past with the present time by employing historical figures such as the Sufi poet, Al-Hallaj and the historical symbols such as Ammuriyah, Al-Mutasim, Al-Tatars [Tartars] and Abu Tammam. Abd al-Sabur does not show interest in myths, instead he shows reconciliation between tradition and contemporariness, and between Western and Arabic cultures. Intertextuality between Al-Sayyab, and Abd al-Sabur from one hand, and Eliot from the other, is apparent from the similarities between their lines. As this study investigates the differences between the three poets, it also focuses on similarities between them from the perspective of acculturation rather than influence and eurocentrism.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As subjectivity associates with the romantic poetry, impersonality associates with the modernist poetry. Impersonality is referred to as the unseen ingredient in the structure of the modernist poem. According to the critics of modernist poetry, a modernist poet should efface himself from his work. According to Litz (2008: 30) "the poem does not express the personality of the poet; but without the spur of personal feelings, the poem would not have been written at all." Yet, the concepts of impersonality and subjectivity seem crucial to modernist poetry. Impersonality means the natural objectivity whereas subjectivity implies the poet's personal feelings about his subject. Subjectivity reflects the self of the poet, and reveals how far the pronoun 'I' can be perceived in the text throughout all the poetic devices. Impersonality cannot merely be investigated the poet's use of the first-person singular pronouns 'I', 'me', and 'my' in his/her poems. However, poetry, according to some critics is considered impersonal when the poet does not use the first-person singular pronoun.

Al-Sayyab argues that a rebel against the past, because it is a past, is a kind of madness. He affirms that literary heritage should be reviewed in order to discard what is bad in it. Similarly, Abd al-Sabur does not reject the traditional heritage or belittle its significance. He criticizes those who look at the history of Arabic civilization as a perfect and an archetype of the ideal nations, and also those who compare Arabic traditional heritage with contemporary requirements to conclude that traditional heritage is invalid for the modern life.

Eliot is among the poets who links a strong relationship between the present and the past through employing myths and allusions to historical and ancient literary works.

Intertextuality as a postmodern term refers to interrelationship between some texts of Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur from one hand and Eliot from the other. (Badawi, 1975) says that the name of T. S. Eliot entered Arabic literary criticism in 1933, and much of Eliot's poetry was translated into Arabic and published in Arabic literary periodicals. Most of the studies which deal with Eliot in Arabic literature focus on the subject of influence from one side, i.e. Eliot's impact on the modernist Arab poets including Al-Sayyab and Abd Al-Sabur. In the postmodern literary theories, comparative literature liberates itself from the subjects of origin and influence.

## METHODS

This study implies the comparative design. It deals with the comparison between the three poets with regard to impersonality, traditional heritage and intertextuality. The study is based on selected poems by Eliot Abd al-Sabur and Al-Sayyab such as "The Waste Land", "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Hollow Men", "Madinat Al-Sindbad" [The City of Sindbad], "Ru'ya fi Aam 1956" [Vision in 1956], Abu Tammam, Ma'sat Al-Hallaj, "Lahn [Melody], Al-Mulku Lak" [For you is the Kingdom], "Ta'amulat Lailiya" [Night Contemplation] and "Baudelaire"

## DISCUSSION

### Eliot's Impersonality

Gelpi (1987) states that impersonality for Eliot means a process of depersonalization whereas objective correlative means an expression of a personal point of view<sup>4</sup>. Eliot coins the term objective correlative to be the way of expressing emotion in poetry. Eliot (1957) differentiates between two forms of impersonality:

There are two forms of impersonality that which is natural to mere skillful craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist. The first is that of what I have called the 'anthology piece', of lyric by Lovelace ... The second impersonality is that of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth: retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol. (Eliot, 1957: 255)

Eliot (1976) says "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." Eliot criticizes the romantic poets for being engrossed in subjectivity in their poems. As a matter of fact, Eliot could not escape being completely impersonal in his poetry, though he emphasizes the importance of impersonality in poetry. Ellmann (1987) argues that T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound advocate impersonality, but they often smuggle their personality back into their poetics. He adds that Eliot insists that poetry originates in personal emotion and that the poet's subjectivity pervades the text.

Writers have different views on Eliot's concept of impersonality for instance, Cianci (2007) states:

The perception that Eliot's concept of impersonality seemed contradictory began early, with reviews of *The Sacred Wood* (1920). Conrad Aiken, for example, outlined the ostensible contradiction between statements about 'impersonality' in the 'Tradition' essay and those in 'Philp Massinger'. The charge of inconsistency was not mitigated by Eliot's comments on *The Waste Land*, which he variously described as impersonal and as 'the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life. (Cianci, 2007: 42)

Ellmann (1987) argues that Eliot contradicts himself throughout his critical prose of impersonality when he says: "No artist produces great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense."

Rajnath (1980) also indicates to Eliot's contradictions by stating:

The problems of impersonality that Eliot confronted in his later poetry differ from those he faced in his early poetry. In the early poetry the experience is personal and the problem is how to depersonalize it, while in the later poetry the experience is general and therefore the problem is how to individualize it. That is to say, the problem that Eliot has to resolve in the later poetry is just the opposite of his problem in the early poetry. Eliot resolves his problem in "Ash

Wednesday” by speaking in his own person and placing the images and symbols, which are highly personal side by side with those, which are liturgical. (Rajnaath, 1980:110)

Some argue that Eliot does not contradict himself, and he is consistent in his theory of impersonality. Impersonality cannot be proved or disapproved in a poem by indicating to the utilization of the first-person singular pronouns, because, the speaker in the poem may be not the poet himself, but a persona. However, repetitions of the first-person singular pronouns seem to be a sign of the poet’s subjectivity. Elliott (1982) refers to the relationship between the poet’s self-projection and the element of persona.

The word persona is used by literary interpreters in an effort to clarify the relationship between the writer - the historical person - and the characters the writer creates. That relationship is never simple... but it is made more difficult when the writer uses the first person singular pronoun, when he writes. “I” (Elliott, 1982: x)

Eliot uses the first-person singular pronoun in most of his poems. For instance, Eliot’s “The Waste Land” encompasses the first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my) enormously, except the fourth section of the poem “Death by Water” which does not involve any of first-person pronouns. In “Ash Wednesday”, the first-person singular pronouns are present from the opening lines. But the speaker in Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” refers to the poet himself indirectly as the poem reflects his religious vision of life and God, but Eliot utilizes the persona as a mask to avoid self-expression. In Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”, the first-person singular pronouns are used three times. Similarly, in Eliot’s early poetry collections *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *Ariel Poems*, the first-person singular pronouns are found in many poems. Exploring impersonality in Eliot’s poetry through tracking the use of the first-person singular pronouns is not highly reliable because the poet may use a technique of a “persona” as the speaker in the poem. In Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot (1957) says:

The first voice is the voice of the poet taking to himself or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (Eliot, 1957: 89)

### Abd al-Sabur’s Impersonality

Abd al-Sabur states that impersonality is not the standard of a good literary work. For him, personality and impersonality together form a perfect art and every good literary work is personal and impersonal at the same time. Abd al-Sabur criticizes some critics who believe that poets are considered personal just when they express themselves and they are impersonal when they do not. He states that such view is common in the critical standards, but it contrasts the mind and the sense, the material and the spirit, and the human and the universe. Abd al-Sabur argues that art is not only an expression, but also an interpretation. He states that self-consciousness

is the starting point of self-criticism, and self-criticism is the first step of progress. He adds that introspection promotes a language for self-dialogue.

### Al-Sayyab’s Impersonality

Unlike Abd al-Sabur, Al-Sayyab has no views on the impersonality. As a poet, most of his poems bear stamps of personality. For instance, his poems “Haffar al-Qubur” [The Gravedigger], “Al-Mumis Al-Amya” [The Blind Harlot], “Al-Aslihah wa al-Atfal” [Weapons and Children] deal with themes of revolution, hope of change, poverty, war, corruption and aggression, and his personal attitudes towards the bad situation in Iraq is apparent. In these poems, Al-Sayyab attempts to make a radical change not only in the Arabic poetry, but also in the political life. Al-Sayyab’s *Al-Mabad al-Ghareeq* [The Sunken Temple], *Manzil al-Aqnan* [The House of Slaves], *Shanasheel Ibnat al-Jalabi* [The Balcony of the Nobleman’s Daughter], and *Iqbal* [name of *Al-Sayyab’s* wife] are sad poems in which Al-Sayyab laments himself.

### Traditional Heritage from the Perspective of Al-Sayyab, Abd Al-Sabur and Eliot

Al-Sayyab and Abd al-Sabur do not reject traditional heritage. They assert the link between the past and the present. Al-Sayyab says that he neither worships the past nor denies it. Al-Sayyab argues that no life without past. For instance, in his poems: “Shanasheel Ibnat Al-Jalabi” [The Balcony of the Nobleman’s Daughter], “Unshudat Al-Matar” [The Rain Chant], “Al-Mabad Al-Ghareeq” [The Sunken Temple], “Madinat al-Sindibad” [The City of Sindbad], “Al-Awdah li Jaikur” [Return to Jaikur], “Fi al-Maghrib al-Arabi” [In the Arab Maghrib], “Al-Mumis Al-Amya” [The Blind Harlot], Al-Sayyab alludes to some historical stories mentioned in the Holy Quran such as the story of Qabil (Cain), Thamud, “Gog and Magog”, Abraha, Kaba, Hira, Mohammed, and Maryam (Mary).

Al-Sayyab also alludes to some historical Arab figures such as Al-Basus<sup>5</sup> and Al-Shimr<sup>6</sup> as in his poem “Marthiyat Jaikur” [Elegy on Jaikur]. Moreover, in his poems “Al-Sha’ir al-Rajeem” [The Evil Poet], “Unshudat Al-Matar” [The Rain Chant], “Al-Mabad al-Ghareeq” [The Sunken Temple], “Tammuz Jaikur” [Tammuz of Jaikur], “Min Ru’ya Fukai” [From Fukai’s Vision], “Cerberus in Babel”, “Li Anni Ghareeb” [For I am a Stranger], “Umm Al-Brom”, Al-Sayyab alludes to several ancient myths such as Tammuz, Persephone, Zeus, Apollo, Tantalus, Midas, Cerberus, Ganymede, Attis, Ishtar, and Narcissus.

Abd al-Sabur does not disregard Arabic traditional heritage or belittle its significance. He criticizes those who overestimate the past, and those who claim that Arabic traditional heritage is useless. The first view searches for the source of power in traditional heritage while the second view searches for the source of power in contemporary civilization. Abd al-Sabur states that culture is a living heritage which links between the past and the present and goes towards the future. Abd al-Sabur alludes to the historical events and figures in

many of his poems. For instance, in his poem "The Tatars Attacked", Abd al-Sabur says:

Tatars attacked,

And fired destruction onto our ancient city<sup>7</sup> (Abd al-Sabur, 1972:14)

In his poem "Abu Tammam", Abd al-Sabur alludes to three figures: Abu Tammam, the poet, a Muslim woman who cried "Help me, O Mutasim!" and Mutasim, the eighth Abbasid Caliph.

That shrieking voice in Amorium  
Has not vanished in the desert  
Sword of the "Baghdadi" revolutionary  
Cleaved the desert to her.. Responded  
When an Arab sister cried:  
Help me, O Mutasim!<sup>8</sup> (Abd al-Sabur, 1972: 141)

Similarly, Eliot emphasizes that the historical sense of the traditional heritage is essential to the poet. In his poem, *The Waste Land*, Eliot links between the theory and practice by presenting numerous allusions to the ancient literary works and myths. He emphasizes the necessity of the positive relationship between modern and traditional heritage. Eliot, (1920), in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", states that tradition should positively be discouraged. He also says "[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists". Eliot is criticized as a traditional poet because of his views on the relationship between past and present.

### **Al-Sayyab and Eliot: Intertextuality**

Badawi (1975) says that the name of T. S. Eliot entered Arabic literary criticism in 1933, and much of Eliot's poetry was translated into Arabic and published in Arabic literary periodicals. Most of the studies which deal with T. S. Eliot in Arabic literature focus on the subject of influence from one side, i.e. Eliot's impact on the modernist Arab poets including Al-Sayyab and Abd Al-Sabur. But this study introduces Al-Sayyab as an innovator rather than an imitator. Eliot's "The Waste Land", is a highly influential poem and many modernist Arab poets celebrate this poem for its condemnation of dark side of the Western civilization. Many Arabic studies present Eliot as the most influential poet of modernist Arabic poetry. On the contrary, some Arab writers criticize Eliot's poetry for being a product of the colonizers literature; and the presence of Eliot in Arabic poetry is a kind of cultural imperialism. Kadhim (2004) mentions that Eliot explicitly supports the British Empire despite his call for the separation of literature and politics. He also says:

Another sense in which "The Waste Land" can be perceived as Imperialist relates to the way the poem tends to center the Western metropolis. If we allow that "The Waste Land", as seems plausible, is at least in part about "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history", then the poem's proclamation of centrality of the West becomes all too obvious. Eliot thus assumes that "contemporary history" is synonymous with European, he precludes the possibility of the existence of other histories which may not have been panoramas of futility and anarchy, i. e., the histories of emerging nations. (Kadhim, 2004:135)

Al-Sayyab's familiarity with Arabic and English literatures enables him to broaden his horizons to create hybrid poetics. In traditional Arabic literary criticism, to borrow from the other texts means to commit a poetic fallacy; and such poetic writings is called 'poetic plagiarism'. Several terms are used to describe the process of borrowing' from other texts, such as poetic plagiarism, or poetic theft, influence, acculturation, hybridity and intertextuality. In post-modern theories, borrowing from other texts is a kind of acculturation and cultural hybridity, rather than plagiarism or influence whereas traditional Arabic theories, consider it as a kind of poetic plagiarism. Plagiarism is acceptable compared to influence, acculturation, hybridity, and intertextuality because plagiarism refers to the intentional behavior and it is considered as a theft of other works while influence, acculturation, hybridity, and intertextuality occur naturally and unconsciously. The cultural hybridity between the Arabs and the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an outcome of colonialism, immigration and translation. Many Arab researchers present Abd Al-Sabur and Al-Sayyab negatively through referring to the influence of Eliot in their poetry, which in turn diminishes their contribution and their creativity. In fact, both Abd Al-Sabur and Al-Sayyab lived during the colonial period, and read the western literatures through translation; therefore, intertextuality between their poetry and Eliot's texts is a natural result of acculturation. The following lines show the common techniques of allusions and myths between them. For instance, in his poem "The Waste Land", Eliot refers to the theme of infertility when he says:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers. (Eliot, 1970: 73)

Similarly, Al-Sayyab, in his poem "Madinat Al-Sindbad" [The City of Sindbad], refers to the theme of infertility and says that spring has come without rain, without flowers:

Oh Spring  
Oh Spring, what has afflicted you?  
You have come without rain  
You have come without flowers,  
You have come without fruit,  
And your end was like your beginning  
Wrapped round in gore; now summer  
Is upon us with black clouds  
Its days full of cares  
And its nights

We spend wakefully, counting the stars. (Khouriand Al-gar, 1974: 99)

Eliot employs myths in many of his poems such as "The Portrait of a Lady", when he refers to Achilles, Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar, when he refers to the divine Hercules. In "Sweeney Erect", Eliot refers to Aeolus, Ariadne, Nausicaa, Polypheme, Eliot says:

Display me Aeolus above  
Which tangle Ariadne's hair

And swell with haste the perjured sails.  
Morning stirs the feet and hands  
(Nausicaa and Polypheme). (Eliot, 1970: 34)

In his poem, *The Waste Land*, Eliot also refers to the myth of Athenian princess, Philomela, who transformed into a nightingale and her sister, Procne who transformed into a swallow:

The change of Philomela, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears. (Eliot, 1970: 56)

Similarly, Al-Sayyab refers in many of his poems to the myths of fertility and rain such as Tammuz, and Ishtar, Attis and Cybele, Adonis and Aphrodite and Persephone, Baal and Anat, Osiris and Isis. Al-Sayyab seems to be familiar with ancient myths, as he employs all types of myths. He employs myths of love such as Eurydice and Orpheus, Zeus and Ganymede, Apollo and Daphne, Cupid and Psyche, and Narcissus. He also employs the myths of sacrifice, sufferings, and struggle such as Isis, Oedipus, Laius, Tantalus, Prometheus, Sisyphus, Medusa, Cerberus and Sphinx, Messiah, Ulysses, Sindbad and Ko-ngai.<sup>9</sup> He also employs myths of death and rebirth such as Tammuz, Phoenix. In his poem "Ru'ya fi Aam 1956" [Vision in 1956], Al-Sayyab refers to several mythical and historical figures. Zeus, Ganymede, Tammuz, Attis, Baal, Ishtar, Mary, Messiah, Lazarus, Judas, Genghis Khan, and Hafsa:

O, strange divine eagle  
O, you who swooping from Olympus in the silence of evening,  
Lifting my soul up to the sky layers  
Lifting my soul as the wounded Ganymede,  
Crucifying my eyes as the Christ, Tammuz,  
Oh, divine eagle be kind to me  
My soul is ripping.

...  
Ishtar is on a trunk of the tree  
They crucified her,  
Hammered a nail into the womb.

...  
Oh, our Ishtars, they weep for murdered Tammuz.  
Lazarus arose from the coffin.<sup>10</sup>

In his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Eliot employs Christian figure: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead". This line is similar to Al-Sayyab's line "Lazarus arose from the coffin" of his poem "Ru'ya fi Aam 1956" [Vision in 1956].

Both Eliot and Al-Sayyab select ironic titles for their poems. For instance, Al-Sayyab's "Unshudat Al-Matar" [Rain Chant] is not really a chant that celebrates rainfall and exposes the poet's happiness when he beholds the rain drops. Instead, the poem depicts sadness and sufferings. The rain in this poem reminds Al-Sayyab about tears, death, hunger, poverty, emigration and the miserable condition of the Iraqi people.

Other examples of Intertextuality between Al-Sayyab and Eliot can be noticed obviously in the following lines:

Eliot, in his *The Waste Land* says: "From which a golden Cupid on peeped out"; and similarly, Al-Sayyab in his poem "Al-Mumis Al-Amya" [The Blind Harlot] refers to the golden arrows of Cupid: "As long as the golden arrows whistle in the air".

In the section of *A Game of Chess*, Eliot says: What is that noise?/The wind under the door. These two lines are like Al-Sayyab's line: "The door was not knocked on, but the wind."<sup>11</sup> Eliot's line: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" is like Al-Sayyab's line "And I measure my hours with cups."<sup>12</sup> In the following lines Eliot and Al-Sayyab allude to the Phoenician sailor who drowns in the sea. Eliot says:

Is our card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

...  
Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead.  
Forget the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. (Eliot, 1970: 50, 65)

Similarly, Al-Sayyab, in his poem "Min Ru'ya Fukai" [From Fukai's Vision] says: "Your father, the explorer of the ocean, slept in the depths/Pearls from his eyeballs are sold by merchants"<sup>13</sup>. And in his poem, "Unshudat al-Matar" [Rain Chant], Al-Sayyab also alludes to the myth of the drowned Phoenician sailor when he says:

The Gulf casts its abundant gifts on the sand:  
Foam, shells and the bones of an emigrant  
Who drank death

At the bottom of the Gulf<sup>14</sup> (al-Udhari, 1986: 32)

Jayyusi (1977) states that Al-Sayyab's lines: "I cry out till the graves moan with the echo of my voice. My voice is sand and wind" are similar to Eliot's lines of his poem "The Hollow Men" in which Eliot says:

Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass. (Eliot, 1970: 79)

### Abd al-Sabur and Eliot: Intertextuality

Abd al-Sabur utilizes Eliot's techniques directly, especially in his poetic drama. Both Abd al-Sabur and Eliot prefer poetic drama to prose drama, and their plays are composed in verse. In the history of Arabic literature, poetic drama is not as prevalent as lyric and epic poetry. Due to the acculturation and hybridity between Arabic and Western cultures, Arabic drama began to occupy significant place among other Arabic literary genres. The first birth of modern Arab theatre was in 1848 by the dramatist Marun Al-Naqqash with his first play *Al-Bakhil* [The Miser] and *Al-Muru'ah wa al-Wafa* [Chivalry and Faithfulness, 1876] is the first Arabic poetic drama composed by the Lebanese writer Khalil Al-Yazih in 1876. Abd al-Sabur's poetic drama is regarded as the real commencement of modern Arabic verse drama.

Abd al-Sabur's first poetic play is *Ma'sat Al-Hallaj* [Tragedy of Al-Hallaj] which was translated into English as *Murder in Baghdad* seems relatively similar to Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The similarity between the two plays is not merely

in the titles, but also in the themes. Both plays deal with a story of murdering a historical and religious figure. Abd al-Sabur's *Ma'sat Al-Hallaj* [Tragedy of Al-Hallaj] revolves around the execution of the historical Sufi figure Abu Al-Mughith al-Husain Ibn Mansur, known as Al-Hallaj, in Baghdad in 922 on the charge of heresy. But the events and the dialogues of Abd al-Sabur's poetic play are not real. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* revolves around the murder of Archbishop, Thomas Becket of Canterbury, who was killed by the knights of King Henry II in 1170 on the charge of undermining the king's authority.

Abd al-Sabur inspires the idea of writing his play, *Ma'sat Al-Hallaj* from reading Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* as well as from reading Al-Hallaj's life. In his play *Ma'sat Al-Hallaj*, Abd al-Sabur criticizes the Arabic totalitarian regimes. He criticizes the alliance between the state and religion against opposition. Abd al-Sabur attempts to present Al-Hallaj as Eliot's Thomas Becket and not as the historical figure, Al-Hallaj.

Abd al-Sabur employs allusions in his poetry, but he does not employ myth as much as Eliot and Al-Sayyab. In his poem "Al-Shaye Al-Hazeen" [The Sad Object], Abd al-Sabur implies the myth of rebirth when he says: "If you buried a corpse in a ground, Its root would sprout and would bear fruits."<sup>15</sup> These two lines are similar to Eliot's: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" (Eliot, 1970: 55). Several lines point out the intertextuality between Abd al-Sabur and Eliot. In his poem "Al-Huzn" [Sorrow], Abd al-Sabur says: "Sorrow spread out in the City / Like a thief inside the calmness."<sup>16</sup> (Abd al-Sabur, 1972: 37) Abd al-Sabur's line presents an image like Eliot's "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table" (Eliot, 1970: 3) Also, in his poem "Lahn" [Melody], Abd al-Sabur says: "O, my (fem.) neighbor, I am not a prince / Nor am I the jester in the prince's palace."<sup>17</sup> (Abd al-Sabur, 1972: 65). Similarly, in "The Love song of J. Alfred Pruffrock", Eliot says "No! I am not prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do". (Eliot, 1970: 7) In Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" he says: 'For Thine is the Kingdom'. This line is similar to a title of a poem by Abd Al-Sabur: "Al-Mulku Lak" [For You is the Kingdom]. This phrase also is repeated four times within the poem:

And the earth said to me ((For you is the kingdom))  
Death for shadow and long live the glare  
For you is the kingdom  
For you is the kingdom  
For you is the kingdom.<sup>18</sup> (Abd al-Sabur, 1972: 62)

In the last section of Abd al-Sabur's poem "Ta'amulat Lailiyah" [Night Contemplation], he repeats the word 'nothing' several times, as Eliot repeats the same word in the second section of his poem *The Waste Land*. Abd al-Sabur says:

Nothing helps you ... Nothing helps you  
Nothing helps you... Nothing helps  
Nothing helps you, nothing  
Nothing helps you  
Nothing  
No<sup>19</sup>... (Abd al-Sabur, 1977: 456)

Similarly, Eliot says:  
Nothing again nothing

'Do

'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

'Nothing'? (Eliot, 1970: 57)

In his poem "Baudelaire", Abd al-Sabur copies a line from Eliot's *The Waste Land* without rendering it into Arabic:

*Hypocrite lecteur*

*Mon semblable, mon frere*

Poet you are, and the universe is prose.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I argue that though Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur and Eliot are culturally different with antithetical ideologies they share common themes and techniques in their poetry. The research paper concludes that the similarities between mentioned poets are due to the factors of acculturation and cultural hybridity. The study concludes that the three mentioned poets have similar orientation and inclination towards innovation and renewal. They also have balanced views towards tradition and modern, and link the past with the present. Al-Sayyab alludes to the ancient myths as well as to Arabic historical figures, but Abd al-Sabur does not show much interest in myths. Instead, Abd al-Sabur uses historical figures to link the past with the present. Eliot uses allusions and myths as a technique of modernist poetry, therefore Al-Sayyab, Abd al-Sabur use this technique to renew Arabic poetry rather than to imitate Eliot's technique. This comparison between Eliot from one side and Al-Sayyab and Abd al-Sabur from another, points out the intertextuality as well as the points of convergence and divergence between them.

## END NOTES

1. Habib Ibn Aws Al-Tai (788-845) was known as Abu Tammam. He was an Arab poet in the Abbasid era.
2. Al-Walid ibn Ubayd Allah Al-Buhturi (820 - 897) was an Arab poet in the Abbasid era.
3. J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1977) 164.
4. Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance 1910-1950* (Cambridge UP, 1987).
5. Al-Basus was a famous war between the Taghlib tribe and Bakr tribe, two rival clans in Arabia in the Pre-Islamic period. These two tribes fought roughly for forty years.
6. Al-Hussein was killed and beheaded in the battle of Karbalā in 680 (61 AH) by Shimr Ibn Thil-Jawshan.
7. My translation.
8. My translation.
9. In Chinese myths, Ko-ngai was a daughter of Kuan-yu, minister to the Ming Emperor, Yung-lo. Kuan-yu was ordered to cast a giant bell; its peals should be heard in every part of the city. After two failed attempts to cast the bell, Emperor Yung-lo threatens to kill Kuan-yu if he fails this time. Kuan-yu's daughter, Ko-ngai, was inspired by the fortuneteller that the bell would be cast successfully when blood of a virgin lady is mixed with

the melted metals. To save her father, Ko-ngai throws herself into the boiling cauldron. One of Ko-ngai's servants attempts to seize her, but succeeds only in grasping one of her shoes, which came off in his hand. On uncovering the bell after it had cooled, it was found to be perfect. Later on, people used to hear the boom of the bell followed by a low wailing sound like the agonized cry of a woman, and the word hsieh (shoe) was distinctly heard, and they say, "There's poor Ko-ngai's voice calling for her shoe".

10. My translation.
11. My translation.
12. My translation of his poem, "Malal" [Weariness].
13. My translation.
14. Translated by Abdullah al-Udhari, *Modern Poetry of the Arab World* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1986) 32.
15. My translation.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

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