
Comparative Study of Selected War Poems by Wilfred Owen and the Iraqi Poet Adnan Al-Sayegh: A Psychological Approach

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Abstract:

The paper is a comparative study of the psychological impact of war on the British poet Wilfred Owen and the Iraqi Adnan Al-Sayegh who, though different in terms of language, nationality, and social and cultural outlooks, have many things in common. It is divided into three sections and a conclusion. Section one which discusses the psychological impact of war as a traumatic experience and the poetic responses to it forms the introduction to the study. Sections two and three are psychological studies of a number of war poems by the two poets. As the conclusion reveals, the experience of war was germane and pivotal to the understanding of Owen and Al-Sayegh as ordinary persons, soldiers, and poets.

Key words: War, poetry, psychology, trauma, Owen and Al-Sayegh.

1. INTRODUCTION: WAR, POETRY, AND PSYCHOLOGY:

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, war is defined as an "Armed conflict between two or more parties, usually fought for political ends"(Mclean, 1996,521).

The concept of war describes a state of confrontation or long-term antagonistic relationship in which the possibility of violence is always present and in which actual violent encounters occur on a regular basis (Schmidt and Schroder, 2001,4). The main focus of this conflict, is "the use of force between large-scale political units such as states or empires, usually over control of territory"(Mclean,1996, 521).

The wars to which both Owen and Al-Sayegh were centripetally drawn were World War I (1914-1918) and Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)(henceforth WWI and IIW). In his seminal book, *The World War I: Reader: Primary and Secondary Sources*, Neiberg (2007, See the introduction in particular) surveys the destructive consequences of WWI on Europe. However, I find that what he has said and documented is as apt to Iraq as it is to Europe for though different in time, geographical locales, and numbers of countries involved, both wars turned large parts of the Continent and Iraq into a series of muddy graves. They also altered the lives of peoples involved into ways no one could have predicted. The numerous cemeteries along the Western Front and the ever swollen area of Al-Salaam Cemetery in Al-Najaf province in Iraq provide a vivid and painfully suggestive reminder of these wars' cost in human lives. Moreover, both wars contribute to the great change in the gender relations and dramatically speed up the pace of social change in the countries involved. In fact, the IIW has often been compared to WW I in terms of the tactics and methods used which included "large-scale trench warfare with barbed wire stretched across trenches, manned machine-gun posts, bayonet charges, human wave attacks across a no-man's land, and extensive use of chemical weapons such as mustard gas"(Arahamian in "Iran-Iraq War", 2013, n.pag).

These times of 'hatred', 'animosity', and 'acrimony', as Connes (2004, 10) aptly declares, in which "a generation of innocent young men...were slaughtered [and] those who

survived were shocked, disillusioned, and embittered by their war experiences . . .” (Hynes,1991, pp.i-xii), are surely to leave undeniable social, economic, political, and more important, for the purpose of this study, psychological effects on generations to come. The psychological traumas and disorders caused by the unprecedented rates of damage, horrors, and casualties manifested themselves in various ways.

Shell shock is among the most important manifestations of these psychological traumas. Its recurrence during the war, particularly the modern mechanized war, shows the likelihood of becoming a psychiatric casualty for some period of time as a consequence of the stresses of military life. It is to be regretted that military authorities often consider the outcome of wars in terms of economic and territorial losses or the number of soldiers killed or wounded. They seldom pay attention to the psychological dimensions of participating in heavy fighting which often turns men who had never killed before into ruthless and remorseless killers.

As psychologically traumatic events, both WWI and IIW resulted in thousands of shell shocked victims. The intensity of the essentially artillery battles often caused neurotic cracks to appear in other wise mentally stable soldiers. These cracks are medically known as 'shell shock', 'war neurosis', 'combat fatigue', and recently 'post-traumatic-stress-disorder' (Encyclopedia Columbia, 2012, no.pag). "Shell shock", as a neurotic disorder, is characterized by a number of symptoms like (1) hypersensitivity to stimuli such as noises, movements, and light accompanied by overactive responses that include involuntary defensive jerking or jumping, (2) easy irritability progressing even to acts of violence, and (3) sleep disturbances including battle dreams, nightmares, and inability to fall asleep(Ibid).

In addition to these symptoms, Gabriel (1988,41) believes that the most common symptom that is recognized in

the victims of psychological breakdown in case of long exposure to battle stress is "Conversion Reactions", a condition where the soldier "converts" his fear into a physical debilitation such as blindness, paralysis, or other physical symptoms. Traumatic amnesia and disturbed dreams were also common. To these reactions Hipp (2005,15) adds that shell-shocked soldiers often became "dazed , uncommunicative, mute, deaf, blind, amnesiac, paralyzed, trembling, or subject to hallucinations".

At the beginning treatment of shell shock was often harsh and included solitary confinement, disciplinary treatment, electric shock treatment, shaming and physical re-education, or emotional deprivation (Shell Shock, Treatment..., 2013, no.pag). More humane and sympathetic, and consequently effective methods of treatment were suggested by some psychiatrists and doctors. Arthur Hurst, for example, suggests taking "the inflicted soldiers to the quiet Devon countryside," and makes use of "hypnotism and persuasion" techniques which enabled him to literally save the lives of dozens of shattered men (See Jones, 2011).

W.H. Rivers (1918, 2-3) who was serving as a psychiatrist at the Craiglockhart Military Hospital believed that the most trying and distressing symptoms from which the victims of war neurosis suffer are not "the necessary result of the strains and shocks to which they have been exposed in warfare". Rather, they are due to the attempt to banish from the mind "distressing memories of warfare or painful affective states which have come into being as the result of their war experience."

In his work on the nightmares of the shocked soldiers, Rivers "observed the repetitive quality of patient's nightmares as offering the means for envisioning a new relationship between the soldier and his traumatic memory" (In Hipp, 2005, 40). In "The Repression of War Experience," Rivers clearly indicated that the endless struggle to smother the threatening

or loathsome memories of war was very injurious and debilitating to the soldier's health. In relation to this, he wrote

We should lead the patient resolutely to face the situation provided by his war experience....We should point out to him that such experiences ...can never be thrust wholly out of his life, though it may be possible to put it out of sight and cover it up so that it may seem to have been abolished. His experience should be talked over in all its bearings. (Bowen, and Weigl, 1997, p.81)

One of the most effective methods used by Rivers in the process of shell shock treatment is the 'talking cure', (and writing cure in the case of traumatized poets) which is a form of Freudian psychoanalysis. This method of treatment, as Kingsbury(2002, 121) states, was " The least Draconian" of other methods through which Rivers "visualized the patient as someone to be managed, someone for whom the power of suggestion is all important". Rivers attempted to get the mentally wounded soldier to turn the most "horrible impressions into tolerable" influences.

Based on the fulfillment of the foregoing steps, 'talking cure' meets the necessity of "articulating the traumatic experience to a listener or witness"(In Rogers, et.al., 1999,3). In the same vein, Manson(1999,9) thinks that encouraging patients to talk about what happened to them and about their feelings and thoughts is one of the most effective ways of getting over the symptoms of shell shock. In other words, by letting the shell-shocked soldiers talk about their horrible war experiences, they will have control over their repressed memories and, consequently, over their nightmares, and this is exactly one of the most important healing methods Dr. Arthur Brooke used in treating his shell-shocked patient, Wilfred Owen.

As for poetry, the savage nature of both wars and the enormity of damage and losses certainly elicit responses from

those poets who participated in them. Both wars resulted in the writing of thousands of poems which can broadly be divided into pro-war and anti-war poems. This division is conditioned by a number of factors such as the ideology of the state, the nature of political system, and the amount of freedom of expression granted to poets. Unlike the British war poets, the Iraqis were subject to heavy political and literary censorship which used to suppress dissent of any kind. Iraqi war poetry, indeed, was heavily influenced by the dictates of the totalitarian political system which put it, like the other resources of the country, at the service of its ends. As a result, and in a stark contrast to British war poetry which changed direction upon realizing the vacuity of the patriotic slogans and the old-fashioned romantic terms of the glories of war, the bulk of Iraqi war poetry remained eulogist in nature. Moreover, while British war poetry was written to shake the home front people out of their complacency, and to expose the hypocrisy of the popular notions of warfare, Iraqi war poetry was meant to mobilize people and to perpetuate the image of the leader as the savior of both Iraq and its people. (For more information about British war poetry see Murdoch, 2002; Stallworthy, 2008; Kendall, 2006; Hynes, 1991; and for the Iraqi Al-Kubaisi, 1986; Al-Hasnawi, 2010; Al-Hasnawi, 2013)

Regardless of these differences, no one can doubt that both the pro-war and anti-war poets wrote to serve certain ends: to glorify war and present it as a holy expedition or to condemn it and expose its fretting ugliness. This is exactly what Owen and Al-Sayegh were doing.

II. WILFRED OWEN'S WAR LETTERS AND POEMS AS TRAUMA TEXTS:

War as a traumatic experience is unusually present in Owen's prose and poetic writings. In fact, he talks about nothing but

war in his letters to his mother and in poems which he wrote in the battlefields and in the hospital.

Like many young men of his generation, Owen (1893-1918) went to WWI imagining that it would be a glorious adventure. Politicians had said that it was noble and heroic to die for one's country; religious leaders had described the war as holy and the men as Christian soldiers fighting in a just cause (Hibberd, 2002, 186). But as the war went on, with more and more people killed and the survivors increasingly disillusioned, patriotic poems such as Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" became a "ridiculous anachronism" in the face of the realities of trench warfare, and John Freeman's "Happy Is England Now" came to seem "positively obscene" (Abrams, 1979, 1917). Owen's first letters from the front revealed a man who was "caught up in the wave of war hysteria which swept Britain at this time, and which appealed to the basic patriotism of all who heard it" (McIlory, 1974, 9).

As Owen experienced the terror, spitefulness, and brutality of war, his earlier belief in war as a heroic adventure vanished and he began to capture, in his letters and poetry the intolerable physical and psychological strain of modern mechanized war by depicting images of young soldiers in action surviving war physically but remained obsessed with its bitter horrifying memories which drove them crazy.

As a soldier/poet, Owen passed through distinct psychological transitions in his attitude towards heroism and fight. Due to his practical experience of war distresses, whether represented by the killing of fellow human beings or the sceneries of death and destruction all around him, Owen went in a painful journey which in turn required painful mental and psychological adjustments.

In a letter that described his inability to adapt himself to the new circumstances in the battlefields, and in a series of

shocking images that told of the persistent presence of death, blood shedding, and fear, Owen explained to his mother:

Not an hour passed without a shell amongst us. We lay in wet snow....and the fear of death,...I had some extraordinary escapes from shells and bullets....Never has the battalion encountered such intense shelling ...(we) remain in the line for 12 days. For twelve days we lay in holes, where at any moment a shell might put us out. (Roberts, 1996, 306)

However, the triggered event of the symptoms that Owen suffered from, including stammering and disorientation, took place on April, 1917. According to Hipp(2002,27), one night Owen was blown right out of his trench by a shell that landed only six feet away; he discovered that the officer next to him had been buried alive in the blast. Lying face to face with his dead companion, he offered his mother a full description of the incident referring to the corpse by using "defensive humor".

Owen's life turned upside down after this incident. He could no longer put up with the war situation. The letters he wrote a week later from the casualty Clearing Station threw light on the changes that befell him: "The doctor suddenly was moved to forbid me to go into action next time the Battalion goes...I didn't go sick or anything, but he is nervous about my nerves, and sent me down yesterday-labelled Neurasthenia"(Owen, 1998, 239).

In June 1917, Owen entered Craiglockhart Military Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was there that he met Siegfried Sassoon, an army captain and a poet who encouraged him to write war poetry of his own. Making use of Sassoon's advice: "sweet your guts out writing poetry", (Kellman, 2009, no.pag) as a means to cope with the horrible war situations, writing poetry for Owen became a therapeutic tool.

In both his seminal essay "By Degrees Regaining Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder"(2002) and book "*The Poetry of Shell Shock*"(2005), Hipp illustrates how two significant symptoms of

Owen's shell shock were cured by writing poetry. The first one was "disastrous dreams" as Owen called them in one of his letters when he was suffering from war nightmares. From Scarborough, Owen told "War dreams have begun again; but that is because of the flapping of the canvas all night in the high winds; or else the hideous faces of the Advancing Revolver Targets I fired at last week"(Owen, 1998,335).

The content of this letter poignantly described how Owen was enduring an inner conflict in confronting his memories of the "hideous faces" that he had witnessed in the battles. These mangled faces and bodies of his torn-war comrades-in-arms which appeared in his nightmares were "an expression of failure and guilt" as Owen himself suggested and his psychotherapist Dr. Arthur Brock felt(Hipp,2002,33). This feeling of "failure and guilt" was due to his unconscious recognition that the work of leading his men in battles led to the moral wrong of their destruction.

In *Health and Conduct*(1923, 172), Brock suggests an approach to eliminate such phantoms in Owen's disturbing sleep by encouraging him to face them and find out what they represent. Furthermore, he points out that in order for Owen to overcome his war traumatic fears, he should "place the offending images within the poems "themselves".

In fact, it was writing poetry, which Owen began at Craiglockhart and continued after his discharge and through his second tour in the trenches that allowed for his complete confrontation of the shell shock which continued to manifest itself through nightmares and feelings of guilt. Furthermore, it was Owen's realization of the necessity of facing his terrible war experience that led his poetry to move beyond photographic reconstruction of war. For his poetry to possess a therapeutic function, Hipp (2002, 33) explained, Owen needed to examine his own psychological grievances.

Owen's first poetic strategy in dealing with these grievances and expressing the inexpressible revulsions of war that one cannot forget was evident in "Anthem for Doomed Youth". In this poem, he avoids talking about war directly; instead, he is using a series of shocking images to illustrate his own experience of the horrors of death that surrounded him and to denounce the extermination of a generation of young men:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons. (In Fergusun and Stallworthy, 2005, 1386 L1-4)

The images displayed in this poem are meant to reflect the dehumanizing conditions of men in the trenches. The only possible answer to the opening question is "the monstrous anger of the guns". There are no prayers, bells, or human voices at all in the poem. Besides Owen was keen on juxtaposing the soldiers and civilians' responses which, though different in their nature, are similar in being united in their voiceless mourning.

Another poem in which Owen avoids talking directly about war is "Disabled". This poem reflects the inner fear deep inside his psyche; the fear from being disabled or deformed and, consequently, rejected by people:

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. (Owen, 2004, 22)

In this penetrating and insightful poem, Owen gives the reader some "non-linguistic set of signifiers" which may lead to the depth of the inner psychological suffering of an inflicted soldier who lost his leg and consequently his colored life (Hipp, 2005, 67). The "wheeled chair" is the first signifier which represents the ultimate fear of any soldier. Owen is trying to project his fears in this poem and to give it a public voice. The soldier

depicted in the poem simulates Owen's alienation in accordance with his "ghastly suit of grey". He feels estranged or "queer disease" because he lacks the language to connect with others. At this stage, Owen feels that his psyche is disabled, pale, and like an outsider, he endures a division between war environment and, in case of returning home, home environment:

— In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease. (L10-13)

Owen's whole entity, here, is handicapped, and this feeling was enforced by the exclusion he suffered as a shell-shocked patient. Furthermore, through comparing his current status with his previous one, Owen is trying to confront war by focusing on how much a ruined disabled soldier, physically and psychologically, has lost. In this respect, he is avoiding direct confrontation with war while war's scenes remain intact in his memories. By transforming those experiences into poetic expressions, Owen takes control of the uncontrollable, i.e. the nightmares of war. This makes war even more present in his poetry.

In "Dulce et Decorum East" Owen depicts one of the most realistic features of war i.e. gas attack. In a letter to his mother, he refers to it as a "gas poem", "a description which emphasizes its photographic representation of a harrowing and realistic experience of warfare"(Hipp, 2002,34). In this poem, by virtue of Brock's advice, Owen uses the strategy of reflecting his unconscious nightmares in a conscious poetic work in an attempt to control his disturbing phantoms and to examine the nature of his psychological wounds.

At Craiglockhart hospital Owen's psyche endured gradual transition from shell-shocked patient into a soldier fit enough to be released and to begin light military duties. "Insensibility" provides an instance of Owen's transitional

stages as it was written between the end of hospitalization when Owen was free from the visible symptoms of shell shock and his near-civilian lifestyle of "friends, oysters, and antique shops" in Scarborough before returning to fight(Hibberd, 1992,87).

In this poem, Owen intensifies the diversity of the two sides, home front and war front, by highlighting the "insensibility" of both contradicting sides. In this context, Caesar (1993, 85) states "Here Owen seeks to ironically contrast the justifiable 'insensibility' of the troops with the unjustifiable 'insensibility' of the home front... Between the insensibility of both 'men' and civilians is the sensibility of [Owen], officer and poet..."

In general, Owen employs irony and satire in his war poems as means of defence against an experience which one cannot help to change. In the opening line of "Insensibility", Owen uses the word 'Happy' ironically as "the use of satire provided another important channel for the expression of anger over war...because it enabled [the poets] to combine ridicule and contempt as they seek relief from insupportable nerve-racking experiences...by satirizing them"(Puissant,2009,23). He tells:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed
Can let their veins run cold. (Fergusun and Stallworthy, 2005,
1387 L1-2)

The juxtaposition of two differing notions of "happy" and "killed" means that the soldiers are getting so insensitive to the extent of feeling happy though they are going to be killed. These soldiers "Whom no compassion fleers"[L3] are almost dead because "their veins run cold". This reflects Owen's belief that men without sensibility are dead. The only way of keeping them alive is to cast away their emotions and feelings in the dugout trenches. They are men who were deprived of all senses of compassion and love or even the legitimate right of feeling

fear. Otherwise, they would not be able to sustain their horrible conditions.

"Mental cases" which belongs to Owen's mature period between May and July 1918 is very much like "Disabled"(Stallworthy,1974,157). In both poems, Owen avoids the description of direct scenes of war. Instead, he explains one of the ugliest consequences of it, mental cases or shell-shocked soldiers. The first stanza opens with detailed disgusting descriptions of men who were the victims of war. An exaggerated version of the psychological inflicted men who were monsters-like reflects the phantasmagorical nature of Owen's memories and nightmares. By means of vivid mental representations of war, the poem talks of the eruptions and interruptions of the men's normal life(Orr ,2002,183). This war has rendered these men inhuman by the monstrous appearance they acquired. Similar to "Dulce et Decorum Est", the speaker depicts them as a collection of ugly bodily parts: jaws, teeth, skulls, eye sockets, hair and hands connected to a worldly hell:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain, -- but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?(Owen, 2002,
41,LL-1-9)

The speaker of the first stanza looks alienated from the fragmented bodies he looks at. In spite of being one of them, Owen wonders about their nature and struggles to understand their torment. In the second stanza, there is a shift in the perspective of the speaker to the men. The voice, at this stage, looks more comprehensive to these men's agonies: "These are

men whose minds the Dead have ravished"(L9). Their situation, by implication, becomes more comprehensible to Owen.

Owen's latest poems testify to the poetic developments in his psychological confrontation with war experience that brought his therapy begun at Craiglockhart toward completion and marked his readiness to return to the war as a whole man. "Strange Meeting" admits Owen's self-revelation of the sustained vision of his nightmares. The poem recounts the neurasthenic nightmare of a soldier who appears to be sleeping on the Western Front. In the first three lines of the poem, the readers are led to believe that Owen is trying to escape from the horrors of war in which he is involved. He is now capable of taking the reader in a journey deep through his nightmares:

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined. (1389 L1-3)

From the first line, one notes the overwhelming presence of war in the poem and in Owen's mind. The thing that differentiates this poem as an achievement of self-healing is that Owen is addressing all wars atrocities and nightmares not only the one that motivated the composition of his poems. Still, the setting which was established in the trenches represents Owen's own experience in the trenches of WWI and his psychological traumas. The dichotomy of the realistic depiction of the trench setting and the world of dreams which introduced the speaking dead functions as an engine to explore Owen's personal guilt for the suffering he indirectly caused to his soldiers:

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
By his dead smile, I knew we stood in Hell.(1389 L.4-10)

The lines depict the protracted suffering of the speaker and his comrades. To convey the essence of this suffering, trenches are compared to long dark tunnels which are in turn metaphorically presented as hell. However, it should be noted, Mortimers(1968,44) affirms, that "This is not the Christian Hell of tortured guilty souls, but the mythical Hades of wandering shades." In describing the realistic world of the trenches, Owen reflects his previous state of psychological disturbance that, metaphorically speaking, passes through a long dark tunnel. His persona moves psychologically and physically along this tunnel which he felt to be like a grave filled with men hovering between deaths and sleeping states. This wavering state of men confined in the image of the dark tunnel indicates that Owen's consciousness and thoughts are not awakened yet as he is wandering in the tunnel of his traumatic affliction.

Although Owen's realization of his poetic voice takes place after his return to the battlefields, it is this decision to return that leads to his death. Owen's return will be an act of 'self-murder', and at the same time, it will be his achievement of poetic voice which was put to rest in the poem's closing call to sleep. In this way, the poem illustrates both the life and death of a poet who prophecies that he will die but will live through his poetry (Hipp, 2005,98).

The poetic career of Owen ends with his death in the war. His returning to front lines was due to his recovery from his traumatic disturbances. The last words he uttered was an unanswerable question which, as Lane (1972, 141)states, "casts a deep shadow over the whole poem"

By degrees

Regained cool peaceful air in wonder. —

Why speak not they of comrades that went under? (L45-47)

To regain peace of mind means for Owen to survive the descent and tells others about it. Owen here is stating the answer through composing an imaginative battle which represents the

whole war, and in which the poet/soldier moves through the natural realm to a transcendental one of both horror and glory. Owen who "can find no word to qualify [his] experience" and "lost all his earthly faculties" in battle has articulated the experience of war for both the fallen and the survivors which remained inexpressible for them. Had he not died early after asking this question, Owen, Hipp(2002,47) believes, "would provide an answer more fully" and to speak more about war aftermath. Owen's last letter for his mother in October 31, 1918 reflects his renewed mood:

"It is a great life. I am more oblivious than alas! Yourself, dear Mother, of the ghastly glimmering of the guns outside, and the hollow crashing of the shells"(1998,362).

III. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF WAR IN ADNAN AL-SAYEGH'S WAR POETRY

Al-Sayegh(1955-) was 25 years old when he was, like thousands of Iraqis, forced to participate in the IIW. Of his war experience which was shrouded in pain and apprehension, Al-Sayegh (2004,694) says: "Nothing safe death and bullet-shooting were awaiting us in the battlefields; underneath us were the mortal remains of our ex-comrades-in-arms; nothing behind us safe the squads of death; over us was a sky of smoke and shrapnel of whose target we were ignorant." As a result, war did not only change Al-Sayegh's life for good, it changed the nature of his poetry as well. War, as a matter of fact, became a central issue in his subsequent poetic output.

During the long years of war which misted up the lives and souls of Iraqis, Al-Sayegh kept looking for books that ran contrary to the "boring and monotonous war propaganda" which the official Media kept bombarding people with.(Al-Sayegh, 2014) The four-volume *War and Peace* (1869) by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and *A Time For Love...A Time For Death* (1954) by the German novelist Erich Maria Remarque were

among the most important literary works Al-Sayegh read in the first year of the war. In the letter, Al-Sayegh also talked about some of the British war poetry which he read in translation in a literary magazine. However, Al-Sayegh was looking for a specific poem which a friend told him about. This poem was "Anthem for Doomed Youth" by Owen. The reason behind Al-Sayegh's interest in this poem is his own identification with the British poet who, like Al-Sayegh, "had lived the war in all its horrors and tragedies; had dreamt of peace which was pronounced few days after his death". Al-Sayegh deeply laments Owen's untimely death which represents for him a clear-cut evidence of the vicious nature of war. As for his opinion of Owen as a war poet, Al-Sayegh staunchly holds the view that

The humanistic poetry [like Owen's] could not be bounded by language or nationality. The poetry that deals with Man's suffering and anguish is an authenticated testimony and a mirror to the age it was written in. A true [war] poet is one who writes the secret history of war and this is exactly what Owen was doing.(Al-Sayegh, 2014)

Out of this furnace of absurdity, Al-Sayegh's war poetry emerged as a testimony to the ridiculousness and mindlessness of war. In fact, war, for Al-Sayegh, was not a mere phantom that haunted his poetic and prose texts; it was his life itself.

In an interview with Al-Sayegh made by an Iraqi newspaper in the 1980s in which Al-Sayegh was questioned about the impact of war on him as a human being and a poet, Al-Sayegh compared war to a thief that stole all the beautiful things in his life. The war, according to him:

had already stolen ten years of my life time; from my bedroom of dreams, war had stolen my bed, my library, my kids' loud laughter, my little radio, and my friends' letters. As a ruined city on a distorted map, the war had left me. That is why the war occupies a central place in my poetry. All my poems talk,

in one way or another, about it. In fact, I am quite obsessed with it. (qtd in Ameen, 2003)

For Al-Sayegh, nothing is more real than the bombs, shells, and the swollen corpses of his dead comrades-in-arms. Therefore, he argues in "Searching for an Address" that "Bombs do not lie/ As do the military communiqués and leaders/ Then take all the bombs and describe war/ Take all the bleedings of war/... And describe peace in my country" (2004, 370 Lines 19-23). But there is no peace whatsoever in Al-Sayegh's country. Instead there is only fear and terror which take many forms and accompany him like his shadows. This sense of fear is best translated in 'Schizophrenia'(1987) in which he affirmatively states:

In my country,
Fear catches hold of me.
While I am writing,
A man lies in wait for me,
Behind the curtains of my window,
He is closely observing me. (12,1-6)

This man who 'closely observes' Al-Sayegh is an ever-present figure in his poetry. He intrudes into the poet's life and abuses it. He might be the literary censor, the military investigator, or the intelligence agent who keeps pursuing him and getting him over a barrel. On the nature of fear that took hold of him, Al-Sayegh said:

Though far away in time, this gruesome grip of fear is still robbing my sleep. Its shadow loomed large on most of my life. I always imagine that THEY are there, lurking behind every window, curtain, and comma, watching every step, in the process of writing poetry or walking in the sidewalks of life.(Al-Sayegh,2002)

In "Ghosts" Al-Sayegh expressed the same feelings of dread and panic. He wrote:

I always heard their strange voices,
Jargonize my name.
Then I heard their iron feet
Going upstairs;
Then, with their fists,
They knock on the door.
Then their guns' muzzles
Were targeted at my temple.
I, then, saw my own corpse
Rolling
Behind the roar of their cars' engines.
Then I heard the clamour
Of those who huddle around me,
Wondering:
'Where do they come from?'
But they did not come
They left the scene open
As wide as the deferred bullet.(28,9-24)

In this sense, Al-Sayegh's poetry can be considered a mirror that best reflected the oppressive psychological conditions under which he was living. In fact, writing poetry, for Al-Sayegh, became a psychological outlet that helped to alleviate the feelings of loss and frustration he had amidst the sounds of shelling and the overwhelming sense of futility. Of his writing experience, he said:

In the process of writing poetry, I set my soul free to tell about the agonies and suffering of my homeland and its dubious history. I tell about the bitter days that I have been through as a soldier in the compulsory service which lasted for more than thirteen years. Otherwise, what is the use of all these writings that exhausted our souls ... with poetry, we heal the wounds and wipe the tears. Like music and painting, poetry makes our suffering more valuable, our life more meaningful, and our tears more flavored.(Al-Sayegh, 1975)

More important is Al-Sayegh's seemingly pathological obsession with the depiction of the psychological impact of war on the collective psyche of the Iraqis. This impact is nowhere clearer than in his poetry which Al-Shabinder (2004) asserts:

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

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

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

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

In this sense, Al-Sayegh's *Sky in a Helmet* which was published in the last year of the IIW (i.e.,1988) in the midst of heavy fighting, can be considered a strong condemnation of all that war stands for. According to Al-Janabi(1990), "The poems in this diwan represent a qualitative development in the poetry of Al-Sayegh in terms of imagery construction, employment of language, and the use of the atmosphere of war in a consciously clear and poetic way".

In 'Sky in a Helmet,' Al-Sayegh does not talk about martyrdom and victory as heroic acts, or about the soldiers who, like knights, sacrifice themselves for a noble cause. Instead, he deeply regrets his country which was lost to war and destruction. In "War has no Name", he is fully aware of the destructive and savage nature of war:

The war will cut the hand of our childhood
It starves us to death.
But we contend with stubbornly
For the sake of our homeland.
It disperses and breaks up
Our days.
But we spend its days in

Entertaining hopes.
And we, the birds of longing
And love,
Seek the help of our sorrows' nests.
We shall cry over a (homeland)
Which THEY ruin.
So are we. (452, 21-34)

These feelings of hope, love, and longing were Al-Sayegh's main means to escape the pressures of daily life in the trenches. The juxtaposition of all these flagrant contradictions, i.e. the 'childhood' which denotes hope and innocence, and 'death' which implies destruction and loss, is indicative of the poet's psyche which is torn to shreds between his desire to survive war and his realization of its mocking absurdity. This conjoining of oppositions to spotlight what Al-Sayegh has already lost as a result of war is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes him from other war poets.

Noteworthy in Al-Sayegh's poetry is the pervasive and recurrent employment of the images of 'piercing', 'puncturing', 'perforating', 'holing', and 'pricking', particularly in this diwan in which they acquire great significance. The image of the 'pierced bread' is borrowed from the holes which the shots cause in the bodies of the soldiers. Furthermore, the hole in the soldier/poet's lung is a miniature of the holes in the fabric of the poet's own country. In "A Preliminary Prologue," Al-Sayegh writes:

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

The 'pierced helmet' here stands for the poet's homeland which is, likewise, pierced and destroyed. The holes in both the helmet and the poet's lung become like windows through which Al-Sayegh looks at both the sky and his country. In *A Sky in a Helmet*, he addresses the sky saying: "O Sky of Iraq.../ Is there no air / The sky of Iraq was pierced with splinters"(431-2, 44-46). So, even the sky of his homeland was torturously pierced.

The sense of suffocation and powerlessness is strongly suggested here. The poet cannot breathe not because of the hole in his lung, but because of the deep sorrow he feels for his country. Al-Sayegh compares himself to a bird which, in spite of the spaciousness of the sky, cannot fly or move freely. The seven years of war which Al-Sayegh spent in the battle fields are also full of holes. In "The Last Stations...The Beginning of Madness", he says:

Sit down, pending my tears could catch breath
Pending my life could restore its
lost years
(as if those years were seven minutes
not seven long years pierced with the madness
of my waiting). (428,97-102)

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

The corporal says:
It is death
Which neither accepts
Subtraction nor addition.
So choose a hole for your head
As wide as your hopes.
It is the time of holes... (430,18- 24)

In the last line, Al-Sayegh sums up his idea of war time which is time of 'holes' made by various 'shots'. As a result, losing one's hopes of leading a normal life or enjoying it causes little surprise. His hopes now center on his desire to physically

survive the successive bullets shot at him and other soldiers. In this sense, the

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

In this sense, Al-Sayegh's remarkable combination of two strikingly different things is a sign of his awareness of the terrible nature of affliction and suffering which his people are enduring. The sky as a symbol of hope, mercy, and giving is, Al-Shabinder (2004) affirms, sharply contrasted with the helmet as a symbol of war, distress, and servitude of the soldier who is whining under its weight. The relationship between them becomes a relationship of life and death, war and peace. The wide sky fades away in the hole and is lost in the time of war.

Like the sky which becomes smaller and smaller until it disappears, everything in Al-Sayegh's life, who was spatially fettered to the trench, the camp, and the battlefield, become narrower and narrower. In the same poem, Al-Sayegh announces:

Here I am, looking through a window's slot
To the street
Which becomes
Narrower ...
Narrower
Narrower. (427,67-71)

Commenting on this state of actual and metaphorical narrowness, Al-Sagar(1988) explains, "In reading this poem, one finds a self not a subject matter, a sensitive feeling not a superficial outward description, a deep personal wound not a

military epic. Here, everything in the poet's life becomes one thing: a hole."

In 'Towards Forgetting', the poet tries his best to forget his horrid wartime experiences. However, the "Memories of ash, trenches, and the black rain" (317, 30) keep chasing him in the smell of his sweet heart's hair; in the streets. In spite of the suffocating presence of war time memories in every nook and cranny of the poet's life, he declares that his sparrows have been able to unfetter themselves from the manacles of war:

I shall set the sparrows of my
Remaining days free.
-The days which neither the summer,
Cages, nor the bombs could dry. (317, 39-42)

Writing poetry for Al-Sayegh was the best way to psychologically set himself at liberty and turn loose the horrible memories of war. Noteworthy is the close thematic and formal association between the word 'memories', and the word 'war'. In 'As Such I Told Her Everything', he tells:

At the end of war,
At the end of your memories...
The buses, soldiers, and the high building pass by
I remember the drowsiness of your heart
Which did not sleep since the
First pulse or, perhaps, shell!
And the shrieking of my memories
To the long street of war... (373, 2-11)

Al-Sayegh, in fact, finds no way out to alleviate the pain which these memories cause save by writing and talking about them. On account of that, talking and writing in the case of Al-Sayegh proves to be an effective method by which he can cure and heal his psychological wounds. However the poet is not sure of his complete recovery from these wounds for he is still surrounded by a "Sky full of holes"(377, 3) even after his return to Baghdad.

It is a well-known fact that compulsive repetition of an action, behavior or word is one of the shell-shock symptoms. The compulsive repetition of the word 'hole' is a case in point here. Al-Sayegh keeps referring to this word using it in different contexts, reminding the reader of its presence which gains in more importance even when war takes a nap "And swallow its 'opium'/ And relaxes on the sofa swaying between two states: wakefulness and sleep".(392, 4-5)

This places Al-Sayegh and his fellow soldiers on full alert since the war's slumber is temporary. It might get up again and cut a swathe through their present lives and future. He tries to accustom himself to forgetting the gruesome war memories but he cannot because he is overburdened with

The dust of war, and the forgotten memories, ...
What are you waiting for in the mail of war...
What are you waiting for in the train of the south...
The soldiers came back from Al-Fao
Burdened with the news of the fierce fighting,
And the hannah of blood and earth.
As a sticky cloud,
I came back to you ...
Freighted with you and the war. (393, 21-29)

The 'stickiness' here refers to the blood which the soldiers keep losing in the war. By implication, it also refers to the continuous draining of Al-Sayegh's personal as well as public hopes and dreams.

This makes Al-Sayegh worthy of what Al-Gilani (qtd in Al-Sudani,2002), has said of him. Al-Gilani believes that Al-Sayegh is the best spokesman of the 1980s war generation, and that he has succeeded in "turning the chaos of war into a language, a form and an aesthetic experience which one can write and read about".

In post IIW, Al-Sayegh tried to minify the references to war in his poetry. Paradoxically, his 1993 diwan *A Cloud of a*

Glue is charged with numberless references to the war's atrocities, military sites, and casualties. As Sha'alan (1998) points out, "In this diwan, Al-Sayegh tried to extricate himself from the remaining memories of war, but he ends in writing about them".

More significantly terms such as estrangement, exile, dispersion, displacement, and separation, or life away from one's homeland appear recurrently in *A Cloud of a Glue*. Considered collectively, the poems in this diwan anticipate the troubles which the poet ran into after his flight from the oppression and the chasing of the regime. In "The Departure", he points out

The wide sea separates us.
In the Garden, there is no rain.
In the (travelling)bag, there is no homeland. (21-23)

After long years of being overburdened with the recurrent tragedies of war and the oppression of political and literary censorship, Al-Sayegh raises his voice to declare:

Having been continuously trotting in
The trenches,
The voice of this poem becomes husky.
Out of fight and bafflement, it
Shouts and calls:
Stop beating the drums of war.
Who is to take away from the
Cellar of my memory
The pictures of the friends who
Died and were sent in the
Mail of the battles? (298, 65-76)

In a nut shell, writing about the war and insistently reminding his readers of its destructive nature prove quite an effective method by which Al-Sayegh was able to psychologically lessen the pain he felt during and after the war. By giving vent to his feelings of abandonment and alienation and consequently

projecting them in the poems, Al-Sayegh was able to survive the tribulations of war.

IV: CONCLUSION - DIFFERENT IN TIME AND PLACE, SIMILAR IN HUMAN CONCERNS:

When reading Owen's anti-war poems, one automatically recalls Al-Sayegh's. Though living in different geographical locales, periods of time, and have different way of living and thinking, this study, like other comparative studies, is interested in exploring certain interconnectedness in terms of themes, poetic response, and aspects of personal life between the two poets. The tendency of the study to dwell on war as a historical event, a literary theme in the poetry of the period, and a psychologically disruptive and traumatic experience makes it interdisciplinary. As the study has shown, war is germane and pivotal to the analysis of Owen and Al-Sayegh's poetry.

As soldiers/poets, the reaction of both Owen and Al-Sayegh to the demoralizing nature of war takes the form of writing poems in which they attempted to achieve meaning in the midst of ongoing scenes of chaos and terror. Certainly, both WWI and IIW informed their consciousness, condition their creative impulse, and their thematic preoccupations. As a result both Owen and Al-Sayegh became anti-war poets and conscientious objectors whose poems reflected a deep sense of frustration and shock which resulted from their realization of man's ability to commit unbelievable acts of savagery during the wars. Similar to Owen, Al-Sayegh tended to display an active response to the sufferings of which he spoke in his poems. This active response made them classical examples of the poets as war-witnesses. Writing poetry for both became a self-revelation of their personal sufferings and an attempt at psychologically surviving the ruinous impact of war. In addition

to that, both identified themselves with their comrades-in-arm and spoke on their behalf of their sufferings and dilemmas.

To sum up, the war for men like Owen and Al-Sayegh marked a turning point in their lives after which nothing would be the same. It was a struggle to survive, and a motivation for constructing their poetic voice. For them, their anti-war poems functioned as a force that can resist the reality of war – a reality present in every dimension of the soldier's experience but moved out of the poem in the poet's efforts to re-envision the memory. Similar to Owen, Al-Sayegh's poetry ushered the death of the traditional warrior/hero and the collapse of traditional values associated with peacetime. Had Owen not died in the war, he would keep, like Al-Sayegh nowadays, mourning the dead, the missing, and the many disabled.

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