

The Prostitute / City Analogy in Modern Arabic Poetry

Saddik M. Gohar

UAE University, United Arab Emirate

Email: saddikgohar@yahoo.com)

Doi:10.5901/ajis.2012.v1n2p29

Abstract

Within a trans-cultural perspective, this paper explores the image of the city in modern Arabic poetry in order to investigate the city / prostitute dialectics in addition to other trajectories integral to the Arab socio-political context. The paper compares and contrasts city images in Arabic and English poetry in order to underline common thematic interest linking these two literary traditions. The paper argues that the Arab poet's attitude toward the city is shaped by local economic / political realities different from western concepts. In Arabic poetry, the hostile attitude toward the city is not only due to imitation of western poets but also because of the peculiar nature of the Arab metropolis . In the Arab world, the city is the centre of political / military establishments and police institutions which are abhorred and despised by the Arab people. The Arab poet's hostile attitude toward the city is intensified by what the city represents as a symbol of persecution, governmental corruption, police brutalities and oppressive / repressive policies advocated by puppet regimes. Therefore, the capital Arab city, the abode of tyrannical regimes, is frequently viewed as a prostitute. However, the feminine representation of the city, in Arabic poetry, is due to socio-political reasons and is not related to gender or sexual politics. But the image of the city is telescoped in order to lend greater force to the poet's criticism of modern Arab life .

I. Introduction

In "The Poet and the City" W.H. Auden mentions some aspects that characterize the image of the modern city which make the poet's job more difficult than before. These aspects - which constitute a cultural basis for the western poet toward the urbanized metropolis - not only determine the western poet's comprehensive vision of the city but also of the entire world (Auden1975 : 187). According to Auden, the modern western poet lost faith in the city because of its excessive use of machines which had a dehumanizing impact on people. The machine, according to the western poet, has disrupted the relationships between man and his world. In this cultural and social context, the philosophical attitude of the western poet toward the city is formulated. The same cultural situation constitutes the poet's vision of the western city which is part of his attitude toward the world.

In a related but not similar context, the Arab poet's vision of the city is not rooted in a similar civilizational context or in a similar philosophical crisis. Due to its simple life patterns and structures, the Arab city does not constitute a source of alienation for

the Arab poet. Technologically, there is no similarity between the Arab city and the western city dominated by the machine and Moloch¹. In Arabic poetry, the hostile attitude toward the city is not only due to imitation of western literature but also because of the peculiar nature of the Arab metropolis. In the Arab world, the city is the centre of political/military establishments and police institutions which are abhorred and despised by Arab poets and people as well. In the Arab cities, human rights are violated on daily basis, thus, the Arab poet's negative attitude toward the city is intensified by what the city represents as a symbol of governmental corruption, police brutalities and oppressive/repressive policies advocated by puppet regimes.

Nevertheless, some Arab poets express their hatred toward the city simply because of their nostalgia for a pre-city / rural past which they long for. This trend in Arabic poetry which associates the city with a corrupt present and the village with an idealistic past of childhood and innocence is rooted in the Arabic Romantic tradition. This trend constitutes an obstacle that prevents the Arab poet from developing a comprehensive and realistic standpoint toward the city/ village motifs. However, with the rise of a new generation of poets – in the post WWII era- who were influenced by the socialist ideology particularly the Egyptian poet , Ahmad Abdul-MutiHejazi and the Syrian poet , Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said) , the image of the city in Arabic poetry began to acquire new philosophical and intellectual dimensions.

The poetry written by the above-cited Arab poets and others reveals varying degrees of intimacy and alienation toward the city and the phenomenon of urban industrialism. It is easy to realize that the city that figures full-face in its physically concrete lineaments and peculiarities in one poem is no more than a reminisced backdrop or even a hallucinated vision in other poems. Thus, snap-shot images that help one perceive the city's power, evil, ugliness, oppressiveness and solitude are too frequent in the Arabic poetry of the city. Here, the city holds together desperate impressions of reality and therefore, it acts as a unifying image amidst conflicting visions of the contemporary scene. For example, the city in the poetry of the Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said) occurs as a manifestation of the frustrations and defeats pervading contemporary Arab history .

Conversely, fragmentation is perceived from time to time through images of the fragmented and schizoid cityscape. Complete passages in "Mihiyar al-Demashqi / Mihiyar The Damascene", for example, invoke the figure of the city to enhance the dismemberment or disjunction of reality as perceived by the narrators / protagonists in Adonis's epic poem . As unifier or dissipater as realized focus or blurred vastness, the

¹The ancient Jewish God who feeds on children presented to him as sacrifices . Moloch is figuratively used by Allen Ginsberg in **Howl** as a symbol of modern commercialized / industrialized civilization which dehumanizes people.

city remains the most outstanding figure/image that influences modern Arabic poetic consciousness. Adonis's city poetry, in this context, illustrates how the image of the modern city – Damascus - is subsumed in a multitude of historical and mythical reality that reflects the impotent culture of the Arab world. The point, therefore, to be made about the modern Arab poet's vision of the city is that the city seldom appears full or intact or sufficiently realized in its concrete/physical form, but it invokes a multiplicity of meanings.

Furthermore, the city forces its way into modern Arabic poetry in different shapes, vague forms, pictures and scenes communicated poetically in different ways to fulfill particular ends. For example, in the poetry of Adonis, the city is the literal environment against whose background the poet organizes and sets forth his desperate samples of cultural fragmentation and deracination. Moreover, Adonis's city poetry invokes both the physical city and its symbolic counterpart, both Eliot's London in *The Waste Land* "under the brown fog of a winter noon" and the city of Baudelaire. In other words, the city poetry of Syrian poet recalls the Elizabethan London of history "the city over the mountains" and the unreal cities "Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria / Vienna, London", as symbols of European cultural disruption and moral bankruptcy. In Eliot's city, human relationship diminish and life is depicted through the fearful image of the robotic masses flowing over London Bridge: "UnrealCity / under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not/ thought death had undone so many / sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled / and each man fixed his eyes before his feet" (Eliot 1973: 236). According to the preceding passage, Eliot's western city is a world dominated by war and death, and governed by chaos and fear.

Moreover, Eliot's city – in *The Waste Land*- and the infernal cityscape of Dante recur in different contexts in Adonis's poetry which targets the city of Damascus. These poems which collect his occasional sketches of the Damascene cityscape including the Qaysoun mountain carry many oblique and deviated scenes of metropolitan life. Adonis's city poetry focuses on the metropolis which is full of socio-economic corruption and exploitation. Here and elsewhere in his poetry, the idea and the image of the city - Damascus - are telescoped in order to lend greater force to the poet's criticism of modern Arab life. Therefore the Arab city is figured out as a whore, an embodiment of moral bankruptcy and stagnation peculiar to contemporary Arab reality. Moreover, the physical reality of the city is the most dominant image and the most successful organizing metaphor in the poetry of Adonis where the city assaults the poet's sensibility as an obsessive image of modern life.

2. TheCity / Prostitute Dialectics : A Trans-cultural View

Historically, the image of the city as a prostitute which appears in Arabic poetry can be traced back to literature on eighteenth-century London, a city which is associated with prostitution and debauchery. In *Prostitution and Society*, Fernando Henriques provides a detailed account of the extent and nature of prostitution in eighteenth century London. He speaks about the various efforts to enforce existing laws against bawdy houses and public indecency and various calls for new laws and arguments “that prostitution should be legalized and regulated and efforts to help penitent prostitutes” (Henriques 1956 : 143). Apparently, London prostitutes were major figures in eighteenth-century literature, in works as varied as *Moll Flanders*, *The Beggar’s Opera*, *The London Merchant*, *Clarissa*, *Fanny Hill*, *The Man of Feeling* and others. Most English writers introduce prostitutes as typical of the city which means eighteenth century London. A few writers present prostitutes not simply as incidental London figures but as indications that things are radically wrong in the city – as signs of the perversity of human relationships in the city and perhaps in England as a whole. Writers such as Steele, Boswell, and Johnson saw prostitutes as inevitable city figures and they did not therefore condemn the city as a whole. Steele writes about prostitutes in *The Spectator* describing both the sad prostitutes and the zestful happy hookers.

Revealing no ambivalent attitudes toward the city prostitutes, Johnson in *The Rambler*, warns girls of the horrid consequences of prostitution, however he attempts to raise compassion for the whores. Steele, Boswell and Johnson associate public prostitution with the city of London and they move on to attack seducers or bawds or the whore’s customers but not the city as a whole. Goldsmith, Fielding, Wordsworth, and Blake have a different perspective. They write about prostitutes, not primarily to caution young girls, or to attack rakes, bawds, and keepers, or to awaken compassion for prostitutes, or to suggest ways of helping some (or most) of them. Instead, they use the prostitute -in different ways - to indict the whole city, and sometimes the whole nation.

In "The Deserted Village", Oliver Goldsmith describes a “poor houseless shivering female” (Goldsmith 1966: 326) at her betrayer’s door. She is the one figure viewed at length in the city night piece that comes near the end of the poem, as the speaker considers where the villagers ousted from sweet Auburn might go. Here the significance of this female is enhanced by the city-country dialectics, and her fate contains much of the argument of the poem. In the poem, the village is a place of wholesome, solid pleasures, of natural ties, innocent love, marriage, and children. The city is a place of “toiling pleasure [that] sickens into pain” (Goldsmith 1966 : 262) – pleasure of few at the expense of many, specifically pleasure at the cost of formerly

innocent girls who are then discarded. Goldsmith's female persona was perhaps once a villager with "modest looks" (Goldsmith 1966 : 327), who "wept at tales of innocent distressed" (Goldsmith 1966 : 328) while herself protected. In the city, she lost everything. Consequently, her friends and her virtue have fled, and she deploras "that luckless hour / When idly first, ambitious of the town / She left her wheel and ropes of country brown" (Goldsmith 1966 : 334-36).

The female speaker in "The Deserted Village" has been seduced and abandoned by a rich man who lives in the city, the seat of wealth and power, the home of Parliament, which passed the law that doomed the village. The city is also associated with the callous treatment of her parallels - the poor female villagers who have the option of sharing her pain if they are foolish enough to go to the city - London. If she is not wholly innocent (as the villagers are), she has been lured to the city by precisely by the same false taste that seems to have seized the whole nation - a taste for ease and luxury rather than her wheel and simple country ropes. And her present condition not only resembles what has happened to the village, but also shows what is happening to the whole nation, whose rural virtues are being destroyed by short-sighted and oppressive luxury, which treats both lovely girls and lovely villages shamefully.

In Arabic poetry, the city is also associated with prostitution and vice. For example, the Iraqi poet, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, in his long narrative poem, "The Blind Prostitute", depicts not only the stagnation of the city - Baghdad- but also the catastrophic history of Iraq. "The Blind Prostitute" could be considered as a turning point in the history of Arabic poetry because it is the first poem which discusses the subject of women as victims of both city and village in such a comprehensive way. The poem starts with the image of the night as it falls down on the entire city. The poem portrays the city as blind as a bat in daylight but unlike the bat, the city becomes more blind at night - the nightfall adds to its blindness. Men in Baghdad visit the ugly, rotten prostitutes in the company of the city's devil, Mammon - the God of Greed. To explore the background of the blind prostitute, Al-Sayyab uses the device of a passing bird-seller peddling his merchandise. Being a country girl, the prostitute yearns for the feel of the bird's feathers and calls him over so that she might touch the bird's wings with her fingers. Suddenly, the prostitute has a flashback to her country - flocks of ducks flying by and the sound of a shot, which she takes to be her father shooting duck for supper.

In reality, she finds her father dead in a field, killed by the feudal sheikh who caught him stealing grains of wheat. The men of her village will not marry her due to her poverty; instead they deceive her, and the men of her tribe even try to kill her. Then war breaks out, bringing a huge influx of soldiers to Iraq and she becomes a town prostitute. Either prostitution or becoming a servant or beggar, is the only avenue open in the city to illiterate women who have to earn their living. Ironically, her name

becomes Sabaah – which means "morning" in Arabic. In one of fate's ironic twists, she is blinded. Her condition deteriorates so that no man wants her besides her young daughter, Raja'a "which means hope" dies. Sabaah is alone, blind and hungry, waiting in vain for men to visit her, as they do to her colleagues. Al-Sayyab emphasizes the social tragedy of the prostitute by referring to the lamp she lights in her room for the visitors who never come, while Iraq is rich with oil. As the noises of the visitors to the other prostitutes begin to fade, the speaker in the poem ironically comforts Sabaah saying "This night has passed / there is another to come"². The poem expresses the trauma Al-Sayyab, himself, underwent in the city, looking for a love he could neither obtain nor buy in the country. This poem reveals the rancor the poet bore against the town, and its psychological disgust with his experiences in its dark streets, therefore, the poet decides to escape from the city and return to his village, Jaikur, southern of Iraq.

In a related context, William Wordsworth decided to escape the city, due to its vices and prostitution, however, in books VII and VIII of *The Prelude*, he is chiefly concerned to explain how his country education allowed him to survive in this modern hell - London - and to leave it with an even stronger faith in man. His reaction to London, primarily involved moral disapproval and a new feeling of alienation in city crowds and city chaos. Prostitutes are his chief example of city vice, therefore he reveals what happens to human nature in the city. The key passage is in *The Prelude* VII, 310-434, is where Wordsworth's speaker first recalls the Maid of Buttermere who was married to a city man who already had a wife and children, and then was deserted when pregnant. Then he describes a London theatre scene, the chief figures being "a rosy babe" (Wordsworth 1972 : 367) and his mother, probably a prostitute, on whose "cheek the tints were false, / A painted bloom" (Wordsworth 1972 : 372-373). Then he tells of the shock he had three years earlier when he first came from the pastoral hills where both he and the Maid were nursed and in Cambridge "for the first time in my life did hear / The voice of woman utter blasphemy / Saw woman as she is to open shame / Abandoned, and the pride of public vice" (Wordsworth 1972 : 416-419).

Wordsworth is not primarily interested in the usual questions asked about prostitutes: how and why they became prostitutes, what their life is like, or what they are like. He is most interested in his own shocked reaction to prostitutes and how he overcame it, which seems to be one reason he leads up to the Cambridge passage as he does. Unlike Wordsworth, Blake in his city poetry, dealing with poverty and

²See Al-Sayyab, Badr Shaker. *The Complete Poetic Works*. Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1986. These lines are cited in Gohar, Saddik. *The Map of Modern Arabic Poetry and Western Influence*. Cairo: Oyun Press, 1998. P. 24.

prostitution in London , looks ahead to a redeemed city, a New Jerusalem . But he sees the present city – the city of “London” – as a place of charters and bans , of weakness and woe. London is another night-piece, in which the speaker singles out three figures – the chimney sweep whose “cry/ Every blackening Church appalls”; the hopeless soldier whose “sigh, / Runs in blood down Palace walls”; and, most of all, the youthful harlot whose “curse / Blasts the new-born Infants tear / And plights with plagues the Marriage hearse (Gohar Saddik 1998: 28)”. Like Goldsmith, Blake uses a traditional figure (The young streetwalker) to show what human relationships are really like in the city. His London is not Goldsmith’s city of luxury or Fielding’s sinful city that preys on marriage , or Wordsworth’s city of vice and confusion. It is a city of “mind-forged manacles” – a city dominated by Church and Palace and the “Marriage Hearse”. He connects the young harlot not to her seducer or to some bawd but to the central institution in human society, marriage. Blake’s point seems to be that marriage, because it is a “Marriage Hearse”, produces harlots just as the palace creates soldiers and the blackening church, chimney sweeps.

In a related context, the Harlem city prostitute in Claude McKay’s poem “Harlem Dancer” recalls the eighteenth century and nineteenth century British prostitutes – cited above - who appear in the poetry of Blake and eighteenth century British novelists. Like Blake's whores, the Harlem’s prostitute is a victim of society. The African-American poet points out that the Harlem prostitute is not supposed to be in what he calls (that strange place):"Applauding youths danced with young prostitutes /And watched her perfect, half-closed body sway;/Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes /Blown by black players on a picnic day./She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,/The light gauze hanging loose about her form;/To me she seemed a proudly swaying palm /Grown lovelier for passing through a storm./Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls /Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,/The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls, /Deferred her shape with eager, passionate gaze;/But looking at her falsely smiling face,/I knew herself was not in that strange place" (Stanford 1971 : 104).

Unlike the Harlem whores, in McKay’s poetry, who are victims of society, Eliot’s prostitutes are integral to the wasteland community. Like most of the female and male figures in *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot’s prostitutes are evil, sterile and vicious representatives of life in a sinful city. Unlike Al-Sayyab’s poor / blind prostitute or Blake’s victimized harlots , Eliot’s whores practice sex not because they need money or shelter or food, but because they are sinners living in a city full of vices and curses. Discussing the image of the prostitute in Eliot’s city as delineated in *The Waste Land*, Philip Sicker argues that Eliot’s prostitute is a sterile woman who “despite innumerable fornications never conceives nor gives birth. Whether she is an actual prostitute or merely a promiscuous female, she is characterized by acute neurasthenia, nervous

chatter, hysterical laughter, and general physical and psychological debilitation” (Sicker 1984 : 420).

3. The City Analogy in Modern Arabic poetry

In “The Poet and the City”, W.H. Auden describes the relationship between the artist and the city identifying the city as a woman:

A metropolis can be a wonderful place for a mature artist to live in, but, unless his parents are very poor, it is a dangerous place for a would-be artist to grow up in; he is confronted with too much of the best in art too soon. This is like having a liaison with the wise and beautiful woman twenty years older than himself (Auden 1985 : 184)

The city, personified as a woman is also one of the peculiar characteristics of Arabic poetry. For example, the great Syrian poet ,NizarQabbani, personifies Grenada as a beautiful Arab woman who falls into the hands of the enemies of the nation after the collapse of the Islamic empire in Andalusia by the end of the fifteenth century and the re-conquest of Spain . Therefore , critics argue thatthe Arab / Muslim history in Andalusia is one of the major motifs in the poetry of Qabbani .In his city elegies , Qabbani engages the rise and fall of great / historical cities in ancient Andalusia. In his poem , “Sadness of Andalusia”,NizarQabbani laments the decline and fall of the Arab / Muslim civilization in Spain identifying Grenadaas a woman raped by the enemies. In Grenada "the only remnants of the Islamic civilization / are the weeping minarets "of the mosques (Saddik 1998: 49)

Qabbani is one of the most prominent urban poets in the Arab world who is concerned with life in the city. Unlike most of the modern Arab city poets - who came from poor rural backgrounds - NizarQabbani was born in the city of Damascus. In his city poems , men and women are figured as modern urban lovers in their taste, dress, mentality and behavior. In his poetry as a whole , there is distinction between the Damascus city of his childhood - which he loves with deep nostalgia - and the cityof Damascus as an Arab metropolis with its ancient religious and social customs and spirit of stagnation and defeat . In “The Whore”,Qabbaniexplores a major aspect of life in the Arab city as he vividly delineates the city’s prostitution area :“In a street full of illuminated hovels/ where each house is one long tragedy/ narrow pestilential rooms/ and a name above each door – Mary or Jamilah/ Flesh is displayed to those who would feed on it/ As the stableman too offers his beasts/ what slavery like that of the woman cast down/ For mere scrapes of paper – underneath her buyer?” (Khouri/ Algar 1975 : 161). In the Arab city, women are victimized by law, tradition, religion and poverty: "their breasts awaiting the butcher/ patient in expectation of fate”. Like the whores in William Blake’s poetry who are victims of capitalist society Qabbani’s

prostitutes are portrayed as victims of patriarchal tradition that shows no mercy to sinful women while considering male sexual adventures as an integral part of one's manhood.

The prostitute persona in the preceding poem expresses her hostility towards the moral codes and social traditions of the Arab city and its inhabitants: "O thieves of flesh! O dealers in flesh/ it is thus that the hunted beast is eaten/ since lust has been upon earth/ you have been as wolves and we as lambs/ we have been the tortured tools of lust/ acting out love, impassively/ Dance over our crucified breasts/ where all softness and light are dead". Then Qabbani alludes to the famous Quranic verses (in The Light section / Surah which discusses the fate of adulterers inflicting punishment on those who are involved in adultery: "The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with a hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case in a matter prescribed by Allah if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment" (Ali 2001 : 504).

Qabbani's inter-textual hint – cited above - aims to affirm that in Arab cities dominated by men, women are destined to pay for their sexual sins regardless of the Quranic instructions in this respect "Stone me, aim well your rocks:/ you are all heroes on that day when I fall". According to Islamic traditions, married women who commit adultery should be stoned to death: "You who judge me, you who stone me/ you are too cowardly to be just". By the end of the poem, The prostitute persona, challenges the moral codes that fail to achieve justice: "You shall not cause me fear, for your law / aids the tyrants, stones the weak/ you call the adulteress to account/ While how many a bloody adulterer goes free!/ But a single bed unites them both:/ The woman who perishes and the man thus guarded" (Khoury & Algar 1975: 167). Unlike Qabbani, who portrays the fears, pains, the whims and erotic desires of Arab urban women to express his opposition to the taboos of Arab society among which sex and women are the most critical, other Arab poets, of country descent, are not interested in approaching these issues. Instead, they express the shock they experience as they encounter the big city. Their poetry obviously reflects the traditional tension between their country values and those of the city.

Furthermore, Qabbani's poem "Diary of an Indifferent Woman" sharply criticizes the stagnation and backwardness of the Arab city in the 1960s especially the attitudes of men toward women. The woman of the title expresses her love for her city in terms of irony referring to the calls of its salesmen, its street songs, minarets, churches, drunkards, worshippers, its tolerance and fanaticism: "its worship of its past/ My city is satisfied with what it contains:/ thousands of dead people chewed up in its coffee houses/ they have become part of its chairs/ Mummified crickets, blinded by the sun rise/ our city is spending its night behind the trick track/ Indifferent to any important event/ indifferent to history" (Gohar 1998 : 134). The preceding successive images

which portray a religious and lazy environment are followed by the female speaker's conclusion that "Our city is without the love/ that would refresh its calcified face and irrigate its deserts/ Our city is without the woman/ who would melt the frost of its loneliness and confer upon its meaning" (Gohar 1998 : 138).

In a more daring poem, "Bread, Hashish, and Moonlight", Qabbani laments the way the lazy inhabitants of Arab cities entertain themselves in the moonlit mountains: "When the moon is born in the east/ people leave their shops and march forth in groups/ to meet the moon/ carrying bread, and a radio, to the mountain tops/ And their narcotics./ There, they buy and sell fantasies/ And images/ and die as the moon comes to life" (Khouri & Algar 1975: 175). In Qabbani's city, people are lazy, ignorant and superstitious. They believe in fate, divine decree and they visit the graves of the saints entreating them to provide them with food and children. Although they live in poverty, they dream of marrying four wives: "On those eastern nights when/ the moon waxes full/ the east divests itself of all honor/ and rigor/ the millions who go barefoot/ who believe in four wives/ And the day of judgment" (Khouri/ Algar 1975 : 179). In the Arab city, an emblem of the Arab world, people escape from reality and live on the memories of the false heroism of the past enjoying banal songs: "In my land/ where we slowly chew on our unending songs/ A form of consumption destroying the east/ Our east chewing on its history/ Its lethargic dreams/ its empty legends/ our east that sees the sum of all heroism/ In picaresque Abu Zayd Al-Hilali" (Khouri & Algar 1975 : 179).

Like Qabbani, Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), employs the metaphor of the woman to refer to the city. In a poem entitled "A Chapter of Tears", Adonis approaches Damascus as if it were a woman depicting the city as a prostitute . He entreats the city/woman to rescue its stranger (the poet) from the loneliness he feels inside his soul but Damascus is unyielding and "the trees weep in the ground of the city". Recalling his suffering in Syrian cities, the poet reveals how he is besieged by the "dreams of terror in the shades of Qaysunmountain, (located in Damascus) dreams of the blind past, of the shriveled corpses, of the dumb graves". In his terror, he calls out: "Damascus do not return. Oh, outcast woman, woman with plump thighs, Oh Damascus/ Oh woman consecrated to any man who would come/ to luck, or the bold who would come/ lying in fever and relaxation/ under the arms of the East/ Oh, woman, destined for mud and sin/ Oh shining seduction/ Oh city whose name was Damascus" (Gohar 1998 : 76).

In the same vein, the poet cries out: "The sky of Damascus is dark, its history is black". The source of the poet's anger is indicated in his description of a woman/city representing lack of conviction, noise and distraction. According to the poem, the woman/city pays attention only to her dead, to her graves and to the dervish refugees. While Damascus in the poetry of Ahmed Shawqi, the prince of Arab poets , is

associated with sheer delight, gardens and sweet basil , it is figured out as a prostitute in the poetry of Adonis. In Shawqi's poetry the earth is described as an abode with Damascus as its garden and the River Barada is likened to Ridwan, a river in paradise. Damascus is referred to as the “dwelling of paradise” (Shawki 1960 : 89) even when Shawqi was describing the city after being bombed by the French forces during the Druze revolt of 1925.

In the poetry of Adonis, Damascus is figured out as a submissive woman who relishes in the yellowed corpses of her victims and she feeds on mud and tears. However, this negative view of Damascus does not reflect the whole picture about the poet's feelings towards his city. In the last section of the poem, Adonis is torn between his love for Damascus and his hatred of it. This ambivalent perspective appears in the following lines: “And I said: No! Let Damascus stay in my nostalgia and in my blood/ And I said: No! Let Damascus burn”(Gohar 1998 : 77)At the end of the poem, Adonis asks Damascus for forgiveness because his anger toward the city was born out of love. For her sake he “had plunged into the depth, destroyed the walls, and experienced the fire which gives light to the oncoming ship of the universe”(Gohar 1998 : 78).

This love/hate relationship is articulated in the text of the poem in terms of the sexual feelings of a man toward a lusty woman: “Damascus is a caravan of stars on a green carpet/ Two breasts of embers and oranges/ Damascus/ A loving body in bed” (Gohar 1998 : 79). He yearns for his city asking Damascus -the woman - to come to him: “Damascus/ The fruit of night, fruit of his bed”(Gohar 1998 : 81). This personification of Damascus as a lusty woman prevails in Adonis's poetry. In “Damascus, a Dream”, for instance, as the poet envisions Damascus being recreated or reborn, he uses erotic imagery: “Damascus is naval of the Jasmine/ pregnant/ spreading its fragrance/ As a roof/ waiting for its newborn” (Gohar 1998 : 82).

In his dramatic poem “Taymur and Mihyar”, Adonis speaks about Taymur, the cruel conqueror who represents power and brute force, and Mihyar who represents the poet, the wizard, the prophet, “the breath implanted in the lungs of life”. In the city, a location for tyrannical regimes, Taymur attempts to burn the poet alive by immuring him in a copper statue of an ox and setting fire to it. To a background of thunder, lightening and smoke, Mihyar rises triumphantly from the ashes like the phoenix who rises from the funeral pyre with renewed youth: “It was said that the sky showered fire upon the city/ It was destroyed/ crushed and burned/ and while its debris smoked/ people smelled them and fell dead/ Mihyar is blood and water/ The earth resembles his face/ Began, like his voice/ And people began to be born” (Cited in Gohar 1998 : 88).

This dramatic poem expresses the vision of Adonis which signifies that the legendary phoenix/Tammuz will destroy the materialistic city and that a new world

will be born on its ruins. This image of rising, rebirth from the ashes is used to indicate the last stage of decadence and decay of the Arab civilization alluding to a new Arab Renaissance. Within the symbolic structure of the poem, Taymur represents the values of a materialistic/corrupt Arab city which seeks to destroy Mihyar. In the end, this process leads to the downfall of Arab decadence and gives rise to a new era of redemption. In this context, it is obvious that Adonis, like other Arab poets, places more emphasis on the city than on the country. Nevertheless, in his poetic vision, both city and village are ugly and destructive – the former by virtue of its industrialization and the latter owing to its poverty and backwardness. Thus, in the city, the inhabitants are destroyed by smoke whereas in the village, the children are brought up to pray, pay lip-service to the past and are taught to be shoeblacks.

Moreover, Adonis identifies the Arab city, Damascus, with the character of the prostitute because of the torture and suffering he underwent in Syrian prisons as a result of joining the Syrian National Party. The poet's hostile attitude toward the city is reinforced by his Sufi studies. From the standpoint of the poet's Alawite background rooted in Sufism, pantheism and extreme sensibility, the Arab city is an embodiment of materialism which must be eradicated. Unlike the Egyptian city poet, Ahmed Abdul-MutiHejazi, Adonis does not, yet, present the country/village as an alternative to the corrupt city. But he sees the solution in freedom, vision, intuition and the transcendence of the traditional dualisms of good and evil, body and soul, and life and death – all this within the framework of continuous revolution and creation.

In his book *Myth in Modern Arabic Poetry*, Yusuf Helawi studies the treatment of the city theme in the poetry of Adonis. Helawi says that Adonis's city "Damascus" is a ghost city where the trees shed their tears³. She is a naked woman exhibiting her thighs to the passers-by. Damascus is depicted as a prostitute who has lost her dignity and humanity. The historical city is delineated by Adonis as an embodiment of ignorance, backwardness and indifference. To him, Damascus is a city who lives on the remains and waste of other nations. In the poetry of Adonis, Damascus emerges as the city of tears who suffers from famine and starvation. Therefore, in "Young Time" from the Songs of Mihyar: The Damascene", "MihyarAl-Dimashqi", Adonis points out that all Arab cities of corruption and tyranny must be eradicated: "Our fire is advancing towards the city / to demolish the bed of the city / our fire is advancing and grass is born in the rebellious ember / Our fire is advancing towards the city" (Boullata 1976 : 63). Apparently Adonis seeks to smash the existing Arab cities of repression while dreaming of a model city, a visionary city. Apparently Adonis's paradise city is Iram, the many-columned city, mentioned in the holy Quran in "The

³ See Helawi, Yusuf. *Myth in Contemporary Arabic Poetry*. Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1994.

Break of Day section" : " Sees thou not how thy Lord dealt with the Ad people / of the city of Iram , with lofty pillars / the like of which were not produced in all the land" (Ali 2001 : 913)

In his treatment of the city, Adonis replaced the simple descriptions and detailed images of daily life, which have been developed by poets such as Hejazi and others with a more complex approach using subtle poetic techniques . His treatment of the city motif is influenced by his vision as a revolutionary who left his homeland, Syria, escaping to Lebanon because of the hard political conditions he suffered there which included a long term of imprisonment in the city of Alqunaitera. In his poem, "The Children", collected in his complete works, Adonis conveys the emptiness, degradation and submissiveness of city life for which the hope of redemption lies in the children. The poem is characterized by the use of colloquial proverbs such as "we call him uncle / the one who married our mother". The poet says " In the lips of the city / A bell of lamentation / Since thirty generations / 'We call him "Uncle" / The one who married our mother / 'But the situation is unbearable! / 'So what!' Time is but a turning wheel! / The face of the city / Is lost in a submissive emptiness./ And the weeping of the children / Opens the gate of Dawn" (Gohar 1998 : 112).

Moreover, in his poem "The City", Adonis condemns the modern city for being "enslaved to the smoke" of factories, machines and cars. He calls it the "raft of the wind", a possible reference to the wind of politics and finances. Adonis continues his attack against the city: "It is ugly like the face of a frog. It has two fingers", (referring to money and politics). Since the city is crowded with people, buildings, asphalt roads, dust, smoke, factories and chimneys, it cannot "reach the horns of the spring" and "It cannot feel the morning river". The city is a pool of the herd, a pool of stale water. It has "one face and two navels", which refers perhaps to the twin evils of corruption and capital.

In the poetry of Adonis, as a whole , the city is depicted as "a mere stone" and again as "the wreckage of a ship". In his anger, the poet threatens to burn down the city with its parched and weary existence and cleanse the face of the day which will usher in the new dawn. The hostile feelings toward the city are juxtaposed to the poet's love, reverence and sympathetic attitude toward his village which he calls "my homeland". He speaks of the shriveled faces wearing masks of sorrow, the roads on which his tears are imprinted and his father who died "as green as a cloud", an indication of the untimely death of Adonis's father in a fire. The corruption of the city is juxtaposed to the poverty, enslavement and misery of his village which is reflected in the image of a boy who "is brought up to pray and be a shoebblack, a slave to hunger, tears and home". He concludes with: "I bow to all these. They are my home not Damascus"(Cited in Gohar 1998 : 119).

4. Conclusion

The Arab City : From Political Corruption to Military Defeats

In "The Actors", Qabbani criticizes the Arab governments after the catastrophe of the June war 1967 attributing the defeat to the existence of Arab tyrannical regimes and Arab cities where people "turn into mice". In the beginning of the poem, Qabbani says: "When ideas, when thought itself / flattens out in a city/ and curves like a horseshoe/ when any rifle picked up by a coward can crush a man/ when an entire city becomes a trap and its people turn into mice/ when the newspapers become mere funeral notices/ everything dies". The result of the death of the Arab city is that "The June war is over/ It is as if nothing happened/ Faces, eyes are no different - -/The stage is burnt down to the pit/ but the actors have not yet died" (Jayyusi 1987 : 379).

After the occupation of Eastern Jerusalem 1967 by the Israeli forces, Qabbani wrote an elegy for the fallen city utilizing Christian narratives. In "Jerusalem", Qabbani appeals to Christ to save the holy city from destruction and annihilation: "I cried till there were no more tears / prayed till the candles melted / knelt till kneeling bored me / I asked about Mohamed in you, and about Jesus". Identifying Jerusalem as the city of all religions, Qabbani makes allusions to The Virgin Mary, Christ's mother, lamenting the occupation of the holy shrines: "Jerusalem, City which smells of prophets / shortest of roads between the earth and the sky / Jerusalem, lighthouse for ships / beautiful girl child with burnt fingers / Your eyes are sad, City of the Virgin / luscious garden where the prophet passed". Further, the agonized poet expresses sadness and sorrow reflecting the grief which dominates the life of Jerusalem's dwellers: "The stones of the streets / the minarets of the mosques are sad / Jerusalem, beauty wrap in black / Who rings the bells in the Church of the Resurrection / Sunday mornings? / Who carries the toys to the children / Christmas night? / Jerusalem, city of grief / large tear that roams under the eyelids"(Asfour 1988: 100).

Identifying Christ with the catastrophic events which took place in the city in 1967, Qabbani introduces Christ as a victim chased by assassins in the streets of Jerusalem: "Who repulses / your enemies, O pearl of religions? / Who washes the blood from the stones of the walls? / Who salvages the Bible? / Who salvages Christ from his assassins? / Who salvages man? / Jerusalem, my city / Jerusalem, my love"(Asfour 1988: 100). Unlike other poems about Jerusalem, characterized by pessimism, Qabbani's text reveals an optimistic vision of the future of the holy city. He predicts a Second Coming for Christ who will return to Jerusalem spreading peace and happiness and putting an end to suffering and pain: "Tomorrow, tomorrow the orange trees will bloom / and the green wheat rejoice / and eyes and olive trees will laugh / Migrating doves shall return / to the blessed rooftops / and children will

come back to play / Fathers and sons will meet / on your tall hills, my country / country of peace and olive trees” (Asfour 1988: 100).

Moreover, in his famous poem “Love and Petroleum”, NizarQabbani blames the rich Arab princes and kings who squander Arab money “at the feet” of mistresses and prostitutes in the brothels of sinful and other European cities while ignoring the suffering and pain of the Palestinian citizens in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and Beersheba. In a sarcastic tone NizarQabbani criticizes the irresponsible behavior of capricious Arab princes: “Wallow/ O oil prince/ in your pleasure/ like a mop/ wallow in your sins/ Yours is the petroleum/ Squeeze it then/ At the feet of your mistresses/ The night clubs of Paris/ Have killed your magnanimity”. Then Qabbani lampoons the corrupt Arab kings and princes who have sold the Palestinian cause and the holy city of Jerusalem: “So you sold Jerusalem/ sold God, sold the ashes of your dead/ As if the lances of Israel/ did not abort your sisters/ And destroy our houses/ and burn our Qurans/ as if her flags were not hoisted/ over the shreds of your flags/ as if all who were crucified/ on trees in Jaffa, in Haifa and Beersheba/ were not of hour kin/”. Finally, the city of Jerusalem is personified as a slain lady, killed by the invaders: “Jerusalem sinks in her blood/ while you are a victim of your passions/ You sleep as if the tragedy is not part of your tragedy/ when will you understand?/ when will the human being wake up in your soul” (Boullata 1976 : 50).

In the poetry of Adonis, the city / Damascus is portrayed as an oppressive spot, a product of Arab ignorance and backwardness. The women of Damascus are ugly, their bodies are dry and the city as a whole is characterized by its “silent graveyards, dead bodies and superstitions”. The cannibalistic city is interested in its victims, in their “yellow bodies”. As a prostitute, Damascus is a city that sells her body to the visitors while killing her own people: “O woman whose veins are full of mud and forests/ O Damascus, your thighs are always naked/ why do you like to listen to the dead and to the sound of the graves?/ why do you like to turn your people into victims and corpses?/ why do you like to eat mud and drink tears?” (Cited in Gohar 1998 : 202).

In the city poetry of Adonis, the people of Damascus are starving to death “quivering in its dark and cold nights/ looking for a hand to feed them or to provide them with bed covers, with shelter, but in vain” (Gohar 1998 : 205). In Damascus “there is fire without flames” even in Ishtar’s room, “the fireplace is without fire, it is full of ashes”. Like Damascus, Beirut is depicted by Adonis as a whore who surrenders her body only to the rich people and the strangers but the poor people of the city have no place on its soil. Beirut is an old woman, an old prostitute who dresses her best clothes every night, putting all kinds of cosmetics and perfumes waiting for “hunting dogs and strangers” but “the poor people have no place in the city” (Gohar 1998 : 206).

Approaching the Arab city as an extension of the western industrialized metropolis, an inevitable evil that must be confronted, most of the Realistic /Socialist Arab poets, unlike their Romantic counterparts did not escape from the city into a vision of nature or paradise. Instead, the city world is portrayed in an exaggerated manner until it becomes a kind of hell on earth where the poets are left with their anguish, loneliness, fears and feelings of alienation and exile. Attempting to escape from the hellish city, they did not resort to nature but they found sanctuary in existentialism or the Marxist ideology. Some of them seek refuge in Islamic Sufi traditions and others found solace in the pre-Islamic concept of the deity of nature. Nevertheless, both Qabbani and Adonis criticized the city because it has become a source of evil, disease, prostitution, political corruption and defeat.

References

- Ali, Yusuf. Meaning of the Holy Quran in English Language. Beirut : Al-Aalami Publications, 2001.
- Ali, Yusuf. Meaning of the Holy Quran in English Language. Beirut : Al-Aalami Publications, 2001.
- Al-Sayyab, Badr Shaker. The Complete Poetic Works. Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1986.
- Asfour, John, ed. and Trans. When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry (1945-1987). Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1988.
- Auden, W.H. "The Poet and the City".
- Auden, W.H. "The Poet and the City". Twentieth Century Poetry: Critical Essays and Documents, ed. Graham Martin and P. N. Furbank. London: The Open University Press, 1975.
- Boullata, Issa, ed. and Trans. Modern Arabic Poets. London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Eliot, T.S. "The Waste Land". The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse, ed. Philip Larkin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. PP. 234-246.
- Gohar, Saddik . The Map of Modern Arabic Poetry and Western Influence .Cairo :Oyun Press, 1998.P. 24.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. The Collected Works. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Hellawi, Yusuf. Myth in Contemporary Arabic Poetry. Beirut: Dar Al-Adab, 1994.
- Henriques, Fernando. Prostitution and Society. London: Mc Gibbon, 1956.
- Jayyusi, Salma, ed. An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.P.379.
- Khoury, Mounah and Hamid Algar (Trans. and Eds.). 1975. An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry. California: California University Press.
- Shawqi, Ahmed. Al-Shawqiyat. Cairo: Dar-Al-Ma'raf, 1960
- Sicker, Philip. The Belladonna: Eliot's Female Archetype in the Waste Land. American Literature 30 (1984)
- Stanford, Barbara D. I Too Sing America. Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Co., 1971.
- Wordsworth, W. The Prelude: A Parallel Text. ed. J.C. Maxwell. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1972.