Contemporary Arab Poetry and Arab Perception of Arab Political Reality: 
Selected Readings.

S M. K. Eiedat* and Mohamad Ahmad Al-Qudah*

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research was to identify major political issues of common concern to selected Arab contemporary poets namely, Salah Abdel Sabor, Nizar Qabbani, Ahmad Najm and Muthafar Al-Nawab. Based on such issues we were able to construct certain Arab political narrative. The relevance of that narrative to Arab political reality is then assessed. Content analysis was used to identify major political issues. The method of deconstruction and reconstruction was mainly used to follow the political narrative. Finally, we utilized relevant literature to Arab politics to assess relevance of such narrative to Arab political reality. In conclusion, we argued that although this is one narrative of Arab politics, its relevance to Arab political reality cannot be denied or dismissed.

Keywords: Perception of Reality, Political Authority, Liberty, Defeat, Social Justice, Contemporary Arab Poetry.

INTRODUCTION

An Arab image of themselves makes almost any reality difficult to cope with. Arab perception of reality stands as antithesis to the Arab image of themselves. Nothing can be expressed in such clear contrast and opposite than that of the dichotomy of image and reality of Arabs can. Bravery gives a way to defeat, submission and absence of freedom. Egalitarianism and community of light gives a way to inequality and ordeal of wealth. It is almost the opposite of light and darkness. The perfect human gives a way to hardly recognizable features of nothing.

For the construction of Arab perception of reality, we selected four Arab contemporary poets, who are considered both influential and popular. These poets are Salah AbdelSabor (Egypt), Ahmad Foud Najm (Egypt), Nizar Qabbani (Syria) and Muthafar al-Nawab (Iraq).

Selecting these four poets from many others does not assume that these poets represent totality of Arab perception of reality but only one narrative of such reality although we acknowledge what stated above that such narrative remains an influential voice which deserves to be examined and identified. Accidentally, none of these four poets is an Islamist. This may reveal that gloomy narration of reality is not confined to Islamic voices.

This research paper addresses three interrelated questions:

1. What are the major political issues of common concern to our selected poets?
2. Can we construct an Arab political narrative based on such issues?
3. How relevant that narrative for understanding Arab political reality?

In addressing these questions we utilized content analysis to answer the first question, namely, identifying major political issues. Methods of de-construction and reconstruction were used to create the political narrative. In assessing the relevance of such narrative for understanding Arab political reality, we relied mainly on reviewing relevant literature in which identify issues of...
concern and potential challenges to Arab political reality. Although we recognize this as only one political narrative, the importance of which, however, cannot be denied or dismissed.

Importance of perception in shaping reality as social construction is long-recognized in the literature including works of (Harris, 1970), (Jervis, 1979) and (Searle, 1995). Whether perception is substitute to objective reality it is a matter of debate.

The four poets raise fundamental questions we used to construct the structure of our research. These questions relate to the issue of victory and defeat in Arab modern history, the issue of political authority and liberty, and the issue of social justice. Regardless of the answers to which the four poets offer, such questions and concerns deserve a meaningful answer.

**Issues and Political Narrative.**

**Defeat**

Somehow, the Palestinian tragedy represents to Arabs embodiment and symbol of what is wrong in the Arab world. That is why the Palestinian issue has taken such mythical quality, which goes beyond the tragedy per se (no doubt important as it is). In certain respects, it has become the focus of Arab politics reducing its rationale and other concerns to that of measuring their impact on the Palestinian issue. Brief chronology of Arab narrative of the Palestinian issue can be illuminating.

At the beginning, there was the war of 1948 as a major Arab disaster [al-nakba]. The establishment of the state of Israel was presented, then narration becomes the most tangible evidence of Arab failure which is depicted in loss of a land and an exodus of people (i.e. Palestinian refugees). (Hourani, 1991)

In 1956 France, Great Britain and Israel attacked Egypt. Egypt stood its ground, due to no small measure of US pressure to halt the strike. However, the US role was not part of the narrative. The year of 1956 was presented, as a potential triumph by Egypt and hope for future victory.

However, as in real life rather than in an imaginary world of story telling, that hope of future victory was short-lived. The Arab states were defeated fair and square. Arabs lost the West Bank; Gaza; Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula. So shocking the experience was that 'a tiny' Israel was able to defeat among others the 'mighty' Egypt and the charismatic Nasser that was particularly difficult to cope with. Arabs called the 1967 defeat a setback (naksa) (Ajami, 1992). Such terminology is very revealing since for many Arabs despite the tangible evidence of defeat, collapsing armies and loss of territory. The year of 1967 was considered as single battle encounter rather than an end of a war. Potential victory was kept alive by such a narrative.

Entered 1973 October War or battles. People wondered that it was a victory (i.e. partial and temporary successful performance by Arab armies, mainly Egyptians crossing the Suez Canal), or a draw? Back to square one (no gain in territory). Therefore, not being totally defeated in 1973 it was perceived as a potential victory.

This may partly explain the lack of popular support or enthusiasm in response to the Israeli – Egyptian peace treaty of 1979. Despite Egyptian regain of its lost territory, the treaty did not fit the frame of reference to victory or even potential victory.

Arab contemporary history and equally Arab perception of reality were presented through a simple dichotomy of victory and defeat. Having not accepted for internalized defeat and victors, they turned into potential victory and equally potential heroes.(Shivelbusch, 2003) Defiance, resistance and symbolic achievements are the ingredients of potential victory and potential heroes (i.e. Saddam Hussein, Jamal Abdel Nasir, Hassan Nasralah, Osama bin Laden and potentially one may add others to the list). The cost of potential victory or heroic acts was dismissed as being insignificant as compared with the prospect of keeping the project of victory alive. Potential heroes are repeatedly compared and contrasted with defeated and weak Arab rulers. By a simple contrast, Arabs tend to inflame achievements of potential heroes and equally to dismiss and downsize the status of prevailing Arab authorities.
What adds to the status and prestige of potential heroes was the failure or inability of many Arab rulers to be part of an act of defiance or that project of potential victory. Somehow, emotional attachment and verbal support to the act of defiance were perceived as participating in the project of victory and can be used to distinguish between the rulers and the ruled. The latter is part of potential victory but rulers are not.

Indeed, considering the gloom of the reality of defeat, potential heroes are all but what is left to define life or for that matter, death as well:

Grace be upon God, this world
Is full of plague, and there is
No cure,
If the Merciful God to be fair to us
Hasten death towards us
Grace be upon God, this world can never be reformed,
Whereas death, whereas death, whereas
Death. (Abdel Sabor, 1988)

The culture of Arab defeat fluctuates between gloom and acts of potential heroes. A gray area of uncertainty usually gives way to clarity of purpose and certainty of conviction. Rationality of politics has no place in this context.

**Issue of Political Freedom**

More than a hundred years ago, around 1900AD, a Syrian reformist, AbdelRahman Al–Kawakibi, wrote his famous *Characteristics of Tyranny* (Tabae al-Istibdad) (Kawakibi, 2003), which stands till this day as an Arab classic in defense of freedom and a severe attack against tyranny and abuse of power. His persistence in attacking tyranny led to his death by poisoning in 1902.

The main theme shared by all four poets, whose writing stretched for more than fifty years, is liberty, freedom, hope, and an inspiration more than the actual experience. In retrospect, Arabs have never in their recorded history experienced freedom. However, some may argue only for 18 years, (Hilal, 2004) which covered the reign of prophet Mohammed's successors, namely Abu Bakr, Omar Ibin al Khatab, and part of the Uthman Ibin Affan's reign.

In a play dramatizing the life and death of Islamic Sufi Al–Halaj, who was executed in 922 (Kùng 2007), Salah Abdelsabor expressed his views through his characters concerning liberty and freedom of speech in the Arab world in the following manner:

Lame man: He was taken away [al–Halaj] by the police… who?
Preacher: Revealed?! What did he reveal for the police to take him away?
I don't know, any way, these
Are strange days; the wise person is
Who is careful in what he says,
And never says anything bad against
Political system, or an individual or
A situation or law or judge
Or mayor or governor or ruler! (Abdel Sabor, 1988)

In a more explicit and revealing manner Nizar Qabbani spoke repeatedly about the state of tyranny Arabs experience:

Do you know who am I?
A citizen living in a state of tyranny?
This is not an Egyptian joke,
Nor an anecdote mentioned in books
Of literature,
[.]
Its [Arab state] export is bags made
Of human skin,
God! What a time [this is]!
[.]
Its (borders) stretches from North Africa to the oil states,
[.]
The first article in its constitution (says)
That instinct of speech should be
Abolished,
God, what a time! (Qabbani, 1987)

Introducing his collective work, the Egyptian popular
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poet Ahmad Najm, who spent many years in prison for speaking against Egyptian political regimes stretching from Nasser to Mubarak, equated poetry with freedom. (Najam, 2002)

In his famous Diary of a Prisoner, Najm states:

Name: Endurance
Indictment: Egyptian
Mouth: Steady, does not move from its place, and when I tried to move it from its place, happened what happened!
Type of government: I was lying down, in prison for 7,000 years.
I eat stones out of boredom, and sleep in a state of sadness,
[.]
I never violated the law
Because I am terrified!
And the law is a sword in [the ruler's] hand.
I endure misery, so is
My name. (Najm, 2002)

Longing for freedom and experiencing freedom, as we all know, is two different things. However, one thing which is certain not only to the mind of the poets but also to the minds of every Arab, is freedom they do not have.

The reasons behind the absence of freedom in the Arab world are complex and different (Ansari, 1998). One theory trying to explain such a state is that power is evil and that rulers are wicked. Every poem expressing the loss of freedom always emphasizes the wickedness of those in power.

Another explanation is that those in power are not only wicked but also lacking courage, the theme which Muthafar al–Nawab emphasized repeatedly. However, this latter description raises an interesting question as to how a ruler with no courage can have such command and control over his subjects. Usually our poets would respond in two different ways:

First, they would emphasize that Arab leaders lacked courage simply because they were defeated by Israel and equally do not have the stamina to stand against demands put forward by more powerful states (i.e. the United States). They, in short, lack the courage to fight. Second, they recognize that the method most commonly used by Arab leaders to control their people is by introducing fear. Terrorizing one's own population, they contend, is not a sign of bravery but rather the opposite. (Abdullah, 2005)

Nizar Qabbani, in particular, raised the role of the media as 'a tool' of control by various Arab regimes. He condemned the role of the media as not only being an extension to political authority but the role of those in the media also lacked integrity. They compete for private advantages offered by political authorities regardless of any notion of collective good or public spirit. According to Qabbani, people of Arab media held no moral high ground.

Facing the apparent success of control and people being terrorized, traumatized and incapable of carrying any meaningful action to free themselves (Hilal, 2004), the poets were not so sure what motivates the people. There is clearly a shift or almost a violent swing in the mood between the certainty of a coming liberating revolution which mostly Muthafar al–Nawab represents and to a lesser degree that of Ahmad Najm. However, their certainty gave way to self-doubt and the doubt of others, which mostly Salah Abdel Sabor and Qabbani fall into.

Indeed, one gets the impression that the poets are like the people, feeling paralyzed and incapable of forward movement.

Inequality and Social Justice.

Arab reality, as portrayed by our four poets without exception, is extremely sad and depressing. One keeps wondering whether the poets themselves are the source of such overwhelming sadness. Their works are also angry and bitter. However, sadness unlike other human emotions (anger and bitterness being the most obvious) is intimate and private. We tend to experience sadness with the feeling of love and with the loss of dear people.

However, the sadness of our poets, in particular, AbdelSabor and Najm, is a product of a deep feeling of
injustice and lack of equality. Their most moving and reflective poetry is that which is related to the notions of fairness and equality:

My star [...] my only star
We sit in a distanced corner… like two
Domesticated cats!
Resigned!
Searching for what days of degradation left
On my tired face,
And on your cheeks of extended pain,
My star, my only star
We still, and so the world is still
It is still sad
[...]
Would my star, a man with a broken back be able to laugh?
[...]
And because these are sick days
And because the lonely night gives
Birth to terror, our little words of
Loves become ill,
[...]
And because these are sick days
And because the lonely night gives
Birth to terror,
We will not gain even love! (Abdel Sabor, 1988)

Sadness created our grim faces,
To install tyrannical rulers!
[...]
But me, I knew the deep end of
Down turn,
road is paved with sadness (Abdel Sabor, 1988)

According to Abdel Sabor and others, the main source of injustice is actually tyranny. The most obvious manifestation of absence of justice is an unjust ruler whose judicial order is by definition lacking fairness. Not only judges are not independent, but also they tailor, their judgments to the whim of rulers. This is indeed the major theme of his play Tragedy of al–Halaj. The two judges who prosecuted al–Halaj elaborated their judgment to suit what they thought was the ruler's wish, namely to sentence al–Halaj to death regardless of the evidence, and so it was. Al-Halaj was treated as a non–person, whose guilt and innocence were not the issue, and in their judgments, the judges addressed the ruler rather than the accused. One of the three judges who abandoned the proceedings because of the pre–determined guilt of al–Halaj was protesting:

Ibn Sareej: Have they privileged this council with injustice?
Tell me in plain language….
Are we judges in the name of
God, or in the name of the Sultan?
Abu Omar (addressing the protesting judge Ibn Sareej): Do you want to deny our Sultan the quality of fairness?
Ibn Sareej: But I would like to prove it, justice is not a custom the living receive from the dead, or a sign of ruling attached in the name of the sultan, [...]
Justice is an attitude, justice
Is unending question, [...] which
Brings another question, [...]
Justice is an unceasing dialogue
Between the Sultan and his people! (Abdel Sabor, 1988)

Abdel Sabor, 1988)

Najm's work is full of similar images of inequality, lack of justice and sadness. The most telling of his
poems include *Egyptian voice*, *Forest*, *Wake up Egypt; Hide and Seek*, *Beggars* and *Who are They?* (Najm, 2002) In answering the question of “Who are They?” Najm answers in the following manner:

Who are they, and who are we?
They are princes and sultans
They have the money and authority with them as well,
We are the poor, the governed. (Najm, 2002)

*Egyptian Voice* is similar to that of Salah Abdel Sabor. It explores the absence of just political and judicial order. (Najm, 2002) However, the most disturbing of his poems in this context remains *Forest*:

A forest whose dogs are wolves
Striking against the people,
And those who sleep in the forest
Will be diminished by worry, forest eats up dead bodies
A forest that drinks blood!
[..]
A forest whose dogs are wolves
Striking against the people,
A forest and its people are poor lots,
Impotent [...] they have no mouth
No teeth, dependent on accident,
They are diminished by worry
[..]
We, the salt of the forest,
Worried, unsettled, worried
Lost,
Among wolves. (Najm, 2002)

Salah Abdel Sabor and Ahmad Najm are very much interested in exploring and also condemning inequality within Arab societies in their works particularly that of Egyptian society. Nizar Qabbani and to a lesser extent Muthafar Al-Nawab put more emphasis on inequality between Arab societies, which according to them are divided between rich (Oil Gulf states) and poor (other Arab states).

Gulf States, according to the two poets, have failed Pan–Arabism. They failed in supporting pan Arab causes such as the most notably that of the Palestinian people.

Adding insult to injury according to Qabbani, not only have Gulf states failed other Arabs, but equally they live a decadent life (Qabbani, 1987) This led Muthafar to remark whether such rulers were actually Arabs?!

In this regard, Arab perception of reality stands in clear contrast to the Arab image of themselves. Inequality, injustice, corruption and decadence stood compared to egalitarianism, austerity, fraternity, and brotherhood.

CONCLUSION
Understanding Arab Political Reality.

Perception of reality as seen and constructed by the four selected poets is indeed very depressing and gloomy. This raises a fundamental question as to whether such reconstruction of reality is indeed reality itself. Another relevant question is whether such construction of reality is unchanging or historical? In other words, does such perception of reality capture our own or is it relevant say to different generation though not from a distanced past?

This research is based on the assumption that reality is a social construction and its relevance is based on how such reality is perceived. For this reason construction of reality by our selected poets is one narrative of reality which is presumably a matter of debate and also a question of empirical reference. In other words, it can be measured by, say, scientific survey asking a selected target whether they share or not the poets sentiments in reference to issue of liberty and also the issue of social justice. They can also be asked to respond to the poets' attitude towards political authority. This may indicate a future area of research.

We emphasise above that there exists the possibility of more than one narrative of reality. This means that our poets' perception of reality is only one narrative. Two questions arise, first, is there other competing narrative to the one which we identified? Second, who in Arab literature represent that competing paradigm? This is a question of great value and worth pursuing as a research problem. This will open up the possibility of constrast and comparison between competing perceptions of Arab Reality. By doing that we will be in
a position to have a better comprehension of what is evidently complex perception of Arab reality. In our research we only identify a single narrative of Arab reality. This recognizes as a limitation to our research.

Our poets in their construction of Arab reality have raised fundamental questions which can be argued and are of value and still deserve to be addressed. One fundamental question is the relationship between Arab political authority and the issue of liberty. This is a question of more than theoretical significance but has a political value. There is growing consensus in the Arab world and beyond concerning the need and urgency for political reform (Lewis, 2002). Such urgency and need have yet to be reflected in Arab political reality. This means that our poets' concern and criticism of the way politics is conducted in the Arab world is a still relevant political issue.

Another fundamental question which all our poets have raised is that of the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, Arab perception of defeat is largely associated with this conflict. It goes without saying that such an issue is still an open-ended political difficulty, which will require a meaningful solution (Cleveland, 2006). Otherwise, the issue of victory and defeat will continue to colour Arab perception of reality.

Finally, all four poets have raised the issue of inequality and that of social justice. This is certainly a very complex issue and a controversial one, but considering the rapid change taking place in the Arab world and globally and the growing dislocation of many segments in various Arab societies (Amin, 2004), it remains a fundamental issue to be addressed. A consensus is certainly needed on this issue and on others which the poets emphasized upon.

REFERENCES


 arabic poetry: selected works

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