RESEARCH PAPER | Language | Volume : 5 | Issue : 6 | June 2015 | ISSN - 2249-555X



Joseph (Yūsuf) in Modern Arabic Poetry

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Arab poets have had an artistic eye on the figure of Joseph since the 1960s. In most cases he symbolizes one thing, the victim, in keeping with the first part of the story of Joseph (the well and the prison). The political and social situation in the Arab world in recent times clearly influenced the way his figure was used. However, a number of poets in their use of this figure have broken sharply with Joseph's image in the classical religious and literary sources. In the present paper I shall attempt to analyze the various functions which the figure of Joseph possesses in modern Arabic poetry, focusing especially on the meanings given it by Arab poets. I argue that several such meanings exist in modern Arabic poetry, although the use of Joseph's figure as a symbol of the victim still predominates.*

1. The figure of Joseph in modern poetry

Since the beginning of the 1960s Arab poets have begun turning their attention to traditional and religious symbols, as they developed a growing awareness of the course of Arab history, and used these symbols as mirrors for exposing reality (al-Karakī 1989, p. 8). Arab poets, as people of the Orient, of necessity deal with the sacred in one way or another: "It needs to be emphasized that contemporary Arab poets' firm belief in the value of dealing with religious sanctity in their poems is not the result of an accidental desire, or of a purely foreign tradition; rather, it is the end result of both living and literary experience, an experience possessing two dimensions. One of these is rooted in the soul and derives from it, since the feeling of holiness is an internal emotion, closely linked to the human entity and thus inextinguishable. As long as Arab societies remain religious, of whatever faith, it is only natural that poets during certain periods in their lives came into contact with religion. The second dimension controls and prompts the creative writer: it is the desire for renewal and innovation (Kanūn 2006, p. 22).

According to Shmuel Moreh the Christian and biblical symbolism adopted by Arab poets, rather than analyzing religious experience and transforming it into rational instructive declaration, were more often than not used for expressing poets' mental and physical state. Poets were also influenced by Western poetry, and their use of religious imagery did not derive from a personal faith, as was the case in classical poetry, but only from a belief in the symbolic meanings of the metaphors in question (Moreh 1997, p. 87).

The use of religious imagery would seem to help establish a dialogue with the reader, since religious texts as a whole constituted a fundamental element in the Arab reader's culture. Religious intertextuality thus helps the poet deliver his message more effectively, based on a shared background with the reader.

The poets were not in general interested in opposing the religious text. Perhaps that is what prompted the scholar ʿAbd al-Muṭallib express reservations concerning the relationship between contemporary texts, in the form of the *qaṣīda* poem, and the "absent", religious text: "Since intertextuality has entered the sphere of "sacred texts", it is imperative to extract the absent text from its original context and transform it in some way into a basic component of the present structure" (ʿAbd al-Muṭallib 1995, p. 163).

Most poets have focused on particular elements of the story and their symbolism, such as the well, the wolf, the sheaves, the ruler's wife, and so on. Most Arab poets have ignored the story's optimistic or happy ending, and put the emphasis usually on its more painful aspects. Joseph has usually been used to symbolize the victim, because of his brothers' perfidy, for which the well was his compensation, and because of his beauty, for which the prison also compensated. The political climate in Arab societies in the 1960s, leading up to the defeat of 1967, served to emphasize the elements of solitude and alienation in the figure of Joseph, who had been abandoned alone, with no succor or aid. This can be seen in the Arab context in general, and in particular in the Palestinian context, in which we find that most poets use Joseph to symbolize the victim, although some Arab poets have also given the figure of Joseph quite different and individual meanings. Joseph as symbol in modern Arabic poetry differs from Christ and Job. Christ usually alludes to redemption, salvation and suffering, while Job symbolizes absolute suffering. Joseph, however, is a figure which has had to undergo painful tribulations, but realizes its affirmative dream in the end. The use of Joseph as symbol or as a mask can be seen in the works of the poets Muḥammad al-Qaysī (1944-2003), ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maqāliḥ (b. 1937), Maḥmūd Darwīš (1941-2008) and Aḥmad Maṭar (b. 1956).

One of the first modern poems in which Joseph is used as a symbol and appears in the title is the Palestinian poet Muḥammad al-Qaysī's "Joseph in the Well":

My enemies tormented me because my
Eyes did not love any but my homeland
They crucified me in exile o caravan leader
My brothers tied me and cast me into the well
They killed me with the answer of silence
The killed me, o caravan leader, because I loved.
(al-Qaysī 1999, 1:51)

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This poem was dated by its author to 1966. It was written in Kuwait. Here the poet depicts Joseph's suffering, or his own, exchanging the word "brothers", sometimes with "enemies" and sometimes with their explicit name. The verses which begin with a verb all belong to one semantic field, namely death. The repeated appearance of the first person singular personal pronoun turns Joseph's "mask" into a manifestation of a state of defeat and death, stressing his status of victim: "Among the most important features of the 'mask poem' is that the speaker's voice in it is haunted by the voice of the poet, and that it is supervised by the first person singular" (Basīsū 1999, p. 216).

The poet's brothers make no move to rescue him in the desert. The poet thus addresses the caravan chief, while they remain silent and abandon him to his death, moving only in order to tie him. The irony is that the reason why he is killed is his love of his homeland. The poem is constructed on an inconsistency between the antecedents and the results; brothers are not expected to cause one's death, and love is not expected to result in death either, in accordance with the textual sequence. The poem also abounds in letters with a deep sound, in keeping with the melancholy note struck by the poet (the Arabic letters ʿ, ṣ, ġ, ḫ, and q).

The poet ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maqāliḥ explains the circumstances under which he wrote his "From the Annals of Joseph in Prison" ("Min ḥawliyyāt Yūsuf fī al-sijn"), which he added as a paratext on the margins, to help the reader understand the poem's atmosphere: "When I wrote this poem my two poet friends ʿAbd al-Wadūd Sayf and Muḥammad al-Masāḥ were in the al-Qalʿa prison in Sanaa, charged with having written modern poetry; this poem I dedicate to them in solidarity and greeting" (al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 546). The poem thus constitutes a condemnation of the conservative mentality which prevents and veils thought. The poem was written in 1973; it contains seven divisions, each of which is headed by a year: 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973. In the first division we read:

When sadness bought me from my homeland,
And my face purchased fear,
My land was on journey through the drought
Waiting for the rain, the bread,
I am not the only one whom his family sold for a few dirhams,
How many youths have families sold for a loaf of bread.
(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 546).

The poet here describes the tragedy of his homeland. He is bought and sold for a few dirhams, as Joseph was according to the Quranic version (Q 12:20), but tries to console himself by the fact that he was not the only one who had been sold. The poet compares living in the homeland with living in the well and prefers the latter, as an indication of the ruling regime's cruelty and his own alienation and solitude. Implicitly he compares living in the well and living under a dictatorship and decides he prefers the first alternative. In the second division the poem says:

When a caravan came to the well
And its men rescued me from the well
And I saw the sky, I laughed. As if I had come out of the earth's womb
And here I am now in the well,
In the womb of terror,

Shouting in my solitude:
"Had you but left me in the well which gave me its water to drink
Its mosses clothed me and its grass fed me".
(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 547).

The irony lies in the fact that the act of going out made the poet think that he was moving to a better life, since now he could see the sky smiling at him. However, he was quickly disappointed, as he discovered that his new reality was more bitter than the one before. The word "sky" here has a metaphorical meaning, of upward movement, as if the poet expected to be able to hold his head high, in other words to have his humanity respected.

In the third division the poet's criticism of the ruler grows sharper. He describes the great gap between the ruler who sells his homeland and the citizens who die of famine. The strongman ignores his function of protecting the homeland and protects his own material desires instead.

Ah, between mountains surrounded by death and night lies Sanaa

My temptress

The raiders expose its features, and the "ruler" caresses his cat

With contempt and counts riyals

Hiding the keys behind his trousers

The famished pass the night around the ruler's palace, naked, praying

Waiting in vain,

Cooking pots of indifference and waiting.

(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 548).

The poet depicts the ruler in a caricature-like manner, contrasting the reality with what would have been expected. The homeland, Sanaa in this case, is being despoiled, and yet the person whom we would expect to protect it is busy caressing his cat, and only cares about his own material wealth, hiding his keys in his trousers. The key and the trousers here have a sexual meaning. This self-absorption is contrasted with the famished people surrounding the ruler's palace, who pray naked, a contradiction in itself, since prayer requires decorum and modesty. In this the poet may also be criticizing the people; the circling around the ruler's palace in search of food may be an allusion to the rites associated with circling the Kaʿba. Such contradictory functions of the textual elements indicate irony. In addition, the ruler in the Quranic texts takes steps to protect his wife, by putting Joseph in prison, while al-Maqāliḥ's text makes him a despicable pimp.

In the fourth division the ruler's wife cheats on him, and he takes revenge on the people, as compensation for his broken manhood:

My village before its destruction did not

Believe that the "ruler" was a eunuch who traded in its sons' honor,

And the "beloved" in the palace grabbed his honor in her

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teeth and traded,

Fornicating with its sons one by one,

And with its grandsons,

And with the soldiers,

With foreigners, both residents and passersby,

He used to see her, her actions made him sleepy, and he would pour his fears and dejection

Above our ribs with fire and whips

The revenge apparatuses expropriate us and distribute our livers and skulls

To the foreigner.

(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 549).

What characterizes the preceding division is its imagery which is based on the shattered expectations of the village, in light of the way the ruling regime behaves, as manifested in the negative statement: "My village … did not believe". The language of exaggeration used to describe the immoral actions of the ruler's wife also emphasizes the gap between expected and actual behavior. The scholar Khālid al-Karakī explains this division as follows: "And thus al-Maqāliḥ distinguishes among equals. If the Yemeni people / the poet himself are the equivalent of Joseph in his tribulations in the well, the "ruler" is the equivalent of the regime, the same regime which the poem attacks so fiercely in the fourth division (the year 1970), including the "beloved" who mangles the ruler's honor, trades with it, and spreads destruction in this "village", which collapsed when the ruler proved incapable of deterring the "beloved" from her immoral behavior, and so poured his own fears and desperation over the ribs of his people with fire and whips, and revenge apparatuses, which expropriate it and distribute its livers and skulls to foreigners" (al-Karakī 1989, p. 38). The use of the word *ʿazīza* for "beloved", contrasting with *ʿazīz* for "ruler" is another source of irony, since what both she and her *ʿazīz* do has very little to do with the root's basic meaning of "glory". The semantic function of the name thus reflects the poet's derisive attitude.

In the seventh division the poet tries to be more optimistic:
The truth has come to light,
Will the chains on my lips be able to proclaim it? I have
Agreed to the conditions … from now on I shall
Try to lure it away from itself.
And tear the shirt with the bloody fingernails of my breath,
[…]

And extricate my body from the harshness of murder.
(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 552).

The first line alludes to the verse in which the ruler's wife admits what she had done with Joseph (Q 12:51), but the poet transmutes her role in order to affirm his own self and gain a victory over his defeat. In order to do so he utilizes the two verbs "tear" and "extricate", which demand effort and willpower.

The poem's title, "From the Annals of Joseph in Prison", indicates that the poet writes in the form of memoirs, which explains why the poem's divisions are labeled by year. It also explains the simplicity of the poem's linguistic form, whose structure is more like that of a confession than an obscurely metaphorical text.

Al-Muqāliḥ shows his great love to his city Sanaa in the poem "Yemeni Marginal Notes on the 'Migration of Ibn Zarīq al-Baġdādī'", in which the poet declares the death of Joseph and his own inability to help him:

My darling
My city
No sound, no sob, no cry
Echoes rise from Joseph's well
I am naked, I have no shirt which I can send with the caravan.
(al-Maqāliḥ 1986, p. 441).

In the poem "A Call for Helping Joseph" by the Lebanese poet Fuʾād al-Ḫašan (1912-1993), he depicts the political situation in Lebanon by way of equating his own town to Joseph. His town has been betrayed and stands alone, with no one to help it, thus explaining the "call for help" in the poem's title.

What was Joseph's sin, that enemies, friends and family
Assembled against him?
What obscure crime turned
All the prayers of lovers into arrows
Bearing him betrayal?
Then they throw stones of vile accusation at the wolf's head
Although the wolf is innocent of his blood!
(al-Ḫašan 1988, p. 379).

Here the poet uses Joseph and the wolf with the same meaning as they have in the Quranic text; only the context is different.

At the end of his poem the poet issues a plea to save Joseph/Lebanon from death:

Joseph in his well awaits the rope of hope
O his family, show him a magnanimous face
If you want the wind's maze
For the fever of the family which he had left to bring him back
Beware of oppressing him …
For it is the last arrow
It is the last arrow …!
(al-Maqāliḥ 1988, p. 388).

Here we see the use of a direct style, and language very close to prose, due to the fact that the meaning is stronger than the form. For this reason the figure of Joseph here is flat and one-dimensional, in line with the missing text.

The poet Aḥmad Maṭar (b. 1956) equates Joseph with the oppressed Arab citizenry. In his poem "Joseph in the Oil Well" ("Yūsuf fī biʾr al-batrūl") the title, as a micro-text, summarizes the entire poem, in which Joseph, oppressed in his well/tomb/land, is unable to benefit from the well's/land's potential, just like the Arabs in their land. Since the poem's message is sharply political, Maṭar uses ridicule, formed by putting opposites together, and creating a disconnected poetic style:

Seven green sheaves of my years
Wither and dry
In the palm of bleeding hope
I watch it in the night of subjugation
Its yellowness laughing at my patience

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My pains die and live.
O master of my prison, tell me
What is this vision of my tragedy?
For I am in the land of plenty
Forbidden to dream since my birth!
I pour wine for my lord
With my right hand
While my left hand receives an order of execution!
(Maṭar 2001, p. 140).

Joseph hides behind the figure of the cupbearer who was with him in prison, and alludes to the seven green sheaves of grain in Pharaoh's dream. The poet, however, applies its negative meanings to his own homeland, which he ironically depicts in a positive light. But he also describes the oppression which he has suffered since birth in an exaggerated manner, saying that he has been forbidden to dream, instead of to express his opinion.

The poem contains repeated tokens of the verbal phrase "I see", which the poet uses in an ironic sense, to express what is happening in his homeland, calling on the reader to participate in exposing the double standard in the utterance (al-Musawi 2006, p. 51).

I see around the black house
A "white house"
Running in pilgrimage dress
Casting coals on my chest
And kissing the nose of idols
Sharpening the sword in order to cut my throat
On the day of the slaughter!
And the thrones of the other idols and the divination arrows
I see them under the feet
Condemning the disgrace of surrender
And calling for a platonic jihad
"Made in USA"
From the seventh back
Advances in conquest to the "eagle"
Engraves the lines of feet
Brings back the Islamic conquest
With the defiant neighing of the roulette
Above the green flags.
(Maṭar 2001, p. 141).

This text is full of derision, which Maṭar creates through his use of a number of different mechanisms. One of these is the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, such as "black house" and "white house", turning the meaning of the color white into the pilgrimage garments, and transforming the contents of the pilgrimage rites, the "white house" being turned into the performer of the sacrifice and Joseph serving as the sacrifice on the "day of the slaughter". The regimes are servile, calling for a "platonic jihad". This pairing of the two words creates a derisive effect, in addition to giving the jihad an English label in the body of the text, which enhances even more the gloomy situation of the Arabs as expressed by the poet. The language itself may be said to have been vanquished through its penetration by a foreign tongue. The poet uses a double-entendre in his use of the word for "conquest" (*fatḥ*), which is given a sexual connotation as well, "seventh back". And the sound of the roulette wheel used in gambling is turned into the neighing of the Arabs' horses fighting on jihad. The use of the word *ḫashm* for "nose", and the act of kissing it, are clear allusions to this custom in the Persian Gulf region. Maṭar seems to depict a downtrodden citizenry, while the ruler enjoys wine, gambling and sex:

And I
Lie down at the bottom of my well
Drinking my poverty
Subject to the cold and to my darkness
A passing car buys
The rest of my skin and bones
The fire from its guns planted in my chest
For free ..
And asks for a lower price!
And the people in charge
Not one of them is aware of my plight
They are up to their necks busy
Implementing Islam:
One hand holds a glass of wine
And the other reaches towards the back of a youth
Craving for Paradises in which run …
When the person in charge submits.
(Maṭar 2001, p. 142).

The language of exaggeration used by the poet makes for irony. Thus he drinks his poverty, and the car buys the rest, as if a bought slave had the power to do so. He also utilizes the distinction between "persons in charge" (*ūlī al-amr*) and "rulers" (*āmirī*), and by means of negation the logical connection between them is denied. Anther device which the poet uses is inversion of content, that is, the content is unexpected, and thus gives rise to irony. This is what happens with the "persons in charge" who are busy with "implementing Islam" with wine and sex, in opposition to the meaning of the oft-recurring Quranic verse according to which the believers in the afterlife will be provide with Gardens of Eden under which rivers run.[1]

The Egyptian poet Amal Dunqal (1940-1983) in his poem "Sirḥān Has Not Received the Keys of Jerusalem (Lamentations) Chapter One" utilizes the figure of Joseph in order to express the bad situation in which Arabs find themselves, exemplified by the Palestinians' inability to return to their land:

They return
While their youngest brother (with the sad eyes)
Is turning over in the well!
Jerusalem is an old woman (her head is blazing white)
Who smells the shirt, and her eyes whiten with tears,
She will not take off her garment until she hears news about her far-away child
The land of Canaan, when you are not in it, is fields of thorns!
(Dunqal, no date, p. 344).

Dunqal disseminates allusions to the absent (Quranic) text inside the present text: "their youngest brother", the well, "their most handsome brother", the shirt, "her eyes whitened", "the land of Canaan". These allusions, as al-Karakī notes, have the effect of making "the poem in its overall perspective a condemnation of the Arabs' current weakness, of those who have forsaken their brother. Amal Dunqal has constructed it in seven chapters, each one of which represents a state of decline" (al-Karakī 1989, p. 41). The poet equates Jerusalem with Jacob, while evoking another verse dealing with Zacharias in *sūrat Maryam* (Q 19:4). Then the poet cancels the effect of the shirt, and her eyes whiten because the return has yet to happen. The intense image of the last line illustrates the importance which Joseph has for the Palestinian displaced persons. Dunqal is thus a poet who linked poetry with politics (al-Musawi 2006, p. 139).

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The Iraqi poet Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb (b. 1934) gives direct political expression to the situation in the Arab world, for which he blames its leaders in bureaucratic prose:

Ah Jacob ...
Observe your sons, for the wolf has not eaten Joseph It is the well ..
Ah who is the well in the Arab nation ah ..
Here their Lord stands in the field
They broke a record in betrayal.
(al-Nawwāb 1996, pp. 343-344).

The Palestinian poet Muʿīn Basīsū (1926-1984) in his poem "The *Sūra* of Yūsuf Salmān" beatifies the heroic Palestinian resistance fighter, and equates him to Joseph:

Yūsuf Salmān in the well
Joseph (Yūsuf) the handsome
Joseph who tears his shirts
On his hands a date palm
Whose are all these date palms
Now leaning on the shore of the Tigris
Joseph in the well
And I am at the well's rim
And the gazelle
Now gives birth at the well's rim.
(Basīsū, 1981, p. 697).

Basīsū turned the well into a place from which he emerges. He does not describe the tragedy which has befallen his hero, but rather looks forward towards the future to which it leads. The well is the starting point for a better life, for birth and renewal in man/Joseph, animal/gazelle, and plant/orange. The manifestations of optimism encompass all elements of life.

Basīsū is one of the few poets who focus on the happy facets of the story of Joseph.

The Palestinian poet Murīd al-Barġūṯī (b. 1944) compares Joseph to the Palestinian painter Nājī al-ʿAlī, who was killed in London, in his poem "The Wolf Ate Him". Al-ʿAlī's voice expresses both the victim and the poet's condemnation of the Arabs' situation. The wolf thus symbolizes political oppression. The poet's attempts to proclaim the innocence of the real wolf adds to the text's irony, since the wolf is shown to be more honorable than the oppressors themselves:

He spoke to me, saying:
The wolf is innocent of my killing, Murīd
For the wolf of the steppes is more honorable than most
Some can certainly learn virtues from him
To do him justice.
(al-Barġūṯī 1997, p. 311).
Give the wolves my apology
The wolf did not eat Joseph on that day
But Joseph was not the one who saves himself by fleeing
Or who will end up feeling fear.
(*ibid*, p. 313).

The poet Maḥmūd Darwīš (1941-2008) used Joseph's story as an allegory (Aṣṭīf 1999, p. 191) in his poem "I Am Joseph, O My Father", which appeared in the collection *One Rose Less* (1986):

I Am Joseph, O My Father
I am Joseph, o my father. My brothers do not love me. They do not want me amongst them o

Father. They attack me and pelt me with stones and words. They want me to die so they may

Eulogize me. They shut the door of your house on me. They expelled me from the field. They

Poisoned my grapes, o father. When the breeze passed by and played with

My hair they were jealous and angry at me, and angry at you. But what have I done to them, my father?

The butterflies landed on my shoulder, the sheaves of grain bowed towards me, and the birds landed on

My hands. So what have I done, my father? And why me? You gave me the name Joseph, and they

Dropped me into the well and accused the wolf, but the wolf is more merciful than my brothers. O father!

Did I do wrong when I said: I saw eleven stars, and the sun

And the moon, I saw them bowing to me?

(Darwīš 1994, p. 359).

In this poem Darwīš gives an allegorical version of "the contemporary Palestinian Joseph's complaint about his Arab brothers" (al-Karakī 1989, p. 44).[2]

In contrast to many other figures of prophets used by Darwīš in his poetry, such as Christ and Job, that of Joseph is quite realistic. Christ accepts his suffering and embraces his fate and Job survives torments that no human can stand; in other words, these are model figures standing for pain and suffering. The figure of Joseph, on the other hand, is dynamic; he possesses very human desires, suffers human pain, and is beset by human drives, such as jealousy and hatred. The figure of Joseph is thus more akin to the lives of the Palestinians, in fact to life in general. Darwīš focuses on a number of elements in the story of Joseph, namely his relations with his brothers, symbolizing the Palestinians' rejection by their brother Arabs, the dry well, indicated by the Arabic word *jubb*, symbolizing the tragic and unjust circumstances of the Palestinians, and then a symbol of a hopeful future, Joseph's dream of the sun and the moon, which are sources of light, in contrast to the dark well in the story. Finally, there is a desire for life, symbolized by Joseph's relationship with Zalīḫa. In this poem Darwīš uses the technique of the mask; he couches the poem in the first person, that forms a mask behind which Joseph's voice hides and from where it both criticizes the situation of the Arabs and gives richer expression to the bitter experience of the Palestinians.

As far as the poem's general structure is concerned, it contains two main dimensions, one negative and the other affirmative. The negative aspect is the attempt made by Joseph's brothers to kill him, which means "that the self planned to destroy the self, but the affirmative aspect is the tidings that Joseph has been given the power of prophecy and that he will survive the bitter experience of living inside the well (grave). This is quite consistent with the poet's faith and future vision, that the Palestinian people will pass beyond this stage" (Mūsā 1995, pp. 82-83).

With respect to the relation of events in the present text

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to the absent text, there is "a historical harmony" represented by the mention of the real facts concerning the story of Joseph, with no deviation (Mujāhid 1998, p. 90; Somekh 1998, p. 35). The poet's objective in his choice of the mask of Joseph is to go beyond it.[3] In addition, "The story of Joseph, his dream, and his eleven brothers' envy, are a recurring theme in more than one of Maḥmūd Darwīš 's poems. The Palestinians, according to the poet, are the new Joseph, whom regimes have banished and become targets of their brother Arabs' envy, until they have became their devoted victim in beauty and innocence" (al-ʿAllāq 1997, p. 113). The poem may be divided into three movements. The first movement is Joseph making himself known to his father, as indicated by the poem's title and the opening line, "I am Joseph, o my father". This introduction shows the problematic nature of the relationship between son and father, since it concerns making known something which should be naturally known. After all, if a son mentions to his father the fact that he is indeed his son, he certainly implies a complaint about being mistreated by him. The fact that the poet insisted on putting a case-ending on the name Joseph refers, in my opinion, to the son's desire for legitimacy, which he tries to obtain through the use of language, despite the requirements of the meter. The call of "o father" perhaps expresses the poet's pleading against the injustice which he feels has been done to him, or because of his desire to appoint his father as a judge to whom he can present his case. What distinguishes the first movement is the use of the negation on the one hand: "My brothers do not love me. They do not want me amongst them", and verbal sentences in the imperfect on the other: "They attack me and pelt me with stones and words. They want me to die so they may eulogize me". The use of the negation has a stronger meaning than that of assertion in poetic utterances. After all, it is natural for brothers to love each other, but the poet denies what is natural and thus tries to deprive his brothers of their humanness, while they treat him as if he were guilty of a crime for which he deserves to be punished: "They … pelt me with stones and words", in an allusion to the act of stoning, and to public defamation. Love and desire are internal motivations, but attacks and stone-throwing are external acts. Darwīš thus wants to say that Joseph's brothers want no part of him at all; they want him to die so they can eulogize him, because he had been favored over them. This is the basis on which Darwīš built the dramatic distinction in his text.

The imperfect verbs indicate continuity on the one hand, and the visual aspect on the other, since they are capable of depicting the scene for the reader. That is why the poet began the poem with them, in order to present his situation as victim before his father.

In the text's second movement we notice that the speaker in the first person has stopped addressing the brothers directly, using instead the third person plural, "they", in a development towards a depiction of just how wrongly Joseph was treated, and a denial of the brothers' description. Verbs of banishment, poisoning and breaking are a basic feature of the brothers' behavior. Note that these verbs appear in the past. The fact that the verbs appear in two tenses, past and present, bear the negative meaning that the wrongs of the past continue into the present. In this movement the poet focuses on the picture of a ruined childhood, which instills in the reader the utterance of the victim.

The question "But what have I done to them, my father?" is a boundary in the poem, because it shows that the victim did not expect to be treated so basely. This question is followed by a transition into nature, which selected him with its various manifestations. The butterflies symbolize freedom and movement, the sheaves of grain symbolize fertility, and the birds are a symbol of freedom in the upper world, in contrast to the situation in which the victim finds himself, as represented by the well.

The brothers shed off their humanity, so that the wolf becomes more merciful than they. The poet exaggerates this aspect in order to stress the depths of the tragedy in which he lives, one in which the wolf, for whom treachery is second nature, is more merciful than the poet's brothers.[4] The third movement refers to the future, represented by the allusion to the Quranic verse "Verily, I saw eleven stars, and the sun, and the moon,--I saw them adoring me!" (Q 12:4). It represents Joseph's hope in the face of injustice. In the text's deep structure there is a coded allusion: Joseph's relationship to nature is reminiscent of Christ on the cross; butterflies land on his shoulder, sheaves bow to Joseph as he stands, and birds land on his hands, in a scene which requires calm and silence on one hand, and evokes the cross on the other. Here the victimhood of Joseph and Christ intermesh. Joseph is like the Palestinians, abandoned by his brothers, symbolizing the Arab regimes, who wanted to throw him into the well, that is, to get rid of him. The poet here reflects the bitterness of the Palestinians that suffer without end, and with no solution to their plight. On the other hand they are also like Christ, because they have been offered up as victims by the Arab regimes that abandoned Palestine. The use of these two symbols, Joseph and Christ, serves to highlight the continuous sufferings of the Palestinians. Here Darwīš thus upbraids his fellow Arabs for having abandoned the Palestinians to die alone, and made no attempts to save them:

The dead shall not forgive those who stood, like us, at a loss

At the well's rim: Is Joseph the Sumerian our brother

Our beautiful brother, that we should deprive him of the stars of this beautiful sky?

(Darwīš 1994, p. 557)

Darwīš depicts the struggle of Joseph the victim with this question of disavowal in his poem "A Cloud in My Hand" in the collection *Why Have You Left the Horse Alone* (1995):

We parted on the house steps. They said:

In my cry there is a caution which does not fit the fickleness of plants,

In my cry there is rain, have I done wrong to my brothers

When I said that I had seen angels playing with the wolf

In the yard of the house?

(Darwīš 1995, p. 20).

The brothers appear to admit that Joseph's cry is special, that is contains life/rain. The missing text is changed on purpose, but retains the formulation of the question as link

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between the absent and the present texts. This change makes for irony, since in the absent text Joseph saw the stars, the sun and the moon, which symbolize his family, while in the present text he sees angels "playing" with the wolf, thus comparing two basically contradictory essences, angels and wolves, thus creating irony in the present text, in addition to deepening its self-containment.

The poet makes Joseph a man of flesh-and-blood, who cuts his ribs, as the women whom the ruler's wife invited to see Joseph cut off their hands (Q 12: 31). He thus changes the absent text, using another element from the story of Joseph, namely the seduction scene:

In Damascus
Joseph cuts
With the flute
His ribs
For nothing
Except for his
Not having found his heart with him.
(Darwīš 1999, p. 136).

Here we can clearly see the connection between the act of cutting and the dispersion of blackness over whiteness in the text, stressing the state of textual fragmentation, in that every phrase stands alone on a line of its own.

The figure of Joseph as victim has been presented in a manner that is far from reporting style or quick pace. This is reflected in the poem "I Am Joseph, Father", in the running style and the full line structure. In fact, every poem in the collection *One Rose Less* (1986) consists of ten lines. Each poem begins with a heading, and occasionally also ends in it, providing a circular structure,[5] which at first glance gives the impression of a prose-like form of address in the poem. Note also the poetic form connected to the elements of nature. Darwīš uses the figure of Joseph in this poem in two dimensions, as victim and as desire for life. For this reason he mentions the details of his life as recounted in the Quran, where the story has an optimistic ending, with Joseph becoming a ruler. For Darwīš this symbolizes the hope for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of a Palestinian state. On the other hand, he uses the figure of Christ throughout his poetry as a symbol of victimhood and redemption, especially in his poetic prefaces. The allusion to Christ is passive because of his tragic end.

Some poets have used Joseph as a personal figure, with no direct political meaning. Such poets have focused on the motif of seduction involving the ruler's wife, taking a reproachful attitude towards him. One of these is the Lebanese poet Shawqī Bazīʿ (b. 1954), in his poem "Joseph's Shirts", which he wrote in 1995. The poem consists of three stanzas, each of which is entitled "Tryout Shirt". The poet addresses Joseph as follows:

Do not believe your beauty,
Believe your shadow on the wall
Choke on the mud of truth
In order to renew
What the clay has broken in you
This is the time which proclaimed the wolf innocent
Of the charge of the blood
On your shirt
It is not your time
This horse which you have not betrayed
In its hesitant tenderness
Betrayed you
And your brothers united with your shirt
Against your father's tears
Do not therefore hang on to the bucket of safety
Which they took up in order to deceive you,
Beware their trickery
And from the cords of annihilation invent
Your rope.
(Bazīʿ 2005, 2:500-501).

The poet rejects Joseph's tranquil attitude of giving in to his fate. He therefore calls on him to rely on himself in order to save himself, and not to rely on others. He tries to rise from his well by his own efforts. The poet asks him not to believe in his beauty, just as the wolf's innocence at the time was not in his favor. The horse is a means of escape, but force did not save him, while his brothers betrayed him, as did the safety bucket. In other words, the poet shows that all the means which surround Joseph only want his death, not his salvation. The poet expresses this fact using the language of negation and direct speech.

According to the poet's depiction, the relationship between Joseph and the ruler's wife constitutes a struggle between good and evil inside the human soul; it is a fight between the two angels Raqīb and ʿAtīd on the poet's shoulder, according to the Muslim faith (Q 50:18):

Zalīḫa seduced me
Through the two gardens of her lips
I was split
And the two angels fought
On my heavy shoulders […]
As if my blood were the playground of the devil
Part of me fights the other part
And unsheathes
Swords against me
Not between myself and Zalīḫa,
But shirts of integrity and desirable
Like the eternal conflict
Between the devil and God.
(Bazīʿ 2005, p. 503).

In this stanza the poet masks Joseph, and this makes him able to represent the eternal conflict between good and evil.

In the poem "Joseph" by the Bahraini poet Qāsim Ḥaddād (b. 1948) the symbolism is even stronger; Joseph here symbolizes a man who has been oppressed since childhood, neglected, and lost in the world.

On a stroll of perdition

On a night in which he stumbled on his broad caftan, fell forward by the compassionate women

The woman heard her strange child's cry as if she gave birth to it now

She saw it as a bereaved mother sees,

Its limbs passing under a savage instrument, torn off one by one

It tears its diaper with a cry that terrifies parlor and living rooms.

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She moves aside the window board/the road stone/the objective's pimples

She moves aside the gravestone and we see a woman
smitten by grief:
(Who gave you all this iron, blood and lost sacrifice,
Was it for this that you store your blood and flesh?
But now you are in treachery
In treachery and plots
Are you Joseph … whose brothers are not countable?
(Ḥaddād 2000, 2:379).

Here the poet turns things around and puts opposites together, stroll and perdition, thus creating a separation (Šabāta 2002, p. 189). He also indirectly evokes the image of Christ, in "moves aside the gravestone". In addition, the contemporary Joseph suffers more than his symbolic counterpart, since he dies, whereas the symbol emerges victorious from every trial. The poet uses a style of differentiation in his negative questions, especially when he addresses Joseph directly and tells him that he is betrayed and the plots are being hatched against him. He then asks "Are you Joseph?", in an attempt, not to deny the link between the symbol and the symbolized, but rather to show how great Joseph's tragedy is. This is further emphasized with the further appeal, "whose brothers are not countable", for Joseph in the absent text had eleven brothers, while the contemporary Joseph cannot enumerate his brothers among humanity. Joseph thus becomes the oppressed man or society in this world, especially in light of the fact that the poet has evoked Christ's image as redeemer in the text and attributed it to the contemporary Joseph.

The Jordanian poet Amjad Nāṣir (b. 1955) condemns Joseph and accuses him of having caused the brothers, or the poet, to be insubordinate. This meaning is quiet far from that of the absent text. Nāṣir in his poem "Stanzas for Joseph" says:

My brother
O my brother
Why did you shoot me with your beauty
And tempted me with the blood of a lie
Made me aspire to the *sūra* of the wolf
To bring back your red-stained shirt.
Why did you leave in the shirt your scent
Which will fly from the wheat magazines
Into our father's face?
You were born under the moon of contentment
And I was born under the sign of regret.
You frightened me with your vision
Of eleven stars under your hand
And so I was overcome with feelings of insubordination,
My brother, o my brother.
(Nāṣir 2002, pp. 304-305).

The poem is constructed using the interrogative technique, which explains the brother's jealousy. According to the poet, no insubordination would have taken place, were it not for Joseph's beauty and his dream. The poem then comes around full circle with the cry "My brother, o my brother". The poem's ending, however, is semi-open, and leaves room for the reader to complete the cry, for example with the words "you are the cause of all this".

The poet ascribes the insubordination also to the difference in the circumstances of the two brothers' births: "the moon of contentment" and "the sign of regret", a reference to the contrasting pairs of power and weakness, wealth and poverty; the inequality of opportunity is thus deemed to be the cause of the brothers' insubordination. The poet uses this to express his view on sin from a general spiritual perspective. In this poem Nāṣir finds an excuse for the "criminal", as distinct from Joseph's symbolic meaning of victim. This is indeed a change in the perspective of a contemporary poet to Joseph.

A poet who takes this path with greater courage is the Iraqi Ḥamīd Saʿīd (b. 1941). In his poem "One Birth in Liberation Square and Another in the Bedchamber of the Ruler's Wife", he turns the meaning of Joseph in the absent text upside down; he is now the foreigner who comes to conquer and illegitimately take over the country's resources/ the ruler's wife:

O ruler's wife, Joseph whom you wee is a murderer
And the red flowers on his shirt are blood
These wounds on your hands and the fetus ..
Are some of his gifts,
Beware his awl, hidden in your bed .. beware of him […]
Joseph wants to slaughter me .. the poem is witness
To a rose in Liberty Square
To a date palm in Liberty Square
To a construction worker .. to the pretty saleswoman
I chanted .. I departed .. I filled the notebook of rain.
(Saʿīd 1984, 1:388-389).

Here the poet turns Joseph into a murderer, and warns the ruler's wife, symbolizing the unchanging fatherland, while her husband the ruler is an informant who plots against her. Both Joseph and the ruler are negative characters, against whom the poet warns his country. The weak Joseph in the well, bereft even of his shirt, has now become possessed of a desire to kill; he carries an awl and wants to slaughter the poet, who represents the citizenry. The ruler's function is to come between the citizen and his homeland. Al-Karakī notes that "here the poet gives Joseph a new role; he warns the ruler's wife about Joseph, because he fears the homeland's joy at this newcomer". (al-Karakī, p. 43).

1.4. Conclusion

We may conclude that the figure of Joseph among most Arab, and especially Palestinian poets, symbolizes the victim. Four different forms which this takes can be distinguished, as follows:

1. *A directly political form*. This can be found in the works of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maqāliḥ, Fuʾād al-Ḫašan, Amal Dunqal, Muẓaffar al-Nawāb, Aḥmad Maṭar, Muḥammad al-Qaysī, Muʿīn Basīsū, and Murīd al-Barġūṯī. The identity of the victim is not always the same; it may be a friend, as we saw in al-Maqāliḥ's and Basīsū's poems, a generalized artistic character as in the case of al-Barġūṯī who compared Joseph to the artist Nājī al-ʿAlī, a symbol of the homeland as in Fuʾād al-Khashan's poem or the Arab citizen as in Maṭar's, and it may symbolize the Palestinians, as in the case of Dunqal and Muḥammad al-Qaysī.

2. *An indirectly political form*. This can be found in the poem by Maḥmūd Darwīš, who turned the figure of Joseph into a victim who addresses the other at a number of levels: individual, Arab, and cosmic. Darwīš masked the victim's voice as that of the executioner, and so liberated the symbol from any specific place, time and personalities, in contrast to the other poets who made a direct use of the figure of Joseph and the story's symbolism.

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3. *An individual symbolic form*. We find this in the poems by Qāsim Ḥaddād, Amjad Nāṣir, and Shawqī Bazīʿ, who highlighted the human aspect of this experience. In fact, we find that Amjad Nāṣir even accuses Joseph of having caused the other to commit the crime, thus changing the figure's function.

4. *The occupying foreigner*. This we find in the poem by the Iraqi poet Ḥamīd Saʿīd, who turns the meaning of the figure of Joseph upside down and makes him a conqueror. This perspective, in diametric opposition to that of most contemporary Arab poets, constitutes a fundamental modification in the substantive function of this figure.

We should also note that most of the poets used the vocative form and direct address in their evocation of Joseph or of the symbols in his story. This was done, so I believe, in order to allow the poet to use his own voice in order to emit the cry of the victim.

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