Review Article

The Integration of Western Modernism in Postcolonial Arabic Literature: a study of Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati’s Third World poetics

SADDIK M GOHAR

ABSTRACT Undermining the narrow critical approaches which neglect the potential intersection between modernism and postcolonialism, this paper explores the attempt by contemporary Arab poets to engage Western modernist heritage in order to articulate domestic narratives integral to the geopolitics of the Arab region in the postcolonial era. In an attempt to redefine tradition and deviate from fossilised inherited legacies and tyrannical regimes, postcolonial Arab writers, led by the Iraqi poet, Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati, pursue solace and redemption in Western modernism, developing Western forms into a poetics of resistance and protest. Through textual apprenticeship, assimilated from Western literature and culture, they combine modernism and postcolonialism into a nexus incorporating Western techniques while emphasising variants and displacements between their nationalist perspective and that of their Western forebears. Convinced of the role played by the West in the shaping of modern Arabic cultural traditions, Al-Bayati reconstructs colonial modernism as a narrative of liberation, engaging in dialogues with Western pioneering writers and masterpieces. Transforming Western modernist strategies into a revolutionary construct, Al-Bayati aims to challenge internal oppression and external hegemony. Through tran-cultural entanglement and textual appropriation of Western narratives he provides diversity and insight into postcolonial Arabic poetry, intensifying the awareness of other traditions and reconstructing his own heritage.

Discussing the banning and condemnation of Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses in some Islamic countries, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge argue:

For the Islamic postcolonial world, the moral is clear and succinct: to write in the language of the coloniser is to write from within death itself. Postcolonial
writers who write in the language of the Empire are marked off as traitors to the cause of a reconstructive post-colonialism. Postcolonial writers compose under the shadow of death. (Mishra & Hodge, 1994: 277)

Apparently the consequences triggered by the publication of Rushdie’s novel, in the preceding century, raised many significant questions about the relationship between East and West, colonised and coloniser. Nevertheless, the hostility towards the book in some Middle Eastern and Islamic countries is not related to the issue of language, identified by Mishra and Hodge as ‘the language of the empire’. The use of colonial languages rarely represents a threat to Islamic culture because, unlike the literature of ex-colonies in Asia, Africa, South America, the West Indies and the Caribbean, predominantly written in the language of the Western colonisers, literature in a large part of the Arab–Islamic world is composed in indigenous languages. Therefore, it is important to point out that the issue of language, raised above, is irrelevant because the campaign against _The Satanic Verses_ is rooted in radical constructs and religious hegemony integral to contemporary political Islamic doctrines.

Further, it is noteworthy to argue that Western/colonial literatures are approached by Arab writers not as hostile texts but rather as part of the human cultural heritage available for literary exploitation. Unlike post-colonial writers who pass through a ritual of self-brutalisation in their struggle to exorcise their colonial past and destroy an old order of which they were part, Arab poets from formerly colonised countries have actively functionalised Western traditions and forms to articulate indigenous discourses. In the post-World War II era poets from different Arab countries engaged Western traditions, transforming them into a discursive dynamics to explore sociopolitical issues of great ramification at national and regional levels. Appropriating Western narratives to be used in a different language and within a different cultural context, Arab poets aim to provide more depth and insight into a fossilised tradition which fails to confront regional transformations and international challenges.

Throughout their encounters with Western culture, postcolonial Arab poets adapt non-native forms to revolutionise local perspectives, deploying narratives of confrontations and challenging the ruling regimes which they found repressive and brutal. In the era of decolonisation Arab poets, led by Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati, were engaged in a positive interaction with Western literature to overcome alienation and disappointment integral to their cultural crisis. Entangled in the labyrinth of regional political events, particularly the Palestinian tragedy in 1948 and the rise of the nation-state in the region, the new generation of Arab poets was seeking salvation in the West and its cultural paradigms. Although literature written in indigenous languages is often concerned with the construction of national and cultural identities, the situation in the Arab world in the postwar era pushed postcolonial Arab poets towards the West in an attempt to develop a poetics of hybridity able to confront the new challenges emerging in the region.
The global concerns of postcolonial Arab poets who felt the impact of Western modernism indicate the gradual disappearance of models of literary history that isolate poets by race, language, gender or geography. Nevertheless, the entanglement between the Arab poets and the West in the postwar era raises the controversial issue of the relationship between postcolonialism and modernism as a reflection of the complex interaction in the works of transnational figures, particularly the Iraqi poet Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati. Drawing an analogy between Third World literature and postcolonialism, Aijaz Ahmad points out:

Postcoloniality is postmodernism’s wedge to colonise literatures outside Europe and its North American offshoots—which I take the liberty to understand as saying that what used to be known as ‘Third World Literature’ gets rechristened as ‘post colonial literature’ when the governing theoretical framework shifts from third world nationalism to postmodernism. (Ahmad, 1997: 276)

Moreover, Aijaz Ahmad argues that during colonisation ‘the ruling class of a colony is located outside the colony and the colonial state is the instrument of that externally-based ruling class (1992: 204). In a related context Arif Dirlik points out that the term ‘postcolonial’ refers to conditions in formally colonised countries after the period of colonialism. Nevertheless, postcoloniality has been released from ‘the fixity of third world location’ and, consequently, ‘the identity of the postcolonial is no longer structural but discursive’ (Dirlik, 1997: 297). Therefore, the term ‘postcolonial’, according to Dirlik, represents an attempt to ‘regroup intellectuals of uncertain location under the banner of post-colonialism’ (p 297). With the emergence of decolonisation ‘this structural feature of the dominated formation no longer applies and the formation therefore ceases to be colonial, regardless of any other kind of dependence’ (Ahmad, 1992: 204).

On this basis, Ahmad illustrates that the line of demarcation between the so-called ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ categories disappears completely and both terms, according to him, have no analytic value nor any theoretical status when they are mobilised to homogenise very complex structures of intellectual production or the trajectories and subjectivities of individual writers and critics or broad intellectual strata. For particular intellectuals or clusters of them, colonial cultural ambience can last far beyond the moment of decolonisation (Ahmad, 1992: 205).

Further, Ahmad points out that ‘colonialism’ is used as a term or category associated with the ‘periodisation of history as regards the rule over the people of a particular country by ruling classes of another country’ (Ahmad, 1992: 204). Ironically, in the Arab world and for geopolitical reasons, there was no wide difference between the colonial era and the age of decolonisation because the legacies of the ex-colonisers were inherited by tyrannical regimes dominating the fate of the Arab people and dragging the Arab homeland back towards the Stone Age.
In the Arab world political and literary discourses were in a state of harmony during the colonial era, when political leaders and poets spoke the same language of resistance and struggle against Western imperialism. In the era of decolonisation the state apparatuses in the Arab world were dominated by military and tribal leaders who brutalised their people; therefore they came into confrontation with the poets and the intellectual elite. The conflict between the Arab poets and the privileged groups that dominate the ruling regimes reached a juncture in the aftermath of the Palestinian tragedy in 1948. The defeat of the Arab armies in the 1948 war against Israel and the rise of dictatorial nation-states forced the young generation of Arab poets into confrontation with the totalising, monolithic official policies of the regimes. In their endorsement of pluralistic, multivalent and anti-hegemonic counter-narratives, postcolonial Arab poets moved towards the West, incorporating Western traditions into Arabic literature.

Nevertheless, the integration of Western forms and literary techniques into postcolonial Arabic poetry is not a feature of the colonial legacy or manifestation of cultural dependency. Instead, Arab poets in the postwar era utilised Western forms and strategies in an innovative way, transforming them into a dynamics of protest and revolution against local, hegemonic policies. Finding solace in Western literature, particularly the modernist project of TS Eliot and Ezra Pound, postcolonial Arab poets such as Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati, Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab2 and others appropriated modernist poetic traditions and Western narratives, transforming them into a poetic dynamics to articulate domestic issues integral to the Arab world in the era of decolonisation.

A scrutinised analysis of postcolonial Arabic poetry reveals the limitations of narrow critical approaches which ignore the potential intersection of Western modernism and postcolonialism. Associating modernism with postmodernism and colonialism with postcolonialism, critics have neglected the complex relationship between modernism and postcolonialism, ignoring how postcolonial poets like Al-Bayati and Al-Sayyab transform modernist texts to articulate new experiences. Unlike Arab poets who express doubts about Western traditions, Al-Bayati and Al-Sayyab utilise Western modernism to express the complexities of the Arab experience in the era of decolonisation. Appropriating Western narratives to serve local purposes, they blend modernism with postcolonialism, providing their people with a communal voice, a revolutionary anthem.

Regardless of the entanglements between modernism and postcolonialism, many critics deny the existence of any bond between the two movements, dealing with modernism as an evil to be overcome. Equating modernism with colonialism and postmodernism with postcolonialism, Stephen Slemon, for instance, points out that colonialism is the ‘armed version’ of modernism, emphasising that ‘postmodernism and postcolonialism have emerged in reaction to this single cultural event [modernism]’ (Slemon, 1989: 8). Apart from his criticism of postmodernism for its assimilation of many cultural and imperialistic features of modernism, Slemon concludes that postmodernism and postcolonialism have participated in
'decolonising western culture' from 'a residual modernism' (Slemon, 1989: 15). Kwame Anthony Appiah, like Slemon, denounces modernism, demonstrating that postmodernism and postcolonialism emphasise a contingent humanism, but one expressing a common 'concern for human suffering while still rejecting the master narratives of modernism' (cited in Gohar, 2000: 28).³

Likewise, Linda Hutcheon denies any common aspects between modernism and postcolonialism, pointing out that postmodernist and postcolonial writers attempt to 'negotiate their relationship to the past because of the ahistorism of colonial modernism' (cited in Gohar, 2000: 19).⁴ Ignoring the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism, Simon During defines the basic aims of postcolonialism in anti-modernist terms: 'to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalistic or Eurocentric concepts or images' (During, 1995: 125). In addition, George Gugelburger distinguishes between postcolonialism and modernism in terms of the differences between what he calls the bilingual language of ‘third world literature’ and the ‘polyglot aspects of the Euro-American modernist tradition’ (Gugelburger, 1991: 501). Interpreting modernism as ‘an international movement, elitist, imperialist, totalising willing to appropriate the local while being condescending toward its practice’, Frank Davey denies any connection between modernism and postcolonialism (Davey, 1998: 119).

Claiming that the ‘post’ in postcolonialism means ‘against’, critics widen the gap between postcolonialism and other literary movements, particularly modernism. Therefore, attempts by postcolonial poets to utilise modernist traditions in a postcolonial context are unfortunately underestimated. Nevertheless, critics who study African American and Caribbean literatures open new horizons in the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism by engaging modernist strategies which seem to be different from the traditional European model. For example, in his study of the Harlem Renaissance, Houston Baker argues that in the 1920s African American poets incorporated complementary strategies to shape liberating modernist poetics. Nevertheless, he defines these new modernisms in binary opposition to Western modernism. Consequently Baker points out that African and African American modernism is ‘radically opposed’ to Western history, therefore it has little to do with the ‘Joycean or Eliotic projects’ (Baker, 1987: 15). Similarly, Simon Gikandi, in his study of Caribbean literature, demonstrates that Caribbean modernism is ‘opposed to European notions of modernism’, particularly ‘the high modernist aesthetic’ of Pound, Eliot and Joyce (Gikandi, 1992: 9).

Unlike Caribbean writers who attempt to undermine the foundations of the European model of progress and the temporal closure represented by the Pound – Eliot modernist project, Arab poets of the postwar era incorporate Western modernist strategies to serve local contexts. Refusing to remain hostage to the historical ghetto, the postcolonial traumatic experience, prominent Arab poets engage a Western colonial tradition which attracted them culturally and appalled them politically. In other words, the interest in Western literature stimulates Arab poets to partake in dialogues with
Western masters, particularly Ezra Pound and TS Eliot. In spite of his advocation of the British colonial project, Eliot’s literary works have gained popularity in ‘the former colonial territories once controlled by Britain’, particularly in the Arab world (De Young, 2000: 3).

Despite his attitude towards colonisation, Eliot’s literary heritage was received positively by postcolonial Arab writers, who were attracted to his modernist theories. Regardless of his criticism of various interest groups, like the missionary organisations, which participated in the colonial project, Eliot argues that colonial domination was beneficial to the colonised countries. In *Christianity and Culture* he does not acknowledge the damages done to native culture during the colonial era:

> to point to the damage that has been done to the native cultures in the process of imperial expansion is by no means an indictment of empire itself, as the advocates of imperial dissolution are only too apt to infer. (Eliot, 1948: 167)

For a variety of reasons Eliot’s literary works and critical theories found a response from postcolonial Arab poets regardless of his interest in the colonial project. In his discussion of the literary scene in the Arab world in the aftermath of Word War II Muhsin Al-Musawi speaks about an emerging attitude dominating Arabic poetry which paved the way for Eliot’s impact on Arab poets. Thanks to this revolutionary attitude Arab poets, according to Al-Musawi, are attempting to construct a new poetics, in tandem with or in separation from classical poetics, with special emphasis on theories of persona, mask and dramatic monologue, along with images, symbols, fertility, myths and historical constructs. There was no separation then between this epistemological stance and their engagement in the struggle against exploitation inside and the fight against the threat from outside. Intellectuals felt the need for an avant-garde to lead the mass population (Al-Musawi, 2002: 173).

Under Eliot’s impact postcolonial Arab poets developed a new poetic dynamics to articulate the ambitions and frustrations of a nation battered by recurrent defeats and plagued with repressive regimes. Recognising the limitations of a local poetic tradition that failed to confront the challenges of the postwar era, they advocated Western poetic forms and innovative techniques to explore national issues and confront domestic hegemony. Influenced by Eliot’s literary traditions, poets such as Al-Bayati, Al-Sayyab and others were able to utilise Western modernist forms like the prelude, the interior monologue, the objective correlative and the mythic method to provide more insight and flexibility in the Arabic poetic tradition.

Discussing the influence of Western literature on modern Arab writers, MM Badawi points out that ‘the most significant authors in modern Arabic literature have almost without exception, been directly or indirectly exposed to western cultural influence’ (Badawi, 1975: 2). Badawi argues that the great
interest of Arab poets and critics in Eliot’s literary heritage made Eliot appear in Arabic literary canons as a synonym for modern English poetry. Influenced by this literary heritage, particularly Eliot’s concept of tradition, Al-Bayati points out that tradition should not be approached merely as an assemblage of human knowledge and experience (Al-Bayati, 1981: 19). To him tradition not only represents the past but also includes the continuous ritual of appropriation and assessment in which the poet re-evaluates and reconstructs the past, while articulating the present and the future through sophisticated art.

Al-Bayati’s concept of tradition is explicitly an echo of Eliot’s theory on tradition. Eliot points out that no artist makes a complete meaning alone and the appreciation of a poet or the significance of his works results from placing him within tradition. In other words, a poet should be compared and contrasted with the dead masters in order to see his contribution to tradition. In ‘Tradition and individual talent’, Eliot argues that modern poets should be aware of tradition and should contribute to it. He also points out that real artists belong to a community and are dedicated to tradition. Being convinced that no artist is able to make a contribution alone because ‘the most individual parts of work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors assert their immortality most vigorously’ (Eliot, 1972: 71), Eliot emphasises the importance of assimilating tradition into contemporary works. To Eliot a poet can be evaluated only in connection with his involvement in tradition and through his relationship with his forebears: ‘his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists’ (Eliot, 1972: 72).

In ‘Tradition and individual talent’, Eliot argues that poetry is not reflection of emotions because it is not conceived in the personal/subjective romantic context. To Eliot, ‘poetry is not a turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality’ (in Eliot, 1972: 76). Eliot also emphasises the significance of engaging tradition in contemporary poetic texts in order to link the present and the past. Therefore in ‘An Appointment in Al-Maara’, Al-Bayati abandons poetic subjectivity and evokes domestic traditions, identifying himself with the great Arab poet, Al-Maari, because both of them are rebels who challenge the political establishment in their societies: ‘our poetry is not used for hypocrisy or prostitution/we are not slaves of the Sultans any more’ (Diwan Al-Bayati, 1972: 366).

As an advocate of revolution against injustice in a postcolonial Arab world, Al-Bayati addresses his master, Al-Maari, saying, ‘Do not you see, millions of the poor/fighting in the dark/waiting for the sunrise’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 367). Further, in ‘The Plight of Abu Al-Alaa’, Al-Bayati recalls the painful experience of Al-Maari, who lost his eyesight and was forced to live as a hermit for the rest of his life. Blending allusions to Al-Maari’s miserable fate with references to Hemingway’s war novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the poet depicts the history of modern Iraq, a country broken up by internal conflicts and threatened by external interventions: ‘For whom the bell tolls/ where can people find refuge and sanctuary?/the poor people are crucified in
the marketplace/it is time for the frogs of the Sultan to be silent’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 174).

In addition to Eliot’s theory of tradition, Al-Bayati incorporates Western techniques such as the use of masks, allusions and objective correlative to enhance his objectivity, creating a distance between the poet and the text. Wearing the mask of Abu Al-Alaa Al-Maari, the poet-rebel, known in the Arabic literary canon as ‘the hostage of the two cloisters’ because of his blindness and self-imposed exile, Al-Bayati explores the theme of exile in a sophisticated way. Associating himself with his master, who longs for death as deliverance and release from life, Al-Bayati describes life in Iraq as a prison and inferno. However, the poet, who was dismissed from his country for political reasons, did not find solace in the ‘kingdom of exile’ because ‘the heart of the world is made of stone’ (Al-Bayati, 1990: 207). Through the integration of Eliot’s modernist theories in the Arabic literary canon Al-Bayati is able to reconstruct his own traditions and cultural heritage, incorporating Islamic narratives in a sophisticated manner for domestic purposes. Drawing upon Eliot’s critical theories, Al-Bayati states that any attempt to incorporate tradition provides new perspective and opens wide horizons linking the present with the past. Thus he engages Eliot’s concept of tradition as a modernising factor integral to the creation of an objective Arabic poetics at a crucial stage in modern Arab history.

Through contact with Western literature and culture, Al-Bayati, like other postcolonial Arab poets, became aware of new traditions and myths which were subsequently transplanted into his local poetic heritage. In this context the intersection between Western modernism and the interests of the postcolonial Arab poet played a vital role in reinforcing an inter-civilisational dialogue between the Arab world and the West, opening new horizons for cultural interaction and literary hybridisation. Entangled with the painful realities of the post-World War II era the postcolonial Arab poet searched for a new poetics to express his predicament. As a result of Western influence and modernist theories, Al-Bayati rediscovered his own cultural heritage, turning to the myths of the ancient near East and incorporating them for the first time in Arabic poetry. Attempting to revive the collapsing spirit of the Arab nation in an era of cultural deterioration and political drawbacks, he engages eastern and western myths of fertility and resurrection, blending mediaeval culture with ancient Egyptian, pre-Islamic, Assyrian and Babylonian traditions. The poet also incorporates Biblical and Islamic figures in addition to Arabic folklore heroes, particularly Sinbad of The Arabian Nights, who is used as a symbol of the Palestinian refugees and the Iraqi exiles wandering in diaspora—‘beggars at the doors of Arab countries’.

As a result of Western influence, the postcolonial Arab poet is no longer the speaking voice of the tribe but becomes part of the international challenges and the regional transformations which changed the geopolitical map of the Middle East:

The human condition presents itself to him in much frustration, alienation, bewilderment and rejection. The growing urbanisation and industrialisation of
his under-developed society with their concomitant depersonalisation of human relations reinforce his feeling of loss. The conflict between old values of stability and new values of mobility is rife within him. Preferring usually, the new, he pays the price in spiritual anguish. Having chosen to be a rebel, he is ready to be a martyr. (Boullata, 1976: xii).

There is no doubt that part of the spirit of rebellion, integral to postcolonial Arabic poetry, is related to the Arab poet’s interest in the culture and literature of the colonial West. His movement towards the West is accelerated by postwar events, particularly the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees and the rise of dictatorial regimes in the region. In other words, the post-World War II era in the Arab world was an eventful period which witnessed significant changes, such as the tragic consequences of the 1948 war and the emergence of military regimes in the region. The political and military developments were simultaneously paralleled by cultural and literary upheavals, culminating in an Arabic poetic Renaissance whose advocates engaged Western literature and culture in order to overcome local crises. Identifying the Arab world as a moral wasteland, postcolonial Arab poets draw on Western traditions and myths in order to revive a stagnant and debilitated culture, giving priority to the dynamic process of reform which requires the dismantling of an old order.

**Engaging the swamps of the East: Al-Bayati’s poetry and the Arab wasteland**

Living in ‘the hateful swamps of the East’, where ‘the miracles and prayers of all saints are futile’, Al-Bayati laments the death of great historical figures who oppose the religious and political establishments in their countries. Linking the past with the present, in an Eliotic manner, he recalls the assassination of the Muslim Sufi, Al-Hallaj, who was brutally crucified by the Abbasid rulers during the 11th century, because of his revolutionary ideology: ‘Al-Hallaj is crucified/he is smeared with blood/a bag of meat/two eyes without eyelids/a rotten apple devoured by worms’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 477). In Al-Bayati’s poetry, and thanks to Eliot’s impact, Al-Hallaj is frequently identified with Christ because both of them were crucified for their views. Christian traditions integral to Eliot’s wasteland narratives are explicitly adopted in Al-Bayati’s poetry to serve local political purposes. In the ‘Gypsy Symphony’ references to Al-Hallaj’s quest, in addition to allusions to ritualistic violence, torture and ‘bodies hanging from the gallows’, signify an atmosphere of death reminiscent of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: ‘Why did they crucify Al-Hallaj?/the verses of the Bible were written with blood’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 362). There is no doubt that the parallelism between Al-Hallaj and Eliot’s slain gods of fertility is a manifestation of the impact of Eliot and Western literature on Al-Bayati’s poetry. The Arab poet seeks salvation in the poetic traditions of the West because he lives in a country where the Bible is written by ‘the servants of the kings/who are doomed to be buried in the dunghill of history’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 362).
Associating the crucifixion narrative with the miserable life of the Iraqi nationalists inside Iraq and in diaspora, Al-Bayati associates Christ with the forces of opposition confronting the dictatorial government of Abdul-Karim Qasim in Iraq during the postwar era. The poet identifies himself with the Iraqi revolutionaries who were forced to live as strangers in their homeland and in exile because of their views:

stranger in my homeland and in exile  
I am isolated from my country  
my wounds, about to heal  
will be opened again  
I will be crucified on the window of a hospital  
O my homeland  
I see you as a passing dream  
your palm trees wake me up in the foggy dawn  
O my homeland, O my destiny  
you left me alone  
and went dragging behind you  
the wagons of the dead (Al-Bayati, 1972: 190)

As an outcast, Al-Bayati identifies himself with Christ, enhancing the motifs of crucifixion and sacrifice. In exile the Iraqi refugee moves from one European city to another carrying the wounds and scars of a homeland, which turns into a memory. Because of feelings of nostalgia and homesickness, the Iraqi refugee sees nothing in the cities of exile except a history ‘written with fire and blood’ and ‘a pigeon crucified on the wall’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 634).

Incorporating Christian narratives, according to Western literary standards, the postcolonial Arab poet provides more depth and insight into the Arabic poetic tradition. In the poetry of Al-Bayati, Christ and the condition of his crucifixion are evoked in different contexts to suggest a multiplicity of meanings. In several poems the crucifixion narrative is used as an objective correlative, alluding to the political situation in Iraq in the postwar era. Identifying Iraq as a wasteland, corrupted by tyrannical regimes, Al-Bayati appeals to Christ to save his country from the curse of dictatorship: ‘the bleeding wounds of Christ/fill the Euphrates river with the blood/dying the face of water/and the palm trees in the evening’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 336). In Al-Bayati’s poetry, the use of religious myth, according to Western standards, enriches the poetic experience of the postcolonial Arab poet and promotes a cultural dialogue with the other blending eastern and western traditions in one context.

Moreover, Al-Bayati blends western and eastern narratives of sacrificial death in order to castigate the tyrannical rulers in the Arab world. Utilising narratives of treason and conspiracy rooted in Islamic history and alluding to the betrayal of Al-Hussain and the battle of Karbala to emphasise the catastrophic consequences of Arab–Arab conflicts, Al-Bayati provides his poetry with more insight and depth. Addressing the people of Iraq and the
surrounding Arab countries, Al-Bayati warns them of the policies of oppression advocated by their rulers:

Do not listen to their songs  
The shores of the Arabian Gulf  
Are inhabited by owls  
Do not listen to the false slogans  
originated in their palaces  
They betrayed Christ  
They drove Prophet Mohamed outside Iraq  
They embraced Al-Hussain, then killed him (Al-Bayati, 1972: 577)

Because of his political views, Al-Bayati is brutalised by the Iraqi regime and is forced to live in a kind of internal exile: ‘stranger in my land/my wounds which never heal/will crucify me on the windows of hospitals’ (1972: 192). Unlike hypocritical poets, ‘the desert rats’ and the regime’s ‘watching dogs’, Al-Bayati is committed to his ideals, therefore: ‘I have been defeated/crucified on the cross of my words and poems’ (1972: 307).

The predominance of Western/Christian allusions in Al-Bayati’s poetry is a manifestation of the sweeping impact of the modernist project initiated by Eliot and Pound on postcolonial Arabic poetry. Utilising Western modernist poetic narratives to depict the postcolonial situation in the Arab world, Al-Bayati reworks history, linking eastern and western cultures and transforming Christian myths into a local poetic dynamics. In his appropriation of the Western modernist tradition, Al-Bayati links the deteriorating state of the Arab nation in the postwar era with the history of fallen empires mentioned in *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*. In *The Waste Land* Eliot underlines the moral collapse of Western civilisation through the collapsing image of London Bridge: ‘London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down (1984: 246). He also refers to the fall of empires, well known in human history: ‘falling Towers/Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London/unreal’ (1984: 244). In *The Cantos*, Ezra Pound also speaks about the collapse of ancient civilisations resulting from the lack of established moral traditions and the spread of usury, using the cities of Sodom and Cahors as symbols.

Like Pound, who incorporates the sinful cities of Dante’s *Inferno* as an epitome of fallen civilisations, Al-Bayati denounces Baghdad because it is turning into a harbour for tyrants who ‘shed the blood of children’ and ‘crucify the sun in the square’ (1972: 362). In ‘For Spring and Children’, Al-Bayati describes Baghdad as the city ‘with closed doors/the city of tears, fire and pain’ (1972: 363). In Baghdad there is ‘no joy, no spring, no butterflies’ and the poet moves from one cross to another: ‘O cross of pain/take me to a new cross’ (1972: 443). The romantic image of Baghdad which recurs in Al-Bayati’s early poetry is replaced by negative images in his later poetry, particularly when the poet was forced to leave Iraq after his nationality was withdrawn in 1963. Articulating this painful experience, Al-Bayati uses
Christian narratives, transforming himself into a Christ figure who is continuously crucified at dawn on the walls of Baghdad.

In Al-Bayati’s later poetry Baghdad is viewed as a slaughterhouse and a holocaust location where people die in great numbers. To Al-Bayati the poor and starving people of Baghdad, oppressed by dictatorial regimes, are more miserable than ‘the hard-working donkeys’. Lamenting the fate of a people surrounded by sterility and stagnation for decades, the agonised poet states that, in the Arab world, the animals are luckier than the dwellers of the cities of persecution and the villages of sickness and ignorance: ‘The animals are happier than the inhabitants of the Arab cities/than the sick and the dead in the villages/I am crucified every day on the walls of the cities’ (1972: 315).

Denouncing the Iraqi regime in the postwar decades, Al-Bayati laments Baghdad because the city has become a sanctuary for the Iraqi dictators and their oppressive apparatuses. In a city where holy books are burnt and the poet’s friends are assassinated for their ideological views, the Iraqi regime establishes a reign of terror, spilling the blood of the Iraqi people: ‘there is blood everywhere/blood on the walls of the churches/blood on the church bells/blood on the artist’s paints/blood on the children’s school books’ (1972: 113).

Consequently, in a poem entitled ‘Beloved’, Al-Bayati expresses his hopes that Christ will liberate his people from oppression and bring salvation and peace to the wasteland of Iraq. However, Christ will not come from Nazareth but from the West, ‘the land of ice’, carrying a sword in one hand and an olive branch in the other. He will put his cross on the wreck of Iraq in an attempt to bring salvation to a country ravished by political conspiracies. This vision of a new Iraq will be fulfilled only through the miracles of a Christ who comes from the West: ‘Christ, the savior will be reborn/in the land of ice and clouds/I can see him appearing in the horizon/at the dusk hour/carrying a sword in one hand/and an olive branch in the other/placing his cross on the ruins of the ancient world’ (1972: 114). When Christ appears in Iraq, states Al-Bayati, ‘the dead people are resurrected/praying for the Christ of the new world’ (1972: 118). The references to Christ and to ‘Saint Augustine’ (Al-Bayati, 1972: 116), in addition to narratives of crucifixion and allusions to Christian martyrs and saints, indicate the impact of Western culture and literature on the poetry of Al-Bayati.

Further, in several poems Al-Bayati uses Christian narratives to castigate the policies of oppression advocated by the Arab regimes in order to subjugate their people. Denouncing the agents of the regimes who are used as pawns in the hands of oppressive rulers, Al-Bayati associates them with the figure of Judas: ‘I saw Judas who betrayed Christ/occupying a supreme position in the palace/of the clown king/he is a fortune-teller, an informer/a clerk and a pimp dancing on all ropes/he attempts to restore virginity/and innocence to the worn-out prostitute’ (1972: 384). Describing the Arabic political system as a worn-out and infected whore and denouncing the secret agents of the Iraqi regime and other instruments of oppression, particularly the religious establishment, Al-Bayati depicts a homeland governed by sword and fire: ‘I saw him [the secret agent] in the cities of cement and iron/an
Imam, an informer/the leader of the army is afraid of him/the state minister uses him as a consultant/I saw him in the palace/a paper dog licking the king’s shoes’ (1972: 385).

In ‘Love Poems on the Seven Gates of the World’ Al-Bayati denounces a postcolonial Arab world where history is written by pimps and prostitutes. In ‘Criticism of Poetry’, Al-Bayati denounces hypocritical Arab poets who have sold their principles, prostituting their talents in order to avoid confrontation with tyrannical rulers who are transforming the Arab world into ‘a circus’ and ‘a Zoo’. Refusing to ‘baptise [his] poems in the water of hypocrisy’, Al-Bayati expresses his indignation at the Arab poets who avoid politics or write about politics while ignoring the crucial causes of the Arab world in an era of global transformations. Addressing the hypocritical poets who isolate themselves from the plight of their people, Al-Bayati says: ‘If I were able to hang my poetic lyre near the beds of the concubines/if I were able to turn my poems into perfumed pillows for the gods of hollow poetry/If I were able to baptise my poems in your philosophy shops/If I were able to ignore my humanity/I would be the best friend of the prince/I would be sitting on a flying carpet carried by the wind/surrounded by thunder and blue butterflies/but I prefer to be tortured to death on the cross of my poems’ (1972: 307).

As a result of his interest in Western literature, Al-Bayati makes allusions to different Western figures and symbols. In ‘To Ernest Hemingway’, he alludes to Hemingway’s novel For Whom the Bell Tolls, recalling episodes from the Spanish civil war, where death and blood characterise life in Madrid: ‘Spanish festivals pass without processions/the sorrows of Spain have no limits/For Whom the Bell Tolls, Lorca is silent/and the urn of roses is full of blood’ (1972: 605). Evoking Lorca, who was executed because of his ideological orientation, Al-Bayati identifies himself with the great Spanish poet. In ‘Death in Granada’ Al-Bayati laments the death of Lorca, identifying the Spanish poet with the Iraqi revolutionaries persecuted by Abdul-Karim Qasim’s regime in the postwar era: ‘Lorca is dying/he is executed by the Fascists at night on the banks of the Euphrates/They mutilated his dead body/Lorca is without eyes, without hands’). He also evokes the Virgin Mary, reminding her of the plight of the Iraqi exiles who live as strangers outside their country: ‘O Virgin Mary/I have prayed for the stranger/to come back from his exile’ (1972: 334). Creating an analogy between the Spanish civil war and the political situation in Iraq in the 1950s, when the country was torn by internal conflicts, Al-Bayati appeals to the Virgin Mary, saying ‘here I am under siege/dying in the darkness of my coffin/the graveyard foxes eat my flesh/stabbed by draggers/immigrating from country to country. O Virgin Mary I am dying for your sake’ (1972: 337).

Like other postcolonial Arab poets who came under the influence of Western modernism in the aftermath of World War II, Al-Bayati’s poetry reflects the disappearance of models of literary history that isolate poets by race, language, gender or geography. In response to local hegemony, Al-Bayati creates poetic texts which aim to establish trans-historical and transnational connections between East and West. Saturated with Western/
Christian narratives and allusions to major European writers from Dante to Eliot, Al-Bayati’s poetic discourse provides one of the most striking points of cultural and thematic commonalities between Arabic literature and the West. He consciously engages with Western culture, advocating the position of Frantz Fanon in *White Skin, Black Masks*: ‘I have to capture the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo’ (Fanon, 1967: 226).

Entering into dialogues with a variety of modernist Western texts, Al-Bayati claims the cultural heritage of the world to be his own. He incorporates Western modernism, engaging a diversity of historical and literary texts in order to create a hybrid poetics able to confront domestic challenges. In the context of Homi Bhabha’s words, Al-Bayati does not ‘oppose the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native [Arab] voice’ but moves ‘beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganise our sense of the process of identifications in the negotiations of cultural politics’ (Bhabha, 1994: 223). Al-Bayati’s engagement with Western culture or what Bhabha identifies as the ‘discursive enunciatory, cultural, subjected process’ related to ‘the struggle around authority, authorisation, reauthorisation and the revision of authority’ is called hybridity (Olson & Worsham, 1999: 39).

**Conclusion**

Because of his persistent attempts to assimilate Western culture and thought, Al-Bayati is frequently accused of Eurocentrism. However, the poet does not aim to abandon Arabic or Islamic culture, regardless of his revolutionary and liberal orientations. Instead, he works toward a hybrid poetics which is able to confront the challenges of a changing world. While postcolonial poetry in general is predicated on a hostile relationship to Western culture and is motivated by a desire to undermine Western narratives, Al-Bayati expresses his admiration for Western tradition in general and for Christianity in particular. Affirming the validity of literary appropriation of Western/modernist texts, Al-Bayati incorporates Christian cultural heritage to address contemporary local issues in the postcolonial era. In other words, Al-Bayati blends the legacies of modernism and postcolonialism to create a new poetics able to meet the challenges emerging in the Arab region in the aftermath of World War II and the consequences of the 1948 Palestinian tragedy. Therefore, Al-Bayati’s poetry resonates with thematic concerns and orientations that have their roots in a new situation that was becoming part of regional consciousness in the Arab world after World War II. The new situation is created by local transformations at the social and political levels which disrupt earlier conceptualisations of an Arab nationalism in which the nation-state, in the era of decolonisation, is supposed to achieve the Arab dream of unity and advancement. In Al-Bayati’s poetry the fragmented conditions of a postcolonial Arab world, brutalised by tyrannical regimes, is projected through a disintegrated discourse informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations which are the products of these conditions.
As a mirror of the radical changes taking place in modern Arabic consciousness and, more importantly, as a mode of feeling, thinking and understanding the existing cultural ethos in the Arab world during the postwar era, Al-Bayati’s poetry incorporates slogans, public proclamations and shocking poetic images. The poet aims to reveal the filthiness of the Arab political system and expose the corruption of the rulers who have betrayed their peoples. Incorporating repellent images, the poet attempts to shock his readers by viewing an obscene reality. Like other postcolonial Arab poets who remain faithful to their political views, Al-Bayati finds himself increasingly marginalised and alienated in his homeland, so he moves towards the West. His life in several European cities and his teaching experience at the University of Moscow bring him into contact with Western literature, which has a tremendous influence on his poetry. Unfortunately the poet’s attempt to Westernise Arabic poetry, which involves the assimilation of the culture of the ex-coloniser, is seen by conservative Arab critics as threatening to Arab nationalism. Nevertheless, Al-Bayati aims to modernise and hybridise a fossilised poetic tradition in order to be able to confront the challenges of a postcolonial world. Al-Bayati’s cross-cultural concerns problematise the critical attitudes which attempt to categorise his poetry as exclusively modernist or postcolonial. The diversity of critical approaches which dealt with Al-Bayati’s poetry and the subsequent contradictory conclusions concerning the poet and his art are an indication that models of literary influence which isolate poets by language, geography, gender or ideology are no longer appropriate in a globalised world.

Notes
1 The Iraqi poet, Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayati, was born in Baghdad in 1926. In 1950 he graduated from Baghdad’s Teachers College with a BA in Arabic language and literature. He worked as a teacher from 1950 to 1953 until he was expelled from his job and his country because of his ideological attitudes toward the puppet government of Nuri Al-Said, the Iraqi prime minister who collaborated with the British occupation authorities. As a political refugee Al-Bayati lived in many countries in the Arab world and Europe and most of his works were published outside Iraq. As a result of his political commitments, Al-Bayati was twice deprived of his Iraqi nationality, once during the 1960s and once during Saddam Hussein’s regime.
2 See my article (Gohar, 2006).
3 For more details, see Appiah (1997).
4 For a critical investigation of Hutcheon’s views on the topic, see Hutcheon (1995).
5 All translations from Arabic critical sources are by the writer.
6 All translations from Diwan Al-Bayati/The Complete Poetic Works, are by the writer unless names of other translators appear in the text or the works cited.
8 Thanks to the impact of Western modernism on contemporary Arabic literature, Arab poets reconstructs Al-Hussain, the grandson of prophet Mohamed, as a Christ figure to connote complex patterns of symbolism rooted in geopolitical Arabo-Islamic contexts and in narratives of conflict between the Shites and the Sunnis. Al-Hussain is historically associated with the bloody encounter in the battle of Karbala, southern of Iraq.
9 The massacre of Karbala, which took place 48 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad, can be traced back to the antagonism between Ali, Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, and Moawiyya, his political rival and the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty. When Othman, the third Muslim Caliph, was mysteriously assassinated, Ali became the Caliph of the Muslim people but Othman’s murder and the inability to identify his killers triggered a conflict between Ali and Moawiyya, the governor of Damascus, because Ali believed that Moawiyya was aware of the identity of the Caliph’s assassins. After Ali’s murder Moawiyya became the Caliph and Ali’s family accepted him as the leader of the Muslim
nation on the condition that Moawiyya’s successor should be selected by the Muslim people through election. Nevertheless, Moawiyya violated the agreement and appointed his corrupt son Yazid as a future Caliph. After Moawiyya’s death Yazid became the Caliph of the Muslim people. Some prominent figures from Mecca rebelled against Yazid, as did the people of Iraq who sent to Al-Hussein, inviting him to come from the Arabian Peninsula to establish a separatist Islamic state in their country. In response to their invitation Al-Hussein and about 30 of his followers, including his family, came from Mecca to Iraq on horse- and camelback. When Al-Hussein and his company arrived at Karbala, southern of Iraq, the Iraqis betrayed him because they were intimidated by the powerful army of Abdullah Ibn Zeyyad, who had been appointed governor of Iraq by Yazid. After being besieged and deprived of food and water in Karbala, Al-Hussein was given two options, either to acknowledge Yazid as the Caliph of the Muslim people or to face his army, more than 30,000 soldiers. Al-Hussein appealed to the enemy leaders to allow him to return to Mecca in peace, but his appeal was turned down. Determined not to surrender or acknowledge Yazid as the Caliph, Al-Hussein’s decision to fight to the end was a suicidal mission. After they were killed the dead bodies of Al-Hussein, his family and followers were mutilated and his head was cut off and fixed on a spear and carried to be exhibited in Yazid’s palace in Damascus.

References
