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## THE INTERCULTURAL IMPACT OF T.S. ELIOT ON MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

Yousef Abu Addous<sup>1</sup>, Malek J. Zuraikat<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Professor of Arabic Literature, The Dept. of Arabic, Yarmouk University, Jordan-Irbid.  
yousef900300@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5347-673X>*

<sup>2</sup>*Professor of English Literature. The Dept. of English, Yarmouk University. Jordan-Irbid.  
m.zuraikat@yu.edu.jo, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1948-2671>*

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Corresponding Author: Malek J. Zuraikat  
([m.zuraikat@yu.edu.jo](mailto:m.zuraikat@yu.edu.jo))

### ABSTRACT

*Due to his uniqueness among other modern English poets with regard to poetic innovation and artistic experimentation, we discuss Eliot's literary heritage, including criticism, poetry, and plays, as the main source of inspiration for modern Arab writers. Using a comparative approach through which Eliot's works are compared to some modern Arabic pieces of literature and criticism, this paper discusses the influence of T.S. Eliot's works on modern Arabic literature through an intercultural perspective. The paper highlights that Eliot's intellectual heritage can be divided into three foundational areas, namely criticism, poetry, and drama, stressing that critics usually argue that Eliot is an opponent of Romanticism and its focus on emotions to the inclusion of certain practical concepts such as tradition and individual talent. This is evident in his poetry, such as "The Waste Land," "Ash Wednesday," and "Four Quartets", as well as some of his plays like Murder in the Cathedral. While this heritage obviously represents Eliot's personal style and distinct cultural background, its influence on the Arab literary circles is sometimes overlooked. Accordingly, this paper uncovers how Eliot's ideas and experiments are received by Arab intellectuals through translation, commentaries on his criticism, and imitation of his plays. The paper concludes that Eliot has been one of the main sources of inspirations for Arab critics, poets, and playwrights whose works speak to the universality of Eliot's literary heritage.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Culture, Literary Influence, Modernism, Intertextuality, Eliot, Poetics.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is agreed by critics that T. S. Eliot is one of the most prolific twentieth-century literary figures, whose multifaceted influence, including literary criticism, poetry, and drama, has influenced not only the Anglophone intellectual world but also diverse global literary traditions, notably modern Arabic literature. His critical thought, particularly found in his essay titled "Tradition and the Individual Talent," presents a vision of a tradition that connects the literary past with the present (Eliot [1921] 2006). Different from other tendencies of English poetry, as evident in Romanticism for instance, he advocates for an impersonal approach to poetry, opposing the Romantic ideals of individual expression, introducing a framework of poetic creation reliant on historical conscious and cultural progress. This model has had its impact on modern Arabic poets aspiring them to deviate from classical traditions to the inclusion of modernist practices. Ghanim Samarrai (2014) addresses several Arabic translations of "The Waste Land", such as Tawfiq Sa'igh's (1955), Nabila Ibrahim's (1959) and Louis 'Awad's (1962), to name a few.

In the 1950s onward, several Arab intellectuals translated some of Eliot's poem, thus producing a decisive moment of cross-cultural literary exchange in the history of Arabic poetry. Such translations, published in different literary journals, such as *Al-Adab* (Literature) and *Shi'r* (Poetry), provided Arab readers and writers with the opportunity to examine several poetic techniques, such as the open form, fragmentation, and mythic allusions. These techniques inspired them to reconsider poetic expression in Arabic, causing a deviation from classical structures to the inclusion of more symbolic and experimental techniques. The influence of this mode is particularly found in the work of Badr Shakir al-Sayyāb, which explains why scholars like Ayasrah and Azmi (2019) have stressed the presence of Eliot's style in al-Sayyāb's poetry, such as the use of impersonality, mythic condensation, and rich symbolism. The researchers conclude that "Intertextuality is apparent in Al Sayyab's poetry where he borrows some of Eliot's main themes like life, death, water, dryness and sadness. Also, it appears in Al Sayyab's main poetic techniques that are copied from Eliot like 'allusion', 'symbols and myths', 'irony', 'the objective equivalent', 'conceptual metaphor' and 'impersonality'" (83). This reveals why al-Sayyāb is a pioneer in Arabic modernist poetry, who blends Eliot's poetic experimentations with Oriental mythological referents to create a "hybrid poetry" that links local

culture with broader global movements.

While this perspective underscores the universality of Eliot's poetry, it also distinguishes him from other English poets, like Ezra Pound and William B. Yeats, for the richness of his poetics and creative formal experimentation, thus functioning as a source of inspiration for modern Arabic poetry. His "The Waste Land", for instance, provided Arab poets with a fascinating model for modernization through its heavy use of mythology, intertextuality, fragmentation, and free verse, a set of formal strategies that inspired a generation of poets attempting to break with classical templates and standards to depict the complexities of a fluctuating cultural context. Moreover, Eliot's preoccupation with issues of cultural collapse and mystical calamity inspired several Arab intellectuals to engage with issues of modernity, identity, culture, and post-colonialism. On the contrary, Pound's mysterious allusiveness and political orientations, along with Yeats's culture-exclusive symbolism related to the Irish culture and questions of nationalism, caused their work to be less accessible or adaptable than Eliot's for Arab intellectuals. Accordingly, this study scrutinizes the multilayered impact of T. S. Eliot on Arabic literature with regard to three interrelated areas: (First), Eliot's critical views and their reverberations among Arab critics, (second), the Arabic translations, adaptations, and creative assimilations of Eliot's poetry, and (third), the reception of Eliot's drama, especially *Murder in the Cathedral*, within Arabic literary plays. Through this investigation, the paper traces the pathways of cultural transmission, i.e. translation, critical discourse, and poetic innovation, by which Eliot's intellectual and aesthetic ethos entered and transformed Arabic literary expression, exemplifying the processes of intercultural negotiation and literary hybridization.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The influence of T. S. Eliot on Arabic literature has always been a subject of interest for many scholars, particularly with regard to his critical essays, poetry, and plays. Within Eliot's theoretical heritage stands his conceptualization of tradition and talent, which fascinated several Arabic literary critics and poets examining the complications of modernity and cultural identity in the postcolonial era. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Eliot [1921] 2006) provided a severe critique of the Romantic conception of the poet as a lonely, passionately compelled individual. Eliot highlighted the subjective nature of poetic creativity and redefined

tradition as an embryonic and active discourse between the past and the present. This understanding of tradition provided Arab critics with a fascinating theoretical perspective for reevaluating their own literary approaches in light of the cultural and political complexities of modernism (Jawad 2014). The significance of this arises from the role played by Eliot's article as a model for Arab critics seeking to reconcile Arabic literary traditions with emerging modernism. This reconciliation was needed during a time when traditional forms of Arabic criticism were losing their applicability, and Arab writers were resisting the emerging Western literary approaches. Thus, the translation of Eliot's essay potentially laid the framework for a new generation of Arab critics seeking to integrate modernist aesthetics into their works without denouncing local cultural traditions (Badawi 1992).

Similarly, Eliot's poetry, especially "The Waste Land", also functioned as a central inspiration for the poetic and artistic transformation of modern Arabic poetry. As explained by Samarrai (2014), Arab readers knew the poem through the translations of Tawfiq Sa'igh (1955), Nabila Ibrahim (1959) and Louis 'Awad (1962). Published in prestigious literary journals like *Al-Adab* and *Shi'r*, the translations played crucial roles in introducing Eliot's artistic experimentations to Arab poets and readers. Samarrai concludes that Eliot's use of multilayered symbolism, fragmented narrative, mythological references inspired my Arab poets to challenge the conventional tone and subject matter of Arabic poetry. This influence is perhaps most clearly reflected in the poetry of Badr Shakir al-Sayyāb. Ayasrah and Azmi (2019) examine the resemblance between al-Sayyāb's techniques and Eliot's, contending that al-Sayyāb's techniques are akin to those of Eliot. This resemblance, however, does not constitute a state of literal imitation, but a state of creative adaptation of Western literary techniques, which testifies to al-Sayyāb's talent as a poet and critic.

A similar perspective is developed by Hashim Hameed Hamoodi (2022) who contends that "the interrelationship between al-Sayyab and Abd al-Sabour on the one hand and T.S. Eliot on the other, results from assimilation and not European influence and tendency" (167). This suggests that Eliot's influence on Arabic poetry and criticism is not limited to al-Sayyāb, but transcends to include other renowned Arab poets, critics, and dramatists. In his study "Literature, Religion and Self-Conquest: A Comparative Study of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*," Ado

Magaji Mansur (2017) argues that there are many ties between Eliot and other literatures "from different historical periods" (2), stressing that Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* serves as a model and source of inspiration for other playwrights to "depict their historical protagonists in their respective spiritual journeys towards achieving what can be seen as self-conquest amidst conflicts with temporal powers" (3). While this influence seems little compared to the influence of "The Waste Land" on Arabic poetry. Scholars agree that *Murder in the Cathedral* has always been a model for "an educated and mostly middleclass readership" suffering the "injustices and complexities of life in the newly independent societies of the Middle East" (Allen 2000, 69). This implies that Eliot's drama extends its historical context, offering universal insights that has inspired several Arabic theatres and other evolving landscapes of Arabic literature in the age of modernism.

Relying on these brilliant pieces of related literature, the following section reexamines the influence of Eliot on modern Arabic literature at the level of both form and content. We suggest that it is because of Eliot's literary experiments in poetry and drama that several Arab playwrights have showed much tendency to reconcile mystical themes with modernist structures, merging religious and existential questions with modernist dramatic forms. Moreover, we contend that Eliot's engagement with themes like death, decay, authority, and spiritual crisis aligns with the socio-political contexts and discourses of Arab audiences during the twentieth century; therefore, it is very likely to hear the echoes of Eliot's voice in several pieces of modern Arabic literature.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Eliot's impact on Arabic poetry can be traced along three key dimensions: first, his conceptualization of literary heritage; second, the thematic and formal innovations exemplified in works like "The Waste Land", particularly his use of motifs such as death, renewal, and the reinvention of poetic language; and third, his formulation of the theory of the objective correlative. Eliot redefined the role of the poet, viewing it not as the production of ornate language or easily digestible meanings, but as the careful articulation of everyday realities. The poet's true skill, in Eliot's view, lies in the ability to render ordinary subjects in ways that are aesthetically compelling and structurally cohesive. This approach stands in contrast to the Romantic idea of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility."

Instead, Eliot frames poetic creation as a process of intense concentration, a disciplined state of mind rather than a reflective or nostalgic one. From this concentrated attention, the poet draws connections to lived experience, producing intricate and multilayered expressions. Importantly, the experiences evoked in Eliot's poetics are not strictly autobiographical. They are impersonal in nature, constructed through a synthesis of emotion and detachment, and integrated into a unified poetic landscape that transcends individual subjectivity. Consequently, poetry becomes an escape from the self and individual personality, thereby challenging the Romantic tradition from which it diverges.

Eliot's critical approach, deeply rooted in classical traditions, evolved to incorporate notions of maturity and perfection. This evolution is evident in his lecture delivered on October 16, 1944, before the Virgil Society, entitled "What is a Classic." For Eliot, literary maturity is embodied in the inheritance from ancient texts, particularly Roman and Greek classics. Moreover, this maturity results from an interplay of social, linguistic, historical, and intellectual factors, underscoring the dynamic nature of cultural transmission. His reverence for the literary heritage prompted him to assert:

Maturity of language may naturally be expected to accompany maturity of mind and manners. We may expect the language to approach maturity at the moment when it has a critical sense of past, a confidence in the present, and no conscience doubt of the future. In literature, this means that the poet is aware of his predecessors, and that we are aware of the predecessors behind his work, as we may be aware of ancestral traits in a person who is at the same time individual and unique. (Eliot 1957, 14)

This "feeling of the past" extends beyond the mere historical understanding of tradition, embodying a vital sensibility essential to both the processes of criticism and creative production. Eliot articulates this perspective in his seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he argues that literary traditions are intimately connected with the historical continuum. Writers must fully grasp these traditions before embarking on the creative act. This implies that contemporary ideological currents alone are insufficient to achieve this goal; rather, one must apprehend the past and future by navigating the interconnected web of European literary heritage from the Greek classical era to the present day.

Such comprehension enables a more nuanced evaluation of great literary and artistic works through comparative analysis with preceding traditions. This raises a critical question: How does

contemporary literary production relate to inherited traditions? How does it engage with the cultural and aesthetic legacies of the past? Eliot describes this relationship as a form of "literary nervousness," a tension created by the integration of new works within the existing framework of tradition. Yet, this process is dynamic and ongoing; it does not conclude with mere assimilation but rather involves a continuous dialogue between innovation and heritage. He writes,

The existing monuments from an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervening of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot 2006, 39)

This dynamic correspondence between past and present—and the ongoing intellectual interplay between contemporary European literature and classical traditions—enables a deeper understanding of the present through the lens of the past. Knowing the past thus becomes a guide for navigating new literary currents, as the intellectual chain is composed of interconnected links, each tied to the other.

The enduring value of new poetic works lies in their ability to carve a path amidst the vast landscape of existing artistic productions. This value is reflected in their alignment with past traditions, without leaving any discordant traces that might cause alienation or diversion. Such correspondence allows poets and artists to transcend their individuality or subjectivity, aspiring instead to achieve a higher artistic objective: objectivity in their creative output. As Eliot famously states, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 2006, 42). Therefore, critical attention should focus exclusively on the artistic production itself, rather than on the artist's personal character or idiosyncratic interests. The aim is to appreciate the aesthetic and emotional power of a literary work, a poem, a musical composition, or a play that moves the core of our being, without the necessity of tracing its creator's biography. A fully realized literary work possesses its own intrinsic essence and objectivity, grounded as much in its connection to historical traditions as in its engagement with contemporary currents.

This relationship is predicated on universality

rather than parochialism, on artistic perfection rather than superficial details, and on objectivity rather than individual subjectivity. Effective criticism must follow the intricate threads that weave these relations together, elucidating both the contexts that produced the work and the critical challenges it faces (Kurraz 2011). Eliot's critique of Romantic poetry was likely influenced by an earlier wave initiated by the English philosopher and critic T.E. Hulme, who directed attention back to the classical foundations of European literary criticism and delivered a pointed rebuke to Romanticism. He famously stated: "I object even to the best of the romantics. I object still more to the receptive attitude. I object to the sloppiness which doesn't consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other" (Hulme 1924, p. 116). According to Hulme, the underlying reason for this critique can be contextualized thus,

The essence of poetry to most people is that it must lead them to a beyond of some kind. Verse strictly confined to the earthly and the definite (Keats is full of it) might seem to them to be excellent writing, excellent craftsmanship, but not poetry. So much has romanticism debauched us, that, without some form of vagueness, we deny the highest (Hulme 1924, 117).

Moreover, Eliot's article "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has exerted a clear and significant influence on Arab critics and poets. Numerous Arab scholars translated Eliot's essays into Arabic, including Rashād Rushdy (1951), Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Badawī (1956), and Laṭīfah az-Zayyāt (1964). Additionally, various translators rendered some of Eliot's critical articles and poems into Arabic (Fareed 1981). These translations served as pivotal sites of cultural mediation, profoundly impacting the writings of Arab scholars and the creative output of poets. Many Arab literary figures engaged with Eliot's thought through processes of imitation, response, and absorption, which laid the groundwork for new critical methodologies. Likewise, poets consciously incorporated Eliotic elements into their own poetry, marking a creative synthesis between Western modernist aesthetics and Arabic literary traditions.

Arab critics have expressed diverse perspectives on Eliot's article and its impact on modern Arabic poetry. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1971), for instance, regarded Eliot's concept of tradition as inherently dynamic, emphasizing that despite divergences, Arab poets consistently maintained a connection to tradition. For them, tradition remained alive through the continuous interaction between the old and the

new within the individual talent. Jabra notes that Eliot's article "Tradition and the Individual Talent" effectively attracted the attention of many young Arab poets. Maher Shafiq Fareed (1981) argues that Eliot's critical ideas played a catalytic role in awakening Arab literary circles and readers to the importance of tradition, encouraging a conscious return to roots and a meaningful connection between contemporary and past literatures (185). Given the scope of this paper, it is not possible to fully detail all Arab critical responses to Eliot's influence; however, it is important to highlight the voice of a major Arab poet who held Eliot in high regard: Badr Shāker al-Sayyāb. In a 1958 letter to Yousuf al-Khāl, al-Sayyāb wrote:

Did you read what T.S. Eliot wrote about individual talent and traditions, and their relationship to poetry? There has to be a line connecting the old to the new, and a sense of the vintage in what we call new. Our poetry should not be a European deformation in Arabic clothing, or semi-Arabic. We must benefit from the best elements of our traditional poetry while simultaneously drawing from Western accomplishments in the poetic world. (Al-Sayyāb 1986, 104)

Al-Sayyāb's statement reflects a nuanced awareness of literary hybridization, advocating for a transcultural poetics that balances respect for Arabic heritage with openness to global modernist influences.

Nonetheless, the reception of Eliot's article among contemporary Arab poets varied: some grasped its complexities deeply while others only partially understood it. Among those who fully comprehended the debate over tradition and modernity was Badr Shāker al-Sayyāb. Through both his poetic work and critical engagement, Badr Shāker al-Sayyāb forged a modern poetic model that holds a parallel significance in Arabic literature to the role T. S. Eliot played in shaping modern Western poetry. Notably, al-Sayyāb did not wholly embrace traditional Arabic forms, nor did he fully align himself with Western modernist aesthetics. Rather, drawing on a deep historical consciousness and a close engagement with Eliot and other Western thinkers, he was able to navigate between inherited cultural frameworks and external influences, crafting a poetic voice that was both innovative and rooted in his own context.

The relationship between Eliot and al-Sayyāb represents a powerful example of literary transmission across cultures, akin to the influence of classical Greek and Roman poets on Chaucer and Gower (Zuraikat, 2023b & Zuraikat, 2022), Dante's

impact on Ezra Pound, or Pound's shaping of Eliot himself. This kind of influence goes far beyond imitation; it emerges from a profound engagement, an internalization followed by critical response and creative transformation. As Harold Bloom describes in his theory of the "anxiety of influence," such interactions reflect a dynamic and often tense dialogue between poetic forebears and successors, where influence becomes a generative force in the development of original work. From this perspective, it can be surmised that al-Sayyāb's ideological and artistic affinities with Eliot shaped his literary commitment. Al-Sayyāb skillfully integrated the revolutionary content of his socialist experience with Eliot's complex poetic techniques, particularly as seen in "The Waste Land".

Published in 1922, "The Waste Land" consists of five poems: "The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and "What the Thunder Said." At its release, it marked a watershed moment in Western poetry, offering a powerful new poetic approach amid competing post-World War I movements such as futurism, symbolism, surrealism, realism, romanticism, and classicism. Eliot employed his full artistic and linguistic prowess, drawing on myths, codes, and quotations in seven languages (English, Latin, Italian, German, French, Greek, Sanskrit), all wrapped in coded, elusive symbolism. Aware of its complexity, Eliot provided extensive notes to aid readers' understanding. The collection reflects his bleak view of modern humanity and contemporary life—a landscape of despair, paralysis, and death—rooted in the post-war trauma and disillusionment. In "The Waste Land" and subsequent works, Eliot depicts a world lacking hope or faith, which profoundly shaped the trajectory of modern Western poetry (Al-Nā'ūrī 1977, 157). The Egyptian poet Ibrāhīm Nāji was the first Arab to draw attention to "The Waste Land" in 1939 (Shalash 1983, 311). By 1945, Noor al-Sharīf discussed the poem and broader English poetic schools in *The New Dawn*, though she criticized Eliot as a "coward retroactive" who avoided engaging with society's suffering. Louis 'Awad also wrote extensively about Eliot's poem, recognizing its pivotal role in English poetry and modern influence, but criticized Eliot as reactionary and authoritarian (Shalash 1983, 312). Salāmah Mūsā similarly described Eliot as a traditionalist blind to the twentieth century's realities (Fareed 1981, 174).

Despite such critiques, "The Waste Land" significantly influenced modern Arabic poets such as al-Bayyātī, Ṣ. alāh. 'Abdul Ṣ.abbūr, and especially al-Sayyāb. Al-Sayyāb's engagement with Eliot

underwent two distinct phases. During the 1940s and early 1950s, as a committed communist, al-Sayyāb echoed prevailing political critiques, dismissing Eliot as reactionary. However, after the mid-1950s, as ideological tensions cooled, al-Sayyāb openly acknowledged Eliot's profound influence on the modern Arabic poetic movement, including the "Committed poetry" trend. At a 1961 Rome conference, he stated:

We have, in this area, to point to the influence of the great poet T.S. Eliot and his poem 'The Waste Land' on Committed Poetry in Modern Arabic Literature, Communist or non-communist, the bad and the relatively good, all alike. (Al-Sayyāb 1986, 52)

Eliot's poetic revolution reached the Arab East roughly 26 years after its Western acclaim, with al-Sayyāb as its foremost Iraqi adopter by 1948. He absorbed Eliot's innovative use of myth, religious symbolism, fragmented form, and liberated verse—though adapted to cultural differences. Unlike Eliot, who drew from a broad range of languages and literatures, al-Sayyāb primarily engaged with English and Arabic, which presented limitations in interlingual poetic implications. Also, while Eliot's despair and hatred in poetry targeted the contemporary human condition and civilization as a whole, al-Sayyāb's resentment was rooted in specific social and political struggles—poverty, illness, and oppression that he personally endured. Al-Sayyāb's poetry reveals a persistent hope for reform and goodness, contrasting sharply with Eliot's pervasive nihilism. His love for his son Ghailan infused his work with warmth and optimism absent in Eliot's melancholic vision articulated in his poem "Ash Wednesday":

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because I do not hope to turn  
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things  
 (Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)  
 Why should I mourn  
 The vanished power of the usual reign?

However, similar to Eliot, al-Sayyāb published several long poems since 1948, such as "The Blind Prostitute," "The Grave Digger," and "Weapons and Children." Like Eliot, he also composed multiple poems grouped under collective titles like "Convoy of Loss," "Jakor and The City," and "The Rain Song." In all these works, Eliot's influence is unmistakable, even though al-Sayyāb's symbolism tends to be less obscure and complex. His liberation from traditional poetic forms is somewhat more restrained compared to Eliot's. In addition, al-Sayyāb's mythical and

religious allusions are less frequent and less elaborate: his references mostly focus on a handful of figures like Tammuz, Astarte, and Sisyphus, alongside Christian symbols such as Christ and Lazarus. Additionally, the repetition of particular words or phrases is a stylistic device shared by both poets.

“The Waste Land” notably influenced al-Sayyāb’s poem “The Rain Song” in its linguistic style, specifically in vocabulary choice and use of repetition. Although “The Rain Song” employs relatively few words, its mosaic-like structure generates remarkable poetic energy. The poem’s linguistic precision and intricate pattern evoke the art of the arabesque, where carefully distributed lines and colors create infinite potential meanings within a tightly controlled form. This linguistic craftsmanship parallels “The Waste Land” in the tightly woven fabric of words, images, and rhythm working in harmony in both poems.

More significantly, this innovative linguistic approach allows both poems to break away from convention, personalize complex modern experiences, and express contemporary hopes and anxieties. Reading “The Rain Song” alongside Eliot’s “What the Thunder Said” reveals how deeply al-Sayyāb absorbed Eliot’s modern sensibility and adapted it to Arabic poetic music. While al-Sayyāb borrowed the song-like quality and musicality of Eliot’s poetry, the similarities in the compositions of these two works further highlight his particular fascination with “The Waste Land.” Several pieces of evidence support this connection:

#### 4. ELIOT: IF THERE WERE THE SOUND OF WATER ONLY NOT THE CICADA

and dry grass singing.

Al-Sayyāb: do you know the sorrow which sends the rain?

And how the gutters sob as the waters flow?

[...]

And each year, as the earth grows green, we starve:

No year passes without hunger in Iraq. [...]

Iraq will grow green with the rain.

Eliot: What is the sound high in the air.

Murmur of maternal Lamentation

Who are those hooded hordes swarming?

[...]

And bats with baby faces in the violet light

Al-Sayyāb: As a child babbles before sleep

Of the mother he has not found for a year

And when he asks and asks is told

‘The day after tomorrow she will be back’.

Eliot: In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust  
Bringing rain

Al-Sayyāb: Across the waves of the Gulf lightning speaks [...]

I seem to hear Iraq hoarding the thunder  
Storing the lightning in plain and mountain.

“The Rain Song” and “The Waste Land” share an intrinsic inner beat—a subtle music generated by language itself. This musicality frees the poem from the constraints of ordinary content, allowing for direct and fluid expression. Ultimately, the expression transcends the music, enabling a seamless transition between states without erasing the previous one. This internal rhythm breaks free from the linear constraints of traditional time, which separate past, present, and future.

One might say that “The Rain Song” revolves around a moment of creative strength, similar to what Dante described as the boundary between two worlds—two opposing forces in human life—which he termed *Limbo* in *The Divine Comedy*, one of the inspirations behind “The Waste Land.” The inner beat in “The Rain Song,” much like in “What the Thunder Said” and “The Waste Land,” arises from the linguistic freedom granted by the poem’s structure. This freedom acts as a trigger, resonating like an expressionist melodic bell. The language, freed from traditional constraints, permits the use of common poetic expressions while maintaining grammatical coherence and preserving the flow of ideas through lexical and verbal cues.

This pivotal moment in “The Rain Song” merges closely intertwined states: the absence of rain and the hopeful anticipation of its arrival; the infertility caused by drought and the fertility promised by rainfall; the barren present and the lush, green future. If Eliot found in the legend of rain a fitting symbol to express his generation’s crisis or his personal turmoil, al-Sayyāb found rain to be a profoundly appropriate image for a land where drought threatens life itself. While it might not devastate gardens, it endangers daily subsistence—perhaps motivating al-Sayyāb to select a rain-related myth from the many myths and rhetorical devices embedded in “The Waste Land” (Shāhīn 1992, 23).

The image of water and rain recurs frequently throughout Eliot’s poetry, especially in “The Waste Land.” This repetition helps infuse the motif with deep symbolic power. Imagery of water—whether rain, river, or sea—and what lies beneath the surface resonates throughout Eliot’s work, creating a cumulative effect. Likewise, the motif of rain and water is prevalent in al-Sayyāb’s poetry generally,

and in "The Rain Song" specifically. Yet, this similarity does not diminish al-Sayyāb's personal imprint on this symbol within the unique context of his poetic experience. Here are a few observations that highlight this perspective: (First), the image of rain and water in al-Sayyāb's poetry is deeply rooted in his national heritage and environment, as well as in the cultural and religious significance of rain within Arabic and Islamic traditions. This includes its presence in poetic lamentations and references found in seminal works like Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. (Second), this cultural grounding does not exclude the influence of Eliot on al-Sayyāb's work. Certain images in "The Rain Song", notably the motif of "sacrifice and redemption" captured in the line "And the remaining of bones are of misery and drowning", appear to draw inspiration from "The Waste Land." This thematic parallel, particularly prominent in the fourth section of Eliot's poem, demonstrates a process of creative appropriation rather than straightforward imitation. (Third), closely tied to this is the recurring contrast between life and death, fertility and barrenness, a motif explored by both poets. However, their respective treatments of this theme diverge notably, especially in the concluding sections of their works. While "The Rain Song" culminates in a mood of hope and regeneration, "The Waste Land" ends on a tone steeped in despair and fragmentation. Scholars have often highlighted this divergence, interpreting al-Sayyāb's poem as affirming the victory of fertility and renewal, in stark contrast to Eliot's depiction of sterility and spiritual decay. (Fourth), the mythological references that shape al-Sayyāb's poetry, particularly in "The Rain Song", are clearly indebted to Eliot's influence. However, this connection in no way undermines al-Sayyāb's originality. On the contrary, he adeptly weaves together a range of sources to construct a poetic voice that is distinctly his own. Through this act of creative synthesis, al-Sayyāb navigates the space between self and other, tradition and innovation, blending local heritage with external influences in a way that reflects both continuity and transformation.

This list indicates that "The Waste Land" served as a key source of inspiration for al-Sayyāb's "The Rain Song" and other poems within his collection. Grounded in a mythic framework revolving around Ishtar, the fertility goddess, "The Rain Song" invokes themes of natural renewal through potent symbols like the nation, the maternal figure, and the land itself. This maternal imagery resonates closely with the revival of motherly motifs that Eliot pursues in "The Waste Land". For al-Sayyāb, rain specifically

embodies the principle of regeneration and life's renewal, whereas Eliot employs water more generally as a symbol of vital life-giving energy. Nonetheless, the poets' visions diverge when it comes to their understanding of salvation and renewal. Eliot envisions Jesus Christ as the ultimate savior and redeemer of humanity, embodying spiritual salvation. In contrast, al-Sayyāb views revelation itself as the path to rebirth, reflecting his belief in historical progress and the collective movement of society. These differing assumptions reflect their ideological stances: Eliot's reactionary worldview contrasts with al-Sayyāb's progressive perspective, which embraces historical change and social dynamics. Thus, al-Sayyāb selectively assimilated elements from Eliot's work that resonated with his own vision, while disregarding or even opposing aspects that did not align with his ideals (Al-Khalifah 1985, 65).

To better grasp this contrast, let us consider the following excerpt from "What the Thunder Said":

Here is no water but only rock  
 Rock and no water and the sandy road  
 The road winding above among the mountains  
 Which are mountains of rock without water  
 If there were water we should stop and drink  
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
 If there were only water amongst the rock  
 Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot

spit

Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
 From doors of mud cracked houses  
 If there were water  
 And no rock  
 If there were rock  
 And also water  
 And water  
 A spring  
 A pool among the rock  
 If there were the sound of water only  
 Not the cicada  
 And dry grass singing  
 But sound of water over a rock  
 Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
 But there is no water. (331-357)

Water holds within it the dual forces of destruction and creation; it has the power both to drown and to save. This paradox is central to Eliot's

treatment in the section "Death by Water," where he conveys profound suffering and pain, especially the suffering of Christ. Yet, following this depiction of sinking and loss, Eliot attempts to shift toward the redemptive aspect of water, the water that saves. This transition to salvation, however, is not immediate; it demands further pain and suffering as a necessary passage.

After reflecting on the death of Christ, the barrenness of the land, and the demise of humanity, Eliot envisions a figure cloaked in brown, wandering uncertainly:

Who is the Third who walks always besides you?  
 When I count, there are only you and I together  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking besides you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantel blooded

It is Christ who appears, sending a bowl for more water, symbolizing the hope for renewal and salvation. While Eliot views Christ as the savior and water as the emblem of rebirth, al-Sayyāb interprets rain as the symbol of rejuvenation, believing that true salvation is achieved through a collective, public revolution rather than spiritual redemption alone (Al-Khalifah 1985, 68).

## 5. CONCLUSION

T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and his landmark poem "The Waste Land" did more than introduce new forms and themes to Western poetry; they ignited a profound and lasting cross-cultural dialogue that reached deep into the heart of modern Arabic poetry. The interplay between Eliot's modernist vision and the distinct cultural and social conditions faced by Arab poets sparked a vibrant exchange—one characterized not by mere imitation but by creative dialogue and transformation. This cross-cultural engagement reshaped Arabic poetry and criticism, empowering poets like Badr Shāker al-Sayyāb to develop a modern poetic voice that was simultaneously rooted in Arab tradition and open to global influences. Al-Sayyāb's interaction with Eliot's work exemplifies how Arabic modern poetry assimilated and reinterpreted Western modernism in ways that remained attuned to local realities. While Eliot's "The Waste Land" portrayed a world fractured by cultural decline, spiritual desolation, and personal anguish, reflecting the trauma of the post-World War I era, al-Sayyāb recontextualized themes of loss and renewal within the specific social and political struggles of his homeland. The rain motif in "The Rain Song" emerges as a powerful symbol of rebirth and hope amid adversity, linking natural fertility with aspirations for social and

political regeneration. This contrasts sharply with Eliot's more ambiguous symbol of water, which, though rich in meanings of destruction and salvation, often carries an undertone of religious and existential pessimism.

This divergence highlights a key principle of cultural translation and poetic influence: such influence is never a straightforward transmission or replication. Rather, it involves a selective and critical process whereby ideas are adapted, challenged, or transformed according to the demands of new contexts. Al-Sayyāb's nuanced incorporation of Eliot's symbolic and formal techniques, including mythic references, fragmented narrative structures, and rhythmic complexity, reflects a sophisticated negotiation between inherited tradition and adopted modernist innovations. He skillfully balances reverence for his cultural heritage with a commitment to poetic experimentation and social engagement, producing work that simultaneously resonates with both global modernism and local identity. Moreover, al-Sayyāb's reinterpretation of Eliot's themes mirrors the evolving political and ideological currents in the Arab world during the mid-twentieth century. In contrast to Eliot's often bleak outlook, marked by skepticism toward contemporary society and spiritual renewal, al-Sayyāb's poetry pulses with optimism and a belief in transformation through social justice and collective effort. This ideological contrast underscores how poetic influence is intertwined with historical and political realities, shaping literary meanings and functions far beyond their formal or aesthetic dimensions.

Thus, the reception of Eliot's work within Arabic literature offers a compelling example of the complexities involved in cultural exchange and literary modernism. It reveals how tradition and innovation can coexist in a productive tension that expands poetic possibilities and redefines artistic expression. For Arab poets and critics, Eliot's writings provided a catalyst to reconsider the relationship between the individual and tradition, between heritage and contemporaneity, and between self and other. Ultimately, the engagement with Eliot's poetry and criticism enabled modern Arabic poetry to articulate its own sense of modernity, not by erasing its cultural identity or blindly adopting external models, but by creating a distinctive voice through ongoing dialogue, adaptation, and renewal. This ongoing process reflects a broader poetic and cultural mission: to honor the past while envisioning the future, transforming inherited legacies into living, evolving expressions of contemporary life.

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