

Re-historicizing the Six-Day War: The Counter-Poetics of Nizar Qabbani

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This paper critically examines the war poetry of the prominent Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani in order to re-historicize the Six-Day War (1967) and dismantle the myths that provided the sparks for the war. Charged with the need to bear witness and responsibility for war, the poems, analyzed in this paper, constitute one of the first extensive narratives of trauma and defeat in modern Arabic literature. As a suppressed tradition of poetic texts production representing the consciousness of the contemporary Arab intellectual, Qabbani's poetic discourse defended the individual against the tyranny and persecution perpetuated by tyrannical Arab governments. Denouncing a network of stagnant institutions that gave rise to the war, Qabbani criticized the Arab official system questioning Arab culture and traditions. Due to its challenge of the hegemonic narratives disseminated by the defeated regimes, Qabbani's counter war rhetoric was censored and excluded from school curricula and Arab press. Undermining narratives which enhanced the rationale of amnesia and castigating military regimes who conspired to obscure the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, Qabbani's counter-poetics underlined the crippling impact of the 1967 war on the collective memory of a nation shattered by recurrent defeats and cursed by successive dictatorial regimes.

Key words: war, defeat, trauma, counter-poetics, dictatorial regimes.

Toward a Poetics of Disclosure: Re-narrating the 1967 War Tale

The defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 war and its catastrophic ramifications introduced into the study of Arabic literature an awareness of the impact of mass trauma on the collective memory of the nation, an awareness minimally confronted in the Arab world even during the era of colonization. Experiencing war and its traumatic memories, the great Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani was transformed from a poet of love and erotica into a revolutionary activist, from a belief in the end of ideology to a new politicized awareness. His growing sense of despair after the defeat and his feelings of exile in his homeland led to his interrogation of Arab cultural traditions based on destructive images that justify a history of false heroism and empty rhetoric. Qabbani's war poetry is a reflection of the frustrated aspirations of Arab intellectuals and an epitome of the sense of alienation of a nation deceived by the political slogans of the Arab regimes in the aftermath of WW II. Therefore, Qabbani's poetry is an assault on contemporary Arab policies with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict condemning the Arab rulers who turned

their backs on the plight of the Palestinian refugees .Dedicated to a revolutionary aesthetic, Qabbani's poetry aims to expose the brutalities of the regimes and the backwardness of the Arab society.

In his war poetry, Qabbani¹ does not condemn the Israeli army or elevate the sacrifices of Arab soldiers or attempt to sentimentalize the relationship between the Arab people and their defeated regimes. As a literary figure who has a great impact on generations of Arab readers since the 1950's, Qabbani introduced a counter-poetics, a personal elegy lamenting a nation plagued by tyrannical regimes and battered by endless defeats. As a representative of the rebellious spirit of a generation traumatized by oppressive governments, Qabbani disparagingly castigates the Arab regimes responsible for the defeat of the 1967 war². Unlike official discourse which simplifies the

¹ Nizar Qabbani was born in Damascus in 1932 in a district famous for its struggle and resistance against the French occupation troops during the era of colonization. As a young man , he married Zahra, a Syrian lady , and had two children, Tawfiq and Zahra. Then he married an Iraqi lady, Balqis, after a great love story but Balqis was unfortunately killed in an explosion which targeted the American embassy in Beirut, where she works, during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980's. Qabbani, who descended from a well-known family, in Damascus, was appointed as an ambassador after his graduation from Damascus University in the 1950's. However, he was forced to resign from his job as a result of publishing poems attacking the Arab rulers and governments after the defeat of the 1967 war. Consequently, he left his country and spent most of his life in Lebanon and Europe where he became a professional writer and poet . Most of his poetry prior to the 1967 war was devoted to the issue of feminism and the degrading status of women in the Arab world. Originally identified as the poet of women and erotic love, his poems were censored in many Arab countries, however his poetry opened new horizons extending the boundaries of Arabic poetics and challenging conservative Arab traditions. His first anthology was published when he was a student at Damascus University and created controversy in conservative circles due to its candid treatment of the issues of sex and male / female relationship in the Arab world. His repudiation of backward and conservative Arab traditions started at an early age when he witnessed the suicide of his sister who killed herself because she was forced to be separated from her lover and marry a man she did not love. Therefore, his early poetry was a severe criticism of a male-dominated world and a challenge of the repressive policies advocated by a hegemonic patriarchal society which oppressed women. Moreover,. his political poetry, particularly his famous and provocative poems "Love and Petroleum", "Bread, Hashish and Moon" and "Margins on the Notebook of the Defeat", led to the censorship of his literary works in most of the Arab countries. Qabbani's reputation and popularity in the Arab world is unprecedented particularly because most of his love and romantic poems that give credit to women are transformed into well – known popular songs performed by famous Arab singers. Qabbani died in 1998 leaving behind him large legacies of books, anthologies, songs, prose works and a history of struggle against all forms of oppression in the Arab world. His unequal poetic works stand as a testimony of a great poet and a modern warrior. Qabbani is undoubtedly one of the most famous and prominent poets in the entire history of Arabic literature from the Pre-Islamic era until the modern times.

² In May 1967 Arab countries particularly Egypt, Syria and Jordan mobilized their forces in addition to an extensive media campaign against Israel threatening to drive Israel to the sea. The fear of an imminent attack as well as the withdrawal of the United Nations emergency forces located on the Egyptian-Israeli

representation of war imposing an illusion of collectivity within a dictatorial system based on hypocrisy and corruption, Qabbani's poetry rewrites the 1967 war narrative denouncing the culture machine which paves the way for the war. Contrary to the war myths, promoted by the official propaganda apparatus, Qabbani's poetry does not valorize those who fight in the war. Instead he denounces political corruption expressing a profound anger against the dictatorial leaders responsible for the war and the subsequent defeat.

By creating an analogy between defeat and internal corruption, Qabbani attempts to redefine the concepts of "war" and "enemy". The hidden agenda in Qabbani's poetry indicates that in 1967, the Arabs were simultaneously engaged into two wars: one against local dictatorial regimes and one against a small country defending its existence. He redefines the enemy not as Israeli soldiers equipped with a western / sophisticated, arsenal of weapons but as Arab dictators who strike the first sparks of war. In other words, Qabbani's poetry reconstructs the enemy and resituates the locus of war emphasizing that the real battles and conflicts are fought both within the hearts of the Arab people and on the ground of political and cultural struggle. In several poems Qabbani reconstructs war as a complex tissue of meaning and signification where the battlefield exists simultaneously on the war fronts and inside the Arab communities. As a matter of fact, the poet attempts to narrow the gap between "military" and "civil", between "soldier" and "civilian" in order to de-construct a web of deeply rooted myths about war and heroism. Denouncing the war image popularized by the regimes' propaganda machines, Qabbani composes poetry which becomes a testimony of the failure of the myth of Arabism and Arab nationalism.

While his poems explore the trauma and feelings of alienation integral to the defeat, they give expression to the less visible but no less dangerous defeat which the Arab people experience under dictatorial regimes. In Qabbani's post 1967 war poetry, the Arab leaders appear, in an unfavorable way, as vampires who work against the interests of their people squandering national resources. In several poems, Qabbani depicts

borders due to Egyptian orders led the Israel government to believe that an Arab military assault war imminent. Things became worse when Jamal Abdul-Nasser, the Egyptian president at that time, announced the blockade of the straits of Tiran preventing Israel to have access to its Eilat port on the Gulf of Aqaba. Mutual defense pacts were signed between Egypt on one hand and Jordan and Iraq on the other. Anti-Israeli incendiary Arab rhetoric and daily threats in Arab media terrified the Israeli community and contributed to the pressures to go to war. The Arab call of a war of total destruction against Israel ended with their defeat. In six days and due to a successful and preemptive military operation led by the Israeli air forces, the Israeli army was able to capture the Sinai peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank including Eastern Jerusalem in addition to Gaza strip. The war which started on the fifth of June and ended on the tenth of June changed the standards of power in the Middle East forever.

hypocritical and corrupt Arab politicians in a humiliating manner viewing them as opportunists and profiteers blocking the way toward salvation and reform in the Arab world. Inimical to the interests of their people and in league with the reactionary forces of evil and darkness, Arab politicians attempted to prevent the Arab community from regaining its vigor and achieving advancement. In “The Governor and the Sparrow”, Qabbani severely criticizes the Arab political system supported by a police apparatus specialized in the arts of brutalization and subjugation. Arab citizens, in the poem are tortured and humiliated for no apparent reasons. In “The Ruler and the Sparrow”, Qabbani foregrounds the policies of persecution advocated by the Arab regimes against voices of freedom and liberation in the Arab world: “I traveled in the Arab homeland/ to read my poem/ I traveled with only a notebook/police stations tossed me about /soldiers tossed me about/and all I had was a sparrow in my pocket” (Al-Udhari 1986: 103).

Depicting a homeland which is transformed into a big prison and detainees camp extending from the Arabian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean, Qabbani criticizes the aggressive attitude fostered by the ruling establishments against Arab intellectuals. In spite of carrying a sparrow, an epitome of his poetic talent, “the officer asked/for the sparrow’s passport / the word in my country needs a passport” (Al-Udhari 1986: 103). Using the “sparrow” as a symbol of the free poetic word, the poet - during his imaginary tour in the Arab world - criticizes the inhuman practices of the state-side police, sponsored by the regime to tyrannize the voices of opposition. In reality Qabbani, himself, was frequently prevented from reading his poetry to the masses: “I travelled from one country to another / carrying a book of poems / but I was taken from jail to jail / beaten by brutal police operatives” (Qabbani 1993: 244³).

Furthermore, Qabbani denounces the attempt of state-side writers and poets who seek to distort the 1967 war displacing its site and meaning transforming it into a civil struggle fought on the terrain of Arab-Arab local politics. In his poetic narratives, Qabbani castigates nationalist Arab poets who attempt to evade reality and overcome the defeat by looking back longingly on previous victories and myths rooted in early Islamic history. In other words, these poets are reluctant to cope up with reality and accept the defeat. Therefore, they claim that the defeat of Arab armies mainly results from the military intervention of Western colonial forces which provide Israel with sophisticated arsenals of weapons. Instead of acknowledging the real domestic reasons of the defeat, they attempt to overcome the post-war trauma by escaping into the past recalling historical episodes of bygone eras of glory when Arab/Islamic armies achieved victories over Western powers particularly during the Crusades and the Muslim conquest

³ All the extracts and citations from *The Complete Political Works of Qabbani* (1993) are translated by the author of the paper.

of Andalusia. Apparently, Qabbani criticizes such an escapist / regressive attitude toward the 1967 defeat which plunges the entire Arab nation into illusions and day-dream.

As the most significant Arab poet in the post 1967 era Qabbani glorifies the revolutionary voices of his generation as the best intellectuals in the Arab nation. In his frenzied pursuit of the truth, Qabbani criticizes the hypocritical poets who replicate the 1967 war narrative according to the ideological agenda of the defeated regimes crying in anger and protest against all forms of tyranny and hegemony in the Arab region. Driven to struggle and resistance as a result of being subjected to the feeling of defeat and humiliation, Qabbani's poetic voice rises out of the junk heap of Arab culture protesting against a web of stagnant traditions that kept the Arab world lagging behind other nations for years.

In his post 1967 war poetry, particularly in "Bread, Hashish and Moonlight", Qabbani exposes a dirty and miserable world where disillusioned people escape in sex but their attempt to evade the world of reality proved to be futile. Though they are capable of transcending physical time and space, they are driven to perform rituals of ignorance and backwardness. Caught up in the labyrinth of shame and defeat, Arab people became the victims of ruthless regimes that struggle to dehumanize them. The tragedy of the Arab people, depicted in the poem, is that they never come back from their journey of illusion. The cause of Arab catastrophes could be traced to a dictatorial system which refuses to recognize the humanity of the people enforcing and imposing an oppressive policy on them. In "Bread, Hashish and Moonlight", Qabbani attributes the defeat to domestic rather than external reasons. He views a world which is already defeated even before the beginning of the war: "When the moon is born in the East people leave their shops and / march forth in groups to meet the moon / carrying bread and a radio , to the mountain tops / and their narcotics/ there, they buy and sell fantasies" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 175).

Depicting a society living in the ages of darkness, brutalized by evil regimes that transform it into a network of prisons and graveyards, Qabbani refers to the spirit of defeat overwhelming his people who live in "the land of the prophets, the land of the simple". Due to ages of tyranny and lack of freedom, the Arab people become "chewers of tobacco" and "dealers in drugs". They not only escape in drugs and narcotics but also pursue their fixed beliefs in superstitions: "When the moon comes to life they are changed into corpses / and shake the tombs of the saints / hoping to be granted some rice, some children / they spread out their fine and elegant rugs / and console themselves with an opium / we call fate and destiny" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 175).

Apparently, the poetic response to the experience of war revealed a long overdue self-critical reevaluation of the chauvinistic myths of Arab unity and nationalism which

gave rise to the 1967 war. Further, the defeat provided a gateway for the poet to expose the social ills endemic of Arab culture. Qabbani speaks about a world where “millions go barefoot” and “believe in four wives /and the day of judgment” while spending “the night in houses built of coughs” because “we have never set eyes on medicine” (Khouri / Algar 1974:179). To Qabbani, the most destructive thing for the Arab people is their addiction of dubious historical narratives and false tales of ancient heroism achieved by their ancestors: "In the land of the simple / when we slowly chew on our unending songs / a form of consumption destroying the East / our East chewing on its history / its lethargic dreams, its empty legends / our East that sees the sum of all heroism / in picaresque Abu Zayed Al-Hilali" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 179). Linking the political propaganda, deployed by the ruling regimes about the superiority of Arab armies, to ancient folkloric epics dominated by fictional figures like Abu Zayed Al-Hilali who achieved heroism only in legends and popular culture myths, Qabbani aims to expose the lies and deception of the Arab rulers who took the decision of war against Israel.

Historically, the defeat of the 1967 war smashed all Arab dreams of unity and led to a state of spiritual impotence and total disillusionment. All the promises of the Arab regimes to their people turned into illusions and the hopes to regain Arab glory ended in smoke. Therefore, revolutionary poetic voices in the Arab world, particularly Qabbani, expressed resentment and frustration questioning the policies which paved the way for the defeat. In an attempt to subvert the myths that preceded the war, Qabbani denounces the official hegemonic discourse which portrays the war against Israel as a moral crusade. As an act of purgation, his poetry becomes a critical reassessment of cultural mythology which leads to defeat interrogating narratives of political propaganda integral to the pre-war scene.

In “I am the Train of Sadness”, Qabbani protests against hegemonic practices, pursued by the ruling regimes, which transformed the Arab citizen into an exile and a wandering Jew: “The inspector asks for my ticket / and my destination / is there a destination? No hotel on earth knows me / nor the addresses of my lovers” (al-Udhari 1986: 102). Lamenting the exilic and Diasporic experience forced upon the Arab intellectual by repressive regimes who turn their backs on human rights and consider issues of democracy and freedom as luxuries, Qabbani skillfully ends his poem with a note of frustration and anger: "I am the train of sadness / there are no platforms / where I could stop / in all my journeys / my platforms slip away / my station slip away from me” (al-Udhari 1986:102).

In a poem titled “The Speech / al-Khetab”, Qabbani sarcastically explores the phenomenon of censorship and the doctrine of silencing the voices of opposition in the Arab world. The speaker in the poem was arrested by the regime’s secret agents because he laughs during the speech of an Arab ruler probably because the dictator utters political slogans about maintaining freedom, democracy and human rights in the Arab world.

Because the ruler's speech was interrupted due to the loud laughter of one of his subjects, "strict measures were taken and a state of emergency was declared in the country" , says the poet . Consequently, Qabbani's persona, due to orders from the embarrassing ruler, spent ten years in jail: "the laugh costs him ten years in prison" (Qabbani 1993: 261).

In "The Speech", the poet apparently ridicules the brutal interrogation apparatus which forced the innocent victim to make false confessions under torture. Qabbani sarcastically reveals the absurd nature of state-police investigation in the Arab world: "when the soldiers arrested me / they said that I participated in a conspiracy to overthrow the government / I did not know that the act of laughter required a permission from the regime / I did not know that laughing required fees and stamps / I did not know anything about brain- wash and the chopping of fingers" (Qabbani 1993: 263). Describing the interrogation rituals and alluding to the emphasis on the conspiracy theory in Arabic culture , Qabbani sarcastically points out that the police officers asked the victim "about the names of the people who urged him to burst into laughter" during the speech of "the leader" and about those who sponsored the operation "the act of laughing" (Qabbani 1993: 262). Obviously, Qabbani depicts the police system, the Arab regime's oppressive apparatus, as the destructive force of the political establishment which feeds on the sacrifices of human blood and suffering.

In a related context and as a result of his painful experience in the regime's jails, the victim becomes convinced that in "my homeland, it is easy to insult God but it is a taboo to say anything that might make the ruler angry" (Qabbani 1993: 264). After hearing "millions of slogans" about the achievements of dictatorial Arab regimes, Qabbani's speaker went to visit the ruler of his country: "when I reached the door steps of the caliph to ask him about the destiny of Sharm al-Sheikh, Haifa, Ramallah and the Golan Heights / he delivered an eloquent speech / when I reminded him of the June defeat and the Six-Day war which turns into narcotics (hashish) taken by the Arab leaders in the morning and the evening / He showed me the military medals and badges / hanging on his chest / when I told him that the sword of the enemy is plunged in our neck / He threw me to the dogs" (Qabbani 1993: 276 – 277).

Explicitly, the allusions to Sharm al-Sheikh, Haifa, Ramallah and the Golan Heights refer to the Arab territories occupied by the Israeli forces during the Six-Day war and a reminder of the failure of Arab regimes to restore the usurped lands. In "Speech", Qabbani delineates a world which is forced to experience defeat and humiliation and a community driven to cultural suicide by the mistaken policies of its rulers. Qabbani also argues that after the June 1967 defeat , life turns into a nightmare in the Arab countries describing a hellish world where intellectuals are brutalized and traumatized by the forces of tyranny controlled by the regimes. The poet attributes all violence, wickedness

and injustice to the Arab political system lamenting a society which completely suppressed and destroyed its intellectual and productive energies.

In "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts", Qabbani cries: "My homeland has lost its virginity / and nobody cares / our emasculated tribes failed to arrest the criminal" (Qabbani 1993: 729). Using discourse submerged in traditional Arab concepts of "honor/dignity" and imagery about "the violation of virginity" incorporating analogies rooted in the tribal Arab culture, Qabbani introduces the theme of invasion of one's homeland through feminine metaphors. In the same poem, Qabbani utilizes T.S. Eliot's concept of "juxtaposition"- as an aesthetic device - evoking the image of Antara Ibn Shaddad al-Absi⁴, the famous Arabian warrior-hero, in order to link the past with the present and tackle contemporary Arab issues. Engaging T.S. Eliot's modernist technique of juxtaposition, Qabbani argues that unlike the pre-Islamic Antara, well-known in Arabic folklore culture, the modern Antara, a symbol of Arab rulers, is a defeated figure who sold his homeland to the enemies: "when they (the enemies) invaded our lands / Antara was selling his horse / and the price was two tobacco packets, fancy dresses / and a new shaving paste / when they attacked us, the uncles of the murdered lady / were drinking gin mixed with lemon / They were spending the summer vacation in Lebanon / Recreating and relaxing in Aswan / Purchasing rings and bangles from Khan al-Khalili" (Qabbani 1993: 230).

Obviously, Qabbani, in the preceding lines, aims to condemn the shameful policies advocated by contemporary Arab leaders and politicians toward great national issues- particularly the Question of Palestine- by comparing them with the heroic sacrifices of a glorious Arab past. In Qabbani's poetry, since 1948, Palestine and / or Jerusalem "the murdered lady" are often viewed through feminine imagery, therefore Qabbani introduces Palestine as an Arab woman ravaged by the invaders. Whereas Antara, in ancient times, was introduced in Arabic culture as a courageous warrior who defended his land and honor, the modern Antara - a symbol of emasculated Arab leaders- unfortunately fails to perform this mission abandoning his beloved homeland. In this context, Palestine is associated with Abla, Antara's mistress who is immortalized in his poetry. It is noteworthy to argue here that the link between one's homeland and one's beloved is integral to Arabic literature because both of them are associated with the concepts of honor and dignity in Arabic culture and religion.

⁴ Antara, the black son of a noble tribesman from Arabia was subjugated to different forms of humiliation including the betrayal of his father who denied his paternity and considered him as a slave living in his household. As a young man, Antara was famous for his poetic talent and war adventures. He was a talented poet who composed famous epics dealing with tribal life. He was also a great warrior who defended his tribe against the invasions of the enemies. Due to his kindness and heroism, Abla, the most beautiful girl of the noble tribe of Abs, fell in love with him in spite of being a black slave.

Apparently, the references to "the uncles of the murdered lady" alludes to Arab rulers who gave no attention to the rape of Palestine "the murdered lady". The allusion to summer and winter resorts in the Arab world - in Beirut and Aswan- where Arab rulers and policy makers spend their holidays ignoring the plight of the Palestinian refugees is an indictment of a corrupt Arab system that should be eradicated from the roots. Further, the image of Arab politicians and decision makers purchasing souvenirs from the bazaars of Khan al-Khalili in the old city of Cairo, a district mostly frequented by foreign tourists, underlines the distance separating the regimes from their people. Instead of being committed to achieve the interests and aspirations of their nations, the Arab rulers are viewed as strangers / foreigners visiting touristic places and shopping at Khan al-Khalili during a time of crisis and defeat.

The Representation of the Defeat

Apparently, the war poetry, analyzed in the paper, is implicated in the dominant political and cultural debates following the 1967 defeat. In this context, Qabbani denounces the establishments which sustained the 1967 war dismissing the cultural myths that paved the way for the war and reinforced it. Resisting attempts by state-side media to obscure the war memories and / or oversimplify the defeat, Qabbani reveals the false representation of the 1967 war to the public opinion reflecting the crisis of reception which occurred by the end of the war and the desire of the regimes to contain the catastrophic consequences of the defeat by focusing on what is called "imperialistic intervention". Taking into account the controversy over the 1967 war in popular circles and the diversity of perspectives raised by politicians, it is noteworthy to mention that the poetic response to the war was complex, multilayered and multi-vocal.

By introducing a tale of defeat the Arab political establishments seemed reluctant to hear, Qabbani repudiates the war and its political motives resisting the de-historicizing process which attempted to obscure the war and its consequences. On this basis Qabbani promotes a poetics of disclosure which aimed to keep the painful memory of the 1967 defeat alive in the Arab collective consciousness. Equating the 1967 war and similar catastrophes in ancient Arab-Islamic history, Qabbani recalls the collapse of the Islamic empire in Andalusia in the fifteenth century. Incorporating significant historical episodes as inter-texts, Qabbani illustrates that the major reason for the fall of Granada, the last Kingdom in Islamic Spain, was the conspiratorial policy advocated by the Muslim rulers against each other. In ancient Spain, the Islamic empire collapsed when Muslim and Arab rulers were divided signing treaties with their enemies against the interests of their Muslim

brothers. Comparing the past with the present and drawing an analogy between the fall of Granada and the occupation of Jerusalem, Qabbani argues that what happened in the Arab world during the 1960's was "a second version of the history of defeat in Andalusia." (Qabbani 1993:312).

In several poems, censored in the Arab world, the great Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani enumerates the reasons of the 1967 defeat linking it to a variety of cultural, social and political factors. The poet condemns tyrannical Arab regimes who are responsible for the war and the defeat. According to Qabbani, Arab regimes are accused of deceiving their peoples with tales of false heroism and empty rhetoric during the years of mobilization that preceded the war. Therefore, the poet insists on keeping the wounds of the defeat open for public debate. In a related context, he denounces the rulers of the Arab-petroleum countries who squandered the natural resources of their people ignoring the plight of the Palestinian refugees subjected to displacement and dispersion as a result of wars against Israeli which have no strategic aims. In his war poetry, Qabbani points out those dictatorial Arab regimes willingly engaged in wars with Israel in order to camouflage internal economic and social catastrophes. Thus, Qabbani urged the Arab masses to get out of the labyrinth of submission and ignorance and confront the forces of corruption supported by the ruling regimes: "do not curse the heavens / if they have abandoned you, do not curse circumstances/ for God grants victory to whom He will" (Khouri / Algar 1974: 183).

Being aware of the dangers of the glorification of war in Arab culture, Qabbani attempts to demolish myths which portray engagement in the holy war / Jihad as a sign of Arab / Muslim moral superiority. Explicitly, the refusal of the Arab public opinion to come to terms with the 1967 war is due to fixed concepts about the impossibility of defeat planted in collective memories by state-side media apparatuses during the pre-war years. Therefore, Qabbani's poetry seeks to dismantle the historical attempts to obscure war resisting collective amnesia which amounts to a denial of responsibility and history. Denouncing tyrannical Arab rulers who failed to defend their countries in a war which they sought, Qabbani's poetry becomes a reflection of the frustration and disappointment of a generation shattered by defeat after being deceived by the false dream of Arab unity and nationalism.

In spite of the atrocities and horrors of the war, Arab poets, since ancient times, have written epics glorifying war and its heroes identifying them with positive moral and cultural ideals. Some poets even run the risk of endowing heroism to historical figures who demonstrated brutality in war. Nevertheless, Qabbani does not give expression to the same heroic mode. Instead, he condemns the Arab policies which paved the way for the 1967 war demystifying a phenomenon that centuries of history have glorified. Due to its crippling effect on the psyche of an entire generation of Arab intellectuals, the defeat

in 1967 war transforms the famous Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani - in a single moment- from a poet dedicating his poetry to romantic and sexual issues into a poet “writing with a knife”. Therefore most of his post 1967 war poetry was highly critical of the policies of Arab governments and the indifference of the Arab people toward these policies.

In Arabic cultural history and folklore, there are several epics which glorify war and its heroes identifying them with positive tribal values and moral ideals well-known in Bedouin traditions. The Arabian community in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras war dominated by tribal wars and Arab-Arab conflicts which gave rise to a war tradition reflected in narratives about the famous Dahes and al-Ghabraa pre-Islamic war erupting as a result of tribal conflicts over pastures and water sources in the Arabian desert. Moreover, there are other folklore epics depicting the adventures of popular folklore heroes such as Antara, Abu Zayed al-Hilali and Sayf Ben Ziyazan. War is also glorified in Islamic discourse particularly in the text of the holy Quran as a kind of Jihad against the invaders of the domain of Islam (Deyar al-Islam) and as a struggle for survival in the hostile environment of Arabia at the rise of Islam.

In Islamic cultural mythology, those who are killed in a just war against the enemy are considered martyrs who are immediately transferred to live in paradise together with saints and prophets enjoying the pleasure of being married to the holy inhabitants of paradise: the beautiful houri. Taking this heritage into account, classical Arab poets ignore the atrocities and horrors of war endowing heroism to Arab warriors even in poems which aim to demonstrate the atrocities of war. On this basis, it becomes obvious that the task of shuttering holy war mythology, deeply rooted in Arab cultural and religious history is an impossible mission. Yet, Qabbani had the initiative of confronting a war tradition which lasted for centuries. As an ex-diplomat, Qabbani has a sharp insight into the ways through which wars are falsely projected in popular culture and mythology for the sake of achieving dubious political objectives. Engaging the pervasive representation of war from an official political perspective, Qabbani attempts to expose the real reasons for the Arab defeat in 1967 war. In his effort to demolish a pattern of myths and undermine attempts to view the defeat as result of imperialistic intervention, he identifies the vicious and immoral policies undertaken by the regimes that lead to the defeat.

Appropriating Western / Modernist Theories

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot explores the relationship between writers and texts from different ages and cultures. Illustrating his concept of tradition, Eliot affirms that “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his [the poet’s] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” and, as a consequence, “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art

which preceded it" (Eliot 1960: 49). Discussing the issue of tradition and its relationship to the past/present dialectics, Hugh Kenner also states: "All that we know of the past is part of our experience now. And it follows that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (Kenner 1959: 58). Recognizing the importance of tradition and the inseparable relationship between the past and present, Qabbani incorporates Eliot's theory of tradition in his war poetry revivifying significant episodes and events from early Islamic history in order to explore contemporary Arab issues.

Engaging the 1967 defeat, Qabbani in "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts" evokes the figure of Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah⁵, the famous Arab lover of Layla al-Aameriyya in the historical love epic. In the original story, Qays is ready to sacrifice his life and split his blood for the sake of Layla al-Aameriyya, his beloved. In a modern context, and through using the juxtaposition technique, Qabbani portrays an image of a modern Qays, a symbol of contemporary Arab intellectuals who escape in illusions ignoring the miserable realities of the Arab world after the 1967 defeat. Like modern Antara who fails to defend his honor (Abla-Palestine), the modern Qays is a cuckold and a coward isolated in his ivory tower abandoning his beloved (Layla-Palestine). While his beloved homeland (Layla-Palestine) was raped "Qays was involved in writing Platonic poetry: "while the Zionists were infiltrating into the bed-room of Layla al-Aameriyya / even the Arab dogs did not bark / and no bullet was fired at the adulterer" (Qabbani 1993 : 231). In his disillusionment, Qabbani points out that "we committed adultery with the invaders three times / And lost our chastity three times / afterwards, we altered our testimonies denying our attachment to the enemies / then, we burnt the files of the (Palestinian) cause" (Qabbani 1993:231). Reconstructing the Arab-Israeli conflict, Qabbani resurrects the history of war between Arabs and Israel. The reference to the three occasions (three times" where Arabs committed adultery with the invaders) signifies the three major wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967 between the two sides which ended in humiliating Arab defeats. The allusions to the burning of "the files of the cause" indicate the negative approach of the Arab rulers toward the Palestinian issue.

⁵ Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah al-Aameri (545-688), the famous Platonic love poet titled as "Majnoon Leila", lived in Najed in the Arabian Peninsula during the Umayyad dynasty . He fell madly in love with Leila, thus , he was known as the madman (al-Majnoon) . His unprecedented love story for Leila ended in frustration and tears. After his marriage proposal was turned down by Leila's folks , Qays spent the rest of his life in sadness and depression roaming the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant region writing Platonic love poems for Leila, an epitome of an idealistic and unfulfilled love epic immortalized in Arab history. Qays died alone in his desert exile after sacrificing his life for a love relationship that brought him nothing except pain and suffering.

In his post 1967 war poetry Qabbani criticizes not only the Arab official situation toward the war but also the negative response of the Arab people in the aftermath of the severe defeat. He comments on the absurd reality of living in a post-war Arab world where “people stay in coffee shops speaking nonsense” uttering “Islamic Sharia slogans” and misreading the real reasons of the 1967 defeat. In a dramatic fashion, Qabbani takes his readers to different destinations and locations inside the Arab world capturing ordinary people’s attitudes toward the 1967 war and the defeat. In one of the coffee shops scenes, deployed in Qabbani’s war poetry, people were listening to the official media report in the radio: “Dear ladies and gentleman, the entire conspiracy was originally masterminded in the USA” and sponsored by “the petro-dollars” obtained from “the oil-producing countries” in the Arabian Gulf. In the preceding lines, Qabbani refers to the claims of the Egyptian regime, during the 1960’s, led by president Jamal Abdul-Nasser, who promoted the idea that the Saudi government supported the 1967 war, against his country, in order to remove his regime from power because of Egyptian military operations - in Yemen - on the Saudi borders⁶.

Afterwards, Qabbani takes the readers to another location in the Arab world where people articulate hallucinatory remarks and disintegrated utterances: “fuck politics / we want whisky with ice cubes / we love foreign perfumes / All women are narrow-minded / And Islamic Sharia is against the victims” (Qabbani 1993 : 236). The shift from conspiracy theory rhetoric to hallucinations about politics, women and Islamic laws (Sharia) is a manifestation of the disappointment and disillusionment of Arab intellectuals who experienced the crippling consequences of the defeat. The escapist attitude, embedded in the preceding lines, reflects the destructive impact of the war and defeat on the collective Arab consciousness during the late sixties. The most dangerous result of the June 1967 war is the fragmentation of the Arab nation and the failure of the Arab rulers to draw the moral lessons and become united: “June comes and goes / and al-Farazdaq⁷ plunges his knife in the lungs of Jareer⁸ / the Arab countries look like chess pieces, scattered stones / and flying papers” (Qabbani 1993 : 235).

⁶ The military government in Egypt claimed that the 1967 defeat was the result of an American-Saudi conspiracy. According to this hypothesis, the Saudis participated in the war in retaliation for Nasser’s military intervention in Yemen against Imam Ahmad’s government, a long-term ally to the Saudi royal family. Historically, the Egyptian army, during Nasser’s reign, interfered militarily in the civil war in Yemen during the mid sixties and succeeded in overthrowing the Imam Ahmad’s monarchy replacing it with a revolutionary anti-Saudi regime led by Abdullah-al-Sallal.

⁷ Al-Farazdaq which means in Arabic “the burnt loaf of bread” was the title of the noble Arab poet Homam Bin Ghaleb al-Tamimi (658-728) who lived in Najd in the Arabian Peninsula. For fifty years, he exchanged satire poetry with his rival, the poet Jareer. He also satirized rulers and princes.

Integrating Eliot's concept that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot 1960: 50), Qabbani engages ancient Arab history in order to deal with the catastrophe of war and defeat indicating that the current situation in the Arab world is an extension of a history of inner conflicts and tribal hostilities. Juxtaposing the past to the present and recalling the verbal hostility between al-Farazdaq and Jareer (two famous ancient Arab poets and the voices of conflicting Arab tribes), Qabbani underlines the continuation of the spirit of tribal differences and antagonism which dominated the Arab scene in the past. Tribal hostilities integral to the Arab world during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras is recaptured in contemporary Arab history and politics. The preceding lines which allude to the mutual poems of ridicule and lampooning of al-Farazdaq and Jareer are used as a synecdoche signifying the mutual campaigns of accusation in Arab media in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat.

In the last section of "A Crime of Honor in front of Arab Courts" and in a sarcastic tone, Qabbani uses inter-textuality and juxtapositions as a medium to reveal his absurd vision of a nation devastated by recurrent defeats. In this poem, written in the 1960's, Qabbani skillfully prophesied the massive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 when the Israeli army occupied Beirut. The poet metaphorically takes his readers to a coffee-shop where people are watching the news bulletin in television: "the official announcer declares: "The invaders were drinking tea in Beirut / they took some rest in Beirut's hotels and came back safely" (Qabbani 1993: 236). The poet indicates that the entire Arab world, after the 1967 defeat, became an open territory for potential Zionist military adventures. Further, Qabbani sarcastically reveals the indifferent reactions of Arab leaders and policy-makers to foreign intervention and aggressions. While military operations and activities on the military fronts including Beirut reached a climax, some Arab rulers were engaged in a different type of action. In a private conversation, one of them said: "there is nothing more tasteful- at the time of war- than drinking gin mixed with lemon/and licking the full and round breasts of women" (Qabbani 1993: 237). Nevertheless, the conversation between Arab leaders is interrupted by another newsbreak: "The official announcer declares that the Zionists made a tour across the city (Beirut) markets /and bought newspapers and apples". Because the invaders felt jealous and "were jerking with grudge" as they confronted the night-life in Beirut" they massacred all the belly dancers in the city". The sarcastic reference to the murder of the

⁸ Abu Herzah Jareer (653-732) was a poet from the Kulayb tribe and he lived in Yamama in the Arabian Peninsula. Jareer was a talented poet but he descends from a very poor family and a modest social background. During the Umayyad era, Jareer and al-Farazdaq exchanged satirical poems which attacked and lampooned the history and traditions of their tribes revealing the weaknesses of the other and underlining the glorious contributions of their tribes.

Beirut belly dancers signifies that the central pleasure spot in the region (Beirut) which attracts corrupt Arab politicians and hypocritical leaders was almost devastated and there were no more prostitutes or belly dancers to entertain the Arab elite.

Regardless of the violence committed by the enemy forces in different parts of the Arab world including Lebanon, the Arab leaders and politicians, argues the poet, are still isolated in their ivory towers. Instead of solving the complicated situation in the occupied territory and soothing the pains of the Palestinian refugees who live in tents, some Arab rulers are involved in sex talks : “Swedish girls are the best in sex / in Sweden , sex , like wine, could be obtained at the bar table”. Nevertheless the sex conversation between Arab rulers and policy makers is cut short by “the official announcer [who] declares that the Zionists were married to our wives / and took them away / to live in happiness and give birth to baby boys and baby girls” (Qabbani 1993: 237). Using angry rhetoric and obscene language Qabbani reflects his feelings of anger and frustration as he contemplates the absurd realities of contemporary Arab life. Apparently Qabbani uses artistic obscenity in his poetry to reveal an obscene reality.

Metaphorically portraying the Arab homeland as “a professional prostitute” fornicated by successive foreign invaders after being neglected by its corrupt rulers , Qabbani creates a frustrated persona who decides “to assassinate my homeland”. Pursuing exile “I will get my ticket / I will pay farewell to the spikes of the corn / to the brooks and the trees / I will put in my pockets the pictures of the fields / I will take the signature of the moon / I will take the picture of my beloved / and the smell of the rain” (Qabbani 1993 : 238). Determined to leave his homeland and live in Diaspora after the painful experience he undergoes in the land of tyranny and defeats, Qabbani's persona justifies his departure on the grounds that the Arab world is no longer a political reality or a geographical location. To him the Arab world is transformed into an entity which only exists “in poems, in plays, in touristic cards / in textbook and maps and school songs” (Qabbani 1993: 239). Unlike hypocritical Arab poets who “put false eyelashes to please the Sultans” Qabbani prefers to live in exile because it is impossible for him to play the role of “the Sultan's clown” (Qabbani 1993:240).

Unveiling the Realities of the 1967 War

Describing backward Arab cultural traditions as a monster eating the minds and imagination of an entire nation, Qabbani displays the damaging consequences of tyranny, religious fundamentalism, sexual repression and technocracy which led to the death of the spirit. His indignation against contemporary Arab society turns his poetry into a prolonged elegy about a whole generation of optimists who were denied the fulfillment of their political and intellectual aspirations in an era of nationalism. Expressing the

disillusionment of a generation who expected prosperity and reform in a postcolonial era, Qabbani denounces the emerging regimes that failed to fulfill the aspirations of their people. After the departure of the forces of western colonization, the expected dream of Arab nationalism and unity was frustrated. According to Qabbani, the corrupt post-colonial rulers, the inheritors of the colonial legacy, have sold out the interests of their nations to the imperialist West in return for diabolical mutual interests. Accusing the Arab regimes of treachery, Qabbani castigates the pro-imperialist / bourgeois rulers and the reactionary forces, who support the imperialist agenda in the Middle East. Through a conspiracy between local dictatorial regimes and imperialistic countries, the western democratic world turned deaf ears to the policies of oppression and human rights violations in the Arab world.

In a famous poem entitled “When Will they Declare the Death of the Arabs?”, Qabbani castigates the Arab official system where “tribes are fighting tribes” and where women are oppressed and human rights are denied. He laments a world where poets “are licking the feet of the Caliphs for the sake of fifty Dirhams and a handful of rice”. In the same poem, Qabbani portrays communities dominated by secret police agents, where people are afraid of the regime “more than their fear of God”. Qabbani also attacks a world, governed by sword and fire where media is controlled by the regime’s informers and where journalists are forced to prostitute their talents serving a corrupt system. In “When Will they Declare the Death of the Arabs?”, Qabbani introduces an image of a bankrupt political system which plays no significant role in current international politics : “The Arab world is exhibited in a furniture auction but I did not see the Arabs” (cited in Gohar 2001:150).

In “A Summer Invitation for the Fifth of June”, Qabbani recalls the memories of the military defeat which took place in the fifth of June 1967. Written five years after the 1967 war, on the fifth anniversary of the defeat, the preceding poem introduces the month of June in hyperbolic context whereas "June" is personified as a bare-footed man with miserable features and a face revealing “the sorrows of heaven’ and “the pains and anguish of al-Hussein⁹” (Qabbani 1993:209). Apostrophizing June and evoking the memory of Karbala (the greatest catastrophe in the entire Islamic history), Qabbani

⁹ The allusion here refers to the assassination of Prophet Mohamed's grandson, al-Hussain. The brutal and ritualistic murder of al-Hussain, the prophet's grandson, by the followers of the Umayyad caliph, in Karbala', during the early Islamic era, split the Muslim nations into two parts, the Shiites and the Sunnis. The battle of Karbala' where al-Hussain was assassinated for vicious political reasons, is frequently used as a symbol of Arab-Arab conflicts while al-Hussain is immortalized as a mythic hero who sacrifices his blood for the sake of his principles.

addresses "the month of the defeat" sarcastically quoting Arab politicians: "we will make you forget Palestine / we will remove the trees of sadness from your eyes / we will burn the Koran / and assassinate Jesus Christ / we will give you a one-way Arab passport" (Qabbani 1993:212). After condemning the indifferent attitude of the Arab policy-makers toward the 1967 defeat, Qabbani criticizes Arab cultural mythology responsible for the backwardness of the entire region. The central irony in the poem is that while Arab politicians were involved in ideological rhetoric and propaganda slogans, the agents and executioners of the regimes were writing the names of their victims on the bodies of "the belly dancers" (Qabbani 1993:214).

From the Suez Crisis (1956) to the October War (1973)

Prior to the 1967 war, which erupted as a result of strategic failure on the part of the Arab regimes who declared war against Israel for no reasonable reasons, Qabbani denounced the tripartite attack against Egypt. In a poem titled "A Message from a Soldier on the Suez Front", Qabbani describes the military offensive, known as the Suez War. In 1956, three countries, England, France and Israel launched an assault on the Egyptian forces and civilians on the Suez Canal region. The invasion took place primarily because of differences between the Egyptian government and England over political and financial issues including the future administration of the Suez Canal in the aftermath of British withdrawal from Egypt. The Egyptian president, Nasser, was forced to nationalize the Canal Company to secure revenues required to build the Aswan High Dam—crucial to Egyptian agriculture and food security—after the World Bank turned down an Egyptian application for a loan due to the intervention of imperialistic countries particularly England and France. But, France participated in the assault initially because of Nasser's military support to the Algerian rebels in their revolution against the French occupation.

Further, Israel also took part in the war as a result of hostilities with Nasser's regime over the Palestinian / Israeli issue. The air forces and the navy ships of England and France were engaged in the war in addition to the interference of the Israel ground troops which occupied parts of the Sinai desert. The aggression against Egypt in 1956 ended in a fiasco due to the failure of the invaders to recapture the Suez Canal. As a result of formidable armed resistance, particularly in the city of Port Said and in response to international pressures from the Soviet Union and the United States, the forces of the three attacking countries were compelled to withdraw without achieving the strategic goals of the war. England and France failed to occupy the Suez Canal Zone and remove Nasser from power while Israel was not able to capture any parts of the Sinai Peninsula. Consequently Nasser's regime achieved a diplomatic victory and Nasser was hailed as a hero.

In Qabbani's poem, the invaders are depicted as international pirates and mercenaries with "blue eyes" and "black hearts" (Qabbani 1993:42). Unlike other poems where Qabbani compares a backward and decadent East with a civilized West, "A Message from a Soldier" is highly critical of western imperialistic policies in the Middle East probably because the 1956 war was not based on any moral ground. Since the war was motivated by colonial aspirations and the desire to keep control over an independent country leading to the death of Egyptian civilians in heavily populated cities located near the Suez Canal, Qabbani describes the attacking forces as criminals and thieves: "the highway robbers come back / climbing over our walls and threatening our existence / turning the homeland of my ancestors into inferno" (Qabbani 1993: 41).

The strategic victory, achieved by Nasser's regime in 1956 over three powerful countries increased the confidence of the regime in its military potential providing impetus which accelerated the events leading to the involvement of the Egyptian army in the civil war in Yemen in the early sixties . After the failure of the Egyptian troops in Yemen due to their unfamiliarity with guerrilla war tactics, the regime was searching for any possible victory to compensate for the loss in Yemen. Therefore, the media war campaign against Israel was intensified after the return of the Egyptian army from Yemen. The strong Egyptian economy was devastated beyond repair during the Yemeni war as a result of the war costs. Therefore, the regime in Egypt - as well as other tyrannical Arab governments—was ready to go through new military adventures to keep the public opinion blind to the catastrophic consequences of the military interference in the war in Yemen. The regime's irresponsible war mobilization, particularly the blockade of the Tiran strait in the Aqaba Gulf which put the Israeli security in jeopardy triggered the first sparks of the 1967 war. This was denounced by Qabbani and a generation of Arab intellectuals.

Disappointed by the spirit of defeat—crippling the Arab collective consciousness after the 1967 war—Qabbani attempts to give his generation some hope of a better future. Thus , Qabbani's speaker, in a poem titled "One Way", expresses his desire to carry arms and fight the enemy : "I am in dire need of a rifle / I will sell the rings of my mother and get a rifle" (Qabbani 1993:327). After purchasing a rifle, Qabbani's persona decides to be involved in armed resistance against the invaders: "now I have a rifle / take me with you to Palestine / I have been searching for my homeland and national identity for twenty years / I have been searching for my usurped house surrounded by electric wires" (Qabbani 1993:328).

In the aftermath of the military victory of the Egyptian army over the Israeli forces and the crossing of the Egyptian troops of the Suez Canal barrier into Sinai in October 1973, Qabbani temporarily regained his potency. Thus the raped homeland is

metaphorically transformed into a beautiful woman making love to the poet who restores his sexual power after years of emasculation following the 1967 defeat. At a particular moment, Qabbani expressed his wish that the October war would lead to the death of the spirit of defeat born out in June 1967, but his desire was frustrated because Arab defeats have no end. Though “June is dead”, Qabbani resumes his criticism of the Arab governments responsible for an everlasting series of catastrophes and successive defeats including the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 resulting into the third Exodus of the Palestinian refugees. Qabbani also criticized the Iraqi / Iranian war sponsored by the oil-producing countries which only served the interests of imperialistic powers in the region. Further, Qabbani severely attacked the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 which opened the doors of the Arab world for foreign intervention leading to the fragmentation of the Arab nation and reinforcing hostilities among Arab peoples.

Conclusion

Catharine, Brosman, in "The Function of War Literature" observes that modern war literature aims to “shape a sense of national purpose and inspire a bellicose spirit by acting on the imagination of young people” (Brosman 1992: 86). Contrary to Brosman’s argument, the 1967 war poetry of Nizar Qabbani is not an expression of the same heroic mode. Instead, the poems discussed in the paper, aim to denounce and deglamorize the war experience. Apparently, Qabbani's war poetry is born out of a desire to demystify a tradition that centuries of history have glorified. Attempting to tear away the veil of idealism and heroism attached to war, Qabbani's war poetry seeks to disrupt the rationale of war and the conventional myths that surround it and justify its atrocities. Characterized by outrage and a sense of betrayal, Qabbani's war poetry represents an immediate and personal insight into the war and its dramatic consequences. In an attempt to bear witness and tell a tale, denied by Arab politicians, Qabbani challenges the lies of the Arab regimes which attribute defeat to the intervention of imperialistic powers and its local allies. In his counter-poetics, Qabbani argues that the Arab defeat in 1967 is not only attributed to military or political reasons but also to social, historical and cultural diseases endemic to the Arab community.

Discussing WW I, Paul Fussel points out that the shock of disillusionment born out of the technological modernization of weapons during the First World War made it a war that “will not be understood in traditional terms and shifted the structure of myths by which war has been conventionally understood replacing myths of glorious heroism with myths of banal anguish and even of victimization” (Fussel 1975:154). In WW I, the starkness of the disillusioned shift of myths was intensified by the close proximity of England to the front. In a related context—and regardless of the geographical proximity

between Israel and the Arab countries involved in war—the Arab poets exploring the 1967 war and its damaging consequences had to break through cultural boundaries and ideological distances which removed them outside the war zone. In other words, revolutionary Arab poets, like Nizar Qabbani and others, had to disrupt political and propaganda myths deployed by the dictatorial Arab governments to keep the public opinion blind to the realities of war. The crossing of such cultural distances to shatter conventional political myths about the enemy was achieved poetically by intellectual Arab poets writing about their disillusionment and repudiations of the policies advocated by local regimes.

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