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Tormenting Thoughts on Exile: Hard Time and Alienation in Hātif Al-Janābī's Poetry

The issue of exile, with its pain and suffering, is the leitmotif of poems of the Iraqi poet in exile – Hātif Al-Janābī. All of his works beginning from the earliest poems are characterised by this alienation, penetrating the mind and the soul of the author. The voice of the poet strikes the cold exile like a whip. It is like the July sun or the hot waters of the Tigres on a tiring summer day. This voice, penetrating deeply into our souls, demands from us to feel the pain of exile and the misery of alienation.

In the Al-Janābī's volume, *Farādīs, ayā'il wa- 'asākir* (Paradises, Deer and Soldiers)¹ which includes poems on various subjects written at different stages of the author's life, the mood of alienation is marked. This mood changes power, rising from one line to another, and falling again like a flame which is flickering out, ready to burst forth again soon. With the very title of the first poem of the volume – *Iğtirāb aš-šā'ir wa-šaqa' al-qaṣīda* (The alienation of the poet and the suffering of the poem) – the will to accept the alienation of the world and oneself, immersed in loneliness and alien, is clear:

“The poem fights a mortal fight, changes
into the remains of soul or the relief of liberation
the exile shakes him, so he falls
as a bird paralyzed by the frost.”²

This world seems to be stiff, as if covered with ice; it lacks warmth in its widest meaning. Warmth coming from love, close relations between people, the fruition of hope. This world is fragmented, alien, and the poet who tries to put the broken pieces into a whole remains solitary on his way. Thus, he refers to poetry. Everything has gone and what remains is poetry, the mirror of the past, torn time. The past is somewhere behind us, as if hidden in the rumples of a Bedouin tent, and the future is somewhere in the depth of distance:

¹ Hātif Al-Janābī, *Farādīs, ayā'il wa- 'asākir*, Dār Al-Madā, Damascus 1998.

² Ibid., p 23.

"I said to the word
 stay out in the cold,
 and it sat still [...]
 I said, wind, play your tune,
 Branches, wake up!
 What's behind is dust
 What's ahead is dust."³

In the very last verse the poet is going to emphasise a much deeper sense of this deverbal adjective (*saḥīq*), bringing thoughts about destruction, being converted into the dust. In this way the poet succeeds to make us return from the spoiled future to the broken "changed into ruin" past. Making us realise that the world with its past and future rotates in a closed circle, the poet reaches his goal. He successfully, expresses the dualism of the broken time – of past and future.

It turns out that something is missing in the world, which despite its beauty, changes into a misty body; a body in which a man cannot have the feeling of fulfilment, until he or she remedies its defects. In a poem *Iṣāra* (A Hint) Al-Jaṇābī asks: "Who is resting?" It looks like a poet who wants to give us to understand that not a single person in this world has a true rest; only God could rest, having created the world. People were left with the duty to fight against darkness, all that which is dark and illegitimate. According to the poet's words we should work at this task continuously until it reaches its end. Our present times still remain vague, and the world is governed by reversed values, because the sun of truth has not reached the sky yet:

"The continent made of white silk,
 the clouds of dust: who is resting?
 The body of the world is now filled with the fog."⁴

This world is pitiful and unhappy, so small that it fits in a cupped hand. Its only window is nailed up with the boards. All hope is dying inside; all good, clear thoughts are getting smaller and disappearing. Optimism is a thin thread of forthcoming hope, it becomes the only shield of the hero facing the forthcoming time. We can see here the surrealist tangled world. The poet describes it as something small, as if bringing importance of its existence into question. The size of this world resembles an empty dish filled only with primitive creatures:

"What a world it is, weak as my heart,
 cruel and broad like my hate,
 self-appointed like my unhappiness,
 what a horrendous empty dish it is."⁵

This world lives only with exile, it lacks lights and hope. Its whole horizon is dark. You will see there nothing except "a wounded steed, pulling another one behind, mounted

³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

by jinn, surrounded by the army of the locust". The view of the wounded steed displayed behind the only window is a sign of pain and horrendous alienation, sown in our souls by this armed rider on an armoured 'blessed' horse. This scene could also illustrate the retinue of a cruel rule, a tyrant supported by guards who can be identified with the army of the omnivorous locust. The world spreading behind the window, filled with armies of jinn and the army of ominous insects prevents the author from being able to understand the sense of his existence as a human being. The consequence of this state is a wandering away from the trend of true life, an impossibility to immerse oneself into it, to celebrate happiness and that which is stately and noble. Even when the author rests in the shadow of his poetry, unintentionally he starts to step aside from it and perceives it as an enemy. It might go to show that the individual is alienated in the extreme. The alienation is not only the matter of the hard life of the emigrant on exile, or the image of tormenting pain. It goes beyond, reaching a philosophical dimension. The poet does not unite with his poem, sometimes he even walks away from it, treating the poem as his enemy. He writes about the poem:

And when I ask a poem: You enemy
that do not allow me to rest,
what is that mourning for?
It runs and hits my chest,
our hearts bleed from the clash of passions,
we cry⁶.

The severe alienation which is present here limitlessly reaches the extreme point in its hardship, breakdown of values and the feeling of farthcoming tragedy and death. It did not start and will not finish with the exile, which constitutes the part of the past residing in the depth of soul that hurts. The poem, like its creator moves from one foreign land to another and the homeland remains far away, hidden somewhere behind the great wall of nostalgia, dilemma and fear:

"This poem is a burning stake,
the elegy of future, the song of dove and destruction,
the dispute tearing the soul or
like a leaky jug
already bold returns this poem
from its exiles to the exile."⁷

Time and place are linked with an almost twin bond. Crying over past times becomes crying over a lost, distant place⁸, with no possibility to get there. This is the place of fulfillment of the childhood miracle, where the bud of youth bloomed. Time cannot be

⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷ Ibid., p. 23-24.

⁸ See: 'Abd al-Ilāh aṣ-Ṣā'iḡ, *Az-Zaman 'inda aṣ-ṣu'arā' al-'arab qabla al-islām*, Manšūrāt Wizārat aṭ-Ṭaqāfa wa-al-I'lām, Baghdad 1982, pp. 260-261.

separated from the human ego. It has, however, a personal individual character and always displays a psychological dimension⁹.

In Al-Ja n ā b ī's world the feelings of loneliness and alienation prevail. Continuously, they attack him on the stage of life, so he mourns over the bad times, in which he has to live. Times which corner him like an enemy. The poet tries to hide himself in the wildest nooks, close to the wind, choosing personal freedom. He runs away to mourn as he wishes over those companions and friends who left:

"I could have chosen the wind
after I was chased
by the armies of eternity
after the horns of solitude
blared in my body
after my poet friends
they and the dreamy revolutionaries
were used up!
Oh, the chirping of solitude
when a man in the epitome of his annihilation
stares at her quarrelling breasts!"¹⁰

A broad wild world seems to be shrinking and the poet is gradually moving further from his life. The most probable reason is the lack of companions – poets and revolutionists – idealists. Their disappearance from the scene of life is a clear symbol of the fall of ideology and lofty words. This fall sowed emptiness in the souls of many thinkers from Arabic countries as well as other corners of the world. The poet tries to excuse them, suspecting the reason for such a state of affairs in the leaving departure of revolutionaries and the giving up of the already silent poets. However, the living of revolutionists and poets does not mean the end of life and the poet should present the image of the world without limitation to the confines of a certain ideology. We should show the complete life, including all the threats of present times and their victims. Then, the image will be better. Loneliness and the sad points of the existence will appear as inseparable elements of the beauty of this world, ordered and tangled, admired and depressing, full of contradictions and harmony at the same time.

Poetry becomes the partner of the desert and emptiness simultaneously: both are the source of the creator's fear. Despite clear contradictions between dark poetry and light uncovered space, the poet can unite these two ends into one part, understandable only by poets. Only they are able to notice a complete life among wild sands, filled with secrets, buried somewhere in sterile wastes. In this lies the symbolism of the desert uncovering its surreal nature filled with the abundance of various images and contradictions, impossible

⁹ See: Hānz Mīr h ū f, *Az-Zaman fī al-adab*, trans. As'ad Rizq, Mu'assasat Siğill al-'Arab, Cairo 1972, pp. 9–11.

¹⁰ Hātif Al-Ja n ā b ī, *Farādis...*, op. cit., pp. 34–35.

to notice by means of an inattentive glance. The poet can do nothing but resolutely push away all fears of getting lost in this dark, completely dark world:

“This stream of dark words
these deserts and burning space
are the horror of poets and a buried voice”¹¹

When the present and the future are seen in dark colours, then the past gets darker colours and meaning. The present is the alienation of an individual, a senseless desert reminding one of a surreal image, displaying an illusive surrealism:

“What can I do
in this wide wilderness?
In the past, I used to toss words like stars
letting the sky harvest from them its wishes
In the past silence had
a sound and a meaning.”¹²

Referring to the past, emphasising it and constantly coming back to memoirs is simply an attempt to run away from the alien present into the past, which although not ideal, is better than the present time. The inner struggle of a poet with time is not only a way to express pity, a trivial complaint about misfortunes. It is a complicated dialectal process, where in the past there appeared a whole world full of contradictions, being a peculiar link of the two opposing worlds that have to co-exist with each other. Such a dialectal arrangement takes place in Al-Janābī's poems. In a poem entitled *Mamlakat al-ġubār* (*The Kingdom of the Dust*) the poet joins the words with opposing meaning into pairs, for example “a blossom and a thorn” as well as “a key and a lock”. In this way he shows the necessity of the co-existence of antagonisms:

“In the past, I used to toss words like stars
letting the sky harvest from them its wishes.

[...]

I was a blossom and a thorn,
a punctured blank in the wind,
a needle moaning in a bed.

In the past, the past was a key and a lock.”¹³

Al-Janābī continuously searches for the absent past, finally to find her hidden in one of the corners of his memories, and the finest details. There appears a very detailed, but bright image of the grandma. Getting to the core of this picture is like a desperate attempt to see the past, to touch the ghost from the past, to call the beloved. In this way Al-Janābī wants to find the stimulus for hope, and the impulse for his dreams about the escape from the critical situation, which is the destructive present of wild alienation.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

¹³ Ibid., p. 25.

The figure of a grandma and all the details recall us the scenes of the happy childhood. In a poem entitled *Al-baḥt 'an ḡaddatī* (Searching for my Grandma) we read:

“In this courtyard
feathers and fingers of gold
the cane
her hair, her wooden wedding comb
and the pitcher silent and blue.
A kingdom of dust
I shake it off
and it returns like drizzle
I see her;
She gasps
Staggers forward
Staggers back
and explode with tears.”¹⁴

In the quoted poem the images shown so far are very dynamic and lively. The grandma is still lively and her surroundings seem to be the symbols of her youth. Suddenly, the situation changes; for a moment we can see her crying, next she disappears, as if never existed. It completely harmonises with the mood in the poet's soul, being knocked, and filled with the torment. Now, the author fully realises that the past does not belong to the grandson, but to the old grandma. The past is not a saviour that saves us from the painful and hard reality but just a memory which dispersed like dust:

“I whisper: Grandmother
I scream: Grandmother!
I repeat, I rave
And suddenly
She vanishes in smoke.”¹⁵

Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-A'raḡī in the introduction to the collection *Farādīs, ayā'il wa-'asākir* writes that elements that accompany the image of the old lady remind one of “what is common to all old people and makes an impression on the reader, that the subject is the reader himself and his or her grandma...”¹⁶ One could agree with that, however, is hard to accept his further statement that by talking about the grandma “the poet destroys the past, along with its details, making it in accordance with his modernist outlook.”¹⁷ This opinion destroys the whole image of the past illustrated by the poet. Al-Janābī seems to withdraw the past to the image of the old lady, treating her like a symbol of the whole Arabic society and trying to remind the reader the famous history of the Arabs and the power of their nation. This is confirmed by the words of the above

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 27-28.

¹⁶ Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-A'raḡī, *'An al-ayā'il lā al-'asākir*, in: Hātif Al-Janābī, *Farādīs...*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

question, carefully selected by the poet, having the symbolic meaning, for example: the word “feathers” associates with great Arabic warriors; the “stick” symbolises strong power, and “gold” – wealth. However, the poet does not concentrate on the past, since the past is not a magic medicine against the problem of the present. The image of the grandma spreads out like the former kingdom called “The Kingdom of the Dust” by Al-Ja n ā b ī.

The attempts to leave the world of despair and unbearable alienation of the poet are clearly visible in his works. He does not give up trying to find hope, despite adversities of reality, and the inner conviction that finding it is impossible. However, he keeps searching, knowing is asking for something impossible. He insists on calling possible what is impossible.

“I said to possibilities, Do all that can be
done.

I said, Speech, boycott me.

I said, Word,

Spread your thighs

and the word wept.”¹⁸

Crying shows poet’s helplessness and despair experienced in exile. The past with all its incapacity reaches into the present. The fact of the assimilation of the past with the present and a rhetorical question asked by the poet in the poem below, which resembles the prose, convinces us that our present helplessness is greater than the past one. However, the door remains open a little for the light of hope, because the last word belongs to the future:

“Suppose our dreams could not be realised

Are we able to do it in a space full of grass and lambs, frogs refusing to beget,
the bones of its sons, of which tennis rackets and clubs were made?

The answer lies in the space between the torn breasts calling a beast for help.”¹⁹

If the poet’s question concerning the possibility of liberation from the darkness and realisation of dreams is doubtful and fearful, the way to a miracle is shorter than “the space between the women’s wounded breasts”. The miracle might be born in the pains of suffering and despair. In one of his well-known works, the Palestinian writer Ġassān Kanafānī wrote: “The miracle is nothing but a strange embryo that grows in the womb of despair, and then is born unexpectedly to become a part of the whole, which would be an incomplete creation without it.”²⁰ Similarly hard to forget are the words of the poet Nizār Qabbānī: “Revolution is born in the womb of despair.”²¹ We notice that the poetry leans towards hope, and undoubtedly it will be fighting misery and suffering. That is just what is clearly visible in the works of Al-Ja n ā b ī, especially in the last verses of the first Arabic issue, placed as if intentionally, in order to emphasise his faith in the going by of life and the birth of the new hope:

¹⁸ Hātif Al-Ja n ā b ī, *Farādīs...*, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁰ Ġassān Kanafānī, *Al-A‘mā wa-al-aṭraṣ*, in: *Al-Ātār al-kāmila (ar-riwāyāt)*, Mu’assasat Ġassān Kanafānī at-Taḡāfiyya, Dār Aṭ-Ṭalī’a, Beirut 1980 (second ed.), p. 437.

²¹ Nizār Qabbānī, *Ilā Bayrūt al-unṭā... ma’a ḥubbī*, Manšūrāt Nizār Qabbānī, Beirut 1976, p. 45.

“The poet is bewitched by light and darkness,
by a dagger that delights in misery

[...]

awakes in the evening dreaming of words.

The departed bury his voice.

Incomers trample over his grave.

And he has no option but go on.”²²

Although exile, alienation and bad times with reversed values occupied much space in the soul of Hâtif Al-J an ā b ī and became the main link of his words, which continuously glide like a wind in various directions of the land of poetry, his poems are open to various climates and broad horizons. They show a rich world and loving details of life in exile, in hectic reality. This world fills up with visions of perfectly co-existent similarities and contradictions, wholes and parts of swollen emotions.

²² Hâtif Al-J an ā b ī, *Farādīs...*, op. cit., p. 236.