THE UNHOLY TRINITY: POLITICS, SEX AND MYSTICISM IN ‘AZIZ AL-SAYYID JASIM’S NARRATIVES

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Abstract
This paper attempts to decode the discourse of dissent in the novels of the late Iraqi writer and thinker ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jäsim. His three narratives afford an interesting case of textual combat, wherein politics, sex and mysticism are exploited as tactical maneuvers for critique, subversion and resistance. This paper reads ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jäsim’s focus on sexual matters as well as his deep interest in Sufism as a strategy of involvement in and alienation from a corrupt political life. Al-Munâdíl (The Militant), Al-Maffân (The Bewitched), and Al-Zahru al-Shaqî (The Suffering primrose) offer instances of mystified politics and/or politicized sex. ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jäsim’s narratives present a space of self-interrogation, skepticism and anxiety that make of him a leading mark in Arab writings of conscience.

A man of knowledge who does not put his knowledge into action is drowned in the sea of intellectual lust.
Ibn Arabî, Divine Governance of the Human Knowledge

The sexual act . . . was rebellion . . .
Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.
George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

The late Iraqi novelist and thinker ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jäsim wrote his three novels between the 1970s and the 1980s. He narrates a wasted Iraq, where images of the self, the homeland and the Arab nation are inextricably enmeshed.

1 ‘Aziz al-Sayyid Jäsim (1941-2000, executed while in prison) was a prolific writer, a polymath, with over 40 books in all fields of knowledge. As a very committed intellectual, with absolute faith in the writer’s need for freedom and free play of the mind, he suffered imprisonment, and strong opposition from partisans of political parties. He never condoned public relations, including conferences, as a way to make a writer known.

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Al-Munādīl (The Militant, 1972), Al-Maftūn (The Bewitched, 1987; published in 2003) and Al-Zahrū al-shaqqī (The Suffering Primrose, 1988) are all steeped in a poetics of self-interrogation, skepticism and anxiety endemic to the literature of dissent. This literature combines the politics and poetics of resistance and transgression, as it takes issue with every form of opportunism, smugness, and coercion and develops ways of undermining power structures and their machinery. While not necessarily targeting systems of political exploitation, neo-patriarchies and totalitarianism, the literature, holds authoritarianism suspect and destabilizes its systems. It also probes into other forms of authority and questions their presence in ways that are not completely free from contaminations. On many occasions, the literature of dissent becomes a medium that is also saturated with the politics of its target. ‘Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsim’s narrative makes use of cultural norms while it develops its own oppositional norms, for dissent means also appropriation of the past, revolutionary or conservative, as Sheila Delany argues. Navigating among the signposts of such a past, ‘Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsim may startle his reader with a mixture of discourse, the grandiloquence of revolutionary language, the univocal stamp of Marxist discourse, and the free and unlimited faring of Sufism. Hence his narrative is unique for its latent resistance to the “new type of scriptor,” the one characterized by Roland Barthes as, “halfway between the party member and the writer, deriving from the former an ideal image of committed man, and from the latter the notion that a written work is an act.” While imbuing his narrative with an admixture of registers, the resultant merging is a challenge to norms and platitudes.

To locate ‘Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsim in Iraqi literature is not an easy task, however. More known as a Marxist intellectual with an ongoing project of appropriation of nationalism and Sufism into his deep-grounded leftist thought, his three novels are somewhat eclipsed by his other writings, including literary criticism, history of Islam, nation, class, and gender issues.

4 ‘Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsim, Al-Munādīl (The Militant; Beirut: Dār Al-Tali‘ah, 1982). Although the title mentions this as the first part of a trilogy, the other two parts did not appear. It was said that the Iraqi Communist Party persuaded people in the Iraqi leadership not to allow the publication of the rest.

5 Al-Maftūn (The Bewitched; Beirut: Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2003).

6 Al-Zahrū al-shaqqī (The Suffering Primrose; Cairo: GEBO, 1988).


9 Ibid. p. 319.