

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Arabic and English War Poetry: A Comparative Study of Wilfred Owen and Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid's Selected War Poems

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ABSTRACT

Over the ages, and in all nations, war has been a significant topic of analysis. The successive outbreak of wars throughout history make the subject of war part of human life. There is no good war, as well as there is no winner; every side at war has something to lose, and this is a universal truth everywhere. War is war; it is the same ugly war everywhere and every time. However, what makes war different is the pen of the writers and the language that is used to describe this serious subject. Each writer or poet presents war differently according to his or her views, attitudes, or experiences. This study aims to make a comparison between two poets who wrote about war. The Arab poet Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid (1930-2015) and the English poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918). This comparative study explores the similarities and differences between these two poets and their ways of dealing with the subject of war. The study will discuss two poems; "Dulce et Decorum Est" from Owen and "You Terrified the Death" (روعتم الموت) by Abdul Wahid. The paper focuses on using language for both poets and with reference to some theories about structure, content, form, and technique of literary language and poetics.

KEYWORDS

War, Wilfred Owen, Abdul Razaq Abdul Wahid, language, high diction

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1. Introduction

1.1 General Overview

In all ages, war has been a significant topic of analysis. In the second part of the 20th century, in the aftermath of two World Wars and in the shadow of nuclear, biological, and chemical wars, more was written on this subject than ever before. In Arabic poetry, the war motif takes two directions; the first one is when the poets are motivated by their sense of duty to defend their country and the second one is when the poets write about war only to brag about their achievements. Sometimes, the poets appear to be mercenaries. So, in the past, technically, Arabic war poetry never possessed its independence status, but this kind of poetry remains connected to the general fabric of Arabic poetry. However, in the modern age, poets started to merge war poetry with their political conditions; therefore, war poetry became a kind of political poetry (Ma'tab 1).

According to Ali Al-alaak, war poetry can be divided into two types; the first one is called the war poem, which reflects the poet's political view, away from fighting and the sounds of weapons. The concept of war poem has widened to include not only a military war but also political, economic, and propagandistic war. The second one is the combat poem, in which the poet speaks directly about a particular battle and conveys all its concrete images and details (101).

In the First World War, the English young soldier poets established war poetry as a literary genre. The early poetry, at the beginning of the war, represents war as a noble affair, celebrating the 'happy soldier' who is proud to give his life for his country. Rupert Brooke and many poets like him published patriotic, motivational poetry that encouraged young British people to join the war.

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If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field That is forever England. There shall be In that rich earth, a richer dust concealed; A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam; A body of England's, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. ("The Soldier" 1-8)

Brooke's poem represents the patriotic ideals that characterized pre-war England, but when the war progressed, the poets began to express a darker twist on the country's involvement in the war. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen began tirelessly writing about the terror and brutality of war. The influence of Sassoon, Owen, and poets like them has lasted much longer than that of poets like Brooke and have shaped the memory of World War I history. The patriotic sentiments expressed in poetry were what people wanted to hear at the beginning of the war; people had not tasted the atrocity of war yet. So, war could lure people at the beginning, but as soon as they discover its ugliness, everything changes. This very view on war is explained in Arabic poetry, as the old Arabic poetry never gave a naïve or superficial picture of war, but it deeply and accurately depicted war and its consequences. The great Arab knight and poet; Amr ibn Ma'adi Yakrib described the reality of war, saying:

الْحَرْبُ أَوَّلُ مَا تَكُونُ فُنَيَّةً تسْعَم بِزِينَيَهَا لِكُلِّ جَهُولِ حَتَّى إِذَا اسْتَعَرَتْ وَشَبَّ ضِرَامُهَا عَادَتْ عَجُورًا غَيْرَ ذَاتِ خَلِيلِ شمْطَاء جَرَّتْ رَأْسَهَا وَتَنَكَّرَتْ مَكْرُوهَةً لِلشَّمِّ وَالتَّقْبِيلِ (www.aldiwan.net)

[When the war seems young, It starts to seduce every ignorant. Then, when it flames up and ignites, It turns back old and ugly.]

One may ask, what makes this old and ugly woman (war) young and beautiful? The answer surely will be the language. When the poet makes the unpoetic, poetic, like the subject of war, he uses extraordinary language filled with abstract and spiritualized words and phrases that conceal the brutality of war. Ted Bogacz says, describing the pro-war propaganda at the beginning of WWI.

The generation of Englishmen which had just reached manhood when this war began will one day have to face the heavy charge that it suffered the eye of the soul to be dimmed. It was brave, but it dared not tell the truth; it could not see the truth.... The truth was buried under words. (qtd in Bogacz 643).

Perhaps the best-known of the WWI poets is Wilfred Owen, who was only 25 when he died in battle. He is well remembered for his anti-war poetry, which presents shocking images replete with mud, trenches, and death. Owen captures the terror and tragedy of modern warfare and the total havoc caused by war. While the Arab poet, Abdul-Razzaq Abdul Wahid, tries to romanticize war and stands in sharp contrast with Owen.

Owen wrote his poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" in 1917 as a response to the jingoistic sentiments that were widely circulated in the popular pro-war propaganda and poetry that filled the pages of newspapers and magazines throughout England. He addresses his poem to the poet Jessie Pope, who wrote motivational poems published during WWI that show war as fun, jovial, and full of glory (Bloom 15).

2-Analysis of the poems

In his poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est", Owen describes the everyday brutal struggle of soldiers on the battlefield; he focuses on the story of one soldier's horrific death. The poem graphically and bitterly describes the horrors of war in a particular battle, though it also speaks about the atrocity of war in general. He depicts the soldiers bent under the weight of their packs like beggars, their knees unsteady, coughing like the poor and sick old women, and struggling miserably through a muddy landscape.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, Till on the haunting flares, we turned our backs, And towards our distant rest began to trudge. Men marched asleep. ("Dulce et Decorum Est" 1-5)

Like Owen, Abdul Wahid describes a particular battle that happened in the Gulf War between Iraq and Iran. The Iraqi poet wrote his poem in 1981 about the Al-Khafajia battle. Abdul Wahid gives a very different description of the battlefield from Owen's. While Owen's soldiers are poor, sick, and old women, Addul Wahid's soldiers are brave warriors who evoke their blood to be ready for the sacrifice. He also describes them as young grooms who are going to meet their brides. He likens the battlefield and the combat to the wedding.

يمضي الزمان وتبقى هذه العبر وهؤلاء الذين استنفروا دمهم كأنما هم الى إعراسهم نفروا

[Time passes away, but these lessons stay, Those who evoke their blood, Are like the grooms going to their brides.]

One might ask about the reason behind this extreme contrast between the two texts. While the subject is one, war is war in every place and time. So, how could the poet change, or in other words, hide the ugly face of war? According to 'Thematology,' many critics "widely believed that subject matter (Stoff) was merely the raw material of literature, which acquires aesthetic valence only after it has been shaped or fashioned in a given drama, epic, poem, or novel" (Weisstein 124). To make the same subject different, the poets have to play with words; in other words, they have to play with the forms of literary texts. There are two main elements in any literary text which are form and content. The form of the text means its language and structure. The form could also show us how the content is displayed or presented. Poets or writers sometimes try to use a particular form in order to give a particular content a specific value. The content is what the literary text is about. The content may be taken or inspired by a given reality; also, the content could be concrete or abstraction. The German thinker and writer Goethe distinguished between subject matter (content), meaning, and form, as he explained that only form is a truly aesthetic act. Goethe states:

The poet's conscious activity focuses primarily on the form. The world liberally supplies the subject matter [Stoff], while the meaning [Gehalt] arises spontaneously out of the fullness of his soul. The two meet unconsciously, and ultimately it is impossible to tell which is responsible for the result. But the form, even though it is innate in the mind of a genius, must be realized and pondered. Great circumspection is required in blending and integrating form, content, and meaning with each other. (qtd in Weisstein 125).

The poet, Abdulwahid, focuses mainly on form, which means that he gives a great deal of interest in language. The lofty language could distract the reader's mind from the truth of war. Owen, on the contrary, does not care about form but content. The Arab poet, in fact, could hide the horrible truth of war by using archaic language and lofty phrases. The power of such a language has a great impact on people's minds; people's hearts also may be thrilled and uplifted by such poetry. Claiming poetry as the art which protects human dignity the most, it would be unimaginable that it stood indifferent to this massive carnage ((Kendall, 2006: 2). Hence, poetry played a significant role in the war effort. "Lofty phrases could give spiritual significance to the most dull subject or speech. Journalists and orators had often used exalted rhetoric as a tool to elevate their written account of great or important events" (Bogacz 645).

Unlike Abdul Wahid, Owen doesn't use high diction, but he seeks appropriate and modern language to tell the truth about war. As a trench soldier-poet, Owen was more concerned with conveying the truth than writing in a high diction; he is not like the civilian poet who aims to choose his words carefully to convey pro-war propaganda.

The ironic title of Owen's poem is "It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And Decorous!"; indicates more than revealing the horrors of war to the unknowing public. His goal was to attack the concept that sacrifice is sacred; he hoped to destroy the glamorized decency of the war (Bloom 15). This ironic title is the opposite of Abdul Wahid's title, which is bombastic and ornate; the high-sounding title seems with little meaning and does not tell the truth; it is abstract to conceal the reality of war. So, how can death be terrifying?

أولاء اهلي واخواني ومن ورثوا أن يركبوا نحو آلاف وهم نفر

[Those are my family and my brothers who inherited To fight thousands, though they are few.]

The poet continues to exaggerate and elevate the image of the soldiers; he praises them and feels proud of them, as they are not afraid to fight the enemy soldiers who, many times, surpass them in numbers. Whereas Owen gives a realistic picture of soldiers who lost their boots on the battlefield.

Many had lost their boots, But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

David Daiches states that; "Owen never forgot what normal human activity was like, and always had a clear sense of its relation to the abnormal activity of war" (qtd in Bloom 50). The normality and the graphic description of the horrors of war in Owen's poetry expose the abnormality of Abdul Wahid's poem. The powerful images and the archaic language of the Iraqi poet give a sense of abstraction and spirituality. The images are not concrete, in the sense that one cannot even imagine how the soldiers are competing with the storms of fire or how they are running towards these fires while blasting. The poet tries to make one feel things and break the "habitualization"; he uses the technique that makes objects "unfamiliar". In his essay "Art as Technique", the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky states that: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." (Shklovsky, 4). If Abdul Wahid describes the battlefield with all its objects that are familiar to us, perhaps, he will not be able to say anything significant about it. "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (4).

The poet 'defamiliarizes' the objects; he does not name them by their usual names, and he never mentions, for example, tanks, guns, or cannons, and that makes them strange and unfamiliar. On the contrary, Owen mentions the objects by their familiar names like "Many had lost their boots" (L.5) or "Gas! Gas! Quik, boys!" (L.9). Shklovsky emphasizes the idea that what gives a literary text its unique characteristics is largely associated with the self-sufficient language without having to rely on social life, history, or anything outside the language (Zwaan 10). He believes that poetic language is different from ordinary language because it is defamiliarized. He places a huge emphasis on the poetic and stresses that phonetically and syntactically repeated elements of language set apart literary from non-literary texts, and that is exactly what Abdul Wahid does (7). The language of poetry and practical language have very different roles. Practical language is used for communicative purposes, while the language of poetry has no such purpose. Owen's language is just to communicate the truth, and that is why he is criticized by many critics. Abdul Wahid's excellent poetry and his skills in using metaphors help him to hide the truth about war, unlike Owen, who presents war as it is.

السابقون هبوب النار ماعصفت والراكضون اليها حيث تنفجر الوافقون عماليقا تحيط بهم خيل المنايا ولا ورد ولاصدر

[Those who are competing with fire storms,

Standing like giants, while are surrounded by the horses of death.]

While praising the courage and strength of the Iraqi soldiers, Abdul Wahid is pitying and belittling the soldiers of the enemy; he describes those soldiers as kids who are thrown into the flame of war by their authorities. He, once again, gives an overstated picture and juxtaposes the image of the smallness of the enemy soldiers with the titan (عماليقا) image of Iraqi soldiers. He describes those enemies as infants who are still breastfeeding. He shows them as weak victims of the war, while the Iraqi soldiers are not.

سل الخفاجية الجن الجنون بها كيف انبريتم لها و الموت ينتظر

وكيف أقحم كسرى في مجامرها حتى الصغار ولم يذعر بما ذعروا من لم يزل اثر الاثداء في فمه يبكي الحليب عليها وهو يختمر

[Ask the battle of Al-Khafajia,

How you stand out while death is watching out,

And how Kissra has thrown them in the war fire,

Even the babies, and doesn't care about their fear]

Even though these words no longer possess any meanings with the progress of the war, and increasing its destructive effects, or even with the end of the war, the poem is still affective. The poem has a great deal of musical qualities that harmoniously connect words with meaning. His musical skills create a beautiful rhythmic structure that enables the poet to make better communications with his audience.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time, But someone still was yelling out and stumbling And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.— Dim through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. (L,9-14).

In these lines, Owen describes the horror of a gas attack. The description is graphic and conveys the soldiers' dread and sadness. Unlike Abdul-Wahid, Owen has no glory or heroes in his poem. He does not have giant men who are competing with the storms of fire, but only common people who have to endure the atrocity of war. David Daiches suggests that "Owen earned a place of his own in the history of English poetry by being able to situate his understanding of the war within a larger context of human experience" (qtd in Bloom49).

روعتم الموت حتى لم يدع دمكم معابرا يلج الدخان والشرر أرض الفراتين قد زادت بكم شرفا جند الرسالة ما هانوا ولاانتظروا

[You terrified the death with your blood That clogs the ways of smoke and sparks. Your Mesopotamia land is glorified by you The great soldiers who hold the message.]

In these lines, Abdul Wahid just continues encouraging and uplifting the enthusiastic spirits of the soldiers. He uses his powerful language to describe those soldiers as heroes and martyrs who can terrify even death itself. The rhetoric, strength, and durability of his expressions create the fantasy world of a chivalric battle that indicates the same idea of Horace; "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country", as dying in war is a glorious thing. It seems that the two men mention the honorable death, as described by Horace, yet, in different ways, Abdul-Wahid takes it seriously while Owen, ironically. Samuel Hynes states:

A generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, Heroism, Knighthood, Crusade, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy, peace, and justice. They were slaughtered in senseless battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned, and embittered by their war experiences and saw their real enemies were not the Germans but the old men at home who had lied to them (qtd in Gökmen, 2011: 1).

If, in some smothering dreams, you, too, could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues— My friend, you would not tell with a such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.*

In the last stanza, Owen directly addresses the readers, trying to make them understand the truth about war as it is previously stated in this study that this poem is written as a response to pro-war propaganda, which was popular at the beginning of WWI. The poet describes the notion of 'dying in war as a glorious thing', as the "old Lie", and he criticizes those who are unfamiliar with war, using their rhetorical language to convince the children, eager for a sense of heroism, like Jessie Pope and others poets. He asks them to stop telling the old lie that has been told for thousands of years in order to send young men to their death, to serve the political needs of their countries or governments. The poet just wants people to face the truth and no longer be complicit with that old lie. George Steiner writes:

Now words matter very seriously in war, the exact use of words, because war is an exact operation, and failure to grasp the realities and needs of war may, and does, lead to disaster. We use words about war as lawyers use them to make a case. Poets are our strategists, our official 'writers up,' as in Masefield's 'Gallipoli,' which, as a military work, is of no value whatever. And this blindness of ours, due to our inexact feeling for words, our hatred of criticism, our refusal to face facts, is the cause not only of many of our blunders but of that system known as a whitewash, which refuses to punish offenders" (qtd in Bogacz 665).

Owen's achievement in poetry is very real as he writes about his experiences in the war. His poetry is logical and convincing since it expresses the most fundamental aspects of human thoughts and emotions. His sense of values never being harmed through all the horrors of war surrounding him. His poetry, he said, was not "about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War." (Daiches 61-67).

Although the Iraqi and the English poets are different in many aspects, they also have something in common. Both poets have received the same charge concerning their patriotism. Abdul Wahid is accused of being a court poet, and he wrote all his patriotic poems to serve the ruler. However, in a TV interview, Abdul Wahid is asked about this accusation; he says, "I'm not the poet of a particular person, but I am the poet of Iraq; I wrote for my country, not for a person". Owen, on the other hand, had received the same accusation. As a poet who participates in devastating combats, Owen has to use his poetry as a tool to convey his experience in war; thus, his poetry preaches things like; "it is not sweet and fitting to die for one's country", therefore, Owen's poetry was seen as anti-patriotic. "Soldier poets like Wilfred Owen often had to express the emotional aspects of their war experiences through a language restricted by stifling conventions and unsympathetic ideologies." (Schilling: 2006)

Furthermore, W.B. Yeats says that Owen is "unworthy of the poet's corner of a country newspaper" because "he is all blood, dirt, and sucked sugar stick." That is mere abuse, but Yeats more formal explanation is still a shocker:

... passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great

tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies... If war is necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever . . (qtd in Bloom 9).

Owen's poetry is discussed with humility by critics, so no estimate of Owen is completed without a reference to the genuine nobility of his character. He once said, "Above all, I am not concerned with poetry" (qtd. In Bogacz 644). Therefore, "we cannot help feeling that Owen the man was greater than the poet" (Daiches 51).

3-Conclusion

Wilfred Owen and Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid are two influential poets who wrote about war. They wrote in different periods of time and about different wars. Their treatment of the subject of war was also different; each one shaped his poetry according to his own understanding of war and the conditions related to each war. Undoubtedly, both poets were not naive, they understood well the dangers of wars, but still, they had to present war in their poetry. As a soldier poet, Owen believed that he should tell the truth about war and never deceive young men with patriotic slogans formed through rhetoric language. Owen refused to write in a high diction like those who romanticized war and gave patriotic and heroic pictures about war. Unlike Owen, Abdul Wahid wrote with a high diction; his poetry is full of patriotism and heroism. He uses rhetoric and extraordinary language to encourage the soldiers to keep fighting. He tries to defamiliarize the subject of war by depicting his war images through archaic language and lofty phrases. The abstract and spiritual words are able to beautify the ugly face of war.

Both poets write not only war poems but also combat poems, poems that describe a particular battle. In the chosen poems of this study, Owen describes this particular combat graphically, and he bitterly describes what happens to the soldiers when they are attacked by gas-shells. A horrible and realistic picture is drawn that puts the reader in the scene as if the reader can see and hear everything on the battlefield. On the contrary, Abdul Wahid's poem does not allow the reader even to imagine what the battlefield looks like. The reader, in fact, will be confused in interpreting these abstractions given by the poet. Abdul Wahid romanticizes war by making the Iraqi soldiers extraordinary heroes who exceed their enemies physically and spiritually. While no heroes or extraordinary traits can be seen in Owen's soldiers. In fact, Owen pities his fellow soldiers in his poem, while Abdul Wahid pities the soldiers of the enemy.

These extreme diversities between these two poets in dealing with one subject, maybe attributed to many reasons, such as the nationality of the poets; Arabs usually tend to write war poetry which is full of pride, praise, passion, and enthusiasm, English people, as Germain de Stael states; "English fiction is not based upon improbable incidents or extraordinary events, like Arabian or Persian tales" (de Stael 203). Another reason is that; Owen is a soldier poet, and this makes a great difference from one who is a civilian poet like Abdul Wahid. The third reason is that Owen had a negative opinion of England's involvement in the war. He did not believe in the righteousness of such a war. Abdul Wahid, many times in TV interviews, assures that he believes in the righteousness of the Iraqi war and he believes that he should defend his country with his poetry.

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