

## USE OF THE FIGURE OF AL- USAYN IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC POETRY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Contemporary Arab poets have used the figure of al- usayn as a symbol of injustice, sacrifice, solitude and alienation. The usages of this figure in today's Arabic poetry are quite similar to those of the figure of Christ, for example the tragic end which both suffered, al- usayn's martyrdom and Christ's crucifixion, or the struggle between truth and falsehood. The present paper examines the use of al- usayn the works of a selection of representative Arab poets and shows this usage at three levels: the human level in general, the national level and the level of the individual.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Al- usayn, Contemporary Arabic Poetry, Karbal , Martyrdom, Palestinian Poetry*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Al- usayn b. Al is a prominent historical symbol in modern Arabic poetry. His place in history has made his figure taken on meanings which contemporary Arab poets have used in order to express their own experiences, the complex reality in which they live, and ideas that are common to the past and the present. Al- usayn's figure had both a political and an ethical dimension, both aimed against the rampant corruption in Umayyad society. As a result, poets vied with each other in describing him as a champion of a noble, humane cause, who refused to accept the situation and stood alone on the battleground, after his adherents had failed to champion him and defend his principles (A mad, 2004).

We need to briefly review the historical background of the events at Karbal . On the tenth day of the month of Mu arram in the year 61 AH (10 October 680 CE) a battle took place at Karbal between al- usayn b. Al b. Ab lib, supported by a group of adherents of the Prophet's family numbering no more than ninety, and an Umayyad force commanded by Umar b. Sa d (d. 686).

History books tell us that in the year 41/661 the post of caliph came into the hands of Mu wiya b. Ab Sufy n, after al- asan b. Ab lib waived his right to the position. Al- asan, his brother al- usayn and their followers pledged allegiance to Mu wiya, in order to prevent bloodshed and bring unity. Al- asan's step was highly praised and the year in which he strove for peace was called *m al-jam a* "the year of community".

The Muslim community was surprised when Mu wiya decided to have his son Yaz d succeed him as caliph. He began to demand an oath of allegiance to his son during his own lifetime in various regions of the Islamic state, sometimes peacefully and sometimes by force. No one opposed him, except the people of al- ij z. The party opposed to the new caliph was headed by al- usayn b. Al, Abdull h b. Umar and Abdull h b. al-Zubayr.

Mu'awiya died in 60/679 and was succeeded by his son Yazid. He sent his governor in Medina to receive an oath of allegiance from al-Usayn, who refused, just as he had refused to recognize him as regent during the reign of his father Mu'awiya. He left Medina clandestinely for Mecca, where he sought shelter and awaited developments.

The Shays of al-Kufa considered the moment opportune for al-Usayn to become caliph. Their leaders wrote a number of letters to him, in which they urged him to come to them and receive their oath of allegiance.

Eventually al-Usayn gave in to the Kufans' repeated entreaties and promises of support and sent his cousin Muslim b. Uqayl b. Abi-lib (d. 680) to Kufa, to assess the sincerity of the people's promises. The latter was impressed by the huge number of people who declared their allegiance to al-Usayn, and wrote to him that all was well and that he should come.

When Yazid b. Mu'awiya heard what had happened in al-Kufa, he dismissed the city's governor al-Nu'man b. Bashir al-Ansari because of his lack of action against what Muslim was doing and replaced him with Ubayd Allah b. Zayd (d. 686), who arrived immediately and instituted a reign of terror in al-Kufa. He bought the loyalty of some with money. The thousands of people around Muslim dispersed, leaving him to his fate. Ubayd Allah caught him and had him thrown from the top of the government palace. He died, and was then crucified. He became the first casualty whose body was crucified by the Banu Hashim.

Al-Usayn left Mecca for al-Kufa.<sup>1</sup> When news reached him of Muslim's death and how the people had abandoned him, he decided to return to Mecca. However, Muslim's brothers insisted on continuing the journey, in order to extract revenge. Al-Usayn was forced to do their bidding. He continued his journey until he reached Karbal, a town not very far from al-Kufa. There he was confronted by a large army, led by Umar b. Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas, while most of his supporters had abandoned him, leaving him with a mere ninety men, members of *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's family) and a few others who remained with him. The battle between the two unequal sides, in which al-Usayn was killed,<sup>2</sup> took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muarram in the year 61/680.

This battle thus gave rise to a frightful tragedy that broke the hearts of Muslims and engendered great sympathy towards the Prophet's family. In its wake, numerous rebellions broke out against the Umayyads, until they fell and the Abbasid state arose from its ruins. Karbal itself became a holy site, of importance in Islamic thought in general, especially among the Shias. It also figured prominently in elegies composed in al-Usayn's memory, from the time of his death to this day (even among Christian poets).<sup>3</sup>

The battle itself, the various details associated with it and its outcome, have come to possess great spiritual value among Shias, who considered the Battle of Karbal to have been a political uprising against evil, while al-Usayn's burial place in Karbal has become a Shia pilgrimage destination, visits to which by the believers are accompanied by special invocations.

<sup>1</sup>On the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Dhul-Hijja, in the year 60 AH.

<sup>2</sup>For more on al-Usayn's death, see al-Aqqad, *al-Usayn ab al-shuhad*, ed. Ibrahim al-Bir, Dar al-taqw, Cairo, 2016; Murta Faraj, *Khalfiyyat wa qi at Karbal wa-shah dat al-im m al-Usayn b. Al*, Mu ssasat al-intishar al-arab, 2011, pp. 488-490 surveys the direct and indirect causes of al-Usayn's martyrdom; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil f l-tarikh*, ed. Umar Abd al-Salim Tudmur, Dar al-kitab al-arab, Beirut, 2004, vol. III, pp. 157-194.

<sup>3</sup>Sa'd Zamzam, *al-Usayn b. Al f l-shi r al-mas*, Dar al-jawad n, 2012.

The Battle of Karbalā (also called the Battle of al- aff) has thus become one of the most controversial events in Islamic history. The battle's course and its outcome had political, psychological and ideological consequences that are still in dispute to this day. It remains the most significant among the series of clashes that have defined the nature of the relations between Sunna and Shā throughout history. The battle and the events associated with it have taken on a symbolic value for Shās, for whom they remain very important cultural cornerstones.

### **THE USE OF THE FIGURE OF AL- USAYN IN MODERN ARABIC POETRY**

Al- usayn's martyrdom in Karbalā created shockwaves throughout the Arab world. As a result, Arab poets have mentioned it throughout history, from the time of the original event to the present day. The concept of *shah dā* (martyrdom) is of great significance in Islam, and modern works of poetry frequently speak of it and evoke the image of the *shah d* (martyr) as a living symbol of prowess, the soil, water, trees, freedom and memory, and what connects these with the Islamic faith and the Islamic nation in its historical evolution towards its goals of freedom, justice and honor (al-Karak , 1998, p. 39).

As Mu ammad Jaw d Mughniya says of the symbol of al- usayn, "If we go back to the Arab heritage, to the party of *ahl al-bayt*, we find that it reflects a loud protest against oppression and oppressors in every time and place, a violent rebellion from the east of the earth to the west. Shā writers use al- usayn's name to refer to this rebellion, to this protest, because al- usayn is the highest and sincerest example of it" (Shabbar, 1969, p. 8). Shabbar adds that "history from the first human being to this day has not known a man spoken of in both poetry and prose as much as al- usayn b. Al b. Ab lib. Every period mourned him, every generation, in every language, at all times" (ibid., p. 21). We thus see that poets in the modern age used historical facts about al- usayn, turning him into a symbol that extends beyond his own age and connects the present with the past.

According to al-Karak , the figure of al- usayn as martyr has come to occupy a unique position, both historically and artistically (al-Karak , 1989, p. 183). This can be clearly seen in Shā literature, in which al- usayn symbolizes sacrifice "and reflects a loud protest against oppression and oppressors in every time and place, a violent rebellion from the east of the earth to the west. Shā writers use al- usayn's name to refer to this rebellion, to this protest, because al- usayn is the highest and sincerest example of it" (Shabbar, 1969, p. 8). It is for this reason that to this day verses are composed about him throughout the Arab world. For, as already noted, "historical events and figures are not merely transient universal phenomena that end when their presence in the world ends, but have a continuation, together with their surviving overall meaning, which can be renewed in the course of history in other forms" (Z yid, 1997, p. 120).

### **AL- USAYN AS MASK**

Masks are among the newer poetic devices adopted by modern Arabic poetry: "The mask is a technique used by important poets in the world, Bates, Ezra Pound, Eliot. A poet, in using a mask, strives to express his view of the world on one hand, and to prevent his poem from falling under the domination of his direct feelings and spontaneous emotions on the other. The mask thus becomes a courageous attempt by the poet to distance himself from his own self and to give his verses an impersonal character, or to express a poetic theme objectively, with no personal overtones. This can be achieved because the mask provides the reader with an esthetic distance by means of which he can view a poetic work without affective or personal pressure applied by the poet on the reader. The mask in a literary or poetic work is the first narrative personality. As the use of masks evolved in modern Arabic poetry, poets became capable of creating their own purely personal masks,

or of borrowing a personality from the past, through whom they could express themselves, using it as a mask (al- All q, 2002, p. 105).

According to Abd al-Ram n Bas s , the possibility which masks provide for the construction of poems makes them the primary entrance for realizing a poem's objectivity. Through them, poems can be transformed into symbols, with an existence that is independent of the poet, because the voice which speaks in the poem, our only entrance into it, is in turn nominated by the poet to serve as a mask, or it can be the mask's voice, in a concealed manner, which reflects the poet's voice, to which it gives an objective, nearly neutral tone, so that it remains at a distance from the direct outburst of the self, whether said mask is an actual human figure, or one that is historical, mythical or literary. Chronological distance gives such a figure a more objective character, one that is deeper the more the greater the role which the character given to the mask played in human history, civilization and culture (Bas s , 1999, p. 220). As J bir U f r notes, a mask constitutes two distinct voices of two distinct individuals working in tandem. In the poem each of these voices supports the other, so that the mask in fact is the sum of the interaction between the two voices ( U f r, 1983, p. 124).

Whoever follows modern Arabic poetry will identify three types of usage of the figure of al- usayn: As a member of the human race, as a member of a nation, and as an individual.

### **SYMBOLIZING MANKIND**

Poets use the image of al- usayn to convey meanings having to do with the human situation in general, in a similar way to the use of the image of Christ, who represents human suffering. In this type of usage, al- usayn serves as a symbol and his death represents a tragic event in human history. The details of the events surrounding his death symbolize the struggle between truth and falsehood, a struggle which poets optimistically predict will end with the victory of truth.

In this type of usage there are points of similarity between al- usayn and Christ, although the latter appears much more frequently in contemporary Arabic poetry. In fact, Christ is one of the most often-used figures. There are a number of similarities between the two: sacrifice; a tragic death; al- usayn died of thirst and Christ, too, died of thirst on the cross; and both were abandoned by their supporters. These similarities led some poets to join the two figures in their verses. Thus, Shawq Baz (b. 1951) in his "Qa dat al- ulb n al-mahj ra" ("Poem of the Abandoned Crosses"), makes us of both figures in the general human type of usage:

Your arms fell behind a shout that said that  
 Christ has come to an end  
 We will begin with no crucifixion  
 The cross was an ancient slogan  
 That he bore until Christ came to an end  
 And we returned to search for his face in life  
 [...]  
 A face large as the Jaz ra, extending between al- usayn  
 And al- usayn's head, whose air is the color of Christ  
 A time of birth will come  
 A separation between the caliphate and the whip  
 Something that will return some god to the millions

That will cast fire in the chest  
 And al- usayn's head and al- usayn's body will both return  
 To Damascus. You will come as a virgin at dawn  
 Resurrection will sneak into you  
 And all the whores will become virgins  
 (Baz , 2005, pp. 76–77).

The poet clearly uses the figures of Christ and al- usayn to express the same meanings, of resurrection and rebirth. Resurrection in the poem applies to everyone, so that al- usayn's personal experience becomes a collective one. The poet's hope that al- usayn's head and body will return whole expresses the return of life, "a symbol which is the opposite of everything that is prevailing and defeated" (al-Karak , 1989, p. 185). The poet also presents an equivalent image of the state of resurrection, based on the principle of transformation: Through al- usayn's return all the whores become virgins, a symbolic call for both purification of oneself and purification of reality, or separating authority from the whip, as the poet says. Arabs' desire to live in a democratic climate is a collective wish that has yet to be realized, a situation highlighted by the poet's use of al- usayn to speak of the beginning of a new life: "We will begin with no crucifixion". Here the figures of al- usayn and Christ are combined, emphasizing the similarities between what each symbolizes. Baz is apparently the only poet to have done this.

Adonis (b. 1930) in his dealing with al- usayn's experience, may be conceived as the poet who made the profoundest use the Arab heritage. In his poem "Mir t al-ra s" ("Mirror of the Head") he presents a dialogue between a man and his wife in the year 680 CE, the year of al- usayn's death, as he tells her of the money he will receive for al- usayn's head:

Mirror of the Head  
 -I followed it, observed it  
 Penetrated into its eyelids  
 I awakened all my greed, I charged and cut into it  
 And came  
 My wife Naw r  
 Opened the house door:  
 I missed you. You were gone for so long. How?  
 - I have good tidings  
 I brought eternity, the money of eternity  
 His head  
 Al- usayn?  
 Woe unto you on the Day of Resurrection  
 Woe unto you, never will a path, a dream or sleep join me  
 To you, after today...  
 So Naw r left.  
 (Adonis, 1988, p. 84).

In this poem, Adonis presents, as noted by al-Karak , “the hero as symbol with the meanings of his psychological worth. Al- usayn here is ‘hero of a tragedy’ and not merely the actual ‘historical hero’. The historical facts have been transformed into a myth, which he combined with his own point of view to create a new state for this hero, an intuitive, emotional state, so that al- usayn’s death became a signal of his continued presence” (al-Karak , 1989, p. 194).

Nature, too, is transformed into essences which walk in al- usayn’s funeral procession, “rock, flower, river”, the river symbolizing renewal and continued life:

When the spears settled in al- usayn’s last breath  
 And decorated themselves with al- usayn’s body  
 And the horses trampled every part  
 Of al- usayn’s body  
 And al- usayn’s clothes were plundered and divided  
 I saw every rock lean towards al- usayn  
 I saw every flower by al- usayn’s shoulder  
 I saw every river  
 March at al- usayn’s funeral.  
 (Adonis, 1988, p. 85).

In his poem “ Awdat fibr yir” (“Return of February”), poet Ahmad Abd al-Mu’ijz (b. 1935) describes al- usayn’s weeping, thirst and loneliness on the battlefield in detail. To this he adds the role of the Umayyads, the impotence and injustice which dominated Damascus, the Umayyad capital. He thus does not focus only on what al- usayn experienced, as did other poems, but also describes the killer directly. However, Mu’ijz’s depictions maintain a distance between the poetic self and the historical event that he describes, through the use of comparison (“as if I”) and the demonstrative adjective (“this usayn”), both devices that prevent the poet’s self from amalgamating with the events. The fundamental theme in the poem is solitude, which dictates the basic position he takes with respect to iniquity:

As if I heard a sound like weeping  
 This usayn alone in Karbal  
 Still fights alone  
 His face covered with dust, yearning for a cup of water  
 The Umayyads are on the nearby river  
 As if I see Damascus after a night of absence  
 Its houses dark, its high prison a space of night, not the night  
 And barrenness in the cup of juice.  
 (Mu’ijz , 1983, p. 360).

### **SYMBOLIZING ARABS**

In this usage type al- usayn’s tragic martyrdom is transformed into an objective correlative of the sufferings of the Arab peoples in general, and the Palestinian people in particular. Reading of the absent text becomes also a reading of present reality.

Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul (1940–1983) in his poem “Min awr q Ab Nuw s, al-waraqa al-s bi a” (“From the Pages of Ab Nuw s, the Seventh Page”) deals in a clearly ironic manner with what happened to al- usayn, focusing on one of the themes associated with his death, the fact that he suffered from thirst when he died. The poet finds the idea unbearable, and gives a narrative description of the scene inside his poem. He goes to Karbal , where he meets a sheikh who tells him of al- usayn’s thirst and death. The poet asks numerous questions which arouse horror at what happened and raise the issue of oppression at the symbolic level. However, at the level of the event itself, the poetic persona in the text flees from reality by drinking wine, so as to forget the blood. This flight enables him to delay having to face reality at the symbolic level. It is at this level that the poem refers to the sad situation of the Arabs in every domain, so that detachment from reality is the only solution. The poet is thus pessimistic, unlike Shawq Baz , who optimistically expected a change in the situation:

I was in Karbal  
 The sheikh told me that al- usayn  
 Died for the sake of a mouthful of water!  
 ... ..  
 I asked myself  
 How did the swords seize the sons of the most venerable ones  
 The one whom the heavens informed replied:  
 It is the gold that glitters in every eye  
 ... ..  
 If al- usayn’s words  
 And al- usayn’s swords  
 And al- usayn’s majesty  
 Fell without rescuing truth from the princes’ gold,  
 Can they rescue truth from the prattle of poets?  
 When the Euphrates is a tongue of blood that cannot find the banks?  
 \*\*\*  
 He died for the sake of a mouthful of water!  
 Give me to drink, o youth ... morning and evening  
 Give me to drink, o youth ... morning and evening  
 Give me drink, youth  
 Exalt me with wine  
 So I will forget the blood!  
 (Dunqul, no date, pp. 384-385).

The poet Q sim add d (b. 1948) in his poem “Khur j ra s al- usayn min al-mudun al-kh ina” (“The Exit of al- usayn’s Head from the Traitorous Cities”) uses the figure of al- usayn as a mask. He is the only poet discussed in this study who moved from symbol to mask, through the telling of the story of al- usayn’s death in the first person. Thus the poet and the figure in the poem are one indistinguishable voice, especially since the poem does not narrate the events as they occurred in fact, but uses them as inspiration and adds the element of will through phrases such as “I dared”, “I

canceled all appointed times of my killing”, “I entered the book of the prophets forcibly”, as if he was master of his fate, just like Christ, who went to the cross of his own will. The poet’s self, searching for its freedom, “blocked the caliph’s sword in its scabbard”. In other words, the victim is stronger than its killer. This is the deep meaning to which the poet alludes, in contrast to the textual context and the hostile reality, as expressed in “the city’s water was poison and tar”. The poet ends this depiction, of the struggle between the free ego and the unjust other, between the oppressed citizen and the oppressing ruler, with his death, which became a “joke”: “When the moment of death arrived, I was lifeless on the pavement, the target of foolish jokes and empty laughter” on one hand, and a victim who surpassed his killer on the other, because as a symbol he will never die, while the rulers will surely be defeated and become rusty like a sword, no matter how oppressive they are. This is the inverted image drawn by the poet: “But they rushed at me with the caliph’s sword. Rust ate the sword in its scabbard. It was not my body. It was a killed sword”. The instrument of killing was itself killed and defeated at the end of the day:

I dared  
 I canceled all appointed times of my killing  
 I took refuge in the breast of childhood  
 I entered the book of the prophets forcibly”,  
 [...]
   
 I dared  
 But they removed the sword from its scabbard, horses besieged me  
 (And hen the moment of death arrived, I was lifeless on the pavement,  
 The target of foolish jokes and empty laughter)  
 I dared, and chose the hour of my death  
 But they rushed at me with the caliph’s sword  
 (Rust  
 Ate the sword in its scabbard)  
 It was not my body. It was a killed sword.  
 ( add d, 1972, pp. 135–137).

In another scene of this poem, the poet speaks in the first person plural, “we”, and universalizes the idea of the victim in an ironic manner, kicking history respectfully. The poet describes the situation of the Arabs from an external perspective, in contrast to the previous scene, in which he adopted the figure of al- usayn as a mask and used the first person singular to express the Arabs’ situation. He returns to the theme of wine drinking, as Amal Dunqul did, in order to escape reality on one hand, and on the other hand, to describe the sufferings of the Arabs in two domains, the political, represented by oppression and the absence of freedom, and the economic, represented by famine. The poet here alludes to the poem “Unsh dat al-ma ar” (“Rain Hymn”) by Badr Sh kir al-Sayy b (1926–1964), from which he took the verse “Not a year passed in which there was no famine in Iraq”, which he generalized and applied to the Gulf region: “Not a year passed in which there was no famine in the Gulf”. The fact that add d borrowed from the poetry of Badr Sh kir al-Sayy b, a pioneer of modern Arabic poetry, known also as “the poet of pain”, indicates the poem in its comprehensive sense is also a call for liberation from oppression and enslavement, just as al-Sayy b succeeded in rebelling against the *qa da* couplet form, which dominated Arabic poetry until the mid-twentieth century. It also testifies to add d’s own rebellion, who by composing prose poetry took another, rebellious step against free verse poetry, thus adding yet another



path to challenging oppression. The scene ends on an optimistic note, as the entry of al- usayn's head into every city marks birth and a new life: "Let al- usayn's head enter ... The country becomes a bride with a thousand children and a thousand lovers". In other words, the head of al- usayn, who was left alone on the battlefield and who died alone, will be transformed into a seed that will enter the land and make it fertile, disseminating and reproducing his message of justice, as expressed in the phrase "a thousand children, a thousand lovers". According to Kh lid al-Karak , "Q sim add d's evocation of al- usayn makes him a banner for those who in the poet's times march towards a more sublime destination" (al-Karak , 1989, p. 187):

We march. We roll along our history and kick it in veneration  
We do not take the soil with the sword. We were a sandgrouse  
Our inkwells were blood and he who was above us  
Urinated on us. We said: Give us to drink  
And we drink. We become drunk so that we pass the nights  
And so we believe that silence is peace  
We march. We know how to part the dust and to sow creatures in it  
How to cut heads and sow them across all generations  
For we are al- usayn, the traveler from Karbal  
And al- usayn's head, torn between Damascus and the Gulf  
We carry it, happy with the Chapter of the Mummy  
[...]  
(Not a year passed in which there was no famine in the Gulf)  
Famine receives al- usayn's head and opens the gate of fire  
Let al- usayn's head enter ...  
Let the country become a bride with a thousand children and a thousand lovers.  
(add d, 1972, p. 169).

In the Palestinian context, poet Mu n Bas s (1928–1984) in his "al-Qamar dh l-wuj h al-sab a" ("The Moon with Seven Faces") associates the figure of al- usayn the victim with the hypocrites who went with al- usayn but then abandoned him. In this poem he alludes to those who support the Palestinian people but then abandon it to its fate. This theme of abandonment occurs frequently in Palestinian poetry, and is expressed by means of various masks, such as Joseph and Christ:

It dies once in autumn  
And twice in spring  
Winter awakens in its branches  
And eats the hands  
I saw him in Karbal  
Under al- usayn's banner  
The neighing of his sword with al- usayn  
And above his sword an engraved poem  
Praising al- usayn's killer.

(Bas s , 1988, p. 195)

A similar sentiment is expressed in the poem “Wa-ttaka a al ram ihi” (“And He Leaned on His Spear”) by Mamd Adw n (1941–2004): “Their hearts throb for you, but their swords come drawn against you”. In these lines he expresses hypocrisy, betrayal, alienation and solitude, but in the parallel text he makes al- usayn the objective correlative of Che Guevara, a non-Arab, thus turning al- usayn into a symbol of every oppressed person, whatever his origin:

When the call reached you:  
 If you desire a sip of water  
 Place this sword on the sands  
 None of the companions has remained.  
 You stood, surrounded by solitude  
 In the middle of the summer furnace  
 When the men dropped away from you like autumn leaves  
 [...]
 Their hearts throb for you  
 But their swords come drawn against you.  
 ( Adw n, 1986, pp. 31–32).

A mad Da b r (1946–2017) evoked details of al- usayn’s death in his poem “al- Awda il Karbal ” (“Return to Karbal ”), in which he made him represent the sufferings of the Palestinian people. Like Bas s , he used this figure to express the theme of abandonment and betrayal, implicitly criticizing the Arab world, that “weredinars of date palms”. However, he explicitly associates Karbal with the refugee camps, and al- usayn’s demise, thirst and alienation with the similar experiences of the Palestinian people. However, his poem is suffused with a kind of optimism, connected to the Palestinian theme of return. The poet uses the figure of al- usayn as a mask, by means of which the reader is urged to compare the two experiences. The first person singular expresses optimism, despite the difficulties encountered in the past: “I am coming, preceded by my passion, I am coming, preceded by my hands”:

I am coming, preceded by my passion  
 I am coming, preceded by my hands. I am coming with my thirst, with my provisions, fruit of the date palm  
 Let the hidden water come out to me, let it be the guide  
 O Karbal , touch my face with your water, lay bare the killed man’s thirst  
 And see on the forehead’s wound the integrity that dictates my steps  
 See my steps  
 It has been said: The soil is shut  
 It has been said [...]  
 I saw them, the refugee camp’s spring does not overflow. They were  
 A merchant  
 A gambler  
 And a masked man  
 They were dinars of date palms  
 I entered my death alone, converted into

A homeland, a massacre, exile  
I have come, preceded by my hands  
O Karbal , it flees from the fire  
I remember how the faces turned  
They knew the rival and seized him  
(It is said: He trotted on my flesh and drank my blood).  
Da b r, 1983, pp. 257–259).

Sam al-Q sim (1939–2014), on the other hand, draws a direct line between Karbal and Palestine in his poem “Shuhad al- ubb” (“Martyrs of Love”). For him, what happened in Iraq is similar to what happened in Palestine:

Why Karbal ! And in Baghdad the blood of my people flows from time to time  
[...]  
And the day on which the face of death jostles my memory, do I cry over my Iraq or over my Palestine?  
(Al-Q sim, 1991, p. 394).

Niz r Qabb n (1923–1998) focuses on the concept of victimhood associated with al- usayn, whose situation he compares to that of the Arab nations. This he expressed as part of his definition of his collective identity (We are citizens), and in the elements that define the levies of these nations, in his opinion, which are represented by the two basic symbols “coffee and wheat”, which he impresses with the seal of Karbal . In other words, the poet sees no difference between the experience of the historical figure of al- usayn and the sufferings of the Arabs. He expresses this ironically in the poem “Li-M dh yasqu u Mut ab b. Ta b n f mti n uq q al-ins n” (“Why Does Mut ab b. Ta b n Fail the Test of Human Rights”):

We are citizens in the cities of weeping  
Our coffee made of the blood of Karbal  
Our wheat kneaded from the blood of Karbal  
Our food, our drink  
Our customs, our flags  
Our fasts, our prayers  
Our flowers, our graves  
Our skins are stamped with the seal of Karbal .  
(Qabb n , 1993, p. 103).

He then correlates the political situation in southern Lebanon with the figure of al- usayn in the poem “al-Simf niyya al-kh misa” (“The Fifth Symphony”), in which he expresses his hope for liberation, through the use of the vocative. He addresses southern Lebanon as both a geographical and a demographic unit, and compares it to the symbol of al- usayn:

I called you “the South”  
O wearer of al- usayn’s cloak  
And the sun of Karbal  
O rose tree that practices sacrifice  
O rebellion of the soil, encountered the rebellion of the heavens

O body that rises from its soil  
 Wheat ... and prophets.  
 (Qabb n , 1993, p. 60).

### **SYMBOLIZING THE INDIVIDUAL**

This type of usage makes of al- usayn's martyrdom, solitude and alienation a mirror that reflects the poet himself as he stands for truth and against oppression. This different usage is also found in works by Niz r Qabb n , Sam al-Q sim and A mad Ma ar.

Qabb n compares his own experiences with those of al- usayn in "If da f ma kamat al-shi r" ("Deposition in the Court of Poetry"). He compares al- usayn's injuries with his own, a hyperbole whose aim is to underline how today's Arab poets suffer when they attempt to rebel against social taboos, especially in matters concerning sex and women's liberation. Qabb n describes his own travails after he made women a fundamental theme in his poetic works:

Al- usayn's injuries ... are some of my own  
 In my breast lies some of the grief of Karbal  
 A deposition in the court of poetry.  
 (Qabb n , 1993, p. 394).

Sam al-Q sim, too, made a personal symbol of al- usayn, whom he evokes in order to define himself as a sincere poet, not a hypocrite, in an allusion to the well-known *ad th* about the Prophet: "I am of al- usayn".<sup>4</sup>

From the poem "K l j 4 (d):  
 The Prophet does not say  
 The utterance: The commanders  
 Are from Quraysh.  
 He does not say  
 He respects sincere poets  
 Without sin or frivolity  
 He does not accept something in between  
 He exchanges love for love with me, in truth and sincerity  
 And knows me well  
 I am not of Quraysh  
 But of usayn.  
 (Al-Q sim, 2014, p. 115).

In his "al-Ikhtiy r" ("The Choice"), poet A mad Ma ar (b. 1954) makes of the story of al- usayn a criterion by which to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between Yaz dd and al- usayn, between sincerity and hypocrisy. Between these pairs of choices, the poet prefers to pray hungry behind al- usayn rather than enjoy wealth and luxury under Yaz d. In this context, al- usayn serves as a criterion for determining the two sides of the equation for whoever wants freedom as an individual, far removed from any partisan framework. By this he means the free intellectual, who

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<sup>4</sup>" usayn is of me and I am of him. God loves whoever loves usayn. Al- asan and al- usayn are of the tribes": <https://www.dorar.net/hadith/sharh/78727>

chooses the right and just side of history, represented by the figure of al- usayn, despite the attendant suffering, difficulty and hunger it involves:

I belong to no party or group  
 I am not a slogan for a movement  
 Or merchandise for a shop  
 [...]  
 Rather, I, in the time of mustering  
 Unite with victory  
 So were I to be given the choice between two:  
 To enjoy wealth and luxury under Yaz d  
 Or to pray famished behind al- usayn  
 I will pray famished behind al- usayn!  
 (Ma ar, 2001, pp. 188–190).

The figure of al- usayn, like that of Christ, conveys meanings of sacrifice, solitude, alienation, fighting falsehood and giving one's life for a matter of principle. Poets have been attracted to this figure because the aforementioned meanings are eternal human virtues found in every society, everywhere and at all times. Arab poets have used the figure of al- usayn in a number of forms, which can be sorted into three types, the human, the national and the individual. These three types, we believe, reflect the use of this figure in most of contemporary Arabic poetry.

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