

The Arab Girl's Pride of Her National Identity: A Reading of Suad Al-Sabah's Poetry

Dr. Heba Maher Attia Hashim

Dr. Walid Alobeid

University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

Doi: 10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p38 [URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p38](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p38)

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to show how the Arab girl as a spokesperson of her fellow young people in the Arab world is proud of her national identity and of her belonging to the Arab nation. This idea is clearly reflected in the poems written by the Arab poet Suad Al-Sabah who feels proud of her Arab nationalism whose heroes she glories and celebrates in her poetry; yet she blames her Arab people for going away from the true national ideals that were unifying them and providing them with power and authority. Therefore, her national voice breaks the silence of her Arab people urging them to go back to the roots of their Arab identity, the most effective remedy that can heal their present wounds. Proud of her belonging to the Arab nation, Al-Sabah looks for her national identity within the hopes and pains of her Arab homeland. Aware of her role as a spokesperson for the Arab nation as a whole, Al-Sabah as an Arab poet has decided to visit and examine the Arab past in order to praise and glorify the patriotism of her ancestors and reflect it in her poetry. This enthusiastic female speaker in her poems asserts her ability to achieve this task and speak with the national tongue of her Arab people, simply because she is an Arab from top to bottom as the female speaker in her poems proudly states.

Keywords: Arab girl, national identity, pride, poetry, Suad Al-Sabah

Introduction

One of the most important roles of literature is to raise young men and women's consciousness of their national identity. This role has particularly been necessary nowadays as young people are confronted with various challenges that certainly affect their cultural and national backgrounds. Cultivating the seeds of national values in the hearts and minds of young people helps them come close to their nation, become aware of its history, and be proud of its past. So, they become ready for contributing to forming its

present and shaping its future, simply because these young people are the backbone of any society as the progress of any nation primarily rests on their shoulders and is mainly determined by their work and enthusiasm. Accordingly, young men and women need to know their national identity and be proud of it so that no other undesirable forces can affect them intellectually or culturally.

Undoubtedly, strengthening the national principles inside young people will shape the ways they think, speak and even act; and this will of course be reflected on the community in which they live. Furthermore, the changing world in which we live nowadays makes it necessary that young men and women should feel belonged to their Arab nation and adhered to their national identity so as to be able to achieve their role as the determinants of change, the agents of progress, and the real contributors to the processes of development in their countries. Accordingly, studying the Arab girl's pride of her national identity in Suad Al-Sabah's poetry offers a positive example to all the young men and women in the Arab world.

Obviously, the focus on young people and national identity goes in harmony with the serious attempts taken by the Arab countries to reinforce this issue in their peoples, especially young men and women. For example, in "Nationalism in the Gulf States," Patrick points out how "the ... states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)...are paying increasing attention to haweeya alwatani (national identity) and heritage (turath) within their countries" (1995, p.1). In "Youth and Moral Values in a Changing Society," George and Uyanga point out that young people "can be the agents of change in their societies ... and become 'lights in perceived darkness' to show the way forward for nations to become truly prosperous, developed and functional" (2014, p.43). In "Youth in Asia: An overview," Atal asserts that "Youth constitute an important segment of society. Yet, not much attention was paid to them." (2005, p.9). Addressing the same issue, Arnet indicates how young men today find themselves in a world that is totally different from the one of their parents and grandparents. Arnet explains, "Youth today are in transition...between two different ways of life" (2005, p.22).

The Arab Girl's Pride of her National Identity in Al-Sabah's Poetry

A well-known Arab woman poet, Suad Al-Sabah was born in 1942 in Kuwait as a member of the ruling family. She graduated from the Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences at Cairo University in 1973. Furthermore, the promising young woman got a doctorate in economics from Sari Guilford University in the United Kingdom in 1981. She later came back to Kuwait and established the Suad Al-Sabah Publishing and Distribution House. In addition to publishing several books of poetry, she initiated a literary prize carrying her own name. Most of her poetry has been translated into English and many other

languages. As a woman writer, Al-Sabah adopted a firm attitude when her country was invaded by Iraqi army in 1990. Enthusiastically, she led a very harsh verbal campaign against the war, defending her land in the media, and attempting to convince public opinion of taking serious steps in order to put an end to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Al-Sabah has a very rich literary production. Her poetic publications include *Early Blinks* (1961), *Moments of my Life* (1961), *From my Life* (1964), *A Wish* (1971), *To You , my Son* (1982), *Fragments of a Woman* (1986), *In the Beginning Was the Female* (1988), *Dialogue of Roses and Guns* (1989), *Urgent Messages to my Homeland* (1990), *The Last of Swords* (1992), *Love Poems* (1992), *A Woman Without Shores* (1994), *Take me to the Borders of the Sun* (1997), *The Poem is a Female and the Female is a Poem* (1999), and *And Flowers Know Anger* (2005).

In his introduction to Suad Al-Sabah's *Fragments of a Woman*, Sarhan argues that the poems written by this woman poet reflect "both the aspirations and disillusionments of an Arab mind concerned with...national issues and intent on forging a way ahead for Arab men and women in an ever-changing world" (1995, p.5). In her poem, 'My Body is a Palm that grows on Bahr al-Arab', Al-Sabah (1995) reveals her love for her country and expresses her pride of belonging to her motherland:

I am the daughter of Kuwait,
Of the sandy shores that slumber
By the waters like a gorgeous deer.
In the mirror of my eyes,
The night stars embrace the palm trees.
From this spot sailed my ancestors in fishing boats,
And came back with the impossible catch. (p. 184)

Obviously, these lines reflect the poet's admiration of her native land which, like an attractive deer, comes at the center of a highly suggestive portrait whose elements are 'the night', 'the stars', 'the palm trees', 'the sandy shores' and 'the waters'. What a beautiful portrayal! Amidst this romantic atmosphere stands the female speaker who enthusiastically describes herself as 'the daughter of Kuwait'. More importantly, she is very proud of her grandfathers, the heroes of the nation, who could overcome all difficulties and could turn the 'impossible' into possible. Not only that, but her

...forefathers explored the waves, the sea,
And the music of the wind.
They befriended death and tirelessly pursued their dreams,
With horse and sword,
With never a moment's repose. (Al-Sabah, 1995, p. 188)

These are the Arab ancestors for whom 'the daughter of Kuwait' sings and rejoices. Her 'forefathers' are the symbols of courage, the representatives

of struggle and the embodiment of determination. 'With horse and sword', they won their battles; with knowledge and wisdom, they 'befriended death'; and with hope and strength of mind, they 'pursued their dreams' till they made their wishes come true. These are the heroes of the past, men and women, whose experiences enriched the history of the nation. Aware of her role as a spokesperson for "the Arab nation as a whole", to quote Sarhan (1995), Al-Sabah as a woman poet has decided to visit the Arab past in order to show and praise the patriotism of her ancestors and reflect it in her poetry (p.7). Finally, the daughter of Kuwait asserts her ability to achieve this task and speak in the national tongue of her Arab people, simply because she is an Arab person from top to bottom:

Can I ever be anything but an Arab?
My body is a palm tree fed by the waters of Bahr al-Arab,
And my soul reflects all the errors, all the sorrows,
All the hopes of the Arabs. (Al-Sabah, 1995, p.204)

Though the heroic deeds of the ancestors give Al-Sabah a sense of national pride and happiness, they at the same time remind her of the frustrating attitude of her contemporary Arab people who, no longer sticking to the principles of their nationalism, fight each other, betray each other and side with their enemy against each other. Whenever the poet thinks of these dangers surrounding her Arab nation, she feels disappointed and her sorrow knows no limits. She makes it clear:

Whenever I think of today's Arabs, I weep.
When I remember what became of Quraysh,
The Prophet's tribe, after his death,
I can't check my tears, and weep.
When I behold dear homeland
Racked by oppression and suppression, I weep.
When I examine yesterday's map
And see our map today,
I weep. (1995, p.200)

As revealed above, the prevailing Arab national and political conditions discourage the poet and fill her heart with indescribable pain. Disloyalty, hatred, conflict, 'oppression' and 'suppression' are the characteristics of today's Arab communities. The previously distinguished position of the Arabs has been lost and their land has been taken by their enemies. That's why the poet bitterly weeps as she compares the Arab former extended map with today's reduced one. What a shame! We have easily wasted what our forefathers built and established by themselves through hard work and continuous struggle. The confusion marking the Arab world today invites the poet to remember the state of chaos that happened for the tribe of Quraysh after the death of Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him). After the Prophet

had died, the hypocrites appeared and the enemies of Islam attacked the Islamic lands. This is what exactly happens in the Arab world today.

For all these reasons, Al-Sabah cries out, attempting to break the silence of 'a homeland gripped in the fangs of terror' and living in 'national frustration' as she says in her poem entitled 'Symphony in Gray':

... We live in an Arab age
In which the heart has stopped beating.
How can I
Turn a blind eye to the blight of a homeland gripped in the
fangs of terror?
How can I
Pass over the state of spiritual bankruptcy,
Of national frustration,
Of drought and death? (1997, pp. 62-63)

This state of 'spiritual bankruptcy' has made the Arab people forget the national roots that previously joined them together. Accordingly, they no longer feel each other, no longer sympathize with each, and no longer help each other. For example, they stand helplessly witnessing the daily deaths of the Palestinian children who own nothing but small stones to fight a huge Israeli army with the most up-to-date weapons. The poet tries to break the silence of her native people, who keep silent and passive, by presenting the heroism of those children, the stone-throwers who never fear death, in hope that Arabs may wake up from their long national sleep and take an action:

Behold our own flesh and blood
Exploding the Hebrew Age,
Consigning the Ten Commandments to the fire
And abolishing Jewish mythology.

....

There they are, sprouting like grass
In all the streets:
This girl looks like a sprig of wild mint,
And that boy like the moon,
Behold them marching in lines toward death,
Like field-sparrows,
And returning to their tents with fingerless hands. (1997, pp. 74-75)

Despite this moving picture that shows how the young Palestinian children daringly conquer death and willingly offer their pure souls for the sake of liberating their occupied country, the Arab people remain in a state of silence and indifference. Even the great examples of national sacrifice shown by that young girl who 'looks like a sprig of wild mint' and that little boy who resembles 'the moon' have never stirred a feeling in them. Disappointed by this

passive Arab attitude, the poet reaches the conclusion that the only hope of salvation lies in these young children who, as Al-Sabah tells us, 'have proved that Israel is only a house of glass / And it has been shattered' (1997, p.73). So, the poet raises her national voice loudly, urging these young fighters to continue in their struggle, without paying attention to their Arab 'tribe's lies', till they reach the shores of freedom and independence:

Resist, beautiful hands,
Resist, tender hands still moist
With the sap of childhood.
Never heed the tribe's lies.
We could not liberate a single handspan of the land
of Palestine,
But those blessed, Heaven-sent hands have set us free.
(Al-Sabah, 1997, p.76)

In this sense, one of the important areas in which Al Sabah searches for her national voice is the unhealed wounds of those who suffer patiently; those who have been oppressed by a colonizer like the Palestinian people or those who have become the victims of a harsh civil war like the Lebanese citizens whose country has a special position inside the poet's heart and mind. In her poem, 'Beirut: Once a Rose, Now a Cause', Al-Sabah shows how she finds relief and serenity in the capital of Lebanon. Whenever she feels the heavy burden of what she describes in the poem as 'the pressures of national calamities' characterizing her Arab world, the poet quickly goes to Beirut in search for hope and peace of mind. Addressing the beloved Lebanese capitol, she writes:

I come to you today Beirut,
To get away from my mental anxiety,
The pressures of national calamities
And the fallacy of peace.
I came from a land terribly backward,
Deeply split
And irreparably fragmented. (1997, p.70)

Thus, the poet finds in Beirut a psychological and national shelter, away from her 'fragmented' and 'deeply split' land whose citizens 'have incinerated their history,/Abandoned the principles of Arab civilization / And forsaken those of Islam' (1997, p.70).

Certainly, all these examples of 'national frustration', to quote Al-Sabah herself, make the poet's sorrow know no bounds. However, for her, the most horrifying event was the unexpected invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqi forces in 1990. This horrible action was a fatal strike for the whole Arab nation, as it created a deep wound inside the Arab body and allowed others to interfere in the internal matters of the Arab countries. It also added a condensed dose of

psychological pain to the heart of the poet herself who was one day an advocate of Iraq and its freedom. Thus, she comes to remind her brother invaders of how Kuwait was the land in which 'the roots of Arabism stretch deep' and how her people 'share the sorrow of those who live in fear', healing 'the wounds of the rebels' everywhere (1995, pp.238-240). This is Kuwait which the poet proudly addresses in the following poem:

Kuwait, Kuwait!
The Arab world has decided to assassinate the word.
It also decided
To exterminate all the beautiful birds, and all pigeons.
We are homeless birds that demand nothing but the
right of speech;
We are intellectual birds that can't stand
Brain-washing and broken bones.
We are militant words
That will defeat with poetry all the dark ages. (1995, p.244)

Though spiritually injured by the barbarian attack waged on her country by Iraq, the poet was completely sure that this nightmare would soon come to an end. For her, Kuwait is, in all times, 'a love oasis' and 'a safe shore' (1995, p. 230). Finally, Al-Sabah asks her motherland to forgive those who wronged her, because this is the nature of Kuwait: kind and tolerant:

Kuwait, Kuwait!
...
Remain as always, a big warm heart,
A shining star,
A beacon for the lost,
A Soft pillow for weary heads,
A mother like all mothers,
And embrace all your children.

The poet goes on, describing her homeland as 'the martyrs' holy shrine' and 'the glorious isle of freedom':

I'll be happy if the soil of my country
Becomes the violets and the martyrs' holy shrine.
Gives a roof to all the victims, made homeless by
Arab wars. I'll be happy if my country
Remains the glorious isle of freedom
Where the dawn breaks when he wishes
And the sea roars as he wills. (1995, pp. 240-246)

As the above lines suggest, the poet's broad national outlook makes her see Kuwait as a symbol of the whole Arab nation whose 'big warm heart' extends to include all her Arab people. Merciful and forgiving, this kind-hearted mother tolerates her guilty children and takes them all under her wing.

The same caring mother never forgets her other children whom the 'Arab wars' has made 'homeless' and miserable; sympathetically, she 'gives a roof to all the victims' and offers them a hand of help and support.

So, we can say that Al-Sabah looks for her national voice in the glorious past of her ancestors, within the serious wounds of her homeland, and amidst the hopeful moments of promising risings.

Al-Sabah searches the soil of her Arab past whenever she feels depressed with the contemporary Arab conditions which fill the heart with misery and agony, exactly as the following frustrating portrait suggests:

Whenever I see a bird in Rome
Or Paris singing
Without fear, I always weep.
And when I see an Arab boy
Sucking hatred at the breast of Arab radios,
I weep.
Whenever I see An Arab army
Opening fire on civilians,
I weep.
And every time a ruler boasts of his people's love,
Of ruling by consensus of opinion, or of the
freedom of speech
I weep.
Whenever I am questioned about my passport
By some policeman at an Arab port,
I turn my back and leave. (Al-Sabah, 1995, p. 202)

Expressively, the above lines draw a depressing picture of the Arab situation today. So, we hear the poet lamenting the lack of freedom at her home where no bird can sing freely as birds usually do in other free countries. In addition, she pities the Arab children whom the Arab mass media feed with horrible news polluting their pure souls with 'hatred' and hypocrisy. Not only that, but the poet also feels shocked when she sees the Arab countries attacking each other, 'opening fire' on the helpless citizens. Furthermore, she is disappointed by the false pretence of democracy and justice shown by some Arab rulers who are nothing but the embodiment of tyranny and oppression. The result of all this is the absence of peace and security from the Arab world whose people no longer adopt a national ideal to unite them. Finally, the poet is ironically asked to show a proof of identity inside her own Arab home.

Undoubtedly, this discouraging Arab scene makes Al-Sabah go deep in the past of her nation to find out a sign of hope to lighten the darkness of the present. So, we hear her political voice commemorating the former Arab leaders whose patriotism, when remembered, stands as an effective remedy for the national and political sickness of which the Arab body complains

nowadays. For instance, in her poem entitled 'To Gamal Abdul-Nasser', the poet alludes to one of the great Arab leaders, a former president of Egypt, who fought hard for the Arab national cause and did his best to unify the Arab peoples, because 'he had the power', Al-Sabah writes, 'to...bring together the scattered tribes' and to 'recover the lost kingdom of Arabs' (1995, p. 218). Completely believing in him as an ever bright star in the sky of Arab nationalism, the poet describes Abdul-Nasser as 'the most glorious of our history, / The tallest palm in our desert, / The dream that blossomed in our eyes' and 'freed us from our fear' (1995, pp. 212-215). But, what would Abdul Nasser do if he witnessed the national dilemma of his people and saw the political weakness of his nation. This is what Al-Sabah asks about in the following lines:

Nasser, the great,
Do you follow in your exile the news of home?
One part is torn rent,
Another is patched up;
One part has gone for normalization,
Another for isolation,
And a third for a policy of open-doors.
One part favours peace,
Another, capitulation.

Some other parts have neither a roof nor doors. (1995, p. 224)

Of course, Nasser would never be satisfied with 'the news of home', the Arab home whose former defenders, like Nasser and others, 'stood like flinty rocks', Al-Sabah states in the poem, and 'never knelt in humiliation' (1995, p. 212). Here, Al-Sabah is completely sure that Nasser would feel sorry for his Arab nation that has been 'torn rent' or 'patched up' by her enemies. Going away from the national principle that connected them before, the Arab countries are now suffering 'isolation' and 'capitulation'. Unless they adhere to the roots of their nationalism, these Arab countries will 'have neither a roof nor doors'.

Then, Al-Sabah tries to break the silence of her Arab people by contrasting their disappointing national and political attitude with the Arab attitude at Nasser's time:

With him we shone like suns
That spread their light on all the worlds.
....
He soared with us above the world's map,
Scoffing at all artificial barriers,
At those fabricated upstart kingdoms,
Their tight, ridiculous patchwork outfits,
Their faded, tattered flags.

He was made in our image,
We were born in his;
He was the strength in our hearts,
The blue flame in our pupils,
The raging wind, the tempest and the flood. (1995, pp. 212-216)

Al-Sabah shows that Nasser reflected the Arab nation and was created 'in her own image' exactly as the nation was created 'in his own image'. Indeed, Nasser provided his Arab people with the strong will, the enthusiasm and the courage they needed in their fight for their national and political cause.

However, Al-Sabah's poetry reveals an optimistic note. The Arab girl in her poems, who is proud of her Arab identity, will keep on searching for her national and political voice which she sees as 'a willow and star' breaking the long silence of her homeland under whose 'ruins' lies the hope for a strong, united Arab nation. She decisively declares:

I shall always keep on searching,
For a willow and star,
And the garden behind the mirage.
I shall always keep on waiting
For the flowers that will sprout
Under all these ruins.
(Al-Sabah, 1995, p. 206)

Conclusion

The speaker of Al-Sabah's national poems provides a wonderful example to all young people in the Arab world urging them to adhere to and be proud of their national identity so that they can find a meaning in their lives. Realizing this supreme meaning, young people throughout the whole Arab world can trust themselves and their national heritage. Accordingly, they become able to reshape the future of their Arab world by contributing to the progress of their countries, simply because these young men and women are the determinants of change, the agents of development, and the core of any society. Thus, there is a universal lesson to be learned by youth all over the Arab world from the example of the Arab girl and her pride of her national identity in the poems written by Suad Al-Sabah.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support for this work from the Deanship of Scientific Research, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. Grant No. S-0178-1438.

References:

1. Al-Sabah, S. (1995). *Fragments of a Woman*. Trans. Nehad Selaiha. Kuwait: Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House.
2. Al-Sabah, S. (1997). *Take me to the Borders of the Sun* Trans. Nehad Selaiha Kuwait: Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House.
3. Arnett, J. (2005). "The Challenges of Growing Up in a Globalized World."
4. *Youth in Transition : The Challenges of Generational Change in Asia*. Eds. Fay Gale and Stephanie Fahey. The Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC). Pp 22-36.
5. Atal, Y. (2005) "Youth in Asia: An Overview." *Youth in Transition: The Challenges of Generational Change in Asia*. Eds. Fay Gale and Stephanie Fahey. The Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC). Pp 9-21.
6. George, I. N. &. Uyanga, U. D. (2014) "Youth and Moral Values in a Changing Society." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* Vol. 19, Issue 6, Ver. I. Pp 40-44.
7. Patrick, N. (1995). "Nationalism in the Gulf States." Kuwait Programme on Development Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States.
8. Sarhan, S. (1995). "Introduction". *Fragments of a Woman*.Trans. Nehad Selaiha, Kuwait: Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House.