

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE *MUWASHSHAHĀT* OF THE IRAQI POET MUHAMMAD SAEED AL-ḤABBŪBI

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In the first instance I wish to thank Mr Ed Emery for organising the *muwashshah* conference at SOAS in October 2004 and for enabling me to offer this paper. The conference has provided a unique opportunity for scholars from all parts of the world to gather and discuss the many facets of the Andalusian *muwashshah*, its origins, history and present practices in countries such as Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Persia. I have attended the conference as a mere spectator and found its proceedings most enlightening. What struck me, however, has been the absence of research papers devoted to the *muwashshah* originating in Iraq.

This presentation is essentially an attempt at filling the gap, through a brief examination of the fine Andalusian *muwashshah* created by an Iraqi poet who began his writing career in the second half of the 19th century.

Muhammad Saeed Al-Ḥabbūbi was born in 1849 in the holy city of Najaf into a highly respected family related to the Chalif, the Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib.

After spending his early years in Najaf, Al-Ḥabbūbi lived for a limited period in Najad in the Arabian peninsula, and then returned to his birthplace and continued his education in literature, mathematics, ethics and theology. During his lifetime Al-Ḥabbūbi showed an insatiable thirst for learning, and excelled as poet, researcher, critic and educator. He passed away in 1915 in Nassyria, at the age of 66.

In his time, Al-Ḥabbūbi's work received the highest accolades and many of his poems were set to music and were performed by top Iraqi musicians. Later, the famed Iraqi singer Al-Gubbanchi sang one of his poems at the Congress of Arab Music held in Cairo in 1932. Both the judges and the greatest Arab poet of the time, Ahmed Showqi (known as the "Prince of Poets"), gave their enthusiastic approval to Al-Ḥabbūbi's lyrics.

In addition to traditional poems (*qaṣa'id*), Al-Ḥabbūbi wrote several Andalusian *muwashshahāt*, some of which were also set to music and were performed in Iraq long after his death. He wrote a total of nine extended *muwashshahāt*, the shortest containing 20 sections and the longest 42. On average, each of his poems consisted of 28 strophes. This can be seen as a

significant achievement comparing favourably with the output of Ibrahim Ibn Sahl, the great Sevillian poet. In his lifetime, the latter wrote only 24 *muwashshahāt* of five sections each, thus creating a total of 116 strophes, barely half of Al-Ḥabbūbi's 255.

Obviously it is the quality and standard, rather than the quantity of this poet's literary output that we ultimately enjoy and appreciate. I now propose to review some of the most salient features of Al-Ḥabbūbi's masterly poetry.

### The form

Al-Ḥabbūbi admired the classical Andalusian poets Abu Bakr Ibn Baqqi (d. c.1150) and Ibn Sahl (d.1250) and followed the structure of their *muwashshahāt*. In several of his poems he used the form found in Ibn Baqqi's famous piece titled "غلب الشوق", a structure consisting of a strophe of three single lines followed by a double structured *tawshih* line, as can be seen here:

غلب الشوقُ بقلبي فأشتكى      ألم الوجْدِ فلَبَّتْ أذمعي  
[...]  
أُيْها الناسُ فَوادي شَجَفُ  
وهو من بَغِي الهوى لا يُنصَفُ  
كم أداريه ودمعي يَكفُ؟  
أُيْها الشادنُ مَنْ علمكا      بسهام اللحظِ قتلَ السَّبْعِ؟

Some of Al-Ḥabbūbi's poems are written in exactly the same vein employing the same metre (الرمل) and structure, as can be seen in "أَيُّها الساقِي":

أَيُّها الساقِي ومن خمر اللمى      نشوتي فأذهبْ ببنت العنْبِ  
عَدَّها عَلي كؤُسا كم سببتْ      من نفوسِ وعقولِ سلبتْ  
زعم النشوان أن قد طربتْ      نفسه لَمَّا احتساها وبما  
احتسني من ريقِ سلمى طربني

In four of his long *muwashshahāt* Al-Ḥabbūbi emulates Ibn Baqqi's poetical structure described previously. He preferred, however, Ibn Sahl's poetical form and metre, particularly as they appear in the latter's famous piece "هل درى ضيبي الحمى", which he subsequently used in four additional lengthy poems. Here the form consists of three double structure lines followed by two double structure *tawshih* lines. As a token of his admiration, he borrowed in fact two lines from Ibn Sahl's previously cited *muwashshah* and used them as *tawshih* in his own poem "يا معير الغصن":

*The muwashshahāt of Muhammad Saeed al-Habbūbi*

اثر النمل على صنم الصفا      تركت مقلته من رمقي  
لست الحاه على ما اتلفا      انما اشكره في ما بقي

**The content**

The thematic contents of Al-Habbūbi's poetry shows close affinity with that used by the Andalusian poets. Like them, he too used the wine-related, congratulatory, panegyric and apologetic themes in his creations. As a matter of interest, his *muwashshahāt* were composed solely to congratulate friends on their wedding occasions. He cleverly exploited these special occasions to expand on the themes of love and wine, to which he added congratulatory and panegyric motifs. In this manner he managed to wrap up all the relevant themes in each and everyone of his rather lengthy compositions. Being a deeply devout individual, he found it necessary to add an apologetic motif in order to exonerate himself for writing about love and wine.

His *muwashshah* entitled "هزت الزوراء اعطاف الصفا" demonstrates perfectly the points made above. The poem was composed for his friend Mustafa Kubbah, on the occasion of his son Abdul Ghani's wedding. The beginning of the poem explores the *theme of love*:

هزت الزوراء اعطاف الصفا	فصفت لي رعدة العيش الهني
فأرع من عهدك ما قد سلفا	و أعد يا فتنة المفتتن
عارض الشمس جبيننا بجبين	لنرى أيكما اسنى سنا
وأسب في عطفك عطف الياسمين	وأنثن غصنا اذا الغصن انثنى
حبذا لو قلبك القاسي يلين	انما عطفك كان الألينا
فأنعطف انت اذا ما أنعطفنا	قدك المهزوز هز الغصن
ان في خذك روضا شغفا	مقلة الرائي وكف المجتني
يا غزال الكرخ وا وجدني عليك	كاد سري فيك أن ينهتكا
هذه الصهباء والكأس لديك	وغرامي في هواك احتتكا
فأسقتني كأسا وخذ كأسا اليك	فلذيذ العيش أن نشتركا

**Translation:**

Alzawra town\* spread an abundance of serenity  
And I gained the opulence of a pleasant life.  
Then keep faithfully your past vows  
And confirm them, you, the essence of fascination

*Menashe Tahan*

.....

Confront the sun face to face  
Let us see which is more radiant

And enchant us more than jasmine when moving  
And more than twigs when they twist and turn

If only your heart would likewise soften  
Your love would turn tender then

Be then merciful when your figure  
Sways like a shaking branch  
And when your cheek resembles a meadow  
Captivating the eyes and the hearts of men

.....

Gazelle of Karkh\*\* how greatly I adore you  
My secret love for you has almost been betrayed

Wine and cups are found by you there  
While my love and yours entwined as a pair

Hence fill me a cup, and for you don't spare,  
As the joy of life is with you to share

\* Another name for Baghdad

\*\* Part of Baghdad, located on the west bank of the Tigris

The following *tawshih* lines illustrate the way Al-Ḥabbūbi tackles the *theme of wine*:

رسب الياقوت فيها وطفا      فوقه لؤلؤها الرطب السني  
ما رآها البرق إلا انشعفا      بسناها شغب المفتتن

As if rubies sank in it, yet there above  
Fresh glittering pearls were afloat

If the lighting would be able to observe  
It would surely fall in love straight away.

The following section contains a *description of the beloved*, which, in my view, is one of the most powerful written in the *muwashshah* form:

من رشا لما تبذى رايعا      أشرق أفتى تشنى نفرا  
قمرا تما وبدر لامعا      وقتنا لدنا وظببا أعفرا

*The muwashshahāt of Muhammad Saeed al-Habbūbi*

إن بدي ابدى الربيع اليانعا      وعن الزهر المنذى أسفرا  
خذه والصدغ فيه اكتنفا      وردة محفوفة في سوسن  
او شقيق فوقه الأسُ ضفا      او كميّ متق في جوشن

**Translation:**

Like a deer, so magnificent when it appears,  
It shines, smiles, sways and shies away  
Or like a perfect moon, a full shining moon,  
Or a supple lance or an Arabian gazelle,  
Or like the mellow spring  
Parading its dew-laden blossom.

Her cheeks flanked by her temples,  
Like a rose surrounded by lilies,  
Or like a wind flower over which a myrtle rested,  
Or like a brave warrior protected by a shield.

To conclude, the poetic excerpts above, with their profound and delicate expressions, their imaginative metaphors and melodious rhymes, clearly demonstrate Al-Ḥabbūbi's poetic virtuosity and command of the genre. These qualities place Al-Ḥabbūbi on the same level as the legendary poets of the Andalusian era.

The main aim of this brief paper has been to draw the attention of the academic community to the Iraqi *muwashshah*, and perhaps to stimulate further research into the literary contribution of Al-Ḥabbūbi, whose fine poetry is deeply rooted in the Andalusian tradition.

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