

Was Halabja a turning point for the poet Buland al-Haydari? HILLA PELED-SHAPIRA^{*}

Abstract

This article examines the writings of the emigré Iraqi-Kurdish poet Buland al-Haydari (1926-1996) and thus explores components of his identity as reflected in themes and motifs of his poetry, in light of the fact that Iraqis belong to a variety of ethnicities, religions and sects. This article will also address the question of whether the poet's self-perception was transformed from a complex hybrid identity with Muslim, Christian, and other influences but excluding Kurdish elements, to a "new" Kurdish identity, as an outcome of the Iraqi chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988. The assumption is that although the Halabja incident was the point at which the poet began to relate to his Kurdish origins, he was still loyal to Baghdad, to Iraq and to Arab culture, rather than solely emphasising his Kurdish identity. The article will examine the thematic and aesthetic effects of the tragedy in Halabja on al-Haydari's poetry in Arabic, focusing on different forms of identity as reflected in the poetry of this political activist.

Keywords: Iraq; Halabja; Buland al-Haydari; Kurdish identity; poetry.

Gelo Helebçe xala werçerxê bû bo helbestvan Buland el-Heyderî?

Ev gotar vekolînek e li ser nivîsên helbestvan Buland el-Heyderî (1926-1996) ku koçberê ji Kurdên Iraqê bû. Ji ber hindê, ev gotar hêmanên nasnameya wî, yên ku di babet û motîvên helbestên wî da rengvedane, derdihîne li gel hayjêhebûna ku Iraqî xwedî nasnameyên tével yên etnîkî, dinî û mezhebî ne. Herwisan, ev gotar dê hewl bide ku pîrsekê ji bibersivîne: Gelo wekî encama êrişa Iraqê ya kimyayî li ser bajarê Helebçeyê di 1988ê da, xwebîniya wî helbestvanî ji nasnameya wî ya durehî ya têkel -wekî Misilmanî, Mesîhîti û bandorên din, ji bilî hêmanên Kurdîtiyê- ber bi nasnameyeka Kurdî ya nû ve daguherîye? Pêşbînî ev e ku herçend helbestvan vegeyriyaye ser rehên xwe yên Kurdîtiyê, ew pirtir maye dilsozê Bexda, Iraq û çanda Ereban, ji dêlva ku tenê pûte bi nasnameya xwe ya Kurdîtiyê bide. Ev gotar dê bandora tematîk û estetîk ya trajedîya Helebçeyê li ser helbestên Haydarî yên bi Erebî vekole bi baldariyeka li ser şeweyên tével ên nasnameyê ku rengvedane di helbestên wî aktivîstê siyasî da.

نایا ههلهبچه خالی وەرچەرخان بوو بۆ بۆلەند نەهلەبەدەریی شاعیر؟

ئەم گوتارە لە نووسینەکانی شاعیری عێراقی- کوردیی کۆچبەر بۆلەند نەهلەبەدەری (١٩٢٦-١٩٩٦) ورد دەبێتەوە و بەو شێوێش بەشە پێکەنجەکانی ناسنامەی وی، وەک لە بابەت و موتیفەکانی شیعەرەکانیدا رەنگیان داوەتەر، دەردمخات، لەسەر رووناکیی ئەم راستییەدا کە عێراقییەکان سەر بە نێتتیک و نایین و کۆمەڵی جۆراوجۆرن. ئەم وتارە رووبەر ووی ئەم پرسپاریش دەبێتەوە کە نایا خۆناسینی شاعیر ئەم شێوەگۆرییە بەسەر دا هاتوو لە ناسنامەییکی تێکەڵاوی ئالۆزکاومو کە کارکردی موسلمان، مەسیحی و شتی دیکەیی لەسەر بوو، بەلام کوردی تێدا نەبوو، بێتە ناسنامەییکی "نۆی"ی کوردی، وەک نەجەمەییکی ئەوەی کە عێراق شاری کوردیی ههلهبچهی له 1988 دا گازیباران کرد؟ و دادەنرێت کە ئەگەرچی رووداوێکی ههلهبچه ئەم نوختیە بوو کە شاعیر لێیوە دەستی پێ کرد بگەرێتەو بۆ رەگورێشە کوردانەیی خۆی، بەلام هێشتايش هەر داسۆز بوو بۆ بەغدا، بۆ عێراق و بۆ فەر ههنگی عەرەب، ئەک ئەوەی تەنیا ناسنامەیی کوردانەیی خۆی جەخت بکات. وتارەکە لە کارکردی بابەت و نێتتیکیی کارمەتەکی ههلهبچه لەسەر شیعری عەرەبی نەهلەبەدەری ورد دەبێتەوە و پێی لەسەر شێوێ جیاوازی ناسنامە دادەگرێت وەک لە شیعری ئەم چالاکە سیاسییەدا رەنگی داوەتەر.

Introduction

In his article on the formation of national identity, Smith (1995: 129-153) explains that human beings have several identities and can simultaneously identify with all of them. Among these different identities, the status of the ethnic community to which the individual belongs is predominant. Smith's observation notwithstanding, young intellectuals in Baghdad in the 1940s and 1950s

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did not pay much attention to their ethnic, religious or sectarian heritage. On the contrary, they stressed the fact that they were first-and-foremost a part of Iraq, prior to being a part of any other entity, especially "Arabised Kurds", "who had long been integrated into the Arab milieu" (Bashkin, 2009: 183, 185). Indeed, Natali (2005: 44-46) asserts that in the mid-twentieth century Kurds in Iraq "chose to be Iraqis first and emphasise Kurdish nationalism within a democratic Iraq", for several reasons, mainly political. Whether Shia, Sunni, Jewish or Kurdish, they took an active part in the social and cultural milieu in Baghdad at that time (Bashkin, 2009).

In this article I argue that the *Halabja* massacre in 1988, in which thousands of Kurdish men, women and children were brutally murdered with lethal nerve agents dropped by the Iraqi air force, was the turning point at which the Iraqi-Kurdish poet Buland al-Haydari began to relate to his Kurdish identity, but in a way that did not completely change his Arab identity or his longing for Arab culture and for Baghdad. Through my analysis I will show that until *Halabja* al-Haydari ascribed himself a complex hybrid identity, but following the *Halabja* atrocity, apart from describing the massacre and Kurdistan with great pain, he still considered himself an Arab and Iraqi before any other identity.

Cultural and political background

Baghdad of the 1940s and 1950s was a city in which art and literature flourished and artists, sculptors, poets, novelists, painters etc. gathered and intensely discussed political and artistic issues (Bashkin, 2009). One of the literary groups in Baghdad during this period was *Jama'at al-waqt al-da'i'* (*The Lost Time Society*) in which members from different ethnic and religious backgrounds were active. The members of this group strived to promote Iraqi culture and literature in particular, under the influence of Western movements and trends (al-Musawi, 1985: 334-335; Shulayba, 1996: 61; Caiani and Cobham, 2013: 38-41). Buland al-Haydari was a prominent member of this society and an integral part of the literary fabric of the Iraqi capital of the 1940s (Baram, 1991: 87).

Al-Haydari was born to an aristocratic family but was largely self-educated. Following the transformation of Iraq from a monarchy to a republic in 1958, al-Haydari had hopes for a more benign government. Nevertheless, despite the creative atmosphere in Baghdad, leftist artists, communists in particular, suffered harsh persecution by the Iraqi authorities. Artists, journalists and intellectuals with leftist leanings, were dismissed from their jobs, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, executed and exiled (al-Azzawi, 1997: 271-272; Al-Sa'idi, 1996; Al-Hajj, 1993: 103, 121-122; Fattal, 2003: 304, 309-317). Places where they used to gather were shut down (Jabra, 1994: 175) and those who were editors of newspapers were put on trial (Fawzi, 1985: 47-78). Al-Haydari, too, was a victim of such persecution. Thus he emigrated to Beirut between 1963 and 1976, returning to Iraq until 1980 and then moved to London (Ajami,

1998: 3-7; Basri, 1992: 91; Jabra, 1994: 123 – 124; Campbell, 1996: 519-520; Moreh, 1976: 271; Boullata, 2010: 278).

Like other Iraqi-Kurdish novelists, who sometimes preferred to write in Arabic rather than in Kurdish in order to reach a larger audience (Zeidel, 2011: 29), , in addition to his poems in Kurdish, al-Haydari chose Arabic as the language of his books on culture and literature, articles on art, and nine poetry collections.¹ This choice of language, and his choice of subject matter, as will be described hereafter, could in fact be taken as evidence that al-Haydari perceived himself as an Iraqi prior to any other identity.

In 1988, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi army launched an onslaught during the *Anfal* operation against the border town of *Halabja*, in which Iraqi aeroplanes dropped canisters of poison gas brutally killing around 5000 men, women and children. As a consequence of the *Anfal* campaign as a whole, which lasted between February and September 1988, over a hundred-thousand Kurds fled to neighbouring Turkey and Iran. The Iraqi regime continued using chemical weapons in the following months in other regions as well, but the *Halabja* atrocity was such that it became a symbol of the genocide committed by the Iraqi authorities against the Kurdish population. *Halabja is also well-known and well-documented due to the fact that it was widely filmed and photographed by journalists whose entry was facilitated by Iran, and because the graphic images were repeatedly broadcast on Iranian TV while the war was still in full swing.*

16

Many survivors later died from their injuries and others were transferred by the Iraqis or executed. Hundreds of Kurdish villages were systematically destroyed and forcefully abandoned in order to prevent Kurdish guerrilla fighters from receiving assistance (Hiltermann, 2007; Bengio, 1989: 193-197, 1996: 228-229, 1999: 153, 2012: 177-183; Tripp, 2000: 244-245; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001: 268-270; Shohat, 1989: 10; Baram, 1991: 22; Aziz, 2011: 78-79; Hardi, 2011: 13 - 37).

Al-Haydari's Kurdish contemporaries

¹ The following is a list of al-Haydari's publications. Poetry collections: *Khafqat al-tin* (*Clay Pulse*, Baghdad, 1946), *Aghani al-madina al-mayyita* (*Songs of the Dead City*, Baghdad, 1951), *Aghani al-madina al-mayyita wa-qas'id ukebra* (*Songs of the Dead City and Other Poems*, Baghdad, 1957), *Khutuwat fi al-ghurba* (*Steps in Exile*, Sidon, 1965), *Rihlat al-huruf al-sufir* (*Journey of the Yellow Letters*, Beirut, 1968), *Aghani al-haris al-mut'ab* (*Songs of the Tired Guard*, Beirut, 1971), *Hivar 'abra al-ab'ad al-thalatha* (*Dialogue across Three Dimensions*, Baghdad, 1972), *Ila Bayrut ma'a tahiyati* (*To Beirut with Greetings*, Cairo, 1984, London 1989), *Abwab ila al-bayt al-dayyiq* (*Doors to the Narrow House*, London, 1990), *al-A'mal al-kamila* (*Complete Works*, Kuwait and Cairo, 1992). Essays and books on literature and art: *Isyarat 'ala al-tariq wa-niqat daw'* (*Signposts on the Road and Points of Light*, Beirut, 1980), *Zaman li-kull al-azmina: nazarat wa-ara' fi al-fann* (*A Time for All Times: Views and Opinions on Art*, Beirut, 1981), *Madakhil ila al-shi'r al-'iraqi al-hadith* (*Introductions to Modern Iraqi Poetry*), Cairo, 1987. The excerpts from al-Haydari's poems quoted in this article are taken from his *Complete Works* (*al-A'mal al-kamila*), Kuwait and Cairo, 1992. This date of publication is probably mistaken since it includes al-Haydari's last collection from 1993, i.e. *The Complete Works* must have been published no earlier than in 1993 and this is how I will refer to it in this article.

Before we turn to al-Haydari's own complex identity, we should highlight that other Iraqi-Kurdish poets of his time never hesitated to mention and emphasise their Kurdish ethnicity, and thus we do not expect a drastic change in their attitude as a consequence of *Halabja*. If we take, for example, the well-known poet Sherko Bekes (1940 - 2013), who was banished to southern Iraq and later lived in Iran and Sweden, eventually returning to Kurdistan in 1992 to become the minister of culture in the Kurdistan Regional government (KRG), we see that he wrote poems full of love for Kurdistan and admiration for the brave Kurdish children who dreamt of carrying a gun from a very young age. These poems were written in 1979 and 1985, with no connection to *Halabja* (Weissbort and Simawe, 2003: 62, 267-268). A perusal of the poems of Ahmed Hardi (1922-2006), who like al-Haydari and Bekes had to go into exile, also reveals a very explicit affection for the Kurds as "*God's freedom lovers*" (Weissbort and Simawe, 2003: 90, 268); in fact, he openly identifies himself as a Kurd when he writes: "We Kurds". A similar attitude towards the Kurds can be found in the poetry of the exile Abdulla Peshew (1946-) as well, although with a more militant tone (Weissbort and Simawe, 2003: 192-193, 272).²

Al-Haydari's poetry before the *Halabja* massacre

In contrast to these Kurdish poets, whose Kurdish origins were very dominant in their poetry, al-Haydari did not place much emphasis on his Kurdish background before *Halabja*. He possessed a complex, hybrid identity: he was an Iraqi communist intellectual born to a wealthy Kurdish family, but preferred to associate with the poor; a poet and thinker; a Muslim but probably with secular views, to judge by his bohemian lifestyle; a resident of Baghdad, Beirut and then London; a prisoner and an exile. All these components were part of his life and poetry, but the Kurdish identity had been "abandoned" by him and was "revealed anew" for a while after *Halabja*. We aim to explore whether this newly re-emergent Kurdish identity was of significance or only a vent to express his feelings with regards to the massacre.

Over the years al-Haydari combined influences from different sources in his poetry, alongside unique metaphors derived from the animal world and time expressions that went far beyond physical time and were being used as metaphors for his relations with his homeland and the authorities (Peled-Shapira, 2012, 2013). Many of his poems speak of his love for a woman, real or virtual, and some are addressed to the poetic speaker's son or mother. Some poems describe the opposition intellectual's relationship with the Iraqi regime, his imprisonment and torture, and many others relate to the experience of exile and its attendant difficulties. In other words, al-Haydari "was interested in the depths, in the dark abysses, more than he was interested in clouds, or in feelings which hover in colorful skies" (Huri, 2006: 82).

² The poems in Kurdish to which I refer in these passages were originally translated into English by Muhamad Tawfiq Ali for Weissbort and Simawe's book (2003).

Muslim heritage in al-Haydari's poetry

In his poetry Al-Haydari used traditional Muslim terminology and characters to reflect various difficulties in his intellectual and personal life. Sometimes the distinction between the personal and the collective becomes blurred. One poem with an Islamic hue is "Shall I return... to whom...?" (*A'a'udu... li-man...?*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 793-797. In it the poet reminds the reader of *Abraha*, the Christian Ethiopian ruler of Yemen who according to Muslim tradition tried, unsuccessfully, to destroy the Ka'ba in Mecca. The poetic speaker asks him:

*What did you leave for your people
Oh Abraha with the hewn nose
But blind shadows
Inspecting in the corners of the deserted neighbourhood
And black cracking nights
Between the mud and the blood* (p. 793)

The character of *Abraha* in al-Haydari's poem carries a double meaning, since on the one hand it seems to represent the Iraqi ruler who ruins everything, but in the last verses of the poem the poetic speaker requests *Abraha* to die inside him, so that the speaker will be able to live again, like a forlorn memory that must die in order for a better memory to flourish. The ruins here are the ruins of the people and they are real, in contrast to *Abraha*'s unsuccessful attempt to destroy the Ka'ba. What al-Haydari does here is a technique called *secularisation of the holy*, which was very common among communist writers in the Middle East at the time: The Holy Ka'ba gets the "secular personality" of a nation instead of a concrete real place.

Another instance of *secularisation of the holy* in al-Haydari's work is the prayer niche (*Mibrab*) in the mosque, which is given a new meaning, that of an object of personal prayers of the heart, in the poem "Furious Nature" (*al-Tabi'a al-ghadiba*. al-Haydari, 1993: 83-86. First published in 1946):

*And as if behind the night
There is a heart tired of the continuation of its suffering
The silence is weary of the noise of the spirits in its prayer niche* (p. 83)

Like the *Mibrab*, *Janna* or heaven is used in a unique way by al-Haydari when he describes the situation in the cities that he knows in the poem "Six Dots and a Silence" (*Sitt niqat wa-samt'*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 729-731. First published in 1990):

*This night the gates of heaven were
Opened*

But heaven was but the body of a murdered man

And I

Was his wounds (pp. 729-730)

In this poem al-Haydari compares his homeland Iraq to a map made of a lie and a dream (*Watani ya kharita min kadhab [...] min hulm.* [p. 730]) which bring its people nothing but pain and death. The object of the Muslim believer's hopes, to reach heaven, becomes here the nightmare of the exile.

Like the *Mibrab* and the *Janna*, the pre-Islamic deity *al-Lat* also appears in a poem, "The Feast" (*al-Walima*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 609-610, first published in 1989), as part of the description of a land that eats its inhabitants alive:

And when the morning newspapers told us

That they crucified al-Lat and that his flesh

Was being handed out right now in the city's temples

[...] How great is al-Lat, that becomes while dying

A feast to a sad nation (pp. 609-610)

Al-Lat here receives the meaning of a god who becomes the food of the land's inhabitants, as a symbol to ungratefulness. Although in pre-Islamic history *al-Lat* was considered female, according to this poem *al-Lat* is a male god, a change that constitutes a breach of convention.

19

In the aforementioned poem "Shall I return... to whom...?" we can also find a symbolic Muslim date: *The year of the elephant* ('*Am al-Fil*. Al-Quran, chapter 105), the year in which Muhammad the prophet of Islam was born and the year in which *Abraba* wanted to destroy the Ka'ba, around 570 A. D. But in the poem that year is mentioned among depictions of blood, bereavement and dead people, signifying that nothing has changed over the years and that the blood of the people has still not been avenged.

Another figure from Islamic history in al-Haydari's poetry is the cruel 'Umayyad governor of Iraq, *al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf al-Thaqafi* (661-714), who was known for his iron fist, and for a speech in which he predicted that blood would flow from the people's decapitated bodies. In the poem "The Return of the Victim" (*'Awdat al-Dhahiyya*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 761-764) al-Haydari maintains a dialogue with al-Hajjaj, based on a historic confrontation between the governor and his opponent Sa'id b. Jubayr, a scholar from Kufa (Motzki), in which the poetic speaker describes what happens in a land where the only sound that is heard is the echo of the ruler's voice, shouting in the name of the devil:

There is nothing but my shadow... I will not leave behind anything

But my shadow

And the gleam of the drawn sword

And blood that hasn't been avenged (p. 761)

The poetic speaker also tells al-Hajjaj that a time will come in which the murderer will become the victim (see also: al-Musawi, 2006: xvi). In this way, the poet uses figures from Islamic history who were condemned for their cruelty, in order to criticise the cruelty of the modern Iraqi regime, whether against the Kurds or the Iraqi nation in general. Al-Hajjaj also appears in a poem entitled "Stolen Borders" (*al-Hudud al-Masruqa*. al-Haydari, 1993: 693-697, first published in 1990), in the context of a "homeland of executioners" (*Watan al-jalladin* [p. 693]) in which the intellectual is considered worthless and dragged by his ears through all the cities.

Also *Al-Saffah*, the first 'Abbasid Caliph, whose name means "blood thirsty" (Moscati), appears in the poem "Death Within the Four Voices" (*Al-mawt ma bayna al-aswat al-arba'a*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 819-824) alongside al-Hajjaj:

I open my window [...]

I hear the voice of the merchants

Announcing

A history for sale and leaders

Whose faces gleam like shining shoes

Murder victims asking for a cemetery

And prisoners

And offenses

Moving uncomfortably in the speeches of al-Hajjaj and the sword of al-Saffah (p. 820)

Al-Hajjaj and al-Saffah serve as an allegory for the cruelty and boastfulness of the Iraqi rulers at the expense of the people they brutalised. As mentioned above, al-Haydari uses historical Islamic characters and terminology in his own unique way in order to criticise the Iraqi authorities. Even though al-Haydari was a communist, we can assume from the intense use in his poetry of these elements taken from Islamic history, that they were inculcated in him as a child, and that this part of his identity is fairly dominant. We observe that in most of the cases described above he refers to Iraq in general and not to the Kurds in particular.

Christian symbolism in al-Haydari's poetry

Christian symbols were frequently used by Arab socialist and communist poets, due to the fact that such symbols "propound the Christian idea of redemption through suffering and the belief that death is overcome by Christ's resurrection" (Moreh, 1976: 270-271). The symbols were taken from Christian hymns, and were in use among the young Arab poets of the mid-twentieth century, not in order to reflect a religious experience, but a mental and physi-

cal state as persecuted intellectuals (Moreh, 1976: 247). This claim finds support in the notion of *palms pinned with nails* in al-Haydari's poems representing the arrival of death, e.g. in the poem "Guilty Even If Innocent" (*Muttaham wa-law kuntu bari'an*. al-Haydari, 1993: 541-544, first published in 1973 [p. 544]), and the feeling of helplessness in the same poem: "I remained crucified by the wall" (*baqitu masluban lada al-jidar* [p. 541]).³ In the previously mentioned poem "The Feast", al-Haydari also combines the pre-Islamic goddess *al-Lat* with *the Cross* and the flesh of the goddess that is being handed out in the temples of the city:

*That they crucified al-Lat and that her flesh
Was being handed out right now in the city's temples* (p. 609)

Al-Haydari is thus making an inevitable comparison between the blood of the poetic speaker which appears at the end of the poem and the flesh and blood of Christ. In addition, there are *wounds* that appear frequently in al-Haydari's poetry which symbolise sorrow, suffering and pain like the Crucifixion wounds of Jesus, for example in his "Waiting" (*Intizar*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 87-89, first published in 1946): "And dawn will be born again on the streaming of the wound" (*wa-l-fajr yulad marra ukhra ala nazf al-jirah* [p. 89]).⁴

The Crucifixion also finds its way into the poem "Disappointment of the Prehistoric Man" (*Khaybat al-insan al-qadim*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 389-391, first published in 1968) where we find descriptions of how life and time make it difficult for the exile to continue, to such an extent that he compares his situation to the Crucifixion:

*Life was
Nailing the cross in the forehead
Crucifying the Messiah every hour
Crucifying this dead man every moment* (p. 390)

In the poem "Who Knows, Baghdad" (*Man yadri ya Baghdad*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 535-539, first published in 1973), the poet describes the Iraqi capital as sorrow in the eyes of the crucified, i.e. the exiled communist intellectual. In the afore-mentioned poem "Disappointment of the Prehistoric Man" we can

³ A wooden cross is linked to everlasting death in Beirut during the civil war in the poem "Your Forgiveness...Beirut" (*Ghufranaki...Beirut*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 617-619, first published in 1989).

⁴ See also the poems "The Death of a Poet" (*Mawt shair*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 101-104, first published in 1946), "That Small Thing" (*Dhalika al-shay' al-saghir*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 153-154, first published in 1946), "Death within the Four Voices" (*Al-mawt ma bayna al-aswat al-arba'a*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 819-824); "At the Time of the Accused Innocence" (*Fi zaman al-bara'a al-muttahama*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 443-448, first published in 1968); "On the Way of Migration from Baghdad" (*Fi tariq al-hijra min Baghdad*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 671-674, first published in 1990); "Then He Went Away from Us" (*Thumma rahala 'anna*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 647-653, first published in 1989).

see how the wanderings are such a burden that the exile feels that he is dying like God in his exile:

*And here I am dying, my sister
As God dies in his exile* (pp. 390-391)

According to this poem, al-Haydari and God are both in exile, while crucifixion occurs again and again.

In another use of Christian symbolism, the title of the poem "Judas's Penance" (*Tambat Yahudha*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 309-312, first published in 1965) alludes of course to *Judas Iscariot* who was accused of betraying Jesus; in it the poet regrets that he did not help his people enough, and undergoes self-flagellation for not having been able to save them. Intellectuals are frequently perceived as social leaders who warn of social ills. Nevertheless, opposition intellectuals in the Arab world often found themselves in the horns of a dilemma, since on the one hand people were not always intellectually capable of grasping their Western ideas and on the other, the authorities persecuted them because of their left-leaning ideas. Here al-Haydari presents Judas's regret as a paraphrase on his own remorse:

*I have been against you my people
I know
How I threw you away
And left you with nothing
But hunger
And destruction [...]
[Even] the death penalty will not wipe off my shame* (p. 311)

In contrast to poems by al-Haydari's contemporaries, in which they mention Judas Iscariot as a symbol of the tyrants (Moreh, 1976: 249-250), here al-Haydari refers to himself as Judas, because he did not succeed in saving his people.

Al-Haydari uses this Christian symbolism, alongside Muslim terminology, to stress the feeling of suffering and to introduce his tormented personality. Even though he was Muslim, al-Haydari used Christian elements to express his experience as a persecuted intellectual and as an exile. These elements shed light on his complex identity, which is drawn from his Muslim heritage, alongside Christianity. This is not to say that al-Haydari had a Christian aspect to his identity, but like other writers of the time, he made use of Christian components among other devices to express his feelings. Al-Haydari also combines the Islamic and the Christian when he refers to the poets as despised (*amghad*) and swindlers (*dajjalun*) in the poem "Who Knows, Baghdad". The Arabic word *Dajjal* refers to the Antichrist, and also alludes to the negative attitude of the Prophet Muhammad towards poets before he had his own pri-

vate poet, Hassan b. Thabit, as reflected in the Chapter of the Poets in the Quran (chapter 26, verse 224-226).

Greek mythology in al-Haydari's poetry

Al-Haydari uses Greek mythological elements to express the experience of wandering.⁵ A prominent character from Greek mythology that appears in Arabic poetry of the mid-twentieth century was *Sisyphus*, who was used by the poets at that time to convey the wanderings of the Arab communist exile (Moreh, 1976: 256-257). Al-Haydari uses *Sisyphus* in order to express the exile's disappointment at the lack of positive change in his condition in the poem "The Postman" (*Sa'i al-barid*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 213-215, first published in 1951):

*No doubt, there is no news
That the earth is carrying for this outcast [...]
And the earth still has its Sisyphus
And a stone* (pp. 213, 214)

According to al-Haydari, every age and every land has its permanent *Sisyphus*, who must eternally push a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down. The pointlessness and hopelessness of existence is enhanced by the comparison between the communist exile and *Sisyphus*, and by the postman bringing no news to the exile; i.e. his situation is not going to change, and no good news from the homeland arrives.

Another mythological figure in al-Haydari's poetry is *Oedipus*. In a poem entitled "Oedipus" (*Udib*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 451-455, first published in 1968) the poet identifies with the tragedy of *Oedipus* in the following words:

*I am deserted like the night...
Like the silence I am deserted [...]
I am the deceived man [...]
How long my journeys are in my chest* (pp. 451, 452, 454)

The tragedy of Oedipus, who had to abandon his adoptive parents' home in order to prevent the prophecy of the oracle from materialising, i.e. to avoid killing his father, symbolises in al-Haydari's poetry the need, or rather the urge, to leave Iraq in order to avoid the bitter end that awaits opposition intellectuals.

Opposition to the regime in al-Haydari's poetry

⁵ On the scant Mesopotamian inspiration on his poetry see: Baram, 1991: 87.

Prison and torture play a considerable role in al-Haydari's poetry. In many of his poems the experience of torture receives various expressions, including depictions of the torturer who tears out the prisoner's nails, burns the latter's hair, whips him and metaphorically (or not) stabs him in the chest. Al-Haydari does not spare his readers distressing descriptions of the helpless intellectual in the clutches of the representative of the regime, as in the poem "Secret" (Sirr. Al-Haydari, 1993: 299-302, first published in 1965):

You will strengthen the rope, and you shall not kill me

you will smash my chest [...]

The whip will bark in my flesh

Like venom

Will penetrate into my body [...]

You will once more burn my hair

And tear out my nail

But my secret

Will remain like your blade in my chest

Two symbols for a free man [...] (pp. 299, 300, 301)

24

Al-Haydari thus conveys to the reader the experience of being a communist opposition intellectual, hunted by the regime. The barking venom-like whip in these verses gives the reader the impression that the intellectual is a small animal being voraciously eaten by the omnipotent authorities. Al-Haydari also gives torture artistic expression by depicting in detail the murders committed by the regime's representatives inside the prison walls in the poem "You Came at Dawn" (*Ji'tum ma'a al-fajr*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 313-315, first published in 1965):

You came at dawn

... And there was here

A massacre that developed without pardon [...]

You came at dawn

And we were here

Murdered in silence [...]

The sun will never rise

And in my home

Sinking in death

My children's steps without voice (pp. 313, 314, 315)

Al-Haydari's identity as an opposition intellectual being "hunted" by the Iraqi regime cannot be denied, given the great significance he attributes to this aspect of his identity in his poetry. The way the regime perceives the intellectual's donation to society is summed up in the following verses from the poem "City Destroyed by Silence" (*Al-madina al-lati ablakaha al-samt*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 723-728, first published in 1990):

*You (the intellectual) must not become more than a whore's thighs
Or a pimp's hands (pp. 727-728)*

In this way, the regime clarifies to the intellectual what he has to do, or rather what he should not do. The comparison of the latter to a whore's thigh or a pimp's hand alludes to the standing of intellectuals in Iraq in general, and to the standing of the communists in particular in that country in the second half of the mid-twentieth century. Each and every intellectual who dares to oppose the Iraqi regime can end up as described in the poem "A Drop of Blood" (*Qatrat dam*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 683-684, first published in 1990):

*We might be killed... we might be burned
We might be executed (p. 683)*

This is very reminiscent of the depictions of torture in the above-mentioned poem "Secret" from 1965; in other words, according to al-Haydari's poems nothing has changed in this respect during the three decades from the 1960s until the 1990s.

Multiple identities in al-Haydari's poetry

For al-Haydari, the experience of exile was more formative for his identity than any other, as in the afore mentioned poem "Death within the Four Voices":

*How big is the humiliation of exile
What misery it is not to know yourself as a human being
But
In exile (p. 822)*

According to al-Haydari, exile makes a person more aware of his identity and ask more questions about it. But one's identity is not always shaped solely by a single clear experience. In a poem entitled "The Ten Identities" (*al-Humiyat al-'ashr*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 621-628, first published in 1989) the poet gives expression to the various identities he has and to the complexity of being "divided" between so many affiliations:

*...And I went out tonight
In my pocket ten identities allowing me*

To go out tonight
My name is... Buland bin Akram
I am from a well known family
I swear I did not kill anyone
And that I did not steal from anyone
And in my pocket I have ten identities testifying for me
So why won't I go out tonight? (p. 621)

In this poem the poetic speaker does not seem to belong to any specific ethnic or national group. On the contrary, he has doubts as to where he belongs. The speaker describes all he has done in order to belong somewhere, with no success. He describes his exile as a route to a happiness that never materialises. The poem begins on an optimistic note, when a man goes out for a walk at night with ten identities in his pocket. Those ten identities, be it Muslim, communist, Iraqi, Kurdish, Secular, Sunni, etc., are nothing to be ashamed of, and at this point the speaker is proud of them, since they testify that he did not do anything wrong or harm anyone. As the poem continues, in analogy to the poet's continuing exile, the reader becomes aware of the darkness (*ẓulma*) and the empty streets where the only sound is that of the poet's steps (*rasif al-shari' kan khibwan illa min sawt hidba'i*). The man's shadow is gathered for a while and scattered for another, but he does have a shadow, i.e. he exists. As far as he is concerned, Iraq has no specific identity, and he himself has an abundance of identities. The speaker checks in his pockets to ascertain that his identities are still there, and tries to prove to himself that he is who he thought he was.

This is my name
This is my description
This is the signature of the chief of police in my town [...]
And I have another seven identities with me (p. 624)

Apparently, the poetic speaker has many identities, but does not feel that any of them belong to him. He checks again and again to make sure he still has them, and the more identities he finds the less he feels that he belongs. The paradox grows when two policemen come by his door and ask him who he is. When the man says his name, Buland bin-Akram, and shows them his ten identities, they laugh at him and at his identities, and tell him that he is guilty. Thus, even after revealing his ten identities, they still treat him like a stranger and condemn him. The different identities that he has do not matter at all, whether Muslim, Iraqi, Sunni, Secular, communist, Beirut, Londonian, or maybe more. His conclusion is as follows:

I grasped that my identities are but false evidence

*And that I will be sleeping tonight in jail in the name of my ten identities [...]
 In a time... in a land without any identity
 Anyone with an identity is condemned (p. 627)*

Even in jail the prisoner invites the jailor to tear up the identities and to wear them out, since they have no value anymore:

*Tear them up... Tear them up, oh my jailor
 Wear them out... Wear them out, oh my jailor (p. 627)*

The ten identities, instead of providing the Iraqi opponent of the regime some confidence and a frame of reference, actually cause him difficulty. The representatives of the law (policemen, jailors) pour scorn on his identities, and these are no longer of any assistance for him. The policemen who are supposed to protect the citizen ridicule him, and the only shadow seen at the end of the poem is the one of the policemen, i.e. they are the only ones who dare walk in the streets; they are the only ones who exist, in contrast to the beginning of the poem, where the poetic speaker was the one who existed, the one with the footsteps:

There is no shadow of anyone in my country but that of the police (p. 627)

The conflict between his different identities thus ultimately results in him being thrown into jail with no identity at all, exactly as al-Haydari had been treated in Iraq for years. The man's different identities, which turn to be one complex and fluid identity - Iraqi, Muslim, Secular etc. - in his eyes, are completely erased by the regime. Ultimately, these various components of the poet's identity - Muslim, Christian, Iraqi, persecuted scholar and an exile in search of his way - appear alternately in al-Haydari's works over the years, before and after the massacre of *Halabja*. But before the massacre hardly any sign of al-Haydari's Kurdish origins, or any notion of Kurds or Kurdistan can be detected in his poetry. Nonetheless, after *Halabja*, al-Haydari identified with the Kurds so much that he gave poetic expression to this subject, something that he had not done before.

Kurdish identity in al-Haydari's poetry after *Halabja*

In the poem "So That We Will Not Forget" (*Li-kay la nansa*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 769-773) al-Haydari freezes that horrible moment in which the planes attacked *Halabja*, and he deeply identifies with the Kurds. In this poem, al-Haydari mourns the dead and attacks Saddam Hussein. We should note that even when still living in Iraq, al-Haydari was in Baghdad and not in Kurdistan; when writing about *Halabja* he identified with the Kurds to such an extent that he described the mountains of Kurdistan as if he missed them himself, as a Kurd who grew up there. At the beginning of the poem he depicts the town

before the attack, the gardens and homes, the green dreams of narcissus and roses, until suddenly one day as a stark contrast to the scent of the flowers, something else fills the air:

A poisonous wind blew

Blown by the eyes of a Booma

To poison all your youngsters, my home... my country (p. 772)

A *Booma* is an owl, usually possessing the connotation of bearing bad news,⁶ and here it probably represents the planes which dropped the canisters of lethal gas. In this poem al-Haydari's empathy towards the Kurds is perfectly clear from his description of Kurdistan as the cradle of his birth and his depiction of the changes it went through following the chemical attack:

The way to my home turned into a cemetery encompassing two thousand graves

In Kurdistan

Nothing but death and its shadow

No daffodil dreaming of growing in a garden

The filthy [Iraqi airplanes] did not leave anything

but murdered people and their ashes together with black smoke (p. 772)

28

This description of complete destruction and the demise of every man, animal and flower, when two thousand gardens turn into two thousand graves, is factually accurate, and fits exactly the testimony of Abbas Abd al-Razzaq Akbar, who had accompanied the peshmergas and later also documented what happened to the *Halabja* area. He said: "The gas had killed all natural life, animals and trees. I saw thousands of goats and sheep, all dead. Also wolves [...] I filmed hundreds of dead animals on the roads around *Halabja*. I couldn't hear anything. No birds. There was absolutely no sound [...] the silence drove me crazy" (Hiltermann, 2007: 105).

Here al-Haydari reaches the peak of the poem in a few lines that some would see as wishful thinking and some as prophecy:

The blood of the victims will pursue the devil's face

From this mirror to that mirror

From the furthest past to eternity

And the rope will be wrapped around the hangman's throat (p. 772-773)

From a current perspective the poem's end shows that al-Haydari's prophecy materialised exactly as he predicted, when Saddam was hanged in 2006, 18 years after *Halabja*.

⁶ This is why the Arabic word here is more suitable than a literal translation.

In the same poetry collection al-Haydari published a poem entitled: "Shall I Return?... to Whom?... " (*A'a'udu... li-man?...* Al-Haydari, 1993: 793-797), in which he does not mention *Halabja* specifically, but the descriptions of the ruins and the date of publication leave little doubt as to the connection to the Kurdish town:

*Shall I return to whom...!? To my home...!?
 To the body of a dead toddler...!?
 To a pile of stones turned into ruins
 Which are about to quietly burst into tears...!?
 [...] Shall I return to look for my daughter
 For my home
 In a pile of stones...!? (pp. 795, 796)*

Together with a bereaved mother who is mentioned twice in the poem, and the bodies of little children, the impression is that al-Haydari describes *Halabja*. In another poem, "A New Reading of Old Pictures" (*Qira'a jadida li-sunwar qadima*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 655-659, first published in 1989) al-Haydari ridicules the news broadcasts and the newspapers in the West that pay lip service to a concern for what is good for the world and for peace, while the bodies of little children in Kurdistan still lie on the ground. The red ink in the newspapers symbolises the blood of innocent victims, and it stands in stark contrast to the empty words of the White House, which, according to al-Haydari, are aimed to cover the world's eyes as regard to the victims of *Halabja*.

However, although al-Haydari mentions Kurdistan and the destruction of *Halabja*, when one examines his last collection of poems, it is obvious that in spite of *Halabja* and the *Anfal* campaign, al-Haydari still writes about Baghdad and Iraq with great pain and love. As an "Arabised Kurd" he continues to feel Arab and Iraqi, and still misses the Iraqi capital, writing about its agony: "*And they say that the spark in the eyes of the people in my city had dried out*" depicting the sadness and helplessness of the city in the poem "Tomorrow if It Explodes" (*Ghadan idba ma infagarat*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 775 - 778 [p. 776]).

In another poem, "Apology" (*I'tidbar*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 779 - 782), he writes "*And there is no sea, no pearls... no island in Baghdad [...] in a big lie whose name was Baghdad*" (p. 779, 782), describing the illusion of the historical rich Baghdad and the emptiness and pitifulness of the contemporary city. In the poem "From Behind the Closed Door" (*Min wara'a al-bab al-musada*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 799-800) the poet accuses his homeland of being both the killer and the victim: "Oh my homeland ... oh you the killer... oh you the murdered" (p. 800). Al-Haydari's longing for his life in Baghdad, as can be seen in

various other poems as well,⁷ is far more strongly conveyed than his longing for Kurdistan as expressed in his poems written after *Halabja*.

Conclusion

Al-Haydari's poetry reveals different influences which should be taken into consideration as part of an exploration of the poet's background. Iraq of the 1950s in general, and Baghdad in particular, were a mixture of various ethnicities, religions, sects and political affiliations; this was the background against which al-Haydari operated. He was born to a wealthy family but had friends among the poor and the rich alike, and although economically he could afford to study in distinguished institutions, he was mostly self-educated. Indeed, al-Haydari had Kurdish origins, but since he was raised in Baghdad, which experienced a period of intellectual and cultural bloom no less than other Arab capitals such as Cairo and Beirut, he came to see himself more as an Arab rather than a Kurd, and thus came to belong to the "Arabised Kurds", who felt that they were an integral part of the afore-mentioned Arab milieu. So while theoretically he came from a mixed background, namely Arab and Kurdish, the fact that he experienced life among Arabs in an Arab capital in the formative years of his life, and that he was deeply involved in the lively cultural scene of Baghdad, was more influential in his life than the impact of his Kurdish origins. Furthermore, as a Muslim who was acquainted with Christians and people from other religions, and subjected thereafter to further influences such as Communism, political persecution and exile, al-Haydari's identity could be expected to be hybrid and fluid. All the components of his identity, as explored in the current article may, when considered separately as well as in combination, help uncover his inner world.

Two main conclusions may be drawn from the study. Firstly, as expected, al-Haydari's identity as reflected in his poems is divided among various components. It includes affiliations with different entities, with links to a Muslim heritage, Christian symbolism and Greek mythology, which are used to express not a religious experience but a state of mind, and to reflect the position of Iraqi communist intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century who were persecuted and driven into exile. In his poetry we can find a multifaceted, fluid identity of a person looking for a path as he describes his relations with the Iraqi regime and the ways he finds for coping with it.

Secondly, upon examining the poems of other Kurdish poets from al-Haydari's generation, we find that they regularly mentioned their Kurdish origins, and hence we do not expect that they will relate differently to *Halabja*.

⁷ See also the poems: "Between Two Signs" (*Bayna 'alamatayn*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 807-810) whose first word is "Baghdad", to whom he addresses a moving speech; "The Will" (*al-Wasiyya*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 825 - 826) in which the poetic speaker tells his son about his land and a promised dawn; "And If Iraq is a feast for her locust" (*Fa-idba al-Iraq walima li-jaradiba*. Al-Haydari, 1993: 831 - 835), in which the title already hints at the poet's longing for his previous life in his homeland.

But al-Haydari was an "Arabised Kurd", and so we find that although he dedicated many verses to the massacre in *Halabja*, in his last collection of poems he still writes with much nostalgia about Baghdad and Iraq as his home. It seems that as a participant in Baghdadi cultural life and the city's artistic groups from the 1940s until the 1960s, when sectarianism was not as blatant as it is today, al-Haydari did not pay much attention in his poetry to the Kurdish component of his identity, a tendency that apparently remained in effect in poems written after *Halabja*, even if one would have expected that some change would take place in his relation to the Kurds.

Indeed, after the massacre in *Halabja* he referred to Kurdistan as his cradle of birth, and described his longing to it as if he had been brought up there himself, but it was possibly only a vent for his feelings against the atrocities, since in his poems he still placed emphasis on his Iraqi and Arab rather than on his Kurdish identity. We may thus say that in spite of the *Halabja* incident, al-Haydari continued to be loyal to and write about Baghdad and Iraq, and although the *Halabja* massacre influenced quite a number of verses, it was not as influential on his identity as was his Iraqi and Arab past.

Exploring this so-far under-researched poet's inner world may fill an existing gap and give us more information as regards to the life of Iraqi exiles in the second half of the twentieth century, in the broader context of the cultural and political situation in Iraq of those times. In a more specific sense, it can give us an indication of the extent of "Arabisation" of "Arabised Kurds", since in spite of the *Halabja* massacre, which was a traumatic event by any standard, al-Haydari nonetheless remained faithful to Iraq and clung to his Arab and Iraqi identities.

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