

Summary

Intensive Spaces, Forms and Ideas in the *Fish Banquet* of Hatif Janabi

Writing about the poetry of Hatif Janabi, undoubtedly leads us to follow his long journey of poetic evolution which was paved with hurdles, the bitterness of human reality, alienation and difficulties of living in exile. His productive and ambitious poetry shows that the poet is full of energy to continue the process of experimentation, which he began in the 1970s of the previous century, whether in Baghdad, Najaf, Kirkuk, or in Poland, Algeria, the United States of America or Britain.

Some factors motivated me to write about the poetic experiences of Hatif Janabi and especially about his most recent collection of poems *Fish Banquet*. Some of these factors are related to my early interest in his poems, others however are connected to my desire to study and discover the poetic world and the essence of the universe in this new collection. It should be pointed out that these poems are clearly inspired simultaneously by the modern realistic perspectives of the 20th century and by the postmodern trends of the 21st century. They are affected by many aspects of culture and different subjects, as well as by human dreams and hopes during more than 40 years of the poet's work.

The concentration on *Fish Banquet* emerged perhaps intentionally with the desire to draw attention to this new poetic experience, the specific building of various images and styles, places and times, especially of such poems as *Three Portraits*, *The Wet Shoulders*, *The Royal Road*, among others. It is also promoted by ideas, values and a number of attempts to avoid the “loyalty” of classical and new classical poetic traditions and to break its “dominance” in the face of modernism and postmodernism.

Writing about poetry becomes a part of the enjoyment, when the reader knows about which poetry is written. The poetic word of Hatif gives readers an image or reflects a mirror of the poet himself. Hatif accompanies readers to enter numerous spaces, including spaces of memories, the roots of childhood and youth. He is writing about the daily horrors of Iraq, the inhuman darkness of terrorism and extremism, the pains of loneliness and different characters of Oriental and Western cities. Hatif is still searching for his homeland amidst the rubble of the soul and universe, trying to relieve sadness and to declare the truth.

I published a study concerning the collection of Hatif's poems *Paradises. Deer and Soldiers* (1998), in the magazine *Al-Mada* in Damascus (1999),

presenting such poems as: *Play on the Skull* (written in the 1970s) – a poem of expectation of the war events in 1973; *Wild Continents* – about war, embargo and repression in the 1990s; *Searching for my Grandmother* – dealing with nostalgia for family and roots; *Dust of the Gazelle* – referring to aspects of mystic love; *Dreamer Like the Desert* – about transformations; *The Wet Shoulders*, *The New World*, etc. Thus I am strongly interested in writing a critical study about his new poems, including his epic *The Royal Road*, in particular, in order to continue studying the poetic process of this current collection.

The aim of this critical study is to follow new tendencies of the poetic collection *Fish Banquet* and to give the reader concrete images of its poems, as well as to provide a general opinion of the poems, their forms, artistic structure, technical construction, values, ideas, trends, themes, similarities, dialectics, and so on.

The poetic collection: *Fish Banquet* was published by Mesopotamia Publishing House in Baghdad in 2017. Its cover design was by Karim Sa 'doun, and its picture design was made by Sadreddin Amin. The collection consists of twenty-nine poems (one hundred and twenty-seven pages). The poems are of different lengths, some of them are divided into multiple parts, for example: *Portraits*, *Psalms* and *The Royal Road*. This *Banquet*, despite its varied styles, directions and poetic possibilities remains full of universal elements, scenes, plastic paintings, images, symbols, semiotic signs, paradoxes, dialectics, legends, myths, metaphysics and beliefs. It is a *Banquet* combining a short breath of poems – a flash with a long or epic poem.

The title, which contains two composite words, *Fish Banquet*, is not arbitrary. The poet perhaps has tried to anchor his "ship" near the circle of fishes, using a semiotic threshold to resemble a complex icon and to reduce his themes and thoughts, starting from this title. The "fish" as a symbol is often used by postmodern Arab poets along with other symbols. The semiotics of signs, numbers and words, the geometric arrangement of spaces of the page and lines are also observed in this poetic collection. Using this specific title, Hatif wants to move smoothly from the *Banquet* to the contents of the poems, emphasizing in this way his poetic identity and renovation, and also declaring his ability, which is based on a high level of poetic and cultural knowledge.

The poems of this new poetic collection deal with Iraqi problems and human issues. His *Banquet* is full of specific topics and tendencies. "It is bitter starting from sweetness" and "it is sweet ending with bitterness", reflecting the Iraqi reality and of the world which is dominated by mysteries and paradoxes. This reality is influenced by domestic aspects and universal contexts, affecting the soul of the poet. It moves through whirlpools of desires and ascends from astonishment and the shock of vision.

His poems present different “plastic” images and panoramas, combined scenes and cinematographic montages, biographies of ideas, culture, history, documents, places, alleys, events, times, poets, writers and friends. They reflect a dazzling environment and defense, Sufi contemplations, nature, woman, love, folklore, tradition and metaphysics.

The accent on movement in the poems of *Banquet* is very active, strong and persistent. The poet tries to choose a certain way to leave behind self-suffering, expressing varied social cases, searching for a savior, and using a key to open new visible or invisible worlds. He also tries to move from the painful history to the world of optimism and hopes.

The *Banquet*, which is full of motion, obtains musical transitional movements concentrating on the internal music or the rhythm of accent - tone of letters and words or the “rhythmical” narrative and “prosaic” style. This collection is also characterized by specific structural techniques, rich thoughts, attitudes, feelings and emotions. The poet also uses important symbols: fish, shadows, birds, among others. He uses poetic tools professionally in order to move bravely from "Euphrates ways" to "sea waves" or from "imaginary rivers" to “productive palms”. Hatif also explains the nature of friendships, human values, universal aspects and the sense of existence.

The author of this study thinks that it is useful to preface poems of this *Banquet* with an approach to Hatif’s poetry. Thus he gives an opinion of the general structure of his poetry, following its evolution and studying its most important trends and tendencies. The author tries to show the poetic place of the poet and his efforts among other postmodern Iraqi and Arab poets and writers. The author seeks to extrapolate a critical study of the *Banquet* poems and to give perceptions of each poem separately, looking for those common elements between poems at the same time. Above all, he may enrich the reader’s knowledge about Janabi’s poems.

To write about the poetry of Hatif Janabi it is undoubtedly necessary to pay attention to many stages in his creative life as a poet, writer and translator, which has not been free of troubles and difficulties. He has been moving from the literary "hobby" stage in the 1970s to the early poetic professionalism stage. It has been observed his different, impressive and experimental works in contemporary Iraqi poetry, especially in using various poetic forms, such as a classical schematic *qasida*, free “metric” verse and a prose poem form approaching European free poetry.

The biography of Hatif Janabi shows that he was born in Iraq (1951). He was a graduate of the Faculty of Arts at University of Baghdad in 1972, and then the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literature in the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw, Poland in 1979. He received a master's degree in theater studies at the University of Warsaw in 1979. His academic aspirations

were continued, obtaining a PhD degree in drama studies (humanistic studies) in 1983 (University of Warsaw).

He worked as a teacher in the city of Kirkuk in the first half of the 1970s, and after his emigration to Poland in 1976, he has worked as a lecturer in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw from 1980 until the present day. He also worked in Algeria as a lecturer of drama and Arabic literature at the University of Tizi Ouzou in 1985-1988. He was a visiting scholar at the University of Indiana (USA) in the academic year 1993-1994. In addition to his specialization dealing with comparative theater, culture and literature of exile, Hatif is also a specialist on intercultural dialogue.

He also is a member of various associations, including the Iraqi Literary Union, Polish Literary Association and Polish Pen Club. His poems, research and writings have been published in many Arabic magazines, including those from Iraq, Poland and the USA. His name was mentioned in more than twenty international intellectual and poetic encyclopedias, especially in English and Polish. His poetry was received more than thirty studies in Arabic, Polish, English, Czech and French, including a study written by the author of this book in 1999. A number of his poems were also translated into languages, such as Polish, English, French, German, Persian, Kurdish, Czech, Slovak and Russian. He has also received several international awards.

Hatif Janabi is one of the best known translators from Polish to Arabic and vice versa. He has translated at least 50 books, studies or articles into Arabic in the fields of poetry, stories and criticism. Some of them are done with his own presentation. They are for example: Wiesława Szymborska, *Poetry Collection* and her Nobel acceptance speech, Al-Mada 1997; Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *Heritage and Contemporary in the Work of the Writer Laila al-Othman*, Al-Mada 1997; Tadeusz Różewicz, *Selected Poems and Essays*, Al-Mada 1998; Czesław Miłosz, *The Praise of the Bird*, selected poems with a translation of his Nobel acceptance speech, Al-Mada 2001; Wiesława Szymborska, *The End and the Beginning and Other Poems*, Al Mada 2002; Janusz Kurczak, *How Do You Love the Child?*, 2002; Zygmunt Komorowski, *Star of the South*, translation of his African poems, review: Janusz Danecki, 2015.

Also worthy of mention is his published academic book *Arab Theater: Its Origins, History and Experimental Experiences, Comparative Study*, Dialogue, Warsaw 1995, his poetic collections: *The Book of the East*, translated from Arabic to Polish by Janusz Danecki, Warsaw 1983; *Broken Poetry*, translated by the poet together with Jan Leńczuk, Białystok 1987; *Wild Continents*, Arabic-Polish poetry, Warsaw 1991; *The Dust of Gazelle*, Warsaw 1992; *Angels of Mercy*, Warsaw 1995; *Questions and their Retinue* 1992-1994, selected poems translated with an introduction by Khaled Mattawa, The University of Arkansas, USA 1996; *Babylon Searches for Babylon*, selected poems, Warsaw 1998;

Paradises. Deer and Soliders, Damascus 1998; *Le Midi Arabe*, anthology, translation and presentation by Abdulfattah Makoudi, Paris 2007; *Earth and Sky Ceremonies*, poems in Polish language, Białystok 2009; *A Desire between Two Clouds*, Beirut 2009; *An Appointment with a Knife's Blade*, Beirut 2012; *If You Enter our Home, The Threshold Will Kiss Your Feet*, Baghdad 2013; *Fish Banquet*, Baghdad 2017; and *Guest* which will appear in this year.

His biography also shows that he is still active in preparing a book on Arabic literature in exile, especially Iraqi poetry, a study on Arabic culture, a number of translations into Arabic and collecting all his poetry in a single volume.

The richness of Hatif Janabi's biography leads us to confirm that the forty years of his creative production is not a coincidence or an incidental "transitory" case, but it reflects his solid work and unstinting efforts. The poet knows how to keep his poetic words glowing with astonishment, brightness and transparency, with numerous values, ideas and themes. Without any doubt, his poetic creation will remain an important accent in postmodern Arabic poetry, especially that of Iraq. His *Fish Banquet* and the poetry of Hatif Janabi are evidence of his poetic possibilities, valuable experimentation and his professionalism.

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