

Title: A semiotic study of excerpts from poems (MarhaGhilan, Qafilat al-Diyaf, and Ruya fi 1956) by BadrShakir al-Sayyab

Meftah Aouadj

University of Batna 1 – Algeria, meftah.aouadj@univ-batna.dz

Received: 13.02.2025 Accepted: 11.03.2025 Publishing: 15.05.2025 Doi: 10.56334/sei/8.4.56¹

Abstract

This article explores an aspect of contemporary studies in Arabic language and literature, specifically semiotic studies in Arabic poetry. It includes an analysis of excerpts from selected poems by Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, namely *Marḥā Ghīlān*, *Qāfilat al-Ḍayāʾ* (The Caravan of Loss), and *Ruʾyā fī ʿĀm 1956* (A Vision in 1956). The study applies semiotic analysis to these poems, highlighting the significance of this approach in the field of Arabic language and literature. Semiotic analysis is considered a fundamental component in modern and contemporary literary studies, particularly in poetry, which has enriched the Arab literary heritage with profound poetic interpretations.

Keywords: Semiotics, Arabic poetry, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, semiotic analysis, contemporary literary studies.

Introduction

The emergence of modern studies in Arabic language and literature had a significant impact on shifting the general methodological approach from a historically dominated perspective—which had prevailed over most studies and monopolized the field of Arabic language and literature for many eras. This dominance resulted in relying solely on the findings of disciplines subjected to historical analysis. However, this transformation, which coincided with the industrial renaissance, led to liberation from these traditional approaches, which were, at the time, seen as bound to methods no longer aligned with the realities of that era. Consequently, modern methods and studies in Arabic language and literature emerged and gradually came to dominate various linguistic and literary research fields. This shift marked a turning point that gave rise to numerous theories and led to innovative contributions and results that scholars of that period utilized to develop linguistic and literary methodologies and apply them across different studies.

In the realm of Arabic language and literature, some poets, writers, and critics began to adopt these diverse modern approaches in order to provide a new dimension to Arabic studies—particularly in

1 CC BY 4.0. © The Author (s). Publisher: IMCRA. Authors expressly acknowledge the authorship rights of their works and grant the journal the first publication right under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License International CC-BY, which allows the published work to be freely distributed to others, provided that the original authors are cited and the work is published in this journal.

Citation. Aouadj M. (2025). A semiotic study of excerpts from poems (MarhaGhilan, Qafilat al-Diyaf, and Ruya fi 1956) by BadrShakir al-Sayyab. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(4), 522-530; doi: 10.56334/sei/8.4.56. <https://imcra-az.org/archive/362-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-4-volvi-2025.html>

poetry. Some scholars endeavored to apply these methods to various poetic texts in an effort to break away from the traditionalism that had overwhelmed much of Arabic literary criticism. This raises several questions: To what extent were these modern approaches compatible with the specificities of the Arabic language and literature? Were scholars of Arabic language and literature able to enhance the substance and analysis of poetic texts? And to what degree can these studies—especially semiotic analysis—be considered a valuable asset that contributed to transforming the analysis of linguistic and literary studies from new and modern perspective.

This scientific approach, built upon various individual efforts, did not belong to a specific classification that would allow one to categorize each study within a defined field. Rather, it represented merely the beginnings. The researchers' focus shifted toward studying language use instead of the language itself, with growing attention to the rules of discourse, principles of conversational cooperation, and the logic of politeness. All of this aimed to facilitate communication within the framework of natural language and contextual requirements. Gradually, this led to a transition from superficial studies to a deeper exploration of poetic text construction, which began to exhibit broader semantic dimensions and profound poetic philosophy. This was made possible through the adoption of various modern and contemporary approaches that enriched the treasury of Arabic poetic heritage (Madour, 2012, p. 48).

Among these approaches is the semiotic method, which represented a revolution in the science of poetic analysis within the field of Arabic language and literature. "Semiotics is considered a branch of knowledge that has marked modern studies... Since its emergence, it has been concerned with interpreting meanings, symbols, and signs... And despite the multiplicity of its terms and interpretations, it has rendered great services to modern scholarship." (Dani, 2013, p. 147)

It is well known that various sciences often emerge in the form of modest, unstructured, and incomplete ideas and beginnings. Later, a scholar typically arises who elaborates on these sciences, lays down their foundations, clarifies their characteristics, distinguishes their components, and solidifies their concepts. In the early stages, there may have only been a few terms and expressions used within a narrow scope, without any significant expansion. However, over time, certain scholars systematized the discipline and established its representative rules and principles. "The features of renewal began with the Russian Formalists, Ferdinand de Saussure, and the Structuralists, leading eventually to Semiotics, which liberated literature and texts from the dominance of Structuralism, and finally to Deconstruction, which developed Semiotics further—opening new horizons in the search for what is hidden within literary texts." (Laila et al.) Thus, "modern semiotics was considered a qualitative leap in the development of the sciences, as it appeared—in its foundations, concepts, and outcomes—as an entirely new discipline. It is a new method for understanding and analyzing phenomena, with its own boundaries, concepts, and tools. Semiotics is not merely an extension of Structuralism, for example, or of any similar theory in the field of inquiry. Rather, it is a reaction against them. Modern semiotics emerged to dismantle and challenge previous theories, offering a different theoretical framework for phenomena and a new perspective on how to analyze and understand them. Therefore—despite its diverse intellectual background and rich historical legacy—it can be said to represent a qualitative shift and an epistemological break from the theories that preceded it." (Al-Maljami, p. 33)

Poem: *Marḥā Ghilān* (Rejoice, Ghilān)

((Baba ... Baba))

Yansābu ṣawtuka fī aẓ-ẓalām, ilayya, ka-l-maṭar al-ghaḍīr

(Your voice flows in the darkness, to me, like gentle rain)

Yansābu min khilālī an-nu'ās wa anta tarkudu fī as-sarīr

(It flows through drowsiness as you lie in bed)

Min ayy ru'yā jā'a? Ayy samāwah? Ayy inṭilāq?

(From what vision did it come? What heaven? What soaring flight?)

Wa aẓillu asbaḥu fī rashāsh minhu, asbaḥu fī 'abīr

(And I keep swimming in its shower, swimming in its fragrance)

Fa-ka'anna awdiyat al-'Irāq

(It is as if the valleys of Iraq)

Fataḥat nawāfidh min ru'āka 'alā saḥādī, kull wādin

(Have opened windows from your visions onto my wakefulness. Each valley)

Wahabat-hu 'Ishtār al-azāhir wa aṭ-ṭimār

(Ishtar has gifted blossoms and fruits)

Ka'anna rūḥī

(It is as if my soul)

Fī turbat aẓ-ẓulmā' ḥabbatu ḥinṭah wa ṣadāka mā'

(In the dark soil is a grain of wheat, and your echo is water)

A 'lant ba'thī yā samā'

(You have proclaimed my rebirth, O sky)

Hādhā khulūdī fī al-ḥayāt, takunnu ma'nāhū ad-dimā'

(This is my eternity in life, its meaning held in blood)

The poet begins with the title he chose—*Marḥā Ghilān* (Rejoice, Ghilān)—based on a mythological vision deeply rooted in the collective imagination of many cultures: the world of *ghouls*. It becomes clear that the poet is influenced by the unseen realms of mythology and often draws from stories passed down orally through generations. These inherited fantastical tales form key elements in his poetic compositions, where he employs obscure terms and hidden symbols across various poems for poetic purposes rooted in his inner world. In this poem, the poet conveys the event of civilization's formation by drawing a parallel with the formation of a family. Each element mentioned has a specific role it fulfills. He likens the birth of civilization in Iraq to the initial stages of human life in the womb. He begins by using the phrase “your voice flows” rather than “I hear your voice,” placing himself in the position of a receiver. He introduces the setting as night—a time defined by stillness and calm, where even the slightest movement or sound is clearly perceptible—unlike daytime, characterized by noise that blurs sound distinctions. The focus is not merely on the sound, but on an essential human trait. He presents the voice as a biological phenomenon that defines human presence, comparing it to rain—not to thunder or wind or any other force. Rain, unlike those, is beneficial—its fall brings life and renewal. Then he asks: “From what vision did it come? From what sky? What origin?” He uses the word *vision* rather than *dream* or *sleep*, because *vision* suggests a realization in reality—it carries the connotation of something destined to materialize. The poet portrays the formation of a human being as a swim through darkness, comparing it to *valleys* rather than *rivers*. Valleys are known for being filled with water at certain times, followed by dryness—unlike rivers, which are marked by the constancy of their flow. Likewise, human life has defined stages before it emerges into existence. He then continues:

Fataḥat nawāfidh min ru'āk 'alā saḥādī kullu wādin

(It opened windows from your visions onto my wakefulness — every valley)

Wa habat-hu 'Ishtār al-azāhir wa ath-thimār
(And Ishtar gifted it flowers and fruits)

Ka'anna rūḥī fī turbat aẓ-ẓulmā' ḥabbatu ḥiṭṭah wa ṣadāka mā'
(As if my soul, in the dark soil, were a grain of wheat, and your echo — water)

The mouth of the valley flows into the sea, which is characterized by its vastness and immeasurability—its expanse is beyond full comprehension. Similarly, when a human is born, they are cast into a life without boundaries. The poet then mentions *Ishtar*, a mythical goddess associated with flowers and fruit-bearing—symbolizing birth and fertility. This allusion is a clear reference to his birth in Iraq. He does not explicitly mention Iraq, but rather refers to one of its symbolic features—Ishtar, a well-known cultural icon among Iraqis. He then continues:

A'lanta ba'thī yā samā'

(You have proclaimed my rebirth, O sky)

Hādhā khulūdī fī al-ḥayāh, takunnu ma'nāhū ad-dimā'

(This is my eternity in life — its meaning held in blood)

The sky does not proclaim resurrection; rather, the intended meaning is the Lord of the heavens. As for *eternity*, it refers to life in this world and the deeds one performs during it, even after death. It is as if the poet is saying that when a person is alive in this world, they are truly living—and when they die, they are questioned about what they did during their lifetime. He likens this idea to a form of *eternity in the world*.

Poem: Qāfilat al-Ḍayā' (The Caravan of Loss)

A-ra'ayta qāfilat aḍ-ḍiyā'? Amā ra'ayta an-nāzihīn?
(Have you seen the caravan of the lost? Have you not seen the displaced?)

Al-ḥāmilīn 'alā al-kawāhil, min majā'āt as-sinīn
(Those bearing on their shoulders the famines of the years)

Āthām kull al-khāṭi'īn
(The sins of all the wrongdoers)

An-nāzifīn bilā dimā'
(Bleeding without blood)

As-sā'irīn ilā warā'
(Walking backward)

Kay yadfinū (Hābīl) wa huwa 'alā aṣ-ṣalīb rukām ṭīn?
(To bury (Abel) while he lies on the cross, a heap of clay?)

(Qābīl, ayna akhūka, ayna akhūka)
((Cain, where is your brother, where is your brother))

Jamma'at as-samā'
(The sky gathered itself)

Āmādahā lituṣṭh. Kawwarat an-nujūm ilā nidā'
(Stretched out its spans to scream. It rolled the stars into a cry)

(Qābīl, ayna akhūk?)
((Cain, where is your brother?))

Yarqudu fī khiyām al-lāji'īn
(He lies in the tents of the refugees)

As-silu yūhinu sālidayh, wa ji'tuhu anā bid-dawā'
(Tuberculosis weakens his arms, and I came to him with the medicine)

In these lines, the poet speaks about the Palestinian cause and the sorrow and suffering it brings to both the Palestinian and Arab peoples. He begins by questioning through the following phrase:

الضياع؟ أما رأيت النازحين؟ (أرأيت قافلة)
The purpose of this question is not for the poet to receive an answer, but rather to express denial and to present this tragic image of displacement—or what is known as the Palestinian refugees. He likens their displacement to a "caravan of loss." Typically, the term *caravan* refers to something commercial or beneficial, but the poet added the term *loss* and did not call it a *caravan of migration*, since migration is generally understood as a journey from one place to another with a clear path. Instead, he used *loss*, a term that conveys wandering, confusion, or the inability to find the intended way along this obscure path. Then he continues:

Al-ḥāmilīn 'alā al-kawāhil, min majā'āt as-sinīn
(Those bearing on their shoulders the famines of the years)

Āthām kull al-khāṭi'īn
(The sins of all the wrongdoers)

An-nāzifīn bilā dimā'
(Those who bleed without blood)

As-sā'irīn ilā warā'
(Those who walk backward)

These displaced people, who bear the burden of their cause, carry the sins of all those wrongdoers who were responsible for their forced migration and for handing over their land to the Zionist Jews. They bleed, but without blood—an emotional bleeding, deep wounds, and immense suffering. Their suffering is unlike that of other occupied peoples. There is a difference between expelling a colonizer while you are still in your own country, and a different reality when your colonizer displaces you instead of being expelled. This represents a kind of backward movement in their lives. Such actions are only carried out by wild, savage animals that drive other animals away from their prey and territory. There has never been a case in world history where colonizers expelled the original inhabitants of a land—except for the Zionists. This approach reflects a brutal, animalistic way of thinking. Then he continues:

Kay yadfinū (Hābīl) wa huwa 'alā aṣ-ṣalīb rukām ṭīn?
(To bury (Abel) while he lies on the cross, a heap of clay?)

(Qābīl, ayna akhūka, ayna akhūka)
((Cain, where is your brother, where is your brother?))

Jamma'at as-samā'
(The sky gathered itself)

Āmādahā lituṣṭh. Kawwarat an-nujūm ilā nidā'
(Stretched its expanses to scream. It rolled the stars into a cry)

(Qābīl, ayna akhūk?)

((Cain, where is your brother?))

Yarqudu fī khiyām al-lāji'īn

(He lies in the tents of the refugees)

As-silu yūhinu sāl'idayh, wa ji'tuhu anā bid-dawā'

(Tuberculosis weakens his arms, and I came to him with the medicine)

The word "they bury" is not meant to refer to the present time, but rather to revive a past history that this land does not belong to the Palestinians. The proof lies in the story of Cain and Abel, who were in this land, and the claim, "We are more entitled to it than you." The poet's question, "Where is your brother?" is intended to illustrate how the Jews came to Palestine and worked to gather and consolidate their people. The question aims to identify the true descendants of the Jews in order to intensify settlement in Palestine today. They are expanding settlements by searching for genuine Jews. Therefore, the poet uses the symbolic figures of Cain and Abel—two brothers whose existence is nearly universally accepted—as a metaphor. The Jews do not accept anyone whose Jewishness is doubtful, and they are very strict about this. Hence, the poet uses the symbolism of verifying identity through the story of the two brothers, Cain and Abel. He then continues:

Jamma'at as-samā'

(The sky gathered itself)

Āmādahā lituṣṭh. Kawwarat an-nujūm ilā nidā'

(It stretched out its reaches to scream. It rolled the stars into a cry)

The sky does not gather; rather, this symbol and its meaning refer to everyone on earth under the sky who is addressed by this call. This call is a search for Abel, to which the poet responds:

He lies in the tents of the refugees, lost and without a home. The poet's use of the word "refugees" symbolizes their lack of a homeland.

Then come the following lines:

Wa al-jū' la'nat Ādam al-ūlā, wārith al-hālikīn

(And hunger is Adam's first curse, the inheritance of the doomed)

Sāwāhu wa al-ḥayawān, thumma ramāhū asfala as-sāfilīn

(It made him equal to the beast, then cast him to the lowest of the low)

Wa rafa'uhu anā bir-rahīm, mina al-ḥaḍīd ilā al-'alā'

(But I raised him with bread, from the pit to the heights)

Al-layl yajhīd, wa as-safā'īn muthqalātun bil-ghuzāh

(The night is miscarrying, and the ships are heavy with invaders)

Bil-fātiḥīn mina al-yahūd

(With conquerors from among the Jews)

The phrase "hunger is Adam's first curse, the heir of the doomed" does not serve to explain this issue but rather points to the original sin whose consequence was Adam's fall to the earth. This fall is the condition we find ourselves in now, with all its realities. The phrase "he made him like the animal" refers to the incident when Adam ate from the forbidden tree, which revealed his likeness to animals—not that he became an animal, but that his condition resembled the way animals live. Then comes the

phrase “he cast him among the lowest,” meaning the descent to earth. The poet then says, “And I raised him with the bread from the depths to the heights,” meaning that when a person is in such a state and is honored, he feels himself moving from one condition to another. Similarly, when Palestinians dispersed into Arab countries, these countries embraced each Palestinian and offered them all they would give their own people, as if they became part of them. In this state, they felt they moved from the depths where they were in their homeland to the heights they reached with their brothers in all other countries. Then he says, “The night aborts,” where the word *abort* refers to a deliberate act of miscarriage that leads to death. Likewise, the Jews’ action is killing and displacement under cover of night, to carry out forced migration and receive ships loaded with invaders—who are the Jews—establishing their foothold in Haifa, that is, securing their presence in this homeland.

Qaṣīdat: (Ru’yā fī ‘Ām 1956)
(Poem: (A Vision in the Year 1956))

Ḥaṭṭat ar-ru’yā ‘alā ‘aynayya ṣaqrān min laḥīb
(The vision landed on my eyes, a falcon of flame)

Innahā tanquḍḍu, tajtuth as-sawād
(It swoops down, uprooting the darkness)

Taqṭa‘ al-a‘ṣāb tamṭiṣ al-qudhā min kull
(It severs nerves, sucking the pus from every)

Jafnin, fa-al-maghīb
(Eyelid — thus the sunset)

‘Ād minhā taw’aman lis-ṣubḥ anhar al-midād
(From it returned a twin of dawn — rivers of ink)

Laysa taṭfī ghallat ar-ru’yā: ṣaḥārī min naḥīb
(The vision’s harvest does not extinguish: deserts of lamentation)

Min juḥūrīn talfaz al-ashlā’, hal jā’a al-ma’ād?
(From burrows that spit out limbs, has the resurrection come?)

Ahu ba‘thun, ahu mawtun, ahī nār am ramād?
(Is it rebirth, death, fire, or ashes?)

Ayyuhā aṣ-ṣaqr al-ilāhī al-gharīb
(O strange divine falcon)

Ayyuhā al-munquḍḍu min Olympus fī ṣamt as-samā’
(O swooping one from Olympus in the silence of the sky)

Rāfi‘an rūḥī li-aṭbāq as-samā’
(Raising my soul to the layers of the sky)

Rāfi‘an rūḥī ghanīmīdan jarīḥan
(Raising my soul, wounded and triumphant)

Ṣālīban ‘aynayya Tammūzan masīḥan
(Crucifying my eyes, a July Messiah)

In these verses, the poet conveys a description of what he calls a vision, which consists of unfortunate events he refers to as a “vision” rather than a dream or a sleep vision because a vision carries the quality of actual realization in reality. This vision settled upon his eye, and he chose the eye because when you

express seeing something, you say “I saw a vision,” meaning you saw something in the subconscious, which is linked to the eye. He called it a falcon, known for its speed and killing power, and did not mention the dove because the dove is a well-known symbol of peace. This blaze that consumed everything resulted in a blurring of night and day in terms of clarity. Normally, dusk is marked by the onset of darkness, but because of the overwhelming horror, it became impossible to distinguish dusk from dawn. Then he says:

‘Āda minhā taw’aman lis-ṣubḥ anhar al-midād
(From it returned a twin of dawn — rivers of ink)

Laysa taṭfī ghallat ar-ru’yā: ṣaḥārī min naḥīb
(The vision’s harvest does not extinguish: deserts of lamentation)

The meaning of “returning from it as a twin of the morning” is that night is typically known for sleep, while not sleeping means being awake and alert—features of the day. So, the night shares this trait with the day and becomes its twin. The phrase “rivers of ink” signifies that this person is ill and has been treated; it refers to an old practice where some people would write on small pieces of paper with ink to ward off frightening dreams. However, despite this, the treatment is ineffective. The phrase “deserts of lamentation” symbolizes the words the person utters, as if they are cries of sorrow for what has happened to him. Then he says:

Min juḥūrīn talfaz al-ashlā’, hal jā’a al-ma’ād?
(From burrows that spit out limbs, has the resurrection come?)

Ahu ba’tḥun, ahu mawtun, ahī nār am ramād?
(Is it rebirth, death, fire, or ashes?)

The word **Juḥūr** refers to those structures made of clay and earth that resemble burrows. The phrase **al-Ashlā’** means everything that comes out of them. The goal is not **ash-shifā’** (true healing), but rather to present what is there and then expel it without follow-up. This signifies the loss of **aṭ-ṭibb** (medicine) and a return to **al-māḍī** (the past). The intended meaning is a return to a former time after wars have occurred and everything is gone, as if **al-mī’ād** (the appointed time) has come. He then wonders: is it **al-ba’tḥ** (resurrection) or **al-mawt** (death)?

Conclusion

It can be said that modern studies have significantly contributed to elevating the artistic and aesthetic level of poetic poems. Studies related to the Arabic language and literature, especially poetry, witnessed a qualitative transformation from the traditional historical approach to modern analysis based on contemporary critical methods. This shift resulted in a rich analytical depth and profound content that added a distinctive poetic dimension to the texts, particularly with the adoption of approaches such as semiotic study. Without the emergence of these modern methodologies, the high artistic value of poetic texts by major poets would not have surfaced. Among these poets, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab stood out by employing various techniques in his poetry, such as allusion, hidden symbols, exquisite imagery, and artistic ambiguity, which imparted latent meanings and poetic ideas with philosophical and creative dimensions. Al-Sayyab’s poetic experience was also influenced by well-known myths, such as Ishtar, the spirit, and death, which he deeply utilized in the structure and meanings of his poems.

References

- Al-Maljami, A. A. Modern Semiotics: Origins and Extensions. *Semiotics Journal*, 17(1).
- Dani, M. (2013). On the Essence of Semiotics and the Image. *Simaat Journal, Bahrain*, 4(2).
- Laila, S., Sheikh Mohammed, R., & Siham Salama, A. The Semiotic Approach in Analyzing the Literary Text. *Annual of the Faculty of Islamic and Arabic Studies for Girls, Alexandria* (33).
- Madour, M. (2012). Speech Act Theory Between Arab Heritage and Modern Approaches. *Al-Wahat Journal, Algeria*(16).