

Female Representation of Sana'a in Al-Baradduni's Poetry

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Abstract

Modern Arabic poetry is fraught with creative representation of major Arab cities specially the ancient ones. The present paper explores the representation of one of the most ancient Arab cities, Sana'a, by the well-known Yemeni poet Abdullah Al-Baradduni. It expounds how this poet represents Sana'a city as a lady with female qualities and characteristics.

Most poems of Al-Baradduni about Sana'a portray it as a woman from different angles and perspectives that reflect the poet's attachment to this city and his attitudes towards the social and political events and changes that took place in Sana'a. This representation also reveals Al-Baradduni's poetic style as realized in his ample use of symbolism and irony.

Keywords: Al-Baradduni, Sana'a, city, representation, symbolism, revolution, Imamate Regime, irony.

Introduction

Generally speaking, Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, is known for its beautiful ancient architecture, weather and its deeply rooted place in history. It is a very ancient city whose importance and beauty have drawn the attention of many travelers, writers and historians since early periods of history. In his book *Al-Ikleel*, Al-Hamdani, the well-known Arab historian and traveller, describes Sana'a as a matchless city on the earth (9). Another historian called Al-Razi describes Sana'a city as the most wonderful city on the earth and the most delightful of all of God's countries due to its extraordinary climate, weather, geography, etc. (*History of Sana'a City* 147).

Abdullah Al-Baradduni is one of the most prominent modern Arab poets known for his poetic creativity and renewal of contents and versification of Arabic poetry (Ezzideen Isma'il, *Issues in Modern Arabic Poetry* 87). His great poetic skills are clearly noticed in the way he represents the topics and themes in his poetry best realized in the portrayal of Sana'a city. When reading Al-Baradduni's poems about Sana'a, one can feel that this city is described and addressed as a real lady with all female qualities and connotations.

Al-Baradduni's Vision of City

Having lived in city for the major part of his life, Al-Baradduni formed a special vision of city in general as can be noticed in his famous poem "The City of Tomorrow". Commenting on this poem, Bahjat Salib says, "the poet is dreaming of an ideal new city. The images drawn in the poem are all hopeful images of life and rebirth" (*Three Contemporary Yemeni Poets* 9). This vision can be seen in the lines below:

Since ages you have been the magic of words
The waited wishes and the dreams of gestures
One day, you will rise up unpromised
restoring brightness to dry plants
planting sympathy in each valley
making a road in each lane. (*Al-Baradduni's Complete Poetic Works* 452)

It is clear that this city refers to the idealistic vision of a modern city and how it should be a place of peace, love and happiness. This ideal city can stand for the poet's quest for the lost innocence, dreams, salvation and wishes for rebirth of a better life. On the other hand, this imaginary city can refer to Sana'a itself since the poet has wishes and dreams of Sana'a city to be in much better conditions.

Al-Baradduni and Sana'a City: Biographical Links

Although Al-Baradduni was born in Dhamar, another Yemeni city, he left it at the age of 13 heading for Sana'a, which attracted him by its beauty, civilization, cultural heritage and learning centres. Since then the poet settled in Sana'a and became enchanted by its beauty and uniqueness; but at the same time, he started to realize its miseries, the obstacles to its progress as well as the suffering of its citizens.

Commenting on the poetry of Al-Baradduni about Sana'a, Al-Maqalih states that Al-Baradduni wrote about Sana'a with a high degree of sincerity and love for this city because in it he found his stability, warmth and respect from its residents (Al-Maqalih, Interview 2018).

This paper is confined to the poet's female representation of Sana'a, giving much emphasis on the major aspects of such portrayal and its thematic and artistic significance. These aspects of the female representation of Sana'a are discussed briefly below:

Sana'a as a Beautiful Lady

Some poems by Al-Baradduni present Sana'a as a beautiful lady with all physical charms. For instance, in the poem "Sana'a in Umayyad Hotel", the female Sana'a is described as having an attractive appearance:

Isn't this Sana'a?
Yes, she is here beaming with her cheerful countenance
and lofty height,
With her dark blue greenness and flavored discourse,
With her hills' freshness and fragrant pastures. (*BCPW* 797)

The poet here succeeds in mingling between the beautiful features of Sana'a the city and Sana'a, the woman by describing Sana'a beautiful appearance, stature, complexion, warm talk and fragrant smell.

In the poem "Abu Tammam and Today's Arabism", AL-Baradduni describes Sana'a city as a beautiful woman but, unfortunately, she is infected with diseases:

What shall I say about Sana'a, father?
A beauty whose two lovers are tuberculosis and itching.
But in her womb never died adoration and rapture. (BCPW 753)

The two diseases, tuberculosis and itching are metaphors that can stand for poverty and ignorance as well as corruption of political systems. Tuberculosis symbolizes internal corruption in the country and itching stands for external corruption coming from other countries (Abdullah Alwan, *Baraddunian Text and Approach* 111). However, the romance and cheerfulness of the female Sana'a are not hindered by her health state.

Sana'a as a Pregnant Woman

Another aspect of female representation of Sana'a is describing it as a pregnant woman as noticed in "Sana'a, Death and Rebirth":

As long as its sleep is pregnant,
Rebirth will never delay
Despite nausea, she longs for parturition,
Her imminent birth delivery is revealed by a bloody twilight and fair dawn.
(BCPW 627)

In these lines, the sleep or slumber of Sana'a is a metaphor of calmness and temporary stability. The portrayal of Sana'a here as a pregnant woman with all these conditions indicates the strong conflicts in Sana'a city among different political powers during the seventies of the 20th century such as the pro-revolution and anti-revolution groups (Alwan 53).

In the same poem, the poet goes on presenting Sana'a as a pregnant woman who is going to give birth to a new important baby:

Yet, despite the shortage of rain,
She is pregnant with Qahtan or Qarib,
Her sad eyes are telling of a coming Yemen,
Like a yearning dream; coming and going away. (BCPW 436)

This pregnant city is expected to have a newborn baby hopefully to become a great leader of the country. Here Sana'a's pregnancy has a political implication as seen in the historical names

"Qahtan" and "Karib". These two historical figures symbolize any successful leader who is hoped to unite and rule the country successfully leading it to prosperity and progress.

It can be noticed that the pregnancy associated with Sana'a in these selected lines indicates the poet's optimism about the betterment and promising future of Sana'a, which stands for the whole country, whether it is realized in the fruit of the revolution or the need for prominent and successful leaders of this country.

Sana'a as a Depressed Woman

Some poems by Al-Baradduni show sadness of the lady Sana'a as can be noticed in the following lines from the poem "Sana'a in an Airplane":

Crying? Nay...
who would feel pity for your depression and sorrows?
Familiarity to miseries makes me see the weeping of women hollow. (BCPW 691)

Similarly, in "Sana'a at an Umayyad Hotel", the poet emphasizes the misery and depression that accompany the female Sana'a:

Her news is foggy, do you know her secrets?
Do you listen? which one of us is aware of his tragedy?
They console us through their trumpets,
As if they were more considerate to our victims than their knives.
(BCPW 798)

This poem expresses the poet's feelings towards his native town, Sana'a, and its tragic circumstances. The trumpets here symbolize world mass media such as radios, TV channels and newspapers that present events and miserable conditions in Yemen. The last line implies the poet's accusation of external intervention of some countries in Sana'a affairs, leading to its miseries.

Emphasizing the same gloomy image of the female Sana'a, the poet in "A City Without Face" describes this city as an emotionless woman whose beautiful and attractive aspect as well as everything around her have become dull and low-spirited:

Even the summer's nights are visionless,
And the spring flowers have become without fragrance,
Do you know that the sun over you can't see,
And your sick nights don't move,
Even love songs lost their passion,
And the verse eyes became void of poetry. (BCPW 603)

This melancholic and depressed picture of Sana'a is a result of frustrating conditions and constant political unrest that Sana'a witnessed during the 70s of the 20th century.

Sana'a as an Old Lady:

In some poems, Al-Baradduni portrays Sana'a as an old lady as seen in "A Song of Wood":

Is that Sana'a?
Her name runs away when inspected,
her lineage howls,
She is an aged woman groaning in the Ice Age,
Wearing the latest things that are brought to her. (BCPW 662)

It is noticeable that these lines have sharp images specially in describing Sana'a as an ageing woman that tries to wear latest fashionable dresses. The fashionable dresses here stand for modernity and openness to foreign cultures.

From another perspective, in the light of 26th September Revolution, 1962, the poet states that this revolution changes Sana'a from an old woman to a young cheerful one:

The aged Sana'a regained her youth,
With soiree lighting up all her parts. (BCPW 469)

This indicates the poet's optimism about the promises of the September Revolution that was made against the Imamate Regime, which ruled Sana'a and the North Part of Yemen before this revolution.

Sana'a as a Maidservant

In another image within the female representation, the poet portrays Sana'a as a maid as can be noticed in the following lines in "Sana'a in an Airplane":

Sana'a, when will you shun?
For it is said you were lofty once.
But as I have become the slave of the slaves,
You too have become a maid of female slaves. (BCPW 691)

Obviously, these lines carry political connotations specially in describing this city as a maid of maids, which can stand for submission and subordination to bad leaders or foreign powers. There is a clear political irony in these lines. The poet indicates that this submission is also shared by the residents of this city as can be seen in the poet's description of himself as the slave of the slaves.

Sana'a as the Poet's Companion

In addition to these female images, Al-Baradduni draws a unique picture of Sana'a as his travel companion:

In the travelling seat you are sitting,
Flying and nostalgic just as I am
Both of us have wooden wishes,
Shaken by violent memories. (BCPW 469)

These lines indicate that the companionship of the poet and Sana'a involves traveling and unachievable dreams. Both of them seem depressed.

In "Sana'a at an Ummayyad Hotel", the poet also emphasizes the same idea of travelling with his female companion, Sana'a:

I thought I got away from this gorgeous lady,
But from where did she come to enchant the epileptic room?
Whispering to me about everything,
asking "Where are departing? Slow down." (BCPW 798)

The poet here wonders how he is joined by his female companion Sana'a during his stay in another country. In a dramatic style, with a blaming tone, Sana'a also asks the poet why he has left her and wanted to be away from her. This shows that both the poet and the city are close friends who can not stand disunion and living away from each other.

Obviously, this imaginary portrayal of Sana'a and the poet as companions during going abroad shows them as two lovers who can not stand being away from each other. The closeness of these lovers can be seen through the dialogue and intimate talk to each other. Moreover, the poet shares eating with his beloved Sana'a as seen in his order of food for two persons not one:

I ordered breakfast for two,
"You are alone', they told me,
"No, Sana'a is with me", I replied. (BCPW 799)

This is a wonderful personification of Sana'a, showing the poet's deep love and attachment towards this city.

Female Sana'a Between Hope and Despair

Due to frequent upheavals and political conflicts, Sana'a sometimes appears confused and distracted between hope and despair. This can be obviously noticed in the following lines in "A City Without Face":

Are you inhaling dawn in darkness,
Without calm or a star indicating dawn coming?
In vain you are appealing to anything rising,
Your eyes are expecting dawn and Night of Power. (BCPW 604)

The poet asks Sana'a how she tries to breathe dawn breeze while darkness is still dominant. Sana'a is expecting the dawn coming but it has not really come. Symbolically speaking, darkness stands for ignorance and corrupt political system. The dawn symbolizes lost waited future and progress of the country after 1962 Revolution which was followed by political and ideological conflicts instead of stability and prosperity (Alwan 72). It is clear that the female Sana'a's dreams of a better life after the Revolution did not come true.

The same state of Sana'a wavering between hope and hopelessness is also illustrated in "Sana'a, Dream and Time":

Without awareness, you are glowing,
Your fire dies down without feelings,
Always dreaming but you have seen nothing,
You just place blames on ages.
Time is still letting you down,
So you rise just to set. (BCPW 586)

These lines imply that Sana'a has recurrent dreams but unfortunately, they are not fulfilled. Because of her frustration, Sana'a lays the blame for her unfulfilled dreams on ages and time. The last line above confirms that it is 'time' that fails Sana'a and acts as an obstacle to her dreams. Obviously, Sana'a's dreams in these lines refer to the dreams of Yemeni people about a good political system based on justice, freedom, welfare and prosperity. The phrase "you rise just to set" can mean that Sana'a revolutions against bad political regimes usually end in failure or the goals of such revolutions are diverted leading to another bad political system.

On the other hand, in the poem "Winds Friend", the poet presents Sana'a with a hopeful note about a good future:

O' dream, can you get a miracle,
That turns pebbles to light,
Sana'a is awaiting miracles,
Dreaming of a typical miracle. (BCPW 824)

The words "await" and "miracle" suggest that those dreams are very great and they require great leaders to achieve them in reality.

Sana'a and Modern Changes

During the Post-Revolution period, specially during the 70s of the 20th century, Sana'a witnessed immense expansion in construction and buildings. These changes and expansion in buildings negatively affected the beautiful architecture of the Old City of Sana'a.

The poem "A Citizen of Sana'a Searching for Sana'a" summarizes the impact of such changes. Written in an interesting dramatic style, this poem shows the (speaker) hero's search for his beautiful old city of Sana'a that has been lost in the new city due to random expansion and investment in this city at the cost of the beautiful architecture and scenery of the Old City. According to Alwan (82), the setting of this poem refers to 1972, the year of political reconciliation between the pro-revolution and anti-revolution groups (the Republicans and Imamate supporters respectively). But there were still ongoing political clashes as shown at ideological and business levels. So during this period, there was an increasing interest in investment in this city in trading and lands under the disguise of bringing development and modernity to Sana'a city.

Through the following lines, the poet summarizes negative changes in the architecture of Sana'a city:

Is this Sana'a?

Sana'a is no longer seen but some old pieces.
Just five years drove away her free Azalian face. (BCPW 372)

The five years mentioned in the line above refers to the period extending from 1967 until 1972 which witnessed openness to foreign culture as well as investment and plots or lands trading (Alwan 83).

Skillfully, the poet summarizes his agony and anger at these negative changes that occurred in Sana'a by choosing a female image of Sana'a; "her Azalian face", which shows Sana'a as a beautiful woman whose beauty is distorted by the acts of others.

The same idea is also emphasized in the poem " Memories of Two Old Men", in which the poet expresses his anger and indifference to the changes that are taking place in society and Sana'a city:

Nothing remained as in the past,
So, nothing is worthy of sadness or happiness,
Sana'a has entered a new gate,
I wish she'd know to where it is leading her! (BCPW 589)

There is a note of warning for the female Sana'a to be aware of this dangerous new gate and route, which refers to new social, political and architectural changes that happened to this city.

Conclusion

To sum up, Al-Baradduni represents Sana'a as a lady from different angles and points of views according to the thematic and artistic nature of his poems about this city. So, for example, when he wants to show the beauty of this city, he presents it as a beautiful lady, and when aiming at expressing his love for it, he portrays it as his companion or beloved lady. The poet also uses this female representation of Sana'a to address historical, social and political issues and changes that happened in this city and in Yemen in general. It is noticed that adopting the female portrayal of Sana'a makes the poems more interesting, vivid, dramatic and suggestive. All these aspects show the thematic and artistic creativity in Al-Baradduni's poetry.

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