

The Last Iraqi Communist: Saadi Youssef (1934-2021)

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At the Casablanca Book Fair in Morocco back in 2009, the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef was signing the seventh volume of his *Complete Poetic Works*. A flock of junior high school girls in their blue uniforms were standing nearby. One of them pointed to her friend, telling Youssef: “She, too, is a poet.” He smiled and gestured to the young poet to come forward. She hesitated: “I’m just a beginner.” “I, too, am a beginner. We are all beginners,” said Youssef. The septuagenarian who uttered those words is widely recognized as one of the greatest modern Arab poets. When he uttered those words, he had been writing and publishing poetry for more than half a century. It was neither a hyperbolic statement, nor false modesty on his part. Well into his 80s, one of the most remarkable features of Youssef’s poetry (and his persona) was his restlessness. He was audacious (even reckless, at times) and on an incessant quest for new beginnings.

Youssef’s life began in 1934 in Abu al-Khaseeb, near Basra, in southern Iraq where lush palm groves line the banks of the Shatt al-Arab, the river formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, before it ends at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf. His personal and political trajectory is intertwined with Iraq’s modern history and its tumults. There are peculiar parallels: the country gained its formal independence from Great Britain in 1932, two years before Youssef was born. It was ruled by a pro-British monarchy, supported by feudal landowners and the privileged urban classes, and increasingly unpopular among large segments of the have-nots. Youssef was born to a poor family the same year the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was founded. Socialist ideas struck roots among the workers in the port city of Basra and found fertile ground among the landless peasants in the south. As a child, Youssef saw downtrodden seasonal workers pass through his village. A disproportionate number of Iraqi writers in the 1940s (and later decades) flocked to the ICP. Youssef joined the party as a teenager and received the first leaflet from [Badr Shakir al-Sayyab](#) (1926–1964), a pioneering figure in modern Arabic poetry and an inspiration and early mentor. Al-Sayyab later abandoned his communism, but Youssef remained unrepentant until his last breath. Youssef’s activism and involvement in the ranks of the ICP landed him in prison several times. He was forced to spend long years in exile in several countries, and this had a tremendous impact on his worldview and poetry. He was imprisoned in 1957 and left Iraq, returning after the 1958 revolution which toppled the pro-British monarchy and proclaimed Iraq a republic. The first republican period, marked by socially progressive politics and massive support for the ICP, ended abruptly when the Ba’ath Party staged its first coup in 1963 and initiated a terror campaign against communists, imprisoning and executing many of them. Youssef was imprisoned and threatened with execution. Years later, he recalled how he was subjected to a mock execution while blindfolded. He fled the country upon his release and settled in newly independent Algeria, where he worked as a teacher from 1964 to 1971.

Youssef studied Arabic Literature at Baghdad’s Teachers’ College, an institution that produced the luminaries of modern Arabic poetry: the aforementioned al-Sayyab and [Nazik al-Mala’ika](#) (1923–2007). Both are credited with pioneering the Free Verse Movement in Arabic poetry and breaking with traditional metrical forms and structures. Youssef published his first collection, *The*

Pirate, in 1952. His early works may seem traditional in hindsight, but they show an emerging poet in command of his craft, firmly anchored in the Arabic tradition and trying to stake his own territory in a crowded and competitive poetic landscape. One of his most memorable lines from a later period crystallizes Youssef's philosophy: "I walk with everyone, but my step is mine alone." In my reading, it speaks to his strong desire and ability to inhabit and bridge the space between solidarity and singularity. His poems allow for both collective and individual subjectivities, desires, and dreams to coexist and converse:

All songs have ended, except the people's songs
[...]
I purposefully forgot what's between the people and me
I am one of them
I resemble them
and from them
the voice returns.

Unlike most of his contemporaries and the major poets of the era, Youssef was not seduced by mythology or metaphysics, nor was he interested in perpetuating a prophetic or Nietzschean poetic persona à la Adonis. As many a critic has pointed out, Youssef's poems brought Arabic poetry down to earth. His unmediated poetry spoke of and to Iraq's landscape (and every landscape he visited after he left Iraq) and was inhabited by citizens, workers, and prisoners. He was in search of the poetic in the minutiae of daily lived experience. His poetic discourse and diction were not haughty. In his own words, the tool his poetry uses "is the most common, ordinary and quotidian one in people's lives. It can be found in the market and on a child's lips before being in a book. It is a simple, accessible and democratic tool. It is the language used by all." In addition to quotidian language, the rhythm of his poetry was influenced by narrative prose genres, particularly the short story early on. His mastery of Arabic meters and an experienced ear gives his poems a unique fluidity and musicality.

Youssef has been called a trans-generational poet because of his transcendent impact. In an homage on Youssef's 70th birthday, the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) acknowledged Saadi's influence and stressed their poetic camaraderie:

Ever since I read Saadi Youssef he became the closest to my poetic taste. One finds the lucidity of a watercolor painting in his transparent poems and the rhythm of daily life in their soft tone. He established a new rhetoric, ascetic on the surface, but in search of essence at its core. [He] is like no other Arab poet. [...] If every poet contains several poets within and if the text is a conversation with other texts, as Octavio Paz says, then Saadi Youssef was one of the poets whose poetry trained me to excavate the poetic in what is seemingly non-poetic. [...] I have been asked often about my dry spells and I would always say: As long as Saadi is writing, I feel he is writing on my behalf.

Youssef credits his long stay in Algeria as an important phase of maturity and exploration. He was already familiar with French, but his Algerian years allowed him access to Francophone poetry. The distance from Iraq gave him ample space to take stock and to find new horizons. In *Far from the First Sky* (the title of one of his collections from that period), revolutionary lyricism was abandoned to make way for contemplations of personal and collective defeats. Internal and existential exile becomes more pronounced. In Algeria, he created Al-Akhdar bin Youssef, a memorable poetic alter ego. By the 1970s, Youssef enjoyed considerable fame in Iraq and the Arab world and was already a very influential poet. He was also one of the major literary translators of the Arab world. His prolific

(more than 3,000 pages) translations (via English) include the works of Whitman, Cavafy, García Lorca, Yannis Ritsos, Popa, Ungaretti, as well as novels by Naipaul, David Malouf, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka, among others.

Youssef returned to Iraq after the ICP entered into an alliance with the ruling Ba'ath Party in 1973. But the regime was merely buying time, and this was a cynical move to lure opponents into the open while constructing a police state and preparing for a campaign of Ba'athification. Only a few years later, pressure and intimidation of communists and non-Ba'athists intensified and culminated in a brutal crackdown in 1979. Youssef was threatened for refusing to join the Ba'ath. He left Iraq again and never returned. His exile took him to Kuwait, Algeria, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Yemen, France, Jordan, Syria, and since 2000, the United Kingdom, where he acquired political asylum and often joked about being "one of Her Majesty's subjects."

Youssef survived monumental events in this series of displacements that were overdetermined by the region's geopolitics and shifting alliances. He lived in Beirut at the height of the civil war and survived the 1982 Israeli siege and invasion of the city, before leaving with Palestinian factions to yet another exile in Tunisia. He had been living and working in socialist South Yemen when the civil war erupted there in 1986, forcing him to leave the cultural institutions and publications he had established.

The Anglo-American invasion of Youssef's homeland in 2003 was a painful and traumatic spectacle to behold, and infuriated and wounded the poet. It followed years of devastating sanctions imposed on Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which led to the 1991 Gulf War. Four years later, from his exile in Damascus, Youssef wrote "America, America," whose refrain, "God save America / My home, sweet home!" punctuated the poet's interrogation of the genocidal impulse of America, the empire, whose missiles and bombs sent Iraq to the pre-Industrial age:

I, too, love Jeans, Jazz, Treasure Island, John Silver's parrot, New Orleans balconies. I love Mark Twain, Mississippi boats, and Abraham Lincoln's dogs. I love corn and wheat fields and the Mell of Virginia tobacco. But I am not American. Is being not American all it takes for the Phantom bomber to send me back to the stone age?

[...]

We are not all prisoners, America
Your soldiers are not God's soldiers.

Two years later, at the height of the sanctions devastating Iraqi society, Youssef, who was living in Amman, wrote "Vision," a prophetic poem many Iraqis still remember today:

This Iraq will go to the end of the graveyard
It will bury its sons, one generation after another, in the valley
And will forgive its tyrant
Iraq will not return
The lark will not sing.

While a staunch opponent of the Ba'ath and of Saddam's dictatorship, Youssef protested the 2003 invasion publicly and wrote against it. What further infuriated him was that the ICP, which had been opposed to the invasion, joined the US-installed Governing Council in Iraq under Paul Bremer in July 2003. Many of Youssef's comrades went back to work in the "new" Iraq. This betrayal earned them the ire and invectives of the angry poet. He saw himself as the last (genuine) Iraqi Communist. "The

Last Communist” became another memorable poetic alter ego and appeared frequently in his late poetry and in the title of one of his late collections, *The Last Communist Goes to Heaven*. The figure of the last communist did not only denounce the treason of Iraqi communists, but rejected predatory capitalism and its cultural manifestation and reaffirmed Youssef’s socialism, at times quite playfully:

I know that tomorrow’s communist is not like yesterday’s
So, how does one become a communist?
Enjoy everything, but own nothing
Read Marx’s early writings, letters, and Das Capital
[...]
Dress well, listen to music, and sing like an Italian opera singer
[...]
Learn the art of silence and listen
Believe in the people and nothing else! [2005]

Iraq’s major poets were all forced into exile at one point in their lives in the 20th century. Al-Jawahiri (1900-1997), a friend of Youssef’s, left Iraq in 1980 and died in Damascus. Al-Sayyab died in a hospital in Kuwait in 1964. Unlike his two friends, Youssef is the one major poet who lived to witness the disintegration of what was once a homeland, and to see its descent into sectarian violence, corruption, and a state ruled by militias and parties beholden to non-Iraqis. The difficulty, or even the impossibility, of recognizing a disfigured Iraq, is a recurring theme in his post-2003 poetry. There are often aborted returns. These poems crystallize the contradictory sentiments of millions of Iraqis who live and die in a vast diaspora, often dreaming of an Iraq that once was, or could have been, but also haunted by its ongoing nightmares:

Can you see the impossible — frond?
[...]
Is it your fault that you were born in that country?
Three quarters of a century
and you still pay its tax
from your ebbing blood.

Following a month’s stay in New York, the poet reminded himself that the country he’d just visited had destroyed his homeland:

When you take a cab today to the airport
Do not, quietly, say goodbye
Don’t say anything
To the country that bequeathed madness to you,
The country that demolished a homeland over your head
and hired death squads
and uprooted the meaning of branches
from your garden.

Whether in his poems, essays, or social media posts, Youssef was an ardent and consistent critic of the post-2003 regime in Iraq and all that it represented. His cruel invectives spared no one and ridiculed major political figures, and even religious symbols such as the grand Shiite cleric al-Sistani. Many were disappointed by Youssef’s language and tone and his willingness to stoop so low

and thought it discredited his legacy. Others were angered and accused him of sectarianism and dismissed his attacks as symptoms of senility. There were even calls by some to burn Youssef's books in Baghdad. But he remained unfazed and believed that it was necessary to reject and fight a regime installed by neocolonialism and the culture it created in Iraq by any (discursive) means necessary. Beyond Iraq, many of his admirers and friends found some of his comments about the Arab uprisings disappointing.

When news of Youssef's battle with cancer became public in April 2021, the Iraqi minister of culture announced that the Iraqi state would offer its support, but Youssef rejected the offer. Ironically, the minister was forced to withdraw and apologize for his offer after being attacked by politicians who cited Youssef's invectives and some of his blasphemous poems.

Despite Youssef's visceral engagement with and commitment to Iraq and its fate in his long exile, he was at home no matter where he happened to be. The eight volumes of his poetry celebrate the humans, flora, and fauna he encountered on his long journey from southern Iraq, through North Africa, Paris, New York, and many other cities, all the way to Harefield, near London, where he spent the last two decades of his life. These were Youssef's most productive. "I have no actual life outside poetry. Poetry is my daily bread and I want it to be the bread of all people. [...] I write so as not to die alone."

Once he realized that his cancer was terminal, Youssef arranged for his body to be cremated, which he wrote about in "Better to burn here":

I am relieved now
I wrote my will
paid for my cremation
Let me, then, propose a toast
and lift my glass: I am alive.

The "last communist" never entered Mecca carrying his red banners, as he'd imagined in a poem, but he was buried at High Gate Cemetery, in London, not far from the first communist.

I will not be a stranger on this earth:
I have named myself what I wanted
I will not be close to this earth:
I have two wings
[...]
I will go to the end of the universe
Joyful and free
Like an Arabian horse
Like myself.

Sinan Antoon was born in Baghdad and left Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. He earned a doctorate from Harvard in Arabic literature. He has published two collections of poetry and four novels. His works have been translated to thirteen languages. His translation of Mahmoud Darwish's last prose

book *In the Presence of Absence* won the 2012 American Literary Translators' Award. His translation of his own novel, *The Corpse Washer*, won the 2014 Saif Ghobash Prize for Literary Translation. His scholarly works include *The Poetics of the Obscene: Ibn al-Hajjaj and Sukhf* (Palgrave, 2014) and articles on Mahmoud Darwish, Sargon Boulus, and Saadi Youssef. He returned to his native hometown in 2003 to co-direct *About Baghdad*, a documentary about Baghdad after dictatorship and under occupation. He has published op-eds in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation* and various pan-Arab publications. His latest novel, *The Book of Collateral Damage* was published by Yale University Press in 2019. He is an associate professor of Arabic Literature at New York University.

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