Poetics of the Familiar in the History of Sorrow by Talib Abdul Aziz

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Abstract:

This article analyzes poetics of the familiar in Talib Abdul Aziz's The History of Sorrow (1994). Aziz uses familiar and tired objects: dust, rust, cracks, old clothes, abandoned thresholds, and unwashed cups to modernize the elegy form. Unlike classical Arabic elegy, which uses mythological reference to grand loss, Aziz uses everyday text to show loss as a slow, cumulative, and gradual process. The close reading of several of the poems show the functioning of poetics of the familiar in relation to three interlinked zones: temporal disconnection, spatial closeness, and the reminiscence of the senses/tactile memory. Aziz's familiar objects and the familiar itself create his elegy form. The familiar, as I like to call it, the anti-sublime, transforms the ordinary into a site of ontological rupture. Relocating loss from the heroic to the ordinary (everyday), Aziz transforms modern Arabic elegy. Loss becomes personally complex and deeply resonant and beyond singular. In the poetry of late twentieth-century Iraq, the familiar found a place to testify honest loss in the style of wounded history and the failed grand narratives.

KEYWORDS: Familiar Poetics, Talib Abdul Aziz, The History of Sorrow, Modern Arabic Poetry, Elegy, Everyday Aesthetics, Iraqi Poetry, Anti-Sublime

شعرية المألوف في تاريخ الأسى لطالب عبد العزيز

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الملخص:

تحلل هذه المقالة شعرية المألوف في ديوان "تاريخ الحزن" (١٩٩٤) للشاعر طالب عبد العزيز. يستخدم عبد العزيز أشياءً مألوفة ومتهالكة: الغبار، والصدأ، والشقوق، والملابس القديمة، والعتبات المهجورة، والأكواب غير المغسولة، ليُضفي لمسة عصرية على شكل الرثاء. وخلافًا للرثاء العربي الكلاسيكي، الذي يستخدم الإشارات الأسطورية للدلالة على الفقدان الجلل، يستخدم عبد العزيز نصوصًا من الحياة اليومية ليُظهر الفقدان كعملية بطيئة، تراكمية، وتدريجية. تُظهر القراءة المتأنية لعدد من القصائد كيفية عمل شعرية المألوف في ثلاثة مجالات مترابطة: الانفصال الزمني، والتقارب المكاني، واستحضار الحواس/الذاكرة اللمسية. تُشكل الأشياء المألوفة عند عبد العزيز، والمألوف نفسه، شكل رثائه. المألوف، كما أُحب أن أُسميه، نقيض الجلال، يُحوّل المألوف إلى موقع تمزق وجودي. بنقله الفقدان من البطولة إلى المألوف (اليومي)، يُحوّل عبد العزيز الرثاء العربي الحديث. يصبح الفقدان مُعقدًا على المستوى الشخصي، وعميقًا في تأثيره، ويتجاوز حدود الفردية. في شعر العراق أواخر القرن العشرين، وجد المألوف متنفساً ليشهد على الفقدان الصادق بأسلوب التاريخ الجريح والروايات الكبرى الفاشلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شعرية المألوف، طالب عبد العزيز، تاريخ الحزن، الشعر العربي الحديث، المرثية، جماليات الحياة اليومية، الشعر العراقي، مناهضة السمو.

Introduction

The placement of the casual and commonplace in the core of modern elegies reveals an innovative shift in the expression of grief in poetry. Traditional Arabic rithā' used myth, history, and glorification of the deceased to frame the loss. In contrast, the Iraqi poet Talib Abdul Aziz (b. Basra, 1953) does not write within these monumental frameworks. Instead, he adopts a more everyday approach. He draws on daily remnants, like dust on neglected surfaces, rusted hinges, cracked walls, walls of coats that shelter the absent bodies, and half consumed coffee (Aziz, 2019). The title of his collection, The History of Sorrow, (1994) presents an irony as history is usually the grand accounts of kings, battles, and conquests. For Aziz, history is the intimate archaeology of the remnants of a home.

This research analyzes how the inclusion of commonplace items in his poetry offers a stylistic approach that restructures the elegy in modern Arabic poetry. Much has been written on the post-war Iraqi poetry's political themes and the fragmentation, alienation, and disillusionment following the war. However, very little has been published that addresses the aesthetics of familiarity that Talib Abdul Aziz uses in his poetry for expressions of grief. Therefore, the primary concern of the study is how the imagery of the neglected, mundane, and worn in The History of Sorrow contributes to a novel elegy framework that is neither modern romantic elegy nor classical Arabic rithā'.

This research focuses on more than just one poet. In late-twentieth Arabic literature, Aziz's familiar poetics can be seen as a philosophical response to historical catastrophe. After numerous wars and a series of political disappointments caused the downfall of the great narratives of nation, ideology, and heroism, poets began to write about what was small and familiar. After all, the small and familiar were perhaps the only things that had not been untruthful. In Aziz's vision of mourning, dust and rust are the only materials to poetically construct mourning that are not untruthful.

This research focuses on a close reading of poems in The History of Sorrow (2019, Dar al-Rafidain) while situating these readings in the context of modern Arabic poetry and elegy, as well the theories of everyday aesthetics. The poetry selected demonstrates, most clearly, an engagement with the poetics of the familiar and draws on the themes of dust, rust, clothing, thresholds, and everyday objects. As an analytical framework, I focus on the interrelated themes of temporal disjunction, spatial proximity, and the evocation of sensory memory. Each of these themes conveys the familiar in an elegiac context.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Scholarly Context

1.1 The Poetics of the Familiar in Literary and Aesthetic Theory

The "familiar" has become an appreciated aesthetic category in several scholarly fields. Each contributes to our understanding of how seemingly inconsequential objects accumulate meaning. Aziz's poetry draws on many of these theories but also goes beyond and radically alters them.

١,١,١ Hegel and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life

G.W.F. Hegel (1975) pioneered the analysis of the importance of the everyday in Dutch genre painting in his Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Hegel stated that the focus of these painters on the household, worn shoes, the kitchen, and the laborers was not simple representation. Rather, it resulted in the painting of the inner life of the modern art of the bourgeoisie and the painting of their middle class self-restraint and self-fulfillment. Hegel believed all of these paintings and art of the Dutch school demonstrated the ability of the middle class to express the phase of the fulfillment of self-consciousness and individuality in modern society through the painting of the everyday. This can be interpreted as the ordinary is not the trivial, but the extraordinary is most immanently ordinary. This can provide a point of departure for the poetics of Aziz.

Nevertheless, while Hegel's discussion is confined within the ambit of representation, i.e., the painting is an embodiment of everyday life in order to convey spiritual truths, the poetry of Aziz is beyond the ambit of representation to take recourse to embodiment. In other words, the common things found in the poems of Aziz are not symbols but reality themselves as they become the locus of sadness. The difference between both of these poets is that Aziz does not make use of dust as a symbol of grief but shows dust as a materialization of grief.

1.1.2 Lefebvre, Blanchot, and the Ordinary as Site of Modernity

Henri Lefebvre's monumental Critique of Everyday Life (2002) positions the quotidian as the central locus of modern experience, the place where structural forces, capitalist alienation, and bureaucratic power exert their most intense effects. For Lefebvre, the everyday is simultaneously trivial and profound—the arena in which grand historical processes become manifest in lived experience. This understanding of the everyday as the site where macro-structures are felt micro-politically resonates strongly with Aziz's project. The Iran-Iraq War, the devastation of Iraqi infrastructure, the erosion of social bonds—all of these historical catastrophes appear in Aziz's poetry not through epic narration but through their material traces on familiar objects. The cracked wall is not a metaphor for national fracture; it is the national fracture rendered visible at the level of domestic space.

A less direct but equally enigmatic approach to the ordinary is proposed by Maurice Blanchot (1969). For Blanchot, the ordinary is neither what we have never encountered nor what we have always encountered, but what we have always encountered without ever being able to understand. In his words, the ordinary is "out of reach even though we've always been within it" (Blanchot, 1969, p. 358). For Blanchot, then, the ordinary cannot be captured through philosophical reflection precisely because it eludes definition and understanding. This sense of the contradictory nature of the ordinary—that which is both accessible and inaccessible—reveals itself in an important way in Aziz's poetry. The things that he writes about are both familiar (dust, rust, coats, cups) and strange precisely because they now represent the ordinary and are thus inaccessible to us.

It is notable as well that Blanchot defines the ordinary as something that takes place on the street, not in the house, as a public phenomenon, not a private one, an interpretation that Aziz subverts by setting the scene of the ordinary in the domestic interior. While the ordinary is defined by Blanchot as something that happens among the anonymous crowds of the city, Aziz defines it as happening in the ruins of the intimate space.

1.1.3 Saito and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life

In her book, Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making (2017), Yuriko Saito develops the idea of how aesthetic engagement with common things contributes to human flourishing. According to Saito, the aesthetic qualities of ordinary objects in our life—from the worn fabric texture to the aged wooden patina—bring about heightened sensitivity and enable humans to appreciate beauty in mundane things. To Saito, the familiar should be understood not as something opposed to the aesthetic but rather as the most widespread form of it.

The importance of the ethical aspects of everyday aesthetics stressed by Saito becomes particularly important in relation to the Aziz's project. In particular, she believes that attention to the aesthetic qualities of ordinary objects is important not only because it allows experiencing them in a different way but because it contributes to the formation of moral attitudes—approach to the world that does not succumb to consumer rationality. The poetics of Aziz turns the attention to the ethical dimension of such aesthetic engagement with common objects. The attentive engagement with such things as dust, rust, and wear becomes a form of witnessing, a refusal to ignore the material traces of grief.

1.1.4 The Familiar in Arabic Literary Tradition

The Arabic literary tradition has long maintained a complex relationship with the ordinary. Classical Arabic poetics, as articulated by critics such as Ibn Qutaybah and al-Jurjani, tended to elevate the "poetic" (shi'rī) over the "daily" (yawmī), associating the former with elevated diction, rare imagery, and virtuosic linguistic performance, while relegating the latter to prose and popular forms (Abd,

2022). This hierarchy persisted into the modern period, though it was increasingly challenged by poets who sought to bring everyday experience into the ambit of serious poetry.

Among the important precursors to Aziz's project are the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964) and the Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-2006). Al-Sayyab's use of everyday imagery—a rain spout, a dead palm tree, the dampness of the Iraqi marshlands—infused his national and personal elegies with a material specificity that departed from classical abstraction (Al-Sayyab, 1964). Al-Maghut took this further, developing a poetics of the mundane that registered the absurdity and despair of post-independence Arab society through images of domestic banality (Abd, 2022). However, as critic O.S. Abd (2022) has noted, even these poets tended to use the everyday as a symbol of larger feelings rather than allowing it to function as the structure of feeling itself.

Aziz's unique contribution consists in his decision not to resort to the traditional symbolic meaning of the familiar object. For example, in Aziz's poems, the old coat will no longer function as a symbol for sorrow; rather, it becomes a tangible thing which is sorrow itself. Such transformation of symbolic into embodied signifies Aziz's unique contribution to the poetics of the familiar in Arabic poetry. In the words of Blanchot, Aziz's objects are "neuter," i.e., neither symbolic nor meaningless, but a place for existential suffering.

1.2 Temporal Dislocation: The Past as Familiar Rupture

Another unique feature of the poetics of Aziz is that of deconstruction of time in the narrative. In The History of Sorrow, memory does not work nostalgically to recover the whole that was lost. Nor does it allow the past to be perceived as something coherent and narratable. Rather, the past comes back into the present as a constant low-grade infection, eroding the stability of time.

This deconstruction of time is reflected in one line from the collection which has become famous among critics. In its Arabic original, the poet says:

هناك طريقٌ واحدٌ إلى الخشب

لم يئنّ بعدُ للقادة(Aziz, 2019, p. 12)

The line cannot be easily understood temporally: the road (accessible, familiar) has not yet become a place where it will later groan (mourn); the captains (great men, archaic) are expected but do not come. The verb "يئنّ" ("ya'innu," meaning "groans" or "moans") implies a sense of pain repressed, a grief which has not yet had its expression. The road which does not groan yet has been the witness of not enough grief to become the place where mourning will occur. This opens up a gap between the event of grief and its occurrence, implying that grief is not an instant but rather a continuous state of expectation. Time here is not linear, it is sedimentary: past, present and future exist in a suspended state without resolution. The notion of "not yet" is essential here because it signifies that grief is not an

event which happens once but a persistent condition waiting for its ultimate realization which may never happen.

This idea of time echoes the psychoanalytic notion of "fear of breakdown," as discussed by D.W. Winnicott in 1974. Winnicott noted that some experiences of trauma, especially those involving the sensation of something being "for the first time," might not be recognized at all until much later, but they keep asserting their presence through a "sense of impending collapse." In Aziz's poems, it is this very sense of deferred time that the familiar object embodies. The coat hanging from its hook, the cup sitting on the table, the door that refuses to be opened—they speak of a loss that continues to be relived.

A particularly poignant illustration comes from Aziz when he describes how a person "begins to forget his boats / little by little." The original Arabic text goes as follows:

بدأ ينسى قواربه
شيئاً فشيئاً(Aziz, 2019, p. 14)

The incremental adverb "شيئاً فشيئاً" (shay'an fa-shay'an, "little by little") is significant: forgetting is not a single event but a gradual erosion of self that occurs through the repetition of daily neglect. The verb "ينسى" (yansā, "forgets") is a conscious, active verb in Arabic, suggesting that forgetting is not a passive failure of memory but an active process of letting go. The boats represent journey, agency, the capacity to depart from one place to another. To forget them is not to lose a memory but to lose the capacity for self-transformation—a process that happens not through catastrophic rupture but through the accumulated weight of small forgettings. This is the temporality of the familiar: time as a constant and slow force, like rust, that wears away at existence without ever producing the dramatic "quake" that would register as event.

This disruption of time is also a consequence of the overall historical trauma of Iraq. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), during which Aziz fought and lost his brother in the battle of Al-Faw in 1986, led to a collective experience of time rupture and the feeling that the history of the nation had been brutally interrupted and was impossible to re-narrate (MPlus, 2017). It is this kind of temporal rupture that is reflected in Aziz's poetry through the objects he describes. In a time-ruptured space where a peaceful Iraq can no longer exist except in memory, these objects become the only reminders of the irreparable damage.

1.3 Spatial Intimacy: Domestic Ruins as Psychic Maps

Aziz’s conception of space provides yet another important departure from classical Arabic poetry. While the classic form of al-wuqūf 'alā al-aṭlāl (standing by the ruins) involved an open commemoration of lost communities and their bonds through the abandoned camp sites, which served as public monuments to the tribe’s loss, the ruins of Aziz are deeply personal and private.

The spaces associated with the marks of sorrow in his poetry are not public monuments but rather the private domestic objects of home, such as the feel of garments, the chill of the cupboard handle, the groan of the floorboards, or the dust shaped by afternoon sun. In one remarkable instance, the poet says in Arabic:

للظلال منازل في الأفنية
وللشرفات ما قد يكون من ظلام
وعشب(Aziz, 2019, p. 23)

Assigning the occurrences in question to specific domestic environments turns architecture into an archive of emptiness. While usually associated with an open view from above on the street or sky, in the story the balcony has been limited to "whatever darkness and grass there may be"—an environment deprived of orientation and openness. With regard to the phrase "ما قد يكون" (mā qad yakūn), meaning "whatever may be," the darkness and grass could be considered rather as possibilities than certainties. Indeed, the very existence of the balcony seems dependent on absence, as now the balcony does not open outward towards something else, but inward towards darkness.

In terms of Gaston Bachelard's notion of "topoanalysis" in The Poetics of Space (1958), such kind of transformation of the architecture is absolutely relevant. According to Bachelard, the house is the "first universe" where our early memories and our first sense of identity form. As the place for daydreaming and the material embodiment of imagination, the house represents shelter for us. But unlike Bachelard's houses, Aziz's houses are built upon a principle opposite to their sheltering function—they witness the dispossession and erasing of the inhabitants' identities.

The bed is not a place for sleep but the trace of the body that once slept there. The cup on the table is not a welcoming gesture but an indication of loss because the hand that touched the cup in the past is no longer there. The cracks in the wall become lines on the psychic map which indicate the fissures inside. The threshold, which was once simply crossed, has become the mark of the boundary between presence and absence, which cannot be crossed again.

This domestic geography is linked to Aziz's personal story. The poet was born in Abu al-Khasib, close to Basra, and came back to the places of his childhood through poetry but found that they have changed due to war and deterioration. He has become an alien in the place he once knew as home. In this respect, Aziz's domestic ruins are a microcosm of the Iraqi postwar experience: a world where everything became foreign due to violence and loss.

1.4 Sensory Memory: Tactility and Olfaction as Testimony

The most distinct feature of Aziz's poetics can be defined as non-visual senses. Indeed, the traditional elegy focuses on visuality—vision of the beloved person, sight of the battle and deserted camp. Elegiac poetry by Aziz, in contrast, is based mainly on tactile and olfactory images.

Not the visual appearance of the dust but its feeling on the skin is mentioned. Not the sight of rust, but its metallic taste of the time passed. The wetness of the fabric becomes the sensory imagery of the lost archive. The cold of the winter door handle, the touch of the old wool, the faintly sticky surface of the not washed table—these physical sensations become the material of his elegy. Such an approach results in the creation of the emotion that is impossible to deny or even argue about. Indeed, one cannot argue with smell, texture of the surface and coldness of the metal.

This approach is consistent with trauma theorists' understanding of implicit or non-declarative memory—the somatic archive that the body contains prior to or beyond its capacity for linguistic expression. The familiar object in Aziz's poetry becomes a somatic catalyst: it is not merely an image to decode but an embodiment of a wound. As philosopher Edward Casey (1987) argued in Remembering, bodily memory is retained in posture, habits, and sensations, distinct from simple memory as a mental image or recollection. Aziz's poetry operates precisely in the domain of bodily memory.

One line from The History of Sorrow exemplifies this sensory orientation:

رائحة المقاعد ستبقى في ثيابهم

حتى نهاية النهار(Aziz, 2019, p. 17)

Unlike the previous lines, this line does not conjure up an image; rather it calls upon a sense, the sense of the lingering odour of shared spaces. The chairs (in the bus, at the railway station, or in the waiting room) are mundane sites where people feel mundane pain. It is not asking its readers to imagine the dead person, but to smell his/her traces. It is a move from the visual to the olfactory, which means a transition from the representative to the embodied. The word "رائحة" (rā'iḥah, "scent") has a meaning that goes beyond itself; scents stay for a long time while images vanish quickly, they get stuck on things.

It bears many important implications for how we can conceive of elegy. The traditional elegist finds solace in the act of transforming disorder into order, of making a poetry out of it. But Aziz's poetics of the familiar does not offer consolation to anybody. It just bears witness to the facts of life. The familiar does not cure us; it documents the permanent wound through the traces left on objects. As noted by Elaine Scarry in her book, The Body in Pain (1985), scar tissue is not a representation of healing; it is a perpetual record of an injury. To Aziz, the poetry of the familiar is the poetry of the scar.

Chapter Two: The Poetics of the Familiar in The History of Sorrow—Textual Analysis

2.1 The Familiar versus the Heroic in Modern Arabic Elegy

The originality of Aziz's enterprise comes into relief in comparison with other important figures in modern Arabic elegy. Take the case of Khalil Hawi (1919-1982): often, he presented loss on a grandiose and epic scale, the fallen fellow as a national icon and loss of homeland as a sacrifice of resurrection of a national spirit. Here, the language is high, the imagery broad, the tone heroic. Another prominent poet was Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008): even in his youth, he combined the personal and the political by means of vast imagery of the ocean, skies, fire, and blood, the rhetoric of "martyrdom" which raised the issue of loss to the plane of national mythology.

But while Aziz does not reject the collective aspect of loss, he resists its heroic tone: in his poetry, the crack in the wall of the kitchen grows year by year just by a millimeter—without violence of any kind but through the ontology of entropy, where the self cannot distinguish itself from the wall. It is neither a lament of the nation nor of a self who fails to recognize himself in the dust of a mirror.

What this means can be seen in how classical elegy tries to attain monumentality by creating a verbal tomb for the departed one. However, unlike with Aziz's objects, these are not created for monumentality, but for their impermanence. Dust will be swept away, rust will take its toll on all the metals, the old coat will fall apart. It is the poetry of transience which does not attempt to defy time, but record its effects upon the surface of things. This is an elegy which recognizes the inevitable decay of everything and everyone, including our sorrow.

2.2 Textual Analysis of Key Images

2.2.1 Dust and Slowness

One of the earliest references to dust in The History of Sorrow presents it in a striking formulation. In the original Arabic, the poet writes:

الغبار ليس دليلاً
الغبار آثار متعثرة
تسير من أفق إلى أفق
لا يرتفع
لا يسقط
يعرف كيف ينسى شكله
يختار أن يكون
وجهاً لشيء
قرر أن ينسى(Aziz, 2019, p. 8)

Dust is conventionally associated with evidence of neglect, the passage of time, or absence. But Aziz rejects this evidentiary function. For evidence to function, there must be a perpetrator, a detective, and ultimately some resolution.

In a world without resolution, footprints remain distorted, going in no direction, indicating no purpose. The phrase "آثار متعثرة" (āthār muta'aththirah) might be more accurately rendered as "stumbling traces" or "impeded marks," suggesting not just distortion but a fundamental impediment to movement or meaning. The root "ع-ث-ر" ('-th-r) in Arabic carries connotations of stumbling, tripping, or being obstructed—a condition of arrested movement rather than simple distortion. Dust here marks not the passage of time but the failure of time to provide direction—the condition of being lost in one's own history.

The grammar of slowness which runs throughout the collection adds to this understanding. The use of the word "تسير" (tasīru, "travels") implies an act of aimless wandering rather than purposeful travel. The dust rises neither towards heaven nor does it travel vertically; instead, it moves horizontally and refuses all transcendence. This horizonalism is not only aesthetic but also biographical in nature since the Iran-Iraq war of Aziz's times was characterized by trench warfare, horizontal front lines, and increasing number of dead bodies (MPlus, 2017). It was not a war for heroic remembering but war of dust and mud.

In this way, the line "يعرف كيف ينسى شكله" (ya'rifu kayfa yansā shaklahu, "it knows how to forget its shape") is especially important. The verb "يعرف" (ya'rifu, "knows") confers upon the dust knowledge and willfulness. Dust is not something inert but rather something alive which has a choice to forget its shape. The verb "ينسى" (yansā, "forgets") is identical to the verb used by humans to forget, implying that dust has the ability to let go of its identity, too. Finally, the line "يختار أن يكون وجهاً لشيء قرر أن ينسى" (yakhtāru an yakūna wajhan li-shay'in qarrara an yansā, "it chooses to be the face of a thing that decided to forget") adds onto the personification of dust, allowing dust to become the face of something which decided to forget itself.

2.2.2 Rust as De-Creation

Aziz's treatment of rust further develops his anti-heroic aesthetic. In the classical tradition, rusted arms typically symbolize abandoned warriors and lost causes—a remnant of heroism now decayed. Aziz, however, locates rust in the non-heroic everyday: tools, metal containers, door hinges, the undersides of sinks. This is not the rust of fallen heroes but the rust of ordinary existence.

In one of the collection's most striking formulations, Aziz writes:

الصدأ وجه الشيء
حين يقرر أن ينسى شكله
لا يحنّ إلى ما كان
لا يشتاق
يترك نفسه للريح
والرطوبة
والزمن البطيء
الذي يعرف كيف يفك

كل ما كان متماسكاً(Aziz, 2019, p. 31)

The expression "وجه الشيء" (wajh al-shay', "the face of a thing") personifies the thing in question. The rust becomes an intentional act in which the object chooses to forget who it is. The verb used here, "يقرر" (yuqarriru, "decides"), indicates intentionality rather than an uncontrollable process of decay. The object does not become rusty because of some outside force working against it but because it has decided to release its identity.

The verse "لا يحنّ إلى ما كان" (lā yaḥinnu ilā mā kān, "it does not long for what it was") is key to understanding the concept of rust here. The word "يحنّ" (yaḥinnu, "longs for" or "yearns for") means more than just remembering; there is also emotional connection implied in the verb. The object here is no longer connected emotionally to the past and therefore feels no longing for its former self. Also, "لا يشتاق" (lā yashtāqu, "it does not yearn") confirms this absence of emotional attachment to the past.

Contrast this image of "الزمن البطيء" (al-zaman al-baṭī', "slow time") with the heroic temporality of the epic and war. This is not the temporality of greatness but that of deterioration, that of gradual decay. "الذي يعرف كيف يفك كل ما كان متماسكاً" (alladhī ya'rifu kayfa yafukku kullu mā kāna mutamāsikan, "who knows how to undo all that was held together") presents us with time as an undoing force, as something that unravels creation.

The elegiac dilemma in this poem is that of watching the rusty object undergo a form of release from its identity that the poet himself is incapable of accomplishing. The poet is unable to claim, "I am free of sorrow." The rusty object is a sign of a release that is still unattainable—a perfect model of a sorrow that the poet will never feel, sorrow that is light and does not accumulate.

2.2.3 The Coat and the Threshold

Two repeated images in The History of Sorrow – the coat and the threshold – offer especially good material for a study of Aziz's poetics of intimacy.

The coat recurs in several poems but always the coat belonging to someone else. Here is what the poet says in one line:

اقتربْ، لكي يفرح معطفُك

بذكرى معطفي(Aziz, 2019, p. 5)

It is noteworthy that the verb يفرح(yafraḥ), which means "rejoices" or "delights," denotes the capacity of the garment to be a bearer of emotions, if not to have them. Indeed, the roots of the word ف-ر-ح(f-r-ḥ) convey the meaning of joy, gladness, maybe, even exuberance, an overreaction to an everyday event.

The coat is not a signifier of the body; rather, it is its metonymy since the coat contains the bodily experiences of its owner. It is the desire of the poet to see one garment to come into contact with another because the bodies that wore them can no longer meet. It is vital that the garment is common; it has been used, it is

mundane, maybe torn. With the help of such borrowing, the self (garment) exists as long as someone else uses it.

In another passage of the poem, the poet writes:

أميلُ إليك
لأقولَ ما لم تقله المياه
وما تتردّد الريح في قوله
وما لا تفهمه المرايا
وما ليس مثل النار
كما أراه(Aziz, 2019, p. 6)

The verb "أميل" (amīlu, “I lean”) implies an attitude that never fully reaches its destination; it is a gesture of intimacy that remains unfinished. The point at which speaking becomes not-speaking, presence becomes absence, is the point at which Aziz's poetry stands. Aziz leans towards the reader in order to show intimacy, while what he wants to say cannot be said through the means of these elements (water, wind, mirrors, fire). Water has never spoken about it, wind doesn’t want to tell it, mirrors can't understand it, and it is not as the poet understands fire. Here we have the poetics of ineffable, the poetics of the threshold that hasn’t been crossed yet.

The Arabic word "عتبة" ('atabah, “threshold”) has deep meaning in itself. On the one hand, it is a concrete door, but on the other, it represents the border between some conditions, the threshold of consciousness, of grief, of the familiar world. The poet leans toward the threshold but doesn’t cross it. To live in the threshold, to refuse from any resolution is the basic point of this elegy. It lives not "inside grief" and not "outside grief," but at its entrance, waiting for a captain who will not arrive.

Chapter Three: Implications and Conclusion

The analysis of Aziz's poetics of the familiar reveals three interconnected characteristics that together constitute his distinctive contribution to modern Arabic elegy.

First, temporal dislocation. Rather than presenting memory as nostalgia or coherent recollection, Aziz depicts the past as a low-intensity intrusion upon the present that degrades temporal stability. Linear time is replaced by sedimented time, where the past lies beneath the present as an accumulating weight. This temporal dislocation corresponds to the dissolution of the self—not a sudden loss but a gradual erosion that occurs through the repetition of daily neglect. The analysis of the line "لم يئنّ بعدُ للقادة" revealed how Aziz creates temporal gaps that suspend grief in a state of anticipation, while the incremental forgetting of boats ("شيئاً فشيئاً") demonstrated how loss operates through accumulation rather than event.

Second, spatial intimacy. Rather than being spaces of public commemoration, the ruined homes of Aziz serve as psychic maps for navigating interior ruptures.

In the poetics of Aziz, the private sphere does not provide shelter, but instead, it bears witness to the progressive dispossession of its residents. The home is a wound that cannot be cured, a space that remembers its residents who no longer inhabit it. As seen in the analysis of "للظلال منازل في الأفنية," domestic space turns into an archive of absence, where the balconies turn from looking outwards into looking inwards towards darkness.

Third, sensory memory. Through focusing more on tactile and olfactory senses as opposed to the visual one, the poetry of Aziz bypasses the more intellectual ways of mourning and gets at the somatic archives of loss. The poet does not want us to see his dead, but rather, he wants us to smell their presence, feel the dust accumulated in their chairs and the chilliness of their handles. This is the poetics of embodiment and not representation. One can see this shift in the line "رائحة المقاعد ستبقى في ثيابهم."

Taken together, these three elements comprise what I term the "anti-sublime" in Aziz's poetics. Where the sublime tries to make up for the loss by elevating it into transcendence, making it vast and terrible in its awe, the poetics of familiarity acknowledges the inevitability of loss as part of life itself. Rather than symbolizing loss, the object represents its physical embodiment. The familiar offers no comfort; it only gives testimony. The familiar does not heal; it witnesses.

But the implications of this poetic approach go far beyond the boundaries of Iraqi literature and even Arabic literature in general. In a world of global catastrophe in the form of climate change and continuous warfare, where politics is constantly off balance, there has perhaps never been greater need for a poetic approach that would be able to focus on the physical manifestations of loss. This is the lesson that we can learn from Aziz's objects of familiarity.

Further research may examine the ecology of the ecological aspects of the ruins in Aziz's domestic world – dust, rust, moisture – as a manifestation of environmental melancholia where the decay of things symbolizes personal losses and an ecologically-infrastructure collapse of the whole country. A comparative analysis of the aesthetics of familiarity of other Iraqi poets of the same age group, like Ra'ad Abdul Qadir and Abd al-Zahra Zaki, may uncover their common artistic responses to national tragedies.

This is a difficult and uncompromising picture. It promises no transcendence, no redemption, no healing whatsoever. Yet it promises something even more important: the awareness that loss leaves a trace behind, that trace deserves to be recognized, and that very recognition is a sign of fidelity to that which was lost. The old coat hanging from the hanger is not a symbol. It is all the elegy that is left.

Conclusion

Talib Abdul Aziz's The History of Sorrow redefines the grammar of sorrow in modern Arabic poetry. It achieves that through an act of focusing poetic imagination on the already-present, rather than an act of inventing something new.

The poet, who lost his brother in an anonymous battle, who survived a war where an entire generation died, who came back home only to discover that home was gone, found out that the only language fit for his sorrow was the language of dust, decay, and unwashed cups.

This is not poetry of great movements; it is poetry of small objects that have been destroyed. But in this destruction, in this familiarity, there is a greater sorrow than all laments could provide. For Talib Abdul Aziz, the history of sorrow is not the history of battles and monarchs; it is the history of a broken tile, a rusty hinge, and a coat without anyone to be warmed in. It is the history of the familiar, and, in his eyes, it is the only history worth remembering.

The worn coat on the hook is not a metaphor for the dead brother; it is the dead brother's coat. And that is enough. That, for Aziz, is the only elegy that remains.

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