

Poetic Form in the Poetry of Shafiq Ḥabīb: Readings in Local Palestinian Poetry

Mahmud Naamneh

Saleem Abu Jaber

Shafiq Ḥabīb was born in 1941 in the town of Deir Ḥannā. He finished primary school in his home town and attended the municipal high school of Nazareth. He studied accounting at Dār al-Muwazzaf in Haifa became a certified accountant. Subsequently he joined the British Council's Institute of Journalism and Public Relations in Jerusalem. He taught at this institution for a short time, but was soon expelled by the military administration (1961) because of his ardent nationalistic poetry and his tenacious political views. As a poet he gazed at reality with open eyes, however painful and oppressive it might be. Ḥabīb then worked in a private accounting firm in Haifa. After working in a number of independent firms he was eventually given permanent employment by the al-ʿAfīfī Nazareth Tourism Co. Ltd. In 1964.

Ḥabīb achieved public recognition through his various journalistic and literary activities. He participated in poetry festivals, wrote for newspapers and magazines, and participated in radio broadcasts. In addition to his activities in the fields of accounting and poetry, he also wrote articles on politics and literary criticism.

Dāliya Bishāra wrote as follows about the poet's activities and his ties to his public: "The poet Shafiq Ḥabīb ascended dozens of podiums throughout the land, defending the rights of the Palestinian people in this land, as a poet who came from the ranks of this people and remained committed to its communal, political and social issues. In all of his poetry collections he highlighted the heroic history of the Palestinian people and how it suffered through the events of the intifada, the destruction of homes, confiscation of land, the housing crisis and Land Day. He was put on trial and sent to prison for his writings, and his collection *al-ʿAwda ilā al-āṭī* (*Return to What Is Coming*) was confiscated".¹

Ḥabīb is a very prolific writer, who has published fifteen poem collections:

1. Qanādīl ... wa-ghurbān (Lamps and Ravens), Jerusalem, 1972;
2. Ma'sāt al-qarn al-ḍalīl (Tragedy of the Lost Century), Nazareth, 1976;
3. Durūb multahiba (Blazing Paths), Nazareth, 1980;
4. Waṭan ... wa-ʿabīr (Homeland and Scents), Nazareth, 1981;
5. Unādī: Ayyuhā al-manfā! (I Call: O Exile!), Nazareth, 1984;
6. Aḥzān al-marākīb al-hā'ima (Grief of the Wandering Boats), Nazareth, 1987;
7. al-Dām wal-mīlād (Blood and Birth), Nazareth, 1988;
8. al-ʿAwda ilā al-āṭī (Return to What Is Coming), Nazareth, 1990.
9. Li-yakūna lakum fiyya salām (May You Have Peace in Me), Nazareth, 1992;

¹ I conducted an interview with the poet on January 1 2012. The interview will be used as an additional reference in this article.

10. Āhin yā aswār ‘Akkā (O Woe, You Walls of Acre), Nazareth, 1994;
11. Ta‘āwīdh man khudhifa (Incantation of One Who Has Been Expelled), Nazareth, 1996;
12. Li-mādhā...??? (Why???), Nazareth, 1998;
13. Ṣārikh fī al-barriyya (Screaming in the Desert), Nazareth, 2001;
14. Anā al-jānī... (I Am the Criminal), Nazareth, 2005;
15. Sha‘ābīb (Showers), Nazareth, 2011.

In addition, he published a prose book entitled *Fī qafṣ al-ittihām (In the Dock of the Accused)*, a work that documents his battle for freedom of expression and against administrative repression. He was a courageous writer who laid bare all that happened to him, whether good or bad.

Ḥabīb grew up in difficult times. He was a witness to the tragedy of the *nakba*, the emigration and aftermath, as can be clearly seen in his poetry. He helped in shaping the features of the national culture and identity of the Palestinian Arab people. He was arrested and imprisoned between 1990 and 1993 for his support of the intifada and for incitement against the Israel Defense Force. The police burned all his books and all the documents it laid hands on in his home, at the publisher, and in book stores.

Ḥabīb was obsessed with the nationalist issue and vented his feelings in poetry and thought. One of his earliest poems, “Ughniya li-bilādī” (“A Song to My Land”), came to be sung locally and throughout the Arab world. The poem appeared in the collection *Ma’sāt al-qarn al-ḍalīl*, published in 1976.

Ḥabīb filled the positions of spokesperson for the Union of Palestinian Writers in the Occupied Territory and chairperson of its Publication Committee. He was also a member of the International Association of Palestinian Writers and together with the poet Fārūq Mawāsī and the late Jūrj Najīb Khalīl edited the journal *Mashāwīr*. He was awarded a temporary living allowance by the Ministry of Science and Art in 1996.

Ḥabīb’s poetic career²

Ḥabīb wrote his first poems already in primary school. In his high school in Nazareth he used to hand in essays in verse and towards the end of his school days he already published love poems in the newspaper *al-Yawm*, because the Communist newspaper *al-Ittiḥād* refused to publish writings by beginners and non-members of the party.

His first poem collection was *Qindīl wa-ghurbān*, published in 1972 at his own expense, like his other works.

Quite early in his career he wrote political poetry, and still does so today. He interacts with current events and has also used the opportunity offered by eulogies for his fellow poets who have passed away, such as Maḥmūd Darwīsh, Emile Ḥabībī, Rāshid Ḥusayn, Shakīb Jahshān, Ḥabīb Shuwayrī, Fawzī ‘Abdullāh, Salīm Makhūlī, Michel Ḥaddād and others. At times he addresses domestic affairs as well, such as family celebrations and congratulating his children. Ḥabīb has expressed his sympathy with numerous personalities, including some from the Druze sect, whom he considered to belong to the Arab nation, among them the leader of the

² See the forthcoming book *Shafīq Ḥabīb – shā‘iran fī marāyā al-naqd*.

Syrian revolution Sulṭān Bāshā al-Aṭrash and the former Druze judge Fāris Fallāḥ. He also wrote a eulogy for the late martyr of the Golan region, Ghāliya Faraḥāt.

The poetry collections that he published between 1972 and 2011 reflect the situation of the Palestinians, their concerns and their sufferings. Ḥabīb lived in stormy times and with his own eyes saw the tragedies of the *nakba* and the emigration, which became imprinted on his mind and appeared in his verses. He wrote patriotic songs; his “Ughniya li-bilādī” (“A Song to My Land”) gave expression to his hopes and love for it. In this poem and in others he addresses his homeland and submerses himself in it. His love for his homeland, its soil, people and holy places, accompanied his writing. He courageously expressed his thoughts, his convictions and the concerns of the people. It is as if he were in a state of solitude located between his love for his homeland and the other things, which made him focus all of his senses on serving the principle in which he believed Ḥabīb composed poetry that was connected to the homeland and combined heroic themes with his own honest feelings and the dangers facing the object of his main interest, Palestine. The homeland thus became part of his poetry.

Dāliya Bishāra states further that “the poet Shafiq Ḥabīb is like a roll of film, with some sad pictures and some happy ones. He moves among topics, interests and styles in a way that made him wake up and go to sleep with the concerns of his nation and people. His feelings were divided between the local and the global, the national and the personal”.³ It was he who wrote:

Let us imagine Iraq dying from arrogance
The wolves will remain
The armies of flies will remain
My heart, O our people, is in Iraq the defiant, but
My wings are in a thousand shackles and fangs.

The poet here highlights how fractured the Arab world is. His language, ideas and style move between Romanticism, Classicism and Realism, making his poetic tableaux aggressive and angry. His sentences are clear and simple, as if addressed to an unsophisticated public at a private meeting. The *structure* of his poems, however, range between the ancient geometrical system, used in most of his works, and free verse. But his poems do not lack music, even when their structure is geometrical. His poems lack complex symbolism; to the contrary, his images are clear and his thoughts are simple and easily comprehensible, despite the presence of melancholy, defeatism and affirmation of the vile situation, as expressed in a language filled with concern and using multiple styles of address. Indeed, he variously uses exclamation, command and prohibition, with the result that his poetry is often statement-like and filled with lexical and semantic repetitions. Ḥabīb took great care to choose the right words to fit his aims. The way his conjugates his verbs and constructs his sentences testify to his linguistic erudition; in addition, he was also careful in his choice of rhyme, meter and how the words sounded. All these elements served to raise the level of his works and helped him succeed in expressing what he had in mind.

Ḥabīb chose to be committed to his cause and to use revolutionary language, as can be seen in his views on the issue of soil, homeland and man. It is this issue which constitutes the basic theme that runs through his numerous poetry collections, in which all the different contexts are eventually funneled into a single outlet: Rejection of all the manifestations of oppression

³ Bishāra, Dāliya, “Dirāsāt fī ba‘ḍ a‘māl Shafiq Ḥabīb”, *Kull al-‘Arab*, Nazareth, January 27, 1995.

and aggression that have surrounded the Palestinian people from the time of the *nakba* to our own day and age.

The poem collection *Anā al-jānī... (I Am the Criminal)*, as an example

This is the second-to-last poem collection published by Shafiq Ḥabīb. The poems in it deal with a variety of themes, some national, some dedicated to an occasion, others expressing human emotions. He uses his poetry to express the situation of the Palestinians, their national sufferings and their hopes for independence. He also expresses his disappointment with the dissention in the Arab world and the defeats it suffers. He shouts in the face of the impotent Arab leaders:

O leaders of flocks! You are nothing but pieces of wood
My Arab identity and faith have become a wax idol melting in flame
The wounded stone speaks protectively and your mouths fill with soil.

Shākir Farīd Ḥasan says of Ḥabīb: “He tells of the children of Palestine, the lilies of the graves and the springs of the future. He speaks about the trampled honor of our times, the scurrying vermin and the reduced freedoms. He asks: ‘Where are the poets in these times?’ and beseeches Christ to save his nation from oppression, injustice and suffering”:⁴

O powerful rebel, shelter us, for we are in a trench of iniquity
You are the light of the world when darkness falls, you are the truth that extinguishes the fire of controversy
You are the light of life in every age, you are the beginning and the crowning touch.

The poems in this collection are quite varied in structure, in theme, in simplicity, in fluency, in strength of emotion and in human warmth. They convey passion and tension, beauty and esthetics, and touch the deepest emotions. Ḥabīb also deals with an important Jerusalem personality, Fayṣal al-Ḥusaynī, a lover of the land, of history and of Jerusalem. Ḥabīb mourns the passing away of the poet Tawfiq al-‘Afīfī, Abū Aḥmad, and expresses his grief at the death of the poet Shakīb Jahshān.

The collection’s four parts are characterized by patriotism, transparency and loyalty; these are the elements that shape the collection, and thus also the poet’s personality.

Al-Aghā Yaḥyā Zakariyyā notes that “the poems in this collection make prominent use of the language of personification, suggestion and symbolism. The poet does not merely focus on the main issue, but also highlights the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, Najaf, Baghdad and Basra, promising that the sun of liberty will rise behind the black cloud that rises in the West, and reminding us of the heritage of Baghdad and Mesopotamia, that does not recognize the meaning of surrender”:⁵

Contradictions and oppositions are part and parcel of the internal music of creative language, which Ḥabīb used very creatively, reflecting his mastery of the language of poetry.

⁴ Ḥasan Shākir Farīd, “Waḳfa ma‘a dīwān *Anā al-jānī*”, *Ḥadīth al-nās*, Nazareth, November 18, 2005.

⁵ Al-Aghā, Yaḥyā Zakariyyā, “Shafiq Ḥabīb fī *Anā al-jānī*”, *al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, July 19, 2002.

The poem collection *Ṣāriḫ fī al-barriyya* (Screaming in the Desert)

The poet's aim in giving the collection its title was to stress once again his opposition to injustice and oppression, screaming in the face of those who are indifferent and drift with the changing winds. He screams at the top of his voice, in the hope of arousing their sense of honor and dignity.

The collection, published in 2001, contains twenty-five poems written over quite a short period. Some of them had been previously published in various newspapers and journals in Israel and the Arab world. The book consists of three parts: "Inkisārāt ḥādda" ("Sharp Ruptures"), "Wardatāni filastīniyyatāni" ("Two Palestinian Roses") and "Aghānī al-rafrāf" ("Song of the Wing").

Here, too, Ḥabīb does not waver from his commitment to his shackled and besieged homeland, nor does he forget the tragedy of his nation, which is but a stone's throw away from freedom, return and independence. He expresses grief and hope, as well as a great yearning for revelation in the wide open spaces of the homeland. He can thus be said to be a poet of authentic commitment, one who is well-aware of the reality and expresses it from his own perspective, using his special poetic mold, with sincere emotions and a realistic revolutionary approach, as in the following lines:

I sow revolution as light
In dark hearts
Return to us, O Abū Dharr
Present us to the tribunal's sword.

Muḥammad 'Allūsh comments on this: "The poet exposes our delusions and illnesses in every aspect, especially our sectarian arrogance that stood in the nation's way in its spontaneous attempts to drive the wedge of conflict and internal fighting among the members of a single people, its Muslims and its Christians. The poet's words are a balm to wounds in their authentic spirituality":⁶

Faith for me is a purity of soul that intoxicates me
How I was pulled by the ringing of bells and the call to prayer
My faith is with God, with no need for an intermediary
Religions were not revealed for bloodshed and violence
For God does not approve of a garrison for a hut
Surrounded by knights of light.

CONCLUSION

Shafiq Ḥabīb may be said to be a poet with comprehensive views and narrative abilities, one whose writings encompassed most of the themes with which the majority of Palestinian poets dealt. He was a man who came from the people and was committed to his nation's collective political and social issues. In all his poem collections he used the events of the past to present his nation's history of heroism and suffering.

His enthusiastic patriotic poems express his committed political position. In addition, he also wrote political essays and literary reviews, adding variety to his output.

⁶ Muḥammad 'Allūsh, "al-Shā'ir alladhī lā ya'rif al-hazīma", *al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, July 19, 2002.

Thus, as already noted, Ḥabīb is a poet of authentic commitment, one who is well-aware of the reality and expresses it from his own perspective, using his special poetic mold, with sincere emotions and a realistic revolutionary approach, to defend the rights of the Palestinian people in this land.

References

- Al-Aghā, Yaḥyā Zakariyya. "Shafīq Ḥabīb fī *Anā al-jānī*". *al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, July 19, 2002.
- Idem. "Shafīq Ḥabīb" – manāra lil-shi'r". *Al-Sharq*, Qatar, February 26, 2003.
- Idem. "Shafīq Ḥabīb – manāra lil-shi'r". *Al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, April 6, 2001.
- Idem. "Ṭā'ir al-fīnīq", in: *Iḍā'at fī al-shi'r al-filasṭīnī*, 1998.
- Idem. "Qirā'a fanniyya". *Al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, April 6, 2001.
- ʿAllūsh, Muḥammad. "al-Shā'ir alladhī lā ya'rifu al-hazīma". *Al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, July 19, 2002.
- ʿĀmir, Nūr. "al-Fann wal-iltizām fī shi'r Shafīq Ḥabīb". *Kull al-ʿarab*, Nazareth, May 2, 2003.
- Idem. "Qaṣīda lil-tashrīḥ". *Kull al-ʿarab*, Nazareth, February 22, 2011.
- Idem. "Ta'āwīdh min khazf", in: *Riḥla fī ajwā' al-ḥurūf – mudākhalāt naqdiyya*, 2000.
- Bishāra, Dāliya. "Dirāsāt fī ba'ḍ a'māl Shafīq Ḥabīb". *Kull al-ʿarab*, Nazareth, January 27, 1995.
- Al-Dīk, Nādī Sārī. "al-Shā'ir Shafīq Ḥabīb masīrat 'aṭā' wa-shāhid 'alā al-ʿaṣr", in: *Ukhuwwat al-turāb wa-humūm al-makān*, 2011.
- Ḥasan, Shākir Farīd. "Waqfa ma'a dīwān *Anā al-jānī*". *Ḥadīth al-nās*, Nazareth, November 18, 2005.
- Mar'ī, Maḥmūd. "Ta'āwīd min khazf". *Bānūrāmā*, July 19, 1996.
- Mawāsī, Fārūq. "Liḳā' wa-amal", in: *Arḍ wa-naqd fī al-shi'r al-maḥallī*, Jerusalem, 1976.
- Idem. "Tarākumāt", in: *Qaṣīda wa-shā'ir*, Dār al-Fārūq, Nablus, 1996.
- Suqayriq, Ṭal'at. "Ishrūna qamaran, Shafīq Ḥabīb wal-nafkh fī al-būq". *Al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, and the website of Mu'assasat Filasṭīn lil-thaqāfa, September 25, 2008.
- Tūmā, Munīr. "Alam yakhtaziluhu qalam". *Al-Ittiḥād*, Haifa, June 1, 2005.