

## A Comparative Analysis of the Conversational Elements in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and Al-Sayyab's 'Marha Ghailan'

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### Abstract

The conversation poem is a genre of poetry mostly associated with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is usually characterized by being personal, emotional in nature, and often drawing on real events from the poet's life. This paper presents a comparative study of the conversational elements in S. T. Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab's 'Marha Ghailan'. Similarity in focus, content, and style are going to be studied. In addition to that, certain points are going to be discussed and compared like; the minimalistic setting, the subjective experiences of both poets, the role of nature, the use of religion and myths, and the role given to the conversational partners.

**Keywords:** Arabic Poetry, English Romantic poetry, Free verse, Conversation poetry

### Introduction

The experience of being a father is not something that can be easily put into words. Therefore, any attempt to do so should be celebrated like S. T. Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab's 'Marha Ghailan'. They succeeded in turning the very special moments they spent with their sons, Hartley and Ghailan, into beautiful poems. They tended to present this experience as the ultimate pleasure in life which inspired them and immortalized their feelings as fathers for many generations after them. The poems, whether intended by the poets or not, can be considered as reminders of the fathers' genuine love to their sons.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, born in England 1772, is not only a notable poet but a prominent critic and one of the pioneers of Romanticism whose writing is considered highly important. The principles of the French Revolution cast its shadow on his personality as well his works. In addition to that, he fell under the spell of Kant's and Schlegel's philosophy and it dominated his more recent theoretical writing (Wynne Davies, 1989).



Bader shaker Al-Sayyab was born in Albasra, south of Iraq (1926). He lived a very strenuous life that ended with his death by sickness, poor and alone. He was highly influenced by the political turmoil that Iraq suffered from at that time. Between being a communist for eight years and then turning to be one of its main enemies, Al-Sayyab witnessed all kinds of suffering. However, the result was a large literary output in which he wrote about love, politics, and society (Awath, 1987).

Despite the fact that there are 154 years separating between both poets, the influence of Coleridge and other Romantic poets existed heavily in Arabic Poetry in the beginning of the twentieth century. The pioneers of Arabic Romanticism were Al-Shaby in Tunis, Ali Mahmood Taha and Ibrahim Naji in Egypt, and Elyas Abu shabaka, Gubran Khalil Gubran, and Apollo group led by Khailil Mutran in Lebanon. Like western Romanticism, they called for individualism in poetic expression and insisted on presenting the poet as the individual creator who is gifted with a special talent, sensibility, and capable of creating a unique interaction with nature and the universe (Abbas, 1971).

Iraqi Romanticism was just an echo to the Arabic Romanticism. Al-Sayyab and other poets who belonged to the same generation were influenced by the end of World War II and its reflection on Iraq and other Arab countries. As a result, Romantic poetry was their way to answer the needs of the educational and mental framework of that time (Tawfeeq, 1979). This can be clearly identified in Free Verse which started in Iraq after World War II. It succeeded in shaping new positive values by addressing various themes like freedom and love. It is significant to mention that free verse is a reflection of the era itself, since it appeared in a time when Arab countries started to gain independence. Thus, poetry found its way to prove its free style. The new general mood was in need to new methods, presented in a realistic poetry to face problems and a free one to handle them in an innovative way (Boullata, 1987).

Al-Sayyab read frequently about Arabic traditional heritage, the Bible, and mythology. He was also interested in Arabic Romantic poets, like the Lebanese Ilyas Abu Shabaka and the Egyptian Ali Mahmood Taha. He was specifically influenced by Ilyas Abu Shabaka who is well known of revolting against metric in poetry and of using local myths in his poems (Ali, 1978). As a student of English literature, Al-Sayyab had the opportunity to study the most prominent English poets. He was influenced by the English Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. Not only he translated some of their works and incorporated them in his work, but he dedicated poems to them (Baidoun, 1991). His poetry primarily went through four distinct phases: Romantic poems 1934-1984, Realistic poems 1949-1955, the Tammuzian poems 1956-1960, and subjective personal poems during his illness 1961-1964 (Allush, 1971).

This paper aims at discussing and comparing the conversational elements in S. T. Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab's 'Marha Ghailan' like the minimalistic setting, the role of the conversational partners, the role of nature, and the image of city versus countryside. Besides, it shows if there are any influences by Coleridge's poetry on Al-Sayyab's. It also reveals a lot about the reasons behind writing these poems.



Many critics examined Al-Sayyab's poetry from a social perspective like AlBasri who argued that the poet's work documented the reality of the political and historical conditions of Iraq in the twentieth century (2014). Others studied the myth in his poetry which presented a clear image of nationalism and patriotism. This can be seen in De Young 's study who suggests that the use of myth is a technique to integrate the personal with the political (1993). Psychoanalytic criticism has also been applied on Al-Sayyab's poetry. Abood and Ali are among the important critics who studied Al-Sayyab's poems, showing the poets' feelings, emotional states, and desires (2018). The postcolonial studies are also present in his poetry criticism. Majeed, Jones and Samarraï studied his employment of the Mesopotamian symbols found that they are considered a kind of resistance to the occupier and to try to present the Iraqis as the owners of their land (2018, 2013,2014). Neimnehand al Qaisi (2015) discussed the Romantic influence on his early poems while Rihan's (2015) comparative study discussed Al-Sayyab's influence by Eliot's poem 'The West Land'.The conversational elements in Al-Sayyab's poetry have not been tackled before. These elements can be found in Coleridge's poetry who is considered a pioneer. These elements are presented through the father-son relationship which unifies both poems and paves the road to a well-structured comparison.

### Research Method

The study follows the main rules of the American school of Comparative Literature which emphasizes the transitional and interdisciplinary nature of literature. It mainly compares the texts produced by different national literatures, taking into consideration the common aesthetic values and the universal laws in literature and literary development. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek 's book Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application is also used for applying comparative study on literary texts. It contains a wide range of topics on the art of comparative literature (1998).

This paper presents a comparative study of S. T. Coleridge 's 'Frost at Midnight' and Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab's 'Marha Ghailan'. The conversational elements in both poems are studied, discussed, and analyzed. These elements are considered main parts of the formal designs of this kind of poetry. Among the most important ones are the subjective experiences and the internal dialogue of both poets, minimalism in setting, the rondo effect, the active role of nature and mythology, and the use of repetitive images. The results of the comparison will show if there are any similarities between both poems and if one of them might have influenced the other.

### Findings and discussion

'Frost at Midnight' and 'Marha Ghailan' belong to the conversation poems. Conversation piece in common is a form of poetry characterized of being formal in tone, since it shows a personal mood. However, the subject matter can be serious sometimes. Horace and Pope wrote this kind of poems, but the two poets who have excelled at them were William Wordsworth and S.T.Coleridge (Cuddon, 1998). Conversation poems are known to have hermeneutic consequences by containing narrative elements and characters to whom readers may relate in a combination of both identification and difference. This kind of poems do not have proper plots, since they present fragments of plot (a single episode of the poet's life). It naturally assumes the character to be an intersubjective construct with whom readers positively identify and get involved in the text (Rajan, 1990). Written in 1798, 'Frost



'at Midnight' is considered as one of Coleridge's most successful conversational poems. Its primary source is the poet's own experience on a cold February night (Hill, 1985). John Cornwell (1973) states that this period of Coleridge's life can be adequately described of being calm. He spent most of that time with his wife and son, Hartley. 'Marha Ghailan' is one of two published poems written by Al-Sayyab to his son Ghailan around 1960. It indicates a strong connection between the image of his son and the symbols of death, resurrection, and fertility, since humans consider having children is a form of immortality and defeating death. The poem is divided into six stanzas; each of them starts with 'Baba, baba' 'Daddy, Daddy'. There is a philosophical argument about the key concepts of life and death which relates the six stanzas together (Al-Dhaher, 2007).

Both poems are distinctive for including a subjective experience which is being told to a silent listener. In 'Frost at Midnight', Hartley, Coleridge's infant, represents his surrogate. He starts the poem addressing him by lamenting on his physical and emotional sense of imprisonment in the city. He expresses his joy that his son will be able to enjoy nature's blessing in a more pastoral life than himself. Coleridge also longs for childhood's innocence. Hartley is a silent listener who turns the poem into a monologue rather than a conversation. Jan Plug (1993) suggests this poem can be described as a self-conversation meditative monologue. While in Al-Sayyab's poem, the first words are 'Daddy, Daddy' uttered by Ghailan calling his father. Al-Sayyab turns the poem more into a conversation by involving his son and building the rest of the poem on his calling. Both sons, Hartley and Ghailan, are in bed witnessing their fathers' mediation on nature, politics, and life.

Minimalism characterizes both poems where setting plays a substantial role. In 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge begins by describing the frost in a very silent surrounding where he sits in his cottage looking at his sleeping baby and listening to the owl's cry. He enjoys this tranquil solitude which the baby's presence does not break, since he is sleeping. Coleridge tells his readers that this quietness provokes meditation 'Tis Calm indeed! is calm, that it disturbs/And vexes meditation with its strange/And extreme stillness' (Coleridge). This exactly exemplifies William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it derives its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (1800, p.8). In 'Marha Ghailan', readers are engaged in the same minimalist setting where the poet addresses his son in the dark. He describes the voice of Ghailan calling him as a drizzle flowing while he is about to sleep. Then, he imagines himself swimming in this blessed and scented rain water 'At bottom of Buwaib, I lie on a bed of its sand, on its scented mud / And the blood from my veins is disgoring into its freshwater, so as to resuscitate all palms 'roots (Al-Sayyab, 2016, p.12).

Another characteristic of the conversation poems is starting the poem with physical and emotional solitude and ending it with a similar physical solitude accompanied with an emotional enlightenment. In 'Frost at Midnight' Coleridge employs the image of 'dying flame' to refer to his state of mind. Peter Barry asserts that he wanted to describe the 'directionlessness in his thinking' (2000, p.620). Barry further explains that this metaphor is a representative to his 'idling spirit'. Coleridge enjoys this midnight solitude although he found it disturbing at first. He gradually feels subdued to his own thoughts. Identically, Al-Sayyab starts his poem



with the same physical solitude in which he is meditating with the presence of his son. Even though Ghailan is calling him, he sails away in his dreams. He mentions that the darkness is surrounding them, while he rests next to his son's bed.

Both poets remember their birthplace village. It represents a beautiful past which they hope to relive. Their experience of living in the city can be described as being bitter and frustrating. The village is usually mentioned when the poets want to represent their feeling of loss in the city. It also represents origins and the traditions in contrast to the city which represents modernism.

Coleridge compares between his own memory of school days and his son's future education. This memory takes him back to Christ Hospital's school where he used to spend his time absent-minded, remembering his birth place. Ottery St Mary, a beautiful town in east Devon, stayed alive in Coleridge's memory in his most boring days in school. He recalled how he spent long hours gazing at the sky. These memories reveal his happy past, presented by his town's people, his aunt, and his sister Ann (Hill, 1985).

My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart  
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,  
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,  
And in far other scenes! For I was reared  
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,  
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.

(Coleridge)

Then, he expresses his relief that Hartley is going to get a different education amid the beauties of nature. Coleridge spent the first nine years of his life in Devon. Remembering his home town revives hope in his heart, since living in the city gave him a sense of unhappiness. He kept longing for one of his relatives to appear while pretending to study (Davidson). He says in the fourth stanza:

But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible

(Coleridge)

In 'Marha Ghailan', Jaykor is more than a village for the poet. It represents a book, through reading it and reflecting on its meaning, he is able to grasp various dualities in life such as; the remarkable contrast between the city and the countryside, childhood and adulthood, death for resurrection or death for the sake of dying, mother or wife, present or future, and belief or atheism. He adequately describes the village as big as the universe where its greenness prevails to cover it as a whole. Jaykor also stands for a nation. Its resurrection stands for the liberation of Iraq. He presented it as a mythical symbol of life, death, and resurrection. When it is green, it means the whole country is full of life, while when it is oppressed, it represents death and destruction. He used it as an image opposite to the city. It is usually related to the images of growth and fertility, while the city carries images of death, loss and destruction. Therefore, Jaykor function as a metaphor for a



utopian pre-colonial past and at the same presents a contrast to the immoral modernity of urban landscapes (Jones, 2013). 'Marha Ghailan' stands as a notable exception among Al-Sayyab's published poems at that time, because the poet presents Jaykor as solution for the misery of the world. It is resurrected in his poems every time he finds himself far from it. It also held his childhood after he became an orphan which makes it a symbol of motherhood. It is interesting that the poet succeeded in presenting this little village to the world and revives it forever in Iraqi literature.

Rondo effect is one of the unique characteristics of the conversation poem. It exists in both poems as it starts with present time, then shifts to the past, and finally returns to the present. In 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge begins with the moment of speaking at night which naturally provokes him to meditate and remember his schooldays in the past. Finally, he returns to the present and feels delighted for knowing that his son will live and be surrounded by nature. In 'Marha Ghailan', Al-Sayyab's profound sense of happiness and gratitude is provoked by his son calling him at night, while he is about to sleep next to him. Then, He delves into a state of melancholy instantly recalling the past and presenting his country's suffering in mythical images. The concluding stanza brings back the sense of hope and happiness, when the poet wishes a better present for his dear son.

The active role of nature is significant in both poems. Coleridge, as a Romantic poet, sincerely believed in the extraordinary power of nature. For him, to grow up surrounded by natural scenery leads to the calmness of mind and soul. He eloquently states that all moments in nature will be sweet to his son. Trying to visualize Hartley see and listen to divine nature's eternal language makes him certain that he will get the best education. The freedom he enjoys in the peaceful countryside is unlimited. He can wander like a breeze, visiting the lakes and the mountains. By linking the past with the present, he explicitly expresses his hopes to his son's future. Nature remains the teacher and the reliable guide there, opposite to the boring education people get in schools 'Of that eternal language, which thy God/Utters, who from eternity doth teach/Himself in all, and all things in himself. Great universal Teacher! he shall mould/Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask' (Coleridge). Coleridge was highly influenced by Berkley's philosophy. His impact of nature as a divine visual language on the poet is clear. Berkley's philosophy is based on the theory that nature exists to be seen because God 's aim of creating it is to be a means of communication with human beings. He considered nature as a divine visual language (Bewell, 2012). He states, 'We see our God everywhere—the Universe in the most literal Sense is his written Language'; "all Nature is . . . beautiful because its every Feature is the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence' (Coleridge, 1971, p.339). The holiness of nature is seen as a unique kind of communication. God is teaching himself through things. It is the eternal language that He continually utters. Coleridge's belief in nature as being holly and sacred influenced his poetry. For him, nature's infinity is revealed in its various forms (Griggs, n.d.).

While Coleridge found in nature his son's mentor, Alsayyab fills his poem with natural elements mixed with mythological symbols. Ghailan's calls for his father are considered the trigger that starts the happy images. The poet sees himself in the riverbed of Buwaib which flows to turn the familiar surrounding into an evergreen



scenery. The poet is harmoniously united with the river, both flows through the other. This unity takes both of them to bequeath life to the date palms through watering them. One of the most significant symbols in Jaykor is Buwaib. The poet employs it in a nostalgic way to create a lively scene 'At bottom of Buwaib/I lie On a bed of its sand, on its scented mud/And the blood from my veins is Disgorging into its freshwater, so as to Resuscitate all palms'roots' (Al-Sayyab, 2016, pp.11-12).

Al-Sayyab is not only known for his heavy use of mythology, but also of using it in new ways and included new meanings in it. Through it, he sincerely wanted to create a new world where humans are respected. He eagerly sought for what can enrich his poetry. This leads him to use the myth, since it is full of symbols. Another critical fact is that he tried to present humans' souls with all their grand ambitions, desires, and problems. This is a way to present the public through the individual (Ali, 1978).

The poet presents himself as Baal, the universal god of fertility. He is also called the Lord of Earth and the Lord of Rain and Dew in Canaan Mythology. Locked in a mortal combat with Mot, the god of death and sterility, Baal's triumph guarantees a seven-year cycle of fertility, while his vanquish leads to seven-year cycle of drought and famine (Augustyn et al, 2020). Baal is presented in the poem wandering and gently spreading his soul to the leaves and fruits around him. An image full of life and fertility which shows his triumph over Mot. The stanza ends with the same image it starts with. The poet says that he melts in his own happiness and sleeps in the riverbed again (Abbas, 1971). The poet's soul transmitted into his son's to grant him life.

I am Baal: who walks on water,  
Whose soul diffuses into the leaves and the  
fruits. ....  
Oh musical ladder, which desire is in your  
mind? (Al-Sayyab, 2016, p. 12)

The mythical images of rebirth and death are usually symbols of his own rejection to injustice and tyranny. Similarly, Alsayyab intentionally uses mythological symbols of rebirth and growth to refer to hope towards a better life. He identified his suffering with that of Sisyphus. The cycles of life are presented in his non-ending suffering, carrying his rock and ascending the mountain. The myth of Sisyphus is used as a symbolic depiction of the tragedy of life that keeps repeating in variant forms and shapes (Al-Dhaher, 2007). Through this line, 'I see my beginning in my ending' Al-Sayyab mentions the cycle of life starting with his grandfather who passed away the same year, through himself, ushering a new life with his son 'Sisyphus rolls it uphill, then it rolls/ Downhill along with your collapse' (Al-Sayyab, 2016, p.12). Tammuz is another notable example of the use of mythology. He is the god of fertility who embodies the power of new life in nature. Al-Sayyab uses Tammuz to display how the weak can defeat the strong 'Tammuz has returned with every ear of grain that plays with every wind' (Ibid). He depicts Tammuz returning and carrying wheat. Although the wheat is weaker than the wind, it tries to manipulate it. Here, the poet turns the logic of things upside down and presents the powerless as making fun of the powerful (Al-Dhaher, 2007).



In 'Marha Ghailan', Al-Sayyab implicitly hopes to be cured from his illness. In the beginning of the last stanza, he appears to be lost. Christ appears to be in a static state where the earth is nothing but a prison full of images of torture like pain, blood, and iron. He is no more a symbol of resurrection, since chaos is everywhere. The sun, which is a symbol of warmth and light, is cold and dark. His son calls him and heralds that the Christ has come to revive him 'Daddy...! Messiah's hand seemingly to be there, Dead skulls seemingly, bud in the tomb' (Al-Sayyab, 2016, p.12). The poet believes in resurrection which enables him to defy the images of death. Ghailan represents the poet's eternity in life. His revival lies in his son's existence. As a result, the tone of the poem changes to be more hopeful. Pleasant warmth triumphantly enters his iron prison, youth runs in his blood, and nature is green again like in the beginning of the poem. The end of the poem accurately represents the poet's hope for a better future.

Coleridge, on one hand, uses similarities to enrich the poem with numerous images through including repetitive figures. At the beginning of the poem, the poet echoes the voice of the owl, the cry of which 'came loud' and 'again! Loud as before' when he repeats his vision on 'Sea, hill, and wood/This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood, /With all the numberless goings-on of life'(Coleridge). Another image is the grate of the fireplace which can be seen as similar to the bar on the school window, since both of them symbolize the confined emotions of the soul and the desire to get the freedom of thought and connection with nature (Kardos, n.d.). On the other hand, Al-Sayyab uses the opposites which show the high-level artistry in his poem. These opposites reveal his changing mood which is reflected on his sensitive character. He uses the images of darkness and light, and death and resurrection (symbolized by Jesus). The sun is mentioned twice in two opposite ways. The first one is as a symbol of cold "And the sun wails in the paths/I am cold, while the sky is full of snow", while the second as a symbol of warmth 'Daddy, Daddy, from which sun did your warmth come, from which star in the sky? Slips to the iron cage, so tomorrow sprouts in my blood?' (Al-Sayyab, 2016, p. 12).

## Conclusion

The poets' companionship of their sons brought real joy and solace to them. Through it, they explored their relationship with their surroundings. It is not easy to prove that Al-Sayyab was directly inspired by Coleridge's poem, since he has never mentioned this. However, he studied English Literature and was undoubtedly influenced by the Romantic poets, so it is possible that he has read 'Frost at Midnight' and tried to write a similar poem later. The similarities between both poems outcount the differences. They both end with optimism, joy, and belief in a better future. It is their earnest desire that their sons live closer to nature where they can treasure their fond childhood memories forever.

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