



Cultural Intertextuality: From Textual Interaction to Cultural Interaction In Modern Arabic Poetry – Al-Sayyab’s Poetry as a Model –

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Abstract:

This study explores cultural intertextuality in modern Arabic poetry through the works of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, focusing on the transition from textual to cultural interaction. It examines how al-Sayyab reinterprets and transforms inherited cultural, mythological, and religious symbols within his poetic structure, moving beyond mere linguistic or literary borrowing to engage in a dynamic dialogue between civilizations. By integrating Mesopotamian, Greek, and biblical mythologies with modern Arab consciousness, al-Sayyab's poetry becomes a site of cultural negotiation and identity reconstruction. The research highlights how his intertextual strategies embody both continuity and rupture, reflecting the poet's attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity and local identity with universal human experience.

Keywords: Cultural intertextuality, modern Arabic poetry, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, myth, cultural dialogue, tradition and modernity, identity reconstruction.

Intertextualité culturelle : de l'interaction textuelle à l'interaction culturelle dans la poésie arabe moderne – La poésie d'Al-Sayyab comme modèle –

Résumé :

Cette étude explore l'intertextualité culturelle dans la poésie arabe moderne à travers les œuvres de Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, en se concentrant sur la transition de l'interaction textuelle à l'interaction culturelle. Elle examine comment al-Sayyab réinterprète et transforme les symboles culturels, mythologiques et religieux hérités dans sa structure poétique, allant au-delà du simple emprunt linguistique ou littéraire pour s'engager dans un dialogue dynamique entre les civilisations. En intégrant les mythologies mésopotamiennes, grecques et bibliques à la conscience arabe moderne, la poésie d'al-Sayyab devient un lieu de négociation culturelle et de reconstruction identitaire. La recherche met en évidence la manière dont ses stratégies intertextuelles incarnent à la fois la continuité et la rupture, reflétant la tentative du poète de réconcilier la tradition avec la modernité et l'identité locale avec l'expérience humaine universelle.

Mots-clés : *Intertextualité culturelle, poésie arabe moderne, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, mythe, dialogue culturel, tradition et modernité, reconstruction identitaire.*



Introduction

The concept of *intertextuality* has stirred much debate in contemporary critical and intellectual studies, especially after the mid-twentieth century. It belongs to post-structuralist culture and is therefore considered one of the new critical terms introduced into modern intellectual thought. It may also be regarded as one of the prominent concepts that occupied Western “poetics” theories on both the theoretical and procedural levels. Consequently, it became widely used among European, American, and Arab critics alike.

Its emergence was due to its novelty and its aim to present new perceptions rather than merely refute traditional conceptions in literature and criticism. Its novelty lies in its new vision of the text and in the critical philosophy on which it relies. Thus, discussing intertextuality necessarily involves discussing the text with which it interacts – raising the issue of their mutual boundaries. Is the text a collection of intertexts? Or does intertextuality arise from a set of texts?

Intertextuality has evolved into a methodological and procedural tool for understanding, interpreting, deconstructing, and reconstructing the text. It has become one of the technical keys to approaching literary texts in particular, allowing exploration of their linguistic codes, deep structures, and internal and external interactions. What, then, is the meaning of intertextuality, and what is its essence?

1. Intertextuality: Concept and Essence

Intertextuality is an open and independent window onto other texts and cultures that interact with the fabric of meaning and context. Hence, it has been described as a *mosaic of quotations*, for every text absorbs and transforms other texts. It involves extracting from an original and transforming it into a new origin – without losing the author’s idea – since the use of previous texts depends on his awareness, influence, intellectual vision, and style, as well as what he can derive from prior texts.

Every text is an intertext, and other texts appear within it at varying levels. Intertextuality thus implies the impossibility of living outside the infinite text, as Roland Barthes put it.

Intertextuality involves two poles: an influenced text and an influencing text. The former is represented by the new text, and the latter by the absent text (the one drawn upon). Critic Jamil Hamdawi considered it the conscious or unconscious borrowing of others’ texts through three mechanisms: absorption, imitation, and dialogue. Mohammed Miftah viewed it as *textual dialogue* or *interaction*, while Salah Fadl regarded it as the intersection of multiple texts, whether deliberate or spontaneous.

It is of two kinds:

- **External intertextuality:** when the writer interacts with texts beyond his own creative works – for example, Ahmed Shawqi’s *The Death of Cleopatra* intertextually engaging with Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, a dialogue with historical heritage.
- **Internal (self) intertextuality:** when the writer engages with his own earlier works, as in the case of Egyptian writer Mohammed Salmawy.



Julia Kristeva divided it into **formal** and **content-based** intertextuality:

- **Formal intertextuality:** concerns external aspects such as structure, chapter arrangement, or dramatic construction (flashbacks, etc.).
- **Content-based intertextuality:** where the present text overlaps with the content of previous ones. "Since the text is produced within a prior textual structure, it correlates and interacts with it by transformation, inclusion, or citation."

Hence, "the current text does not arise from nothing but is conceived in the blood of others. It includes diverse literary and artistic components. The production of the present text becomes a process in which absent texts participate as essential tools of production. The texts (absent and present) interact to form a new text."

Texts, however, do not interact as mere linguistic entities but as cohesive semantic practices. They surpass, conflict, and merge, interacting as systems of signs, each with its own meaning. When these systems meet in a new text, they collectively create a new symbolic system responsible for producing meaning. The writer, therefore, uses various literary and cultural elements, taking into account their generic and stylistic differences.

1. Its Nature

1.1. Expanding interpretive horizons:

Intertextuality enriches texts by multiplying layers of meaning, opening space for the reader to uncover hidden dimensions and reread the text from various perspectives. It

provokes the reader's awareness by connecting one text with others.

1.2. Building cultural and historical bridges:

It links different literary traditions, showing how old literature interacts with new literature, reflecting the continuity of cultural and historical dialogue.

1.3. An effective critical tool:

Intertextuality enables critics to analyze texts deeply, revealing the influence and overlap of other works that enrich the literary creation.

Thus, it transforms the text into an open dialogue with its literary and cultural heritage, enriching the reading experience, highlighting multiple dimensions of the work, and enabling the writer to reconcile past and present – creating dramatic nuances that stimulate and engage, making it a fertile and influential field of knowledge.

2. Intertextuality in Contemporary Arab Critical Discourse

The Arab cultural scene embraced the term *intertextuality* like other new Western terms. It found resonance in the critical field for its effectiveness in interrogating the literary text and renewing its approaches, despite the issues it raised.

The principle of *cultural exchange* (*muthaqafa*) aroused an open debate about universal human culture – the dialogue of civilizations, openness to the other, and positive engagement without subordination. Constructive dialogue between old and new allowed the West to break free from blind imitation and to shape its own critical theories within its intellectual and literary context.



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Hence, *intertextuality* became one of the central concepts dominating late Arab critical discourse, replacing older notions such as *influence and affectedness* used in comparative studies.

Early attention to *intertextuality* in modern Arab criticism began in the 1980s with Yumna al-'Id's article "*Irony in Arabic Narrative*". Later, critics like Mohammed Bennis enriched the term, introducing "*the absent text*" and later "*text migration*" in his study *The Migration of the Eastern Text to the Western Text*.

Mohammed Miftah stated:

"Intertextuality is inevitable, for no one can escape his temporal and spatial conditions or his personal history and memory. The foundation of any text is its author's knowledge of the world — the same basis upon which the reader interprets it."

Abd al-Malik Mortad viewed *intertextuality* as an inherent quality of all creators — "for it is impossible for any writer to compose a literary text without a prior deep engagement with other texts."

Some, like Peter Dembowski, saw *intertextuality* as a critical reaction against the claim of literary autonomy — not by revealing source texts but by exploring how they operate within the new text. Thus, *intertextuality* became a critical inquiry focusing on the text itself, seeing it as an endless network of symbols and semiotic intersections comprehensible to the reader familiar with its multiple citations.

French critic Marc Angenot noted that every literary work is intelligible only in relation to overarching textual patterns, themselves sequences of prior texts — forming relationships of transformation or subversion.

This idea found clear expression in Julia Kristeva's writings, influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky's novels, emphasizing the dialogic nature of texts.

Hence, the literary heritage became a vital source for modern poets, including Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, who drew from global and Arab traditions alike, reworking them artistically to convey his vision.

3. Al-Sayyab and Western Literary-Cultural Dialogue

A creative poet selects from human heritage what resonates with universal emotion. Poetry becomes the voice of life through which it reaches society, illuminating hidden feelings and transforming them into living reality.

Among such poets is the Iraqi Badr Shakir al-Sayyab – one of the foremost Arab poets in his intertextual engagement with Western, especially English, literature. Trained in English language and literature, he was deeply versed in English poetry.

A close reader of his works perceives his extensive use of mythological, historical, and religious Western motifs – sometimes paralleling them, sometimes transforming them, depending on his poetic theme. "No Arab poet has engaged with a Western text as profoundly as al-Sayyab."

His poetic inspiration traces back to the earliest Western epics, notably *The European Iliad* of the eighth century BCE, and to mythological and ritualistic sources such as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.

He read T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, as well as Romantic poets and Shakespeare. Through them, he saw humanity's loss of primal happiness and its attempt to regain it through



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revolution and reform. His poetry abounds with images and symbols foreign to Arabic tradition, yet through his bilingual culture he created hybrid, cohesive texts blending diverse cultural elements.

3.1. Mythological Symbolism in Al-Sayyab's Poetry

Mythological symbols derive their meanings from ancient legends and tales, using mythical figures and events to create artistic and intellectual depth. These symbols convey layered, complex meanings extending beyond literal narrative, encompassing cultural, historical, and philosophical dimensions often linked to sacred or traditional beliefs.

Such symbols expand interpretive horizons and connect individual experience with the broader cultural and historical network of humanity, turning literature into a dialogue between past and present. They enable poets to renew language and form by adapting ancient myths to modern human concerns.

Each poet has his own mythic symbols that express his message and aesthetic vision – some politically motivated (like Tammuz or Ishtar), others driven by the search for a pure, original word that conveys inner tension.

Al-Sayyab, one of the leading figures of modern Arabic poetry, made extensive use of myth and symbolism, liberating Arabic verse from conventional form toward a broader poetic space marked by ambiguity and layered meaning – a “mystery,” as critic Izz al-Din Ismail described it.

He drew upon a vast array of Greek myths (Sisyphus, Nausicaa, Odysseus, Oedipus, and others) and Babylonian

myths such as Tammuz and Ishtar – symbols of the suffering human being.

The Symbol of the Ishtar Myth

According to the Babylonian legend, the god of wrath was slain by a wild boar and dies once every year, descending into the dark underworld. With his death, his beloved Ishtar – goddess of fertility – disappears.

Al-Sayyab used this myth to depict the tension between life and death, struggle and hope. Sometimes he alluded to it implicitly – portraying human conflict with harsh reality, particularly in poems about love, collapse, and the quest for salvation, expressing the contradictions between the beauty of love and the bitterness imposed by time.

He says:

- As if my eyes carry the gleam of Ishtar
- Between the tears of the night and the mirage of days
- I search for a longing that heals the wounds of the earth

The Symbol of the Adonis Myth:

According to the Greek legend, the god *Adonis* – the Phoenician god of mythology – was killed by a wild boar while hunting in one of the forests of Semman, and the earth was soaked with his blood. The legend says that his beloved “Astarte” mourned him. This myth dates back to the fifth century. To express the idea of eternal artistic beauty and undying longing, Al-Sayyab says:

- In the face of twilight appears the face of Adonis
- Melting, as if his soul were made of the scent of roses
- He is the symbol of love that never dies but is born again



These verses reflect the spirit of Al-Sayyab's use of symbols, as he evokes *Adonis* as a symbol of artistic beauty, longing, and rebirth, creating a poetic image that unites emotion, symbolism, and depth.

The Symbol of the Tammuz Myth:

The myth of *Tammuz* fulfilled Al-Sayyab's purpose in choosing the tragic meaning of his poems, as confirmed by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who said: "It was by coincidence that I showed Badr this myth in two chapters of a volume I translated from *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer. When Badr read it, he found in it two poetic dimensions through which he employed its idea for more than six years. He wrote his most beautiful and profound poetry inspired by the Tammuz myth, and after 1954, its lines intersected with his poetry and branched out from it."

Tammuz is a Babylonian name and a universal symbol that dies in order to live again. His death represents the death of fertility, and his return signifies the return of life. He is the monk of rich life and the renewer of its abundance. In Al-Sayyab's poetry, Tammuz represents the struggle between life and death, hope and despair. Among the most famous verses in which Al-Sayyab used the Tammuz symbol are:

- Tammuz passes between my hands
- He digs deep into my heart a new wound
- And every year he returns to be born in bitter moments

These lines express man's struggle with mortality and his constant search for renewal. The poet evokes Tammuz as a symbol of life that embraces pain and plants the seeds of

rebirth in the heart of consciousness – an approach close to Al-Sayyab’s style in depicting the contrast between tears and light, death and resurrection, giving the text a renewed existential and human dimension.

3.2. The Influence of Shakespeare on Al-Sayyab’s Poetry

Shakespeare played an important role in shaping Al-Sayyab’s literary and linguistic awareness, enabling him to employ dense poetic imagery capable of expressing his suffering and ideas in a dramatic way that portrays the conflict of the self and poetic monologues. This is manifested in the following points:

3.2.1. *The Spirit of Tragedy and Inner Conflict:*

The Shakespearean tragic hero, who faces deep inner conflicts and struggles against uncontrollable external forces, appears in Al-Sayyab’s portrayal of his poetic self, which suffers from alienation and pain in confronting the injustice of time and society. Although Al-Sayyab did not quote Shakespeare’s verses literally, the spirit of tragedy and internal conflict that marked Shakespeare’s works – especially Hamlet’s existential questions – are clearly reflected in Al-Sayyab’s poetry and diction.

He reworked these ideas within a contemporary Arab context, where instead of literal borrowing, he drew from Shakespeare’s expressive form that reflects man’s dilemma between existence and nothingness, his constant struggle with fate and injustice. Some of Al-Sayyab’s verses echo Shakespeare’s question about the meaning of existence in *Hamlet*, formulated in a skeptical tone expressing deep inner struggle. In one of his poems inspired by that spirit, Al-



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Sayyab employed echoes of tragedy and inner conflict as embodied in Shakespeare's plays:

- Between the fog of existence, my soul moans in silence
- As if it repeats "To be or not to be" in the stillness of night
- Sorrows bleed upon the strings of a broken heart
- Like Hamlet's shadow twisting between the cruelty of fate and the pain of separation

These verses attempt to embody existential tension and inner conflict – Al-Sayyab's Shakespearean inspirations echoing the phrase "To be or not to be," revealing hesitation and bitterness in facing life.

3.2.2. *Dramatic Language and Rich Vocabulary:*

Al-Sayyab borrowed from Shakespeare's emotionally charged and suspenseful style, using linguistic structures and poetic imagery that convey dramatic intensity mixed with beauty and sorrow, reminiscent of Shakespeare's depiction of human tragic scenes, as in:

- The fire screams: "O roses, bloom, for spring is born!"
- O my shadow stretching as I die, O the rebirth of my life anew
- Where Christ remains, neither dying nor living, like a shadow

3.3. Reflection on Time and Fate:

Al-Sayyab's poetry often contemplates the notions of time and fate, similar to Shakespeare's plays, which discuss human destiny and how it is shaped by forces beyond one's control. This philosophical view of existence appears in his

verses meditating on the fate of the individual in a changing world, as in:

- And death, and birth, and darkness, and light—
- Until my soul awakens full of the trembling of tears

3.4. Symbolism and Existential Depth:

Just as Shakespeare used symbols to express human conflicts and the search for meaning in life, Al-Sayyab used symbols to express the crises of his age and the ongoing quest for identity amidst conflicting social and political forces, as he says:

- There came a time when mankind
- Measured with cattle what the heavens kept within of fate

Thus, Al-Sayyab transferred from Shakespeare the spirit of tragedy and Western existential drama into the Arab context, contributing to a qualitative transformation in modern Arabic poetry by drawing upon the image of the afflicted hero and his inner struggle against nearly unchangeable forces.

3.5. Doubt in Fate and Identity:

Shakespeare raises questions about the meaning of existence through *Hamlet*, resonating with Al-Sayyab's continual search for identity amid complex political and social realities. He says:

- The rain still pants,
- Dark as the world of man, grim,
- Blind as the thousand and nine hundred forty nails
- Hammered upon the cross.



3.6. Reworking Western Symbols:

Al-Sayyab transforms Shakespearean symbols into rich Arabic poetic language filled with imagery, giving the text multidimensional depth that expresses both suffering and hope. As he says in *The Hymn*: Ishtar granted him flowers and fruits, as if my soul In the soil of darkness were a grain of wheat, and your echo, water.

Thus, Al-Sayyab succeeded in creating a poetic space that unites Arab human sensibility with Western philosophical contemplation, making his work a mirror reflecting the existential concerns of our age. Being a man of encyclopedic culture, he drew deeply from mythological, religious, and European literary sources – not by total imitation but by partial borrowing – seeking artistic inspiration to express his personal experience through transformation and adaptation of the borrowed source, thereby enriching his poetic text.

This cross-continental intertextuality became a mechanism for cultural enrichment through dialogue between Western European and Asian thought, imparting a broader and deeper human dimension – not only through texts but also through the construction of poetic imagery, the expression of emotion, and the treatment of profound human issues.

Conclusion

The heritage of world literature constitutes one of the major sources relied upon by poets in building their literary texts, especially modern poets, who employ it effectively to

convey contemporary meanings. It is natural for successive generations of poets to be influenced by their predecessors, accompanied by familiarity with other cultures, their ways of thinking, relationships, and expressions of their experiences.

In the inherited content, poets often find what answers their questions about certain situations not fully addressed by the present. This formed part of Al-Sayyab's modernist project, through which he sought to enrich the Arabic poem and expand its expressive horizons, using it as a medium to intensify meanings and internalize the issues of existence, alienation, and suffering.

By merging symbols with his Arab cultural heritage, he succeeded in creating a new poetic language pulsating with life, reflecting the concerns of the Arab human being within a global context – an artistic process that harmoniously blends the local with the universal.

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