



ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: <http://www.jtuh.tu.edu.iq>
**JTUH**  
 مجلة جامعة تكريت للعلوم الانسانية  
 Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

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07816371201

**Keywords:**
 Statue,  
 Adnan Al-Sayegh,  
 National,  
 Icon,  
 Culture and Semiotic
**ARTICLE INFO****Article history:**

Received 26 Mar. 2021

Accepted 24 Nov 2021

Available online 26 Feb 2022

E-mail

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## Iraqi Statues as Iconic of Iraqi Cultural Identity in Adnan al- Sayegh's Selected Poems: A Semiotic Study

**A B S T R A C T**

The function of statues has been interpreted in various ways, either at an academic or artistic level. Because of the different functions and meanings that they reflect, they are still a matter of some debate in various fields. Hence, examining the depiction of national monuments, historical scripts, and statues, is a worthy way to understand their material and the moral value at their roots. However, throughout this study another aspect of statue's function has been suggested, that of National statues as an iconic of Iraqi cultural identity, from a semiotic theoretical perspective. The aim of this paper is to delineate the identity of national statues depending on the text and the context that they come with; the focus is to define the importance of national statues by reconstructing the cultural identity of their roots and to present national statues as a bridge that help to transfer Iraqi culture and history to others who are not native. Semiotic theory, which was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, can be applied to this discussion.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.29.2.2022.25>

النصب التذكارية العراقية كرمز للهوية الثقافية العراقية في قصائد مختاره لعبدان الصائغ : دراسة  
 سيمائية

سرمد مجيد محمد/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية/ كلية الآداب/ جامعة الانبار

الخلاصة:

فُسِرَتْ وَظِيفَةُ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ بِطُرُقٍ مُخْتَلَفَةٍ، سَوَاءً عَلَى الْمُسْتَوَى الْأَكَادِيمِيِّ أَوْ الْفَنِيِّ. وَلَئِنْهَا تَشْكُلُ وَظَائِفٌ وَمَعَانِي مُخْتَلَفَةٌ، فَإِنَّهَا لَا تُزَالُ مَوْضِعُ نَفَاشٍ فِي مُخْتَلَفِ الْمَجَالَاتِ. لِذَلِكَ، فَإِنَّ دِرَاسَةَ تَصْوِيرِ الْأَثَارِ الْوُطَنِيَّةِ، وَالنُّصُوصِ التَّارِيخِيَّةِ، وَالنُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ، هِيَ طَرِيقَةٌ ذَا قِيَمِهِ جَيِّدَةٌ لَفَهْمِ قِيَمَتِهَا الْمَادِّيَّةِ وَالْمَعْنَوِيَّةِ فِي جُذُورِهَا الْأَصْلِيَّةِ. عَلَى أَيِّ حَالٍ، خِلَالِ هَذِهِ الدِّرَاسَةِ، تَمَّ اقْتِرَاحُ جَانِبٍ آخِرٍ لَوْظِيفَةِ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ، وَهُوَ دِرَاسَةُ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ عَلَى وَجْهِ الْخُصُوصِ كَرَمَزٍ لِلْهُويَّةِ الثَّقَافِيَّةِ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ، مِنْ مَنْظُورٍ نَظَرِيٍّ سِيمِيَّائِيٍّ. الْهَدَفُ مِنْ هَذِهِ الْوَرَقَةِ هُوَ تَحْدِيدُ هُويَّةِ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ بِالْإِعْتِمَادِ عَلَى النَّصِّ وَالسِّيَاقِ الَّذِي تَأْتِي بِهِ ؛ يَنْصَبُ التَّرْكِيزُ بِشَكْلِ خَاصٍّ عَلَى تَحْدِيدِ أَهَمِّيَّةِ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ فِي إِعَادَةِ بِنَاءِ الْهُويَّةِ الثَّقَافِيَّةِ. كَذَلِكَ، تُرَكِّزُ عَلَى تَعْرِيفِ النُّصَبِ التَّذْكَارِيَّةِ بِشَكْلِ عَامٍ وَ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ بِشَكْلِ خَاصٍّ كَجِسْرِ يُسَاعِدُ عَلَى نَقْلِ الثَّقَافَةِ وَالتَّارِيخِ الْعِرَاقِيِّ إِلَى الْآخَرِينَ غَيْرَ عَرَاقِيِّينَ. كُلُّ هَذِهِ الْمَفَاهِيمِ اسْتَنْتَجَتْ مِنْ خِلَالِ تَطْبِيقِ النَّظَرِيَّةِ السِّمِيَّائِيَّةِ لِتَشَارِلِزِ سَانْدِرِزِ بِيرِسِ.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التماثيل ، عدنان الصائغ ، العراقية ، الأيقونة ، الثقافة والسيميائية.

## Introduction

Although in the realm of contemporary English dictionaries statues are regarded as a historical notation tool with a commemorative function, they still do not have very clear meanings (Bellentani and Panico, 2016, 28). Simultaneously, statues have become a source of delusion in various epochs, due to the multiple connotations they can represent. One of the functions that statues stand for, is political intention. Such as, in post-societies, this is concrete and obvious. Political elites have used statues as a gateway to market their views, principles, and heroics. Consequently, these numerous connotations have paved the way to defining statues as neutral urban decorations, which is more akin to being “reworked and reinterpret[sic] in way that are different from, or rather contradictory to, the intentions of those who have had them installed” (Hay et al, 2004, 204).

That is, the function of statues tends to be changeable rather than immutable; accordingly, a full understanding of their functions is quite difficult because of their manifold references. Thus, interpreting the figurative meaning of a statue requires one to have some considerable background knowledge with regard to its roots. Therefore, examining the depiction of national monuments, historical scripts,

and statues at their roots, is a meaningful way in which to understand their material and moral values.

However, the aim of this paper is to delineate the identity of national statues depending on the text and the context that come with them. Its particular focus is to define the importance of national statues in reconstructing the cultural identity at their roots. Moreover, the paper addresses a set of related issues: to whom statues are important, how statues have been studied, how statues can be understood, and how the selected poet represents them.

### **How have statues been studied?**

Because of statues don't have constant meaning yet; they can become highly appropriated by their various academic researchers. More than once, statues have been fleshed out in different forms, making their interpretation a controversial issue in various fields. Examining the true interpretation of statues in any field whether this be literature, history, geography, etc...., requires one to give due consideration for other, previous studies, to make one's thesis both argumentative, and fruitful.

In fact, statues loom large in academic studies in term of classifying their identities, to what field of sciences they belong. The underlying symbolic meaning of statues is one of being a memorial tool, but this is not necessarily their explicit meaning. Although statues' function used to be a commemorative function, it can be also engaged with other sciences and its meaning can be understood depending on the designer's and the context that it comes with it. For instance, one of the forms that statues adopt is that of physical and aesthetical objects that have historical and artistic value. This idea has been broadly discussed by urban and art historians (Bellentani and Panico, 2016, 30).

From the same point of view, Roger W. Caves entirely affirmed the idea of urban and art historians placing states under the umbrella of artistic values and commemorative functions. As he expounded in the following lines:

A construction or an edifice filled with cultural, historical, and artistic values. The conservation and maintenance of [statues] is justified by those values. Historically, the idea of the monument

is closely tied to commemoration (of a Victoria ruling, a new law). In the urban space, monuments have become parts of the city landscape, spatial points of reference or elements founding the identity of a place (2005, 318).

Statues have also been investigated from a political perspective. In line with political views, statues have been utilized to make up or embellish certain selective narratives or celebrating convenient events and, indeed, obliterating what is distributing. That is, statues are used to support political elites' dominant worldviews in space. Consequently, this acts as a kind of delusion amongst public in which they glorify one thing and efface the rest (Bellentani and Panico, 2016, 29). Moreover, the same idea has been examined by a plethora of geographers. In the light of statues' use as a political tool, David Harvey tested the political controversy over the building of the Sacre-Coeur Basilica in Paris. He deduced the same view of statue, as a tool in the bag of those who have the authority (ibid 30).

In addition, David J. Getsy, an art historian, curator, and art writer, in his paper "*Act of stillness: Statues, performativity, and passive resistance*", considered the implications of statues from a new perceptive referred to as the "three-dimensional representation". Through this model, he clarified that statues can be interpreted in more ways than one. He proved that the interpretation assumed by state has a powerful relationship with the area in which they are erected (Getsy, 2014, 2).

In this study, however, another aspect of statue's function has been suggested, namely that of national statues as an iconic of Iraqi cultural identity, from a semiotic theoretical perspective. This paper aims to present the national statues as a bridge that have helped to transfer Iraqi culture and history to others who are not natives. Semiotic theory, as developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, can be applied to this discussion.

Peirce, in his theory, notably assumes that a sign could be a symbol for something is still unrevealed. With regard to understanding such a sign, he articulates that there are three elements that must be determined to interpret that sign correctly. These three elements are: the sign's vehicle or what he called "representamen", the idea that is created in a listener's mind by hearing or reading that sign, the "interpretant", and the thing or concept that the sign stands for, "iconic". By

combination these three elements, we can get the true meaning of statues (Mertz,2013, 4). Accordingly, a given statue's meaning is interpretable depending on what its roots represent. As a result, this becomes a step for learning and investigating because the true meaning of a statue is crossed with its roots, and this would lead those who are not from the region to examine the statue in order to recognize and understand its symbolic meaning. Therefore, one needs to understand the historical background of a given statue before offering any commentary about it.

### **The contextual and iner-textual relations of statues**

As argued above, the interpretation of statues is a complex process unless the analysis lays in its roots/culture. The same thing can be found when examining the underwritten meaning of literary texts. In a literary scope, the recent theories of interpretation offer two pillars that the interpretation of text revolved around, those assuming that texts can be illustrated only according to intentions of the authors, and those regarding text as bearing various possible interpretations. Eco suggested that interpretation falls somewhere between that of authors' and readers' views (1979,145). This view has overcome the rule that "good" interpretations occur when texts are interpreted based on the intentions of the author. Eco, through the "model of reader", articulates the idea that the author simultaneously presupposes and constructs their relationship, making assumptions about its social background, education, cultural traits, tastes, and needs (1992, 7-11)

As long as texts have been classified as aesthetic productions that consistently keep something unrevealed, this has led a number of attempts by authors to fail to control users' interpretations. Eco claimed that "every text, after all, is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand it would never end"; that is, texts become the "loci" where both readers and authors negotiate their interpretations (Bellentani and Panico,2016, 31) .

More clearly, text's meaning cannot be understood from one point because it refers to more than one meanings and this needs a sort of balance between authors' seek and readers' interpretations to get the true meaning of them. As a result, this opens the way to the consideration that the interpretation of the text cannot be restricted

to that between the author and reader, but rather that it is polarized according to three elements (author, reader, and object). As Yanow claimed “meaning resides not in one of these not exclusively in the author’s intent, in the text itself, or in the reader alone-but is, rather, created actively in interactions among all three, in the writing and in the reading.” She explores, the idea of that a text contains its own object, and that is impossible to understand the meaning of the text without it (2000,17)

Similarly, statues have the same feature of the text in which they can support a set of interpretations and connotations when they employ to serve a literary function. Thus, the divergent functions of statues give an impression that the state’s interpretation can never be predetermined because of the different forms that they have that allow them to be used in ways the designers or users might never have thought of. Lefebvre, in describing the capacity of statues to generate various interpretations through the metaphor “horizon of meanings”, stated that:

A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a ‘signified’(or ‘signified’); rather, it has a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of and for the sake of a particular action (1974,222)

### **Adnan Al- Sayegh**

In the view of poets, using metaphorical language in lieu of conventional language is more precise than dealing with everyday language. It does not evaluate, as an adequate language which acts as a bridge between poet and reader, and consequently the poet must rely on what Lewis called “ring road” (i.e., indirect language) (1982,160).

Therefore, poets often do not lean on straightforward language to disseminate their poetic experience, but rather tend toward the use of metaphorical language to express their true self-attitude. Poetic language is not a language that is easily understood rather; it is difficult to accommodate at once. This is because poets do not write in ways that might be considered ‘usual’; rather, they carefully pick their words and form them in ways that are in accord with their particular ideas. As a

result, expressing what is inside by poetic imagery is considered, one of the most significant poetic traits.

Poetic image, moreover, is regarded one of the eminently aspects that the literary criticism concentrates on, the true worth of poetic image is manifest in the fact of it being the measure of the poet's creativity and one of the most essential criteria that is adopted by literary criticism to make judgments as to the originality of the work.

However, based on Herbert Reed's view, poetic image represents the most important part of poetry, where it is a central pole in giving the literary work enough legitimacy to be tangible. That is, poetic image is one of poetic constituents that is undeniably burden. As Reed said, "we must always be prepared to judge the poet... according to his/her power of using metaphorical images in his/her poetry and its originality. This means that the poem's failure or success is attached with its pictorial capabilities" (Shakir and Sayel, 2020,23).

Thus, neglecting the common techniques and going beyond the usual is a concrete way to attract the reader's intention and stretch their imagination for the sake of helping to dive into boundless worlds. Visual techniques which are found to "fill the gap that [has] happened because of the poor connection between author and reader", is one of the most ways that Adnan Al-Sayegh try to engage with it. Al-Sayegh is a contemporary Iraqi poet among those who used visual techniques such as, art and statues in their works. As a poet, he tries to keep up with modernism and make his ideas clear. Accordingly, he has been selected as the central pillar of this study (Balavi et al,2015, 28).

As generally known, for each creative work, there are two messages: one is literal, whilst the other is internal. In the same level, in poetry, each poem has its own connotation that might be manifest from different events that contribute to this poem to be written; these events may be closely related to the poet's life, and transferring these events in poetic style can be effected in an almost infinite number of ways. Al-Sayegh attempts to avail himself of different devices in order to express his intended message. He energetically uses various images such as; symbols, motifs, and myths to make his poetic experience equal with his ancestors from the same the movement that he is. Al-Sayegh wrote many poems; one such is

“In the Garden of the Unknown Solider”. It is a poem that clearly and effectively focuses on a specific period in Iraq. Through his poem, Al-Sayegh tackles two issues: the darker side of Iraq-Iran War and the significant side of Iraqi statues that continuously maintain the connection between the reader and historical events.

“In the Garden of the Unknown Solider” was well-formed and written. By using metaphorical image and employing a historical event in the poems, Al-Sayegh conveys his idea of describing Iraqi cultural legacy ideally. In the context of his poem, he switches between past and present to keep his readers and listeners continuously engaged with his idea (Hussein,2015, 98). In addition, he creatively writes in two different times to get the reader to connect to his thoughts, as can be noted from the title of the poem itself. The title of the poem could stand alone as a poem in its own right because it refers to a great cultural statue, the “Unknown soldier”. Based on Yanow’s view of interpretation of statue, she powerfully proves that understanding the symbolic meaning of a statue is associated with cultural context (Bellentani and Panico,2016, 39). That is, cultural context directly and entirely affects a monument’s interpretation. So, the Statue of the Unknown Soldier is ambiguous unless one comprehends the significant meanings at its root. However, the Unknown Soldier is a historical Iraqi monument which was designed by Khaled Al-Rahal to celebrate the sacrifices of Iraqi soldiers in the defense of their homeland. Al-Sayegh used this statue as memorial tool to ensure that Iraqis would always remember those soldiers and as a civilized monument which would engage others who were not Iraqis to test its historical meaning.

The purpose of using national monuments does not, however, come out of the blue, so to speak. Al-Sayegh in a personal interview with me , noted that his employment of national monuments is a means of supporting cultural identity, whether that of humanity or nationality. This is a good point to ensure the goal of this paper in defining statues both as teaching for non-Iraqis and commemorative tools for Iraqis themselves. He argued that his symbols are taken from multiple sources, as he noted in the following:

Each poem has its own rite, climate, rhythm, form, content, and inspirations, as well as its language. throughout that, and through it, symbols come and are formed accordingly to the poet’s vision, experience, and style. It may be a single symbol,

and several symbols may be intertwined in a single poem to take more than one approach. The symbol may be mythical: Arab or foreign, ancient, or modern. The symbol may be religious: Islamic, Christian, or other religions and beliefs. And the symbol may be historical, cultural, or social, etc.....

In the opening lines, Al-Sayegh presents his powerful poetic legacy. He used various nouns, verbs and metaphorical phrases to vouch for the beauty of poetry laying in its diversity. In the first line of the poem, he used the verb “forgot”, which in Arabic supports more than one meaning. The verb “forgot” sometimes does not refer to its pure meaning, but may also refer to particular significant sign. According to the text, the poet explains the use such of this verb is with regard to describing the soldiers who are in a rush to protect their homes. Again, he comes back to determine the time of the event by using “that morning” as an adverb. He continues his description by repeatedly using another approach to depicting the enthusiasm of the soldiers to defend their homes through the metaphorical application of the punishment of the sergeant as a symbol of soldier’s enthusiasm. Al-Sayegh emphasizes that the soldier although he was punished by his sergeant, continues to defend his home. He frequently repeats the word “the soldier” as if he wants to highlight the value of that soldier. Notably, Al-Sayegh returns to utilize the same function of the verb “forgot” to demonstrate the soldier’s enthusiasm to defend his home as per the following lines:

The soldier who that morning forgot to shave his hair

And was punished for it by his sergeant

The soldier left fallen in the dust of battle

The beautiful soldier with his thick beard

(Under a Strange Sky, Al-Sayegh 471)

Al-Sayegh, in unparalleled poetic style reverts to mixing the past with the present to demonstrate the result of that soldier’s sacrifice. He used the word “after” as a pre-modifier to “ten years” to illustrate the role of that soldier in bringing about peace, fun, beauty, and interest for those who are under his protection. He depicts

his “thick beard” as a forest that pleased those who saw it. As mentioned in these lines:

Until-after ten years, it was a forest of tangled bush

Such that nightingales sang in his branches

And children always played on his swing

And lovers came closer in his shade

( Ibid 471)

In another prestigious poem, entitled “Roses over the Unknown Soldier’s Statue”. Al-Sayegh returns to referring to the image of the Statue of Unknown Soldier in spite of this having already having been embodied in another poem. Repeatedly, using the Statue of Unknown Soldier, draws attention towards the discovery to what purposes this statue stand. Notably, the poet continued to instantiate the Statue of Unknown Soldier as though he wanted to emphasize the suffering of the soldier during that time of (the Iraq-Iran War in particular) and demonstrate the importance of the soldier to all (Hashem and Jalaei, 2015, 106). He emphasizes the role of the soldier who sacrifices himself to allow others to live in peace. What is fascinating in this poem is the use of the statue as an unbroken source of poetic images, where these images either stand represents a commemorative function or a teaching tool.

In the first four lines of the poem, the poet portrays the soldier as a falcon who flies within the space of Iraq and extends his wings to put all places under his gaze. On the level of poetry, this approach to description is considered an eloquent, because the poet consciously adds a unique trait to his text. Al-Sayegh depicts the shadow from the wings of the falcon (soldier) as kind of protection for others to live peacefully. By giving such glossy description of the soldier, Al-Sayegh become one of the most prominent poets at the core of war poetry. Al-Sayegh has been widely known as a poet who tries to go beyond tradition, in that he always invokes novel approaches within his poems, as indeed can clearly be seen in this poem. In “Roses over Unknown Soldier’s Statue”, he attaches the word “Wandering” to two dots as a way to say that after these two dots, there is the reason for that action.

Wandering ..

In the space of Iraq

Extended, the shadow of his wings .. where the goal

Line of light ..

Lightning passes over it

(Wait for me under the Statue of Freedom, Al-Sayegh 519)

Moreover, Al-Sayegh further explores the position of the soldier who strongly defends on his home by giving his most precious possession, his soul, as a gift to make sure his home is always safe. The poet compares the fallen soldier to a rose that will live again, even if it is covered with dust. Finally, Al-Sayegh depicts this rose as a symbol of Iraq's pride, as per the following lines:

Shade the earth

With his blood

And the dust touched him

So he wakes up

Rose..

Rose

It was..

Iraq

(Ibid 519)

## Conclusion

Thus, with the above in mind, it is legitimate to say that national statues have multiple applications. However, these applications can be difficult to understand without some knowledge of the statue's historical relevance. Therefore, Al-Sayegh

skillfully shows not only his excellent poetic experience but also uses the historical events of others to make his poetry a means of learning as well as enjoining. He mixed his skills with historical images to entertain readers, renew memories and make his poetry a gateway for those who enjoy connecting with other cultures.

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