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Achilles" and Hashim Al-Rifaie's
"A Message from Africa"**

Dr. Islam Ahmed Hassan Al-Sady

A Lecturer at English Language and Literature
Department
Faculty of Arts -Mansoura University

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Heroism versus Imperialist Nihilism in W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" and Hashim Al-Rifaie's "A Message from Africa"

Prepared by

Dr. Islam Ahmed Hassan Al-Sady

A Lecturer at English Language and Literature Department

Faculty of Arts, Mansoura University

dr.islam7@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper at hand attempts to examine the concept of heroism in two of the modern poets. One of them is W. H. Auden and the other is Hashim Al-Rifaie. By tracing the development of this concept, it is noticed that some misconception has occurred, resulting in much aggression and injustice in the world. Under the guise of heroism, many types of transgression against the freedom of other nations have been committed. Those who seek justifications for their savagery and atrocities will certainly find some. Hence, the creation of illusive false heroism to send soldiers to battle. This is the strategy of beneficiaries. Through an examination of Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" and Al-Rifaie's "A Message from Africa," it is hoped that the misconception has been cleared. The intention is not to allow any exercise of deception in the name of heroism. It is nihilism, rather than heroism, to colonize other people's native land. It is again nihilism to boast of modern war equipment and exercise them on civilians and innocent people. It is nihilism to encourage rape and moral degeneration. This is anti-heroism. Only when we develop a humanistic attitude can we have any claims to be called human; otherwise, we can be more savage than real animals.

Keywords: Heroism, nihilism, aggression, love, anti-heroism, imperialism.

One of the supportive values of life is the idea of heroism. In hard times, we search for and cling to the heroes. They lead nations out of difficulties and help better our life. At the beginning, it is necessary to define heroism and the hero and trace the development of the term over ages. To start with, Baldick states in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* that we differentiate between the protagonist of a work of art and “the usual sense of heroism as admirable courage and nobility” (112). Of course, these qualities are there in a popular hero like Achilles, who fights to redress the honor of his nation, sacrificing all for the demands of his nation. Again, Baldick confirms that if the leading character fails to be noble and courageous, he/she turns to be an “anti-hero.” When the popular hero is handled in plays, he is then called a protagonist or a tragic hero. In the case of Achilles, he was a popular hero who turned later to be the tragic hero since Sophocles and others wrote about him and his fate.

Throughout human history, the meaning of heroism has undergone changes to fit and support each period. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* offers a survey of the concept of heroism throughout human history. In short, the legendary hero of the past “transcend[s] ordinary men in skill, strength, and courage . . . [and was] of semi divine origin, unusual beauty, and extraordinary precocity.” (n. pag.)

Of course, the ancient hero was resourceful, crafty, and honorable as well as a man of action. Heroism was a sublime concept closely associated with defending the native land and the honor of the nations. Hence the high esteem and halo of awe that surround the classical hero, who is seen godly and supported by gods. It is true that heroes were flawed, yet even this turned to be an advantage, since it was used to educate others. The lesson was

clear. No matter how great you can be, you have to watch for your weaknesses; they can lead to your downfall.

An important change happened with the advent of the sixteenth-century Renaissance when men of letters created nobility and heroism in the life of mortal man. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* highlights this change when it confirms that the “Renaissance heroes no longer had to be supernatural or socially important” (n. pag.). Contrary to the classical hero who was supernaturally supported, though flawed, the Renaissance hero is supposed to stick to the moral code, a change introduced thanks to the influence of Christianity.

Later, with the birth of the middle class and the appearance of the novel to delineate the lives of the common man, one notices new changes introduced to the concept of heroism. The simple man or woman who fights to live honorably can be seen heroic. The simple lady who resists temptation exercised on her virtue can be heroic. Ronald G. Asch confirms that modern heroism includes those who enjoy “intellectual integrity and strength of character required in a battle for knowledge and wisdom against the powers of darkness and superstition.” (7)

Thus the meaning of heroism widened to encompass the common man and even the unseen struggle and the internal tension. Gerard Casey highlights the concept as follows:

Any man may at any time turn his eyes back to the source. The virtues of the hero --truthfulness and courage-- effect creative and redeeming transfigurations in all situations, in all wars both outer and inner, both visible and invisible. (4)

This leaves no doubt that all redeeming qualities like patriotism, faithfulness to family and civil society, resisting the forces of the dark, refusing moral degradation—all can come under the umbrella of heroism. The concept of the masculine hero, though persisted to nourish people's natural fascination with the male hero, gave way to female heroines as a result. The selfless mother who attempts to make both ends meet and sustains her family in hard circumstances is heroic. On the other hand, those who let their country down and escape duty at war or even at home are considered as anti-heroic.

Of course, this change in the concept of heroism has not appeared overnight. It has taken time. By examining war poets' narratives, Christina Pividori acknowledges the need to redefine heroic masculinity. She believes that this "redefinition implies a new approach to the recurring tension between heroic and anti-heroic narratives" (6). Of course, she refers here to such devastating war moments when poet soldiers felt how insignificant human life had become. A soldier who shares an underground tunnel with decayed corpses and rats can hardly be called heroic. Siegfried Sassoon reports, in his poem "The Rear-Guard," how a soldier shares the same tunnel with 'the dazed, muttering creatures underground/ Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.' Griffith comments that man's irrationality is the reason of man's suffering. He says: "The lack of vision in this poem becomes symbolic of a lack of rationality that becomes more acute as the poem goes on." (n. pag.)

Similarly, Isaac Rosenberg envies a rat in his poem, 'Break of Day in the Trenches,' for its freedom of movement through the battle field, and its openness when dealing with people of different races. He addresses the rat: 'they would shoot you if they knew/

your cosmopolitan sympathies.' Griffith emphasizes that this "rat's life expectancy is probably better than most of these young soldiers, who may be dead next week, or tomorrow, or later that day." (n. pag.)

Having surveyed the development of the concept of heroism over important stages of man's history, it is seen important to show why Auden and Al-Refaie are chosen to be examined in this study. First, both poets have been deeply affected by the tragedy of war and all the deceptive maneuvers included. Again, both poets wrote their poems under investigation after the World War II and the shock it caused. Moreover, both poets were socially oriented in the sense that they both were in deep concern with the devastation that afflicted all human institutions. Maxwell stresses that Auden showed "that a poet could influence the political debate of a society. Auden was famous in London, his poems were excitedly published, his image prejudicially constructed, both by his enemies and by his friends" (n. pag.).

Al-Rifaie was similarly saddened because of the imperialist aggression in Africa and was proud of the role Egypt played to help other African nations achieve liberation from imperialism. Moreover, both Auden and Al-Rifaie used the technique of persona to narrate details of the modern dilemma and failure of heroism. It has become anti-heroism since modern war proves to have no respect for man or human values. It has become a nihilist tool of destruction and devastation. Thetis is Auden's persona who predicts the death of her supposedly heroic son, while Al-Rifaie chooses a European colonist to comment on the failure of imperialism, since he sees natives as the real heroes. Both were against the modern war and false claims of heroism. Auden's

predicted the death of Achilles while Al-Rifaie predicted the victory of the natives.

After this comparative look, it is time to examine W. H. Auden's present poem, "The Shield of Achilles." The title of the poem immediately recalls the *The Iliad*, with its epic reference to ancient heroism, especially those associated with Achilles and his shield. Traditionally, Achilles's shield reflects life as seen and evaluated by the classical citizens. Such life was characterized by stability and peace. The Greek society, as Auden's poem reflects, had walled cities, in which we see 'vines and olive trees' as well as '[m]arble well-governed cities.' Side by side with this, the traditional shield had vessels 'upon untamed seas' with zealous warriors on board, fighting the waves in their way to defend their country. All is expected to be found engraved on the metal of the shield.

Auden, however, finds himself in a world of destruction and madness. He dominates the thirties of the twentieth century. It is a time of shock following the World War II. Consequently, in his diagnosis of the then dilemma, he recalls ancient heroism as depicted on the original shield and then imagines what would Hephaestus would have engraved had he been among us in this mad century. He begins the poem with an omniscient narrator who introduces Thetis, Achilles' mother, looking over the shoulders of Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths, while the latter forges a new shield for her son in place of his original one. It is known that Achilles' original shield was borrowed by Patroclus in his fight against Hector. After killing Patroclus, Hector deprives him of Achilles' shield as a spoil of war. However, contrary to her expectations, Thetis is shocked at what Hephaestus creates on the metal.

The ancients glory reflected on the original shield is replaced by 'An artificial wilderness/And a sky like lead.' Auden deliberately distorts the original scenes to attract the readers' attention to the change that has come over the glorious heroism of the past. The reader contrasts his memories of the golden fertile past with the present images of infertility and barrenness. The victorious past life, where light and the blue sky dominated, again contrasts sharply with the gloom of the lead-colored sky of the present scene.

The second stanza gives more details of this new society that teems with signs of aridity and fatigue. The plain is 'bare and brown,' where there is '[n]othing to eat and nowhere to sit down.' Of course, this contrasts with the greenness and vegetation of the past life as reflected on the first shield. We see crowds of people, yet they are 'unintelligible' and '[w]ithout expression.' As if they are mindless, they wait for 'a sign.' All these are negative images that are meant to hammer the message home that life is no longer as it once was. Heroism is not possible in this society.

The third stanza elaborates more on this society. We see a multitude of soldiers who listen to a 'voice without a face.' The voice is after proving that there is a just cause. It mentions some 'statistics.' However, it is as 'dry' as the plain where people stand. Contrary to the enthusiasm that used to fill the hearts of the ancient soldiers as they heroically discuss issues of life and war, the present scene reflects depressed common people; they were without cheers or discussions. They are in 'grief.'

After two stanzas of thwarted expectations, the fourth stanza returns back to Thetis in a new round of hopeful expectations typical of what used to happen in the glorious heroic past. Homer

describes the original shield as having, among the scenes it reflects, one with 'heifers' decorated with garlands of white flowers and taken to the altar as a sacrifice to the gods. It is a scene of 'ritual pieties.' Yet, Auden's new scene is set in 'flickering forge-light.' It waxes and wanes only to shock the goddess with a totally different scene. It is described in the following two stanzas.

The fifth stanza reflects an enclosure by '[b]arbed wire' of a spot where some 'bored officials' relax and say jokes to entertain themselves and defeat boredom. It is very clear that they never busy themselves with the agony of the multitude of people or even their own guards, who were sweating because of the heat. Three of the crowd are tied to posts, put to shame, tortured, and killed. It is a ritual meant to kill monotony. Human dignity is nothing. In the past, the whole nation fought a neighboring nation to redress the honor of one man whose wife had been stolen. At present, killing has become an entertainment.

The sixth stanza ironically juxtaposes the dreams and aspirations of those three men with their image in the eye of the indifferent officials. The result is that what their 'foes like to do was done.' The three men get a double share of death, because they 'lost their pride/And died as men before their bodies died.' The repetition of the plosive /d/, /b/, and /p/ reflect a suppressed vexation that does not escape the attention of even the inattentive reader. The soldiers die a psychological death followed by the physical one. Nothing is worse than to be made to feel so insignificant that you do not feel yourself worthy of help. Rather, you live this nothingness as a reality. Their fate is in the hands of the indifferent few. They 'could not hope for help and no help came.' It is no coincidence that Thetis was searching for animal

'libations' only to be shocked with these two stanzas where humans were sacrificed instead.

The seventh stanza, juxtaposes a further expectation by Thetis with another bitter reality. The original shield used to offer scenes where young men and ladies gracefully dance to rhythmical music to satisfy their taste for arts. However, Hephaestus carves a 'vacancy' of a wild field of weeds through which 'urchins' spread here and there. Instead of the dancing boys, we see two boys who attempt to hurt a third, a bird which escapes the stone of a smart boy, and a scene of rape. These are the shocking 'axioms' of the new way of life. It is a life where there is no place for heroism, chivalry, or magnanimity. It is a waste land, where no promise is kept, and no one weeps 'because another wept.'

The aridity of the scenes does not inflict external nature only; rather, it spreads to include human nature as well. It is now as barren as weeded stretches of land. The change in both external and internal scenes is symbolic of the change life has undergone. The golden days of past heroism have gone. We have lived to experience a new bitter life, void of heroism, happiness, taste for arts, and respect for fellow men. In short, it can hardly be called life. It is death in life. As such, it is worse than the traditional physical death. It is a disease that would certainly fail to sustain people or fire the enthusiasm of Achilles. That is why the goddess cries at what Hephaestus 'wrought.' In reality, it is a cry for the death of the heroic Achilles, '[w]ho would not live long.'

It is now very clear how Auden succeeds in making this poem an elegy to lament the death of heroism and glory of past life, when people managed to pay enough attention to all sides of life without exception. There was a time for invading alien shores to

restore honor, for the enjoyment of life, for considering man's dignity and rights, and for religious piety and sacrifice. Nothing was left without due care. With this glorious image of ancient past in mind, Auden surveys the modern scenes of the present waste land. A look at the negative touches proves the point.

Now, instead of olives we see 'artificial wilderness,' and in place of active community we get 'no sign of neighborhood, / Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit.' It is a no man's land. There is no sense of belonging. The use of synecdoche deepens the tragedy, since the reference to people came through expressions as 'A million eyes, a million boots in line.' The use of 'boots' to refer to people is very derogative. Instead of inspiring enthusiasm, the soldiers are left 'in grief.' Even at their worst moments, people 'neither moved nor spoke.' They 'could not hope for help and no help came.' The only thing that came is 'shame' to add to their agony and make them 'die before their bodies died.' It is a waste land or 'a vacancy' of rape where man is 'aimless and alone.' Instead of fulfilling the mission even if it costs the hero ten years of absence, we have a new world where no promises are kept and no sympathy is felt. In such a world, the goddess foretells the death of her son.

There are many touches that prove the fact that Auden depicts a miniature waste land, influenced by that of T. S. Eliot. The use of the omniscient narrator here runs parallel to the use of Tiresias in Eliot's poem. Another technique is contrasting the past and the present to show the unbridgeable gap between them. The use of Hephaestus, Thetis, and Achilles is meant to summon the past with its glory and charm typical of the echoes Eliot creates in his poem. According to Harriet Monroe Eliot and Auden were intimate friends and that Auden's "first book, *Poems*, was published in 1930 with the help of T.S. Eliot" (n. pag.). It is well-known that Eliot's

The Waste Land was published in 1922. This proves the friendship between both poets; it is very natural that Auden's poetry reflects some of Eliot's influence, like the use of allusions, echoes, twisted symbols, the use of persona, and most importantly, the chess-board technique that is meant to place black and white side by side.

The chess technique Auden employs sets the heroic past side by side with the shocking present. We have to remember that Auden's poem appeared in 1955 after the end of World War II and the destruction it caused. Here the imperialist ambition has come to the peak of its fruition. The destruction caused by these world wars resulted in waves of pessimism. This madness is far from being heroic. The twists and distortions introduced by Hephaestus, contrary to Thetis' expectations, present an anti-heroic imperialist present. In fact, Pividori nominated three things that made the world wars of the twentieth century different from all wars: 'military technology,' 'war machine,' and 'mass death.' She believes that "[t]he three features paved the way for some of the anti-heroic ideas generated then and reinforced after the war" (9). It is as if Auden cries protesting against the brutality of modern war that cares for no human values. It is not only anti-heroic; it is anti-human as well.

Auden makes his point clear that the atrocity of man's wild nature, whetted by his imperialist thoughts, resulted in the barrenness of human relations and the large-scale greed and alienation that characterized human life in the modern period. The mass destruction, sense of despair, and loss of neighborhood one feels here in this poem and elsewhere in his poetry – all these lead one to read a sense of nihilism.

To define nihilism is not an easy task because of the many writings on the issue. However, one can refer to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary to know that nihilism is "a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless (n. pag)." Allan Pratt in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that nihilism means a belief in no value and is

often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy." (n. pag.)

The encyclopedia finds roots of nihilism in the attitudes of early pessimists and even in Shakespeare's definition of life in *Macbeth* as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (5.5.27-29). However, existential nihilism, according to Pratt, won emphasis with Friedrich Nietzsche who believed that values are baseless and that life is meaningless. Such attitudes read absurdity everywhere and favored suicide as an escape from agony. Ashley Woodward emphasizes that nihilism is "associated with moods of despair, random destructiveness, and longing for nothingness. . . . Nihilism is the sickness, destruction and decay, symptomatic of the decline of the West" (52). Of course, it affected morality, politics, society, and religion. According to Woodward, Nietzsche declared that 'God is dead', and took to destroying past values like "God, metaphysics, truth, pity, compassion, humility, and the distinction between good and evil" (55-56). This is active nihilism, according to Woodward.

It is clear by now that Auden follows Homer's technique of description, though for a different purpose. Venessa Peters confirms that Homer describes the shield in "five concentric circles, which Homer describes from the centre outward" (95). Haephestus, the earth, the heavens, and the sea are described in the innermost circle. Then we have city life at peace and war. Then come scenes from rural life and seasons, which are followed by a scene of dancing. Finally, we get the river at the rim of the shield. By comparison, Auden's poem can be regarded as a miniature mock-heroic epic. As such, the poem comes very condensed. Instead of five circles, we have three. The poet is after achieving two missions: first, to remind the reader of ancient life and heroism as forged on the steel of the original shield; second, to offer his own heartbreak world, which comes as the opposite of the classical one.

Auden's mission, as is clear, is more complicated. In the habit of the epic narrator, he plunges in *media res* or the middle of action. The first stanza comes in the form of two four-line ballads cemented together forming a stanza of eight lines. Here Thetis looks over Hephaestus' shoulders for greenness and 'well governed cities' only to be shocked at 'wilderness/And a sky like lead.' After this eight-line stanza, we get two rime royal stanzas to give more elaborations of the nihilist society where one can see '[n]o blade of grass' and where loss and hunger, indifference, fear, and grief are felt everywhere. In the fourth stanza, we have details of the second circle. Here, Thetis expects to see animal sacrifice and rituals, yet actually sees human lives wasted indifferently as a parallel offering in two eight-line stanzas.

This technique is followed twice: An eight-line stanza (two ballads as a block) is followed by two seven-line stanzas or rime royals to elaborate on the present modern nihilist imperialist scene.

This makes six stanzas. The remaining three stanzas that follow are a ballad, a rime royal, and a final ballad. They form the third circle. In the ballad, she expects to see young men and ladies dancing gracefully as was the habit in traditional ballads, yet the rime royal shows how scenes of rape, violence, and lack of magnanimity follow. It is a human jungle where there is no trace of sympathy. The final stanza expresses Thetis' prophecy that her heroic son 'would not live long.'

The structure is very symmetrical. It is an oscillation between ballads and rime royals, again contrary to traditional poems. It is as if Auden intentionally created the form to make up for the vicissitudes of our modern catastrophic non-existence! The shock resulting from the massive devastation of war and its imperialist attitudes has deepened people's rejection of life. Nihilism, according to Andrew Huddleston, encouraged people to believe in "the almighty dollar . . . undergirded by no deeper moral compass," (1). Its supporters saw it quite natural, and attempted to justify its presence as if to prepare the scene for its domination. James Tartaglia comments that nihilism has

evidently struck terror into many hearts. But there was no need for protection, consolation, or resignation, since nihilism is neither a threat nor a challenge; it only comes to seem that way because of inherited prejudice and intellectual error. (vi)

This devastating materialism urged man to swallow the illusion of philosophers, resulting in forsaking God and spiritual values for the sake of dreams of dominance and achieving riches. They even accused Christianity of being nihilistic, as mentioned in Huddleston's work, simply because God does not interfere to help

people in despair or stop agony (4). This is clear in Auden's poem where people 'could not hope for help and no help came.' As a result, Labang confirms the link between many of Auden's poems and nihilism as follows:

Existential nihilism can therefore be accounted for in Auden's poetry in terms of the fear, insecurity, and doubt as well as the excruciating pain, helpless suffering and the miserable death that his personas experience. (29)

This sense of insecurity and fear as well as anti-heroism resulting from a life that turned into a human jungle, where people prey on one another, shocks us when reading "A Message from Africa" by Hashim Al-Rifaie. In the first stanza he says:

الغابةُ السمرَاءُ مِنْ حَوْلِي يُعَلِّفُهَا الضِّبَابُ
تَهْبُ السِّيَادَةُ لِلْقَوِيِّ وَمَنْ لَهُ ظُفْرٌ وَنَابُ
وَأَنَا وَرَاءَ الْغَيْلِ تَطْلُبُنِي الْأَسِنَّةُ وَالْحِرَابُ
مُتَرْقِبٌ لِلْهَوْلِ يُرْعَشُ فِي يَدِي هَذَا الْكِتَابُ
فَمِنْ الْبِقَاعِ النَّائِيَةِ
خَلْفَ السُّهُولِ الدَّامِيَةِ
أُرْجِي إِلَيْكَ الشُّوقَ دَقَاقًا وَأُبْعَثُ بِالْحَنِينِ
مُتَمَنِّيًا أَنْ يَرْجِعَ الْمَاضِي الْجَمِيلُ.. أَتَذَكِّرِينَ؟ (١-٨)

The dark forest around me is wrapped in fog

Granting sovereignty to the mighty and those with hoof and canine

I, behind dense trees, am targeted by arrows and spears

Anticipating horror, this message trembles in my hand.

From such distant areas

Behind bloody plains

I send you my overflowing longing and nostalgia

Wishing for the return of our lovely past, you remember?

(1-8)

From the very beginning, Al-Rifaie creates an atmosphere of ambiguity and fear. Using an imperialist soldier in an African colony as his persona, he imparts a touch of authenticity and irony to his poem. His narrator is supposed to be a modern heroic European fighter who writes a letter to his beloved at home. Yet, instead of coming to Africa to help the natives live a better life, as Kurtz was supposed to do in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, he creates by his misconduct as an imperialist a human jungle parallel to the animal jungle around. Sovereignty, we are told, is for 'the mighty' not the righteous. Those who enjoy sharp teeth and claws prevail in the animal jungle; while those who enjoy machines guns and tanks prevail in the so-called human life.

Thus, the speaker, or the modern hero, though armed with advanced weapons, trembles while writing his messages. Ironically, he could not feel otherwise, since everything around is suggestive of death: bloody plains, arrows and spears, and impending danger.

He is targeted by spears and arrows in this foggy forest. In the midst of all this, he expresses how he clings to love memories in the hope to survive.

كَانَتْ لَنَا دُنْيَا نُجْمِلُهَا الْوَدَاعَةَ وَالسَّكِينَةَ
الرَّيْفُ وَالْمَرْعَى النَّضِيرُ وَرَبْوَةُ الْحَبِّ الْأَمِينَةَ
وَسُرُورُنَا الْوَتَّابُ فِي يَوْمِ الذَّهَابِ إِلَى الْمَدِينَةَ
وَالآنَ حَيْثُ خَنَاجِرُ الثُّوَارِ تَلْمَعُ بِالضَّغِينَةَ
أَحْيَا لِنَقْتِيلِ الشُّيُوخِ
فِي كُلِّ زَاوِيَةٍ وَكُوخِ
وَيَدَايِ تُعْمَسُ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ فِي دَمِ الْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ
الثَّائِرِينَ عَلَيِ الْقُبُودِ وَسَطْوَةِ الْمُتَجَبِّرِينَ (٩-١٦)

We lived a beautiful life of gentleness and serenity,
The countryside of green pasture and the secure hill of love,
Our pouncing happiness when going up to city;
Now, where revolutionist daggers flash with hate,
I live to kill the aged
In every corner and cottage,
And daily get my hands dipped in the blood of the helpless

Who rebel against the fetters and power of tyrants. (9-16)

It is clear that the African poet reverses Auden's technique here. Instead of the initial peace and the heroic past that was followed by present wilderness, Al-Rifaie starts with wilderness then seeks refuge in past glory and peace of love. He reminds his beloved of their romantic moments. The turn-over, that has afflicted his life, changes his previous paradise into hell. It is a life without real heroism. Again, in Auden's poem, the narrator reads heroism in time of peace as much as in time of war. Similarly, Al-Rifaie's European persona yearns for the happy life that was filled with love and peace, reading heroism in the peace of their romantic moments.

It is anti-heroic, since the speaker exercises his merciless murderous guns against the helpless and the old. The speaker ironically shows his sympathy for the victims he kills. They fight for freedom, and who would like to live in fetters? Thus, the persona is psychologically flawed, since he lost faith in the justice of the fight for which he is supposed to pay his life.

وَمَعَ الْمَسَاءِ تُزَلْزَلُ الْأَحْرَاشَ دَقَّاتُ الطُّبُونِ

وَتَرْتَرُ أَنْعَامُ الدَّمَارِ عَلَيَّ الرَّوَابِي وَالسُّهُونِ

وَمَرَاجِلُ الْأَحْقَادِ تَعْلِي فِي الْمَرَاعِي وَالْحُقُونِ

وَأَمَامَ حَشْدِ الرَّاجِفِينَ تَقْرُ أَسْرَابُ الْوُعُونِ

حَتَّى إِذَا صَرَخَ النَّذِيرُ

وَدَنُوا مِنَ السُّورِ الْكَبِيرِ

جُنَّتْ بِنَادِئِنَا وَخَاضُوا نَارَهَا مُتَقَحِّمِينَ

فَإِذَا النَّيْصَالُ مِنَ الشَّمَالِ تَلْفُنَا وَمِنَ الْيَمِينِ (١٧ - ٢٤)

In the evening, woods quake with drum beats,
 And destruction tunes echo through hills and plains,
 While grudge boilers keep boiling in pastures and fields
 And before a creeping pride of lions flocks of ibexes
 stampede
 Till the herald shouts,
 Signaling the rebels' approach to the big wall,
 Our guns get mad, as they bravely break through fire
 Soon blades of arms surround us on the right and the left.

(17-24)

In this stanza, the poet depicts a typical war scene that starts in the evening with drum beats of the African rebels. It is a scene of grudge and destruction, since the Africans courageously march to the big fence where the trembling modern heroes hide behind. This leaves no doubt that the colonized Africans are the real heroes. They take the initiative of defending their honor. The cowardly colonists open fire to exterminate indiscriminately the enemies. The madness used to describe the guns is in fact a reference to the Europeans' desperate attempts to survive. Contrary to the colonist narrator, the daring natives, who insist on paying the price of freedom, win our admiration for their contemptuous attitude

towards death. They present an admirable example of heroism, while the colonist forces stand for aggressive nihilism. Though Nihilism is clear in the use of mad guns, it is clearer in the following stanza:

اليَوْمَ كُنْتُ مَعَ الْجُنُودِ أَسِيرُ فِي الْمُسْتَعْمَرَةِ

شَاكِي السِّلَاحِ وَكُلُّ شِبْرٍ تَحْتَ رِجْلِي مَقْبَرَةٌ

فَتَدْفَعُوا مِنْ جَوْفِ أَكْوَاخِ هُنَاكَ مُبَعَثَرَةً

طَلَعُوا عَلَيْنَا فِي مَنَاجِلِهِمْ وَكَانَتْ مَجْزَرَةٌ

دَوَى بِهَا صَوْتُ الرِّصَاصِ

وَتَعَدَّرْتُ سُبُلَ الْخَلَاصِ

وَوَدَيْتُ لَوْ ظَفَرُوا هُنَاكَ بِقَائِدِي الشَّهْمِ الْأَمِينِ

ذَٰكَ الَّذِي أَلْفَ التَّنَائُوبِ خَلْفَ مَكْتَبِهِ الْحَصِينِ (٣٢-٢٥)

Today I and the soldiers were marching in the colony.

Fully armed, I tread on where every hand-length is a grave;

They poured in great numbers out of scattered cottages

Right on us with their scythes, it was a massacre.

Bullets resounded;

Survival chances were almost naught.

I wished they could capture my magnanimous honest
commander

He who is used to yawning behind his fortified office.

(25-32)

Here the terrified narrator depicts how crowds of heroic natives attack him and his fellow armed soldiers. The land the soldiers tread on has become a big grave, where so many natives are buried. It is not a common fight; it is a mean nihilistic one. To kill the aged in their cottages is no doubt absurd. They are civilians, after all. Nevertheless, throngs of heroic natives, armed with primitive weapons, like scythes, attack the faithless colonizers, who survived with the skin with their teeth. The natives heroically continue their fight for freedom whatever the price, while the narrator lost faith in the justice of his cause. He even wished that his commander gets captured to try the taste of his soldiers' agony instead of his continual yawns. We notice how gradually the European colonizer changes loyalty. He is now closer to the Africans than to his own people. Yet, he has to go on with his aggression against his will. This is going to make him lose his own dignity. This is a natural result of applying a nihilistic attitude where it does not belong.

وَرَجَعْتُ مَحْمُومَ الْفُؤَادِ وَقَدْ تَأَجَّلَ مَضْرَعِي

وَدِرَاعِي الدَّامِي تَجَلَّدَ ثُمَّ نَاءَ بِمِدْفَعِي

وَفَقَدْتُ فِي الْمَيْدَانِ صُورَتِكَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ مَعِي

وَفَقَدْتُ إِحْسَاسًا جَمِيلًا كَانَ يَمَلُّهُ أَضْلُعِي

أَحْسَسْتُ أَنِّي صِرْتُ وَحْشًا

أَوْ لَا أَقْصِرُ عَنْهُ بَطْشًا

وَالْفَرْقُ أَنَّ الذِّئْبَ لَا يُودِي بِذَنْبٍ فِي كَمِينٍ

وَأَنَا أَنَا الْإِنْسَانُ أَقْتُلُ إِخْوَتِي فِي كُلِّ حِينٍ (٤٠ - ٣٣)

I returned with a feverish heart, feeling my death put off.

My bleeding arm, after much forbearance, failed my cannon.

I lost in the field your photo that was with me;

I even lost a beautiful feeling that used to fill my ribs;

I felt I became a beast,

Or not less than a beast in brutality.

The difference is that a wolf cannot ambush a wolf

While I, the human, kill my fellows at all times. (33-40)

This stanza witnesses hideous transformation of humanity to a status lower than that of beasts. The narrator feels he has been on the verge of death. He survived, yet his survival is very humiliating. He lost his cannon, or his honor as a soldier. More importantly, he lost the feeling of love, which used to give him hope, symbolized here by his beloved's photo. He has become a heartless beast in human shape. He has even overcome animals in their wilderness. While animals cannot lay ambushes to kill one another, he -- in his supposed humanity -- does in cold blood. This

is the lowest degradation man can reach. There is no room left to talk of humanity, not to mention to talk of heroism, since the narrator sees clearly the absurdity and meaninglessness of his presence in Africa.

The Arab poet who knew the agony of the colonized country excelled in expressing the real meaning of heroism. The European soldier, whose history is supposed to tell tales of heroism, chooses to fail in the test of humanity. After turning Africa into a big grave to satisfy the mean ambitions of imperialism, nothing is left but outright nihilism. The human self is so cheap. It is virtually nothing. The poet viewed two jungles: the former is the literal one where real beasts live; the latter is the wilder metaphoric jungle where humans outdo beasts though enjoying the human shape. In such struggle, no one is expected to win. Since solace is missing in real life, the soldiers seek it by recalling memories of past life:

وَيَسِيلُ فَيَبْصُرُ الذِّكْرِيَّاتِ إِذَا جَلَسْنَا لِلسَّمْرِ

هَذَا يُحَدِّثُنَا عَنِ العُشَّاقِ فِي صَوْءِ القَمَرِ

وَسِوَاهُ يَسْخَرُ مِنْ أَسِي الدُّنْيَا وَأَطْمَاعِ البَشَرِ

وَأَنَا أَحِنُّ إِلَيْ لِيَالِينَا وَمَا قَبْلَ السَّفَرِ

وَتَدْفُقُ الأَمَلِ الحَبِيبِ

فِي نُضْرَةِ الوَادِي الحَصِيبِ

وَتَدْوُرُ عَيْنِي تَسْأَلُ الأَصْحَابَ فِي صَمْتِ حَزِينِ

عَنْ غَايَةِ جُنُنَا لِنُنْذِرَكُمَا فُسَاةَ مُعْتَدِينَ (٤١-٤٨)

Our night chats overflow with memories

One tells love tales in moonlight;

Another laughs at the tragic world and people's greed.

Yet I yearn for our nights and pre-travel life,

For the hopes we cherished

In the greenness of the fertile valley.

My eyes roll to question fellows in plaintive silence

About the end set for our heartless aggression. (41-48)

The warriors' rest is, however, inevitable. It gives vent to hidden hopes, and offers support to the stressed alienated soldiers. In their vigilance some soldiers whisper their memories of romantic lovers in moonlight; others laugh at tragic fate of greedy people. The narrator, on his part, longs for his lovely nights with his beloved and pre-military campaign life, when they cherished hope of cultivating the fertile valley. Typical of all unjust wars propagated by beneficiaries, the soldiers here do not know the reasons for which they fight.

It is clear now that the soldiers are psychologically torn apart. They participate in a campaign against their best judgment. This reminds us of the Auden's narrative voice that coldly tries to justify the cause of war. All imperialist forces follow the same technique of false logic and justification to recruit young men to join war. However, disillusionment is a must. Soon, the patriotic

mask falls and the ugly face of false heroism and brutality of nihilism appear quite clear, resulting in trauma and other psychological diseases that characterize post-war life of soldiers.

أَوْ لَيْسَ يَكْفِينَا لَكِي نَحْيَا نِتَاجَ الْمَرْعَةِ
 حَتَّى أَصَبَّ عَلَى أَخِي سَوْطَ الْعَذَابِ لِأُخْضِعَهُ
 وَيَقْضُ حِينًا مَضْجَعِي وَأَقْضُ حِينًا مَضْجَعَهُ
 وَأَعِيشُ مُغْتَرِبًا هُنَا بَيْنَ الرِّمَاحِ الْمَشْرَعَةِ
 يَأْتِي الطَّعَامُ إِلَيَّ فَمِي
 مُرًّا تَلَوَّثَ بِالدَّمِ
 وَأَصُوغُ مِنْ آلَامِ قَوْمٍ جَنَّةً لِلْمُتْرَفِينَ
 الْحَالِمِينَ وَثَوْرَةَ الْبُرْكَانِ تَهْدُرُ مِنْ سِنِينِ (٥٦ - ٤٩)

Are farm products not enough for us to live?

Why pour the whip of torture on my fellow to subdue him?

Now he deprives me of sleep, then I deprive him of sleep.

Alienated here I live among spears to their targets.

Food comes to my mouth

Bitter and stained with blood.

I, thus, create of people's agony a paradise for the
 luxurious,

The dreamers, while volcano eruption roars for years

(49-56)

Here is a refutation of the causes of war on part of the narrator. He remembers how they used to have enough products from his farm. Of course, lack of products does not justify aggression on others. What if the narrator used to have enough? Surely aggression becomes more hideous. The question, 'why do we fight here?' remains unanswered. It is absurd to fight for what we do not need. It is equally meaningless to deprive myself and others of sleep, and live in impending danger. The image of a soldier having a bloody meal is really disgusting.

Finally, the narrator realizes that he fights for the dreamers of fortune and luxury, even when this can only be achieved at the cost of other people's misery. This is the moment of disillusionment many heroic soldiers come to. Many of world-war soldiers heroically called for stopping the fight. Sassoon, for instance, wrote a letter to his commander to stop the fight that is no longer a liberation fight. Biagini quotes his words:

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. (203)

Sassoon calls it 'a war of aggression and conquest.' Similarly, Al-Rifaie's soldier recognizes the Africans as his brothers, while he calls his camp soldiers 'fellows.' This hint redeems the narrator. He turns against his commanders and feels closer to the enemy he fights. He sacrifices all to relieve his conscience and wins the deserved admiration of readers. Moreover,

he sends, through his beloved, a message foretelling the failure of the imperialist campaign. It reads:

فإلى متى يستغذبون البغي في ليل الجراح

قولي لهم لا تغمضوا الأجفان عن ضوء الصباح

لا توصدوا الأذان قد دوت أناشيد الكفاح

لن ينعكص الصوت القوي بما لدينا من سلاح

وأنا إذا عاد الجنود

سأعود أرجو أن أعود

ولربما تأتيك أنباء عن المتمردين

من يقرؤون ويسمعون: "الموت للمستعمرين". (٥٧-٦٤)

Till when they enjoy transgression in the night of wounds?

Tell them do not close your eyelids to avoid the light of morning.

Do not shut your ears, for struggle anthems resound;

We cannot suppress the high voice by our weapons.

I, if soldiers return,

Am going hopefully to return.

You may get news of the rebels

Who read and hear: "Death is for the imperialists." (57-64)

In this final stanza, the narrator expresses his indignation at the beneficiaries of war, who play the deaf and the blind. He questions remains: till when they keep enjoying this tragic transgression that turns people's life into a permanent night of suffering. It is no use attempting to suppress a nation that is intent on winning freedom. Weapons prove weak before the strong-willed. The narrator finally concludes with his hope for a safe return, which seems remote, due to the resounding motto that reverberates everywhere: 'Death for imperialists.' Al-Rifaie chooses to make the rebels readers. They really deserve our respect.

It is clear that both poet, Auden and Al-Rifaie, share the same attitude towards modern war. it is no longer bearable in the presence of mass-destruction weapons. If we have to fight, let it be similar to past fights. Heroism is only possible if war is defensive and if all ways to avoid it are tried and exhausted. After this long history, humanity must have got the lesson that cooperation and peace are equally heroic. Past heroism that depended on physical prowess is outmoded. Both Auden and Al-Rifaie agree that modern war is nihilistic. The weapons of modern war are enough to explode the whole earth and turn it into ashes.

Thetis anticipates that Achilles will not live long, while the persona of "A Message from Africa," sees survival chances rare, since he is stuck among the blades of the natives. The African fighters are ready to die for their freedom. The imperialist atrocity that turned their country into a big grave has proved useless. Moreover, the morale of the invaders is failing and will inevitably lead to failure, while that of the African fighters is booming as reflected in their resounding anthems.

Contrary to the bloody war, one reads real heroism in situations that reflect human sympathy. Such heroism existed in the past even among enemies. It is found there between Achilles and Priam, when the latter humbly goes to the former's camp in the middle of the Trojan war. He forgets all his social status as a king and goes demanding the corpse of his murdered son, Hector. In a very pathetic scene, the aged Priam stands heedless of all dangers and rumors. His request is honored by Achilles who feels pity for his enemy. Erickson sees humanity as the basis on which all people can meet, regardless of differences. Both Achilles and Priam

recognize themselves in each other and are united by a common bond of suffering and loss. This leads in turn to a further forging of mutual respect when Achilles is convinced to return the body of Hector, and to offer Priam safe passage out of the Greek encampment. (54)

Now we have to admit that this is the kind of heroism we badly need to adopt and propagate. Moral strength is heroic. Again, to consider human feelings is equally a heroic act. It ennobles man and elevates his status. On the contrary, to deal with the weak as if they are animals to be exterminated is really savage and uncivilized. This is the nobility and real heroism we have to propagate, rather than the thoughts of nihilism. If another modern war broke out, it is going to be the end of the world. we have to understand this lesson very well.

Many philosophers and moralists such as E. M. Forester called for adopting a rationalist attitude mixed with human considerations instead of the egoist imperialist stand. Forester believes that such values as "tolerance, good temper and

sympathy—they are what matter really, and if the human race is not to collapse they must come to the front before long” (5). They constitute a good basis for modern heroism.

A final word is necessary concerning Al-Rifaie’s meter. We noticed how Auden introduced innovations to the form of his poem, combining both the ballad and the rime royal. His arrangement is all his. He imitates no previous poet. Similarly, Al-Rifaie uses the shortened form of an Arabic meter called ‘Al-Kamel,’ in which a foot, ‘mutafaelun,’ is repeated four times per line to form what is called the partial form of this meter or Al-Majzu’. The poem comprises eight stanzas, each consisting of eight lines. All lines include four feet, except the fifth and sixth lines of each stanza, which include only two feet. Again, this unprecedented innovation is meant to create a kind of fluctuation of movement similar to the vicissitudes created by Auden’s alternate movement between ballads and rime royals. Thus Al-Rifaie, typical of Auden, experimented on form and meter of his poems keeping the classicism of his language intact. Their daring attempts to reshape form and revolutionize content testify to their great poeticism.

Al-Rifaie’s talent as a poet is beyond doubt, though he died early while he was still an undergraduate in the Faculty of Dar Al-Oloom, Cairo University. For his enthusiastic support of the cause of freedom for African occupied countries and adoption of Arab Nationalism cause, Al-Rifaie was celebrated as one of the best poets of his day. Yousuf Al-Sebaey, the famous man of letters, acclaimed his achievements. Aly Al-Gendy, Dean of his Faculty, wrote a dirge on his death. Kamaluddin Hussein, Minister of education of his day, invited him to read his poetry on

many occasions. When commemorating him in his Faculty, Hussein said:

إن صورة هاشم الرفاعي باقية هنا، وقصته باقية في كل مكان وفي كل أرض

وفي كل نفس؛ لأنها قصة الشاب المؤمن بدينه وعروبتة ووطنه. (بدون ترقيم)

He predicted that this Arab poet would live forever not only in Egypt, but also in the heart of freedom seekers everywhere on earth. He was awarded the first prize of a poetry celebration held in Damascus. The late President Jamal Abdul-Naser shook hands with him on more than one occasion. Truly, Hashim Al-Rifaie is an example of patriotism, nationalism, and real heroism. He was antagonistic of nihilism and imperialism as is clear in many of his poems. It is thought that through such honest voices, like Auden and Al-Rifaie, we can fight the negative calls of destructive imperialism and nihilism. Such poets are the living heroes of our day.

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البطولة في مقابل العدمية الاستعمارية في قصيدة دبليو أيتش أودن "درع أخيل" وقصيدة هاشم الرفاعي "رسالة من أفريقيا"

إعداد

د. إسلام أحمد حسن الصادي

مدرس بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية الآداب - جامعة المنصورة

الملخص باللغة العربية:

يتناول البحث الحالي فكرة البطولة لدى اثنين من شعراء العصر الحديث، وهما دبليو أيتش أودن، وهاشم الرفاعي، وكلاهما كتب قصيدته بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية، تلك الأزمة التي هزت الدنيا، فانطلق مصلحوها يُشخِّصون الداء ويصفون الدواء، ويشترك الشاعران في تحليّة معني البطولة فيلجأ الأول لاستدعائها كما تتبدي في الأدب الكلاسيكي القديم محفورة علي درع البطل الإغريقي أخيل، لكنه يشوه ما على الدرع ليحل محلها صحراء بدلا من الحقول الغنّاء، وعسكريون مللوا لكثرة الكسل وقلة الإنجاز، فتسلّوا بقتل الجنود بلا منطق، ودون جريرة، والناس ينظرون غير مكترثين، وكأنهم يرحبون بالموت بدلا من حياة هي والعدم سواء، ما حدا بنا إلى تعريف فكرة "العدمية" كمذهب أطلقه البعض، وآمنوا به بل، ودعوا إليه، ما دفع أم أخيل إلي توقع وفاة ابنها البطل، وكأنها تعلن موت البطولة في عصر فقد معناها، ومقوماتها.

أما هاشم الرفاعي فيتخذ من أحد جنود الاحتلال كشخصية تعبر عن رأيه فيجعله يرسل رسالة لحبيته يصف من خلالها وحشيته، هو ورفاقه في قتل شيوخ مسنين كانوا في بلادهم آمنين حتى أتى هو ورفاقه لينشروا العدم بدلا من البناء، ويتضح أن المستعمر ينفذ أجندة بعض المنتفعين من الحرب، فهو بطل مزيف، بل يري

البطولة الحقة في اندفاع المواطنين الأفارقة للذود عن وطنهم، ومقدراتهم، فهو لا يخفي إعجابه بهم، وتوقعه لانتصارهم، بل يشكك في إمكانية عودته إذ يري الموت أقرب إليه من الحياة! وهكذا يشترك الشاعران في بكائهم على البطولة التي أعطت الحياة معناها فلما غابت غاب معها معني الحياة، وانتشر العدم واللامبالاة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البطولة، البطولة الزائفة، العدمية والفناء، الإمبريالية والاستعمار.