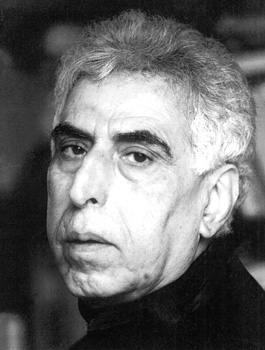
**Yousef, Saadi (1934-)**  
SUMMARY  
Saadi Yousef is an Iraqi poet, author, journalist and political activist. He has published forty-five volumes of poetry, nine books of prose, several essays and has translated various literary works into Arabic. Yousef’s socialist sympathies and opposition to Saddam Hussein’s regime forced him to leave Iraq in 1979 and live in exile in a range of countries before settling in London in 1999. Often referred to as one of the most influential figures in modern Arabic poetry, he was a key proponent of the twentieth-century movement away from traditional Arabic poetics. Yousef’s poetry is distinctive in its use of free verse and its attention to personal experiences of political realities. Although his poetry reflects upon the turbulent conditions in Iraq, it also engages with a range of wider socio-political contexts in the Arab World.

Photograph of Saadi Yousef taken from  
<http://www.smith.edu/poetrycenter/poets/syoussef.html>

MAIN ENTRY

Saadi Yousef was born in Abulkhasib, a village near Basra, Iraq. He graduated from the Teacher’s College at Baghdad University in 1954 with a degree in Arabic Literature. First exiled from Iraq in 1957 after his socialist sympathies compelled him to travel to an unauthorised youth conference in Moscow, Yousef settled in Kuwait where he worked as a teacher, until the 1958 Revolution in Iraq. He returned home the following year however, after being briefly imprisoned, he left again to work in Algeria. He returned to Iraq in 1971 and worked for the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, but left in 1979 when Saddam Hussein came to power. He has since lived in exile in Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, France, Jordan and the UK, working variously in journalism, publishing and translation. Yousef’s experience of exile is a major influence on his poetry which frequently refers to his own sense of dislocation from his homeland.

Yousef began writing poetry as a teenager, during the 1950s,at a time when Iraqi poets such as Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab (1925- 1964) and Nazik Al-Malaika(1923-2007) had initiated a move away from restrictive forms of traditional Arabic poetry. Yousef’s first volume of verse, *Al-Qursan* (*The Pirate*) (1952), was a book-length poem that adhered to traditional Arabic poetic form. Yousef’s second collection *Ughniyat Laysat lil-Akharin* (*Songs not for Others*) (1955) signalled his participation in contemporary efforts to modernise Arabic poetry. Here, influenced by Al-Sayyab and Al-Malaika, Yousef employed the *taf’ila* (free verse) form. This verse form, that has since become popular in modern poetry throughout the Arab World, moved away from the fixed structural patterns and symmetry prominent in classical Arabic poetry, thereby allowing the poet to write in lines of varying length with irregular rhymes. Yousef’s lyrical poetry experiments with the intricacies of the *taf’ila* form, often combining it with traditional features of classical Arabic poetry. His poetry, particularly that composed during the twentieth century, has thus been cited as an innovative contribution to the development of modern Arabic poetics.

The political content of Yousef’s poetry has also received significant critical attention. Many of his poems, for example ‘In Their Hands’ (1956), ‘The New Baghdad’ (1975) and ‘America, America’ (1995), confront the suffering of Iraqi civilians during years of political oppression. These poems indicate Yousef’s sustained interested in Iraq as his homeland and a site of political struggle. Other poems, for example ‘The Spring’ (1982), refer to places Yousef has lived whilst in exile and highlight a spectrum of social injustice across the Arab World more generally. This attention to difficult socio-political conditions reflects Yousef’s own efforts as an activist and has earned him a reputation as an overtly political poet. However Yousef’s poetry also articulates a distinctly personal perspective on political events; his poems often discuss politics through introspective reflections that focus upon the personal feelings of a people or an individual. This technique is representative of a wider twentieth-century movement in Arabic poetry that sought to include both social and personal concerns.

In addition to his poetry, Yousef has published a selection of prose; his poetry, however, stands as his greatest contribution to modern Arabic literature. His expansive body of poetry, that includes a spectrum of experimental poetic techniques and a diverse range of political and personal content, is indicative of his extensive influence on modern Arabic poetry. Although much of his work remains untranslated, efforts have been made to translate some of his poetry into English. The first major English translation of Yousef’s work, *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face* (2002), translated by the Libyan poet and academic Khaled Mattawa, won the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation in 2003. Yousef also won the Al-Owais literary prize in 2004, but the award was withdrawn after he criticised Sheikh Zayed bin al-Nahayan, founder of the United Arab Emirates.

**Selected List of Works**

**Poetry**

*Al-Qursan* (1952)

*Ughniyat Laysat lil-Akharin* (1955)

*Al-Najm wa al-Ramad*(1960)

*Nihayat al-Shamal al-Afriqi* (1972)

*Al-Sa’a al-Akheera* (1977)

*Yawmiyat al-JanoobYawmiyat al- Junoon*(1981)

*Muhawalat*(1990)

*Ashjar Ithaka*(1992)

*Salah al-Watani* (2004)

**Collections of Poetry Translated into English**

*Without an Alphabet, Without a Face: Selected Poems* (2002) (translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa)

*Nostalgia, My Enemy: Poems* (2012) (translated from the Arabic by Sinan Antoon and Peter Money)

**Short Stories**

*Nafethah fi al-Manzil al-Maghribee* (1974)

**Essays**

*Afkar bi-SawtHaade* (1987)

*Khutuwat al-Kangar*(1997)

**Further Reading**

Huri, Yair (2006) *The Poetry of Sa’adi Yusuf: Between Homeland and Exile*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Between-two-worlds-poetry-and-translation/024M-C1340X0017XX-0000V0>

Recording of Saadi Yousef reading and discussing his poetry. Taken from the British Library website.