

Language Contacts in Arabic Poetry: Patterns of Merging Languages in the Poetry of Adonis and Fuad Rifka

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Language contacts in poetry differ from other forms of linguistic contacts, allowing writers to merge formal specificities of distinct languages within a single poem. This paper focuses on contacts between Arabic and European languages in selected poems of Adonis (*1930) and Fuad Rifka (1930-2011), both of whom are Syrian-Lebanese by birth and have lived for many years in Western Europe: Adonis

in France and Rifka in Germany. How, then, do both poets deal with contacts between Arabic and French or German in their poetry? Can poetry be a way of crossing boundaries by merging patterns of different languages into one?

Keywords: Modern Arabic Poetry, Identity and Alterity, Arabic Literature vis-à-vis Western European Literatures, Humanism

Introduction

„In their search for identity, Arab writers have for many generations often tried to define themselves in relation to the other, the other being in most cases the European“ (Badawi 5). Scholars may agree that the intervention of European countries in the Middle East and North Africa influenced Arab identity and thus Arab writers. They diverge, however, regarding the consequences of this encounter. This paper aims to depict patterns of cross-cultural influence in the region from the Arab perspective, taking contemporary Arabic poems as its object of study. Both of the chosen poets, Adonis and Fuad Rifka, have experienced Western European languages in their daily lives. We therefore have to ask: How do contacts between languages influence their poetry? How do two different cultural and linguistic spheres interact in their respective poetic languages?

Despite the centrality of identity to different periods of their writing, this paper will focus on selected poems published after the defeat of the Six-Day-War in 1967, in Arabic referred to as *al-naksa* (the setback, debacle). This traumatic historical event prompted Arab peoples to question their shared sense of belonging (Klemm 181). The fundament of this identity after 1967 was premised not on visions of the politi-

cal nation but rather on cultural and linguistic continuities (Jabra 12 and Pflitsch 197). From this framework evolves the following question: How is identity shaped in poetry after the Pan-Arab dream was shattered?¹

Adonis

“Writing allows me to discover who I am, I learn to discover and reveal myself. It subsequently allows me to be aware of the other and, of course, the world” (Esber 42, translated from French into English by the author).

Adonis, or ‘Ali Ahmad Esber (born in 1930), expresses in these words that the processes of finding a way to oneself and the act of writing are intertwined. Born in Syria, Adonis migrated to Beirut in 1956 and first came to study in Paris in 1960. He later reflected upon this experience as a possibility to look at his own tradition from afar, which allowed him to distinguish its patterns more clearly (Weidner, ... *und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott* ... 152).

From the 1960s onwards, his writing increasingly emphasized the individual. Adonis depicts individualism as opposed to traditional power mechanisms of the Muslim community (Weidner, “Art. Adonis” 6). Two prominent long poems constitute the pathetic search for Arab identity in the

aftermath of 1967: “*Hadha Huwa Ismī*” (“This Is My Name”) and “*Qabr min ajli New York*” (“A Tomb for New York”), published in 1969 and 1971 respectively (Irwin 27). This paper will examine three shorter poems published in the 1968 collection of poetry entitled *Al-Masrah wa-l-Miraya* (The Theatre and the Mirror).

I argue that Adonis has responded to the dichotomy of identity and alterity since 1967 by composing poetry which relies on two conflicts of perspectives. One conflict stems from the desire to reform the Arab self without uncritically imitating so-called Western modernity. The second conflict appears to be subtler, as it focuses on the internal dimension of reflection. The two constituents are the poetic writing self on the one hand and a rather alienated, unrecognizable self on the other. Both conflicts reappear in Adonis’ repeated attempts to find a voice that is capable of responding to contemporary challenges.

Self-Reformation vs. Western Modernity

According to Stefan Weidner, Adonis distances himself from the idea that modernity is a *Western* invention or property. He argues that a conscious return to a cultural, religious and literary Arabic Islamic heritage can prevent an identity crisis vis-à-vis the *West* (Weidner, “Der Dichter als Essayist: Mit Adonis Denken” 22). The

short poem “*Al-Mi’ dhana*” (“The Minaret”) gives an idea of how cultural and religious aspects can clash with the arrival of a stranger.

المئذنة

بكت المئذنة

حين جاء الغريب - اشتراها
وبنى فوقها مدخنة.

(qtd. in Adonis, Darwish, al-Qasim 132)

The Minaret

A stranger arrived.

The minaret wept:

He bought it and topped it with a chimney.

(133)

The minaret as a synecdoche represents the mosque, which in its turn metonymically evokes Islam. The personification of the crying mosque can be interpreted as the desperation and sadness of an Islamic society, provoked by the arrival of a stranger who purchases the minaret only to replace it with a chimney. The word minaret in Arabic is derived from the verb *adh dhana*, meaning *calling to prayer*. In the first form, however, it is *adhina*, meaning *to listen*. As such the minaret symbolizes an internal communication comprising the acts of calling and listening

between a religious institution and its community.

This communication is severed and rendered meaningless by the stranger, *al-gharibu*, whose lexical roots echo both *ghurba* (absence from the homeland, exile) and *gharb* (West, Occident vehemence, violence). The stranger is clearly a negative foreign actor who, by building a chimney atop the minaret, expresses the hierarchy between the internal and the external. His role does not arise from his difference, but from his wielding of power upon the internal space. A cultural and religious symbol is replaced by one of industrialization, underlined by the rhyme of *mi'dhana* (minaret) and *madkhana* (chimney). Concerning the poem's form, Abdullah al-Udhari argues that Adonis "revived and modified the classical form *qit'a* (short poem)." He uses the above poem as an example of how Adonis worked towards finding a new poetic language both "deeply rooted in classical poetry" and "employed to convey the predicament and responses of contemporary Arab society (Adonis, Darwish, and al-Qasim 87).

Adonis himself speaks of a "double-sided conflict, internal and external" between the "self (ancient, traditionalist)" and the "other (modern, European-American)". He

proposes the creation of a unique Arab cultural modernity as a solution to this conflict (Adonis, *An Introduction* 77, 80), which has become more urgent in the aftermath of 1967. The following poem expands upon this idea, while adopting a more overt political tone.

الغرب والشرق
كان شيءٌ يمتدُّ في نفقِ التاريخ
شيءٌ مزِينٌ ملغومٌ
حاملاً طفله من النفطِ مسموماً
يغنيه تاجرٌ مسمومٌ
كانَ شرقٌ كالطفلِ يسألُ،
يستصرخُ
والغربُ شيخه المعصومُ
بُدلت هذه الخريطةُ
فالكونُ حريقٌ
والشرقُ والغربُ قبرٌ
واحدٌ
من رماده ملمومٌ...

(qtd. in Adonis, *Ein Grab für New York* 82)

West and East

Everything stretches in history's tunnel.
Everything decorated is mined,
carrying its oily, poisoned child
sung to in a poisonous trade.
It was East, like a child asking,
pleading
and West was his flawless elder.
I turn this map around

for the world is all burned up:
East and West, a heap
of ash gathered
in the self-same grave.

(qtd. in Adonis, *Selected Poems* 103)

The poem's title is reminiscent of J. W. Goethe's famous verses "The East is God's! (/) The West is God's! (/) Northern and southern lands (/) rest in the piece of his hands." (*West-Eastern Divan* 13). Whereas both poets, Adonis and Goethe, share the aim of transcending the East-West divide, they envisage different ways of realizing this aim.

History and power seem to be central aspects to overcome the gap on Adonis' part. This impression is evoked not only by the use of metaphors such as the tunnel of history, but also by the change of tenses in each stanza. The first stanza is composed in the past and describes what has led to the unjust relationship between the East and the West, or between the poisoned child and the flawless elder. The second stanza tries to address the imbalance of the past by responding to it in the present tense and threatening to "turn the map around" (Adonis, *Selected Poems* 103). This clearly refers to the construction of nation-states in the Middle East and North Africa along Western imperialist lines in the twentieth century.

The poem, however, goes further than suggesting to reverse the power relations. Instead, it closes with the remark that both East and West are finally reduced to the same ashes of an oil-fueled fire. The reader is left with the impression that the past, which was characterized by an economical hierarchy between both regions, is regarded as the reason for the futureless present situation. Relying on a repeated mono-rhyme, which phonetically echoes the classical Arabic *qasīda*, is an attempt to find a place amidst this scene of destruction.

The Poetic Self vs. the Alienated Self

“*Al-Lu’lu’ a*” (“The Pearl”) follows a very different approach, devoting space to a first-person speaker. Although it was published in the same collection as the aforementioned poems, it addresses the internal conflict by focusing on tracing moments of alterity not to the *other*, but within the self. It begins with a stanza illustrating a lack of orientation and the feeling of being separated from one’s own community. The lyrical I describes itself as a burning river, overwhelming the pearl of poetry. By naming itself a prophetic fever, it takes a position in line with the traditional function of Arab poets who used to communicate visions to their tribes. The climax of this stanza leads to three verses, in which

the I draws parallels between its own body and the tools of writing: “I am a book, my blood is ink and my limbs are words.” (Adonis, Darwish, al-Qasim 129). Language is portrayed as a means of reinterpreting the self.

اللؤلؤة

(الحلم – المرأة)

كيف أمشي نحو شعبي، نحو نفسي
كيف أمضي نحو تَهَيَّامي وصوتي، كيف أصعد؟
لستُ إلا نَهْرًا يرفض، يخبؤ، يتوقد
غامرًا اللؤلؤة الشعر الخفيفة
لابسًا وسوسة الشمس،

والإ

حلمًا

أني حمى نبوية

أني ضوء يلفّ الليل، يعرى

سائخًا في جسد الليل،

وأني

جامح

أحتضن الأرض كأنني

وأنام

قارِعًا ناقوسي البحريّ فيها

لهبًا يفتح،

يستنزّل فيها

أية،

أني كتاب

ودمي حبر

وأعضائي كلام.

(128)

The Pearl

(Dream - Mirror)

How can I walk towards my people,
towards myself?

How can I walk towards my passion, my
voice? How can I ascend?

I am only a river that rejects, surges,
blazes;

Overwhelming poetry's hidden pearl,
Wearing the sun's suspicion;

Or

A dream.

I am the fever of prophethood.

I am the light that enfolds the dark,
Naked, wandering in the night's body.

Obsessed

I

Hold the earth like a woman

And sleep,

Ringing my sea-bell

To spread a flame,

To summon a sign.

I am a book

My blood is ink

And my limbs words. (129)

The second stanza repeats the first verses, while inverting the position of the words “people” and “myself”, lessening the importance of the people. Now that it found itself through poetry, history evolves as a new challenge to face. This impression is reinforced by the assonance of

“*kalāmūn*” (“words” or speech), the last word of the second stanza, and “*rukāmūn*” (ruins). The destruction of history is thus interwoven with the destruction of language.

كيف أمشي نحو نفسي، نحو شعبي
وَدَمِي نَارٍ وَتَارِيخِي رُكَامٌ؟
أَسْنِدُوا صَدْرِي -
في صدري حريقٌ

ومزامير،
جبالٌ وكُرومٌ
ومسافات
وأجسادٌ عُصُورٍ تَتَجَرَّجِرُ
ونجوم
والتَّوَارِيخِ مَرَايَا
والحَضَارَاتِ مَرَايَا
تَتَكَسَّرُ.

(130)

How can I walk towards myself, towards
my people,
When my blood is fire, my history a
heap of ruins?
Give support to my chest –
There is fire in my breast,
Psalms,
Mountains, vines,
Distances,
Bodies dragged from all periods,
Stars.
And histories are mirrors
And civilizations are mirrors
Smashed to pieces. (131)

The lyrical I concludes the poem with the observation that voices sing in its ashes. Although the self is burnt by the stream of history, it is able to hear these voices within poetry. Walking like the children of its country, they represent a people from whom it is and will continue to be separated.

لا، دعوني:
إنني أَسْمَعُ أَصْوَاتًا تُغَنِّي فِي رَمَادِي
إنني أَلْمَحَهَا تَمْشِي كَأَطْفَالٍ بِلَادِي.

(128-130)

No, leave me alone:
I hear voices singing in my ashes,
I see them walking like the children of
my country.

(129-131)

Language contacts in the three poems mentioned here result from contacts with different worldviews which inspire a reappraisal of the writing self. History is the factor that leads to contacts between different literatures in Adonis' poetry. Language appears to be the only way of moving forward and immersing oneself in these contacts without losing the self. Adonis engages with language contacts in an explicit dialogue throughout his poetry - sometimes the poetic voice addresses

itself, and sometimes it reaches out to different versions of *the other*.

Fuad Rifka

Fuad Rifka differs in his approach to questions of identity, depicting it as antecedent to thought and writing. This is reminiscent of the philosophical concept of *equi-primordially*, assuming that world, language, and humankind are three archetypal phenomena of existence (Rentsch 398). Rifka's vision instils his poems with an internal sense of calm. Until the early 1980s, his writing was characterized by the withdrawal into the internal, in an attempt to act against the instability of the world, partially due to the defeat of Pan-Arabism. From the 1980s, the wish to open up and blend with the universality of creation becomes increasingly explicit. At the same time, the form of his poems adapts simpler patterns, without losing their depth of content (Neuwirth 161; Weidner, "Provokation oder Erlösung" 121). Political events such as the defeat of 1967 thus become increasingly less relevant to his poetry, at least explicitly. The continuous urgency of the quest for identity is illustrated in the following poem entitled "If" ("لو"):

لو
 نحنُ لو كنّا حجارةً،
 ولنا الأرضُ مغارةً،
 نَحْتَمِي فِيهَا مِنَ الْأَبْعَادِ،
 لو كنّا محارةً،
 في حَشِيشِ الْبَحْرِ! لكنْ
 نحنُ جُرْحٌ،
 نحنُ أنهارٌ بلا مَجْرَى،
 بلا مَرَسَى أمانٍ
 نحنُ أجراسٌ على دربِ الرِّمَانِ
 نحنُ لو كنّا بلا ذكْرَى، كصخرٍ،
 لاسترحنا،
 إِمَّا نحنُ مَدَى، نحنُ إشارةً
 وعلى الأفاق رِيحٌ ودخانٌ.

(qtd. in Rifka, *La Cabane du Soufi* 18)

If

If we were rocks,
 and earth our cave,
 in it we would find refuge from the
 dimensions,

If we were mussels,
 in the sea grass! But
 we are a wound
 we are rivers without a course
 without a safe haven
 we are bells on the path of time

If we were without memory, like a rock,
 we would rest,
 but we are space, we are a sign,
 and on the edge of horizon, we are
 wind and smoke.

(18, author's translation.)

This poem communicates the aspiration to seek refuge among the elements, while at the same time emphasizing the impossibility to realize this. Due to the steady flow of time and events, kept alive in our memories, existence is fluid. We cannot rest, because we are led and sometimes wounded by the desire to move on, the poem suggests. The elements of water, earth, air ("wind") and fire ("smoke") are summoned to illustrate that as much as they are part of nature, it is the nature of this voice to continue its journey.

As this poem shows, the lyrical self in Rifka's poems attempts to wander through the world. Consequently, his poems do not comprise any explicit alterity, although the act of restlessly wandering causes wounds. Rifka's attempts to encounter the other with candor and fascination are reflected in the form of his poetry, as a closer look will show.

Unifying World Poetry vs. Dividing Polarity

The poem "Hölderlin" ("هولدرلن") exemplifies how Rifka intertwines poetry and philosophy from both Arab and German *cultural* backgrounds.

هولدرلن

من ضفافِ الرِّينِ أصغِي لخطاكُم
 يا رفاقي الحاملينُ
 غارة الصَّلْبِ: لكمُ أبني بروجًا
 تَسْتَضِيْفُ البرقِ، تومي
 لوجوهِ الساهرينُ
 يرقبون الطارقَ الآتي
 بأعيادِ السنينُ.
 مثلهمُ نحنُ انتظارٌ
 فوق جِسْرِ اللَّيْلِ نَسْتَهْدِي، نُسَوِّي
 لشفاهِ الآخرينُ
 أغنياتِ الحبِّ والأسفارِ والحضنِ الأَمِينِ.
 فجأةً يأتي
 وفي المُنْعَطَفِ المجهولِ يمضي
 ذلك الضيفُ الإلهيُّ الجَبِينِ.

(qtd. in Rifka, *La Cabane du Soufi* 46)

Hölderlin

From the Rhine's shores I heed your
 steps
 oh, companions who carry
 the crucifixion's laurel: For you, I build
 towers
 that host lighting, giving a signal
 to waking faces
 awaiting the nocturnal visitor
 who brings annual feasts.
 Like them, we are waiting
 we pray for divine guidance on the
 bridge of night, we arrange
 for the lips of others
 ballads of love, travel, and safe
 embrace.

All of a sudden, he comes
and disappears in an unknown turn
this guest with the divine brow.
(46, author's translation.)

In numerous interviews, Rifka expressed his deep fondness of German literature and his wish to build bridges between different cultures (Jentzsch 32). To illustrate the beginning of his interaction with German poetry, he describes how he stole Rainer Maria Rilke's *Elegies* from the Goethe-Institute in Beirut. Without understanding the German original, he was fascinated by its English translations (*Gedichte Eines Indianers* 29). Later, he compared German poetry to a friend with whom he wishes to share a house (*Tagebuch Eines Holzsammlers* 206). His poem "Hölderlin" refers to the German Romanticist poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). Rifka described his first encounter with Hölderlin's poetry as a "revelation" (Jockey 9). The poem is composed of different dialogical levels due to changing voices. The first voice addresses its fellows and wishes to build towers for them that shall illuminate their night-time journeys. The metaphor not only concretely refers to lighthouses but also to the towers of the German city Tübingen which are named after Hölderlin.² Thereby, the voice expresses the aim to guide them

both in a spatial-visual regard and on the philosophical-poetic level. His poem draws a parallel between the European stream of Romanticism and Islamic mysticism, both of which uphold the poet as a mediator between the divine and the earthly spheres. For it is the poet who receives a *divine* guest.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger to whom Rifka devoted his doctoral dissertation, connects the role of the singing poet with the idea that poetry and prophecy merge into one during the time of ignorance (*Weltnacht*). He explicitly mentions Hölderlin here by saying that what *Weltnacht* means for him, is called a holy night in Hölderlin's choice of words (Heidegger 266-8). The poem continues to rely on this idea by applying the role of poetry to different situations. Reminiscent of the singing poet, Rifka chooses to speak of songs: the songs of love, travel and safe embrace. The image of an embrace emphasizes that the presence of a human being is salient, rather than the availability of a safe space. The voice of this poem is aware of the "lips of the others", but instead of stressing their otherness, it welcomes them with open arms.

Who, then, speaks in this poem? The impossibility to answer this question seems to be key to its message. On the one hand, one can recognize Hölderlin as

the divine guest who lights the way of his fellows. On the other, the poetic voice also tries to incorporate this role. Its ambiguity affords the poem a wide appeal, independent of how it is interpreted. The lyrical self is indifferent to whether its verse reaches a foreign recipient, a known recipient, or several recipients. What it does deem important is whether these recipients are open to and aware of its message. Instead of thematicizing alterity, Rifka chooses to work towards merging different world views into a general awareness of existence.

The poem's form reflects the hybridity of its content, showing a crossed rhyme in the second stanza ("*tūmī*", "*al-sāhirīn*", "*al-ātī*", "*al-sinīn*"). Rifka neither uses a classical Arabic mono-rhyme nor free verse, but adapts a European structure of rhyme to Arabic verse, without imitating any particular German form of poetry. For him, the quest for identity is a challenge that binds all human beings together. Stefan Weidner confirms this observation by stating in his laudatory speech, delivered upon Rifka's receipt of the Goethe Medal in 2010, that he succeeded in bringing both the German and the Arabic traditions of poetry together and that he created a "new, third language and culture" ("Es gilt das gesprochene Wort").

Human Community vs. the Inexplicability of Existence

The merger of two languages and world views is expanded upon in the poem "Trial" ("محكمة"). Whereas Adonis' poems mentioned above address either the speaking voice or a version of the *other*, Rifka's poem initiates a dialogue with an abstract interlocutor who, due to the questions he poses, seems to be related to existential matters.

محكمة
 - متى وُلِدْتَ؟
 «لا أعرف،
 دائماً كانتِ المنابعُ والبدايات.»
 - إلى أين؟
 «لا أعرف،
 فالجهاثُ وسيعةُ
 وما مِنْ طرق.»
 - متى تموت؟
 «لا أعرف،
 فَجأةُ تهبُّ الرِّيحُ،
 فَجأةُ يسقطُ الورقُ.»
 - مَنْ أنت؟
 «لا أعرف،
 على كلِّ شيءٍ
 عُيُومُ الحُجُب.»

(qtd. in Rifka, *Gedichte eines Indianers* 82-83)

Court

- When were you born?

"I don't know,
 the sources and beginnings have
 always existed."
 - Where are you going?
 "I don't know,
 the directions are wide
 and there are no paths."
 -When will you die?
 "I don't know,
 all of a sudden, winds blow
 all of a sudden, leaves fall."
 - Who are you?
 "I don't know,
 above all
 lies a veil of clouds."
 (82-83, author's translation.)

The poetic voice appears to be unable of formulating its own existence. A second voice poses several questions, such as "When were you born?" and "Where are you heading to?" to which he can only respond with abstract metaphors. One of them is that "the sources and beginnings have always existed". The lyrical I does not seem to be able to locate itself within a certain space. Instead, it refers to comprehensive categories. The final question is "Who are you?" Although the first voice does not know any answer to this question either, it is not concerned. Nature seems to grant it certainty, for it refers to natural phenomena such as the seasons and the

wind. Rifka emphasizes that his interaction with nature is strongly influenced by Oriental poetry and the Arab mystical tradition (Neuwirth 166). The second voice does not judge the comprehensive answers of its counterpart. It might confront it with questions, but does not impose any particular thoughts or acts on it. Yet, the poem is entitled "Trial". A certain sincerity results from this title, emphasizing the poem's existential level of reflection. Within only four stanzas the poem moves from birth to death and to the heart of questioning one's own identity. Rifka's concept of identity is static in the sense of staying connected to the comprehensiveness of the universe, though it is depicted as intrinsically dynamic and open to new influences. His desire to become one with the cosmos becomes gradually more exigent. He regards poetry as a bridge not only between different peoples, but also between their plural cultural identities: "Every culture has its own identity, but this shall not mean, that no communication is possible between them. An excellent bridge between them would be the poem" (Traube, author's translation).

Conclusion

As this analysis has shown, the quest for identity is a key theme for both authors.

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However, their respective concepts are grounded in different assumptions.

Adonis applies the opposing categories of an external and internal space, emphasizing the past. His poems stress that past influences such as European imperialism and the defeat of 1967 have led to repercussions both in the present and future times. Instead of creating an essentialist *Occidental* view, his lyrical voices turn against specific aspects related to *the other*. Not he himself is criticized, but rather his influence on the internal space, for instance, by applying the supposedly *European* concept of modernity to Arab countries. The contacts of languages and cultural backgrounds inspire a re-engagement with the Arabic language and literary heritage. Re-interpreting classical Arabic poetic forms and choice of words goes hand in hand with creating a dialogue between the lyrical self and varying versions of *the other*.

Rifka gives the impression that the categories of *the self* and *the other* are counter-productive to his poetry. He refers to the idea of being connected to both the overarching cosmos and the community of humankind - beyond any borders of nation-states. He connects different philosophical approaches as well as poetic traditions. Indeed, his approach leads to a new poetic language. German rhyme

schemes seamlessly merge with classical Arabic vocabulary, without engendering conflict. Yet, the contacts of languages and the continuous restlessness of his voices inflict *wounds*. They demand a constant effort to raise awareness of why one finds oneself in a particular place, far from the comfort of home.

Both authors share the premise that poetry and writing are crucial to their way of retrieving, reconfiguring and realizing identity. Adonis regards it to be the path to be followed in his search for concepts of identity that adapt to present circumstances. Rifka favors writing as an approach to merge with the universe and existence itself. This explains why explicit references to political hierarchies and results from events such as the Six-Day-War of 1967 appear more in Adonis' than in Rifka's poetry.

Regarding their positions towards the *West*, both poets engage in a dialogue between literary traditions of different backgrounds while none of their poetic voices is defined as exclusively Arab. Instead, they create a collective sense of identity by drawing on common experiences and expressing shared aims: the *Arabic-Islamic* legacy and the people in Adonis' poems on the one hand, and the human community in Rifka's poems on the other.

Notes

¹ I have presented some thoughts expanded on in this paper at the annual conference of the *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)* in 2017.

² Both poets shared the experience of living in this city.

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