Woman in Nizār Qabbāni’s Poetry

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Abstract

Nizār Qabbāni is the most influential and best known Arab poet in modern times. He began composing verse in his school age. He is considered a great protagonist of feminism in the Arab world. Besides romantic poetry, he brought forth the sufferings of womenfolk generally and of Arabs’ especially. Nizār very aptly combined classical language with colloquial words through his poetry.

Nizār Qabbāni, the most influential and best known Arab poet in modern times, was born on 21st of March 1923 in the city of Damascus, Syria to an educated family. He was the second of six children of his parents, two of whom were girls. His grandfather was the founder of an Arabic theatre in the 20th century and his father, Tawfīq Qabbāni, was one of those involved in The Syrian Revolution. As a result, Nizār was born and bred in a political environment. Nizār’s house as he claims had become a rendezvous of the revolutionaries against French colonialism and political issues were constantly discussed there. (1)

He attended a variety of schools and colleges of Damascus. He first graduated from National College of Science. Then he moved to "Madrasat al-Tajhīz" (the Preparatory School), from where he acquired his second degree in philosophy. In addition to reading Arabic literature, Nizār also learnt French and went through French literature in his college days as learning French was compulsory. According to Nizār Qabbāni, no student in the class was allowed to utter even a single word in Arabic, and those caught speaking Arabic were beaten with a stick. This compulsion turned blessing for him and he read the poetry of ‘Musset’(2) ‘Baudelaire’(3) and ‘Paul Valery’(4) stories of ‘Alexander Dumas’(5) and ‘Hugo’(6) and dramas of

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‘Molière’(7) and ‘Racine’(8) which opened in front of him new literary vistas. Another important point is that he was taught by Khalil Mardam Bak, a well known Syrian poet and professor of literature in the college who left a deep impact on Nizar.

After completing his degree he was accepted into the college of law in the University of Syria and graduated in 1945. He then started working as a diplomat in the foreign ministry of Syria, which allowed him to travel to many countries. He visited different Arab, Western and Asiatic cities including Cairo, London, Beirut, Peking and Madrid. Following the unification of Egypt and Syria he worked as the Second Secretary of Embassy of the United Arab Republic in China. He remained engaged in this profession until 1966 when he resigned from politics, quit work in diplomacy and devoted himself to poetry.(9) He established a publishing house bearing his name in the city of Beirut.

Nizar married twice; first his cousin Zahrā who gave birth to a son and a daughter. In 1973 his son Tawfīq died of heart disease at the age of 22. His death broke his heart. His second wife, Bilqīs, was an Iraqi who gave birth to two children. She was killed in the explosion of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut, 1982. Her assassination left a very deep impact on Nizar who wrote long elegy bearing her name Bilqīs.

After the death of Bilqīs, Nizar left Beirut and moved first to Paris and then to Geneva. In the end he reached London where he spent the days of his youth - and settled there. He spent the last fifteen years of his life in London and died on 30th of April 1998 at the age of 75. According to his will he was buried in Damascus.(10)

Nizar’s Poetry

Nizar wrote his first poem in 1939, aged sixteen, while on a school trip from Beirut to Italy. Nizar says about it:

“While other students, my companions on the journey were laughing, basking in the sun and taking photographs on board of the ship, I was standing alone at the front of the ship, and here I muttered the first word of the very first verse I composed... Struck by surprise, the first verse jumped out of my mouth like a red fish, which jumps out from the depths of the water.. After two minutes a second fish jumped out.. And then after ten minutes a third fish jumped out... then a fourth.. Then a fifth.. Then a tenth.. I jumped with joy because of the palpitations of red, blue and golden fish in my mouth”.(11)

He published his first collection of poems: “Qālat lī al-Samrā” (The Brunette said to me) in 1944. In this collection he had
stepped into the world of taboo and wrote candidly about the female body, which other poets only mildly alluded to. The collection was full of bold sensual images and the language was very simple and full of damascene idioms. Verses of this collection spread like wildfire. He followed the path of ʿUmar ʿibn Abī Rabīʿa. In fact he had rather surpassed him. This sensual aspect of his poetry divided his readers into two categories. It penetrated the hearts of the young students of schools and colleges and captured them. They found these verses reflecting their own feelings and emotions. They read them in their bedrooms and in the streets. They also memorised stanzas and stanzas and even complete poems of this collection. Students copied lines from his poems in their schoolbooks and verses appeared on every classroom blackboard in Damascus.

As a result, three hundred copies of this collection sold like hot cakes, and its first edition was consumed within a month after its publication. In appreciation of his young fans, Nizār noted:

“Throughout my poetic history, students have been my troops, my voice, and my passport to the world”. (12)

While the clergy, Sheikhs and religious scholars harshly criticized him and wrote critical articles and columns against his poetry, for example Sheikh Ali ṭanṭāwi wrote:

“His book contains a factual description of what takes place between a licentious debauchee and a shameless accomplished whore. This description is void of all creative imagination as the writer is not a literary figure possessing rich imaginative talent. He is rather a papered child from the rich class, a darling of his parents. He is a school boy, so his book has found readers among the boys and the girls in the schools.” (13)

Nizār remained in Cairo from 1945 to 1948, which resulted in a new poetic collection named: ‘Ţufūlatu Nahd’ which was published in 1948. The reader of this collection can easily get the gist of the whole book and he finds no difficulty to understand that Nizār’s critics couldn’t succeed in shaking his resolve as he had not budged from the path he adopted in his first collection. In addition, the openness of Cairo had further liberated the poet and refined his poetic language. It is interesting to note here that after its publication the famous critic Anwar al Madāwī’ wrote an article about this collection and sent it to Aḥmad Hasan Zayyāt, for publication in his journal. Zayyāt accepted it but he thought it discreet to change the title from ‘‘Ţufūlatu Nahd’’ (Young Breast) to ‘‘Ţufūlatu Nahr’’ (Young River).
Nizār then moved to the United Kingdom and stayed at London. The freedom he enjoyed here had not been experienced before. The climate and grey sky fascinated and captured his mind and heart. In this way the sun of the East set in his poetry and the fog of London took its place. Here he compiled his collection ‘Qaṣāid’ (Poems), the most beautiful of his poetic works as stated by Dalīla Burkān(14).

In this collection, he expressed himself in the first person feminine. Thus he spoke for the generations of silenced women. Then his poetic collections started coming one after the other in the following sequence:


Nizār’s poetry captivates hearts, and one is forced to read them again and again. For example, look at the beauty of the following two poems:

I did not inform them about you.. but they Spotted you bathing in the pupils of my eyes
I did not talk to them about you.. but they Read you in my ink and in my papers.(16)

And
Because the words of the dictionaries perished Because the words of the letters died Because the words of the novels died I would like to discover a new way of love I will love you in accordance to that way.. Without words.(17)

With regard to the poetic language of these collections the first thing which draws the attention of the reader of these collections is Nizār’s limited and sensual vocabulary.

Another distinction of his poetry is that Nizār combined classical language with colloquial words. He chose words used in daily life and did not resort to the dead and buried words in the graves of dictionaries for the sake of rhymes which made his poetry easier to understand, to memorize, to sing and to enjoy. Look at the following poem and enjoy the simplicity of the words he used in it.

O you with profound eyes! your love Knows no limits
It is mysticism
It is adoring
Your love is like death and being born
Unlikely to be repeated more than once\(^{(18)}\)

But this feature of his poetry was heavily criticized. Critics also said his poetry is for teenagers and not for well educated and highly cultured people. In reply he said:

“Then, who are the intellectuals whom you want to address in your poetry? Are they well qualified doctors, engineers, managers of banks, owners of companies, contractors, ministers, and employees? Statistics about the distribution of books have proved that all the people I mentioned earlier don’t read the books or visit a library and their main source of acquiring knowledge is either television series or daily newspapers, while cultural lectures and empty chairs are always filled by students who have very little culture. Yes they are the real consumers of poetry”\(^{(19)}\)

**Image of women in his poetry**

Nizar has focussed the problems of women taking advantage of lust and sexual starvation found among young men and women. And in this way he could attract a large number of fans from all sides, men and women, young and old across the entire Arab World. It is very clear that the main theme of most of his poems is love and woman. He says:

“They ask me: why do you write about the woman? And I answer with the utmost innocence and simplicity: And why do I not write about her?”\(^{(20)}\)

He says about womanhood:

I tried to question: what is womanhood?
Then turned away from the question.
For the most important thing about womanhood is
That it is not to be told.\(^{(21)}\)

He also says:

My beloved asks me:
What is the difference between me and the Sky?
The difference between both of you is that
When you laugh oh my darling
I forget the sky.\(^{(22)}\)

He also says:

Please say I love you to increase my beauty
As without your love I wouldn't be beautiful
Say I love you so that my fingers may turn into gold.. and my forehead may become a lamp. In these poems Nizār appears as a sincere lover who expresses true love for his beloved. For example he says:

Twenty years on the pathway of love
But it still remains unknown
So at one time I was the slayer
And most of the times I was the slain
Twenty years oh book of love!
And I am still on the first page. (24)

He exaggerates in the praise of his beloved and gives her the highest place in the world. Everything in the world follows her orders and no one can even place a leaf in its place without her permission. Her body is the most beautiful thing in the world and a source of protection, salvation and supernatural power in the face of death. He says:

Your body is the sovereign
It rules us in the name of The Almighty
And admits us into the paradise by His permission
And drives us away from heaven by His decree. (25)

He also says:

“Nothing protects us from death except woman and writing (about her)”. (26)

He sees his sweetheart behind all his collections as he composed them for her. She lives in his poems and without her, his poetry would be like a body without a soul. That’s why we find him indebted to her in his poems. He says:

Thank you for your love
As it taught me reading and writing
and your beautiful face, which is hidden like a sparrow amongst my registers and notebooks
Thank you for living in my poems. (27)

His poetry gives us a detailed sketch of his beloved's charms. She is a beautiful and tall girl who has a small mouth, and long black, blond and brown hair. Her red lips are like opened pistachio and rose petals. Her teeth are as white as snow and her small hands decorated with long nails are as soft as velvet. They are the most beautiful masterpieces in the world. She owns a healthy body. Her fingers have been made from ivory and pearls. Her feet are small. He praised in...
different poems big black, green and blue oily eyes. In short we can easily sketch his beloved. The following lines will show how he praised the different body parts of a woman. For example in the praise of a tall woman he says:

If you were not in my life
I would have carved out a woman like you o my love
Who would be tall in height like a sword.\(^{(28)}\)

Admiring for her mouth he is not different from other Arab poets who admired the small mouth of sweetheart. He says:

If you didn’t exist in reality o my beloved
I would have toiled for months and months
To work out this tender mouth and these (fine) fingers\(^{(29)}\)

In another poem he likened her face to a star which lost its way in the dark clouds of her locks. It is like a beautiful painting which can illuminate even the wall of the studio it is hanged on. It is like a sentence which was uttered but was never comprehended. He asks The Almighty: How many years it took you to finish the sculpture, didn’t you grow weary, didn’t you become tired?\(^{(30)}\)

He is fond of long, black, blond and brown hair. For example he says about black long hair:

I asked the wind
To comb the locks of your dark black hair
But it apologised that as the time was short
And your hair was long.\(^{(31)}\)

Arab poets also paid lot of attention to soft hands with henna. They likened the colour of fingers to “Al-Anam” (name of a tree with soft branches and red fruit), and ivory and pearl. Our poet says in the praise of soft hands:

I visited the museums all over the world
From Louvre, the Metropolitan, and Prado
And I saw the finest plastic works
And oldest sculptures and Icons
But I didn’t see a sculpture
More overwhelming than your hands\(^{(32)}\)

He also says:

Your hands are two rare Arabic manuscripts
And two books ... which don’t have a second copy
So please don’t draw back your hands
to my hands
So that I may not become illiterate again(33)

Nizār did not utter anything about hands coloured with henna. However, he talked about the long nails of women which are very popular with contemporary women.

Female breast is Nizār’s most cherished subject. Here he lavishly engages in multiplying similes e.g. apples, horses, roosters and baby lamb.

Arab singers frequently sang about healthy and filled women’s legs and sometimes they criticized slim ones (34). Nizār talked about the softness of his beloved’s legs. He says:

I Think...
Without the smoothness of your legs
Could grass ever decorate the earth? (35)

While small feet were a big source of inspiration for Nizār and appealed to him a lot. He says:
The woman whom I love
Has two very small feet
Which resemble the speech of children(36)

Although he is all praise in her as a poet he is aware of his value also. He knows about the power of his words. He knows that because of his poetry his mistress will remain alive and days and years will not affect her. His beloved will remain as young as she is now, because his words have stopped the wheel of time, and captured her age, so it will move no more. He says:

O my sweetest of the sweet... Don’t worry
As long as you abide in my poetry and in my words
You may grow old with the years.. but
You will never grow old in my pages.(37)

Flag bearer of Women’s rights

Nizār was an ardent feminist, an addicted and chronic lover and an enthusiastic supporter of women’s rights and their protagonist. He says:

‘‘I do not clear myself of the crime called love. On the contrary, if someone does not fall in love, he has committed the biggest crime in the world. I say loudly that I am an addicted and chronic lover, and when there is no mistress in my life, I would be converted to blotting paper.’’(38)
He was a ceaseless campaigner for women’s rights, and his verses praise the beauty of the female body, and of love. He considered himself the champion of women’s rights and harshly criticized the men, who dominate society and condemned their behaviour. In the following poem he has unveiled the two faces of society which are opponent to each other. He says:

Oh my Judges, Oh my attackers
You are too cowardly to do perfect justice
You shall never frighten me, In your law
The powerful sinner wins and the unarmed is shot
A woman is questioned when she commits adultery
While compulsive adulterers are not.
The same bed they share
But only the woman falls while the man is protected

Nizār lamented this double standard of the Arab society. Sons and daughter share the same parents but parents discriminate in favour of their sons and give them superior place at home. Allah has made sons and daughters equal, gave them equal rights and they are equally answerable for their deeds. Thinking that their sons are the gifts from God, parents pay more attention to them, spend more money on their education and treat them as special creatures and allow them to do whatever they like while daughters are considered to be a burden and not accepted happily. That's why they condone the biggest sins of sons while the same parents treat their daughters harshly and never overlook even the slightest deviation on their part. He says:

My brother returns from the brothel at dawn drunken
Returns as he is sultan
Who named him sultan?
And he will remain in the eyes of the family the most beautiful and the most precious among us.
And he will remain in the clothes of fornication the purest among us.
My brother returns from the brothel intoxicated like a roaster
Praise to Him who created him from light and created us from cheap coal
And praise to Him who wipes out his sins but not ours.\(^{(40)}\)

Being a woman is the biggest sin in this male dominated society. She is punished from the day she comes to this world for this sin which she didn’t commit and she has to face its consequences for the whole of her life. Nizār says in this regard:

I am a woman
The day I came to this world
I faced the judgment of my execution
While I didn’t see the door of my court
While I didn’t see the face of my judges\(^{(41)}\)

He described his deep feelings about women and his sympathies for their deprivations and unequal treatment. He also addressed women’s psychological and sociological problems and tried to make men realize that they are responsible for every wrong done to women in the Arabian Society. He said in the introduction to his collection “Yawmiyātu Imraah Lā-mubāliyyah” (Diary of an indifferent woman):

“This is the book of every woman...sentenced and executed before she could open her mouth. The East needs a man like me to put on the clothes of a woman and to borrow her bracelets and eyelashes in order to write about her. Is it not an irony that I cry out with a woman’s voice while women cannot speak out on their own”. \(^{(42)}\)

He addressed women in many of his poems and incited them to revolt against oppression by men. He says:

Revolt, I like you to revolt
Resist against history and gain the upper hand on the grand illusion.
Revolt against the East which looks at you as a feast on the bed
Don’t be afraid of any one as the Sun is the graveyard of the vultures \(^{(43)}\)

But the woman after listening to him says:

O my Lord
I am afraid to say all the things I have (in my mind)
I am afraid if I do the sky will be set on fire
O my Lord your East
Will Confiscate the blue letters
And the dreams from the coffers of women
And will use the knife and chopper
To address the women and slaughter the spring and the yearnings therein and the dark plaits
O my Lord your East will make
Its high honoured crown from the skulls of women.(44)

In some of his poems we find him encouraging women and persuading them to resist against the old customs and traditions of the society which impose so many restrictions on them while they leave the men to do whatever they desire. Relying sometimes on the customs of the society and on the name of religion at some other times, they exploit religion and explain its teachings in the way they like. He criticizes this kind of men’s behavior very bitterly in one of his poems saying:

We spent the whole life in bedroom
with an army of harem around us
And a document of marriage in our custody
And a deed of divorce in our hands.
And we said: Allah has legalized (it)
Our nights as divided
Among our four wives
Here a lip, here a leg
Here a nail, here a finger
As of the religion was a shop we had opened to satisfy ourselves.....
And to enjoy the maids who are our property.
And we twisted the word of Allah in the way that benefits us
And We are not ashamed of what we do
We played with its sanctity
And its noble intent
And remembered nothing except the bed
And we took nothing from these words
Except our four wives. (45)

Although women dominate most of his poems, and his poetry collections are filled with feminine themes, he does not consider women more than a stop on his long voyage, or a port...
thing, -according to Nizār- in the history of voyages is to stay at a port. One port is like a graveyard of ambition. He says:

‘‘I do not deny the love poetry I wrote; I also don’t deny my views based on feminism. But I don’t want people to believe that I think of nothing but women.’’(46)

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References

1- Nizār Qabbānī, Qissatī m'al-Shi'r, Lubnan, Beirut, Manshorāt Nizār Qabbānī, 1st edition, 1973, p: 08.
3- Charles Baudelaire (April 9, 1821 – August 31, 1867) was a French poet who also produced notable work as an essayist, art critic, and pioneering translator of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. See: Ibid, Vol. 1, P: 966.
4- Ambroise-Paul-Toussaint-Jules Valery (October 30, 1871 – July 20, 1945) was a French poet, essayist, and critic. In addition to his poetry and fiction (drama and dialogues), he also wrote many essays and aphorisms on art, history, letters, music, and current events. See: Ibid, Vol. 12, p: 244-245.
5- Alexandre Dumas, (24 July 1802 – 5 December 1870) one of the most prolific and most popular French authors of the 19th century, best known for his historical novels of high adventure which have made him one of the most widely read French authors in the world. Ibid, Vol.4, P: 267.
6- Hugo, Victor (Marie) (26 February 1802 – 22 May 1885) was a French poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, visual artist, statesman, human rights activist and exponent of the Romantic movement in France. Ibid, Vol.6, P: 125.
7- Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known by his stage name Moliere, (Baptised January 15, 1622 – February 17, 1673) was a French playwright and actor who is considered to be one of the greatest masters of comedy in Western literature. Among Moliere’s best-

8- Jean Racine, (Baptised 22 December 1639 – 21 April 1699), French dramatic poet and master of French Classical tragedy. He is one of the "Big Three" of 17th century France (along with Moliere and Corneille), and one of the most important literary figures in the Western tradition. Ibid, Vol: 9, P: 879.

12 - Nizār Qabbānī, *Qiṣṣatī Ma’al-Shi’r*, P: 19
14 - Daūfa Burkān, Nizār Qabbānī Shā ḫūrul ḫūrul asr, Maktabah Miṣriyyah, P: 14.
17 -Ibid (Kitābul Hub), Vol:01, P:743.
21 - Nizār Kabbān, Sayabqal Hubu sayyedi, p:12.
29 - Nizār Qabbānī, Al-amāl al-shirīyyah al-kāmilah, vol:02, p:69
31 - Nizār Qabbānī 100 Risālatu hub, p: 37.
And on the lips of a woman he talked about the blond hair:

وضوء الشمس أستفيه
سنابل شعري الأشرف

33 - Nizār Qabbānī, Sayabqal ḫubbu sayyedī, p:104-105.
34 - For example Umar bin Abī Rabīah says:

نصر هو ناءت به شاهقية
هضيم الحشاح حسنة المتحرس
قطوف الوف للحال غريبة
وثيرة ما تحت اعتقاد المؤزور
36 - Nizār Qabbānī, Sayabqal ḫubbu Sayyedī, p:57.
38 - Nizār Qabbānī, Qissat maal-Shir, p: 132.
41 - Ibid, P:585.
42 - Ibid (Yawmiyātu imraatin lā mubāliyyah, P:5.
45 - Ibid. Vol. 01, p: 636-637
46 - Nizār Qabbānī, Qissat maal-Shir, P:130.

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