

Voice of Protest and Desire: Exploring Female Psyche in the Poems of Nizar Qabbani



Kirtikumar Vitthani

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Prof. V B Shah Institute of
Management, R V Patel College
of Commerce,
Amroli, Surat, Gujarat, India

Abstract

Women's problems and issues are widely debated and contested in the postmodern world. Issues like female-ness, sexuality, identity, anger, love are explored from new perspectives. Various forms/ techniques of literature have been generated and employed to give expression to the female/ feminine voice. Traditions are challenged and redefined in the context of love, family relationships and self-consciousness. Crucial contemporary female/ feminist concerns are very clearly evident in the poetry of contemporary Arabic poet Nizar Qabbani (English translation). The political and social realia have been codified in constructing an image of the new woman. The present paper is an attempt to explore the depths of women's psyche through the lens of several poems by the poet. The paper endeavours to explore how women's desires have been given voice, how does the anger comes out with a strong protest against male chauvinist society and unravels the problematics of the patriarchal society. By voicing her protest, Qabbani tries to allow woman to have her space. The poems ironically depict the problems and miseries of women, and also vents their desire to unbind themselves from long slavery of male. The narrator loudly speaks how a man fails to fulfill the desire of a woman and how she indulges in a sexual relationship with another female. The voice of strong protest can be heard when the narrator expresses that sexual desires reign supreme in men's interests. The woman in the poem no longer believes in the traditional confession of love by males. She has no qualms about committing adultery which is fulfilling and satisfying.

Keywords: Protest, Identity, Sexuality, Anger and Expression, Desire

Introduction

Women's problems and issues are widely debated and contested in the postmodern world. Issues like female-ness, identity, anger, love are explored from new perspectives. Literature from all over the world has reflected on the condition of women and has attempted to correct, modify, supplement, revise, humanize and criticise the male dominated world. Various forms and techniques of literature have been deployed to give expression to the female/ feminine voice. Traditions are challenged and redefined in the context of love, family relationships and self-consciousness.

Major crucial female/ feminist concerns are clearly evident in the poetry of contemporary Arabic poet Nizar Qabbani. The political and social realia have been codified in carving an image of the New woman. The present paper studies some translated poems of Qabbani into English and tries to have an insight into the female psyche. It is an endeavour to understand the voice of protest and desire that finds expression through the medium of poetry. Here is an attempt to explore how women's desires are laid bare, how the seething anger finds expression in the strong protest against male chauvinist society and unravels the problematics of patriarchy.

Being known for his passionate verses full of frankness, eroticism and sensuousness, Qabbani constantly criticizes Arab traditions and social norms. The first person feminine narrative in his poetry allows a towering presence and a voice to women. In his anthologies of poems, he transcends the societal taboos and describes the female body without inhibitions. The frankness in the stark descriptions of the physical attributes speak loudly of the urge to break free from the narrow confines of

orthodoxy and pseudo-prudence that govern sexuality. He believed in the doctrine: freedom of bodies is the freedom of spirit. His writings take women to new dimension by presenting their deepest and most repressed sentiments. There is an urge for women's liberation, to take control of their lives, bodies and destinies. One can find a true expression of their lives and exploration of their inner world.

The theme that attained passing references, mild allusions from other poets, achieves frank expressions in the hands of Qabbani. Marked with sensual imagery, the poetry celebrates erotic freedom and ecstasy. It depicts the world of women and the world of love, full of sexual images, though love and sex are forbidden in Arab society. The female presence is quite visible though some of the poems have male narrator. The female narrator has no inhibitions in expressing her sexual desires. In the poem, "Your Breasts", the woman narrator's thought, "I cannot resist touching fire" clearly demarcates the urge to have pleasure of the male touch on the female body.

The poems are inundated with vocabulary of yearning, excitement, love, lust, and rebellion. They clearly show that women and writing are the way of liberating the self, breaking away from the confines of codes of conduct and ultimately attaining salvation. The words like sex, drug, ravenous dogs, hips, vessels of pus signify the mechanical sexual intercourse and the sexual deprivation that is rampant. It demeans the pious consummation to the level of pure sexual gratification.

The power relationship as it exists in the Arab world finds a voice in the poetry. Men are always addressed as 'Master' with 'M' capital. The adjectives like my, dear, baby used in small initials are used in sarcastic and ironic way. The love, devotion and complete surrender of women to their 'Masters' is repaid with lust. In return, they are treated as naive, 'stupid women', sex objects. The poem "The Vessels of Pus" narrates how a man forcefully fulfills his sexual desire. Non-consensual, forced sexual relation leaves indelible physical and psychological scars on the Women. The woman feels cursed for being a woman. The poem reveals the pain they experience, the sufferings they go through, the agony that fills their minds, the souls that lie murdered and torn apart into pieces. The female narrator says,

"No! No, I do not want,
For the fiftieth time I told you I do not want!
(But you had me against my will)
Then you buried your head in the pillow, you brute,
You turned your face to the wall...
Turned your back to me,
Me, whose veins are barking,
Whose hair is scattered on her shoulders... You even
stole the cover,
Murdered my sole hope, tearing it to pieces,
To you we are vessels of pus.
And woe to the vessels of pus
Which can neither choose nor refuse!"

The end of the above quoted poem highlights a crucial issue of women's freedom. They are horribly helpless when it comes to their own

choice. The last line of the poem "A Letter From A Stupid Woman", calls women's freedom a fairytale. The only freedom that exists is the one that men alone can experience. He writes, "A senile fairytale, the freedom of women in our countries/ For there is no freedom/ Other than, the freedom of men..."

There would always remain a gulf between the sensibilities of the two sexes – an ever widening gap wherefore men would remain insensitive to women's emotions, sentiments and feelings. If at all any understanding is possible, it can only be at the physical grid. The female voice expresses this bitter truth in "A Letter From A Stupid Woman",

"Don't become annoyed, my dear Master,
If I revealed to you my feelings

For the Eastern man

Is not concerned with poetry or feelings

The Eastern man - and forgive my insolence - does
not understand women
but over the sheets."

The poems vent the desire of women to unbind themselves from the long physical and psychological slavery of men. After a prolonged subjection of women as objects of sexual gratification, women break free from the ethical standards carved for her. She transcends the stereotypical image of a loyal woman and commits adultery which is fulfilling and satisfying for her. She calls it an experience! The voice of strong protest can be heard in the poem "My Angry Cat." The woman speaker in the poem no longer believes in the traditional confession of love by males. The reader does not find a miserable, helpless woman but an asserting, defying woman who accepts her sexuality unabashedly.

"You're repeating yourself
for the twentieth time.

Is there another man in my life?

Yes. Yes. What did you think?

Even graveyards have visitors.

There are, my dear sir,

a lot of men out there,

and no garden is ever devoid of birds.

You're just an experience I had"

And then, the woman sets aside all the claims of love by the man. She is well aware that love has had no meaning for the man till now. The bond that existed was merely physical. She says,

"You love me!

There you go again,

dredging up all that ancient history.

And since when did you ever show

the slightest interest in me

outside the contour of my hips?

Where does this sudden gush of love come from?"

The female narrator goes to the extent when she mentions that she was never more than a forsaken chair, a furniture in his house. She further retaliates:

"Why are you staring at my breasts

as if you owned them?"

The above lines echo the protest against their bodies being owned by men. Qabbani points out to the limitless, unfettered soul of the woman who refuses to let her body be caged. The bruised body

retains stronger, determined and indomitable spirit. By breaking the silence, New woman has raised her voice against all the oddities of society and social norms. The female narrator in the poem titled "Pregnant" lets loose her wrath when the master desires his mistress to abort his child. She lashes out venom when she is offered some amount to get the baby aborted. She has gained enough strength to abort her illegitimate child because she is not ready to accept a coward father.

"I've always known what a cowardly bastard you are.
 You who sowed shame in my crotch,
 Who broke my heart...
 What? Are you really throwing me out
 While my shame holds me down on my back
 To ravage me with the dark fact
 That I'm...pregnant?
 Who's it for, this money?
 For an abortion?...
 So this, then, is my retail price?
 The price of my fidelity, you cheap little heap of trash?
 I didn't come for your stinking cash it.
 But thanks.
 I'll take this baby and abort it.
 I want no coward father for it.

The above poem depicts the brutality inflicted upon women, not of a region, caste or colour; it is the experience of every woman, having no face, no name, no identity. In the poem "A Letter From a Stupid Woman", she puts forward an argument about her name. She lacks identity. Names make no difference. The names they carry are the 'silliest' things. They are a substitute for their individuality which passes into nothingness; fading her into oblivion. All that remains is just the body. Any woman who musters the courage to voice her 'concerns' is tagged as a 'stupid woman.' Her endeavours are futile since the man's word shall prevail. After all, it's a man's world. Qabbani's sarcastic tone is evident.

"My dear Master,
 This is a letter from a stupid woman
 Has a stupid woman before me, written to you?
 My name? Lets put names aside
 Rania, or Zaynab
 or Hind or Hayfa
 The silliest thing we carry, my Master - are names
 My Master
 Say all you wish of me.
 It does not matter to me:
 Shallow... Stupid... Crazy... Simple minded.
 It does not concern me anymore...
 For whoever writes about her concerns...
 in the logic of Men is called
 a stupid woman
 and didn't I tell you in the beginning
 that I am a stupid woman?"

Qabbani was an ardent feminist, a hardcore supporter of women's rights. Qabbani openly condemns in harsh terms, the gender double standards that exist in the society. He unveils the bitter reality on our faces. The reality which we all have known to exist since times immemorial but have neither the courage to accept nor the urge to raise our voices against. History stands testimony that women

and men are judged on separate scales. It saddens to realise that the very notion of the progressive human race is a sham in the face of this truth, so remarkably put forth by Qabbani:

"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."
 The woman in the poem questions these double standards for judging men and women separately. Those who attack her are unfortunately her judges too. Yet, she is not intimidated. She knows that she would suffer the brunt, be punished for the same sin for which the man would be let free. She objects to the bias that exists so potently in the society.

The protest is visible in the lines where she questions the pardon granted to sons for the sins they commit. He is atoned of the unpardonable offences. The sin fades not the greatness of the son. He is immaculate despite his adultery. The same society that harshly condemns the slightest deviation in women, absolves the sons from the worst moral transgressions. The woman poignantly blames the Almighty for creating this rift for he created the woman inferior. She satirizes God's sense of justice which condones men's sins but not theirs.

"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."

No sin is greater than the sin of being a woman in this androcentric society. The moment a girl breathes her first, she is penalised, unaware of her fault. Qabbani empathises with women for the deprivations thrust upon them.

"I am a woman 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."
 Women lack the courage to protest and retaliate against the discrimination and oppression. The fear is writ large on their faces. She feels that the wrath of men would be let loose on her if she voices her dissent. Even their dreams would be seized from them.

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.

Qabbani instills in women the courage to resist, to rebel against, to question the customs, the traditions that fetter them, inhibit them, and cage them. The same odd customs and traditions that sanction men to act freely and willfully. They claim undue advantage of customs and religion, interpreting them to their benefit. Ironically, he divulges the secrets of men who in the garb of religion, gratify their basest desires.

"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: God 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 God 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."

Aim of the Study

The Aim of the study is to recognize the voice of protest and desire in Qabbani's poetry

Conclusion

Qabbani unveiled the duplicity of the society and the selfish manipulations of religion by men.

Gender-related taboos find a forum in his poetry from the frustration of a sexually dissatisfied wife to the agony of a forsaken pregnant mistress for refusing an abortion. He created a parallel universe for women, where they could experience a life they had only envisaged. Through Qabbani's poetry, women find their due honour, admiration and respect. To conclude, Qabbani's oeuvre is a manifestation of the poet's earnest zeal for the establishing of new gender relations based on freedom, equality, dignity, and beauty. Through his work, he consistently assails attitudes and practices that lead to women's exploitation. Despite the harsh criticism on Qabbani's stark descriptions of the female body or his objectification of women, he remains a potent proponent of Feminism. His poetry resonates an acute awareness of oppressive gender bias and his incessant efforts to herald a change in them. It is high time to break away from conventional orthodoxy of the society. Now is the time for women to rise and Qabbani hails it through his poetry.

References

1. Qabbani, Nizar. *Arabian Love Poems*. Trans. Bassam K Frangieh and Clementina R Brown. Lenne Rienner Publications Inc. USA. 1999. Ebook.

Web References

2. https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/7378/1/329951_vol1.pdf
3. https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/238982.Nizar_Qabbani
4. http://muftah.org/feminism-nizar-qabbani/#.Vss1U_197b1
5. <https://newrepublic.com/article/100613/nizar-qabbani-poems-arab-man-sword>
6. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/24105/Loya_Arieh_1975.pdf?sequence=1
7. <http://www.sackett.net/QabbaniPoetry.pdf>