

## **Domestic Utopias: Emirati *al Nabati* poetry as an agent of personal, social and national transformation**

Poetry as a satirical socio-political polemic or means to settle a dispute is a very ancient practice in Arabia and gatherings to recite them in residences or *diwan* are central to moral definition among the tribes. As such they are often targeted weapons still used among the Bedouin today, whose origins have been traced to competitions such as at Ukaz, near Mecca, a pre- Islamic (*al Jahili*) the centre of linguistic sparring (Irwin, 2001). The Classical ‘Hung’ poets, whose gilded words are raised up and adorn inside of the *Ka’aba* have associations with this form and as such this tradition has significant resonance in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

Recent contributions to the vernacular or the *al Nabati* genre have included edgy political commentary, from Iraq and Jordan. Abbas Jijan, for example, Englished by Holes and Abu Athera takes on major political leaders and controversial events such as the likes of President Obama, Hollywood, Blackwater, 9/11 and Abu Gherb (2009). Additionally, Jordanian poet Abu Samir makes use of George Walker Bush as a Bedouin mouthpiece, for his own scathing political commentary (2004). He opens :

Ah climbed atop a Texas peak, out west

In our proud nation,

A peak so hah no folks live there, to

Fahnd some isolation.

(Trans Holes and Abu Atheera, 2007)

However, by contrast, the Emirati voices in this collection have just as much attitude but apply it to traditional domestic platforms rather than strident international ones. There is no controversial political stance or commentary, but rather healthy domestic engagement and frank exchange of views of a more downhome nature. This does not make their contributions any less notable but rather more regional, family-based and intimate. The chivalric code of the desert Bedouin advocates taking a position centred on the family unit, just as the personal and public personas of antiquity found in Sophocles. It is from such origins that much of western literature springs: Boccaccio, Chaucer or Shakespeare. Hence Domestic Utopias impinge directly on the public sphere and define personal, social and national character.

Oftentimes the dynamics of family life are fraught with provocative decision making which do indeed require exemplary action. Personal character and tribal identity in relation to the ruler or patron are key in *al Nabati*, and while Holes has suggested that the use of Arabic dialects (*malhun*) have been used in the past to express political and economic independence from mainstream centres of government, the poems in the Emirates are also very often supportive of the *status quo* (2009).

The narration of change which occurs in the poem is represented as a kind of literal, spiritual or socio-political journey, a standard theme in Arab poetry. Leading by doing to inform government, as the promptings of Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*, can produce a transformation in favour of virtue and therefore, appropriate choices are made to govern family first. This may be seen as either reactionary or forward looking, depending on interpretation, perhaps both, but it is central to the Bedouin moral landscape.

While Sidney in his *Defence of Poetry* remarks:

whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example

( 85/22-6)

his definition of the true work of a poet shows the importance of demonstrating concepts. The voices in this corpus are also eloquent in their advocacy of their own pragmatic form of ideal or *al adab* action and Islamic aesthetics combine ornate calligraphy with rhetoric and behavioural decorum. Here Shamsa al Falahi an elderly lady in her eighties, addresses her daughter in a form of private poetics and as Ingham notes, the story behind such poems (*salfah*) is often recounted with a description of the local topography and rain prayers (1993). Her poem conforms both to Sidney's description of poets and to Ingham's observation on *al Nabati*.

The background to The Untitled Pastoral (2009) was composed as a rebuff to a suggestion that the family goat herd should be sold to avoid the need for her to shepherd them in the heat of the day. However, Shamsa is adamant that Bedouin tradition should be continued and describes her trip to the pastures in glowing terms. The camel ride (*huda*), now a luxurious car trip, is referred to as her (*merwahee*) مرواحي This 'key word in context' is used instead of a standard choice for journey such as *rihlah* (Kenny, 2009). The continuity of such customs, in spite of the family's new inflated circumstances, incorporates an elongation of the word for journey to three syllables, which emphasizes Shamsa's continued enjoyment of the outing and her wanting it to go on. The ee sound, carrying from the adjective *yazeen*, meaning pleasurable, continues the sense of merriment. Hence political unity to the state is complimented by an individualized feistiness and individualism. The choices made are

deliberate, rational and set a definite tone. Adra has pointed out that Yemen has a similar oral tradition (2008).

Briefly, for the purpose of access to the non-specialist of which I am one, a co-transcription of the Arabic is offered below to give a Romanized impression of her oral composition. Shamsa's voice is contained in a hyperlink in the raincloud photograph:

Li baetoum maya ban ethman  
Fi souq ind elli yebehoun  
Yama thebaythna touys esman  
Hag althyoof youm yelhoun  
Omin thudel Zayed ali ashan  
Labeea elsir vola anna madyoun  
Ou endi shajaha ana hab qezlan  
Voila min eytba el houn  
Yazeen mirwahee menseyan  
Wost el cruizen rahmij eloun  
Mahather el della wa saman  
Wish zobus onin el jet mashoun  
Wal draywal shattar ou fanaan  
Wili to harrac serah eptoun  
Mistanis fildel edan  
Fi esbetia oumin el hamam yehraddid alhoun  
Late alrahad yebaat denan  
Wa el barre eli fi el mizoon  
Wa yasgee ala aldoulah wa alwatan  
Wa bedu eli fil bar esqoun.

(Noura al Muhairi and Elizabeth Rainey, 2015)

The translation does not attempt to emulate the couplets of the original but rather tell the story in a contemporary form of English. Bidney and von Amin's recent publication of *The West-East Divan. The Poems, with "Notes and Essays": Goethe's Intercultural Dialogues* has focused renewed interest on the use of co-translation both into the German and now its Englishing (2010). As the search for theoretical approaches can sometimes make such a process even more fraught, since there is a lack of agreement among specialists Goethe's words are helpful:-

What I would like best, though, is to be regarded as a traveler who will be worth hearing if he eagerly assimilates the ways of life of a strange country, tries to appropriate its forms of speech and learns how to share views and comprehend customs. He will be forgiven if he succeeds only in part...Judicious people will be forgiving because they understand. Amateurs, less distracted by my shortcomings, may accept without bias what is offered.

( 2010, p175-176).

Here Shamsa's *argumentum ad antiquitatem* invokes a lifestyle with a fixed set of cultural norms. Her family transformation is tied up with an appeal to Bedouin standards of behaviour and her own domestic power, projected together onto the welfare of the nation. The links of animal husbandry with political statecraft and activity with cultural narration illustrate how her code is undiminished, despite the bewildering changes that have beset contemporary Emirati society. The journeys undertaken in the poems reflect the core human need for community, as immortalized in her Bedouin dialect. This physical, social and

national rainmaking is a mainstay of the intangible heritage of the United Arab Emirates and a vibrant and dynamic practice. The co-translation has been approved by Shamsa.

If I sell them, I will never see their worth,  
Countless times fed kin from kids,  
Favoured by Zayed, I keep my counsel and owe no man,  
Am brave, not given to sloth.  
The road to the pasture is silky smooth,  
I cruise to the field in my dark, velvet ride,  
Coffee to go, car full of grain and hay,  
A skilled driver knows how to keep me chill,  
Happy in the trees' shadow, amid full bird song  
Would hear thunder's ring and full lightning sparkle,  
Watering country, town and Bedouin.

(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey and Noura Al Muhairi, 2012)

Briefly, in the second example, The *Untitled Hunting Dialogue* transmitted by Shamsa on behalf of her brother Mohammed, the key word in context (*drah*), is translated as 'path' though literally it means poor behavior. The behavioural role model is the archetypal hunter and his saluki companion. The dog's voice is dominant, given the most lines and a second internal rhyme in Arabic, making it more sophisticated than that of her master and appears in italics. Mohammed wrote it around fifty years earlier, in an older form of the dialect. The translation reads:

She will never let me down, my sweet white ball of cotton.

*My marksman, my soul's own delight, alert to my call.*

*With all my being I strive to please you,*

*On full guard at your voice and steadfast,*

*To kill the long-eared buck, sentient under the ghaff,*

*And deep in the far mountain, bring home the quarried goat before sunrise.*

*I will protect you, you who have never danced to the oud,*

*Or even once held a cup of wine, or followed a crooked path.*

Eagle- sharp- eyed, pure-bred, of the best pedigree.

(Trans.Elizabeth Rainey and Noura al Muhairi, 2012)

Therefore, the Bedouin examples shown here, desert hunter and Doric swain, traditional roles that inform emotional and pragmatic responses, are the embodiment of inherited values and activities. The ability to initiate transformational narratives in personal, social and national platforms is second nature to the Bedouin. Shamsa who is illiterate and her brother Mohammed, who could read and write, both show remarkable persuasive technique. Grandmother is a funny, kind and generous woman and as the UAE increasingly takes the stage in regional and global politics, it does so with a Bedouin voice as its guide.

The people, their poetical product and their pedigree have been drawn into focus in these two cameo selections, using eponymous figures whose example informs present day family and regional decision making and may yet continue to shape the emergent nation

state in the same fashion. The decision making process projected in this art form concludes with an ethical invocation or (*mitayil*), intended to sustain the family, the tribe and by extension all humanity, through impeccable practice (Sowayan, 1985). *May the Circle Be Unbroken*.

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