

ORAL POETRY, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND LITERACY IN YEMEN
Najwa Adra

Presented at "The Diversity of Yemeni Poetry", Middle East Studies Association's
42nd Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, November 23, 2008

By now, most of us are aware of Yemen's extraordinary poetic heritage and the sophisticated command of language demonstrated by men and women. Throughout Yemen, as well as in diaspora, verse provides a socially accepted manner of publicly expressing deep feelings of sorrow, joy, and concern. Long oral and written poems (sing., *qaṣīda*) which generate formal poetic replies are circulated, recited and discussed (Caton 1987, 1990, 2005; Miller 2002, 2007; Staub 1989; Taminian 2001). Short poems and rhyming proverbs are inserted into conversation to make a point; greetings are often phrased in rhyming couplets, which require appropriate rhymed responses. As Caton has shown, tribal conflicts are mediated through verse. Verse may also be utilized to negotiate household quarrels. Little has been written, however, about the oral 2-4 line poems traditionally sung and chanted by rural women in Yemen as they work in the fields, herd livestock, engage in domestic tasks, or commemorate absent pilgrims (*darh*). Lila Abu Lughod (1986, 1990) has described similar poetic genres in Egypt's Western Desert, and Terri Joseph (1980) and David Hart (1976) have done so for the Moroccan Rif.

Following are some samples of what is commonly known in the Northern Highlands as *maḥan* poetry – verses sung by women as they ground grain with heavy stone mills. Although grain is rarely ground by hand any more, many of my friends still sing their sorrows and frustrations while cooking or performing other chores. Most of their songs are improvisations on common tropes, and some are original compositions. For example, after a quarrel with her in-laws, a friend of mine sang:

Kadh dhāb abūh ligāl al-akh 'āyib
Mā 'āyibāt illa-l-nisā' al-maṣāyib

(He is a liar who calls his brother blemished [i.e., accuses his brother wrongly]/None have done wrong except those women who have [caused] problems.)

At another time, she sang:

Gad kuntu 'ind ummī mishgir mighyal
Dhal ḥīn 'ind al-nās galbī tighayyar

(When I lived with my mother I was a sprig of basil in water/Now [that I live] with others [in-laws] my heart has turned [bitter].)

A variant about an absent son who does not write or call his parents is:

[Ibnī ibnī], yā mishqirī mighyal¹
Min yawm sirt min ‘ind ummak, galbak tighayyar

(My son, my son, oh sprig of basil in water/Since you left your mother, your heart has turned [away].)

Another on the same topic:

Gilt ibnī ibnī galbī ‘alayk ‘āṭish
Sa‘-l-ḥanash ḥīn yiltawī wa mā bish

(I said, my son, my son, my heart thirsts for you/Like the [thirsty] snake that turns round and round in place without finding any.)

A good verse calls on the support of the community. A woman complaining about her marriage sang:

Lā tingidūnī lā kharijt wa-bṭayṭ
Min al-haram w-aldaḥs dākhil al-bayt

(Do not blame me for going out and staying away/From the nagging and misery inside the house.)²

The following lines were composed and sung by a young professional musician whose widowed mother moved to a distant village to live with her new husband:³

Lā tingidūnī lā damma ‘at ‘iyūnī
‘Ala-li-sārū wa falatūnī

(Do not blame me if my eyes tear/Over those who have left and foresaken me.)

When I last visited al-Ahjur, my friends recited this verse several times to tell me about the girl’s unhappiness and express their sympathy for her.

Poetry can express feelings that one should not discuss. A young woman who is unhappy with her suitor may sing:

Gālat shillinā al-maṭar min fawg bayt al-Adwar
Mishtīsh ḥabīb gudū-l-awwal

¹ *Ibnī* (my son) is my substitution for the boy’s name. I did this to protect the privacy of the poet.)

² Thanks to Afrah Yusr for her help in translating and contextualizing this and other verses.

³ Because this was sung at a wedding it is not technically considered *maṭhan* poetry.

(She said, may the rain carry us away from above the deaf man's house/I don't want a lover. [I still love] the first one.)⁴

These are not the sorts of things a young virgin is allowed to say directly, but parents, if they are decent, can take their daughter's perspective into account when they hear her words. Even if they choose to ignore her wishes, her honor and reputation remain intact.

The poetic process is participatory and often calls for response. Here is an example of a wedding song from the region of Al-'Ānis, in which the musician praises a dark-skinned dancer to curry favor with her powerful family:

Miḥla-l-khudārī idhā dahak wa btasam
Mithl-il-'asal ḥīn yij'ilūh 'ala-l-samn

(How beautiful is the dark one when he laughs or smiles/Like honey when poured onto clarified butter.)

Her fair-complexioned, but uninfluential, partner took offence and responded:

Miḥla-l-'arag fawg ḥājib-l-bayādī
Mish hū 'arag hū ṭall fawg kādhī

(How beautiful is the sweat on the brow of the fair one/It is not sweat but dew on screw pine [Pandanus] blossoms.)

What you have heard are common examples of this little-known poetic tradition. In an effort to attract adult rural women to literacy classes and, at the same time, to affirm this tradition (and in cooperation with the Ministry of Education), I piloted a literacy project in 2002-2003 in which learners' own stories, poetry and proverbs provide the texts from which they learned to read and write. Details about this highly successful project can be found on-line in Adra (2008). Here, I will only present two of the texts generated in pilot classes:

1. Background to the text:

In Yemen, if a woman is offended by something her husband or her in-laws do or say, she can return to her father or brother's house in protest. (A variety of terms are used to refer to this practice. In the area around Sanaa, it is *ḥanag* – lit., anger, exasperation.) The following text, which was generated by a photograph, deals with *ḥanag*.

The story:

The setting is the guest room of Ṣāliḥa's house. Her husband's sister, Ḥamīda, is visiting them in protest. Ḥamīda's brother's children, Muḥammad, 'Abdallah, and Āsia, have come to the guest room to greet their aunt. Ṣāliḥa is offering them all breakfast, and

⁴ Bayt al-Adwar is included for the sake of rhyme. In this case, it also refers to a specific house in the community.

Ḥamīda is talking with her nephews and niece.

The first poem included in this text is a song, and the second a proverb. Both are taken from the folk tradition:

Yā ḥāniqa lā bud min rujū‘ish
Lā yinfa‘ish ahlīsh wa lā dumū‘ish
Illā ṣamīl akḥḍar yridd rūḥish

(Oh, protestor! You must return [to your husband]/Neither your family nor your tears will help you/There is no hope for your [hurting] soul. (Literally, your only hope is green straw – i.e, no hope).

The second one:

Mā yidim lil-mar’a-l-ḥārib
Illa bayt ahlāhā-l-khārib

(Nothing remains for the woman who flees/Except the ruins of her [paternal] family’s house.)

These are poetic ways of saying that there is no justice for women. They signal an active engagement with issues of concern to women. These are not the words of victims who suffer quietly.

2. The second example addresses girl’s education:

The Story:

Muḥsin went to the fields early in the morning. He went with Ḥamūd and his daughter, Raḥma, to sow seeds. When his wife brought them breakfast, she greeted him, saying: “Yā ma’in” (Oh, hard worker - This is a common greeting and appreciative comment to someone who is working.) His reply, also a common reply, involves a pun on her words: “Allāh y’in al-jamī” (May God help us all.)

His wife: “Shame on you for taking your daughter out of school to work in the fields.”

He protests with a verse attributed the the folk hero, ’Alī bin Zāyid:

Mā rayt mithl-il-zirā‘a
Ma rayt anā mithlihā shay’
Al-wagt kullihū matālim
Ghayr al-madhārī lahā awgāt

(I have never seen anything like farming/ I have never seen anything like it at all/ It is always time to plant something/In addition to those plants that have specific sowing seasons - In other words, there is always work to do.)

His wife’s sarcastic and brilliant poetic retort was composed by a learner:

Hādhihī-l-sana biyidrisayn ‘ajāyiz

Wayn al-mudīr yidī lahin jawāyiz?

(This year, old women are studying/Where is the director [or school principal] who should be giving them certificates? In other words, why are men in positions of authority not providing girls the support they need?)

In this example, the story reflects hurdles to education often encountered by rural students. Poetry and humor present both the man’s reasons for taking his daughter out of school and his wife’s annoyed and clever retort.

You have heard only a few examples of an advanced form of communication that is highly effective in the mediation of conflict. Poetry synthesizes the issue at hand and allows for disagreement without confrontation. When someone feels insulted, expressing anger in a poem is more sophisticated than physical violence or shouting. Moreover, rhetoric that one’s adversaries appreciate increases their willingness to accept compromise. This is critical thinking at its best, and in one form or another, it is (or was) engaged in by all sectors of the society.

With this in mind, I suggest a corrective to Abu-Lughod’s characterization of such poetry as resistance – as “minor defiances of the restrictions enforced by elder men in the community” (1990:43). Poetry in Arab societies may, at times, signal defiance by the powerless, but it can also be understood as a positive force that reconciles broader cultural constraints. Rather than focusing on the female poet as simply the victim of patriarchy, her heartfelt verse can be understood as agentive. In saying this, I do not deny the power of patriarchy and extent of injustice toward women in either Arab or Euro-American societies. But I think we need to understand the wider cultural frameworks within which patriarchal forms operate.

In Yemen, poetry has long been the socially sanctioned method in which disagreement is couched, even among equals. In my previous research I noted that poetry and other expressive forms are used to balance cultural restrictions that constrain all sectors of society, restrictions that hinder the elite and powerful most of all (Adra 1983, 1998, 2004). As in other Arab societies, men’s and women’s honor is maintained by adhering to myriad restraints – among these, the responsibilities of hospitality, the prioritizing of family and community over individual wishes, the importance of emotional restraint in public. It is only in bounded contexts defined locally as intimate, that women or men are allowed to express themselves, play, and generally “let their hair down”. I suggest that in this society poetic expression provides a counterbalance to the excessive constraints of public life.

Change

Some genres of men’s poetry have been enhanced through their dissemination by audiocassettes, radio and television (Caton 1990, 2005; Miller 2007) and women’s written poetry has gained social acceptance (Miller 2002, Taminian 2001). But rural women’s oral traditions are threatened by new media such as television (Adra 1996),

socio-economic and technological changes (among these the replacement of hand mills by electric or gas-powered mills, school attendance, diminished agricultural roles for women, increased urbanization), and imported conservative interpretations of Islam that denounce women's voices as un-Islamic. The poetry, music and dancing that were once highly valued forms of expression are increasingly criticized as outmoded or, worse, as irreligious (*makrūh*).

The devaluation of women's verse is not only a literary loss but signals a more general decline in women's participation in their respective communities. Historically in Yemen while elite urban women were secluded, village women were economic partners of men. They did not veil. They worked with men in farming, herding livestock or processing and marketing fish. They traveled long distances to fetch water and wood and sometimes participated in the market, and, like men, they danced all night at weddings. A village woman had a number of traditional options to mediate marital conflict or terminate an unhappy marriage. All of this is changing. Urbanism and a monetized economy are diminishing rural women's economic roles and, consequently, their influence in their respective communities. Silencing their poetic voice further excludes them.

REFERENCES CITED

Abu Lughod, Lila

1986 *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1990 *The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women*, *American Ethnologist*, 17(1):41-55.

Adra, Najwa

1983 *Qabyala: The Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic*. Doctoral Dissertation in Anthropology, Temple University.

1996 *The "Other" as Viewer: Reception of Western and Arab Televised Representations in Rural Yemen*. In *The Construction of the Viewer: Media Ethnography and the Anthropology of Audiences*. P. I. Crawford and S. B. Hafsteinsson, eds. Pp. 255-269. Højbjerg, Denmark: Intervention Press.

1998 *Dance and Glance: Visualizing Tribal Identity in Highland Yemen*. *Visual Anthropology*, 11:55-102.

2004 *Literacy through Poetry: A Pilot Project for Women in the Republic of Yemen*. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 32(1&2):226-243.

2008 *Learning through Heritage, Literacy through Poetry*. *Adult Education and Development*, 70, http://www.dvvininternational.de/index.php?article_id=731&clang=1

Caton, Steven

1987 *Power, Persuasion, and Language: A Critique of the Segmentary Model in the Middle East*. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19:77-101.

1990 *"Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

2005 *Yemen Chronicle: An Anthropology of War and Mediation*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Hart, David

1976 *The Aith Waryaghar of the Moroccan Rif: An Ethnography and History*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press for the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology.

Joseph, Terri

1980 Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Riffian Berber Women. *Signs*, 5(3):418-434.

Miller, W. Flagg

2002 Public Words and Body Politics: Reflections on the Strategies of Women Poets in Rural Yemen. *Journal of Women's History*, 14(1):94-122.

2007 *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Staub, Shalom

1989 *Yemenis in New York City: The Folklore of Ethnicity*. Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press.

Taminian, Lucine D.

2001 *Playing With Words: The Ethnography of Poetic Genres in Yemen*. Doctoral dissertation in Anthropology, University of Michigan.