

Nazik Al- Malaika: Perusals and Translations

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Nazik Al- Malaika (1923-2007) was born in Baghdad for a cultural and literary family. She was the oldest of seven siblings. Her father was a poet and the editor of a 20-volume encyclopedia on Arabic grammar and literature. Al- Malaika's mother was also a poet. She wrote poetry against the British rule under the pseudonym Omm Nizar al- Malaika. The young Nazik thus grew up in an intensely literary environment "My father laid out a wonderful smooth path before me," she writes here,

When he provided me with books containing the principles of grammar and the classics of our literature. Thus, it was only natural for me to be the only student in the Arabic department to choose the various schools of grammar as a topic for my dissertation. My supervisor was a great professor, the late Mustapha Jawad, and he had a profound effect on my intellectual life. The manuscript of my dissertation is still in the college building and carries the corrections that he made on it in red ink. (Moreh, 1976 : 79).

At an early age, Al- Malaika also recounts the influence that the modern poetry of Mahmoud Hassan, Badawi Al- Jabal, Amjad Al- Tarabolsi, Omr Abu Risha and Bishara Khouri initially exerted on her.

In 1941, Al- Malaika joined the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad, and got her B.A. Her attachment to poetry, however, had begun many years before her years of formal study, and she tells us in her autobiography that she composed her first poetry in classic Arabic at the age of ten under the tutelage of her father (Moreh, 1976 :66-8). For Nazik, the year 1947 was to mark the beginning of her social and spiritual maturity. She was among the most prominent figures of modernism. It was in this year she published her first collection of poetry, Ashiqat Al- Layl (Lover of The Night) by using a new form as what she called "free verse". The new form that has found acceptance virtually throughout the entire Arab world is connected with her name and Badar Shikar al- Sayyab (see Jayyusi, 1977 :905). In her first collection she wrote her first poem in "free verse", entitled "Cholera". In her autobiography, Al- Malaika writes " On Friday, October, 1947, I woke up, she writes,

and lay in bed listening to the broadcaster on the radio, who said that the number of the dead in Egypt had reached one thousand. I was overwhelmed by profound sadness and deep distress. I jumped out of bed, took out a pen and paper,.....

.....and I

Sat on a low fence and began to compose "Cholera"; a poem that has subsequently become well-known. I had heard that the corpses of dead people in the Egyptian countryside were being carried crammed together on horse-drawn carts, so as I wrote I imagined something of the sounds of these horses:
"The night reposed\ Listen to the impress of moan amble \
In the deep gloom , under silence , and over the dead. "

(Moreh, 1976 : 79).

Under these circumstances , Arabic poetry was first freed from the rigid strictures of traditional rhythmic forms and rhyme schemes. Nazik Al- Malaika must take much of the credit for this emancipation.

In 1949, Nazik published her second collection, entitled Shrapnel of Ash prefacing it with a theory of new poetry metrics. In this theory , she explains the new theory metre which she had introduced into Arabic poetry and her own practice of free verse. Two years later, Nazik had won fame outside Iraq. She read English literature and the French literature as well. She studied Latin and learnt by heart long poems of well-known ancient Greek poets. In 1951, she traveled to the US where she studied literary criticism and in 1954 she also went back again to the US to study "comparative literature". Her third collection, entitled Bottom of the Wave was published in 1957. In fact, she wrote this collection as a reaction to the 1958 revolution which was a great source of inspiration for the poet to express the happiness of people, saying:" The happiness of children when, embraced by parents is like the happiness of a thirsty man when drinking water. The happiness of July when flirting with cold winds is like the happiness of night when it gives to the stars and the birth of the Republic."(Khater, 1990 : 24-26).

In 1962, Nazik published her first book on literary criticism entitled Issues of Contemporary Poetry . Her fourth collection of poems under the title The Moon Tree was published by the beginning of 1968. In 1970 she wrote a long poem entitled "Life's Tragedy" and "A Song for Man". Between 1973-1974, she published poems such as "For Prayer and Revolution" and "The Sea Changes its Colours".

Al- Malaika taught many years at the university of Kuwait and in 1985 a festschrift appeared in her honor. It contained twenty articles on her work. In 1990, she moved to Cairo. In 1999, she entered the literary scene again with a new book of verse, entitled Youghiyar Alwanahu Al- Bahr, which also contained an autobiographical sketch. For many years, Al- Malaika suffered from Parkinson's disease. She died in June 20, 2007 in Cairo.

The late forties and early fifties were the beginning of a new stage in the Arabic prosodic system stimulated by the need for change. Al- Malaika could find the basis for the so-called "New Verse Form" in the innovations of the previous Arab romantic

poets as well as in the European, especially the English poetry. The new situation in Iraq after World War II helped in the creation of the new prosodic system. Poets, then, were able to use the manner that suited them, with nothing to fear from academic criticism. In this atmosphere, fresh experiments were made.

In 1947, two poems appeared, by Al- Sayyab's "Was it Love" and Nazik Al-Malaika's "Cholera", which broke the monotony of Al- Khalil's metres, and announced the birth of a new movement in the Arabic poetry, Al- Malaika said:

The new movement reconsidered ancient prosody
and used some of its details to provide an innovation
which would help the contemporary poet in freedom
of expression, in lengthening and shortening the
expression as the need may be.(See Khayyat, 1965:170)

As a matter of fact, Al- Khalil prosodic system was radically altered by the modern poets.

Nazik Al- Malaika contributed considerably to the development of the new movement, and furthered the experience to higher level of achievement. In spite of the heated argument by the Arab critics about the validity of the new form, it proved its capacity to embrace the new experience in life, and to a more accurate and effective expression (Lu'lu'a, 1973:113). It might be useful to illustrate the major differences between the old and the new prosodic systems to show how far Al- Malaika had gone in her experiment. These differences can be summarized as:

1-The new poem is an organism. "The new poem became a cohesive organism read as a whole".

2-There is unity of subject-matter which the old poem lacks, and N. Al- Malaika concentrates also on the length of the new poem. The old poem is composed of several lines of the same length, and each line is divided mostly into two halves. The lines in the new poem differ in length and they are not divided.

3-Rhyme is occasional in the new poem. It is determined by its function. In the old poem, rhyme is an essential element whether it is functional or not:

This dynamic form, rejecting the inviolability
of traditional metrics and the lifeless poetic
diction in favor of a freer, simpler poetic
language, is capable of a more vital expression
of content.(Khouri and Algar, 1974:19).

From her reading in English romantic poetry, Al- Malaika found it possible to vary the number of tafi'lahs and rhymes in the Arabic poem without affecting its music and harmony. In her book Issues of Contemporary Poetry, Al- Malaika asserted that the poetic development is not only variations in the number of tafi'lahs (metres) from line to line, but it is the logical consequences of our interest in reading the European

literature and studying the latest theories of philosophy, art and psychology. She observes that contacting other nations is the first motive for development.

In her book Issues of Contemporary Poetry, Al- Malaika concentrates on four basic factors which gave rise to the free verse movement. These are:

1-Propensity to realism - she views the free metres enable the modern Arab individual to turn tail from romanticism to realism which adopts hard work as its ultimate goal.

2-Longing to autonomy - she concentrates on the intention of modern poet to have his own deep-seated individuality through taking up modern poetic style which represent his personality as to be well distinguished from the old poet. .

3.Disaffection from patterns – she confirms the poet's disaffection from sticking to the repeated and monotonous pattern ; the monotony of the two-hemistich order of the Arabic classical poetry which the modern poet revolted against and "the poet turned away into the foot order and started to seek the meaning and utterance".

4-Preferring the content - she sees that modern Arab individual turns to prefer the content in form considering that it is a reaction to the dark stage of the history of the Arabic Poetry in which the use of formal void molds and the forms which do not bring out a lively need. Therefore, she blames the Poets who are interested in the abstract forms and in not conveying certain content to their readers but creating abstract forms that enjoy mere formal value. Thus, for the modern poet, the direct reaction was to shift to being interested in content and attempting to get away from the outer layers. Nazik Al- Malaika observes the free verse movement is one of the forms of this propensity because it carries a revolution against the tendency to use form in Poetry (Al- Basri, 1971: 52).

It is evident that these four factors are, not all , psychological factors; they are basically social, historical and artistic factors.

Nazik Al- Malaika's romantic poetry was written in the forties when she was still writing in the conventional tradition. She admired Keats and Shelley because both hold their position in the foremost rank of English romantic poets. The sensitive nature they possessed appealed to her own sensibility. And it happened that their poems were taught in the college when she was a student in the Teachers' Training College in Baghdad.

In her first volumes The Lover of Night (1946) and Life's Tragedy (1970), which run to 1200 lines in rhyming couplets, Al- Malaika was clearly influenced by the long poems of the romantic English poets such as Byron, Keats and Shelley. Al- Malaika adds: "When I wrote my long poem Life's Tragedy vol. 1 (1945), I was only twenty two, and I was very much interested in the reading of the long English romantic poetry. Hence, I liked to write such long poems in the Arabic Literature" (Asad, 2000:50).

In Life's Tragedy vol. 1 (1970), Al- Malaika admits the influence of Thomas Gray's "Elegy written in Country Churchyard" . She quotes Gray's philosophy of life and death, but in other country and different society. Therefore, she acquires a universal touch and extends the meaning to include all humanity regardless culture and country. In her poem Life's Tragedy, Al- Malaika expresses her quest for happiness, which is occasioned by the suffering of the second World War. She was driven to seek this happiness in vain, first in the palaces of the rich, then in the palaces of the rich, then in the monasteries of the ascetics, in the dens of sinners, in the simple life of Shepherds and peasants; among poets and lovers. Finally, the poet finds rest and happiness in the presence of God, who provides the answer.

The other poet who left his mark on Al- Malaika is Keats. She quotes long lines from Keats's Ode to a Nightingale in her poem A Song for Man (1965):

Darkling I listen, and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call 'd him soft names in many amused rhyme
To take into the air my quiet death. (Keats, 2005:20-24)

Al- Malaika said:

Only if I have a liking for my death, and
Call for its darkness in the best of names,
Will death, then, answer me my heated desire
And come to my aid? (Diwan Al- Malaika, 2008:150-153).

In the above lines, Al- Malaika depicts the poet as a singer of sweet songs, a lover of beauty, a lover of man and the universe, a person of hypersensitivity, a tragic being and a rebel who endures great sufferings and eventually she called for death to end his sufferings.

Al- Malaika's "Evening Thoughts" was written also under the influence of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". She was influenced by Gray's description of nature with the steps of the wanderers at night and the poet is sitting alone in the darkness. Yet, Al- Malaika, in her poem describes herself in the same way the poet describes himself with the shift from the English landscape to the Iraqi palm trees:

Oh, Hira poetess, what is the secret of amazement?
What made thee a dreaming spirit under palm trees?
Learning thy head upon thy hands at shadow
Sinking in thy thoughts, griefs and long silence
Mid the charm of darkness in the fair field.(Ibid,546-600).

In "To Poetry", Al- Malaika is influenced by the great English romantic poet William Wordsworth. In her poem, Al- Malaika addresses poetry saying that she will travel all over the world to collect its voice from every "cold fountain", and that she will travel to the mountain of the north where "Oak trees tell the passing time\ tales full of fragrance". (Ibid,20-21). Among these tales, there the tales of wolves, of the

philosophy of the flowing stream, but the most peculiar among which is the tale told by oak trees:

About a lamb that feels a deep despair
And spend the whole day
Champing grass and thoughts,
Meditating in the mid of this deep universe. (Ibid,3-6).

The influence of the English poet Edgar Allen Poe was great on Al- Malaika's volume Shrapnels and Ash, especially her poem "Cholera" (1947) which marked the beginning of the modern Arab poem. In her book Issues of Contemporary Poetry, Al- Malaika tells us about the circumstances that lead to the composition of "Cholera". She said:

When I composed that poem, I was trying to depict
My feelings towards Egypt during the time of Cholera
And I tried to express the sound of the horses legs
Drawing the carriage of the deads who were
The victims of that fatal disease in the
Egyptian Countryside. (Abdul-Hai, 221-224).

Al- Malaika's "Cholera" was written in free verse that enables the poet to express the misery of life and the "horses- drawn carts" of the dead. The whole poem was inspired by the sound of the horses bells of Edgar's "The Bell" (1949). Al- Malaika does not imitate only Edgar's use of the free verse but also the images which give the reader an idea about the amazing music.

Edgar Allen Poe depicts, in the first 14 lines, the bell sounds and describes them that they are the bells of "Silver" that create joy. The second half of the poem, consisting of 21 lines, depicts the wedding bells and describes them as the bells of silver that create happiness. While the third part., consisting of 34 lines, depicts the fire warning bells and describes them as the bells of "lead" that create terror. The last part, which consists of 44 lines , is connected closely with Al- Malaika's "Cholera". Al- Malaika describes the death bells as the bells of "Iron" that create an atmosphere. (Badawi, 1975: 220-205).

Al- Malaika provided a good means to the use of everyday language which makes her poetry simpler and clearer. This concept meets at the same time with Eliot's call for new poetic language derived from everyday life. She became aware of the fact that the choice of words is important in writing poetry. She believes that language should contain all what it needs to be understood (Ibid,140). In her volume Shrapnels and Ash, Al- Malaika's adds that:

It has been asked what is language? And why should it be given new scopes.
We should put in mind that language dies if it does not get on well with every-
day life. In fact the Arabic language has not acquired the power of suggestion,

yet , by which it expresses anxiety and pain within ourselves. Once, it was a suggestive language , dancing , smiling , weeping and storming, but now it is troubled by generations that are good in making statues only . Thus, they made of its utterances ready-made copies and distributed them to their favorite writers and poets. These generations were unaware of that a poet may contribute to a language more than the contribution of a thousand linguists and grammarians all together , because he , with his warm feelings and precise Linguistic hearing, finds out new meaning for utterances never to be found before. The poet may violate a rule by his artistic sense. Thus, he does not distort language, but pushes it forward (Ibid,151)

Accordingly, Al- Malaika confirms that the poet has to undertake the responsibility of bringing about a radical change to the lexicon which is used in his time. He may leave a large number of utterances that are used in the past decade and put forward new utterances which have never been used before.

The use of everyday language has been often repeated in most of her poems in her volume Shrapnels and Ash and many others.

Translation of Selected Poems

The study sheds light on the translation of some of Al-Malaika's poems . These poems were selected according to the manifestation of English poetry influence on her.

Cholera

The night reposed ,
Listen to the impress of moan amble ,
In the deep gloom , under silence , and over the dead.
Cries ascend and tremble ,
Grief's well out and blaze,
Which , groan echo , tumble ,
Every heart has a maze ,
In the still hut , blues ,
Everywhere , a soul cries , in glooms ,
Everywhere , a man does lament ,

Ah , whatsoe'er death rent ,
Death , death , death.

O, glaring grief of Nile , of death ,
Dawn rose ,
Listen to the strides impress of walkers ,
In the dawn silence , listen , look at mourn riders ,
Twenty dead , tenth ,
Reckon not , listen to mourners ,
Listen to sound of poor child ,
Dead , dead , figures disappeared ,
Dead , dead , no morrow remained ,
Everywhere , laments a body , a grieved ,
No abiding while , no quietude ,
Ah , whatsoe'er the death's hand did ,
Death , death , death.

Of what death acts , humanity growls ,
Cholera .
In the fright cave , with remains ,
In the ever-rough silence , death's ease ,
Cholera malady rains.
Heavily flows , ill-wish ,
Bright , joyful vale descend ,
And cry , the unwell and foolish ,
Mourners' voice's ne'er heard ,
Everywhere , its claw left echoes ,

In the farmers hut , and in house ,
Nothing but death's cries ,
Death , death , death .

Death , thru merciless cholera , avenges ,
Silence's painful ,
Nothing but the sound of praises ,
The graver , even , passed away , no helpful,
The mosque muezzin passes ,
The dead , no one eulogizes .
Nothing but groan and wail , left ever ,
The child's lost mother and father ,
Sheds tears of ablaze heart ,
Tomorrow , evil malady grabs , nodoubt .
O , cholera ghost , left what !
Nothing , death grief , but ,
Death , death , death .
O Egypt , my sense , what death renth .

I am

Who I am , the night wonders
The deep 'nd black , I'm restless secret , bewilders
Its mutinous silence , I am
Induced to rest , I am
And kept my heart with doubt
Grave-faced , here, I kept
Years wonder , I gaze out

I , who am I ?
Who I am , wind wonders
Time me ignored , I'm its soul , bewilders
In nowhere , I am , like hers ,
Tread we keep , no end
Pass we stick , but no bide
Till we up to the bend
End , we fancy , of ill-side
Hence it was the bad-tide

Who I am , aeon wonders ,
Like him , times , I traverse
Give life I , then , the others
Far bygone , I revive ,
Of affluent hope , the snare
Then , bury I do it , alive ,
New past , then , I flare ,
Of ice ,which , its morro
And soul wonders who I am ,
Baffled , like here , in gloom I stare .
Peace me , no one disharrow ,
Do ask I keep , but reply ,
False it will , long endure
Near do deem , I try
Yet , I get , but not sure
Die away and it did lam .

Evening Thoughts

When night mantles the steppes
And clouds pass along the lines
Lefts over not but fearful silence
And gloominess fell under sulkiness wings

Left over not but pigeons wail
And – of rillets – whispers and moan
Of a passer-by in the darkness – the amble
Whose sound pass and calm down

Talk , I sit , to the night silence
And hue of grieved darkness , to eye
My song , I send , to the space
On every dolesome heart , I cry

To pigeon whisper , I lend ear
And at night , I hear the rain fall
And to moony moan in the dark air
Sing admist trees far – to – all

And of a far – gone mill , a sigh
Wail the night and grouch the dull
The chant for to hear that I

Refrain to warble behind the hill

I hearken to no sound but wail

And turn the eye to , but gloom , no colour

Clouds and silence with night's mournful

For I sense grief-struck , but no wonder

Like this evening , life I deem

Dim , the tone is lonely and dismal

Its men , in a morning , they dream

As pass through a night – deep and awful

The Moon Tree

On top of pine-appareled mountain

Prevailed in sperm and velvet horizon

Where moths alight high to pass evening

And heaven stars bathe , at spring

There a far-fictive lad did live

Starlight and moon colour , eat if starve

And pine scent and wet jasmine , he toasts

Of agitated lily fragrance , his though's

Weird-visioned and dim-memoirs , he was

The mounts scent and song amble , he trails

To hunt the moon , were , his dreams

Captured in rosy and dewed cage with perfumes

Weave the net with a dream , the night passing

Cold grass-pillowed at a purled spring

Sit up with eyes on the night vale , as the moon
On cold redolent water of spring , been thrown
Scarce slumbered – the joy light passes if not
And the swoon wine tumbler quench lips' thirst
Scarce toast'd the water head except when
Crescent pours the night gown o'cheered scent , then

In a summer , he slipped at night
Swift and bare-footed with excite
To a lofty peak , trod with haste free
And sheltered by shield of a high tree
And set t'reckon the seconds with throbbing heart
Wait the pleasant moon in a night – cheer and rapt
In a while , the gloomy clouds dispersed up
And silver brow and gripping charm crop up
Kept near , went blind on delighted hunter
On the hill , pace the darkness lines , dreamer
Embraced and fingered the brow , the lover mount
And let his lips touch the soft lash , and redolent
Fetched with its soft tumbler and vast brightness
That engaged all the past visions – the lips

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