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A Woman Moving Within Me by Nizar Qabbani

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Housseem Ben Lazreg
A Woman Moving Within Me

Nizar Qabbani
امرأة تمشي في داخلي

Anybody who has read my coffee cup
realizes you are my love
Anybody who has read the lines of my palm
discerns the four letters of your name,
everything can be denied
but the scent of a woman we love,
everything can be concealed
but the footsteps of a woman moving within us,
everything can be debated
except your femininity.

Where shall I hide you, my love ?
We are like two burning forests
and all the television cameras are on us
Where shall I hide you, my love
and all these journalists want to place you
on the cover page,
and make me a Greek hero,
a public scandal.

Where shall I take you?
Where shall you take me
when all the cafés have memorized our faces
and all the hotels registered our names
and all the sidewalks recollected the rhythms of our feet?
We are exposed to the world like a seaward balcony,
visible like two golden fish
in a crystal container.

Anybody who has read my poems about you
perceives the sources of my inspiration,
anybody who has travelled in my books

arrives safe to the harbor of your eyes,
anybody who has got my home address
heads for your lips,
anybody who has opened my drawers
finds you sleeping there like a butterfly,
anybody who has dug up my papers,
knows the history of your life.

Teach me how
to confine you in the Taa Marbuta
and prevent you from coming out,
teach me how to trace around your breasts
a circle in purple crayon
and prevent it from flying,
teach me how to detain you like a full stop at the end of a sentence,
teach me how to walk under the rain of your eyes without getting wet,
to smell your body seasoned with Indian spices without fainting
and to roll from the imposing heights of your breasts
without crumbling.

Keep your hands off my small habits
my tiny things
the pen that I use to write
the papers on which I scribble
the key chain that I carry
the coffee that I sip
the ties that I buy,
keep your hands off my writings
as it is unreasonable that I write with your fingers
and breathe with your lungs,
it is unreasonable that I laugh with your lips
and that you cry with my eyes.
Sit with me for a while

to reconsider the map of love that you drew
with the harshness of a mogul conqueror
and the selfishness of a woman telling a man
“Be.. and he is”

Talk to me democratically,
for the tribesmen in my country
have mastered the game of political repression
I do not want you to play
the game of emotional repression with me.

Sit down so that we can see
where the borders of your eyes lie,
where the limits of my sorrows are,
where do the waters of your territory begin,
and where does my life end?
Sit down so that we can agree
on which part of my body
your conquests will end
and when at night
your conquests will begin?

Sit with me for a while
so that we can agree on a way to love
where you are not my servant girl
and I am not just a small colony
on your list of colonies
that is still seeking — since the seventeenth century —
emancipation from your breasts,
which do not respond
do not respond.

Commentary

Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) was one of the most famous Arab poets of the 20th century. He was born in Damascus in 1923 and spent a lifetime fighting for Arab women's liberation and empowerment through his writings. The themes in his poems range from passionate and revolutionary verses about love, eroticism, and feminism to constant criticism of Arab leaders and the conservative traditions of the patriarchal Arab society. Over the course of half a century, Nizar Qabbani wrote 34 books of poetry including *Childhood of a Breast* (طفولة نهد, 1948), *Drawing with Words* (الرسم بالكلمات, 1966), *No Victor Other Than Love* (لا غالب إلا الحب, 1989), *My Beloved* (حبيبتي, 1961), and *Love Does Not Stop at Red Lights* (الحب لا يقف على الضوء الأحمر, 1985). He also composed many works of prose, such as *My Story with Poetry* (قصتي مع الشعر), *What is Poetry* (ما هو الشعر), and *On Poetry, Sex, and Revolution ...* (عن الشعر و الجنس).

In this poem titled *امرأة تمشي في داخلي* (“A Woman Moving Within Me”), the poet expresses his feelings of love and passion towards his beloved using highly creative poetic images. Some of these images are linked to the Arabic culture such as reading the fortune in a cup of coffee and reading the fate line on the palm of a hand. In this commentary, I bring to light a central poetic image that poses some challenges while translating it to English. In fact, the verse “Teach me a way to lock you up in the Taa Marbuta” (علميني طريقة أحبسك بها في التاء المربوطه) contains a reference to one character of the Arabic alphabet that acts as an indicator of the feminine gender. It is spelled this way ة. The uniqueness of the meaning of this metaphor lies in the fact that the poet wants to lock his beloved in this letter which is not only the indicator of the feminine gender in Arabic but also has the shape of a closed circle, from which escape is difficult. Since finding an equivalent metaphor in English seems challenging, I resorted to foreignization as a translation strategy and I kept the expression in Arabic.

In addition to that, on the stylistic level, the poet used a sensual language whereby he evoked repetitively the beauty of a woman though her body or at least some parts of it such

as the breasts and the lips. For instance, “roll from the imposing heights of your breasts,” “Teach me how to trace around your breasts,” or “seeking emancipation from your breasts.” For Nizar Qabbani, the female breasts became a space for revolution, emancipation and a weapon to challenge old conventional social norms. In other words, he tried to subvert the prevailing status quo of sexual politics in the Arab World which is tainted by “political and emotional repression.” To conclude, Qabbani’s poetry exhibits a great sense of enthusiasm for the construction of new gender relations based on freedom, equality, dignity, and beauty.