



METAPHORS OF REDEMPTION

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Abstract:

Arabic poets use this metaphor that I called "the metaphor of redemption" as an astute and prudent opening to talk about taboo subjects. The Metaphor of redemption is used to say things in a more delicate and refined way, particularly for authors who live in societies where religion fathoms the spirits, in other words, countries where religious prejudice opens more room to intolerance and fanaticism. The word "redemption" is a Christian word that I borrowed to express the idea of salvation. In the world where eyes say more than words, metaphor becomes then a sort of remedy, I would say even an indispensable prescription, the only open door to say things when we come close to taboos, to the point that the aesthetic purpose which is the primary function of any metaphor becomes only accidental or maybe a luxury in this case.

Key words:

Metaphor, censorship, taboo, redemption

Love usually begins with a metaphor, as it has an emotional depth, moreover it has a great influence over our poetic memory. It cultivates intimacy therefore excluding all those who are unable to penetrate the speaker's mind. Love usually begins with a beautiful metaphor and ends up with an elegy a kind of funeral song that sounds again the echo of the metaphor. Lacan¹ argued "*I always try to say truth; however we can never say the whole truth.*"

Metaphor stands between the need to reveal something and at the same time keep it concealed.

Nizar Kabbani² in his poem "Language" said:

*When a man is in love
how can he use old words?
should a woman
desiring her lover
lie down with
grammarians and linguists?
I said nothing
to the woman I loved
but gathered
loves's adjectives into a
suitcase
and fled from all languages.*

The poet may lament his beloved's hard-heartedness to beg her to admit

¹Carminiani. *Les Portes du Delta*. 1994:88

²Translated by Diana Der Hovanessian and Lena in Jarryusi 1987: 375



defeat. He offers an extensive record of the features of her beauty: the eyes are likened for Poe³ to the “twin stars of Leda” in his text “Ligeia”, for Al Sayyab an Iraqi poet to “the two palm tree forests in early light”. For Hijazi⁴, an Egyptian poet, the eyes are his last refuge

*Your eyes are my last refuge
Where I hide my face in your gaze,
Waiting for my end
Where light is most intense.
Your eyes are grass and dew
Where for a moment I spread my
shadow
Then continue on my way.*

The cheeks, the lips and teeth are also compared to the appropriate precious stones. A lover is a man wounded by Cupid’s arrow and the wound is also metaphorically characterized in Kabbani’s poetry by a “storm-tossed ship”, nonetheless the wound is at the same time freeing a wonderful feeling Kabbani⁵ said:

*Who are you
Woman entering my life like a dagger
Mild as the eyes of a rabbit
Soft as the skin of a plum
Pure as strings of jasmine
Innocent as children’s bibs
And devouring like words?*

Metaphors are used to say things in a more delicate and refined way, particularly in societies where religion has an undeniable authority. The metaphor becomes then a sort of therapy, an essential recommendation to say things when we come close to taboos, can we say then that the aesthetic purpose becomes a luxury in our case?

In a short story that I⁶wrote *A Woman in Black* Loubna, the major character did not want to go to see Mustapha, unless her mother gives her blessing. After much thought Myriam, Loubna’s mother gave her benediction but in a whole metaphor:

“God gave us two ears and only one mouth so that we listen twice than what we speak, I have perceived the sound of your question, nevertheless I suggest to you to build a tent in the region of this river, when your visitor comes layout carpets and cushions, and give him mint tea, after all every human being is a nomad as regards love, the sand storm may disfigure the landscape, and causes difficulties, it peppers your exposed skin and eyes, nobody and nothing is able to dash your hopes, you will persist like a good nomad to make your route deep into the Sahara with your camel caravan, you will accomplish something when after much suffering you make your home around an oasis.”

³Stern, Philip Van Doren *The Portable Poe*. 1973: p 228

⁴Jayyusi, S.K. *Modern Arabic Poetry an Anthology*.1987: 261-2

Translated by Sargon Boulus and Peter Porter

⁵Ibid, p 370

⁶Ghenim, N. *Awomanin Black*. 2008: p 4-5



Can we say that the use of metaphor here is aesthetic for the most part or is it a running away from the burden of taboos?

Men attain adulthood at the age of eighteen, whereas women are kept minors till the marriage. They are still in need for the permission of their husbands to work. It is easier for men to divorce, whereas for women it is a long and perilous process.

Fundamentalism has also swept the little chance for women to open up.

They are kept under lock and key.

Sulaiman al-Fulayyih⁷ a Kuwaiti writer describes ladies in his poem "Women"

The women in this country are statues

They have been chiselled out of rock

Their hearts are piled high with emptiness

Their faces are stone and have no features

The most terrible thing for an artist is to be faced with people without expression, as if they are wearing masks all the time. Behind a mask it is hard to guess if a person is smiling or crying. Behind a mask, people lose their character, to become only the shadow of themselves. Nothing is more terrible than a face which is not charged with expressions. It is emptiness. When a society relies more on appearance, it is based on a highly refined degree of hypocrisy. The more

a society relies on appearance the further it is from truth. The mask hides the natural features of people and transforms human beings into statues. Our society ranked love, women and poetry a third category as Suad al-Mubarak al-Sabah⁸, a Kuwaiti writer who said in her poem "A New Definition of the Third World"

Because love with us

Is a third-rate emotion

And because women are third-class citizens

And volumes of poetry are literature of the third rank

They call us the peoples of the Third World.

They call us peoples of the Third World because everything related to beauty is hindered. The pretty plaits of little girls have been veiled. Love and poetry have been abandoned to the sustainment of the revolutionary one. And the real martyrs have been substituted with false ones. This deceitful climate is somehow untruthful. It is misleading. Surrounded by these entire trumped-up story gives rise to one more concept particular to our culture the concept 'taboo' that is deeply engraved in the minds of our people and deeply expressed by poets.

In the poem "*Rendezvous in the Cave*" written by the Egyptian poet Ahmad

⁷Jayyusi, SK *The Literature of Modern Arabia An Anthology*: 1988: p 84-5

⁸ Ibid, p 185

Abd al MutiHijazi⁹a taboo is more arresting, more poignant when it takes the shape of metaphor.

*Your eyes are two words never uttered.
Having failed to be spoken
they remain themselves,
two nuns in black habit
waiting desperately for their wedding night.*

Eyes are charged with unarticulated words. These words are not spoken, thus they take other channels. While a woman conceals the feeling of love, she remains "a nun in black habit" as the writer puts it to denote "a virgin", who is protecting her virginity till the wedding night. These taboos are within the inviolable and sacred domains. They are not specific to the oriental cultures only, however they have cautious implication in our culture, they intensify censorship and make it deeper. As soon as a taboo takes the shape of a metaphor, it intensifies it, it mystifies it. A taboo adds more obscurity and sophistication to metaphor contributing inadvertently, that is by pure accident to the beauty of metaphor. There is always part of happiness in sorrow as there is always part of beauty in ugliness. A taboo is of great stimulus. It spurs out the metaphor of redemption, to uncover the covered, to articulate the

unarticulated, and to break the wall of silence. The question: "is art prosperous and comfortable in a liberated or repressed country?" is definitely a question that calls for another area of research. I do not pretend to answer such a difficult question, yet I do believe that art is not comfortable in a repressed country, it is more secured in a liberated one, however the more repression the more there is need for astuteness and perspicacity. Sigmund Freud¹⁰said:

"No matter how much restriction civilization imposes on the individual, he nevertheless finds some way to circumvent it. Wit is the best safety valve modern man has evolved; the more civilization, the more repression, the more need there is for wit."

Metaphor in this case is a fine key to circumvent restriction and repression. It is that extravagant key that helps poets to evade the cell and the ceiling of conventionality, so it seems that the more repression the brighter and wittier is the metaphor.

In the short story "*My Father Writes to my Mother*", the author AssiaDjebar¹¹ talked about an Algerian taboo which is the inability of a woman to utter her husband's name:

"Whenever my mother spoke of my father, she, in common with all the women in her town, simply used the personal pronoun in Arabic

⁹Ibid, p 262. Translated by Sargon Boulus and Peter Porter

¹⁰Seldes, G. *The Great Thoughts*. 1985: 143-4

¹¹Bruner, C. *African Women's Writing*. 1993: 162

corresponding to 'him'. Thus, every time she used a verb in the third person singular which didn't have a noun subject, she was naturally referring to her husband. This form of speech was characteristic of every married woman, from fifteen to sixty, with the proviso that in later years, if the husband had undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca, he could be given the title of 'Hadj'."

This rule is neither written, nor spoken. However all adults in the post-colonial period, especially girls and women know that husband and wife must certainly not be referred to by name. Nevertheless AssiaDjebar shows in this short story the progressive move of the mother from "he" to "my husband" which is already a huge effort to "Tahar", the name of her husband.

The writer cannot break away from his community. He is the conception of a society, and his product reflects his environment. The metaphor is of utmost importance in these cases. However, this does not contradict the use of metaphors for the aesthetic purpose, the artefact of the metaphor which transforms words into "objet d'art".

Metaphor is merely the same as a dream. It is no more than a dream. As contrasted with a night dream, it is a daydream fulfilled in a linguistic way. It is the trophy of a lively imagination. Metaphor and dream are akin in the

sense that they are order out of disorder. They are consistency out of inconsistency. They are native of nature. They breathe in it. They are inspired from it. They are used to restore life, to renovate nature in a perplexed and bewildered style, but how many times has man been at a complete loss when faced with life? Metaphor is a memory image of life with all its intricacy, joyfulness and even its insignificance. Hence man is disorientated, confused, but also pleased and cheerful when faced with metaphor, warmly and intimately as when he is faced with life.

The metaphor as well as the dream is disguised to such a point that it misrepresents things. Distortion is intentional. It is a means of disguise. When a writer has unpleasant truths to say, he feels himself just as in a dream. He is between wish-fulfilment that is to reveal everything and repression that is censorship. The writer stands in fear of editing accordingly he disguises the expressions of his opinions so these metaphors become then "necessary misrepresentations". The harsher the supremacy of censorship is, the more systematic becomes the disguise and over and over again the more ingenious and creative the employed means to get the reader on the right path of the writer's ideas. Metaphors become secret codes in which every sign is translated into another sign of known meaning and success in

interpretation remains a matter of inventive guess of direct intuition. The best interpreters are those who grasp similarities. They are able to recognise the true picture in the distorted one. They are able to depict those symbols that are as old as language itself. Arab poets use judiciously this outstanding figure of speech that I called "metaphor of redemption" Redemption is used by Christians as the salvation of sinners, their deliverance, their rescue from sin. It has always been by faith and repentance through the power of god. Where is the salvation or the redemption of a writer? A writer is a man who lives in a world of words. He is surrounded, enclosed by words. He realizes his dreams in words, and words extend these dreams through metaphors. Metaphors take shape and profile in an excruciating silence, in a hurting silence where thoughts are buried. After a lot of observation, occurs a sudden revelation. The metaphor is a clever key to circumvent censorship. In El Watan, an Algerian newspaper on the 26th of May 2008 Baaziz, a committed Algerian singer talks about his extradition from the airport of Tunis. In his interview he focuses on subversion that is resulted from censorship. He said "the more prohibition, the more desire to do things." He said "It is deplorable for a powerful authority to be afraid from a

modest singer." Baaziz is also prohibited in his own country, because he talks about injustice and crisis in the Algerian society in a direct and a straight way. He does not handle things with kid gloves. Artists who master metaphors have rarely had problems with authorities. Kabbani¹² in his poem "the Rooster" has violently attacked Arab rulers through a long poem where the rooster is metaphorically used to represent this animal with a lot of thirst for power and women. He said:

**In our neighborhood
there is a sadistic bloodthirsty rooster
bullies the chickens
beats the chickens
sleep with the chickens!!
leaves the chickens
and forgets the names of his sons.....**

Metaphor is a judicious trick in these difficult cases, whereby the artist reveals truth without releasing it totally. The major problem of our artists is that they have a lot to say, but they are watched and bound by politics and religion. They generally chose between hypocrisy and exile. They have limits and they know perfectly the borders of those limits. Metaphor is subtle. It is that delicate remedy for artists to express themselves under restriction. Things

¹² «The Rooster» is a poem of Kabbani that I translated directly from his own voice on YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AMj67Q7RQ0>

are not said directly, they are understated. It is regrettable for our artists to be forbidden in their own countries simply because they are saying the Truth. They are deprived self-expression, so most of them are living abroad. They export themselves to import their art. It is easier for them to work in a foreign country. They are in a kind of forced exile.

These metaphors seem to disguise a raw reality. They are our redemption. They are our only rescue and deliverance from censorship.

Something very important has been stolen from individuals, it is their freedom. It is a blessing from God but committed to a fraud by society.

Since there is curse, where is redemption?

By creating a metaphor, a poet is restoring his own individuality. It is a very deep revenge towards his compulsory adherence to society.

While he was young, he used to call things in an idiosyncratic way, and slightly he learned all the words from his environment. He conforms to the agreed language to the loss of his own. As all human beings, it happens to him to experience different feelings. He is in this case between censorship and confession. He wants to call things by their names, but he finds himself turning and turning around till all people understands what is meant. Metaphor of redemption is liberating, it is a kind of therapy. It is able to

unearth the psyche, and bring to light the unseen. It is a kind of meditative introspection. To unveil the veiled is a meeting between unconscious and conscious, between censure and confession. The meeting of these contradictory and conflicting emotions is not free from troubles. It is flesh and blood. It is happiness and grief. It is desire and frustration. It is a complete confusion. The metaphor of redemption is made out of blame, guilt and remorse. Despite all these negative sensations committed as an offence to this kind of metaphor, yet it is the only way to break out. The metaphor of redemption remains a kind of escape and rescue from the assumed and the unsaid. It is the only option for an artist to express the inexpressible or to express what is considered too awful for words.

The metaphor of redemption stands between censorship and confession. It is torn between the need to reveal the truth to make it public and the fear of guilt. This metaphor bears out the declaration of guilt. It remains only one of its kind in comparison to other types of metaphors by the distinctiveness of its genesis and the condition as well as the circumstance of its occurrence.

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