

Strategies of Desire in Nejoud Al-Yagout's Poetry

Shahd Alshammari

English Department, Gulf University for Science and Technology
Kuwait

Abstract

This paper considers the ways by which language is used within the context of poetic expression. Kuwaiti author Nejoud Al-Yagout experiments with the usage of English and Italian in her poetry collections *This is An Imprint* (2015) and *Ounces of Oneness* (2016). The work, the author argues, is essentially a desire for an ultimate dissolving of boundaries. Western thought relies heavily on binaries and dichotomies that are set in hierarchies. Reading Al-Yagout's work as a translingual writer enables us to shift between borders of language and culture. Throughout a close textual analysis of her poetry, we arrive at the premise that Al-Yagout's work is not only undefined by language and culture, but it is also limitless in its expansive call for a dissolution of boundaries. The speaker is almost always androgynous, to use Virginia Woolf's term, and searches for a deeper understanding of herself within the borders of society. The author of this paper argues that Al-Yagout's multiplicity of voice arrives instead within the semiotic chora, and yet, the chora in Al-Yagout's work is not the maternal, but rather, the Divine.

Keywords: Arab, Anglophone, desire, Gulf, Nejoud Al-Yagout, poetry, strategies, women, Kuwait

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In recent Anglophone literary scholarship, there has been an increase in works produced by Gulf women writers. Most of this work has not received significant literary attention and many of these authors are interested in widely divergent themes. While Anglophone literature tends to be written by Arab-American or Arab-British authors (such as Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Djaber and others), literary criticism is yet to consider Gulf writers literary production. There are quite a few names that are setting the literary stage, including Mai Alnakib, Layla Al-Ammar, Nada Faris, and Nejoud Al-Yagout. These writers specifically write in English and as such fit in the Anglophone Arabic literature genre. Some of this work has been classified under different categories of postcolonial literature, international literature and hybrid literature. Most of this work emerges as both English and Arab, Middle Eastern, and is a blend of social and political realities. There is a tendency for this work to be cross-cultural, transnational, and to break apart from stereotypical images of Arab (Gulf) women. The language itself (whether in works of poetry, novels, short stories) crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries and opens up new spaces of belonging and identity. One of the Kuwaiti authors who grapples with language and identity is Nejoud Al-Yagout. Al-Yagout is a Kuwaiti author who writes only in English. Her works include *This is an Imprint* (2014) and *Awake in the Game of Pretending* (2015), *And The Raven Recites* (2017). Desire features as a binding thread throughout Al-Yagout's poetry collections. For the purpose of this paper, only a few poems from *Ounces of Oneness* are considered (2016).

The work, although bold in its exploration of themes such as identity, love, nostalgia, desire and its repercussions, undermines the stereotypical image of the Arab woman. Rather than succumb to the image of Arab women as miserable and oppressed women, Al Yagout's work as a translingual writer forces us to look elsewhere and to question the usual perceptions we have of Muslim women as oppressed, or of Arab women as only capable of writing about their miseries and patriarchal cultures. In Al Yagout's work, an affair with language is at hand. It a constant process of movement and rhythm, a push and pull of opposing forces, and surrendering to the temptations of semantics. The speaker is often at crossroads of binary oppositions: male/female, self/other, East/West. Her work challenges all binary oppositions and calls for a subversion of dichotomies. The title of her latest collection of poetry, *Ounces of Oneness*, reveals the poet's mission: to divert our attention from individualism to a more collective understanding of the mechanisms and nuances of life. The many moments, ounces, selves, characters, all eventually dissolve into one, the collective, the divine. Only through a complete deconstruction of borders and boundaries does the poet access the state of divinity.

Al-Yagout as a translingual writer, a master of two foreign languages, English and Italian, and her native tongue is Arabic, is able to have multiple affairs with languages. According to Kellman's, (2000) there is a prejudice against affairs with other languages, a perverse hyper-ability, akin to hypersexuality, that connotes a lack of commitment to one's mother tongue.

Translingualism, the act of writing in more than one language or in a language other than one's primary one, has also been conceived of in terms of sexual betrayal. Henry James characterized L1 as the mother and L2 as the wife, but others have regarded switching language variously as disloyalty to the mother (tongue), adultery, or polygamy. (p. 35).

Kellman, (2000) tactfully diagnoses the situation at hand: translingual writers are the “libertines of the literary world” and yet the “letters they wear are scarlet” (36). Translingual writers must contend with readers’ suspicious conclusions and find a space in-between and outside the borders of languages and cultures. Al-Yagout’s audience asks the same questions. This is a Kuwaiti writer who chooses to write in languages that are definitely not Arabic.

Multiplicity of voice is a dominant theme in Al-Yagout’s work. The speaker’s voice shifts in-between paradigms of differing heightened emotions and tranquil meditations. The speaker, always digressing, always uncertain, always searching without the desire to find an answer, has found her answer within the Divine. The Divine, in Al-Yagout’s work, the “Beloved” is part of the musings and dark spaces of the poet’s mind. The text is in a constant state of flux, of fluctuation, and the speaker’s voice is almost always hesitant. Language, in Al-Yagout’s poetry relies heavily on the tempo of the words, on music and rhythm, and on desire itself. There is no linear path and it is always in motion, just like desire and love. To experience love is to surrender to both of our feminine and masculine sides, to the child and the adult, to the yin and the yang, and experience, ultimately, a frenzy, a madness. Al Yagout’s work is unapologetic about its madness, its infatuation with existence and nonexistence, and it does not offer any solid definitions of her identity or being. In fact, she repeatedly states that she is embraced in nothingness, in a void.

In the same vein, Virginia Woolf’s positing of “androgyny” in *A Room of One’s Own* as an ideal co-existence of the masculine and the feminine within the self, reminds us of the ultimate falseness of dichotomies. Al Yagout’s poetic personas, are, in many ways, genderless. She is able to trespass, to transgress, and to visit unknown territories of the soul, while refusing to abide by labels. In a sense, the words shift imaginary places and spaces, endorsing multiple textual strategies that remain loyal only to the word. It is not English, nor Italian, nor an Arab identity that she has created, but rather, it is a form of joyous copulation of language.

In poetry, poems challenge and encourage dual interpretations; there is always that which is known and unknown. Readers know that Al-Yagout is a Kuwaiti author and yet our interpretation already is incomplete. We arrive at partial interpretations, a semi-understanding of poetic utterances and the way language is used in a given moment. Although poetic language pays close attention to language itself, Al-Yagout’s work employs more than aesthetic function. There is an investigation of the impossibility of remaining within the bounds of language, in a way, the author is driven to find the semiotic *chora*. As such, there is a move to a more feminine, even maternal, poetic space. This maternal space, this womb, although feminine and female in definition, is not the ultimate destination. There is a profound liberation from the symbolic elements of speech, whether in society, patriarchal language and regulations, as well as gendered and racialized identities. The symbolic and its insistence on division is clearly rejected in Al-Yagout’s work.

For instance, the poem “Grammatica” amplifies this state of borderless language. Consider its title, “Grammatica”, Italian for Grammar. Immediately there is an unsettling of language and expectation. She states: “I dove into *scio nescio* and/rented a *Columbina*/when all I wanted was a

place to/hide from them, from me/from you/And though you were a comma/you felt like a full-stop" (Al-Yagout, p. 31). Al-Yagout does not provide footnotes or a translation of the Italian words, further frustrating the reader, while still teasing out aesthetic and poetic pleasure. Because she is diving into the "scio nescio" or "I know nothing" she is going further into ideology, language structure, and all that has been culturally inherited. Her search for a place to "hide from them, from me/from you"(p. 31) is a slow unlearning of patriarchal ideological thought that governs our existence and self-imposed divisions. The conflict arises upon facing the other, separate from the self. The other feels like a "full stop", a division, and end to myself, the other is where I end and he/she begins, but that is the symbolic definition, language's structural separation. What the poet feels is that the other is a "full stop" when in a different realm, in the semiotic realm, in the realm of poetry, in the realm of the Divine, the other is me, a continuation, an extension, a segment of myself. As the poet struggles to unlearn dichotomies and binary thought, she allows for a reconsideration, a re-appropriation of meaning: "Still we dash -/and dash-/into each other" (p.31). This infusion is the all-consuming space of the *chora*, of the one and only, the Divine. She states: "We are one – unveiled –/in one, of one." (p. 31).

Language in itself is a means for communication, at the most basic and fundamental level. But also, paradoxically, language can be confining and limiting. When language is remolded and even transcended, the escape allows for a more fluid state of being, a self that finds ecstasy in a more poetic space, Kristeva's semiotic. Kristeva's semiotic celebrates not only a breakdown of language as suggested by earlier critics, but it can also celebrate multilingualism and affairs with language, rather than a strictly patriarchal and symbolic structure of language. When reconsidering Kristeva's *chora* in light of Sufism's understanding of the Divine, the Beloved, God, this paper moves away from Western materialist science and psychology and claim that the ecstasy (jouissance) found in Kristeva's definition of the maternal womb is parallel to the loss of the self and the ego in Sufism.

In Sufism, the goal of the mystic is to find that place of oneness, the ultimate reunion with the Divine, the creator, a return to the womb (again, to allude to Kristeva's semiotic *chora*). In traditional Western psychology, this break from the symbolic constitutes a descent into madness, into an irrational world where meaning is no longer paramount. The loss of the ego, the loss of the self and language is not seen as a crisis, a descent, rather than an ascension. In Sufi literature and poetry, the lover is wholly intoxicated by the Divine. The love surpasses all logic and boundaries, there is nothing but oneness, a return to a truth, that is, the true Beloved. Given this understanding of wholeness, or unity and duality, the individual then is no longer separated from the Other, but rather, is re-absorbed into cosmic totality.

The poem "Divine" where Al-Yagout, like Rumi and Hafiz, asks to be intoxicated by the Divine. She pleads: "Be my wine/Intoxicate me...Be my wine so I can stay/silent in the space/where there is no/yours, mine." (Al-Yagout p. 10). What images of the Arab woman are present here? None. What expectations are fulfilled? This is untrodden territory. The usage of wine imagery is of course prevalent in Sufi literature and this allusion is necessarily appropriated in Al-Yagout's spiritual journey. Her search for a place of silence highlights my earlier argument of the

desire to go back to the semiotic. Again, only when this space is found, there is a spiritual awakening, not in the Western understanding of fragmentation and chaos, not in the sense of a loss of the self, but rather, finding a more embracing and unified self. All boundaries and borders between self/other dissolve. It is no surprise then that language is nothing but an accessory, a tool, because ultimately, silence is the beginning and end of the poet's journey. In silence, in the breakdown of language, is where the poet finds sacred space. This space is the ultimate destination, the union with the One, the dissolving of the self and the merging with the Creator.

Conclusion:

Al-Yagout's work, then, focuses on the dissolving of the self, the ego, in order to merge with the One. She uses multiple languages in order to suspend language. The mother tongue is not elevated above other languages. Her affairs with language and the fluidity of Al-Yagout's work is what makes it appealing while at the same time rejecting notions of static identities. There is nothing but a void. Being and nonbeing, existence and nonexistence, Arabic, English, and Italian, languages and borderless identities. Al-Yagout is a Kuwaiti author who chooses to write in more than one language and her work is able to transcend fixed notions of culture, gender, race, and language.

About the Author:

Shahd Alshammari is Assistant Professor of Literature. Her research interests include Disability and illness narratives and memoir. She is the author of the short story collection *Notes on the Flesh* (2017) a Kuwaiti illness narrative dealing with gender and disability.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2364-3231>

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