

The Subsistence Perspective: Nizar Qabbani's Non-hierarchical Eco-Feminist View of Women/Nature

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Abstract:

Taking the ecofeminist notions of women subjugation and the exploitation of Nature in a patriarchal system as its point of departure, this paper addresses the issues related to the need for setting this male-female relationship to balance again. This goal can be reached through the close study of Nizar Qabbani's poetry from Maria Mies's Subsistence Perspective. The study examines the extent to which this perspective, eco-feminist in essence, can be applied to the renowned Syrian poet's work. Nizar Qabbani (1923- 1998) has been widely studied for his feminist attitude and his revolt against the deeply rooted orthodox ideas related the role of women in society. However, with the advancement of women's studies in general, and ecofeminism in particular, a study of his non-hierarchical view of nature, women and men will provide a novel approach to the poet's vision. What Maria Mies calls for in her *The Subsistence Perspective* seems in harmony with such a vision.

Keywords: Nizar Qabbani, Eco-feminism, *The Subsistence Perspective*, non-hierarchy, Maria Mies

ملخص:

تتناول الورقة البحثية الحالية الرؤية الشعرية لدى نزار قباني (1923-1998) من منظور العيش على الكفاف وذلك من خلال تصور لا هرمي للمرأة والطبيعة على حد سواء، ومن ثم يوظف هذا البحث لعدد من القضايا على أساس لا هرمي لعلاقة المرأة بكل من حولها، خاصة علاقتها بالطبيعة، في محاولة منها لتحقيق نوع من التوازن والتكافؤ، بعيداً عن التناول الهرمي الذكوري المعتمد على مفاهيم القوة والبطش، سواء بالمرأة أو الطبيعة، لأنهما كما يرى قباني متكافئان، أو بالأحرى وجهان لعملة واحدة. لكن الجانب الأبرز في الورقة هو تناول عدد مختار من أشعار قباني من منظور العيش على الكفاف الذي نظرت له ماريا ميس (2000) بقولها بأن التعايش من خلال الحد الأدنى الكافي للحياة يتيح إعادة تصور علاقات متوازنة وصحية أكثر مع المرأة والطبيعة، مما يحافظ من ناحية على القوى التي مُنحتها كل منهما، ويطلق من ناحية أخرى لعنان الابتكار الخلاق داخل مجتمع متكاتف، استطاع تلافي علاقات القوة والنظرة الدونية الاستغلالية من جانب الرجل لكل من المرأة والطبيعة.

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Introduction

Since Françoise d'Eaubonne's (1974) introduction of the term eco-feminism in *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, along with Rosemary Rhuether's 1975 *New Woman, New Earth*, many voices have reinforced the interrelatedness between women's subjugation and nature's oppression. Man and culture have been condemned as the tyrants, responsible for all forms of imbalance between what should be and what really is as far as women and nature are concerned. Mary Mellor remarks that "eco-feminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women" (1). This has set the path for most eco-feminist writings.

This paper examines Nizar Qabbani's (1923–1998) poetry through the lens of eco-feminism which assures the imbalance between men, women and nature on the one hand, and searches for solutions to this dilemma, on the other. Qabbani tried in his poetry to set this relation to balance again, and his socialist as well as poetic vision resonates with eco-feminists in general, and Maria Mies, in particular. In an attempt to free the Arab women from the deeply ingrained orthodox patriarchal attitudes, he envisages a society based on the Subsistence Perspective, in which Mies finds a solution to the economic and social dilemmas resulting from the globalized capitalist misuse of all natural resources, including women. A society of cooperation, sustainability and non-hierarchy is what Mies, and Qabbani, advocate in their work.

Qualitative in essence, the paper examines the extent to which Qabbani's poems succeed in building upon eco-feminist major tenets and re-establishing man-woman, and man-nature liaisons. It also highlights the transformations that Qabbani sets necessary for a woman to undergo until this form of subsistence is achieved.

The Major Developments of Eco-feminism

Nkechi and Emmanuel highlight eco-feminists' belief that the "connections (between women and nature) are illustrated through

traditionally 'female' values such as reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature." For both, "women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society." (33) Such an attitude is reinforced by the idea that "the strong oppression and subordination of women in families and society have a difference into conceptual binaries that allows a systematic justification of domination power-over-power by subjects (of) the higher-ranking categories into lower ranking categories examples like man over woman, culture over nature, and white over black." (Kogilavani and Leelavathy, 169)

Ariel Salleh finds that the position of ecology and feminism is "both an experientially based and rationally constructed critique of an irrational male-produced social order" (8). She investigates the dichotomy between male and female physical features and psychological instincts and finds that there are sound grounds on which this separation is based. Man is essentially separate from nature, while women, by contrast, are inherently engrained with it. In the same vein, Adrian Harris differentiates between eco-feminism and liberal feminism where the former does not seek equality with men as such, but a liberation of women as women. For him, "...women are treated as inferior to men, 'nature' is treated as inferior to 'culture', and humans are understood as being separate from, and often superior to, the natural environment." "Throughout our history," he adds, "nature is portrayed as feminine, and women are often thought of as closer to nature than men. Women's physiological connection with birth and child-care have partly led to this close association with nature."

This attitude has led Donald A. McAndrew to believe that the essence of eco-feminism is better seen as "the source for a resocialization of women and men into an egalitarian state of humans and environment." (3) This form of egalitarianism is backed up by a form of "symbiotic unity (which is) more powerful for its variation" (4) since such a unity shall end all the claims of dualism and dichotomy among men and women, as well as man and nature. It is, eco-feminists affirm, a state of "interrelatedness, community, whole all existing in the healthy diversity and connectivity of living and nonliving entities. Put simply, adopting eco-feminist view is the gate to achieve the long-awaited objectification of nature and women.

McAndrew contends also that one reason for the dichotomy between man and nature lies in the "sci-tech's view" that the natural world is something to be mastered or even conquered, resulting in the enslavement of all natural objects to the interests of man. Women, on the

other hand, have always proved themselves in harmony with Nature. Men, as such, have come to claim that their mastery over nature, and control of women, is something justified, if not inevitable. McAndrew concludes:

These sci-tech beliefs blind us to the deterioration of the natural-social ecosystem and must, therefore, be seen as part of a pathological philosophy derived from an anthropocentric and, eco-feminists would stress, androcentric culture. (5)

Restoring balance to the relationship between men and women on the one hand, and men and nature on the other, denotes the need for a reevaluation of the role of both victims: women and nature. The reevaluation process requires, Ariel Salleh argues, a counter-effort on the part of men to “rediscover and love the women inside themselves” (in McAndrew, 5). This attitude is viewed by eco-feminist thought as a restoration of the spiritual dimension of living, which is lost in the productive/consumptive materialism of the patriarchal world. In the same vein, Carolyn Merchant traces the stable relationship among all universal elements, including men back to the sixteenth-century when Europeans were familiar with “organism” as “the root metaphor binding together the self, society, and the cosmos.” (1) There has always been a form of “interdependence among the parts of the human body, subordination of individual to communal purposes in family, community, and state, and the vital life permeating the cosmos to the lowliest stone.” (1).

Maria Mies's Subsistence Perspective as a Social Framework

Maria Mies is a German professor of sociology and author of several feminist books. Her work with Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen presents a form of the renewed social relationship uniting women, men and nature. In *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, (2000) both could provide a solution to the aforementioned deeply rooted social imbalance between men and women. Unlike the capitalist view of economy and society, which is clouded by the need for permanent growth of goods, services and money, the subsistence perspective is one from below; i.e. from what is necessary. Mies stresses that the core element in the subsistence perspective is the concept of "what constitutes a good life." (2) She maintains that

empowerment can only be found in ourselves and in our cooperation with nature within us and around us.... It lies in mutuality and not in competition, in doing things ourselves and not in only passively consuming. It lies in generosity and the joy of working together and not in individualistic self-interest and jealousy. This power also lies in our recognition that all creatures on earth are our relatives. (5)

With these basics in mind, Mies assures that the subsistence perspective is not only necessary from an ecological, feminist or anti-colonial viewpoint, but also necessary for the re-establishment of healthy social relationships between men and women, rural and urban areas and, above all, between humans and nature. She also postulates that, "If the central concern of all economic and social activity is not the accumulation of dead money but the creation and maintenance of life on this planet, nothing can remain as it is now." (7)

Mies outlines the basic principles of a society based on the subsistence perspective. They include: (1) an economy which brings about a good life for all: humans and nature everywhere on this planet; (2) providing the real needs of people rather than the production-consumption system, i.e. what is possible for all on this limited planet; (3) non-hierarchical relations which transform all exploitative, dominating, colonial forms into reciprocal, respectful, mutual ones; (4) the total revaluation of the capitalist society in order to eliminate patriarchy and violence; and (5) technology that serves life; one that does not lead to competition.

Nizar Qabbani: The Poet of the Arab Woman¹

The Arab woman is not an exception with regard to suffering from deeply rooted orthodox patriarchy. A woman has always been wrongly taught to be inferior to a man. Her only suitable abode is her house, where there is a father, a brother or a son to take all decisions and dominate her fate. She has no voice and is limited within the confines of traditional as well as social beliefs. All what she gives to man – life, nurture and love – are the legible right of the male figure.

With the advent of the twentieth century and the spread of education, Arab women could achieve a great deal and prove that they are an integral part of the society. A notable example is Huda Shaarawy

¹The translation of Qabbani's poems is the researcher's.

(1879–1947) the Egyptian feminist who influenced not only women in Egypt but throughout the Arab world. She was a pioneer in feminism, in 1923 could found the Egyptian Feminist Union to bring to light the suffering of most Arab women who had to live in seclusion from social life. Despite these efforts, patriarchy has remained the norm, and women still call for their equal rights to men.

The Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) can be truly thought of as the poet of the Arab woman; his poetry is mainly concerned with the relation between men and women, dedicating his effort to setting it to balance again. Against all odds, he could write poetry that really stands out against all patriarchal forms of domination. This is largely due to embracing a project that aimed at giving the Arab woman a voice, and correcting the Arab male's view of the female as an inherited property into an equal friend. Arieh Loya asserts that "he wrote of love and women in a realistic, day-by-day way." (483) This realism is what gives his poetry its uniqueness. He could move forward from scrutinizing the Arab female *status quo* into challenging and reformulating it. To do this, he set the path for a three-stage transformation: the oppressed property, the angry and reckless woman, and the equal friend.

Qabbani's view of his liberated female takes as its point of departure the principles outlined by Mies for the subsistence society. He seeks a world in which man, woman and nature form an organic unity. It is a society of mutual understanding, cooperation and life. There is no room in it for the capitalist view of growth and competition. Rather, the male character is also taught to review his stance from the woman he is living with. This leads to the male's undergoing similar transformation stages to those of the female. Khaled Al-Ajlouni describes this as "communal modernism" in which Qabbani seeks to communicate his message to the audience, enticing that audience to rethink their attitude towards the society, and take steps to achieve transformation and change in light of renovation, enlightenment and modernism. (269) Qabbani, in this sense, rejoices life in its subsistence form.

Qabbani's Glorification of the Female

Qabbani's vision is different from his predecessors' and contemporaries'; he starts his by turning the traditional male-female relationship upside down. That is, he makes of the female a powerful being who is neither inferior nor equal to the male. He, rather, speaks to her in a meek voice as if he were a child, a boy or even a servant. In "A Woman Moving Within Me," Qabbani entreats his beloved to sit with him for a while:

to reconsider the map of love that you drew

with the harshness of a mogul conqueror
and the selfishness of woman telling a man
"Be, and he is."

Talk to me democratically.

In these lines, the reader is faced with a new view of woman; it is she who draws the map of love, and it is also she who, in a mighty voice, says "Be and it is." Qabbani insists that the female figure is, like nature, bestowed with unique qualities and powers, leaving space to establish "the new gender relations based on freedom, equality, dignity and beauty" (Houssein Ben Lazreg 21). The poet tries to set a deal with this woman:

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.

(A Woman Moving Within Me)

This interpretation denounces M. M. Badawi's claim that Qabbani's feminist attitude is due to "the growing gap between the poet's readings in Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine, and his own experience of conservative Damascus society" (221). Conversely, the gap is bridged once the poet could see women, men and nature forming an organic unity.

Similarly, in "Letter", the poet complains when his beloved does not send any letters for a year. The same image of the forlorn lover, yearning to his beloved's letter, illustrates Qabbani's insistence on viewing the female differently. Receiving the letter, the poet wonders if this is a letter or the spring spreading its roses and feminine fragrances everywhere in his room. He ends the poem entreating his lady, "Do not be miser, write to me / In my veins, each letter reserves a place."

To intensify this novel view of the female, the poet prepares the male to a similar transformation. The male finds his real value in the female's presence. When he decides to fight, he does so for her sake. "Decision" is a poem that starts in a traditional way where the male imposes his patriarchal power over the female:

What should I fear? I am all laws,
I am the ocean, you are one of my rivers.
I made all women rings in my fingers, planets in my orbit.

("Decision")

All of a sudden, the tyrant male in these lines turns out to be just a general in the beloved's army. He confesses that all his efforts are for her love and protection:

Your eyes are my only law,
My ships, my travel fellows.

("Decision")

Through female supremacy, Qabbani has prepared his reader to review the man-woman relationship, and become ready to set it to balance.

Qabbani's View of the Woman-Nature Relation

Qabbani's poetry celebrates Nature in all its forms: rural and urban. Damascus, his hometown, has long been known as "the "pearl of the East," praised for its beauty and lushness. The city is known by its popular epithet al-Fayḥā' ("the Fragrant"), earned perhaps for the freshness of its surrounding orchards and gardens" (*Britannica*). The city's "air of exotic pleasures, the timelessness of her huddled adobe homes, labyrinthine half-covered alleys, and the peeking of beautiful black eyes behind studded doors... could well be a feast of history to the passing explorer" (Muhammed Al-Khalil 27).

Nizar Qabbani marveled nature, seeing in it the abode in which subsistence life can be achieved. This gives a strong basis for his eco-feminist attitude. His early poem "A Note to the Reader" reinforces this link and demonstrates the poet's determination to remain loyal to nature in general, and to this Damascene beauty in particular:

I live for my country, its stars,
clouds, breeze, and dew.
I pour the rivers of my colour pots
upon my redeemed green home.

(A Note to the Reader)

Nature, from the subsistence perspective, includes both the village and the city. Seen as part of the modern world, city life, with its festivities, lights, cafés and restaurants, is also present in many of Qabbani's poems. Yet all these elements are integrated in harmony to the extent that it is difficult to separate the female from the rural and urban. When the civil war afflicted Lebanon (1975-1990), he dedicated a whole volume to Beirut. The city is depicted as a woman who, like any female, suffers from the male tyranny and greed. In "Beirut, the Lady of the World", he asks the city in agony:

Who sold your pearl adorned fences?
Who hunted your magical ring,
And cut your golden plaits?
Who slaughtered the joy sleeping in your green eyes?
Who deformed your face with a knife?

Who poisoned sea water, and threw malice on rosy beaches?

"Beirut, the Lady of the World"

The doer of all these crimes is the male: political leaders who stand behind this civil war. The poem works on the two eco-feminist planes: the female and the ecological. Both are intertwined to represent one oppressed creature. He condemns those leaders:

My lady, they took Beirut from both of us
stole "the thyme bread" from our hands
stole "the corniche," sea shells
and the sand covering our bodies
stole the coffee smell
the cafés dreams, and the street lanterns

(Seven Lost Letters in Beirut Post)

Throughout his poetic career, Qabbani has always viewed Nature as a sustaining resource for life and love to all its elements: animate and inanimate. In "The Green Eyed," Qabbani describes how this green colour, the source of fruitfulness and symbol of resourcefulness, grants life to everything and takes the lover in an odyssey of joy, comfort and ecstasy. He asks this "green" eyed lady about her "green" robe:

Where did you get your green robe?
Who sold you this colour? Be honest.
Are its threads made of the Seine banks,
its colour from the Danube?
or have you collected them from the grass
in a white lily basket?

.....

Your eyes amid light
a willow in a lily morning

(The Green Eyed)

The green and blue colours permeate the whole poem, opening a window to a form of paradise before the poet. This tendency towards viewing everything in its relation to nature has been a mark of Qabbani's poetic achievement. The reader is always aware of nature's role in sustaining life in all its forms. Yet, such an understanding of nature is conditioned with a similar realization of the role of women. Both are inseparable in the poet's mind. In "A Beloved and Winter," the poet laments the absence of life and the barrenness of earth which is due to the absence of his beloved. The latter promised to come in the winter, but failed to keep that promise. Now the poet feels the loss of everything:

The streets are bare with no stories
to embroider, nor an elegant dress.

....

All friendly birds migrated
Scents died, trunks are laid.
Oh, Beloved! The years is gone
and the hut is never pleased.

(A Beloved and Winter)

Once the beloved is there, life is regained and nourishes everything, including the poet's mind and soul. Although he admits the impossibility of having such a creature – the woman – under his control, he, likewise, confesses the resourcefulness of her presence:

I need you.
I know you are just a possibility,
A mere hypothesis,
A question calls for another.

(A Dashing Longing)

At that very moment, the poet feels that he has reached the "borders of impossibility."

This treatment of Nature as a sustaining power and, at the same time, synonymous with the woman reinforces an eco-fem relationship that Qabbani has strived all his poetic to achieve. He could prove the "masculine infatuation with the feminine condition" which Muhsin Al-Musawi sees basic to Qabbani's poetic vision. "It is something achievable provided that the young generation are "flaunting conservative norms" (97) which view women as second in rank to men, and, as such, are part of the latter's property. Both men and women are originally born alike; they have the same capabilities and enjoy the same rights. Nizar Qabbani, like any other feminist writer, holds this organic view. "A Beloved and Winter" moves a step forward after this aridity of life when the beloved has forsaken him. Once she is there, the poet celebrates the freedom he feels in the company of his beloved whose presence nurtures life factors:

I love you.
My love knows no bounds.

.....

I smell the grassland breeze in your mouth.
The herd run in your plaits.
When I kiss it, I feel the fields.
Spring kisses my lips.
I am, like the field, part of you.

(A Beloved and Winter)

The image is perfectly delineated to reflect a form of harmony rarely found in reality. The three tips of the triangle - Nature, woman, and man-blend in a way the reader cannot distinguish them, nor do they wish to.

In her study of the relation between feminism and political repression, Mohja Kahf enumerates four types of women in Nizar Qabbani's poetry. They are the Sultan's Wife, submissive and pragmatic, the Sultan's Daughter, a beautiful lady, the Reckless Woman, and the Lady Friend in Exile, a wise woman who shares the poet his understanding that "even grief is evergreen."

The reckless woman marks the second stage in the female, as well as male, transformative journey. She is angry at her social milieu, traditions and patriarchal tyranny. At the same time, she realizes her abilities and role in life. Qabbani reverses the stereotypical misconception that menstrual blood is not a sign of weakness, transforming this blood into a powerful tool with which a woman writes the chapters of her freedom story. Wisam Mansour maintains that the Reckless Woman is not "mortified of her burgeoning womanhood" (7). Qabbani, rather, finds in this blood the ink with which the woman – a quill – shall rewrite the modern history of free women. When she sees the blood, she rejoices in its sight, finding in it forms of natural resourcefulness.

I was surprised this morning
with my first feminine proof.
I kept silent
watching the magnificent spring,
following its golden stream
without asking any question.
(Diary of a Reckless Woman)

The stream of blood bears several connotations and is synonymous with Nature's fertility. It is not a thing to shine from, nor is it a proof of feminine weakness. Mansour stresses how this blood connects a female with Nature in an everlasting bond:

Menstruation ties the reckless woman's body to fertility.... Thus, blood and bleeding are not accidental to but constitutive of women's subjecthood in Kabbani's poetry. For Kabbani, menstrual blood marks the renewal of life through procreation. (7)

While the Sultan's Daughter relishes in magnificent clothes that represent man-made world and, in part, give an indication of women's suppression, the Reckless Woman enjoys the freedom of her nakedness – a symbol of belongingness to nature:

Here is ink without hand
Here is blood without murder
Shall I be mortified by it?
I am its source abundant
I am its hand
I am its spindle.

(Diary of a Reckless Woman)

Qabbani's Non-hierarchical Society

Domination is synonymous with hierarchy. It justifies domination strategies and allegedly prove it as *natural*. Karen Warren never thinks of a solution to the problems associated with women and Nature "in a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (3).

Part of Qabbani's subsistence society is eschewing hierarchy. For him, a man is not superior to a woman. The wise Lady Friend that accompanies the poet in his later years in Europe asserts his appeal to all men to set up their relation with women as friends not as master-slave or superior-inferior ones. She "emerges as the poet's match, and even exceeds him, in breadth of cultivation and sophistication" (Mansour 11). Hierarchy negates Mies's view of "a good life," denoting "freedom, autonomy, self-determination, preservation of the economic and ecological base, and cultural and biological diversity." (20).

Qabbani restructures the man, woman and nature relationship on these bases of the good life or abundance. Since a woman has the power to energize a whole world with her resourcefulness, she is equal to man. In "Granada," he remembers a meeting with a Spanish woman who tours Alhambra with him. She tells him about the glorious history of the Arabs. Hearing all this, the poet both cries over that lost glory and rejoices in that woman's personality. He ends the poem asserting that hugging her before their farewell gave him the feeling that he hugged a man called "Tariq Ibn Zeyad." Once this idea is established, the "killing split – the split between female and male sensibilities," to use Dorothy Dinnerstein's words, "shall vanish forever, leaving room enough to revalue man's relation to Nature and women." For her, this split "keeps people blind to an essential fact: the private and public sides of our sexual arrangement are not separable, and neither one is secondary to the other."

A woman as such represents the one who is capable of nurturing life and setting the world to peace. She is one pillar, along with man and nature, in the new subsistence society where "colonized and marginalized spheres

of reality (nature, women and children) have to become the central focus of economic activity." (Mies 21)

Conclusion

Throughout his poetic career, Nizar Qabbani proves he is an eco-feminist. He has provided the modernist Arab readers with new vistas of thought apropos male-female relationships. He could also open men's eyes to the need for a reevaluation of this relationship that has long been based on hierarchy. His is a vision of women as equal to men in both sensibilities and role in society. This vision seems in harmony with Maria Mies's subsistence perspective. Women and nature have been represented as inseparable in many of his poems.

Qabbani has been concerned with the exploitation of both women and nature. Yet, he gives much attention to the role played by both in the lives of a man. His goal is to liberate both men and women from their inherited patriarchal dogmas that have proven futile, if not catastrophic for both, and have their consequences on ecology, too. He could open men's eyes to the cultural diversity they gain when considering the female as an equal friend who shares his ambition for sustainability and a shift in the type of life they both lead. With this perspective, a change towards the subsistence society of abundance and real welfare will take place, transcending differences of class, race, gender and age.

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