

Nazik Al Malaika: The Pioneer of ‘Free Verse’ in Arabic Poetry

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Abstract: Nazik al Malaika is a famous Arabic Poetess. Her name and fame rests on her poetic excellence. She was mainly a modern Arabic humanist and feminist poetess. She is known as the pioneer of ‘free verse’ poems in Arabic poetry literature. Although there were some other poets who advocated the ‘free verse’ poem in Arabic literature, yet Nazik al Malaika have been in front of the critic’s discussion always from her time till now, in this case. In this article she has been coined as the chief path finder of modern Arabic poetry and in case of changing the thousand years old traditional form of Arabic poetry by using ‘free verse’ leading to a new way of composing style.

Keywords: arabic poetry, free verse

1. Introduction

Iraqi poetess Nazik al Malaika was one of the most influential poets in Arab literary world of the 20th century. She was born in Baghdad city in a liberal family. Her father Sadiq Al Malaika was a language instructor and her mother Um Nizar Al Malaika was also a feminist poet. It is mentionable that Nazik was the oldest of the four children of her parents. Her parents named her after a Syrian hero of Army Nazik Alabed, who had led a series of uprising against the French Army. She belonged to a Shia family. Nazik’s maternal grandfather, who was a Jurisprudent, was also a famous poet of 19th century, and he was the editor of twenty volumes of Encyclopaedia. Although Nazik al Malaika started composing poems from an early age of 10, her father wanted her to master Arabic grammar. So after having acquired the skill of Arabic grammar, she took a degree in Arabic from Baghdad Teacher’s Training College. She studied drama and music also. She studied literary criticism in Princeton University and completed M.A in comparative literature in the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Nazik al Malaika was fluent in four languages other than Arabic, namely, English, French, German and Latin. Nazik also studied in British council.

2. Discussion

The themes of her poetry were mainly history of her native Iraq, idealism, hope, disappointment, exile and depression. English poetry influenced her to compose her poetry to the level of excellence. Nazik al Malaika’s poems expressed the feeling about Arab Women Identity, revolution, the fight against colonialism, unity, social and economic issues.

Nazik al Malaika is considered by the critics as the introducer of free verse in Arabic poetry. She published about 15 volumes of poetry, prose and criticism during her lifetime. Her first collection of poems was ‘Ashiqat al- Layel’ (The lovers of the Night), 1947, producing ‘The nature’ and ‘The night’ as the themes of the poems in this collection. Here she expressed an idealism which is mixed with pessimism and fear of disillusion.

Nazik Al Malaika in her Diwan’s collection in 1947 included a poem namely “The Cholera”. She exercised free verse in this poem which started a free verse movement in the Arab literary world. Free verse style of composing poetry broke the traditional scheme of writing poem. She advocated about it in her book- ‘The Issues of contemporary poetry’, where she mentions about four necessary conditions to start a movement. These are- (1) Intention, (2) Confident announcement to invite the other poet, (3) A wide reaction and (4) Provocation for other poets to use this style in composing poetry.

As Nazik had the knowledge of music, so she could able to break the meter and rhyme of old model Qasida. “The Cholera” was all about the expression of her feelings towards the Egyptians suffering from the disease Cholera. She said in her book The Issues of Contemporary Poetry that “meter is the soul to electrify the literary material in changing into poetry and images and feelings are not poetic but till they are touched by the fingers of music and the pulse of meter beats in their veins.” In a newspaper namely, Al Mustaqbal, a critic Fakri Saleh commented that al Mala’ika never intended for modernising to go as far as it did, a position which gathered her criticism from the influential modern poetry magazine Al ‘Sh’ir’.

‘Spark and Ashes’ is her second collection of poetry published in 1949. It was more revolutionary than the first one. In the introduction she explained that traditional form of Arabic poetry prevented it from attaining the same level of other advanced world literatures. In this collection she produced the themes honour killing, nationalism, alienation and social and feminist issues.

Nazik Al Malaika’s third collection of poetry was ‘Depth of the Wave’. It was published in 1957. In this collection both classical forms and the free verse were mixed.

Free verse poetry is called ‘Taf’ila’ in Arabic. It is also said as ‘Sh’ir al hur’. Nazik al Malaika created new thinking, new images and new meter in Arabic poetry. By it she changed a one-thousand-year old tradition in Arabic poetry literature. In

al- Jadid, an Arab cultural journal, it was explained that the leap from the classical poetry to free verse was very controversial and she faced open criticism from her own family and from the literary critics who supported traditional forms.

In the New York's Times, expressing Nazik al Malaika's obituary it was explained that- "Ms. Malaika was one of the small groups of Iraqi poets who broke away from classical Arab poetry with its rigid metric and rhyme schemes. Being influenced by the writing of Shakespeare, Byron and Shelly as well as by classical Arabic poets, these poets took up modern topic and used lyrical languages that spoke with the immediacy of life on the Arab street."

'Cholera' was her first poetry to be written in free verse. She was inspired to compose this poem after listening to the radio announcement about the cholera disease which raised death toll in Egypt. According to her Autobiography, within one hour she had finished the poem, she ran down to her sister Hissan's house. She told her sister that she had written a poem that was very strange in form and that, that would cause controversy. As soon as her sister read the poem, she became supportive to that. But her mother received it coldly and asked Nazik what kind of rhyme that lacked musicality. Al Malaik'as father had been also critical, she said he had mocked her effort and had predicted that's failure, yet she had stood by that stating simply, asked them to say whatever they wished. She explained that she was confident that her poem would change the map Arab poems.

Now a day's modern free verse would ultimately become very popular, in large part because of her poem Cholera, although that was not accepted at first. Nazik al Malaika continued her experimentation as the antithesis of tradition. During that initial time of the introduction of free verse in Arabic poetry, Nazik al Malaika suffered a lot by the conservative character of the society which suppressed tendencies toward modernism.

There is a debate over the matter that whether Nazik al Malaika was really the composer of 'Cholera' or whether this poem was really the first Arabic free verse poetry. Some critic express that 'Cholera' was the result of the free verse movement which was headed by Nazik al Malaika and some other poets. The other one was Badr Shakir al- sayyab whose first free verse poem was, 'Was there a love?,' it was published in his collection "When the Flowers Decay." Published in November 29, 1946. Which is composed a year before 'Cholera'. Of course Nazik al Malaika, acknowledged some poetic attempts done in free verse around 1932 by Ali Ahmad Bakatheer. Mahmood Matloub also published a poem called 'Free Composition' in 1921, about which Nazik wrote in her famous book 'Issues of Contemporary Poetry', published in 1962.

The debates over whether Nazik al Malaika was the first poet

to introduce free verse in Arabic Poetry have been continuing till date. In a newspaper Al- Nahar, critic Salah Hasan says, "She closed the door behind her forever after the whole world ignored her and failed to acknowledge her as the true pioneer she was." But in 1967 Nazik started a counter revolution against free verse assuming everyone would return to the classical form in future. This new attitude of Nazik later disappointed her from certain literary bodies.

Despite these changes in sentiment, most of her work remained amalgamated of classical form and free verse. Despite, this change of heart and mind, this modernist movement gave Nazik al Malaika a unique position in the literary world.

3. Conclusion

Nazik al Malaika's some selected poems were translated to Nepali Language also by a Nepali poet, lyricists, play writer, translator, Suman Porkhel (B 1967). She married Abdel Hadi Mahbuba who was a fellow student in the Arabic Language Department. Later who established the Bosra University with the help of Nazik al Malaika and some well-wishers.

Nazik al Malaika lived for some years in Kuwait since 1970. She taught at the University of Kuwait for 20 years. Nazik al Malaika had suffered from Parkinson's diseases for the last years of her life.

She went to Egypt for the last years of her life. She lived in Cairo till her death at the age of 83 in June 20, 2007.

Nazik al Malaika won many prizes and awards in her life. For example, she won the prize 'al- Babtain' for her poetic creativity in 1996.

A prize namely 'The Nazik al Malaika Prize' for Arabic feminine creativity, story writing and novel criticism was created in the year 2000, honouring Nazik al Malaika's Achievemnts. It is granted every year for woman innovators by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture.

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