

Nizar Qabbani's Attitude towards Arab-Israeli Peace Treaties: An Analysis of his Poetic Contents

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Abstract

This study aims to discuss the attitude of the Arab poet Nizar Qabbani towards peace treaties with Israel. It examines a number of poems in which the poet shows his rejection of these treaties. Using a discourse analysis approach, the study explores the poet's attitudes toward these treaties and the poetic imagery he uses to express his rejection. The study concludes that Qabbani's attitude is marked by his rejection of such treaties, and he expressed his anger towards the Arab leaders who signed them and on the Arab nations who did not object their signature. The content analysis of Qabbani's poetry reveals that it is characterized by directness and constructiveness in some verses. It is also marked by its distance from the simple and compound images and from the aesthetics that are always found in his romantic poetry.

Keywords: Peace treaties, Arabs, Israel, Arabic poetry, Nizar Qabbani

1. Introduction

No other poet has ever gained the recognition and research which Nizar Qabbani has had in both modern and old Arabic poetry. Excluding the two poets, namely, Al-Mutanabbi and Mahmoud Darwish, Qabbani's experience, which extends to more than fifty years, has gained tremendous recognition due to the issues and thoughts his poetry explores. These issues are considered by some as problematic in the Arab societies, which are based on customs, traditions, and superstitions.

Qabbani lived his life defending women and their right to live a dignified life. He always tried to help women rise above their lower social status which is inflicted by the Eastern man. The incident that happened to his sister, Amina, in the early stages of his life and his poetry played a role in making him believe that one of women's simplest rights is to love and get married to the man she chooses. Choice should not be imposed on women because they are not merely machines for producing children and unfolding distorted feelings. Qabbani always lived in this feminine universe which includes contradictions, feelings, and stories. So, he tried to convey Eastern/ Arab women's voice to the world of men, who still viewed women as bodies to make love with whenever they wanted, and on whom they imposed their lusts and sexual desires anytime they wish. In his poetry, he targeted the simple Arab audience because his message could never survive without supporters, partisans, and adherents. According to Mohyi Al-Din Sobhi: "He announced that since his beginnings, he has been working as an ant, dragging letters and words on his back in order to find a democratic language for poetry; a language that sits with people in coffee shops, drinks tea and smokes cigarettes with them" (Mohyi Al-Din Sobhi 1982, p. 36).

Qabbani was not concerned with the world of politics as much as he was concerned with his main issue, which was women's rights. He was as if "he went out of women's chamber four times throughout twenty three years to inbreathe the air of Arabian nationality for a short time and then return to his chamber" (Abu Ali 1999, p. 144). But the setback of June was the cold water poured on Qabbani's feelings and poems. It was the shock that moved Qabbani from his feminine slumber to his national rising. It converted a poet who writes about love and longing to one who writes with his knife, bullets, and cannons:

Oh. My sad homeland

You have converted me in a moment

From a poet who writes about love and longing

To one who writes with his knife (Qabbani 2008, p. 475)

Following this shock, Qabbani had "no more than one horse to ride, which is the horse of anger... But where do the limits of this anger begin? And where do they end? It is very hard for me to draw the lines of my anger. As long as one centimeter of my land is occupied and humiliated by Israel, and as long as Israel's settlements are built on it, my anger will remain a shoreless sea" (Qabbani, 1982, p. 34). Qabbani announced that:

his crime has been committed against our homeland, and that the Arabian lands have been robbed. The Jews have entered the Arab houses, and the Arabs could do nothing. As a result, the files of the defeat have been closed and thrown into the crematorium of the Arabian chivalry and magnanimity. And with the rising of the sun of a new day, the street cleaners started collecting the fingers of the dead and the toys of children, and coffee shops were filled as usual with their visitors, as if nothing has happened (Mirvat Dahhan 2002, p. 75).

Qabbani also called for "purifying the Arab intellectual from the sores of humiliation and oppression" (Raja' Al-Naqqash 1992, p. 199), as if this call is initiated by him because he will be the one to carry its torch. It is a call from Qabbani for the intellectual, whatever his profession is, to ascend his wounds and to work on liberating himself from the oppression of temporary selfish motives, as the intellectual is the one responsible for the catharsis of the intellectual solidity as well as for evoking the creative and active life that yields on the pulsation of the Arabian street. This is conditioned by rejecting hypocrisy, becoming emancipated from the dualism of thinking, and creating an active thinking movement that transcends the static condition of education to the dynamic condition of cognitive actions (Raja' Al-Naqqash 1992, p. 199).

Qabbani says:

If the desert were able to hear me

I would ask her...

To stop sprouting millions of poets

And to liberate this good nation from the sword of words (Qabbani 2000, p. 215)

The moment Qabbani awakened from the chambers of women, got rid of the smell of the French perfumes, and became aware of his enrollment in the issues of the nation which smelt of blood and defeat, he was shocked by this scary Arab reality. While Jerusalem and the Arabian cities plunge in their own blood and wounds, the Arab presidents plunge in their own desires, luxuries, and private affairs. Maha Kheir Beik states, As much as he rejects the dissipation of the oil wealth on desires, he is angered by the silence of the princes of oil over the transgressions, crimes, and violations committed by Israel in Jerusalem and other Arabian cities. So he called for Arabian submissiveness, where he robbed the symbols of their spiritual personality and emptied their presence and position from value and activity, and the great countries started using these symbols for passing their plans. The poem was, thus, a bold cry in the face of the princes of oil, where Nizar surpassed the literary and diplomatic protocol. He expressed his wrath in all possible political, national, social, and humanitarian connotations. He also referred to the negative role played by some of these princes and exposed their abandonment of the issues of their nation due to being dragged by the temptations of the great countries which assassinated their human nature and forced them to bargain all that is sacred. (Maha Kheir Beik 2007, p. 77)

Qabbani says:

Arise, O long-lived..

From your rosy room

And open your windows..

To the sun, to justice, and to the masses

People have not seen you since the last days of the Umayyads

Are you really an Umayyad?

Go out into the street, O prince

And read.. Even if you read the daily newspaper

Read.. About Suez, Jordan and Golan

And the captive cities

About those who cross the river

Toward the West Bank

Is there O long-lived., At your royal court

A small map

Of the West Bank? (Qabbani 2000, p. 187)

2. Nizar Qabbani's Attitude towards Arab Peace Treaties with Israel

Following the setback of June 1967 (Naksa Day), Qabbani's poetry became his second passport as it allowed him to enter the hearts of all Arab audiences with his following poems of love and affection every now and then. In this poetry, Qabbani used a direct language and remained distant from the poetic imagery used vividly in his love poems of the previous stage, or even of the following stages. It was an honest expression of the conscience of the Arab citizen, who found in Qabbani's poetry a space for hope and a whip to hold in the face of these Arab regimes, which led to defeat and which held cannons that shoot backwards. Qabbani argues that these regimes want him to be a poet of flirtation and love, and not a poet of war. He said, "My political poetry hanged me on more than one cross and on more than one noose. The attitude of half of the Arab regimes towards my political poetry is one of enmity and rejection. They ban my books from entering their lands, whereas they used to pamper me and to open their arms for me as a love poet. A true poet is one who is slaughtered by the knife of his words, such as Socrates and Al-Hallaj. I am a poet who always chooses to walk by the edge of the dagger" (Nasrallah, 2003, p. 44):

O Master Sultan,

Because I approached the mute walls of your city

Because I..

Tried to reveal my grief.. And my distress

I was kicked with a shoe (Qabbani 2008, p. 492)

When he says this, he "asserts the poetic commitment to the issues of the Arab human who is encircled by the political regimes. These political regimes have created emergency rules and have formed inspection courts, and the guards and employees in these courts never stop chasing the citizen whose path towards utopia is also hindered by social conventions and traditions" (Habiba Mohammadi 1999, p. 90). Nizar chose to stand with the defeated Arab citizen, not with the Arab regimes, which have been defeated in front of their enemy and in the minds of their citizens. He resolved his choice by stating that "in this stage, any word which does not take the shape of a rife shall be thrown into the trash and become a fodder for animals" (Qabbani 2000, p. 431):

I wander around in the Arab world

To read my poetry to the public

I am convinced

That poetry is a loaf of bread baked for the public (Qabbani 2000, p. 243)

2.1 The Camp David Treaty

Qabbani could have overcome the bitter taste of defeat and the setback (Naksa) with what has been achieved in Al-Karama War and the War of October. Both wars gave him hope that it is possible for the Arab land to be liberated and for the Arab dignity, which had been wounded for decades, to be restored. However, Qabbani's biggest shock was when Egypt, which was seen as the backbone of the Arab world, submissively went to Tel Aviv to sign the peace treaty with Israel and when the Egyptian President, who led the War of October and whom the Arab people believed was the one to resurrect the nation and to enter Jerusalem on his horse as a conqueror and a propitious of a new Arabian dawn:

We thought he

Would enter Jerusalem on his horse

And reclaim Al-Aqsa Mosque from captivity

And call people to prayer

But he surprised us

And handed over the lands from the Nile to the Euphrates (Qabbani 1979, p. 5)

Qabbani expresses all his anger towards the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, and accused him of selling the cause and handing its files without war to the Jews. He also accused him of apostatizing from Islam to worshipping their Torah and practicing their religious rituals as if he had become one of them:

His name was

Before he apostatized from the law of Islam

Muhammad. And became Abraham

His name was our lord the Sheikh

He used to consistently pray and fast

But he surprised us

Wearing a rabbi's jubbah in New York

Reading the Quran in Hebrew

And reciting the Adhan in Hebrew (Qabbani 1979, p. 6)

There was great hope that Egypt, represented by its president, would bring Arabs victory. This was evident in the behavior and sayings of Sadat. Nevertheless, Qabbani and all Arabs woke up to a scary fact, which was that Sadat had given up and sold everything:

We always used to see him

Sitting in Sayyidna Al-Hussein

Asking God for forgiveness

And reciting Surat Ar-Rahman

We used to think he was reciting the Quran

But he surprised us... And took out the Torah (Qabbani 1979, p. 7)

Then he addressed Egypt by referring to it as (Baheyya). He asked her about the one who forced her to become the Jews' captive and dancer who sold herself to their wishes and follows their commands and desires:

How did they force you O Baheyya?

To carry liquor to their king David

And how did they teach you O Baheyya?

To read the Talmud

And to become a dancer in the Jewish neighborhood (Qabbani 1979, p. 8)

Qabbani reinforced these ideas in more than one poem which he wrote following the Camp David treaty. In his poem "Damascene Love Songs for the Moon of Baghdad", he addressed Al-Mutanabbi and told him that another Kafur had come to rule Egypt, and sold it to the Jews, and mortgaged its Arabian sword to the enemies. He described Sadat as merely another slave who followed the orders of the Jews and wipes their feet with the Arabian principles, which we thought he learned in the School of Abdel Naser. He is not more than a player who practiced deception and hypocrisy on the good Arab people:

Did you receive the news O Al-Mutanabbi

That Kafur dismantled the pyramids?

Egypt has fallen into the hands of a villager

Who could not find anything to sell but (a tram)

He is theatrically ambitious, and wears a face

For comedy and another for drama

He is neurotic and he yells in Egypt like a rooster

And in Jerusalem, he shines shoes..

They stripped him of everything . . . and when

They used him, they threw him the bones (Qabbani 2000, p. 510 – 512)

In his poem "I am Tired of my Arabism, my Friend", Qabbani reveals his refusal to believe that Egypt had signed a treaty with the Jews. It is a dream that cannot be true. How can I believe that Egypt has made peace with the Jews disregarding the Arabian blood that has been shed, and that it has become a grassland for the Jews where the flag of Israel flaunts above the corpses of martyrs?

Who would believe that Egypt has been Judaized
 Sayyidna Al-Hussein's tomb is now a wasteland
 This is not Egypt... Its prayer
 Is Hebrew.. and its imam is a liar (Qabbani 2000, p. 644)

For Qabbani, the reason behind the disasters of Arabs is the Arab leaders whom he called 'Abi Lahab'. They are the cause of trouble and the reason behind the Arabs' afflictions. The hatred he carries for them increases following the killing of his wife Balqis in Beirut in 1981:

All thieves from the Gulf to the Ocean

Destroy.. and burn,

They ransack.. and get bribed

They rape women

As Abu Lahab wishes

All dogs are employed

They eat

And get drunk

At Abi Lahab's treat

Now heat grows

If Abu Lahab disapproves.

No child is born

Until his mother goes to bed

With Abi Lahab

No prison is open

Without Abi Lahab's opinion

None is beheaded

Without Abi Lahab's command (Qabbani 2000, p. 68 – 71)

In his poem "Rachel and her Sisters", Qabbani announces that he is depressed by the Arab regimes and that he does not believe in their ability to regain the land nor the dignity of Arabs. He fills his poems with "feelings of disappointment, bitterness, and discontent with focus on exposing the phenomenon of self-criticism, which almost reaches the extent of despair" (Omar Al-Daqqaq 1971, p. 436):

Why should Israel fear some Arabs

After they have turned into Jews? (Qabbani 2000, p. 763)

Qabbani disbelieved in these regimes. He sometimes announced his depression that is caused by the Arab nations, which are unable to free themselves from superstition and tradition nor from the Arab presidents who torture, humiliate, and insult them. "From the circumstances, practices, and habits of Arabs, Nizar found enough reason to boost his satire to the extent of mocking Arabism, deforming its nationalism, and doubting its glories and histories in some of his poems, such as: "The Actors", "Interrogation", "I, my friend, am tired with my Arabism", "The Visa", "Oil has Attacked Us", "Diary of an Intellectual Dog", "A Confidential Report from the Land of Qamestan", "Drum Solo", "I Named You South", "When are They Announcing the Death of Arabs", "Red Red", "I Am With Terrorism", and "Against Everything." (Ahmad Taj Al-Deen 2001, p. 1)

2.2 Oslo and Wadi Araba Treaties

Qabbani's political poetry is generally pessimistic in tone, and this is caused by the consequent defeats of Arabs as they lost land in every war and lived in devastation whenever they attempted to make a change. Nevertheless, a glimpse of hope can still be found in his poetry, and this glimpse makes victory possible. His poetry prophesizes the Fat-h movement, especially following Al-Karama war, which Palestinian organizations participated in beside the Jordanian Arab Army. This led to destroying the legend of the unbeatable Army of Israel. Thus, hope was there again, and Qabbani and the Arab audience were hopeful that the good is yet to come:

And after.. And after

We despair from our despair
(Fat-h) came to us
Like a pretty flower growing from a wound
Like a well of cold water irrigating deserts of salt
Suddenly.. We revolted against our shrouds, and we resurrected
And suddenly
Like Christ.. We resurrected after death (Qabbani 2000, p. 140)

Despite the Camp David treaty, Nizar was still hopeful that the Egyptians were able to shake systems and that they were able to cancel the treaty, rise again to war, and get back to the Arab lap following Sadat's attempt to get Egypt out of the Arab flock. Nizar's poetry in this regard tends to be harsh in its blame and revelation because of the great love he carries for Egypt and its great people:

Forgive me O Egypt if poetry went out of control
For the taste of fire is still in my mouth
Forgive me..for you are the mother of prowess
And the mother of forgiveness and pardon..
Forgive me..if I burned myself and burned
For neutrality is not possible
Egypt.. O Egypt.. My passion is dangerous
So forgive me if I lose my composure (Qabbani 2002, p. 483-484)

However, the shocks and disasters did not fall individually on Qabbani's heart and mind, which had lost the ability to comprehend the happenings. The Palestinian Liberation Organization, which was the only legislative representative of the Palestinian people, undertook peace with the Jews, and afterwards, the Jordanian Government followed the same humiliating path of pretended peace. Accordingly, the walls of Arabian shyness collapse in front of the walls of shame and humiliation which had been constructed by what is referred to as the peace of the braves. In fact, it is the peace of the cowards who have sold their countries and within whom the veins of Arabian dignity and pride have dried out, for they have pretended to forget the blood and sacrifice of martyrs. In his poem "The Hasteners," Qabbani declares once again his discontent with all the Arab regimes:

The last walls of shyness fell
And we rejoiced.. And we danced..
And we were blessed to sign the peace treaty with the cowards
Nothing terrifies us any longer..
And nothing shames us
For the veins of pride have dried within us...(Qabbani, 2002, p. 747)

It is another moment of fall-down where the Arab regimes compete to kiss the shoes of murderers and butchers, like Sadat did before:

Our virginity fell . . . For the fiftieth time..
Without being shaken . . . Or without crying..
Or being terrified by the sight of blood..
We entered the age of haste. .
And stood in lines, like sheep before the guillotine
And we ran.. And panted..
And raced to kiss the boots of murderers..(Qabbani 2002, p. 747)

Hereafter, Qabbani questions the price of this peace. He illustrates that Israel gives Arabs the fractions in order to sign and sell their lands:

They starved our children for twenty years

And at the end of the fasting.. They threw us

An onion..(Qabbani 2002, p. 748)

Arabs got used to this downfall and to this humiliation since the fall of Andalusia. History repeats itself; Arabs go to Madrid for peace in 1992, five hundred years after the fall of Granada, and it is as if the Jews congratulated this new fall:

Granada fell

For the fiftieth time -- From the hands of Arabs

History fell from the hands of Arabs

The pillars of spirit fell, and the thighs of the tribe

All the songs of heroism fell

Seville fell..

Antioch fell..

Hattin fell without a fight..

Amorium fell..

Mary fell in the hands of the militias

And there is no man to rescue the heavenly symbol

And there is no manliness (Qabbani 2002, p. 748)

Thus, it is an example of the public theft of our features, heritage, beliefs, and historical and religious symbols, and the Arabs have no power nor strength, for all they can do is watch and wait for their fates with prayers and tears:

We no longer possess a single Andalusia in our hand..

They stole the doors, the walls, the wives, the children,

The olives, the oil, and the streets' cobbles.

They stole Jesus, son of Mary

While he was still a suckling..

They stole from us the memory of lemon..

Apricot..mint..

And the lanterns of the mosques (Qabbani 2002, p. 749)

Qabbani then wonders once again about what we have gained from this miserable and humiliating peace. He also questions the areas of this thought-to-be an Arab victory, as long as all we have got is a country whose size is as small as a “can of sardines”, a hotel which is referred to as a homeland, and a torn body called country:

They left a can of sardines in our hands

Called “Gaza”

A dry bone called “Jericho”

A hotel called Palestine..

Without a roof and without pillars..

They left us a body without bones

And a hand without fingers...(Qabbani 2002, p. 750)

The result of this disgraceful peace does not equal the Arab honor which has been lost on the threshold of the United Nations and the great countries. Moreover, this soft courtship with the Jews only yielded in humiliation and ignominy, and this peace is merely a pill that is used for narcotizing the Arab nations and injecting them with morphine so that they will remain deeply asleep:

After this secret courtship in Oslo

We came out barren..

They granted us a homeland smaller than a grain of wheat..

A homeland to swallow without water

Like aspirin pills!! (Qabbani 2000, p. 751)

As Qabbani's resentment increases, he goes back to being pessimistic by labeling the Arab presidents and nations with insulting labels in a harsh political satire. He states that we, Arabs, have become stray dogs looking for shelter, having been deprived of everything. It is neither a reconciliation nor peace. It is a new case of rape which the Arab world has encountered from its ocean till its coast:

After fifty years..

We sit now on the destroyed land..

We have no shelter

Like thousands of dogs!!

After fifty years

We do not find a homeland to dwell in except for the mirage..

It is not a reconciliation, that reconciliation which, like a dagger, was thrust into us..

It is an act of rape!! (Qabbani 2000, p. 751-752)

Nevertheless, Qabbani still bets on the awareness of Arab nations as well as on their ability to make a change. Despite the fact that their presidents went hastening to Oslo and Wadi Araba, their awakening and live consciences are the bet in front of which all peace treaties fall:

What is the use of haste?

What is the use of haste?

When the conscience of the people remains alive

Like the fuse of a bomb..

All the signatures of Oslo will not equal..

A mustard seed!! (Qabbani 2002, p. 752)

The Arabian dreams were broken into pieces on the rock of reality when the Arabs awoke from their last dream, which is the peace of the braves, on the dumps called Camp David, Oslo, and Wadi Araba:

How we dreamed of a green peace..

And a white crescent..

And a blue sea.. And spread sails..

And all of a sudden we found ourselves. In a dump!! (Qabbani 2002, p. 753)

But who will penalize these presidents and leaders for the tragedy, the disappointment, and the retreat of Arabs which made us the Jews of history and turned us into stray dogs while the Arabian citizen is in a deep slumber:

Who will ask them about the peace of the cowards?

Not the peace of the strong and able.

Who will ask them about the peace of selling by installments?

And renting by installments.. . And the deals..

And the merchants.. . And the investors?

Who will ask them about the peace of the dead?

They silenced the street.. . And assassinated all questions..

And all the questioners...(Qabbani 2002, p. 753)

The illegitimate marriage with the enemies who have raped us, drunk from the blood of our children, and left our dead corpses on the road has taken place:

... And we were married without love...

To the female who once ate our children..

And chewed our livers (Qabbani 2002, p. 754)

Qabbani's bet remains as long as there are fedayeen who die for the sake of their countries and their case. These fedayeen use their chaste blood to write what the cannons of Arabs were not able to write, for the cannons have turned out to be rusty due to being stored for a long time and being let down by the presidents:

Only the fedayee... Writes poetry ... And all that we wrote is nonsense

He is the real author of the era ... We are the ushers and the employees

When the guns start playing ... immune poems die (Qabbani 2000, p. 402)

Qabbani's hope is linked to the children of the stones, who have returned to the Arabian dignity both its taste and color, and who have proved to the world that a whole-soled stone is capable of defeating the enemy's tank:

They dazzled the world..

With nothing but stones in their hand..

And they lit like lanterns,

And they came like a good omen

They resisted.. And blew up.. . And they were martyred..

And we remained as polar bears

Whose bodies are armored against the heat..(Qabbani 2008, p. 203)

A child of stones leads to the moment of land restoration. It is the moment of the missing truth, which was thought to be gone after all these years during which the Arab upper hand has practiced the toughest acts of humiliation and servility. Nevertheless, the child of stones is the pursued hope and the one to restore us from ourselves as well as from the dominance of this hireling and indolent Arab regime:

O you generation of betrayals..

O you generation of commissions..

O you generation of garbages

O you generation of debauchery..

You will be overrun –no matter how slow history is-

By the children of the stones (Qabbani 2008, p. 204)

Qabbani continued to believe in the future that would be built by the children of Arabs. He would call them after each setback, misfortune, submission, and disappointment caused by Arab leaders and nations. This is depicted in his poems from "Marginal Notes on the Book of the Setback 1976" to his last political poem:

O Children..

From ocean to gulf, you are the wheat of hope

You are the generation that will smash the chains

And kill the opium in our heads..

And kill the illusions..

O Children, you are -still- good

And pure, like snow and dew, pure

Do not read about our defeated generation, O children

For we are failures..

And we are like watermelon rinds, useless

And we are decaying.. Decaying.. Like old shoes (Qabbani 2008, p. 496-497)

3. Conclusion

The study concludes that self-flagellation is merely a means and not a purpose. The aim of it is to revive what is left from the dignity of Arab nations, to ignite the resisting spirit they have, and to stimulate the endeavors which Qabbani believed to be dead for a long time. The study also reveals that Qabbani's attitude is characterized by his absolute rejection of these treaties. He has poured his rage on the Arab presidents who have signed these treaties as well as on the silent Arab nations.

Qabbani's political poetry is characterized by its directness and constructiveness in some of its parts. In this kind of poetry, he has distanced himself from the simple and compound images as well as from the aesthetics found in his romantic poetry. He has always seen hope in the children and youth of the Arab nation as he could not find it in its men. Qabbani's poetry is known for its stabbing dispraise. It contains words which modern Arabic poetry tried to forget as well as to deduct from its poetic and lingual dictionaries. Through his poems, Qabbani expressed the point that peace enabled Israel to get what it was not able to get by war and that the Arab peace treaties signed with Israel are an act of rape of the land as well as of the Arab citizen.

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