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**Diaspora – New Features of the Phenomenon
and its Cultural Impact. Case of Omani Poets**

Abstract

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by unprecedented human mobility. The number of refugees and emigrants has considerably risen over the past several decades. In every part of the globe there are large scale displacements due to different factors. Yet, as a matter of fact, the phenomenon of human migration and living in Diaspora isn't the new one. Zāhir al-Ġāfirī from Oman has travelled extensively: starting in Iraq he made his way to America via Maghreb, ending up eventually in Sweden. He is an excellent example of Diaspora poet. His poems are full of memories and yearning for the past, for someone beloved who has been lost.

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The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by unprecedented human mobility. The number of refugees and emigrants has considerably risen over the past several decades. In every part of the globe there are large scale displacements due to different factors. Yet, as a matter of fact, the phenomenon of human migration and living in Diaspora isn't the new one. As it explains Myria Georíou in her article entitled *Why Diaspora is a Key Concept for understanding Multicultural Europe*, the idea of Diaspora itself, goes back deep in human history. It was initially used by the ancient Greeks to describe their spreading all over the then known world. For the Greeks Diaspora signified migration and colonization. For the Armenians, the Africans and other nations who later adopted the term, the concept implied more painful meanings of loss of a homeland, violent deterritorialisation and longing for return. As

much as the history of migration and settlement for these or other populations that have moved across the globe has changed, so did the concept of Diaspora.

Today, Diaspora has become a main topic for very dynamic debates, which comprise ethnicity, nationality, identity and boundaries. The concept, as it was mentioned, has transformed in time, and has returned to help us to describe and understand sociological phenomena like migration, reterritorialisation, and people's multiple sense of belonging and loyalties beyond national borders. We very often touch the Diaspora problem when talking about different attitudes toward ethnicity, real or just imagine relations between emigrants who do not necessarily depend on returning to a distant homeland.¹

Yet, taking advantage from the concept of Diaspora and its historical evolution we can't forget that it serves to describe everyday reality of certain group of population. When we say Diaspora we instantly evoke people who struggle with their specific problems. As it was said, in most cases emigrants are obliged to make the decision about leaving their homeland due to political or economic reasons. But at the very same time we may find others who live in Diaspora because it was their personal choice. In any cases, coming to the country of their exile the migrants carry with them their culture, knowledge and very often create vibrant communities. It is not to be neglected that they frequently contribute to the economy of their homelands through various support. Last years this phenomenon is particularly stressed by economists. Today in the context of globalization the idea of the *brain gain* or *brain circulation* challenges the traditional concept of the *brain drain*. The two way flows of skilled specialists between the countries where they were born and the countries where they reside may provide bilateral opportunities. Nowadays through various means of communication people who stay abroad can still be actively involved in their homeland live. Emigrants can read online newspapers from their countries or listen to the radio station they left after their departure. They can even get their favourite dishes thanks to relatively easy circulation of goods.

Apart from that, as it shows the history, migrant communities create sometimes very strong cultural centres. It is enough to evoke Lebanese or Syrian Diaspora to see how important their income for the national culture was. The perspective toward the natal country, which is given to the artists in exile, enables them to touch various problems from the new position. The reality they have to live stimulate to raise new questions. Very often the cultural context in which they remain marks them go beyond their own tradition and seek after new forms of expression. But still, even those who stay in Diaspora for a long time never get rid of difference or alienation features, which mark their artistic production. People in Diaspora transform and lose a part of them to enrich in exchange their personality with the new values. As a reward for their not bitter experience in exile they discover new development perspectives for their art.

Myria Georgiou again says that Diaspora illustrates the hybrid and ever changing nature of human identity. This new, complicated identity implies diversity in cultures and traditions, which co-exist, compete, merge and emerge.² From the other hand, existing of

¹ M. Georgiou, *Why Diaspora is a Key Concept for Understanding Multicultural Europe*, www.multicultural.net.

² Ibid.

Diaspora highlights the importance of the sense of particularity and national belongings. As far the artists or writers who live and create in countries of the exile all these phenomena take the material forms. The artistic production or literary output reflect their inner experience and problems they have to face every day.

Many Omani lived for a long time abroad, because of difficult conditions of life, together with the absence of educational possibilities. Some of them, e.g. Sayf al-Raḥbī or Muḥammad al-Ḥartī returned to Oman when Sultan Qābūs ascended to power and led to development of Oman. Others are still abroad, e.g. Zāhir al-Ġāfirī (born 1956). He has travelled extensively; starting in Iraq he made his way to America via Maghreb, ending up eventually in Sweden. He has published the following collections of poems: *Azlaḥ bayḍā'* (*White Hooves*), Paris 1984; *Aṣ-ṣamt yā'ī li-al-I'tirāf* (*Silent Confession*), Köln 1991; *'Uzla taftīd 'an al-layl* (*Loneliness Approaches at Night*) Muscat 1993; *Azhār fī bi'r* (*Flowers in the Well*), Köln 2000.

The poem *Ġhurfa fī āhir al-'ālam* (*The Room at the End of the World*), which comes from the last collection can be classified as love lyricism:

*In a distant room, at the end of the world, at the end of the night
Nights of a song brought by a storm, I remember you now
Like a hazy hallucination that has accidentally occurred by the source
Of my Life
The pen is cast behind me, into a distant land
Which I rarely visit*

*I listen to your absence under the window of truth
The guests have already left, there is neither a trace of living shadows,
nor flowers
At the door's threshold.*

*My glance at you – when you are not here – is like the repentance of
the unfaithful
My dreams have spilt like sand upon your bed, my grief
Sprinkles you with fragrance of the white water that is like night.*

*I and you are two banks between which my life flows
On the glowing coal of eternity
Your fruit are golden this night, while the music
Comes on its own, delicately like the spring rain
From a distant room at the End of the World³*

³ Zāhir al-Ġāfirī, *Ghurfa fī āhir al-'ālam* in: *Azhār fī bi'r*, Köln 2000, pp. 17–18.

The work begins and ends with the self same title motif of the room at the end of the world. This constitutes the key element and is a clear compositional outline. The said room is full memories and yearning for someone beloved who has been lost, who appears to the lyrical as a hazy and unreal hallucination. It is difficult for him to believe that she could ever appear in his life. The lyrical subject is full of remorse and repentance. Undoubtedly the separation occurred because of his choice. For he was he that left his beloved homeland, which as he himself admits *he rarely visits*. Besides the words admitting guilt can bear this out *My glance at you – when you are not here – is like the repentance of the unfaithful*. The metaphorical image of the distant room, somewhere at the end of the world, can symbolize the emotional state of the poet: forgotten, lonely, isolated, closed within the four walls of one's own despair and inflamed yearning. Everyone has left him, even his friends. Around there exists the horrifying gapping emptiness with the breath of death: *The guests have already left, there is not a trace of living shadows, nor flowers/ At the door's threshold*. The persona compares himself and his beloved to two banks distant from each other between which the whole of his life floats on a glowing coal. He is dependant upon her and her love. He realized, however, that it is impossible for the two banks to ever come together: *I and you are two banks between which my life flows/ On the glowing coal of eternity*. The end of the poem brings us the sad resounding melody of silent yearning brought by rain – is this the rain of tears? The poem is an example of direct lyricism for it constitutes a lyrical monologue delivered in the first person. The persona is characterized by the emotional relation to reality and the world that is presented. This lends the work to the character of personal lyricism.

The poem *Arḍ ba'ida (The Distant Land)* continues the subject matter. This is a work about unfulfilled love, although one can clearly detect that this love was requited. The heroes loved each other but had to separate. The persona was passive, he did not fight for his love and therefore lost it – for ever?

*I waited for your life on a distant
Land
Each moment that passed brought
To one's palm the fervour of patience.*

*My dream is the shadow thrown by the tree
Your wound is the grief of those going
To sleep
While your voice always flows, with difficulty,
Into oblivion.*

*Death drowns in your palm
Like a flower in
The desert of night
Your palm which saw*

*And felt the light rain on
The window.
[...]
The touch left its shadow on your bed
The touch blossomed
When the light disappeared*

*My life, autumn has not reached
Your life
I drink from your palm the idea of water
When I am parched.*

*Your empty cup and my bread
On the table
And I endeavour to cause a storm
But am unable⁴*

This poem is also an example of a direct lyricism. The lyrical subject reveals his experience and feelings of unfulfilled and unhappy love. The hero lives on the memories which come to him at night. He contemplates what has been and what might be. The poem is full of various stylistic means. We notice metaphors: *my bread* as life and human existence appears here in opposition to *the empty cup* expressing some kind of end, non- existence, maybe death. The poet is not averse to simile: *Death drowns in your palm/ Like a flower in/ The desert of night*. The flower symbolizes hope, spring, love, the passing of human life in the desert of night. For *the ash of the garden* is none other than man's fate. In the poem ash symbolizes purification and the fragility of life. Through the poet's use of animation, i.e. the giving to inanimate objects animate features, such as *the touch blossomed*, *your palm which saw* the work's dynamism is enhanced. Finally the use of symbols, like for example autumn signifying the autumn of life, old age: *autumn has not reached/ Your life* enriches the expressiveness of the utterance. The above mentioned means make the poetic image stand out and make it more dynamic.

An interesting poem from the said collection is the verse *Az-Zā'ir (The Guest)*:

*Let me pass
I am unknown guest, I carry on
My wings the dust of night.
Fervour lives in me
I am the sun of long years.*

⁴ Zāhir al-Ġāfirī, *Arḍ ba'ida*, op. cit., pp. 12–14.

*Nobody except me wants to tell
 What happened in the past
 Nobody with the exception of me
 I am the severe tome of the times
 And the lord of the forts.*

*Truth gathers in my fiery gaze
 And dreams
 And between my claws I hear the soul of the adder
 The last
 And with this
 My heart, it is the heart of a merciful angel.⁵*

The work begins with the persona's request for permission to pass through the gathered crowds. It draws attention to the fact that he is a guest who is conveying truth. Despite his advanced years: *I am the sun of long years* he still has strength which is emphasized by the words: *Fervour lives in me*. Alongside this, the lyrical "I" presents himself as an individual who notes down everything that happens around him as well as events from the past. He appears also as *the lord of forts*. These words could mean events concealed in memory will never be erased, for it is difficult to reach them. Later in the poem we learn that people are not doing well, while the *fiery gaze* of the persona is able to perceive everything and nothing can hide from it. He observes people's behaviour and attempts to help them in understanding and counteracting the evil which is rife in their surroundings. The stubbornness and lack of willingness to listen to what he has to say causes him pain. He decides to oppose everything even though he is conscious of the danger he might find himself in. There appears in the poem an adder which is the symbol of death. It lives in hiding and acts unexpectedly, while its colouring is designed only to confuse its victim. The poem ends, however, optimistically, when the persona admits that his heart is *the heart of a merciful angel*, who is able to forgive. The said guest of the title desires to show a right, good road. Unfortunately he does not find an audience as there are everywhere in the world places filled with evil, while human hearts are blind and deaf.

Zāhir al-Ġāfirī has shared the entire responsibility for modern poetic experience among his contemporaries in Oman and even outside the country. *He himself believes that the modernist writing experiment in Oman has transcended national, geographical, cultural and social boundaries in order to reach the mass of intellectuals around the world.*⁶

Zāhir al-Ġāfirī is trying to find better future. He is travelling, changing places, people and in the end he is always alone.

⁵ Zāhir al-Ġāfirī, *Az-Za'ir*, op. cit., pp. 41–43.

⁶ Muḥammad al-Yaḥyā'i *Hiwār ma'a Zahir al-Ġafirī*, "Oman Daily Cultural Supplement", 11th March 1993, p. 3.