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Arieh Loya

**POETRY AS A SOCIAL DOCUMENT:
THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE ARAB
WOMAN AS REFLECTED IN THE POETRY
OF NIZÂR QABBÂNÎ**

‘The Arabians created or developed no great art of their own. Their artistic nature found expression through one medium: speech...poetry’

(PHILIP HITTI, *History of the Arabs*)

No other people in the world, perhaps, have given more information in their poetry on their cultural and social life than have the Arabs over the centuries. Many years before the advent of Islam and long before they had any national political organization, the Arabs had developed a highly articulate poetic art, strict in its syntax and metrical schemes and fantastically rich in its vocabulary and observation of detail. The merciless desert, the harsh environment in which the Arabs lived, their ever shifting nomadic life, left almost no traces of their social structure and the cultural aspects of their life. It is only in their poetry – these monuments built of words – that we find such evidence, and it speaks more eloquently than cuneiform on marble statues ever could.

Interestingly enough, Arabic poetry still fulfills the same function in modern times. This study attempts to deal briefly with a touchy problem of Arab society: that of the Arab woman. Nizâr Qabbânî, a contemporary Syrian poet, has devoted most of his poetic output to this problem. Qabbânî speaks of the plight of the Arab woman in her name and with her voice, using the first person feminine in most of his poems in this genre. His poetry reflects not only her problem, but also the mood, experience and agony which Arab youth has undergone in the last three or four decades in respect of their relations with the opposite sex.

Nizâr Qabbânî was born in Damascus in 1923. His father was a fervent Arab nationalist who took part in the movement for Syria’s liberation from foreign French rule. His grandfather, Abû-Khalîl, was a poet and a composer of sorts, as well as the actor of whom it was said that he laid the first foundations of the Egyptian theatre.¹ Qabbânî, then, grew up in an atmosphere of poetry and song in a relatively affluent, albeit traditional, Damascene Muslim family. Damascus

¹ Muḥyi ’l-Dîn Şubḥî, *Nizâr Qabbânî Shâ’iran wa Insânan* (Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-Jadîd, 1965).

was, as it still is, the center of economic, political and cultural life of Syria, as well as the gate through which Western culture (primarily French) infiltrated society. It also was the cradle of Syrian Arab nationalism. Social differences were marked in Damascus as they were in other Arab cities, reflecting themselves in a patchwork of quarters where resided the affluent and where craftsmen, artisans and simple workers lived. The Qabbânî house was located in an old quarter of the city: al-Shâghûr. A garden surrounded the house ('In our firm-embroidered garden/The roof of our house was hidden . . .'¹) where Nizâr spent his youth while he attended elementary and secondary schools, and later when he enrolled at the College of Law of the Syrian University, from which he graduated in 1945.

Qabbânî's youth coincided with World War II, when Syria, like most of the other Arab countries, was undergoing radical change. While the world was shaking with global war, Syria was violently agitated by its struggle to free itself from French rule. Together with the bitter resentment felt against the French in Syria,² there was an angry feeling of inner rebellion among the new generation against their own society's traditional means and values. This new generation, born under the French mandate over their country, and educated in a rather untraditional way, was at odds with the older generation for its reluctance to embrace western ways and technology as a means of catching up with the progress of the world. It rebelled against the tradition of the past, the way of life, the values and concepts of old, and asserted its own, mostly based on western models and drawn from western ideology. As if this was not enough, this rebellion was intensified and aggravated by a disturbing vital problem: the relation of that generation of young Arabs with their feminine counterparts.³

Traditionally, there existed a strict separation of the sexes in Syria as well as in the other Arab countries. Young people of opposite sex did not mingle freely with each other. While the western woman in Europe and America had attained almost full emancipation (Lib Movement's claims notwithstanding) and participated in the social, political, cultural, and economic evolution of the western world, the Arab woman remains confined to the small world of her house and its immediate surroundings. For although the movement for the emancipation of the Arab woman had started before the end of the last century, its effect was slight in practice and extremely gradual. It is true that a certain change in the status of the Arab woman had occurred because of the spread of western education; but in the forties of this century this change was only skin

¹ From his poem 'Baytî' (my house), in his collection *Qaṣâ'id* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijârî, 1964), p. 57.

² For a detailed study of these problems see A. H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon* (London, 1946), also Edmond Rabbath, *Unité syrienne et devenir Arabe* (Paris, 1947).

³ Sex as a powerful force and its effects on social and political upheavals is only recently being studied and taken into consideration by sociologists and political researchers. To my mind, one can hardly disregard this dynamic force when studying modern Arab social movements without risking attaining partial answers.

deep. While the new generation of women went unveiled in Syria and looked not very much different from their western sisters, they still retained conservative social and moral values. Their behavioral patterns, especially towards the opposite sex, were still governed by the traditional taboos of the past. So it was that the new generation of young male Arabs, engaged in a frustrating struggle to change their society, found their female counterparts still part of the society they were fighting. The young man in the Arab world found himself forced to move within the straitjacket of two extremes, for Arab society of that time permitted only that 'insipid relationship between the young which was strictly supervised by their families and which was intended to lead into marriage. This was one extreme. The other was that of carnal relations with prostitutes which, though condemned, was tolerated, accepted and practiced by all.'¹ Girls in particular were severely restricted. The highest value was placed on their immaculate chastity before marriage and complete and unquestionable fidelity after it, no matter what their feelings might be. This of course was a one-way street, for in marriage, sexual relationship was dominated by the male and his impulses, of which jealousy (for the woman was the man's exclusive property) was the strongest and concern and consideration for the woman the slightest. Therefore, when Qabbânî published his first collection of poems in 1942, *Qâlat Lî al-Samrâ* ('The Brunette Said to Me'), though hardly daring if judged by present western standards, it made a rippling wave in Syrian and Arab society in general. The old generation found it repulsive and unacceptable, while the new generation felt in Qabbânî's poems an echo of their own aspirations and personal experiences. Qabbânî thus found his place as a poet treating social themes of his time. He brought to the fore the crucial personal problems of the Arab youth, who were rebelling against their fathers' ways, and for whom the dilemma of the social and legal position of the woman and her relationship with men were the most painful, because they were suppressed by social taboos.

Since he wrote of love and women in a realistic, day-by-day way, Nizâr Qabbânî became the object of severe criticism on the part of the conservative, traditional elements of his society. *Shaykh* 'Alî al-Ṭanṭawî, a prominent religious leader, headed the first of a series of vitriolic attacks on Qabbânî for breaking away from the conventions of classical Arabic poetry and for saying aloud what in their opinion should have been left unsaid. It is in this light, his daring to bring to the open the problems which social convention and taboos kept inhibited, that we must view the importance of Qabbânî's poetry. In any case, despite these severe attacks, including the resigned proclamation of Qabbânî's own father ('This lad, full of illusions, will never be of any use, either to himself or to the world!'),² our poet continued to publish his love

¹ 'Abd al-Jabbâr 'Allûsh, 'Al-Ḥubb wa'l-Mar'a fî Shi'r al-Sayyâb', *al-Âdâb*, 2:4 (Beirut, 1966).

² Nizâr Qabbânî, *Poetry Is a Green Lantern* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijârî, 1964), p. 122.

poems in which he described his feelings toward women, and the injustice done to them by their fathers, brothers, husbands and other legal guardians, as well as by their illicit lovers. He told of the Arab male of his time who used women as a mere tool for pleasure, or as servants or slaves attending to his needs or whims, without the slightest consideration or concern for their feelings or respect for their persons as human beings.

Qabbânî's first collection consisted of 28 short poems written in a simple, economical style, avoiding the usual rhetoric of classical Arabic poetry. The acclaim immediately given by the younger elements of his audience was due to its simplicity and honesty and because it spoke of things that preoccupied their hearts and minds. They also felt vindicated by this poet's departure from the classical poetic tradition, which was part of the fabric of the conventional society they were rebelling against.

QABBÂÎ AND THE QUESTION OF THE ARAB WOMAN

In his first collection, *Qaşâ'id*, as in many still to come, Qabbânî's *leitmotiv* was women. He seemed to be driven by a dark obsessive urge for the opposite sex, long contained and repressed – an almost uncontrollable hunger which the poet tried to sublimate:

There is a woman in my red veins,
Striding with me in the folds of death,
Hissing in my bones, turning my lungs into a forge...
Desire gnaws at my core,
Its semen drawn from the primordial shore...
Compounded in my body is a hunger yearning for another,
Extending compulsive hands...¹

The poet was twenty-one when this collection was published. One would suppose that a large number of its twenty-eight poems had been written a year or two earlier,² namely in 1942. Judging by the content of the poems as well as by the social background of that time, one infers that Qabbânî's sublimation of his repressed physical urges was the outcome of deprivation. Unattainable, his women became idealized, eerie beings whose mere tread made the pavement bloom with flowers ('Tread! for your footsteps/Cause the pavement to blossom!').³ Like many a Muslim Sufi mystic before him, Qabbânî saw the features of God in a beautiful face:

In the form of your face I read,
The glorious form of Allah!⁴

¹ His poem 'A Note to a Reader', included in his collection *The Brunette Said to Me*.

² This fact is confirmed in a handwritten biography in my possession.

³ His poem 'A Robe in Panic', p. 38.

⁴ His poem 'In Front of Her Mansion', p. 55.

It is of his languishing, tormented longing for a woman, that Qabbânî sang, not the actual experience. Of these Qabbânî had yet none, save with some ugly old prostitutes to whose memory he dedicated two (probably three) of the poems of his collection. Otherwise, his yearning for the idealized woman was ready to spring and attach itself to any appealing girl – someone he met accidentally in a casino or a coffee-shop, whom he immediately and readily idealized: *a priori* and with premeditation. In his desperate desire for her, he imagined his cup of coffee yearning for hers!

Near me, she was seated . . .
My coffee-cup
Leaps in my hand from its longing for hers.¹

Or, she may happen to be a mere tourist whom the poet had met in one of the many beautiful mountain resorts of Lebanon. To her, this unknown woman, his heart flew, his urges were roused:

Is it you sitting on a bench!!!
To her I give my lungs, she who is sitting!
Let me cull berries from the fragrant fence
To feed your burgeoning nipple.
I love thee with the tempest of youth,
With twenty [years] that ignore consequences.²

Qabbânî thus lived in a dream of desires and hopes for a woman he did not know – or, knowing her, he could not attain. His fervent sublimated passion was all the more devout because it lacked attainment and gratification, for one can love devoutly only things that remain beyond the dulling impact of reality, and the memory of those beyond our reach stays always green, always unaffected by age and the vicissitudes of time. Deprived of the actual experience, Qabbânî compensated by living with the relics of the women he idealized – icons representing sacred beings, which by default, became themselves sacred: a fragrant handkerchief, a perfumed lock of hair, a letter, a bed, even a walled room:

I live by your red handkerchief
That retained some of your fragrance;
And here lies a letter, your precious prose . . .
A lock of hair, most dear of all you left:
Adored, dancing over the bed.³

Such were then Qabbânî's love poems, the songs of his and his generation's frustrated adolescence, yearning for the unattainable romance about which they read in the novels of the West and saw in their colorful movies. He was attracted by a glimpse of beauty, aroused by a red mouth, or two budding breasts, or

¹ His poem 'In a Coffee-Shop', pp. 63–4.

² His poem 'To a Tourist', p. 102.

³ His poem 'Her Room', p. 73.

attracted by a pair of youthful legs¹ – all aspects of the female body, ever so close but ever so inaccessible, and the sublimated desire to possess them.

At this stage there are no discernible signs that Qabbânî was able to view women as entities in themselves or to be concerned for their inner spiritual life. They were just beautiful females, alluring and disturbing, whom he seemed unable yet to see as equals: partners sharing the joys and sorrows of life with man. Qabbânî was echoing the feelings of his generation of young Arabs, urged by their repressed sexual passions, turning on sleepless, tormented pillows, their minds filled with carnal images of lust, their souls disturbed with the despair of deprivation. These barred any deeper conception of women as human beings.

It is to his mirroring this collective dilemma which beset Arab youths of his generation that Qabbânî owed his initial and immediate success, and later his fame. Indeed, his poems, had they even been devoid of artistic values (which they have not), would still have been a landmark, if not in Arabic poetry, then surely in Arabic sociology. In this respect they are, as Salmâ al-Jayyûsî has penetratingly remarked, 'an important sociological document'.²

Qabbânî comes out differently when he writes about another kind of love: that which he actually experienced, the only kind that was possible in his time and place: that love bought in the brothels of Beirut or Damascus or other Arab urban centers. There was no sublimation on the part of Qabbânî here, no idealization, no blossoming of the asphalt pavement:

In vain you exert yourself. My desire
For your hateful corpse is extinct.
I am abhorred by your sagging breasts,
Nauseated at the sight of your tattered nipples.³

These women Qabbânî viewed with stark realism: they are old and repulsive, their breasts are sagging, their armpits are 'filled with worms and disease'.⁴ Owing to this realism born of experience, the women come out alive and distinct. We find earthy, individual details: a gold tooth, pale thighs, the smell of cheap, loud perfume, an eyebrow over-groomed and painted 'like the walls of a cemetery', a face marred by smallpox, shrinking breasts 'like dried figs'. These are not the women glimpsed from afar, desired women whom he supposed to be perfect, infinitely beautiful, always fragrant and endlessly radiant. But here Qabbânî's humanism comes to the fore: his descriptions of them are not confined to disgust and abhorrence. The poet is full of compassion, and he blames

¹ See his poems 'A Mouth', 'Firm Breasts', 'Your Breast', 'A Symphony on the Pavement', etc.

² Salmâ *Khaḍrâ* al-Jayyûsî, *Wathîqa Ijtimâ'iyya Hâmma*, vol. 11 (al-Âdâb, Beirut, 1957), p. 1.

³ His poem 'To a Hag', page 131 in *The Brunette Said to Me*.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 133.

the institutions of society for their plight. He ruminates sadly and with an undertone of anger for their predicament:

What slavery! A woman lies under the [man] who bought her
For a few contemptible paper notes. . .
How despicable is the price of a human being,
Claimed to be an end, is made but a means
A woman is held responsible if she sins,
A man is not.
One bed joins them:
The woman is condemned, the man protected!¹

Thus from the very beginning of his poetic career, Qabbânî sided with the Arab woman and held man and the society he dominated to be responsible for the wrongs done to her. Qabbânî was understanding and compassionate at all times toward women, save toward the adulteress. For her he had nothing but disdain because he viewed her as a sinner against her children since he was convinced that adultery had a destructive influence upon them.

Nizâr Qabbânî's stand remained essentially unchanged throughout his twenties and early thirties, which coincided with the forties and fifties of the present century (in the meantime he joined the Syrian diplomatic service after graduating from the Law School in 1945). His next four collections of poems, published during 1944 to 1950, were written in more or less the same vein. He remained obsessed by women's outer appearance and by their bodies, heedless of their inner qualities as persons. His erotic poems make the great majority of his first collections seem like one long poem in which the poet sings repetitious songs to many blurred, indistinct women. Here and there a new dimension is added to his erotic visions: nature, the moon, the clouds, rain, sparrows, even a bedroom in the city. The stage of his love poetry is wider and more delineated. One infers that Qabbânî has finally graduated from theory to practice, from dreams to actual experience:

When I kissed your right breast
You exclaimed: 'What about the left one?'²

Our poet's graduation from longing to actual love-making is even apparent in the titles of his poems. No longer 'To a Tourist', or 'Her Room', or 'Her Long Earrings', but 'The Savage-Lipped', or 'The First Kiss', or 'With a Woman':

She whined like a tired wolf
Wanting me as a lioness would
With a desire that had a hand!
Her dark legs under the blanket: slithering snakes,
Her body on fire – frightening, ruddy,

¹ His poem 'The Despot', *The Brunette Said to Me*, p. 154.

² His poem 'Whispers' in *The Childhood of a Breast*, 1948.

Her necklace swam over her young breasts
 Full of tunes.
 My desire, like her necklace swam:
 Panting, huffing, hissing.¹

His imagery remained carnel.

Then, in 1950, Qabbânî published a collection of thirty-two poems entitled *You Are Mine* (*Antî Lî*). He was twenty-seven, and one feels a certain maturity, a certain toning down of his flight of erotic fancy. For the first time the poet seemed able to peep into the inner world of his beloved. Nothing much: a dialogue between his beloved, who was excited at the prospect of meeting her lover, and her sister:

The lipstick! my sister. . .
 And where are my cosmetics,
 And my comb,
 And the jewelry? . . .
 In me rages a passion
 Like that of a storm.²

Our poet has at last discovered that a woman is human like a man, could speak of earthly things such as lipsticks and combs – but, above all, could have raging desires like those of a man. She is no longer the impassive, glorious goddess enthroned on Olympic peaks or exalted on eerie, inaccessible ivory towers. However, it is not until he reached thirty-three, in 1956, when he published his fifth collection that we find him free of his stormy, unrequited physical urges. We find him, at last, not so much concerned with his beloved's body as with her mind. He ceases indulging in nostalgic descriptions of her breasts, legs and thighs, and wants to feel how important his love is for her: a poet's love immortalizing his beloved:

Heed not what people may say
 For you would not be great
 Were it not for my great love for you.

At this stage, Qabbânî entered the world of the Arab woman, and through the use of the soliloquy he conveyed her feelings, hopes, joys and sorrows, her attitudes toward man, mainly the cruel man, the opportunist, and the unfeeling. Perhaps it was the most outstanding achievement of Qabbânî's poetry that he wrote with a woman's voice, presenting the Arab woman's point of view.

In three poems in this collection we see Qabbânî at his best. In 'Pregnant', 'Letter from a Spiteful Lady', and 'The Vessels of Pus', the poet speaks in the first person *feminine*, as a woman would, relating her plight. In 'The Vessels of

¹ His poem 'With a Woman', *ibid.* p. 168.

² His poem 'The Two Sisters', from *You Are Mine*, p. 16.

Pus' we hear the bitter words of resentment against the man and the place he forces her to occupy in society, and also against the marital relationship in which the man uses woman to satisfy his carnal urges against her will:

No! No, I do not want,
For the fiftieth time I told you I do not want!
(But you had me against my will)
Then you buried your head in the pillow, you brute,
You turned your face to the wall...
Turned your back to me,
Me, whose veins are barking,
Whose hair is scattered on her shoulders...
You even stole the cover,
Murdered my sole hope, tearing it to pieces,
A while ago you were excited like a runaway bull,
And now you lie beside me: a cage of jerked meat,
Ugly jerked meat.
No! Abdul Hamid did not die:
He survives in you all...
How many a martyred breast fell under your whips
And many a shapely waist
Wept of your selfishness.

O, murderers, pirates, caverns of ice!
To you we are vessels of pus.
And woe to the vessels of pus
Which can neither choose nor refuse!

'A Letter from a Spiteful Lady' speaks of the perfidy of men toward the innocent women whom they seduce by words of love and sweet promises of joint happiness, only to be discarded for new victims in a vicious circle of criminal deception:

I can see her [the next victim] beside the fireplace,
Sitting in the corner, on the same chair,
I can see you give her your hand,
The same icy hand,
The same repeated stories you had told me,
Raising the same cup you had offered me,
The cup you poisoned me with.

In 'Pregnant' a girl informs her lover that she is pregnant. He yells at her and sends his servant

...to push me out in the desolate street.
O, you who had sown shame in my core.
Broken my heart!...
What?!!! Do you spit on me?
While vomit is in my throat!

Fingers of nausea choke me,
And your inauspicious heir in my womb,
And shame crushes me,
And a dark truth fills me:
That I am pregnant!

Your fifty liras . . . what for?!
How ridiculous!
To abort me?!!!
To sew my shroud?
Is this then my price?
The price of fidelity! You rotten bastard!
I did not come for your filthy money,
Thanks!
I shall drop that child
For I want not a villain for its father!

Perhaps the most famous and socially significant poem in this collection is the one entitled 'Bread, Hashish and Moon', where Qabbânî lists the ills of Arab society, placing poverty and polygamy at the head of this list:

On nights in the East when the moon is full,
The East sheds all dignity and strife
The millions who run without shoes,
Who believe in four wives
And in the Day of Resurrection,
The millions who find bread
Only in dreams,
Living in houses of coughs,
Not knowing medicine . . .

In his next collection of poems, entitled *My Beloved* (*Ḥabibati*), Qabbânî seems to have undergone a further evolution. These were published in 1961 when the poet was thirty-eight. They reflect not only the personal maturity that is usually connected with age, but also the beginning of a more normal approach to woman, a better understanding of them as human beings whom one can love not only with his hormones, so to say, but with his mind. This new approach reflects the change that occurred in Arab urban society in which a new generation grew with a freer contact with the opposite sex, and therefore a better and more encompassing understanding. The majority of the twenty-eight poems in this collection again involved love. But the poet in addition was seeking friendship. His love is 'greater than all words':

I have for love
Expressions
Of which no inkpot has ever thought!

His imagery is picturesque and his verse rarely becomes trite. However, it is the words that dance in his poetry, not the limbs of a woman's desired body:

My lady!
I have in my notebook thousands of words
Dancing!
One clad in a yellow dress,
One in a red one.

In this stage, Qabbânî is more than ever the spokesman for the Arab woman rebelling against her status in society, for although certain favorable reforms were made in the Arab world concerning woman's position – Syria granted full elective rights to women in May 1959, Egypt became the first Arab country where two women were elected to the National Assembly in July 1957, and Iraq was the first Arab country to appoint a woman to a ministerial post in July 1959 – the Arab woman, in general, remained dominated by the male, her liberty, rights, education and self-expression severely restricted. In his 'Voice from the Harem' Qabbânî touches upon the quality of love against which the Arab woman rebels in her struggle to be loved for herself, for what she is, and not for her body:

You love me!
No, do not say it again,
For you make me laugh...
'You love me'
Like you love any, any woman.
'You love me'
I am a face
Among the many faces in your color book,
A yellow paper you will discard after you read...
One card in a deck of cards
that you take out
And put back.
When you find a new toy
You will destroy me...

You want me!
A new favorite that you will bury
Behind the walls of a chronic Harem!
But I,
I am seeking – O, you exploiter! –
A man that would love me,
For you do not know how to love.
You are a collector of objects
Your field is the eyes [of women]
Not what is behind those eyes.
You are a child playing
With colored beads...

In his poem 'Love and Petroleum' he speaks in the same vein, asserting the right of the Arab woman to gain her freedom and self-respect:

When will you understand?
 O, unbridled camel of the desert
 Whose face is nibbled by smallpox...
 That I will not be here
 Ashes in your cigarette,
 A head
 Among the thousand heads that lie on your pillows...
 A breast over a marble
 On which your fingerprints would be recorded.
 When will you understand?
 That you cannot numb me
 With your rank and power
 That you can never take over the world
 With your oil, your concessions,
 Your petroleum with which your cloak reeks,
 Your cars which you lay, numerous,
 At the feet of your princesses.
 You slave of your emotions,
 To whom wives are one
 Of many hobbies that you heap
 By the tens on your pleasure bed,
 That you stuff
 Like insects pinned to the walls of your halls,
 When will you understand?

In 1968 Qabbânî explained the reasons for his assuming a female identity, speaking with a female voice. In his book *Diary of a Woman Who Does Not Care*, in which he again elaborated on the social problems of the Arab world, he wrote in his introduction, and at the request of the girl-students of the American University of Beirut:

This is the book of every woman whom this stupid, ignorant [Near-]East sentenced and executed before she could open her mouth. Because of this...the [Near-]East needs a man like me to put on women's clothes and borrow her eyelashes and bracelets in order to write about her. Is it not the irony of fate that I should cry out with a woman's voice while women are unable to speak with their own natural voice?!... We men...claim to be civilized while we are more primitive than the hyenas of Siberia [sic!]. We study at universities in Europe and return even more savage than the Mau Mau. We present flowers to our beloved, but we saw off our sisters' necks [if found to have love affairs]. The freedom which I am asking for women is the freedom to love, to say to a man: 'I love you', without her head thrown into the trash can... We need to break down the sex superstition, to look at it in a civilized, scientific way... I urge you to raise yourselves to the level of human beings!...¹

I have quoted Qabbânî at some length here because this is one of the few occasions where he summarizes his viewpoint and explains the much criticized

¹ Nizâr Qabbânî, *Yawmiyyât Imra'a Lâ Mubâliya* (Beirut: Manshûrât Nizâr Qabbânî, 1969).

trait of his poetry, namely his speaking in a female voice, usually considered a disgrace in Arab culture.

Although the majority of Qabbânî's poems are either addressed to women or speak in a woman's voice, they leave us with the impression that these women were not specific, well-delineated persons on the whole. The underlying reason may be the general reluctance of Arab poets since pre-Islamic times to refer explicitly to their beloved lest they be recognized and disgraced (as would their tribes).¹ On the other hand, it may be due to the poet's longing for women, which remained ungratified for long frustrated years. His unrequited passion, ever ready to spring at any fleeting feminine feature, caused these features to be superimposed one upon the other. The many faces and bodies, desired but not possessed, thus became one hazy, indistinct identity. Judged by the bulk of his poems, Qabbânî seems to have no particular woman in view. One also finds his love poems to be repetitious in the sense that the themes are fairly limited, while the poet's artistic talent is only deployed in the variations.

The stress on variations at the expense of themes, if judged by Western critical values and Western artistic standards, may be branded as lacking in poetic skill or devoid of artistic imagination. But Western critics should always keep in mind that Nizâr Qabbânî, although influenced and inspired by Western culture and despite his vociferous preachings in its favor, is first and foremost an *Arab* poet of Near Eastern culture and Near Eastern background, addressing himself to an *Arab* audience imbued with Near Eastern values and artistic standards. The application of foreign standards of literary criticism, be they Western or otherwise, as criteria for gauging Qabbânî's poetic skill or effectiveness, should be handled with care for they are bound to be misleading. For the Near East, or rather the whole Eastern world for that matter, has always stressed variations rather than themes, the small differences rather than the sweeping distinct differences. This applies to poetry, music, painting, and all aspects of art. Involvement with detail is one of the most characteristic features of Eastern art. Arabic music, to give one example, sounds to the unaccustomed ears of Westerners monotonous and repetitive. In fact it is rarely so. Untrained ears fail to notice the small differences, sometimes infinitesimal, in the repeated musical themes. An outstanding example is, perhaps, the Japanese much-mentioned movie film *Rashomon*. Here the same basic story is repeated by four characters, all witnesses to the same happening. While each of these witnesses relates the same story, the details in tone, facial expression, and the story itself, vary. To the untrained eye, it would seem that the same story has been repeated four times. What monotony!

¹ G. E. von Grunebaum in *Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 264, states: 'Social custom supports impersonality. In Mohammedan times the family feels disgraced when one of their womanfolk is mentioned by a poet as the object of his affection. . . It is bad manners to use other than fictitious names in erotic verse.'

Qabbânî's excellence, then, lies in his manner of dealing with the variations on his theme. This is where his originality is to be sought, and where he displays the qualities of a gifted and delicate poet. His style is easy and flowing. His artistic ideal is that 'art should lift up the veil from tragedy without seeking solutions'.¹ Qabbânî touches upon his subject with the tenderness and delicacy of a butterfly. He seems more like a painter using his brush than a poet his pen. He has aptly entitled one of his poetic collection 'Drawing by Words' (1966) (*al-Rasm bi'l-Kalimât*). Qabbânî *paints* a scene, seeking neither cause nor effect. Like Wordsworth, he wants to carry his feelings alive to the heart of the reader as an immediate excitement. In the introduction to his book *The Childhood of a Breast* (*Tufûlat Nahd*) Qabbânî says: 'Let us then read these poems as we would look at the moon.' In this regard, Qabbânî's artistic ideal is inspired by the philosophy of Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), who viewed poetry as 'knowledge in the sense of intuition or contemplation, not theological, not conceptual, not critical'.² Perhaps his poem 'A Note to the Reader' contains his manifesto:

My characters are a flock of sparrows
Spreading their black wings over the bright sky.
I am the character, its nerves, pulse, beat,
Torn asunder before it is born.
I spilled my paint-jars like rivers
Over my green motherland.
I imagined until scents became visible
And the vibrating echo was smelled.³

Above all, Qabbânî, as he described himself, is spontaneous

I felt 'something', so I created 'something',
On the spur of the moment, without intending.⁴

Be that as it may, and apart from the artistic value of his poetry, Qabbânî's poems remain documents which, above all, reflect the social problems of Arab youth and their inter-sex relationship in the Arabic society of the last three decades of the present century.

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¹ Nizâr Qabbânî, *Qasâ'id*, p. 175.

² Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 146.

³ Nizâr Qabbânî, *The Brunette Said to Me*, p. 25.

⁴ Nizâr Qabbânî, *The Childhood of a Breast*, p. 9.