

Journal of Cyberian Cultural Studies

Volume 7(1) (January 2003)

Special Edition: The Poetry of Zahra al-Zahra (II)

The Journal of Cyberian Cultural Studies, founded in 1996, is a quarterly review of art, music, literature, and media in Equatorial Cyberspace.

Poetry of Conflict: Interpreting Zahra al-Zahra's Poetry

Shira Kogut
(Special to the JCCS)

Zahra al-Zahra wrote her last book *Echoes of Angst: Does Not a Zebra Dream?* in 1995. It was more political than her first book of poetry *The Peacock Laments at Dawn*. When one interprets some of the poems from the last book one sees how she hides her criticisms of the 18-year old on going civil war, in Brynania, using elements of nature. Her metaphorical language is used to describe the oppression of the Zaharian people, to criticize the government, and to press for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Brynania. Due to the books political criticisms al-Zahra came under the suspicion of the military junta and was arrested in November of 1996. Her whereabouts remain unconfirmed, but her poetry rings loud in our minds and hearts. A peaceful solution must be found to end this conflict and bring freedom to the Zaharians of Brynania.

Zahra al-Zahra was born on the day that Brynania received independence from France, but the government was in the hands of a Zaharian, Dr. Naul Poble. The government was over-thrown by General Rudolph Arvantidis in February 1973. The General, who was of Brynanian, origin restored the power of the country to the Brynanian majority. Since then despite more coups the power has remained in Brynanian hands and that is the cause of this civil war. Al-Zahra was very young when Brynania was under Zaharian power, but without a doubt her father a political leader in the Zaharian government influenced the political nature of her poetry.

In her poetry al-Zahra never quite defines what she means by freedom. She puts forward a few possibilities. Freedom could mean complete political independence in a Zaharian state or perhaps simply liberty under a democratic Brynanian government. In all three poems that will be analyzed the constant trend is toward an end to the conflict. She does not allude to what result the end of the war must have, but she does allude to how it must end and that is in peace.

Traditionally al-Zahra has been committed to a non-violent resolution of the conflict, but the omission of Zaharian rebels from her poetry can be translated in two ways. The first is that she abhors their actions and does not want to glorify them by acknowledging their actions or existence. The second is that she silently applauds their actions, but saying it out loud would be contrary to her own anti-violence stand. I believe the former is the correct assumption due to the Brynanian-Icasian roots on her mother's side she could not possibly condone the destruction of her own family.

Another fascinating characteristic of her poetry is that she does not have any titles for any of her works. This could mean that she does not like to give titles because titles are seen as labels and she does not want her art to be labeled the way people are labeled. Due to al-Zahra mixed ethnicity she is more acutely aware of the ethnic tensions within Brynania on a personal level, therefore she is most likely sensitive to the effects of labeling people. Perhaps by not labeling her poems she wishes to convey the message that when peace comes people will be seen as people and not according to their ethnic origin.

In the first poem she writes like the mango falling from the willow tree, the Birds of Freedom always survive the storm. In the first part of this poem she combines two things that do not actually belong together, a mango and a willow tree. These two elements that clearly do not go together are symbols of not belonging. She means to show how Zaharians in Brynania feel as though they do not belong. Her use of the willow tree is also ironic because its full name is the weeping willow so it symbolizes the crying of the Zaharian people. The act of the mango falling from the tree is a reference to the fact that power in Brynania slipped from Zaharian hands. The second part of the poem does not state how the birds survive the storm, but simply that they survive. She insinuates that Zaharians will survive the civil war. She uses the metaphor of a storm to represent the war because both cause destruction and elicit havoc and chaos onto society. She uses the symbol of the bird because the bird is always seen as the symbol of freedom because of its ability to fly. Although freedom is in the middle of the sentence she places a capital at its beginning because it is the name of the bird, but even more so because she wants to place a strong emphasis on freedom.

The second poem goes as follows Chameleon, Those who claim to govern. Shades of green. Promise of PEACE. Shades of black. We burn with the fire of WAR Chameleon, Shed your skin. This poem is fascinating because she uses the chameleon and its capability to change colours in order to describe the government and its changing face of corruption. At the end of the poem by instructing the chameleon to shed its skin she is demanding the government shed its lies and corruption. Begin this poem by replacing the word Chameleon with the word government because she is talking directly to it and at once her meaning is clear. By using the words claim to govern she decrees that the government is indeed not ruling in the proper manner that a government should. The colour green represents money, which incriminates the government for their role in the diamond trade and the greed they shown by perpetuating the civil war for their own monetary gain. Peace is written entirely in capitals to emphasize that the government promised its people peace, but the colour black represents the death of that promise. Fire initiates the same destruction as a war and both are also not easy to stop. The chameleon is the government who must cease their corruption and keep the promises they have made to their people.

The final poem shows the author's frustration with the failed peace process. The snake lies sleeping in the grass, bloated from swallowing freedom in one gulp. Nearby, the ants cry out, Struggling along beneath the weight of the Rubber Plant of Peace. The snake is a dishonest and sly creature therefore it represents the government while the ants hard working, strong, and responsible insects represent the Zaharians. The size of the ants versus the snake is also a representation of the small Zaharian community versus the larger ethnic Brynanian majority. The inaction of the sleeping snake represents the government's unwillingness to stop the war. It is remarkable that a snake can unlock its jaw and effortlessly swallow its food without chewing in the same way the government swallows its people's freedom whole. The Zaharians cry out about their oppression. The reason a rubber plant was chosen as the plant of peace was because peace has continually been recoiled through failed peace attempts the way one would bounce off rubber. The Zaharians want peace, but it is a weight on their shoulders because they seem to be the only ones searching for it. The government is not, so they are carrying the weight alone.

One can only wonder what al-Zahra must be thinking as she sits segregated from the world and from her people, a political prisoner. Does she know the events of the on going civil war? Does she continue to write her critical poetry or has she broken under the whip of her confiners? One can only pray that this proud woman continues to remain a strong voice of honest criticism even in the face of utter hardship. Zahra al-Zahra the major political cultural icon, whose poetry crosses the ethnic divide and falls on all

hearts of those who want the violence to end, still remains a source of inspiration for all peace seekers within Brynania and the world at large.

About Zahra al-Zahra

Zahra al-Zahra was born in 1961 in McGilldishu/Duchovnyville, on the day of Brynanian independence from France. Her father was a local Zaharian politician (and, briefly, Minister of Culture in the Poble government), her mother an artist of Brn-Icasian ethnicity. Zahra was awarded a French government scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in 1982, but in 1985 she returned to Brynania to complete her studies at the University of Grenoble (later, Hamraville)--in order, she explained, to be closer to her now war-torn people. In 1987 her first book of poetry (*The Peacock Laments at Dawn*) became a national best-seller, and she became (along with the national football team) one of the few cultural icons spanning Brynania's deepening ethnic divide.

Since the [previous edition of JCCS featuring the poetry of Ms. al-Zahra](#), previously lost or misplaced poetry has been unearthed by various scholarly groups. Zahra al-Zahra remains in prison.

The following was recently uncovered during an archival search in Aiku in July 2002:

Love live a free Duchovnyville!

Darkness extends her icy tentacles across my eyes like a California power emergency.

Great globs of cold oatmeal fall from my eyes

Blinding.

I am as a bat, escaped from my cave only to be trampled by a lunatic goat fed on rancid apples.

The seas wash over the rotting hulks of the once fine vessels

Calling to memory the zebra's tail,

swishing at tse tse flies that will leave it bleeding from the nostrils.

Ebola.

Everywhere is stinking, rotting oatmeal.

It oozes across the land as a blight of dutch elm disease.

Not even the border guards can keep it out.

For we all must have firewood.

Free your minds, Free Zahra!

Forthcoming in the April 2003 edition of JCCS:

- The new season of "Cyberian Idol": everybody cover your ears!
- Concordian Royal Ballet Company presents "Simsim Lake"
- Mixed metaphors and their use in Cyberian prose