

The Leisurely Art of the Goldsmith Applied to Language: Sophia Naz's *Date Palms*

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What does capitalism do to language? It impoverishes nouns even as it produces an elephantiasis of them. Pre-capitalist literary cultures reused a small stock of nouns by infusing each noun with multiple meanings over generations as gender-, class-, caste- or religiously exclusive literary communities reformulated a relatively stable and small stock of themes. Recall the old saying attributed to different Anglo-American scholars of classical Arabic literature that “in Arabic, every word means one thing, its opposite, something obscene, and something about a camel.” Though a jocular exaggeration, it captures a truth about several pre-capitalist literary cultures which allowed punning,

orononymy, syllepsis and suchlike verbal ingenuity on a scale (e.g. an entire narrative poem in Sanskrit readable backwards and forwards as two different poems) that make Edward Lear and Ogden Nash's best accomplishments seem like party witticisms. Capitalism made this impossible when it assigned each new commodity just one name even as it led to a burgeoning of names to match its burgeoning of commodities. Such monosemy was also a result of the increased rationalization of social life in capitalist societies as larger bureaucracies meant a more ramified jargon, such technical vocabulary permeating everyday life to ever-greater degrees.

What this meant for the lyric was that, since it no longer had rhetoric proper to itself, its creativity lay in how it appropriated the many non-lyrical languages that permeated everyday life. In his 1923 poem "Of Modern Poetry", Wallace Stevens captured

this loss and shift by characterizing modern poetry as a displacement of theatre:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

That this poem composed at the height of Euro-American modernism spoke of modern poetry as an interiorization of theatre captures the shift of status for poetic speech from a kind of public or interpersonally agreed upon discourse to a private and provisionally satisfactory whispering of the mind to itself. Poetry was now an inner dialogue in a local language about what mattered locally:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet

The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.

This is why, as the literary critic Helen Vendler remarked of the long poem in English since the early twentieth century and as the philosopher Theodor Adorno remarked of the nineteenth century German lyric poet Heine, each poet has had to reinvent the modern lyric by renewing its relation to “the non-lyrical surround” (Vendler), the ambient noise of journalistic and social media clichés, bureaucratic, political and scientific jargon and so forth. Recognizing the impossibility of lyricism, the aesthetically successful modern lyric has been an assemblage of non-lyrical languages.

Another linguistic effect of capitalism is the hegemony of the sentence. The metrical uniformity of lines in pre-modern poetic forms ensured that the

line and then the phrase within it were the main linguistic units of meaning, not the sentence. This is why a millennium of manuals and treatises in Persian-Arabic-Urdu poetics before colonialism do not even mention the sentence and focus on the hemistich instead. But realism changed that. Realism, the preeminent literary mode of early capitalist societies, entailed the valorisation of the everyday as focus of literary attention. Not only everyday subjects but everyday forms of speech, too, were now imagined to best represent reality. The heritage of traditional prosody in which a unit of meaning more or less coincided with the metrically uniform poetic line now served poets less and less when they tried to formulate everyday states of being. A sense was pervasive that the shocks, incompleteness and dislocations of modern experience had estranged the modern self from ages when meter was a verbal icon of real or desired worldly order. An inner hesitation,

argued the poet Denise Levertov, ought to determine where to break a line. And yet, the canon of twentieth century Anglo-American poetry didn't break with the sentence itself. Instead, it fractured it, letting it spill across uneven line endings. The reasons for this are as various as the poetics of each poet's oeuvre. But the retention of the sentence is the retention of semantic connection with the discourses of the novel, scholarship and journalism. It has also been the main means to the adoption of the chatty, almost prosy tone of so much American English poetry for the last century.

Sophia Naz's second collection of poems, *Date Palms* (2017), makes remarkable interventions in both of the above respects. It renews lyric language by refusing the monosemy of nouns and by estranging clichés. And it resists the hegemony of the sentence by making the phrase the unit of meaning. In doing both, as I will show below, it appropriates

the legacy of the Persian-Urdu ghazal. Consider these four opening sections of “Meter Taxi”:

Staccato and vibrato
are twinned
parts of wordless speech

The *tuktuk* takes time
and cuts it so fine
past my fellow travellers

What’s in a line
that has lost its meter, spilled
into a haggle of currency?

Language as bone of contention
dogs me

As with the titles of many other poems in this volume, the very opening already tells us that what we are reading of here isn't just a "meter taxi". We begin by reading of two patterns of "wordless speech", alerting us to the other or prosodic sense of "meter", a premonition confirmed by the third section's punning "line/ that has lost its meter". "Twinned" alliteratively matches the second section's wholly alliterative "The *tuktuk* takes time", a phrase that is "staccato and vibrato" at once. The "fine" in "cuts it so fine" alliteratively echoes "fellow" in "fellow travellers". We are not reading of - or not reading only of - a form of transport in a South East Asian tourist location; we are reading of (and listening to) a thing that is at once a vehicle out there somewhere in a South East Asian city as well as a kind of unfamiliar speech. Nouns in Naz's poetry simultaneously name things that are out there in the

world and in here within the speaker, often across two or three or more languages.

Lyric intimacy, presented as a kind of subversive nomadism in “In the City of Proper Nouns” (“as if speaking was leaping / from building to building”, 40), dissolves even proper nouns:

The rulers of the City of Proper Nouns
hated and feared the lovers
who spoke only of you and me

In “Flight” the speaker sees “Karachi” blur in rain from aeroplane height: “That’s how this city, that everyone insists / is Karachi / has disappeared”. By this insistent sensual muddying of the proper noun, leitmotif of nationalism and token of governmental surveillance, Naz’s lyric speaker inhabits a

cartography made up of languages that blur into each other rather than of discrete spaces.

Such inter-linguistic blurring most conspicuously takes place through the many happily un-footnoted if italicised Urdu and other non-English nouns that appear in her poems (*pallu, kal, rasam, malmal, tawaf, komal dha, taan, khali...*), thus addressing a reader habituated to South Asian diglossia. The reader who knows no South Asian language other than English is the none the worse for it because the visual and aural context of such vernacular nouns either lets one infer their dictionary meaning or settle for their half-understood but equally important sensual look or feel.

But there are other ways in which we hear other languages in her English. Naz's poetry abounds in figures of speech that categories from European

rhetoric scarcely cover but which are better covered by ones from the Persian-Urdu ghazal tradition to which Naz, by the very choice of this penname as by other poetic choices, bears an explicit affinity. The categories of alliteration, amphiboly, anaphora, paronomasia, synesthesia and mixed metaphor fail to capture the specificity of what the poem “Holloway” does with its own title, exploring hollowness and way-ness at once. A reader familiar with the pre-colonial Persian-Urdu ghazal tradition would recall such etymological splittings and plumbings of a word’s connotations from the jigsaw puzzle-like intricacy of Ghani Kashmiri’s seventeenth century Persian ghazals or Ghalib’s nineteenth century Persian and Urdu ghazals. Persian-Arabic rhetoric taxonomized varieties of lexemic similarity to a greater degree than European rhetoric, recognising varieties and degrees of orthographic and acoustic *tajnis* or ‘homonymy’. Many of these sub-

categories of homonymy perfectly describe Naz's figures of speech where English rhetoric cannot. The point is not that – or not just that – Naz ought to be read through a bi-cultural lens but that her poems cite Islamicate rhetorical practices that, in their time, were rooted in disciplines of ethical self-transformation. Arguably, the ultimate stakes of Naz's poetry, too, are ethical ones concerning how to live virtuously in a world riven by nationalism and borders, linguistic and otherwise. Such virtue in her poetry lies in a quality of attention to ambiguity as a way to arrest progress.

Special mention must be made of an innovation that cannot be credited to any tradition, Islamicate or Euro-American, an innovation I will call “interlinear amphiboly”. Aristotle recognised amphiboly when he disapproved of it in *On Sophistical Refutations* as a “fallacy” where a sentence was amenable to more

than one interpretation although none of its parts had more than one meaning. For all that, poets in Islamicate and European traditions had no qualms about using amphiboly and Persian-Arabic rhetoric even authorized it by listing it as *idmāj*, a term whose Arabic root means “braiding”. But they did so in metrical poetry while Naz does so in free verse. Specifically, she does so across two lines.

This innovation deserves singling out because it presents a distinct logic for breaking a line. This is not the modernist way (e.g. T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”) of signalling the fractured quality of modern urban experience that involved the use of freestanding or grammatically disconnected phrases. It also distinguishes itself from so many sloppy free verse poets who break their lines for no reason other than that they want to turn their prose into what they think is poetry by stacking it

vertically. Naz breaks lines to seed doubt about whether and how units of linguistic meaning could end while often remaining grammatically continuous across a line break.

Consider the following two examples: “Date Palms”, the title poem, is an extended play on the calendrical sense of “date” and the “palm” of the hand. It ends with: “Day is the color of half / and half, a cloudy presence / hides your past / Drink it down, stare at the grounds / Night is the taste of lost earth.” *Day*, the syllable that opens “date”, is “the color of half”, a phrase glossing the poem’s earlier use of the Urdu word *kal* that means both “yesterday” and “tomorrow”. But it is also “half and half” or the North American mixture of cream-and-milk. The line “Day is the color of half” makes sense by itself but also makes sense when read continuously with the next line. This is no mere virtuosity for this is how

this poem about middle age (“*kal*, sums up / your middle age where / yesterday and tomorrow / have the same name”) embeds autobiographical references in the rhythms and materiality of language, refusing what Helen Vendler once called “first-order transcriptions”. (This is equally true of the many other autobiographical references in this volume, none of them simplistic documentations of memory.)

The second section of “Hours” opens thus: “Nippled bells on each side of her / glass face, alarming in beauty”. Each line makes sense by itself as well as in succession. Such examples abound across this volume, keeping the reader from linear reading across line breaks by functionally ambivalent caesuras.

Though not a single ghazal appears in it, *Date Palms* must be considered an appropriation of that genre’s

heritage. Indeed, it seems to me worthier of membership in the ghazal's tradition than so many other English language ghazals. For all that they replicate the ghazal's overt structure of couplets and phrase-rhymed second hemistichs, scores of English (and hundreds of modern Urdu) ghazals do not work to inherit what makes the form especially precious and difficult in a world that commodifies language: they do not, like Naz, make polysemic use of nouns and do not foreground the phrase at the expense of sentence syntax in such myriad ways. Reading the ghazal-like back eddies, loops and braidings that structure Naz's best poems demands philology – what Nietzsche called “the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language” – not progress.