

The Tripolitanian

His shirts were white as snow; a pure rarity to find in the desert.

“My son, you must escape with the others! We will help you climb, but run as soon as you reach the other side - we will follow you from behind!”

“But Buba, the wall is too high. Who will help you over?”

“We will find a way. Now go: climb.”

Shots.

“*Buba, buba!*”

“Khuuuuuu.”

The ghostly, painful sound of the soul being released as Sessi ran hissed: through the walls, down to the tips of the hairs inside his ears.

The early sun protruded through the roof made of palm tree branches, into the mud hut, through to Sessi's eyes; he awoke instantly as fresh as anyone could in the Sahara desert. It felt sticky and humid although he didn't take notice of it. It was a beautiful morning: the sand was as calm as ever. He hesitated for a moment and then stumbled over to the jug and bowl to wash himself for morning prayers. It was early: he struggled to open his eyes. His hands gathered water together and crashed it against his face, forcing his eyes apart. He was wide awake from his dream.

Sessi progressed in purifying himself in such a delicate way: using water to clean his hands, nose face and arms three times, followed by his hair, ears and lastly feet. Five times a day he would follow this routine, sometimes more, other times less, but the number of times did not matter. Libya was simple, life was simple and so pleasing God was pleasurable. Cleanliness was essential in the life of being a servant to God and Sessi would not willingly present himself in any other way.

Sessi started to put on a traditional short knee length dress, like an over-sized shirt, though the sleeves were loose and the buttons on the front stopped three quarters of the way down, rather than near the bottom. The material was “sensible”. A beige set of waistcoats were placed over the top: Farmla and Bidieya, which consisted of elaborate embroidery and décor, though the simplicity mirrored that of the desert; they draped down to his hips. Along with these was a pair of loose, beige trousers which were tightened with a long belt-like piece of cord, enlooped into the top of the garment. Over these a thick white sheet wrapped over half his body and left shoulder, as if to prevent the devil from whispering. Traditional Libyan clothes consisted of five layers, like a mosquito perfectly preserved through layer upon layer of rock. He took pride in his appearance.

A true patriot, that was his status; his neighbours knew this very well. Many times in his life would he give; he never held on to his money tightly because he knew it came to him from God, and it could all be taken away the instance it came - just as the Angel of Death comes down upon souls at inexplicable times. Money wasn't necessary to lead a happy life in his eyes: it was the knowledge he attained from books and ancient Greek arts that kept him content. Riches were only a method of testing, and his test was yet to conclude.

The sand stretched as far as the eye could see. He did not know what it was but there was something daunting and captivating about this primaeval orange ocean. It was written in the waves of landscape undulating to the horizon. It was somehow unusual, something seemingly unsettled, though to pinpoint it would have been unimaginable. The skies were filled with crimson sandy clouds that weren't unusual for the desert, but there was something wrong; Sessi felt it. Today was different to yesterday; he knew deep down it would not be the same feeling tomorrow.

The call for morning prayers echoed out from the roof of the mosque, breaking the peaceful silence in the little village, though the words were not abrupt, nor were they disturbing to Sessi's ears. His soul embraced the calling which soothed him and his soul into a state of calm. These were God's words; they acted like medicine for those who understood the remedy. With "Allahakbar" he soon submitted himself in entirety. His mind was overshadowed deeply in the thoughts of life's purpose and meaning - what was he on earth for? What was his true test? A question that some men wished they knew the answer to, sometimes these thoughts led to terrifying places within their minds. Sessi was not a frightened man; he feared his Creator more than any other obstacle that man could face, so how could he fear the creations of God more than the One who created them in the first essence? It was not arrogance, nor was it pride: it was submission and with that came strength. That was something not everyone had the ability to find within themselves.

"Asalam walakum warahmitallah", Sessi said, looking over his right shoulder. "Asalam walakum warahmitallah", once again, facing towards his left. The uplifting feeling he received from completing his prayers on time despite the damp, regardless of the humidity, in the company of the cold, was more pleasurable than a blanket or sliver of shade. These were materials that gave bodily comfort, but God gave spiritual sustenance for those who settled with Him alone.

A call from the surrounding mosque was despatched. It was a fast rider: the message he carried must have been an urgent one. Sessi soon stood from his prayer and awoke back into his earthly thoughts. As the rider approached it became clear he was dressed for battle, since he rode fiercely though fluently on horseback. When he entered the town's perimeter it became evident his shirt had dark red stains. He had been sent from his village for help. Sessi ran outside, hearing crowds full of discomfort, both men and women; raised voices, outraged and unsettled. They were all seething with anger. The wounded messenger asked to speak to Sessi. He explained that his town was attacked; the men were shot, women and children taken away to labour camps. The village was looted - before being burnt down. It was the Turks. They claimed they were not paid enough taxes.

It was murder! A reason for battle, an obligation for jihad!

Sessi hurried back to grab his gun and pellets from inside, simultaneously removing the white sheet from his shoulder where his wife quickly securely strapped thin leather armour. He rewrapped himself in the sheet whilst collecting his thoughts on what he should do: this was not about revenge - it was a necessary act for his people and their land. All those in the village needed his courage: that he knew.

He was met by a group of men outside his hut, all of whom were ready to confront the Turks, to whatever end was needed. Sessi attached a long, curved sword to his belt, and called for his horse. He and his companions set out towards the outskirts; the messenger insisted on coming, but Sessi refused him - he was trailing blood.

They rode out east to the Turkish castle. It took Sessi and his companions six solid hours on horseback to get to the defences. They were a mile away but could still make out the activities. It had large, nine foot mud walls surrounding it, fortified with large stones embedded in the foundations. There were four metal gates, one on each side of the walls: each had two watchtowers guarding either side; the keep was situated in the centre. Sessi knew this castle very well; it was by the will of God that he had escaped all those years ago as a child. He took a moment and started reading prayers over his family, whose passing did not come easy for him; nor did the pain ease into adulthood, but he had learnt to embrace death. He was well acquainted with it; more so than his companions. One thing he learnt was that death should not be feared, but tyranny should be faced.

They were as safe as they could have been from the Turks; anything coming towards them in the distance would have been spotted. Sessi decided to rest a few hours to come up with a plan. He knew they were outnumbered, so he removed his satchel from his shoulder and started writing his petition. With his quill and red ink pot he consulted with his companions on the eight terms necessary for peace in the region. They were simple.

Sessi and his brothers prepared themselves and started riding the long mile stretch of road up to the main gate. There were few of them. They were all prepared to face their enemies: one of them started to recite religious chapters, powerful verses from the Holy Qur'an; they brought the men to tears of emotion, but stimulated them with the strength they needed.

They were met by thirty soldiers and one officer outside the walls. The mouth of the abyss was situated beyond the perimeter of the dull dark keep; its wooden tongue lying upon the dusty clay earth.

The officer wore thick brown leather shoes, grey gravelled trousers and a dark rich black cape, enveloping his whole body in this hell which he possessed. He carried death on his shoulders; his eyes were lifeless. The ghoul lacked even the least of health; he carried a disease, a curse. The burning light that caused the soldiers to weep did not warm the officer, who was perpetually cold. His face seemingly disintegrated as the resolution deepened. This was no longer the face of a man, nor was it bearing a soul that would listen to reason.

"Asalam Walakum." Sessi began by sending words of peace.

The favour was not returned.

Sessi spoke clear Arabic so the Turks would understand. He explained how the tyranny that had taken place was unacceptable, and how it would cause problems for them in Libya. No signs of a reply were given, neither verbally nor by gesture. He was very surprised how such a monster could stand listening to a horrific account without the slightest change of facial expression, not even a blink.

Sessi stepped closer to hand the terms over to the ghastly man. It took a long five seconds of holding the terms out for him to actually take hold of them, relieving Sessi's grasp of the script. The officer constantly stared through his eyes, like the coldness that the Angel of Death would give in transition from this world to the next. He kept his shivering, hard glare on Sessi as he unfurled the scroll. Before at last scanning the words, he glanced at the soldiers behind him and spoke: two words, in Turkish.

Sessi understood.

“Eight requests”, he said, with a slight semblance of a smirk, then turned back to Sessi and said in Arabic, “Asam alakum”. It was not a welcoming reply.

The large gate opened and the officer walked inside. Sessi stood for a moment and then mounted his horse. The Turks did not want to have to abide by any term, which was very clear. Sessi and his brothers turned around and started the ride back to safety.

A cannon shot from the walls and fifteen muskets fired; the desert’s sand was marked with blood, but not Sessi’s.

His brother’s horse fell to the ground and trapped him, and there was no chance of release without help. Sessi turned swiftly to assist, but the gates opened and the cries roared out as fifty men charged out mercilessly.

These cowards did not have the fearlessness of Sessi. He and his brothers were guided by their Creator, and nothing would resemble fear in their minds. They were led by Sessi, the sincere servant of the Humiliator.

Sessi and his men turned and released their imprisoned swords from their sheaths, which had not tasted flesh in years nor had they seen sunlight, but they were hungry; they were thirsty. As they marched towards the castle the chants declaring themselves as God’s warriors overpowered the cries from the Turks. Oh, this battle was needed, and by God Sessi and his brothers would only be too happy to send the Turks to Him.

The clash of metal upon metal prevailed over the sound of flesh, ripping from each other’s bones. Blood painted the sand: it not only stained red, it sealed the blood of the martyrs that wept, not allowing it to sink and disappear. Their blood was to be remembered; their bodies were never to rot. The same could not be said for the Turks, whose wasted lives of tyranny were fated only to embark on a journey, to an unimaginable hell with no chance of exit once entered.

The cries echoed far and wide until every last one of Sessi’s companions were slaughtered, but the fighting did not stop, so fierce it was. Sessi did not buckle, but his arm weakened.

The gate opened and so he appeared: the officer, with a long, double-bladed sword. He was sitting tall upon an undead, devilish creature. The sword was so sharp and swift, touching the sand with every foray of the monster. Sessi confronted the devil with nothing more than a sword and his faith. He was blessed with that, his eternal companion.

“Allah Huakbar” were the last words of my great grandfather as he fell to the ground, a last sigh escaping into the hot air, releasing his soul from the prison of this earth. It was not the same painful gasp of his fathers, but more comforting, and layer upon layer of Sessi’s clothes drank the redness from within, like a baby’s first taste of sustenance.

His face was serene, without pain.

And that seeping crimson liquid did not spring from a wound from a sword’s blade or musket ball.

Sessi's peaceful smile embraced the sky as he rested his hand over the area where satchel and ink pot were placed.

Then the sun's rays gradually revealed the sparkle of the scattered shards of glass around his form, the inky redness which now permeated his shirt.

A true rarity to find in the desert.

Ghazal 1 – I've Withdrawn

I dress myself nicely, I get no reply;
Wash myself completely, I get no reply.

She has fair hair, the lips that dare -
I yearn for you, I get no reply.

Why do I cry and long for your thigh?
Just reject me! I get no reply.

I close my eyes and try to abstain;
My heart feeds my veins. I get no reply.

That kiss looks soft and so succulent,
Please turn to me! I get no reply.

I think of what lies beneath your eyes -
Will you glance at me? I get no reply.

But what if I dance - will that entertain your glance?
I try to jump and frisk, but I get no reply.

Why do these tears stream from each of my eyes?
My name is Diya: will I catch a sigh?

Ghazal 2 – To Converse

Those men do not attend you -
One day, will you converse with me?

I try to follow the lead that has been given;
You know words are obscure - will you converse with me?

I beseech you to respond - don't leave me alone.
I want to speak to you - will you converse with me?

Can I transgress, my eternal companion,
Or shall I wait for you? Will you converse with me?

You have given to me an everlasting love,
More than that of a dove. Will you converse with me?

If the ghazal is the poem, and love is my theme,
At which point will you discuss Didi's capricious dream?

Ghazal 3 – Test My Heart

I fear my mother,

Escort me to hell.

If I long for wealth above You,

Take me to depths of the abyss.

If I seek for others' help,

Punish me with infernos.

But when, I ask You for support,

Add to my pension - if none else.

And when I call outwards,

Grant a life of beauty.

If my sustenance is You, and Your provisions:

Be my acquaintance on the road to ecstasy.

Ghazal 4 - Judgement

On the day that we run,
Know that we are not drunk.

On the day those longbows are bent,
Have mercy - those who fear will repent.

On the day the eclipse is confirmed,
The hour will be near, as will You.

On the day we build, poking into the sky,
Allow us to see how materials lie.

On the day that humility will call,
Wealthy individuals - all will fall.

On the day heaven will fill,
Hell will choke; spit out some grit.

On the day our destiny is near,
Make us remember: the reason to fear.

Ghazal 5 – Affection?

How can we progress when I get no requite?
Shall I take your silence and choose to advance?

Does it make me pitiful when I get no requite?
Or am I just devoted? You seem unresponsive.

Shall I give up if I get no requite?
Could there be a reason for dismissal?

Ghazal/Ballad – Life's Narrative

When I run down the street,
I see the place for people to meet.

They laugh, they kiss,
They cheat, I hiss.

They are gay and straight,
They hand themselves on a plate.

Little do they know,
One day they'll fall low.

And from that day,
They used to play.
They'll realise inside,
They can't longer hide.

So is it worth their filthy lies?
Like those no good, dirty flies.
So when they stay,
Tell them not to ruin my day.

Reflective Commentary

The original anecdote told to me by my father for the narrative *"The Tripolitanian"* is about one of my deceased grandfathers, Sessi Boghrada, and his troubles with the Turkish occupation in Libya during the 18th century. I decided to experiment with genre conventions by seeing if I could achieve a combination of reportage and fairytale, besides including the exotic setting, which would be interesting to my target readership of westerners, whom I thought would be fascinated by the connotations. The reason I chose to fictionalize the history was that I wanted to produce a narrative rather than a strictly factual biography, which would have been very difficult with such limited contextual accuracy, as well as written sequential data of the era. For this reason, transferring a folktale into a narrative seemed the best way to convey the morals that could be taken from the story: dying gracefully by the hands of God, with his death significantly marked by "the inky redness which now permeated his shirt". This is in contrast to the pain of a bullet, like the fate of his forefather earlier in the story, "Khuuuuuu".

I was inspired to take on this family legend, unique to my heritage, and manipulate it into a suitable narrative, along with metaphors that also reflect the typical cultural conditions my grandfather was subject to at the time. There is an important objective correlative - the white shirt - which forms part of the motif of clothing. This I decided early on would be a significant feature, because in an Islamic upbringing, appearance has great symbolic significance to characteristics and personality, which I then elaborate on as the story develops.

I chose to write in third person as a heterodiegetic narrator in order to allow the reader to experience this setting created through descriptive (factual and metaphorical) writing which would have been very hard to achieve in a homodiegetic way. My finished narrative corresponds well to William Labov's six part structure of oral narratives, as the story follows a similar pattern, although the coda at the end is subtler, allowing the individual's upbringing and knowledge of Islamic teachings to incorporate the metadiegetic message which understandably not all would get on first reading; as in the case with complex narratives or films such as *Inception*, that leave the viewer pondering over the final scenes.

As a young reader I always loved Arabic folktales and fantasized over creating my own narrative that I could pass down to younger generations, allowing my progenies to add further accretions, in turn creating a line of Chinese whispers throughout time with me at the start. So I moulded my story on the form of the *1001 Nights*, "**Appointment in Samara**", knowing that its structure would interest the reader by its symmetry. There is talk of seeing the Angel of Death and staring it in the eye, but

with an underlying message that however much you feel you are in control of fate, you will never escape it. This I related to *Sinbad the Sailor*: “A man may fight many battles and never die, unless it be the will of Allah that he die”. This closely matches how my main character was a slave, but survived, which was very rare. However, it can be seen as it was God’s will for him to survive, although at the same time it was his destiny to die in the battle with the Turks. The mention of the Angel of Death in my narrative - “just as the Angel of Death comes down upon souls at inexplicable times” - also foreshadows the fate of Sessi to the reader early on. It suggests something isn’t quite normal, although the reader has no previous knowledge of his lifetime to compare it other than the statement, “there was something wrong; Sessi felt it. Today was different to yesterday; he knew deep down it would not be the same feeling tomorrow”. This plays a vital role in setting the scene in which the protagonist is waking up, and spiritually feels this discomfort, which inevitably leads to the latter stages of the narrative.

When it came to editing I found myself changing diction and syntax very regularly in order to ensure the correct implications were evoked for the reader; I achieved this by workshopping both the story and poems to ensure they were written correctly, in order for me to cut out idiolectical imperfections that could potentially occur.

Overall, one of the main themes used to connect all of my modes - the ghazals, ballad and narrative - is the theme of religion, specifically Islam. This influence came from both cultural background and the form itself. The ghazal’s origins date back to the 6th century when Sufi Muslims used poetry as a spiritual remembrance of the oneness of God, i.e. in monotheism; this has remained one of the most important pillars of Islam throughout time, as mentioned in the Holy Quran. In modern times the ghazal has become increasingly adapted to courtly love and branched away from spirituality in certain instances, which is a reason why I switch between the two concepts, giving no clear distinction in certain couplets: “I dress myself nicely, I get no reply. Wash myself completely, I get no reply”. Using Islamic texts, the theme of washing is imperative; it is addressed in my poetry and narrative. The link here is that in order to worship in the obligatory way, we must present ourselves as clean and modest in regards covering and adornment. The background of a ghazal is an unconditional love which is not necessarily returned; however, the lover does not seem ungrateful for this unresponsiveness because the love may be knowingly unattainable - nevertheless, the poetry is still produced. As with the narrative, I enjoyed writing about prayer and the smaller details that impacted on Sessi’s life, which all added to the motifs associated with him throughout, such as “the sincere servant of the Humiliator”, which expresses a proposition in regards to the status of

Sessi in contrast to God. “Humiliator” in this instance is used as a suitable epithet to describe one of the many attributes of God, deriving from Islamic scriptures.

I was able to switch between modes fairly easily using my theme of Islam because of the vast array of meanings implied by it. The ghazal specifically was a fun choice to experiment with, even though not all conventions were followed throughout. However, I managed to always keep the same number of syllables in each line of every couplet, as well as the *radif* (same word or group of words) although they were not always present at the end of the two couplets as they should conventionally be. This is seen in the ghazal, “**Judgement**” with the words, “On the day”. I also incorporated in the poem, “*I’ve withdrawn*” the *maqta* (the poet’s name) which is a traditional touch many poets use: “My name is Diya, will I catch a sigh?”. The most difficult aspect was trying to incorporate the *radif*, *maqta* and same amount of syllables but along with rhyming couplets, hence why the term “bastard ghazal” is used when a poet does not incorporate all conventions that are stated in one complete poem.

Lastly I decided to use a slightly different form of poetry at the end in “**Life’s Narrative**”, which combines the bastard ghazal form and a typical ballad form, commonly used for songs in recent years. The connection between the two is that each couplet rhymes just like a ghazal should be, although this proved to be difficult in my preceding ghazals. I decided to use a range of verse to represent just one form: the ghazal. Although we can see that the ballad form is very similar in syllable symmetry, as well as tone to the other ghazals: “They laugh, they kiss/ They cheat, I hiss”. This can be seen also in “**Judgement**” - “On the day that we run,/ Know that we are not drunk”.

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