

Corner: A merciful reprieve

Time is the greatest leveler of humanity. It's a mantra that I have repeated to myself constantly to 'ground' me in a sense, to keep me ethereally connected to a semblance of some elusive spirituality. That is why I escape behind my poetry, prose, I am not concerned with literary definitions here because that is where darlings are killed in a hacking rhythm, words impregnated by seeds of violent thoughts and worldly frustrations and that's where I met Khaled.

Khaled means permanence, an alluvial form of Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, but also a Sufi notion of *fanaa* (self-annihilation). We met on a *nafas* (breath) and we continue to breathe and infuse our worlds – he, through images and sounds, I, through words and sounds - other worlds because this one is littered with corpses heavy on our hearts, crying for us before we taste their sweet resinous stench.

In Pierre Bourdieu's sociological magnum opus, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, he inquires "how can we not feel anxious about making private worlds public, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals?" (1999:1).

These anxious fragmentary jottings are what animate Khaled's new work 'corner' (2012) and this text. From the silence of the majestic landscapes where you patiently wait for something to occur, some revelatory moment of confession, Khaled simply captures the images and sounds of Lebanon, a technique I have grown to appreciate in our collaborative conversations, a calmness and wisdom exuded on and off camera.

And then, Sheikh Bilal appears in a humble form on screen. His long sequenced soliloquies juxtaposed against a metronome on a green hue typify what Werbner and Basu term "an implicit, embodied form of charismatic knowledge" when speaking of Sufi saints (1997:6).

His sermon in the lounge room or the bedroom is an oratory tour de force, an anthropological narration of his faith metred to explain ornate details to the camera. His calmness melded by the hectic roads, laneways and humdrum of Tripoli on the other side of the screen.

Khaled's last pilgrimage to capture the intricacies of *tasawwuf* (Sufism) on camera was marred by personal tragedies. A simultaneous sense of unease and urgency that marks this latest skillful work is spectrally felt.

From 99 to Naqshabandi, Greenacre, Engagement to corner, Khaled and I have talked about these spiritual matters without distinctly naming them as that. His works put forth a radical political theology precisely in their slow moving temporalities. They do not need to evangelise their viewer. They stand on their aesthetic gravitas precisely because they are.

The first time he showed me his work for *Edge of Elsewhere* almost three years ago now in the suburban confines of his studio, I entered a temple of notes, a mountainous and enviable hip-hop record collection, bikes, tools and tape recorders.

He spends an inordinate amount of time crafting, sharpening, working on these stitched visual tableaux. The physical and intellectual labour is induced through the spiritual. It becomes the medium where the soul is crafted into a state of divinity.

This is where Khaled's artistic genius is imminently revealed. He fulfills the ethical injunction that "the disciple has to struggle...as a means of material and spiritual blessing. This necessitates the disciple's spiritual submission and also devotional labour" (Werbner & Basu: 38-39).

He carefully traces those lives of street anthropologists who encounter the mystical in their toil. Rearranging fruit or toys, digging ditches, making coffee, driving, all become rhythmic exercises of talawa (recitation). Transforming the esoteric into a corporeal form, these recitations, mantras are not heard on screen but rather felt.

Sheikh Bilal surmises though “we don’t demand the maadih to have a remarkable voice...our main concern is that the devotee singing...be a human that is committed and has surrendered fully...When a true devotee sings this truth, it is done with care and in full, not empty. This person sings from the heart and knows the weight of what is being said”.

It instantly brought to mind the several conversations about Khaled's love for Sheikh Imam who was a charismatic Egyptian singer during the 60s. His voice lilting with tonalities of suffering, he crafted a vernacular canon of anasheed (elegies), influenced by the transformations in his beloved Egypt. He influenced many leftists and Marxists with his signature ‘Guevara Died’ – a treatise in obituaries and how it buries the dead through beats.

Accompanied by Ahmed Fouad Negm affectionately known as El Fagoomi, his poetic interlocutor who wrote Sheikh Imam’s lyrics for many years and appeared on stage in his traditional and simple garb of the galabeya. They sing one of their most recognizable songs ‘Our Darlings’:

Our darlings, where are you? We miss you
Do you still remember or have you forgotten about us?

Our darlings, our darlings...

We are in exile and in the air we vanished
You are in exile inside our hearts

Do not think that we have vanished
Even if they disperse us or tear us away

Our darlings...

This is the story of the people from the hearts of
The people to the people
Wakes up on the tongue of people and stays
In the consciences of people

Oh most dignified wound
Oh purest wound
Oh most hurtful wound in the hearts of people

Oh Tal Zaatar

Dedicated to those fallen martyrs of the Palestinian refugee camps during the civil war in 1976, it is a delicate hagiographic exposition repeated several times, as it to bring back the dead, to invoke spectral powers, to feel their presence because admitting their absence would be a fait accompli, a time when language stops and nihilism reigns supreme.

More importantly, it is sung in that accessible colloquial Egyptian Arabic with an oud that brings its audience to an affective valence, an experiential shedding of the soul from its worldly layers precisely through community, with the textual insertion, nay insistence, on the word ‘people’. This is what distinguished Shiekh Imam and Ahmed Negm from their contemporaries, they were truly populist singers mobilizing masses to recite their songs. It is not surprising to note that during the Egyptian uprisings last year, young revolutionaries were vocally singing Imam and Negm’s satirical, subversive and always moving lyrics.

Only a few months ago Negm appeared on a popular political show with well-regarded Egyptian journalist Yosri Fouda frail, worn out, from years of imprisonment, torture and disappointments singing 'Our Darlings'. Sheikh Imam who passed nearly two decades ago was a spectral presence, Negm shaking his head, lamenting, closing his eyes, reciting the words he wrote four years ago, knowing the weight of what is said.

This psychic burden is what sustains his exegetical prowess, his hermeneutical traversal of political transformations that claim many lives give his songs an emotional currency in a morally bankrupt zone of transition from autocracy to theocracy.

Only a few weeks ago, a sufi shrine was destroyed in Tripoli, not the city depicted in 'corner', rather in Libya. Defaced, these sufi saints had their graves upturned by those who deem tasawwuf a heretical ideology. Even in the solitude of the ground death becomes layered with more lacerated antinomies, injured subjectivities shattered yet again by the weight of the world.

Sheikh Bilal makes clear where these earthly troubles require a rahmania, literally a mercy. An awesome demonstration of flesh that is punctured that he dispels while explaining to Khaled that it is performed for the disciple, the apprentice, the murid to "strengthen the pupils hearts". In these times where blood is spilled mercilessly, where names become forgotten as soon they uttered, Khaled's corner urges to recite, to remember.

Farid Farid 2012 for Edge of Elsewhere

Bibliography

Werbner, Pnina & Helene Basu (ed.) 1998. *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre et al. (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press