

## **Al- Malaika and the Identity Crisis of an Arab Woman**

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### **Abstract**

*The dialectical relationship between individual and society should be harmonious and consistent otherwise it may lead to a condition of uncertainty and doubt about oneself. This paper hypothesizes that the Arab poetess Nazik Al- Malaika encounters a type of antithetical relation with her society. Such relation leads her to a condition of being uncertain of her identity. This paper is an attempt to define the term 'identity crisis' as modern theme in literature and to figure out and examine whether it has any impact on the poetic production of Al-Malaika. This study concludes that Al-Malaika's poems prove a kind of what can be called identity crisis resulted by her disability rather than her failure to cope with the Arab strict manly society.*

**Keywords:** Nazik , Malaika, identity, crisis, Arab, Ana, Strangers, Revolt.

### **Introduction**

Rapid developments in the different fields of life: commerce, telecommunication technologies, together with cultural confrontations at the global level is creating a paradigmatic shift in people's understanding of selfhood and identity.

Though mainly psychological, the term 'Identity crisis' is a concept of broad meaning can be widely and differently recognized and identified. It can be political, economical, social, literary rather than psychological condition. The concept has different connotations due to the reasons which can create it. For the purpose of this study, the literary impact of the condition identity crisis is to be investigated. More precisely, its streams in and effect on the literary productions of Nazik Al-Malaika is to highlight and be under scope.

*Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines the term as 'personal psychosocial conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality'. (*Merriam Webster*, 20017). This definition intersects with the definition of the *Psychology Glossary* in joining this condition, i.e., identity crisis, to adolescence. It regards identity crisis as description of 'a possible developmental condition associated with Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development'. It can be a condition of failure to develop ego identity before adulthood i.e. during adolescent. The ego identity development is necessary to leave adolescence stage and function as adult. The disability to develop identity during adolescence leads to identity crisis which is consequently resulted in 'social withdrawal, negative behaviors (like crime or drugs), and uncertainty about identity or goals'. (*Psychology Glossary* 2017).

*Cambridge Dictionary* defines identity crisis as 'a feeling of being uncertain about whom or what you are'. (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017) Similarly, *English Oxford Living Dictionaries* defines identity crisis as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society, (*English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, 2017) Not only does 'identity crisis' have psychological connotations, it has also some socio-cultural roots founded by the different sociological roles played by the individual and the different cultures he/she can be affiliated to such as national identity and cultural identity . Going back to the origins of the word 'identity' proves that the word driven from the Latin adjective 'idem' meaning 'the same'. It may be defined as 'the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group'. (Tiwari, 2013, p.6)

The renewal, woman right advocator, romantic modernist Arab poetess, Nazik Al-Malaika, who is famous as the first, with Badr Shakir al Sayyab, to write Arabic poetry in free verse rather than classical Rhyme, is not free from the influence of 'identity crisis' condition as hypothesized by this simple study. This paper makes a serious attempt to trace and map out the theme and impact of 'identity crisis' as employed meanwhile performed and reflected in the production of the Arab poetess Nazik Al-Malaika by examining some of her poetic works as evidence. It seeks also to provide an assessment of Al- Malaika's conceptions and realization, as an Arab woman, of the sense 'identity crisis'.

### **Methods**

The multidisciplinary approach is to be adopted in this study together with the analytical method in order to examine the credibility of the hypothesis of the study.

### **Discussion and Findings**

Nazik (August 23, 1923 – 20 June 2007), (Arabic: نازك الملائكة meaning 'angels' in English, was an Iraqi female poet and is considered by many to be one of the most influential contemporary Iraqi female poets. She wrote from a profound sense of revolution overwhelmed by melancholy and deep sadness resulted from the inability to cope with reality. Her poetic production embodies, perhaps more than anything else, the struggle to attain an understanding of a wide range of issues through the exploration of the meaning of her own identity, as an open-minded woman, in the context of nature and different aspects of life.

Al-Malaika's poetic production is undoubtedly characterized by its terseness of language, eloquence, original use of imagery, delicate ear for the music of verse, slender sensation and flowing emotions of a modern romantic poetess. Her poems reveal clearly the fact that Al-Malaika is a woman unable to accept the hardship of her strict society. She suffers the limitations and intolerance of her society i.e. Iraqi Arab society which is considered by Arabs as one of the most cultural Arab societies; and her works as reminders of the Iraqi mid 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural renaissance. Nizar Marjan, the Iraqi consul in Cairo, revealed this to The Associated Press. He declared that Baghdad, then, regarded the Paris of the Middle East, where poets and artists flocked to work. (*The New York Times*, 2016)

As the Romantic period was a movement brought about because of the dislike of reason; typically, Al-Malaika became famous because of her hatred of reason and revolution against any sense of restriction or limitation. *The New York Times* affiliates her to those few 'Iraqi poets who broke away from classical Arab poetry, with its rigid metric and rhyme schemes.' She was affected by the works of 'Shakespeare, Byron and Shelley as well as by classical Arab poets who took up modern topics and used lyrical language that spoke with the immediacy of life on the Arab street.' (*The New York Times*, 2016)

Her revolutionist nature and self confidence were undoubtedly early clear in her character. This is clear in her voice tone ensuring her parents who seemed unsatisfied with one of unrhymed composition of a poem. In her autobiography, excerpts which were published in the electronic newspaper Elaph, Al-Malaika writes of the poem's creation and declared that she had finished a poem within an hour and ran down to her sister ,Ihssan,'s house. She told her sister that she had written a poem that was very strange in form and that it would have caused controversy. As soon as Ihssan read the poem she became very supportive. But her mother received it coldly and asked her, "What kind of rhyme is this? It lacks musicality". Al-Malaika's father was also critical. He mocked her efforts and predicted its failure, yet she stood by it, stating simply, "Say whatever you wish to say. I am confident that my poem will change the map of Arab poetry." (Steven, 2008)

This defiant resistant character can be one of the main sources that give birth to the feeling of identity crisis specially when encountered with the traditions of the Arab Iraqi society. Al-Malaika is recognized as an anomaly in her society, and her fame and legacy as a poet resulted from her breaking away from traditions. The leap from classical poetry to free verse was very controversial, and she faced intense criticism from not only traditionalists, but also her own family as stated above.

She was distinguished for her high education and being fluent in four languages which enable her to give impassioned speeches on women's role in Arab society urging them to have more of a voice and challenges the deeply entrenched patriarchal system. 'She achieved financial independence, which was highly unusual at that time. In her writings and speeches she shared intensely personal revelations, yet preferred to remain physically secluded from the outside world.' (Steven, 2008)

Coming back from study abroad, she found herself an outsider inside her family rather than her society and came to feel that she was not the same girl who had left several years before for America to study. She attempted hardly recognizing her identity but in vain.

Out of the bitter feeling of being unfairly treated, in tribal strict society, where women are inferiorly denied their simplest rights, Al- Malaika isolated herself gradually from her society and socialized herself with alienation and isolation and accustomed herself with melancholy, frustration, pessimism and defeat. In her poem *Revolt Against the Sun* she addresses the sun confessing the fact that her sadness is not a gesture of weakness rather than a form of revolt and resistance: 'Careful! Do not let a bewildered sadness/Or a sighing tear in my eyes deceive you./ For sadness is the form of my revolt and my resistance.' (Drumsta, 2014). She warns the sun not to be deceived, also, by her sad features because they are fountain of her pain and inspiration of her soul:

'Careful! Do not let the sadness of my features

My pale color or the shiver of my emotions deceives you.

If my bewilderment and the lines of my torrential poet's sadness  
should appear shimmering on my brow,

It is only the feelings that inspire pain in my soul (Drumsta, 2014)

She recognized that she could not coexist with her harsh society. Consequently, she created her own private society where she could peacefully live though sadly: 'So I have come to pour out my bewilderment to nature/among the fragrant roses, the afternoon shadows.' (Drumsta, 2014)

Unfortunately, such isolation is nothing but painkiller and analgesic dose leads to no healing. Even nature mocks the poetess's agony which adds more to her suffering: 'But you mocked my deep sadness and my tears/And laughed above my bitterness and pain/Even you, Sun? What melancholy! (Drumsta, 2014)

Attempting to examine the theme and streams of identity crisis, the poems entitled '*Ghoraba*' or '*Strangers*' in English and '*Ana*' in Arabic, i.e. '*I am*' can be good examples to discuss here.

The poem '*Strangers*' reveals a psychological condition of alienation. Individuals may be alienated on different levels psychologically, socially as well as culturally. The bitterness of this feeling duplicated when experienced in someone's own home, society and culture. This type of conflict has its fundamental negative impact on identity recognition. Due to (Saleem, & Hussam Bani-ata, 2013, p. 282) 'alienation is the result of loss of identity. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is a common place theme in modern fiction.' They think that people ignore the purpose behind life and the relevance of their existence in this world. Edmund Fuller remarks that in our age "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problems ----- a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence" (Saleem, & Hussam Bani-ata, 2013, p. 282).

In her poem '*Strangers*', the poetess tends to surrender to the condition of being stranger that is why she asks her addressee/ companion, who has ignored identity, to share her blowing out the candle. Since she and her addressee represent the two parts of night, light becomes of no benefit for them:

Blow out the candle and leave us strangers here

We are two parts of the night, so what is the meaning of light?

Light falls on two fancies under the eyelids of the evening

Light falls on some shrapnels of hope

I was called we and I call myself I:

Hot ashes. (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

Unexpectedly, after throwing the impression of her fond of darkness, she surprises her readers by comparing herself together with her addressee to light. Actually, she feels that light is as stranger as them: 'We are here like light/Strangers' (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014). The original text shows a kind of identification between the poetess and her addressee. The 'shrapnels of hope' were called 'we and I call myself I' (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014). This sense of identification gets the translator to say 'I was called we'. As if the two characters in the poem are the poetess and herself.

The feeling of being stranger is the murderer and grave for her feelings, happiness and any other sense of life. It seems as if she is stranger to herself and vice versa:

The pale cold gathering is like a cold day  
 It was a murder for my anthems and a grave for my feelings  
 The clock rang in the darkness nine and then ten  
 And I with my pain hear and count. I was puzzled  
 Asking the clock what is the meaning of my happiness  
 If we spend the evenings, you know better...  
 Strangers (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

She loses her sense of time. Therefore, she is unable to identify past from future/ tomorrow and morning from night. Her hours passed coldly and silently and her eyes confessed the bitter fact that she is mere stranger:

Hours passed like in the past covered with withering  
 Like the unknown tomorrow, I don't know is it dawn or dusk?  
 The hours passed and silence is like winter weather  
 Don't you see? Our eyes are withering and cold  
 As if it is strangling me and oppressing my blood  
 As if uttering in me and saying  
 You two are under the storms of the evening  
 Strangers( *PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

She wants to convince herself to blow out the candle i.e. to surrender to their (her and her addressee's) destiny because their strange souls are weak faint yellow lights can have no influence on the thick dark night. Their faces colored as autumn, their eyes are withered and cold, their hearts are extension and their silence echoes their fear from that ugly sense of being strangers:

Blow out the candle, the two souls are in a thick night  
 Light falls on two faces colored like autumn  
 Don't you see? Our eyes are withering and coldness  
 Don't you hear? Our hearts are extension and extinguishing  
 Our silence is the echo of a frightening warning  
 Sarcastic from that we will return  
 Strangers... (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

The poet proves to be in a bad dilemma of self recognition. She does not know who or what brought her today and from where she started in the past. Neither past nor future can relief her inquiry. She is badly wish to get rid of the feeling of being strange; but in vain:

We who brought us today? From where did we start?  
 Yesterday didn't know we are comrades... Let us  
 Expel the memory as if it had never been from our youth  
 Some rash love passed by and forgot us  
 Oh... Wish we return where we where  
 Before we vanish and we are still  
 Strangers (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

In the poem *I am* (in Arabic *Ana*), the poetess tries to go deeply inside herself searching for her own true identity. Getting help from nature, represented by night, wind together with centuries, and time. She tries to identify her identity by affiliating herself to these phenomena: The night asks me who I am/I am its deep black anxious secret/I am its rebellious silence/I masked my true nature with calm/And wrapped my heart with suspicion/And here I remain distracted (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014). She feels identification between herself and night with all its manifestations i.e. its darkness 'black anxious secret' and 'its rebellious silence'. She covers her true rebellious nature with calm, wraps her heart with suspicion however remains mysterious, uncertain and distracted. So, the same question echoed again but by centuries this time: 'I gaze and the centuries ask me/Who I am?' (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014). And wind asks her who is she? But now she immediately changes her mind about her real identity. She is not the night any more. She is the confused spirit of the wind whose time is disowned. Like the wind, she travels restlessly without end or pause in order to reach a bend pretending that that bend is the end of her suffering but unfortunately she discovers the bend is just void:

The wind asks me who I am?  
I am its perplexed soul that time disowned  
And similar to it I have no place  
Endlessly, we walk  
We do not stop, we just pass through  
And when we reached the turning  
That we thought was the end of suffering  
Suddenly it is just void. (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

Unable to find herself neither in night nor in wind; she questioned her identity again on the tongue of time because she feels that she is as powerful as time embracing centuries, returning and granting them. She created, together with time, the distant past from the charm of the pleasant hope and return to bury it in order to fashion a new yesterday whose tomorrow is ice i.e. dead:

The time asks me who I am  
Similar to it and as powerful as it, I fold the eras  
And come back to grant them resurrection  
I create the distant past  
From the infatuation of a pleasant hope and  
Then I go back to bury it  
To form a new past with  
An icy future(*PoemHunter.com*, 2014)

But unfortunately she seems disabling to recognize herself again. She goes back to herself and asks herself: who she is; but this time she reaches at the bitter reality that she is still doubt, uncertain about her own real ego: 'Myself asks me who I am/I am as perplexed as it, I gaze at darkness/Nothing would give me peace/I keep asking.' (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014). Whenever she thinks she finds the answer she comes to discover its falsity. The real answer is still blocked by phantom. The answer of her continuously echoing question, i.e. 'who is she?' is mere unreachable mirage: 'And the answer will remain blocked by the mirage/And I keep thinking it comes closer/And as I reach it, it melts suddenly/It fades and disappears.' (*PoemHunter.com*, 2014) She ends her poem in an endless questioning arriving at no answer.

### ***Conclusion***

To sum up, the condition of being uncertain about oneself can be obviously traced in the poetry of the Arab poetess Nazik Al-Malaika who is consciously or unconsciously unable to hide hitting upon this theme in her poems. Not only does she symbolize the highly educated Arab women in the Arab strict society, she is a phenomenon by herself. She is worthy enough to be called so because of her distinguished ability to employ her precious creativity in performing the identity crisis of the educated Arab women.

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