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“The Exquisite Face of the Other: Intellectual Exile and the Lyric”

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Solmaz Sharif's 'Exquisite Face' of the Other: Creating Grievable Lives through the Lyric

Maria Capecchi

Lyric poetry is a genre constantly being renegotiated and redefined. From the fragmented parchments of Sappho's ancient sung texts to the "American Lyrics" of Claudia Rankine, part of the thrill of the lyric form is its mutating nature. Solmaz Sharif's poetry book, *Look*, is a masterful adaptation of the lyric form. Her poems combine erasure, Department of Defense terms, Wikipedia entries, and references to the Iran-Iraq and US wars of imperialism, collaging experiences of soldiers, immigrants, and citizens on both sides of the United States' so-called War on Terror. In a world of political extremes, "cancel culture," and reactionary social media platforms, Sharif's political lyrics question representation itself. She calls upon her western reader: "It matters what you call a thing: Exquisite a lover called me. / Exquisite" (3), acknowledging the lyric's traditional apostrophe—the fragile woman. *Look*'s opening lines juxtapose the speaker's exquisite body with the objectified targets of the Iraq war detailed throughout the poem: "Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat sensors were trained on me, they could read my THERMAL SHADOW through the roof and through the wardrobe" (3). The speaker is both the Petrarchan beloved and the military target, a target that refuses to remain outside the frame of war: "Whereas I thought if he would LOOK at my exquisite face or my father's, he would reconsider" (4). While beautiful, *Look* is not a fragile collection of poems: her work is emotionally haunting, filled with raw, violent images. Particularly when viewed against the backdrop of the white, masculine lyric, Sharif's work enacts social renegotiations of the lyric.

The Poetics of Activism: The Lyric Form and Politics

To understand the politics surrounding Sharif's lyrical choices, it is important to first address her choice of form, the lyric.¹ The lyric genre is constantly being renegotiated and redefined, allowing poets to adapt and repurpose lyric elements for social critique. Jonathan Culler in "Lyric, History, and Genre" discusses the significance of genre adaptation, stating,

"generic transformations involve the negotiation of social meanings, drawing upon the social and cultural implications of genres, but also using popular material to enrich and modify existing genres... Generic transformations can be a social act. Generic transformation reveals the social changes in audiences and the interpretation of popular and polite literature" (65).

As a genre transforming text, *Look* allows for a complex analysis of both voice and form. Sharif's choice of the lyric is itself political, as the genre has been a traditionally male platform.ⁱⁱ *Look* fits the lyric form through its focus on speaker, emotion, and voice and expands the lyric genre through references to global warfare, complication of the didactic/personal binary, and Sharif's use of erasure and military terminology. These adaptations, along with Sharif's use of a complex lyric voice, opens the possibility of multiple voices and interpretations in her text.

Essential to a contemporary understanding of the lyric is the voice within the poem, both who is speaking and who they are addressing. Sharif repurposes the lyric voice in order to create subject visibility for individuals made invisible through US conflicts in Iraq and Iran. She uses both the confessional style as well as the lyric mask-- where the lyric I is no longer transcendent or impersonal, but rather a mix of personal and persona-- to craft her self-described political poetry. Here, an understanding of the historical conception of the lyric I gives greater understanding to how Sharif alters the form. As Gillian White explains, the typical lyric poem assumes a private audience, and, like the Petrarchan lyric,ⁱⁱⁱ a distance between the speaker and the addressee (32). In this way, the lyric poem's reader "overhears" a personal exchange. Recent genre tensions in contemporary American poetry, specifically from the Language Poets of the 1970s and 1980s, call for "artifice" and "intellect" over "nature and "sentiment" (White 12), where the "lyric [was] defined by unmitigated individual subjectivism, self-absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism" (White 5), have strengthened this distance between speaker, subject, and poet.^{iv}

However, this contemporary conception of the isolated lyric, where speaker, addressee, and audience are separate entities removed from any historical or personal context, is not the only model. Key lyric theorists argue against this limited perception of the lyric voice. As early as 1985 Herbert F. Tucker, in "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," critiques the Romantic lyric's insistence on lyric isolation, introducing the concept of the "lyric mask" as illustration. New Criticism, in his estimation, fails to ground the poem in history and establish a link between poet and work:

"while texts do not absolutely lack speakers, they do not simply have them either; they invent them instead as they go. Texts do not come from speakers, speakers come from texts. ... to assume in advance that a poetic text proceeds from a dramatically situated speaker is to risk missing the play of verbal implication whereby character is engendered in the first place through colliding modes of signification (153)."

This interplay between poet, character (the speaker or voice in the poem), and audience is precisely the work of the lyric mask, where the poet is a conscious maker of meaning within their poetry. Rather than "abolish[ing] the poet and set[ing] up the fictive speaker" (152), an understanding of dramatic monologue as a hybrid between romantic lyricism and symbolist and imagist desires (150) allows the critic to understand how the dramatic monologue's character can neither be seen as a true expression of the poet (as in romantic lyrics) nor as completely disassociated from the poet's perspective (as the reactionary modernist view). Rather, the character/speaker functions as a mask, allowing the poet to confront important issues without alienating the reader. White extends this idea when discussing the confessional lyric, describing it as a challenge to the assumption of the "universal, impersonal, transcendent subject," an "I"

the reader feels is “our own” within the lyric (32). Whether through the lyric mask or the perceived personal within confessional poems, the reader is exposed to differing viewpoints which the poet uses to guide the reader through alternate opinions and realities.

Not only does lyric poetry contain a complicated scholarly history, but the concept of political poetry has also fallen in and out of favor throughout the lyric’s long history. Sharif, in a talk at The Loft, described the original assault on political poetry as a focus on didacticism, describing a cultural environment where readers resist poetry that explicitly evokes emotions or teaches lessons: “there’s a perceived shame in learning [needing to learn something], a shame in not knowing” (“Big Ideas...”). Sharif dismisses this didactic critique, explaining that all poems give the reader new knowledge. To read a poem is to step into the poem’s persona, to momentarily experience another perspective. Furthermore, Sharif self-describes her poetry as political, directly addressing the debate over lyricism in politics and the perceived political/personal binary. This conception follows Adrienne Rich’s insistence on the personal as political: “at the crossover between personal and political, we [women poets] were also pushing at the limits of experience reflected in literature” (*The Arts of the Possible* 56).^v While the political/personal, the political/aesthetic often are perceived as poetic binaries, Lynn Keller’s essay “Post-Language Lyric...” discusses the interconnected nature of the personal and political, where “the impulse toward the love lyric—is repeatedly thwarted by the experience of twenty-first-century globalized existence, in which violence around the world is instantly broadcast by news media” (76-77). Keller’s assertion indicates that the Petrarchan trope of the lyric speaker, where “the traditional lyric lover is usually separated from the beloved, by either the beloved’s reserve or physical distance, and the poet-lover uses lyric to bridge that distance” (Keller 77), can no longer function in our modern, interconnected society. The Petrarchan lover-from-afar never could exist in reality, but the global military context illuminates their impossibility— one must ethically be present within the lyric, both politically and emotionally: “the afar, in this context, is something [the poet] longs for but rejects, since assuming a distance from current events denies our global connectedness” (Keller 77). In this sense, a denial of politics and global events is a turning from the connection the lyric strives for. The contemporary poet cannot simply turn inward for inspiration; to bridge the gap, the personal must interact with the political in the contemporary lyric.

Sharif also adjusts the lyric form to bridge the physical distance between her Western audience and the Iraqi and Iranian subjects of her poems, juxtaposing the personal with the political. The lyric form itself, with its origins in Greco-Roman culture, contains a long history of political and cultural assumptions as well as aesthetic traditions. The genre’s Western and masculine roots make Sharif’s lyric adjustment particularly suited to challenge Western hegemony. Section III of *Look* contains two Wikipedia excerpts describing offensives in the Iran-Iraq war, complete with underlined “hyperlinked” terms set within a larger body of poems about Sharif’s uncle killed in the Iran-Iraq War. A Wikipedia description of Operation Nasr, “The Iranians blundered into the ambush and two tank forces battled for four days in a sea of mud” (82) is both informative and strangely evocative, humanizing the Iranians and adding poetic imagery of mud to the scene. This familiar Western content, when taken out of its online context, becomes a small prose poem. The informative text is laid out to the left of a poem where Sharif describes writing her Amoo (uncle), a soldier in the Iran-Iraq war. The physical connection between the passages, bound together on separate sides of the manuscript, effectively bridges the gap between the facts of the war and the people in it. Sharif’s depiction of her uncle

informs the reader's understanding of his war experience, and her positioning of the poem next to a Western account of a battle politicizes the personal experience. Furthermore, the poems' nearness draws attention to proximity: the Western account's distance from the realities of the Iran-Iraq war calls into question Western knowledge of this conflict. Even Sharif, despite her personal connection to her uncle, is removed from the events, "list[ing] pocket contents as if filling out an autopsy report" (*Look* 83). Her physical proximity to her uncle's letters—"the script in his letters grew tighter, barbed" (*Look* 83)—and personal experience is still at a remove from the battle. Sharif's juxtaposition ultimately depicts all forms Western knowledge as questionable representations: "I write him daily / And so I learn to ignore him" (*Look* 83).

Sharif also plays with poetic form; she not only uses found poetry (the Wikipedia entry), but also uses an elastic lyric I to voice the poem. Rather than making her uncle the speaker or addressee of the poem, Sharif instead conflates herself and her uncle. Her reality and Amoo's blur as she drives by "balloons held down in a net" that turns into "the netting over his helmet." As the poem continues, the pronouns multiply, and, with a "we," Sharif invites her Western reader into a moment from the Iran-Iraq war:

"And alive we bring up the hands to hold together his neck
And I place in his hands his head
And I place in his hands my hands
And I place in his eyes a LOOK we share in the rearview
And I place between us a bar of laughter
And I place between us the looking and the telling they want dead" (83).

In this lyric moment, the reader co-creates Amoo, literally holding him together as Sharif collages images, bridging the divide between her Western audience and her Iranian uncle. Again, Sharif uses the term "look," creating a receptive, reciprocal interaction. Through the creation of Amoo's character, Sharif's mask allows her reader to experience the connecting laughter as well as the "looking and telling," the personal, "they" wish to erase from the political. While this lyric is removed from the romantic Petrarchan lyric, the love Sharif feels for her uncle binds the political reframing of the Middle Eastern enemy in the reader's imagination, effectively bridging the gap between the political and personal. Sharif's mask allows the personal, the death of her uncle, to combine with the political, drawing into question Western understandings of the Middle East. Sharif defies Western attempts to reframe her uncle in a negative light, using the "bar of laughter" Sharif and Amoo share to voice the "telling they want dead." Here the poetic mask's "colliding modes of signification" (Tucker 153) resists Western forms of knowledge, creating a political lyric.

This sense of the political recalls Theodor Adorno's "Socially Antagonistic Poet:" a writer who uses the lyric as a "language game" with the understanding that the lyric subject is a socially mediated construct (343-344). In this understanding, the poet uses her awareness of language and subject creation to "give voice to what ideology hides" (340). For Sharif, her use of DOD terms allows the reader to question held assumptions about meaning and invites her through juxtaposition to view the ways in which war has been normalized in US culture. The multiplicity of meanings in "Deception Story" reflects Adorno's description of lyrical language as the "medium" that creates the "collective undercurrent" of the lyric work, which is "the subjective expression of social antagonism. . . . the objective world that produces the lyric is an

inherently antagonistic world” (344). In this understanding, the poet uses her awareness of language and subject creation to “give voice to what ideology hides” (340). Within this antagonistic world exist many forms of violence, from casualties of war to the oppression of racism. Sharif’s work connects these forms of violence, linking the immigrant experience to the violence inflicted in the Middle East.

The Politics of Subject Visibility & Creation of the “Other”

Within the frame of war, altering Western cultural views becomes equally important to halt Western imperialism and subject formation. Judith Butler’s work, specifically her books *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* and *Grievable Lives*, explores the consequences of predetermined cultural narratives that dehumanize. She examines the problem of subject visibility and the recognition of the “other,” focusing on “grievability.” As Butler describes in *Frames of War*, to reframe and redefine grievable lives is an essential component to recognizing the other: “Grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters. . . . Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living” (14-15). Butler acknowledges the problematic creation of unrecognizable people, “ungrievable” others. “Precarity,” she argues, needs to be understood “as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence” (28). For Sharif and Butler, subject-formation is political: the ungrievable subject becomes a tool of war and ungrievable people become “unrecognizable” casualties, effectively ceasing to exist within the Western framework. Without a recognition of their personhood, these people are voiceless, their life’s significance invisible to the Western gaze. Therefore, institutional acknowledgement is needed to amplify the other’s voice. Butler describes this acknowledgement as a frame, “a field of representability . . . both jettisoning and presenting . . . without any visible sign of operation” (73). Individuals and communities outside of the frame become inhuman, ungrievable casualties of war. Sharif’s political poetry reframes the Western gaze by reclaiming subjectivity for Iraqi and Iranian people.

Sharif creates subject visibility for the subaltern through her series of poems “Reaching Guantanamo.” The series imagines redacted letters Salim Hamdan received from his wife while detained at Guantanamo for being Osama bin Laden’s personal driver. The poems’ lyric form, redaction (also known as erasure or blackout poetry), is described by Rachel Stone as “a type of poetry created from the substrate material of an existing text. Obscure many of the words, these poems command, and you will find the sentences that have been there all along.” While the political purpose for erasure is to obscure meaning, poetic erasure exposes new meaning by eliminating words within a text. In “Reaching Guantanamo” the invented redacted letters echo, in Sharif’s words, “communication interrupted by state and political forces,” drawing the reader’s attention to real political efforts to silence the subaltern (“The Near Transitive Properties . . .”). Poetic erasure echoes state tactics that “make the reader aware of her/his position as one who will never access a truth that does, by state accounts, exist” and “invoke fear and paranoia via inaccessibility” (Sharif “The Near Transitive Properties”). Sharif repurposes these tactics through her poetic authority, creating fictionalized letters that allow Hamdan’s wife, Umm Fatima, to speak and Hamdan himself to become recognizable.

feels the strain of the separation: “It’s getting sharp” and “I don’t mean to cause alarm” show the toll Hamden’s internment has taken on his family. This conjuring of Hamden through apostrophe allows the reader to empathize with his experience as they imagine what it would be like to receive the letter. Ideally, the collaboration between Sharif and her reader effectively humanizes the other, causing the reader to rethink the larger effects of political erasure as well as their assumptions about Muslim women.

While Sharif clearly creates grievable lives through her exilic state, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s interrogation of representing the other^{IX} remains an important area where Sharif’s poetry potentially fails. The question becomes, as an Iranian-American exile distanced from the conflict and people she is writing about, is her poetry capable of giving voice to those living in Iraq on the front lines of the United States’ war of imperialism? Sharif herself draws attention to this problem in her poems about her uncle:

“...I wrote
I burn my finger on the broiler
And smell trenches, my uncle
pissing himself. “How can she write that?
 She doesn’t know,” a friend, a daughter
 of a Vietnam vet, told another friend,

another daughter of a Vietnam vet” (*Look* 80).

Here Sharif emphasizes aporia—an irresolvable contradiction—acknowledging that she is not an authority. The act of writing, of voicing the other, requires fiction. Quite literally Sharif cannot know the experiences of her Amoo who died before she was born, just like she cannot voice the Truth of Hamdan and Umm Fatima or her parents. Sharif acknowledges that, at best, these poems “parrot the loss” she describes (“The Near Transitive Properties...”). As an immigrant removed from this community, Sharif’s authority is limited to her understanding of Iraq from a distance. While her rhetorical moves in “Reaching Guantanamo” make visible Hamdan and Umm Fatima, her fictional voicing of this woman’s life does not truly allow the subaltern to speak.

While Sharif’s structure brings awareness to and argues against state erasure tactics, her voicing of Umm Fatima may not be ethical.^X Sharif’s voicing uses her privilege to legitimize the suffering of and give visibility to the other. Yet, she still speaks *for* Umm Fatima, continuing the legacy of intellectuals speaking for the subaltern. Spivak’s famous phrase: “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 93) identifies a relationship between men, and, at its most inclusive, the female academic who similarly uses the “brown woman” as a subject of discourse. In this construct brown women, like Umm Fatima, become a voiceless subject. While Sharif’s academic voice is broadcast, Umm Fatima’s authentic voice remains silent. Within this mentality the subaltern woman can never speak, never act. It can be argued that subject visibility is a worthwhile goal, but to truly view the other requires a dialogue that is missing from these poems. Instead, Sharif’s work is a fictitious dialogue, one where Sharif creates a lyric mask to dialogue with the reader. While Sharif may bring new awareness and create grievable subjects, ultimately the voice she creates is as tied up in her own experiences as an immigrant and intellectual exile as it is representative of the other.

Yet this conflation of the poet, the reader, and the subject is precisely the work of the political lyric. By asking the reader to inhabit the poem's speaker, acknowledging the ways in which language fails through erasure and DOD terms, and refusing to draw simple solutions to complex problems, Sharif ultimately creates a lyric that calls subjectivity itself into question. Rather than a single, clearly identifiable speaker, her poems draw the reader into the experiences of those unrecognized by the frames of war. Her poems' subversion of lyric expectations through the lyric I, erasure techniques, and the combination of politics and aesthetics allows Sharif to deftly question the US's engagement in the Middle East. She asks her reader to co-create grievable lives, bringing subject recognition to those invisible within the frames of war. Sharif's pronouns ask the reader to inhabit multiple points of view; these positions create a dialectical tension rather than a clear theme. *Look* concludes with the lines: "we have learned to sing a child calm in a bomb shelter / : I am singing to her still" (93). Sharif's "we" encompasses the reader, writer, poetic persona, and inhabitants of the bomb shelter, joining all in the act of singing, an act intimately bound in both the lyric form and the parenting of a child. In this lyric moment, Sharif creates a space where the sung lyric itself becomes a place of healing within the bombed-out landscape described in *Look*.

Notes

- I. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines lyric in this way: “A lyric is usually fairly short, not often longer than fifty or sixty lines, and often only between a dozen and thirty lines; and it usually expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker (not necessarily the poet herself) in a personal and subjective fashion. The range and variety of lyric verse is immense, and lyric poetry, which is to be found in most literatures, comprises the bulk of all poetry.”
- II. Historically, the Petrarchan lyric focused on women as the objects of the male poet’s gaze rather than the poem’s speaker. (Poets like Sappho indicate that the male gaze was not always a component of the lyric voice. However, the male gaze remains an important critique of the Western lyric voice.) Later poets like Sylvia Plath were negatively deemed emotional and confessional while their male contemporaries escaped this label. Sharif’s use of a lyric that combines the personal and the political is a hybridization of lyric form, one that complicates an accepted understanding of the role of female poets.
- III. Despite many adaptations to the lyric genre, Petrarch’s legacy is strong within both the genre and criticism. His tropes continue to affect scholars’ understanding of what lyric is and how poets use the lyric form.
- IV. While contemporary performance poetry and spoken-word poetry have emphasized the personal within the lyric form, these styles are often deemed less literary. Poets like Jamaal May and Danez Smith are bridging this divide with both critically acclaimed books as well as illustrious careers in performance poetry.
- V. Rich begins her discussion of the personal and political in poetry by explaining: “As a poet, I had learned much about both the value and the constraints of convention: the reassurances of traditional structures and the necessity to break from them in recognition of new experience. I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (*Arts of the Possible* 55). Breaking traditional structures is precisely Sharif’s work throughout *Look*, and her aim is similar to Rich’s: poetry as action and dialogue.
- VI. Rachel Stone in *The New Republic* reports that erasure poetry has increased in popularity since President Trump’s election. While *Look* predates this boom in erasure, Stone’s thoughts on erasure echo Sharif’s thoughts on poetic language: “In these [erasure] poems there is a desire to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape Americans’ lives, from government bureaucracy to new media. The poems’ authors reassert power over language that has typically been used to determine who does and does not belong. And while poets have been reassigning meaning to texts in this way for at least a century, erasure has gained new energy at a moment when the country is deeply polarized—when official documents may hold radically different consequences and meanings for different people.”
- VII. When questioned about this rhetorical move, Sharif described her role as imagining the redaction in order to bring awareness (“Big Ideas...”), much like Butler’s subject visibility. She continued stating that if we had access to the letters, it wouldn’t be her role to write them. She described her writing process: she didn’t write the letter and redact. Rather, she skipped the parts that are cut out. Sharif didn’t want a letter only she could

- access. Her ultimate goal was to reenact the cruelty, not the position of the DOD (“Big Ideas...”).
- VIII. Both Adorno and Altieri encourage the blending of these genres to highlight the impracticality of simple solutions.
- IX. Here I again borrow from Spivak’s concept of the subaltern. In the accepted Western paradigm, Iraqis and Iraqi immigrant populations in the United States are defined by perceived ideological separations, or “deviations,” created by their culture, which is depicted as oppressive, Muslim, and extremist (words that are often used interchangeably despite their obvious differences). Spivak argues that, “for the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 80). To be “unrepresentable” means one cannot be spoken of in symbolic forms or expressed in a communal (symbolic) way. Once Iraqi people and immigrants are cast as subaltern, these individuals can no longer speak for themselves.
- X. The term “ethics” itself suggests a problematic either/or binary. While Sharif’s work troubles the concept of voice, ultimately, I believe that she herself is looking for an ethical solution, or, at the least, encourages her reader to think in terms of ethics. Perhaps not a conception that emphasizes a clear right/wrong, but one instead that recognizes ethics includes areas of gray.

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