

Tomorrow You Will See How Beautiful Our Home Is

Hanan Kassab-Hassan

I fear, when I talk about Fairouz, that I might slip into a nostalgic mode, or slip unwittingly into that translucent spot where childhood images mesh with the scents and sounds of cities, and that I might begin my discourse about Fairouz and end up by confounding Beirut with Damascus.

Has Fairouz not always brought us together? Her voice is an inseparable part of the city, particularly when Damascus would wait the whole year for September, and when Beirut was only a by-way to Antelias, as if the traveler had only one destination, namely, her residence overlooking Rabieh. “You’ll see tomorrow, you’ll see how beautiful our home is ...”¹ I always had a child-like conviction that she was singing that song only for us every time we used to journey to the Rahbani residence. For when we arrive there, it indeed was beautiful, and Fairouz used to greet us on the terrace with coffee cups in her hands.

Fairouz sings about a little house in Canada nowadays. Did she favor snow over sunshine? Did she decide to travel? This song has stirred much controversy and has made headline news. The world would collapse if Fairouz were to leave for Canada!

Fairouz is not Canada-bound, simply because the said ditty is a translation of “Ma Cabane au Canada”, but when it is delivered by Fairouz, it becomes her mouthpiece, regardless of the imagined personality conjured up by the lyrics.

It often happens that the listener forgets the lyricist and listens to the lyrics as if they were the singer’s, so the lyricist and the singer are confounded, save in rare cases when the author of the lyrics is a man



Fairouz in one of her concerts. Picture Credit: Marwan Assaf

and the singer a woman, as is the case with *Samra yam ‘uyun was’ah* (i.e. the dark wide-eyed woman) and *Katabtu ilayki min atabee hikayat ‘asheqin ta’b* (i.e. I wrote you out of blame, tales of a forlorn lover). This factor, among others, transforms the song into the mantra that lovers fully embrace and through whose lyrics they communicate, even identify, in such a way that potentiality becomes actuality, to use Aristotle’s principles.

The lyricist lends the singer his voice through a set of rules reminiscent of what happens in theater where the “I” of the playwright is diffused within the multiple ‘Is’ of the imagined characters incarnated by actors who use a borrowed, non-existent “I”. Hence, the impact of words changes when they become imagined. That is, the words of the actor/character become devoid of meaning or impact outside the context in which they were uttered.

According to John Austin’s principle of performative utterances, sentences can become speech acts in certain situations and action verbs, such as “say”, “listen”, and “sing”, become actualized as soon as they are uttered. In all three cases, the sentence is not being used to describe or state what one is “doing”, but is being used to actually “do” it.

When Fairouz sings for the city of Jerusalem with complete humility, in prayer-like fashion, the verse, “For you, O City of Prayers, I pray”, she is actually praying. Whomever else might sing this phrase with the same inflection would be in a praying mode one way or the other, thereby achieving a state of complete fusion of the author and the mouthpiece, of the word and the action, particularly when the rest of the hymn makes a transformation from the “I point of view” in “I pray” to the “we point of view” as in “Our eyes journey to you every day”, chanted by the choir.

This is a rare occurrence in song writing, for songs usually depict an imaginary situation. Thus, “Earth shattering wrath is imminent” does not literally mean that a war had been waged.

When Fairouz croons, “I tell my daughter”, the verb matches its resulting action, hence creating perfect congruence between the “I” of the singer and that of the performer at that defined moment when the lyrics are being uttered. Since we cannot isolate the word from the context of its occurrence, we see that the rest of the verse removes the action from its context, throwing it in another time frame altogether, namely the cold night: “I tell my daughter if the night is cold”, thus the verb put in the present tense imbues the action with a

contemporaneousness that minimizes the effect of fusion (between the singer and the performer), and conjures up the image of a generic mother, not necessarily Fairouz. The same pattern governs the rest of the song, including the stanza, “I tell my neighbor ... let’s sing since you’re lonesome; singing could make your waiting feel shorter”.

The fusion exists not only in action verbs, but also between the “I” of the speaker and that of the imaginary character portrayed in the song. The lyrics written by the Rahbani brothers reflect, through Fairouz’s voice, the personality of the woman in love in a way that is different from that reflected in the lyrics prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s when songs only spoke of love, longing, and separation.

Fairouz’ songs have ushered in a new personality into the world of love, that of the young, innocent woman who opens her eyes to newfound emotions and who is clueless as to what is happening to her: “Oh mother, I don’t know what’s wrong with me”; “Mother, I don’t know how he approached me”; “I love you but I’m not sure ... they told me”.

At the time, Fairouz was coming of age herself, demure and reserved, trying to carve her niche in the world of singing, and probably in the ways of love (during this epoch, she had a liaison with Assi Rahbani which subsequently led to marriage). The songs of that era were most likely inspired by Fairouz’s persona. If they stood out during those early beginnings, it is because of the uniqueness of their interpretation.

But what kind of passion do these songs describe? The lyrics in Fairouz’s repertoire elevated love to an unadulterated and transparent state, in a way unparalleled in the history of the Arabic song. Both the music and the musical arrangements, embellished by Western accents, made Fairouz’s vocal interpretations unique and set her apart from what was commonplace. Both have contributed to making her voice ethereal and transparent, and to branding its owner as an exceptional singer. The media further reinforced this image by bestowing on her such titles as “The Ambassador of Lebanon to the Stars” and “The Woman with the Angelic

Voice". These titles, although flattering, have robbed Fairouz of her depth as a real human being, and while these songs lifted her to the heavens, they deprived her at some level of her image as a mortal. Fairouz herself (with a little help) has contributed to the spread of this image when she weaved around herself the web of the enigmatic "Diva", impenetrable, and inaccessible to all but a select few. However, those who knew the real Fairouz then and know her now recognize her strong personality, her commanding presence, and her flair for repartee. This latter image is more in tandem with the image her son Ziad had subsequently carved up for her.

The Egyptian songs of that period went to great lengths to describe the state of sensual love, and would not shy away from portraying lovers who drown in "the hell of kisses". These influences were all too present in Fairouz's earlier and oft-forgotten songs:

The words of lovers; whispers from heart to heart and nostalgia; closer and closer
Teardrops, drowning the eyes,
disappear in kisses, when eye lids move
Tremors of lips, and convulsions of foreheads;
the ultimate secret of life. The words of lovers.

ولا كلمات العاشقين همسات من قلوب
لقلوبٍ وحنين. من قريبٍ لقريب

قطراتٌ في المقل. غرقت فيها العيون
تتلاشى في القبل. عند تحريك الجفون

رعشاتٌ من شفاه. واختلاجٌ من جبين
سرُّ أسرار الحياة. كلمات العاشقين

In later songs, they [the lovers] approach love with diffidence, through prudish images that hardly exceed touching hands and exchanging looks, and in rare instances, embracing. The carnal desire would surface then vanish just as summarily, sometimes fronted as a fib, as in, "they said he held me twice tightly... look what a lie! ... Once! granted... but twice?" or, as in a song that slips the pangs of passion into childhood innocence, "The house went round and round ... and we are mere children", or when another says, "We're having a tête-à-tête,

united in love; together on the chair, insane". Here again end both the frenzy of passion and desire for unification, "Come close so we can chat a little".

The majority of the Rahbani songs written for Fairouz have focused on a type of love devoid of gender, and on a lover whose identity was unknown: "The Handsome One". "The Handsome One hasn't shown up in a long time"; "The Handsome One passed by and greeted us"; "O Handsome One, how could you be mad at us?"; "The Handsome One would not talk to us anymore"; "The wind knocked on the door, we thought it was our loved one ... the Handsome One long gone is back to reproach us for not keeping in touch"... All of these lyrics have contributed to keeping Fairouz - and the protagonist whose role she plays - away from any potential association with her personal life; in her songs, she incarnated love in the absolute. Thus, the object of affection, regardless of sex, age, or social class, was blessed in this liaison, putting forth an image of unspoiled love, and contributing to sketching a state of love that is both absolute and encompassing.

This volitional window dressing of reality against a backdrop of idealism and romanticism becomes all too noticeable when we compare the Rahbani songs with the ones written by the Lebanese poet and writer Joseph Harb. During this period, the image of the protagonist was transformed into that of a woman who is more mature, and closer to reality; she spends the night with the loved one, parting ways with him at daybreak: "When we say goodbye at the door, daylight is barely coming out". In the song "On a night and in the rain", passion is described in more sensual terms, notwithstanding the fact that congruence is improbable since the description is given by a third party: "Two lovers sitting down ... consumed by one another ... having a talk by candlelight ... their eyes fixated on each other ... their hands cold, and their lips paramours staying up together". At the end of the song: "Between their kisses by candlelight and their moans, every time they remember the door, a teardrop rolls down from both their eyes".

Then Ziad, her son, composer and lyricist, comes in. Surprising is the image he has presented of the

woman in the songs Fairouz has interpreted, and far is the distance that separates the woman who used to plead: "I'm coming back to stand by his door in prostration, showing penance for my absence and asking for his forgiveness" from the one who taunts, "You stop by or you don't ... I don't give a damn".

Ziad has dismantled the translucent image that his father Assi and his uncle Mansour, both composers and lyricists, had painted for the woman incarnated by Fairouz. He replaced her with a real and realistic one, firmly grounded in time and place, and closer to the woman of our times. Ziad's work in this respect is an evolution in the concept of the song, the relationship between man and woman, and the female image. For the woman doesn't merely fall in love and wait, but she also argues, derides, acts up, and asks questions forcefully: "How are you? What a character you are!" She also possesses enough courage to analyze her emotions and justify them by using arguments not related to passion and love: "My acquaintance with you came out of sadness; my acquaintance with you was not normal; it was the result of boredom; your love for me started more like pity; I wanted tenderness, and didn't care much, got stuck in this circle, and needed a human being".

The man in Ziad's songs is no longer the infatuated lover who is greeted by the moon at his doorstep. He has become a real and loathsome person: "Do you remember what you last told me? If you want, you can stay or you can go. I got upset then and didn't think it through much. That it's you ... this is you".

This new balance has brought relationships closer to our times, and closer to reality, with a zest of wit which emanates from the day-to-day bickering, as in this song:

You talk over me; I talk over you; who would benefit?²² Trust me, day after day, your talking keeps going up; you tell me I keep rehashing the same old stuff when in fact you are the one actually doing it; you're always sure of everything yet nothing seems sure; you predict a bright future for us... where do you see the brightness? You've got 10 birds on the tree and none in the hand".

Or when the lyrics transport us to such realism we can almost see it: "Quit blowing smoke in my face, even if you smoke 'light'."

This is not to mention the many references to characters or moods culled from old Rahbani favorites, such as "O guardians of snow, O guardians of cold and rain and wind" which spring up in: "O you who await the snow you don't want to go back", among others. Even the world depicted by Ziad's songs seems more real, worn out, weighed down by life's tribulations, such as traveling to Kuwait and Sharjah (in search of work), where the crampedness of houses which stopped being "a forgotten room in the night"; one "that withers at the edge of dark and wind", or "a house befriended by rivers". It is now a tiny and dark apartment: "Wider was this parlor; more welcoming this balcony" in a building with many floors and an iron gate: "I wish your house wasn't far; and the front door not made of iron; I would've joined you in a moment and come up to talk to you my love so I could fall asleep".

Instead for the poetic image about voyage, the ambiguous identity of travel companions and the wait at the crossroads in "They made us wait at Darina's stop; we didn't know their name; they didn't know ours; a small car; night and jealousy, and lovers in pairs going no one knows where", we find in Ziad's lyrics the realistic image of the bus and its passengers who can be seen in other means of public transportation. "One is eating lettuce; another eating figs; there's this character with his wife; he hyperventilates and his wife gets dizzy".

The Rahbani brothers have fashioned a world wherein beauty and purity had reached unrealistic proportions, and led the biographic "I" of Fairouz to a state of complete oblivion in order to allow her to exist in the song as an imagined character, and to endure in people's consciousness as a heavenly presence that is totally ethereal.

By contrast, Ziad has crossed the "t's" and dotted the "i's" and separated the personalities of the imagined woman who is the protagonist of the songs from Fairouz, the singer, when he restrained

the illusory gimmicks and proclaimed the song as a realistic peg through its lyrics and the process of its recording, by emphasizing the dialogue between the singer and the backup vocalists, just as in the song, "Send my regards to him": "I'm singing the refrain, and when I do, sing back; it is the same old refrain, if you can ad lib to it; then repeat the verse, send my regards to him, do".

If the Rahbani Brothers have followed in the footsteps of those who have inspired the works of fictional theater, Ziad, by contrast, has succeeded in obliterating the artifice and in insisting on the instruments of theater and the ways to achieve them, and in driving the audience into a state of denial. He freed the participant from the world of illusion and made him/her see in the imagined work of art not an alternate idealized image of the world, but a realistic rendering of the human transactions negotiated in the world around him/her. He invoked his critical sense, in much the same way Brecht introduced his theory of alienation in the epic theater.

Ziad has brought about change as early as his first song for Fairouz at the time of her husband Assi's ailment: "People are asking me about you, my beloved". In this song, through merging the lyrics with the actual temporal context in which it was conceived (i.e. Assi's death), a collusion occurred between the protagonist's "I" and the singer's "I" in singing, so we started thinking of her as a real woman, not just the voice of an imagined character: "It hurts me to sing, my love; for the first time we're not together". Ziad's second song, "I have to bid you farewell", marked the dawning of a new era in the history of the Arabic song. Just as in modern story-writing the act of writing becomes the theme of the story, and in the theater, the actor's occupation becomes the theme of the play, Ziad's songs reflect critically and innovatively on the nature of songs

as an art form. He takes a critical stab at the nature of the song which he describes as "words on paper"; the nature of the singer's life ("Every night I sing in a different city, take my voice and tour constantly; not a single song was of benefit and not a word; it's something sad"); the relationship between interpretation on stage and the living reality of the singer ("Everything I say is heartfelt and real"), the difference between interpretation and reality ("If we did not cry or shed tears, it doesn't mean we're happy"); and the relationship between the singer and her audience ("Now I have to bid you farewell and tell you about myself; at the end of the day if it hadn't been for you I wouldn't sing"). He even goes as far as announcing the end of the Rahbani traditional song: "Musicians played and signed off, and the audience became scarce." This song is ominous, anticipating the end of it all, namely, the musicians' disbandment, the audience's departure, then the separation. It had the makings of a swan song.

As for Fairouz, Ziad has succeeded in dissociating the different roles she plays. He presented her as Assi's wife in "People are asking about you", as a singer in "Now I have to bid you farewell", as a mere performer in "My comrade Sobhi al-Jeez", and as a woman in all the songs that speak of romance between a couple. He even drove the song to the ultimate level of minimalism when he cast away all lyrics and bestowed on it an ambiguous title: "...and wheat", leading Fairouz in the process to the ultimate state of perfection, morphing her into the best in her. He turned her into a voice.

Hanan Kassab-Hassan is Secretary General, Damascus - Arab Capital of Culture, 2008 and Dean of the Higher Institute of Drama, Syria.
Translated from Arabic by Ahmad Oueini.

ENDNOTES

* This paper was presented at the three-day forum (April 27-30, 2006) entitled "Something Is Happening": Fairuz and Ziad al-Rahbani hosted by the Anis Makdisi Program in Literature, at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on the rich and diverse music of famous Lebanese singer Fairuz and her son, composer Ziad.

1. Most of the quotations are phrases, lyrics, or titles from Fairouz's songs.
2. This is the literal translation of a Lebanese idiom.