

The Autobiography of Muḥammad Shukrī: Modern *Su'lūk*

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Autobiography crosses the border between author and subject. Today I will examine the autobiographical trilogy of Moroccan author Muḥammad Shukrī (1935-2003), *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, *Zaman al-akḥṭā'*, and *Wujūh*, known in English as *For Bread Alone*, *Time of Errors* (or *Streetwise*, from the alternate Arabic title *Al-Shuṭṭār*), and *Faces*.¹

Throughout these works, Shukrī presents himself as a modern example of the *ṣu'lūk* poet, a character first found in the Arabic literary tradition during the *jāhilīyah* (or pre-Islamic) period. This liminal, mythological space was first populated by the vagabond or brigand poets, such as Ta'abbaṭa Sharr, 'Urwah ibn al-Ward, and al-Shanfarā.

Another border to be taken into account in this case is that of language and translation.

The first third of the series was initially published in English as *For Bread Alone: An Autobiography*, by Paul Bowles and Shukrī. It was not published in Arabic until 1982.

Additionally, in the case of this first work in particular, borders of cultural limits placed between the permissible and the forbidden have recently become more defined. The most prominent example of this is a 1998 ban of the book in Egypt following parental

¹ Translations and earlier editions: First published in English as Mohamed Choukri and Paul Bowles, *For Bread Alone: An Autobiography* (London: Peter Owen, 1974; San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987; London: Saqi Books, 1982, 1993, 2000). The French translation is *Le Pain Nu*, translated by Taher ben Jalloun (Paris: Maspéro, 1980; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980, 1997). Earlier Arabic versions than the collection used in this paper are Muḥammad Shukrī, *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī: sīrah dhatīyah riwā'iyah 1935-1956* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1993), *Al-Shuṭṭār* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 1992), which is available in translation as *Streetwise*, translated by Ed Emery (London: Saqi Books, 1996) or in French as *Le Temps des Erreurs*, translated by Mohamed El Ghoulabzouri (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994). In the paper, the separate book titles, *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, *Zaman al-akḥṭā'* (*Al-Shuṭṭār*), and *Wujūh* are used in citations, with page numbers, to help the reader distinguish which section of the collected works is being addressed. The edition used for this paper is *Min qjli al-khubz waḥḍahu: al-a'māl al-kāmilah, sīrah riwā'iyah—al-khubz al-ḥāfī, zaman al-akḥṭā', Wujūh* (Casablanca: al-Murkaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2008). Listed to the right of the page numbers corresponding to the collected works in *Min qjli al-khubz waḥḍahu* are the page numbers corresponding to the single volumes of *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, 5th ed., (Dār al-Sāqī, 1999), *Al-Shuṭṭār*, 1st ed., (Dār al-Sāqī, 1992), and *Wujūh*, 1st ed., (Dār al-Sāqī, 2000).

opposition to its inclusion on Professor Samia Mehrez's modern Arabic literature course syllabus at the American University of Cairo.

The following exploration of Shukrī's works follows the traditional poetic form of the *qaṣīdah*, or long ode, and the most popular poetic form of pre-Islamic Arabia. The famous *mu'allaqāt*, "hanging ones," were made up of the seven best *qaṣīdahs* of the pre-Islamic Arabs and were written on gilded cloth hung around the *Ka'ba* in Mecca.

The *qaṣīdahs* of the Arabs were used to exemplify tribal values and the importance of kin connections and belonging to the tribe, the central social unit of the pre- (and perhaps also post-)Islamic period. Usually, the *qaṣīdah* was made up of three parts: the *nasīb*, in which the poet demonstrates his longing for an absent beloved or remembrance of an abandoned abode, the *raḥīl*, during which the poet traverses the desert with his riding beast, and a final portion, which varied, but was often a *fakhr*, or a tribal boast, celebrating the poet's return to his tribe after his long journey. Suzanne Stetkevych has compared the traditional structure of the *qaṣīdah* form to the *rite of passage* paradigm of Arnold van Gennep, which also operates as a tripartite model of 1) separation (*nasīb*), 2) liminality (*raḥīl*), and 3) reaggregation (*fakhr*).

Today, I will use a comparative analysis of one of these classic odes, the *Lāmīyat al-'arab* of al-Shanfarā, to investigate the *ṣu'lūk* nature of Shukrī's autobiography. This analysis follows that of Suzanne Stetkevych included in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, in which she adeptly examines *ṣu'lūk* poetry as an example of "perpetual journey," which she terms a "rite of passage manqué." On the *Lāmīyat al-'arab*, she writes,

let us observe that the imagery throughout the *Lāmīyah* is of behavior diametrically and dialectically opposed to the tribal values of protection, propagation, satiety, and ease (that is: aggregation); the poem is fraught instead with images of danger, hardship, poverty, and privation,

wildness and wilderness. Of particular note is the absence here, as in most *ṣu'lūk* poetry, of the she-camel, the mount on which the tribal poet completes the crossing of the liminal desert (*raḥīl*) and arrives at the safety and satiety of the tribe and its institutions (tribal *fakhr*). So too, the themes that commonly comprise the *fakhr* section—the battle and hunt scenes with the horse as the mount, the drinking scene, and the commensal feast—are to be neither expected nor found in the typical *ṣu'lūk* poem [parentheses are Stetkevych's].²

Jaroslav Stetkevych has argued that *ṣu'lūk* poetry, which casts off tribal solidarity and community, still represents the 'chivalric values' of the Bedouin.³ The *Lāmīyat al-'arab* immediately embodies the theme of non-aggregation by its inversion of the traditional *nasīb*, instead celebrating the departure of the poet's kinsmen. The remainder of the poem follows the poet as he travels through the desert. He burns his bow and arrows, the last vestiges of his tribal connection, during the course of his journey. Finally, he prowls around the perimeter of a campsite, readying an attack on the tribe members, who do not know what to make of his mysterious presence. Following the poem's anti-*nasīb*, the *Lāmīyat al-'arab* enters the traditional liminal section of the *qaṣīdah*, the *raḥīl*. However, the *ṣu'lūk* poet revels in it, unlike his traditional counterparts, and he fails to undertake the traditional reaggregation with the tribe at the end of the poem. For this reason, Suzanne Stetkevych writes, "the *Lāmīyyat al-'arab* was composed in such a way as to define a genre—even to encompass it—with the result that to this day, the relation of every other *ṣu'lūk* poem to the *Lāmīyyah* is that of the part to the whole."⁴

² Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 150.

³ Jaroslav Stetkevych, "The Arabic lyrical phenomenon in context," *The Journal of Arabic Literature*, Badawi, M.M., P. Cachia, M.C. Lyons, J.N. Mattock, J.T. Monroe, Vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 58-59.

⁴ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals* 157.

A number of aspects of Muḥammad Shukrī's life are direct examples of Stetkevych's failed *rite of passage*. Born in the Rif Mountains of Morocco in 1935 to a poor Berber family, Shukrī faced a variety of hardships from an early age. His family fled famine in 1942, moving to Tangier—but not before his father wrung the neck of Shukrī's younger brother when he cried out for food. Perhaps one of the most important factors in the comparison of Shukrī to the early Arabian 'character' of al-Shanfarā is the similar relationship of each of them to their kin, al-Shanfarā to his natal tribe, and Shukrī to his father. Al-Shanfarā was taken from his natal tribe, Azd, by the Fahm tribe, and then ransomed back to another Azd clan in a prisoner exchange. Back with the Azd, "al-Shanfarā was then kept as a slave and foreigner—however affectionately treated—rather than being returned to his natal clan. This amounts, in effect, to his Azdite kinsmen's denial of his true identity... His position vis-à-vis the normal tribe convention is thus betwixt and between, ambiguous and anomalous."⁵ Both al-Shanfarā and Shukrī long to avenge themselves by spilling the blood of their fathers.

Shukrī's autobiography progresses, for the most part, chronologically. The first novel opens at the death of Shukrī's uncle, in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. Soon after, his family emigrates to Tangier, where, poor and hungry, Shukrī must find any means of employment to support himself. He first works in a café, where he is introduced to drugs and alcohol. He grows older and moves to Oran. There, and after his return to Tetuan and Tangier, he explores his sexual identity. At various points throughout the first two novels, he and his father have a number of violent altercations. In *Al-Khubz al-*

⁵ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals*, 126.

ḥāfī, Shukrī experiences homelessness a number of times, living on the streets, scavenging for whatever food is available, and prostituting himself.

Morocco gains its independence midway through the first novel, an event Shukrī addresses as a bystander rather than as a participant. He then works as a smuggler, during which time he is arrested for getting into a fight with a drunk in the streets. Following his experience in jail, the first novel concludes with the main character resolving to attend school and learn to read.

The second book, *Zaman al-akhṭā'*, initially covers Shukrī's arrival and experiences at school in Larache (Al-'Arāish), a small city in northern Morocco. He remains poor, sleeping in the streets or in a mosque or staying up all night in a café and making up for the loss of sleep with a nap during the day. Shukrī finishes his education and enters teacher's college. During this period, Shukrī moves a number of times, spending time in Larache, Tangier, and with his family around Tetuan (usually during summer breaks from classes). He struggles to obtain his teaching certificate, initially failing his exams. Soon after, he begins employment, though the exact timeframe is not addressed in the narrative. Later, Shukrī experiences a breakdown and checks into a mental hospital. He then returns to Tangier for a period and goes back into mental care after attacking a man visiting his apartment. His mother (and father, though Shukrī was not informed about it until much later) die. He attends his mother's funeral and drinks himself into oblivion, bringing the narrative to the end of the second book.

The final novel operates outside an exact time frame. A number of stories intersect throughout the book. *Wujūh* tells the stories, through Shukrī's eyes, of other inhabitants of Tangier. However, some of the events in *Wujūh* occur during the time

frame of *Zaman al-akhtā'*. For instance, Shukrī describes episodes that occur while he is in mental care, a period also covered in the second book. *Wujūh* also includes Shukrī's experiences as a writer, his travels, and his reactions to his literary reception in the Arab world and beyond. The end of *Wujūh* narrates his relationship with a young Belgian woman named Veronica. Once Shukrī sends her home, the story ends with a short reflection on the whole of his life. Shukrī died a few years after the publication of *Wujūh*, on November 15th, 2003, when he succumbed to cancer of the throat at a military hospital in Rabat.

Shukrī's characterization of himself in his work might best be defined as anti-heroic. Before he is even a teen, he habitually smokes *kīf* (the Moroccan term for marijuana) and drinks. He is an illiterate throughout the first third of the autobiography and the initial chapters of the second. In *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, he rapes another boy. Throughout, he steals, he has sex with prostitutes, and he lives in the streets. Even after establishing himself as, first, a teacher of Arabic and, second, a widely-published author, Shukrī continues to revel in his disconnection from society, his solitude, and his rejection of cultural morays.

Shukrī's *naṣīb* follows that of al-Shanfarā, best shown in the opening line of the *Lāmīyah* (the meter is *ṭawīl* in acatalectic tetrameter):

*Aqīmū banī ummī ṣudūra maṭīyakum
Fa-annī ilā qawmin siwākum la-amyalū*

Get up the chests of your camels
and leave, sons
of my mother. I lean to a tribe
other than you.⁶

⁶ Al-Shanfarā, *Lāmīyat al-'arab*, line 1, translation by Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classical Arabian Odes* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1989) 24.

The *nasīb* of Shukrī's work operates as an inversion of its traditional functioning in the Arabic *qaṣīdah*. The initial chapter of *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, occurring at the beginning of the trilogy, occupies the traditional position of the poetic *nasīb*. His total autobiographical work includes a variety of other instances in which the main character reflects back on this period of his life. However, none of these cases indicate the traditionally understood 'longing' for times, places, or people lost. Instead, Shukrī does the opposite, focusing on the violence, disease, and death associated with his origins—his father murdering his brother, dead animals rotting along the road to Tangier from his birth village, his uncle's funeral and his brother's. Though the instances of reflection are spread throughout Shukrī's works, each is a look back on the initial chapter of *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*.

Shukrī's descriptions of the Tangier of the 1950s and early 1960s offer the only true *nasīb* in the trilogy. He remembers the city in its heyday, before the aftermath of the 1967 and Gulf Wars contributed to its economic decline. The usual objects of the *nasīb*, which conjure up ideas of homeland, connection, and tribal solidarity, are noticeably either absent or reversed for Shukrī. He expresses no sense of loss for his native tongue, Rīffian Berber, or for the Rīf Mountains where he was born. In the final chapter of *Wujūh*, Shukrī addresses his early years: "That childhood, emigration destroyed it."⁷

Beyond his disconnection with his land of origin, Shukrī continually works to invert the idea of 'tribal' or familial connection. He equates his father with the colonial powers and fantasizes about killing him throughout the first two books. His father, a

⁷ 493 (*Wujūh*, 152). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

deserter from Franco’s army, represents not only the figure of the oppressive patriarch, which Shukrī makes apparent through his descriptions of his father’s violence, but also the power of colonial domination. Ensuring the dissolution of kinship ties, and taking a path similar to al-Shanfarā, Shukrī even thinks to himself, “If there were someone I wished would die before their time, that would be my father.”⁸ His relationship with his father is so strained that Shukrī only finds out about his father’s death (a natural one) during a phone call from a sister: “She told me about dad’s death. ‘When did he die?’ ‘A few months ago.’ ‘Why didn’t you all tell me when he died?’ ‘Cause we knew you never liked him....’”⁹

Shukrī’s *raḥīl* permeates the entirety of the trilogy and there is not time today to address the overall liminality of his works in full. Two examples from *Zaman al-akḥṭā* must suffice.

After entering school at around twenty-one—a step towards social reaggregation following his vagabond past, Shukrī’s body remained that of the *ṣu‘lūk*.

My clothes were covered in dirt and fraying, and they stank of my body odor. Lice lived in them. My shoes let in water. My hair was knotted and sticky, having gotten quite long. I scratched it continuously until my fingernails were black. When I combed it towards the front, to clean out the crust and dust, I combed out a squirming black louse. Every time I combed, there were three or four more fat lice, moving around vigorously. I poked them—with a small stick—making them race each other, then I put them in a small scrap of paper and set them on fire with a lighter to amuse myself with the ‘pop! pop!’ of their burning.¹⁰

⁸ 77 (*Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, 89).

⁹ 356-357 (*Al-Shuṭṭār*, 198).

¹⁰ 220 (*Al-Shuṭṭār*, 32).

Shukrī's filthy hair and unwashed clothes are a direct sign of his liminality in this stage. For the *ṣu'lūk*, "[n]o clothing veils him from the scorching sun; his hair, the grooming of which is a symbol of culture, is uncombed, unanointed, and full of lice and filth."¹¹

In line 54 of the *Lāmīyah* al-Shanfarā asks, "On how many a night of ill luck, when the hunter burns his bow for fuel, and his arrow wood..."¹² In the titular chapter of the second book, "Al-ʿAysh fī zaman al-akhtā" ("Life in the Time of Mistakes"), Shukrī discusses his rejection of his settled life in Tangier.

I burned the last of what I had written in Val Fleuri [a suburb of Tangier where he was teaching] and returned to my room on the roof of Hotel La Balātā [in the city proper] to sink into the pollution of the city. I began selling off sets of my books, every day, for any price, and I'd get drunk. I took sick leave from work. All I had left was *New Leaves* by Rosalía de Castro and the *Dīwān* of al-Muʿtamid ibn ʿAbbād. One night, I publicized my bankruptcy, both physical and moral. I was in the *Brasserie de France* café. I don't know why, but I was shouting curses at the Pharaohs. I threatened the barman, saying I'd smash up his bar if he didn't [*sic—idhā huwa lam yunād...*] call up the fire department, but they came anyway. I had one more drink before I left with them. 'Poor guy, he's gone crazy from books.' I heard the barman tell the waiter.

'I saw him one night sleeping on the step out front of the Monocle Bar, with his books as a pillow. May God protect him.'¹³

Shukrī's removal from society is later complete after he checks himself in to a mental hospital, where he would remain for some years over the course of his life. He continually rejects social gatherings, discussing his hatred of family events, the importance of his personal solitude—something he valued above almost all else, and the disgust he felt towards the Moroccan national dish, couscous—a meal usually shared among people from a central serving platter.

¹¹ Stetkevych, S., *The Mute Immortals*, 155.

¹² Al-Shanfarā, line 54, translation by Sells, 29.

¹³ 307-308 (*Al-Shuṭṭār*, 139-140).

Later in life, during the period chronicled in *Wujūh*, Shukrī continues to reject social normalization and occupy a liminal position. He still frequently sleeps with prostitutes, though he is referred to by at least one of them as *ustādh*, a term used for intellectuals or teachers.¹⁴ Now an internationally published author, he still writes, when talking to an old friend, a former prostitute:

‘Damnation is present in all work. Even when I write, it doesn’t save me from being cursed, forbidden, attacked to the point of banishment, prison, and murder. I might have received more insults than you’ve suffered. I’ve been spit on by some of them in the street, in bars, in official and non-official institutions—everywhere!—because I am a goddamned writer.’¹⁵

The ultimate anti-*fakhr*, and Shukrī’s final and lasting rejection of social aggregation, occurs at the end of *Wujūh* when he sends away his girlfriend, Veronica. She was a nineteen year old girl from Brussels with whom Shukrī was living in the 1990s.¹⁶ After she had been in Morocco for some time,

Her mother came to see how her daughter had been getting on in Tangier. It had reached her that her daughter was living with a wretched writer, who was addicted to alcohol and hash, and anything else that’s suspicious. What a shame! Her daughter came from a respectable, dignified family. How could this be her fate! She saw nothing of what she heard. We put her up in the al-Janīnah Hotel. I introduced her to a Moroccan artist, a failure in her art and her marriage, so that she might keep her busy. ‘What’s your daughter doing with that old, drunk writer? He’s going to corrupt your daughter. Take her with you. That’s my advice to you.’ That’s what Veronica told me she heard from her mom...¹⁷

Because of her mother’s visit, and his own reflection on their relationship, Shukrī writes,

¹⁴ 389 (*Wujūh*, 26).

¹⁵ 452 (*Wujūh*, 103-104).

¹⁶ The chapter “Fīrūnīka” (“Veronica”), 474-491 (*Wujūh* 131-150), treats their relationship.

¹⁷ 490 (*Wujūh*, 149).

I knew that Veronica would have loved to stay until she'd used up everything she'd made working in a cafeteria for two years in Brussels, and whatever else her generous mother might give her to live on, but I decided to end our adventure. 'Veronica, return to your mother and your studies. Return to your life, to anything far away from me, I'm for no one but myself.' And that's how it was. She returned to whatever she wanted to return to, and we never again saw each other, telephoned, or wrote. Today, I've got no idea if she's dead or alive!¹⁸

Shukrī effectively retreats, alone, into his life, like the *ṣu'lūk*. After Veronica, there is nothing left of the story. Shukrī left nothing behind except his writing: no wife, no children, and no real estate. Shukrī's final years show few signs pointing towards social reaggregation or incorporation and offer more evidence of his continued liminality.

Shukrī's autobiographical trilogy, read through the lens of the *Lāmīyah*, directly parallels the experience of the *ṣu'lūk*. Paratextually, the back cover of the collection treated in this paper refers to Shukrī's life: *fī hadhihi al-amākini 'āsha Muḥammad Shukrī ḥayāta al-ṣa'lakah* (In these places [the bars and whorehouses of Tangier] Shukrī lived the life of a vagabond). Throughout the trilogy, Shukrī never expresses any longing for his lost homeland (the Rīf Mountains), his lost native tongue (Rīffian Berber), nor even for his estranged family. His only longtime companion was his dog. Over the course of the narrative, he ruins, destroys, or loses everything he ever loved. For the majority of the trilogy, he lives alone. He lauds the *ḥarām* (the forbidden) and shuns the *ḥalāl* (the permissible), inverting traditional boundaries in his writing.

The fact that *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī* has created so much controversy, for instance, at the American University of Cairo, is another testament to the *ṣu'lūk* nature of Shukrī's work. The *Lāmīyat al-'arab* provided a prominent counter-example to Arabian tribal

¹⁸ 491 (*Wujūh*, 150).

values, acting as a mirror for pre-modern Arab society. Shukrī's autobiographical trilogy operates in the same manner. He is the perpetual outcast, even after death. The strong opposition of conservative factions to his work only serves to empower it even more, for Shukrī's autobiography is meaningful precisely because it rejects the values that his opposition aims to protect.

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