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Critical Discursive Psychology of Bedouin Women's Poetry

Laura Strachan

INTRODUCTION

Recently I was introduced to Julie Cruickshank's article "My Roots Grow in Jackpine Roots": Culture, History, and Narrative Practice in the Yukon (1998). In it she spoke about indigenous oral narratives and their inherent cultural implications. She argued that narratives are used to detect subsurface relationships-between past and future, between people and place, among people whose opinions diverge (*ibid.*: 2). Her article provided me with an insight into a genre of which I had very little experience and even less understanding. It was within this context that I began to rethink my position on the various formats of oral traditions. I started to see folktales, narratives, songs, and even poetry in a new light. I began to recognize that their importance reached far beyond 'artistic' representations of traditional societies. For me they became a window to enlightenment. Their words, lyrics, and actions permitted me to look past surface representations. It was in this manner that I was able to catch a glimpse of how deeply these traditions contributed to their very being. Cruickshank forever changed my perception of oral traditions. Oral traditions are indicative of connections, relationships, and knowledge, past and present, through which members of the society share experiences, learn their history, and ultimately establish their own identities. In many cases it may be the only avenue individuals have to express

their 'true' feelings and desires. Ahearn says that most linguistic anthropologists regard language as a form of social action, a cultural resource, and a set of sociocultural practices (2001: 3). In this context the analysis of oral traditions provides the researcher with the opportunity to look beyond the conventional forms of discourse i.e. conversational analysis, written text, etc. As part of a larger tool-kit, analyses of this nature could contribute immensely to the understanding of contemporary societies. For me, this has become an epiphany of sorts. I now consider the analysis of oral traditions an important element of my ethnographic research. Discourse analyses could reveal social action and local knowledge about members of the group that may have gone unnoticed by other means. It may reveal a side of life that may not be evident within the public domain. Cruickshank says that like letters and journals, oral histories are not always passed on as complete narratives, but they are much more than documents to be recorded and stored away (1998: 4). They need to be appreciated as indisputable social indicators and societal foundations. Ahearn says that all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation (2001: 4). It is in this context that I have begun to appreciate the anthropological value of analyzing oral traditions. In terms of my own research I have decided to focus on the oral tradition of poetic discourse. It is my belief that by conducting an analysis of

women’s poetry I may become privy to various forms of agency. The nature of my analysis would be to get at the heart of the ‘true’ female Bedouin. I recognize the naiveté of such a statement but it is my intention to show that the poetry is representative of the women’s inner feelings and culminates in appropriate cultural expressions of their daily lives. As elsewhere in the world, language is quite clearly involved in questions of identity, ideas about the nation, hierarchy, and authority (Haeri 2000: 18). Many times what is said in the public arena is not what is said in the private domain.

My analysis of choice is critical discursive psychology. I feel that this approach is best suited to the type of discursive material I have chosen and will help me to achieve the objectives I have in mind. My analyses will be concentrated on excerpts taken Deborah Kapchan’s work, *Gender on the Market* (1996), and from two of Lila Abu-Lughod’s works, *Veiled Sentiments* (1986) and *Writing Women’s Worlds* (1993). Although these researchers have conducted their own analyses of these poems, I will demonstrate how critical discursive psychology can be used as an important analysis tool for the identification of women’s true feelings. I would like to discuss the nature of Bedouin poetry and the critical discursive psychology analysis method before I attempt the actual analysis.

BEDOUIN POETRY

My impending research will be focussed on Middle Eastern Bedouin societies. Many Bedouin communities adhere to strict social constraints in which the actors exist within established boundaries and countless limitations. Women, children, and even men live within the confines of a society based on honour and rigid

religious dogma. Oral traditions are an intrinsic part of Bedouin life. Songs, folktales, narratives, jokes, and even poetry contribute to their oral traditions. Abu-Lughod says that poetry is the discourse of intimacy which, excluding ritual occasions, is shared with close friends, social peers, or lovers (1986: 234) and that it carries the sentiments that violate the honour and modesty codes witnessed in ordinary public domains (1990: 47).

This was the turning point in my research agenda. The more focussed my Middle Eastern queries became the more aware I was becoming of the important role poetry plays in Bedouin societies. This acknowledgement has forced me to look at Bedouin women in another light. Kapchan and Abu-Lughod’s numerous works include many *ghinnawas*. They are indicative of the women’s feelings regarding their position in life. Abu-Lughod thinks of the *ghinnawas* as a (Abu-Lughod 1986: 232-9). highly formulaic and stylized oral, lyrical poetry. It is a discourse of love which is opposed to the mundane discourse of ordinary language structured by overt social values and honour-linked personal ideals. Poems are vehicles for the expression of attachments to sweethearts or spouses that, if communicated in everyday social interaction, would damage reputations and jeopardize claims to respectability and, at the individual level, would ordinarily undermine self-image and self-presentation.

For many women poetry has become their only discursive outlet. It has become an avenue in which they can express their feelings of attachment without betraying their position in Bedouin society.

Within the Arabic world there exists two distinct forms of discourse. There is a meeting of Classical Arabic, the

“high” language, and national vernaculars, the “low” language. According to Haeri, Classical Arabic is the language of writing, education, religious sermons, and administration while the vernaculars consist of the media or oral exchanges, nonprint media, poetry, and plays which are regarded as impediments to “progress” that needed to be overcome “exactly like poverty and disease” (2000: 3). It is within the latter genre that Bedouin poetry originates. The national vernaculars are representative of the “real self”, symbols of local national culture (*ibid.*). They are representative of the everyday, common person. Speakers regard “High” as superior to “Low” in a number of respects (*ibid.*: 5). They are seen by many upper class Middle Easterners as a throwback to an earlier time. The nomadic language is something to be looked down upon if not entirely eradicated. Government administrators see its use as anti-progressive and like other things Bedouin wish to lose the traditional ways to those of the nation-state.

Kapchan says that the study of verbal genres in the Middle East and North Africa has produced a rich literature, exploring the construction of both personal and community identities and the relation of expressive life to issues of political economy, gender construction, and cultural ethics (1996: 5). It is within this context that my goal of establishing the hidden and/or disguised Bedouin mind-set will be examined. Cruickshank (1998: 24) said that the endurance of oral tradition in the Yukon speaks to the persistence and adaptability of narratives as a framework for bridging social fractures that threaten to fragment human relationships. I believe that Bedouin poetry is a mechanism for social dissatisfaction and is used as a verbal outlet for the actors. Upon preliminary

analysis it becomes apparent that there is something other than artistic representation taking place in these forms of discourse. The poetry is indicative of deeper meanings both socially and personally.

CRITICAL DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY ANALYSIS

Women acknowledge their place within the Bedouin societies. In accordance with Edley, gender, for these women, comes to be understood as something that is ‘done’ or accomplished in the course of social interaction (see Taylor 2001: 192). Membership in a very strict, male-oriented culture has left Bedouin females without a public voice. Often, the voice becomes that of their oral traditions, which are handed down from mother to daughter for generation upon generation. For the average women oral traditions remain behind closed doors. They are something private that they share only with their female peers. These discourses become something very different from what is in the public domain. The poetry becomes a representation of the women’s inner feelings concerning their lives and their daily struggles.

The analysis of Bedouin poetry is an attempt to localize the individual within the constructs of the social, political, economic, and environmental parameters in which they exist. The actors react to their lives in ways which may not always be visible in the public domain. In order to fully understand the complex relationship that exists between discourse and the speaking subject we not only need to study the way that people draw upon psychological concepts in the course of ordinary conversation but we also need to look at how particular discourses of the ‘self’ and ‘mind’ come to structure how we all think, feel, and talk (*ibid.*: 223-4).

Bedouin poetry is my attempt at ascertaining how these women see themselves within their social constructs.

In general, for as many types of discourse there may potentially be as many types of analytic techniques. Haeri says that the social, cultural and political implications of the language situations reflect, refract, and are enmeshed in many of the research questions that have concerned anthropologists of the Arab world: religion, ritual, the debate on modernity and tradition, the problems of translation, and ideas about the self including questions of national identity, gender, authority, the state, and so on (2000: 16). The critical discursive psychology approach, in my opinion, tackles these issues more directly than any of the other methodologies I have come across. It treats language as a topic by examining the ways in which people talk about-or construct-things like attitudes, memories, and emotions (Taylor 2001: 185). It is for these reasons that I believe it to be the most appropriate method for the task I have chosen.

When people express an attitude or recount an episode from the past they are being highly context-specific and the speakers can be seen to accomplish a wide variety of social actions via these different forms of talk (*ibid.*: 190). The goal is then to understand the contexts from which the discourse originates. If this can be ascertained the position from which the actors formulate their discourses can be better understood. The Taylor and et al text provides a theoretical foundation upon which to construct critical discursive psychological analysis. There are three concepts which lie at the heart of this analysis method: (1) interpretative repertoires are the 'building blocks of conversation', a range of linguist resources that can be drawn upon and utilized in the course of everyday social interaction

which are part of any community's common sense that provides a basis for shared social understanding (2) ideological dilemmas are 'lived ideologies' which are composed of the beliefs, values, and practices of a given society or culture, and (3) subject positions are the 'locations' or identities made relevant by specific ways of talking within a conversation (*ibid.*: 189-210). The combination of the three concepts contributes to a more thorough analysis for obtaining information and ultimately understanding the motives underlying the words and verses of the poetic discourses. I will now apply this approach to poetic excerpts from the above-mentioned works of Kapchan and Abu-Lughod in an attempt to identify the position and true feelings of the Bedouin women. In my analysis I will be looking for similarities in patterns of content, the actor's way of life, and to try to locate and be aware of who is implicated in a particular discourse.

CRITICAL DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY ANALYSIS OF FEMALE BEDOUIN POETRY

For the analysis of Bedouin poetry I have chosen a number of extracts from Kapchan and Abu-Lughod's texts. Although their ethnographic research focussed on different parts of the Arabic world and on different nomadic tribes, the poems are similar to those of other Middle Eastern Bedouin women. Kapchan, for example, studied Moroccan women in the marketplace. She recognized that their oral traditions spoke of their personal identities. The women who partake in the marketplace economy share their lives, through oral discourse, with those who visit in the market. Abu-Lughod focussed her research on the northern Bedouin tribes of Egypt. She uncovered a form of discursive resistance

among the women that belied their public social actions. Both women spoke of the power associated through their use of the language. Haeri argued that regarding the question of the role of gender the variationist paradigm assumes a direct one-to-one relationship between speakers' (linguistic) behaviour and their ideology (Haeri 2000: 8).

Ghinnawas seem to have been the medium in which the young woman could voice responses not culturally appropriate for a young Bedouin woman (Abu-Lughod 1986: 221). My analysis will concentrate on the *ghinnawas*. The application will be two-fold: I will address poetry from Kapchan's work separately from that of Abu-Lughod's excerpts. I will apply the critical discursive psychology analysis to each grouping and then discuss any similarities. Before I begin the analysis I would like to draw attention to the type of language the Bedouin women used in all of the excerpts. Haeri said that women use nonclassical urban forms in seeming preference and they use the standard forms (i.e. Classical Arabic) significantly less frequently than men do (2000: 7). As we have already seen, this type of discourse is inbred with connotations of inferiority. Bedouin women are stigmatized, from men and Classical speakers, by unselfconsciously partaking in nonclassical forms of discourse. I argue that this also contributes to the unrelenting social denigration of these women.

Kapchan says that she is beginning to notice changes in the women's recognition of their cultural identities. Their language is indicative of these social manifestations. The examination of women's linguistic and bodily practices illuminates how they are inscribing new values into a fast-changing cultural landscape, while being scripted into the

commodification and stratification of social life (Kapchan 1996: 6). The Bedouin/Berber society is structured on family honour and family obligations. The first poem is an example of this. The speaker recognizes women's value as a male commodity. Her own identity as an object, a piece of property, is expressed in a playful wedding song the *neggafa* (female singer) sings (*ibid.*: 174):

1.

The bride is pawned, [here] she
is in hock

Before her father she is pawned,
she is in hock

Before her mother she is
pawned, she is in hock

Before her paternal uncle she is
pawned, she is in hock

Before her maternal uncle she is
pawned, she is in hock...

The second poem is based on a *shikha*, a female performer in the marketplace. Her *ghinnawas* are representative of her social standing and associated feelings. Caught in the ramifications of an Islamic, patriarchal society she expresses her disdain through her lyrics. According to Kapchan (*ibid.*: 181) there is nothing that illustrates the recent changes in the relative status of women and men in Moroccan society so fully as the altered position of the *shikha*. Her unabashed expression of sexuality in song, movement, and lifestyle comments upon and, in a limited sense, reveals what is usually clothed, veiled, and preferably dismissed among those who are modest (*ibid.*: 194-5):

2.

Beer and red wine
She blamed it on them.

Strachan—Bedouin Women's Poetry 32

They made you drink whiskey
And you spent all night [pining
and] crying.

Oh one who bought me
Put me next to you.
Now you'll begin to need me
You sold me and I bought you
My heart is your property.

The third example from Kapchan's Moroccan research demonstrates the unhappiness experienced by the women who are forced into arranged marriages. The tension between romantic love and the assignment of partners by family and social pressure echoes the *shikha's* own dilemma: in choosing the former, a young couple attain their own prerogative but lose the support of their families (*ibid.*: 200)

3.

For years I've loved him.
[Now] a woman came and wants
to take him

By your mother, you won't win
him
Even if we make his life fall.
Oh my days.

His old wrinkled mother came.
She told me, "let go of my son."
He's your son [but he's] my love.
Oh my days.

With regards to interpretive repertoires the point is to establish any regular patterns of talk. I recognize that all three poems convey some representation of the unhappiness these women live with. They are also indicative of the daily struggles these women tolerate in order to exist within a society where they have little say about their lives. Words and phrases such as: "pawned"

and "hock," "they made you," "one who bought me," "you sold me," and "your property" are all examples of the women having limited control over their lives and the sadness and frustrations attributed to someone else controlling their fates. The *shikha* sings from her own subject position and that of the other women. It is in this manner that she constructs appropriate subject positions for women in the society. The analysis of these constraints contributes to the general overview of the limitations that exist for these women on a daily basis.

The concept of ideological dilemmas is very evident in these poems. The indeterminacy of lived ideologies makes them wonderfully rich and flexible resources for social interaction and everyday sense-making (Taylor 2001: 203). The dominant male ideology is explicit in the poetic excerpts. This ideology is part of the Bedouin common sense. Male members of society have say over the women's lives.

The third concept is that of the subject position. In a sense, it is this concept that connects the wider notions of discourses and interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves (*ibid.*: 210). They identify the position of the speaker. For instance, these women are speaking to their audiences from a position of frustration and helplessness. Words and phrases such as: "but he's my love," "I've loved him," "you won't win him," and "And you spent all night [pining and] crying" are indicative of the types of subject positions the women find themselves in. They are unable to control the circumstances within which they live. They are unable to live their lives without suffering serious consequences. They are socially imprisoned.

Abu-Lughod's research on Egyptian women conveyed many of the

same psychological discursive mannerisms that the Moroccan women exhibited. Even though the women recognize their place in Bedouin society this does not necessarily mean that they accept it. Women may not agree with the decisions made by the men in their families but they recognize the futility in arguing. Unable to change their circumstances the women choose to participate in oral discourse. For many Egyptian women it has become the only way to express their unhappiness. The women have subsequently developed strategies of resistance that protest these forms of patriarchal domination. Lila Abu-Lughod recognized that the women have been able to use their oral traditions as a means of subversive resistance. She says that there is a concern with unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems or even to ideologies of emancipation (Abu-Lughod 1993: 41). Sometimes it is only the women who recognize its existence. Resistance can be practiced on almost benign levels of social interaction.

Abu-Lughod has recognized four types of resistance associated with these particular Bedouin women: (1) the sexually segregated women's world where women daily enact all sorts of minor defiance of the restrictions enforced by elder men in the community (2) the resistance of Bedouin girls and women to marriages where family members arrange marriages for the young girls (3) sexually irreverent discourse where women make fun of men and manhood, and (4) the *ghinnawas* (Abu-Lughod 1990: 43-46).

The following excerpts show various forms of patriarchal resistance the women have developed to help them cope with the lives they have to live. Aside from the poems being verbal extensions of their personal frustrations, anxieties,

and general malaise, the women also take great pleasure in duping the men. Women seem only too glad when men fail to live up to the ideals of autonomy and manhood, the ideals on which their alleged moral superiority and social precedence are based, especially if they fail as a result of sexual desire (*ibid.*: 45).

In the first excerpt, women are unhappy with arranged marriages, especially when the men are old or are blood related. The young women are objecting in particular to older men and their paternal cousins, two categories of men who tend to have binding ties on their fathers that would make their marriage requests hard to refuse (*ibid.*: 44):

1.

I won't take an old man, not I
I'll give him a shove and he'll fall
in a ditch

I don't want the old fex on the
hill What I want is a new
Peugeot

God Damn the uncle's son
Lord don't lead me near no
blood relative

A second type of discursive resistance is evident in the analysis of poetry pertaining to polygyny. Bedouins are practicing Muslims. According to Islamic interpretation, men can marry a maximum of four wives if he is able to treat them all equally. For many women, the husband's desire to take a second, third, or even a fourth wife has serious implications for the older wives. Many of the women are secretly displeased with their husband's decision to acquire another wife. Their poetry supports this notion.

2.

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Better death, blindness, poverty,
and destitution than a match
with a married man

You want, oh dear one, to be
disappointed and to fight about
something not fated to be...

Without pleasures is my lot
oh God, may it not be imposed
on a friend...(Abu-Lughod 1986:
217)

In the following excerpt, the women's words clearly betray her public portrayal of indifference to her husband's decision to divorce her. This is a classic example of how public discourse can vary from the private. The woman's ordinary statements oscillated between denials of concern about her loss and her husband's rejection and expressions of bitterness and anger.

3.

On my breast I placed a
tombstone, though I was not
dead, oh Loved one...

Can it be that the eye would not
want to be happy again and its
condition to clear...

If a new love match is not
granted the ache in my mind will
continue, oh beloved...(ibid.:
218).

The next poem highlights the recognition that these women have some form of agency. Although they adhere to the patriarchal dictates of their respective societies the women realize that deep down they have power and control-albeit the method of deployment can be extremely underhanded. "A woman can't be governed-anyone who tries to guard her will just get tired. Whatever a woman

wants to do she can do. She's smart and she can think" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 78). It demonstrates the will and the length women will go to get their way. This is indicative of the women's agency while living within the confines of a patriarchal society.

4.

"you who guards the female,
you're fatigued

You who guards the female,
you're fatigued

One time she'll go to milk the
herd and rendezvous

One time she'll get up at night to
tie up the goats."

The last poem for analysis is that of the loneliness the women can feel if they have been ostracized from the group. One young woman found herself isolated within the Bedouin camp from the other women. Abu-Lughod calls these poems of loneliness (*ibid.*: 114-5):

5.

Friends in times of ease
I found out in need were
enemies...

Your worries increased, my love
Watch you don't pick up terrible
illnesses...

They watered the loved one with
a waterwheel
Of bitterness until she was
drenched...

Despair over them, oh loved one
Made you a stranger even to
those your father begot...

The application of the critical discursive psychological analysis provides

an insight into the Egyptian Bedouin women's mind-set. First of all, the interpretive repertoire suggests that the women in Abu-Lughod's study maintained a similar pattern of discourse as those seen in the Kapchan analysis. Their repertoires consisted of words and phrases indicative of women existing within socially oppressed situations. Words such as: "don't want an old man," "God Damn the uncle's son," "a match with a married man," "without pleasures is my lot," "on my breast I placed a tombstone," and "you who guards the female" supports the patriarchal repertoire of women having no control over their lives. In reality there are three separate repertoires: 1. the repertoire of a patriarchal society and 2. the repertoire of women having no say in their societies, and 3. the repertoire that women are sad and frustrated by their social constraints. Because of the nature of the society all three repertoires are tightly intertwined to represent a unified continuum.

The analysis of ideological dilemmas again is analogous to Kapchan's work. The male dominant ideology runs rampant through the various discourses. Words such as: "no blood relative," "old fex," and "may it not be imposed on a friend" are clearly consistent with the male dominated Bedouin society.

The subject position is seen as slightly different from that in Kapchan's analysis. The women here seem to show a greater degree of agency. Words and phrases such as: "I'll give him a shove," "I want a new Peugeot," "better death, blindness, poverty, and destitution," and "One time she'll go to milk the herd and rendezvous" demonstrate the power the women are feeling through their own language. Whether these actions actually take place is not the focus of this analysis. The issue is that the words belie what is spoken in the public domain, for example

Abu-Lughod's poem #4. The women, who are deemed by many to be oppressed and without agency, are standing in stark contrast to these suppositions.

CONCLUSION

The application of critical discursive psychology supports the premise of language and power. Ahearn argues that language and power are commonly intertwined (2001: 3). The women's participation in the social realm is extremely limited and restricted. The women have found various subversive mechanisms in which they can be active players, albeit on a quieter note, in their societies. Abu-Lughod says that women's poetry, the *ghinnawas*, is of sadness, suffering, and despair but stands as a defiance of the system symbolizing freedom- the ultimate value of the system and the essential entailment of the honour code (1986: 231-252)

In terms of the analysis method of choice, there may have been a more appropriate approach than the critical discursive psychology but I feel after applying to the data it contributed to the understanding of Bedouin women's poetry and the, sometimes, ulterior motives behind this genre. It provided insight into a very secretive, veiled society. The women's mind-set is often hidden from the public domain and it is through analyses such as this one that anthropologists can obtain some semblance of an understanding of how these women feel about their lives. "Analysis is not a matter of following rules or recipes; it often involves following hunches and the development of tentative interpretative schemes which may need to be abandoned or revised" (Taylor 2001: 198).

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