

The Story Behind The Songs

*“Mother, tell this bad man to forget about me,
I am not a meal to him, nor seeds to pick as he wishes”*

In July 2013, 11-year old Nada Al-Ahdal shared her story with the world through all social networks, and with great courage avoided her arranged marriage to a rich Saudi man. Her story is that of many Yemenite girls and young women.

Yemen, a country at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, is dominated by a clan-based, polygamous and highly patriarchal society. Women, more often girls as young as the age of 8 to 10, are often coerced into marriage to an elderly man they barely know, if at all; sometimes as a second or third wife. After following their husband to their new home, they would attend to the tasks that they had been trained for by their own mother. Often, they would never see their families again.

Since the women in Yemen were illiterate, a major historical source for describing their lives was their oral poetry, which was passed down, for generations, from mother to daughter by word of mouth. Their poems and songs documented their longing for freedom, aspirations, desires and disappointments.

The oral poetry differed from region to region and town to town and often contained an element of revolt, strongly protesting the quality of their lives or the choices made for them, without their consent.

The women sang while they worked together, during their everyday household chores such as grinding flour, washing clothes, carrying water from the spring or cooking and served as an emotional outlet for their feelings and repressed sentiments.

EPK

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SECRET WOMEN SONGS FROM YEMEN

Most of the songs were of an improvised nature and thus, the women not only were singers; they were also composers and poets as well.

There are several types of songs. They are songs of separation (sung mainly during the *Hena* ceremony, when the brides-to-be were officially separated from their families), songs of unfulfilled love and of longing for freedom. The songs allowed women to mentally escape their strenuous everyday life and create a spiritual inner world of freedom and expression.

The Women's songs, which are sung in Arabic, (Hebrew was considered as the Holy language and a privilege reserved to men only) are considered as folk music; part of an heritage that has been passed down orally from mother to daughter for centuries and although they mostly relate to sorrow, sadness and yearning for a life of gentleness and love, they are not all necessarily sad. They can be humorous too; often ridiculing the husband.

Gulaza's rendition of these secret women's songs is charged with emotions and the audience is propelled into a world of prayer, love, mystery and longing for freedom.