

Ameen Rihani : Daring to Dream

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There comes a time when we need to go beyond mere ceremonial activities intended to honor great figures such as Ameen Rihani and begin to seriously address the more challenging task of critical in depth analysis of their works. This is long due in the case of Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) who articulated in word and action an enlightened modernist vision of his own not only for his people but for humanity at large. And in analyzing his works in depth, we need to understand him from his own perspective and what he truly stood for in his time and place in the map of Arab intellectual discourse rather than from present perspectives. We do not do him much favor through the superimposition of our current notions on his thought and life.

To put it more plainly, I wish at the outset to object to the way some ceremonialists have been defining him from current perspectives as a mainstream pragmatic person seeking consensus and reconciliation. Those concepts are presently loaded with new subjective meanings in a totally different historical context. Rihani was an independent, principled intellectual and activist who stood firm in defense of his convictions proving that he was a man of uncommon courage in challenging the establishments of his time. He was a rebel with a cause and vision, and his career was one of dissent rather than adjustment to the prevailing reality in the East or the West. He was and continued to be throughout his life an Arab nationalist , but on his own terms from a secular and democratic point of view and in opposition to traditional theocracy and nationalistic authoritarianism.

What he saw then between East and West was not cooperation and free exchange and mutual respect but conflicts and confrontations resulting from European imperialist invasions . He saw that as inevitable because he realized that the genius of this industrial age is destined to world conquest and power(1). He saw contradictions and conflicts of interests rather than a cooperating family of nations seeking justice for all humanity. Surely, he admired American democracy and system of government and wondered when would freedom turn its face toward the East? On the other hand, he openly criticized such American value orientations as pragmatism and utilitarianism, as well as policies in support of Zionist plans for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine by uprooting and transferring or transplanting Arab natives.

Rihani never wavered on these issues in the name of pragmatism, consensus, and reconciliation . Certainly he was a rational thinker and respectful of others, but he was also a visionary rebel who challenged the system highlighting existing contradictions and injustices and offering an alternative vision for a better and more humane society. In announcing his views, he was honest, truthful, confrontational, and independent minded insisting on freedom of thought. Certainly he had a dream for Arabs and he was not discouraged by obstacles, difficulties and setbacks.

His works and activities need to be understood and analyzed in their historical context then and not from present perspectives. Most countries of the world were colonized rather independent nations and there was no coordinated action in pursuit of mutually beneficial goals. Cooperative visions then under European colonization meant submission to forces of domination. Clearly he saw the world order of his time as based on contradictory power relations, and he stood on the right side of conflicts between powerful and weak nations. The global system then was colonial and not in any way based on the principles of interdependence and common interests and security for all.

Mind you, I am not suggesting that the current global system has been totally transformed . What we have at the present time is a post colonial system, for the present world order continues to be organized around selfishness, narrow national interests , power relations , and exclusion rather than inclusion . In times of crisis, such as this very present period, world order has become unmasked and shows its true ugly face. Most unfortunately, what we see is savagery and tribal warfare devoid of democratic, moral and humanistic principles. What we continue to have at the beginning of the 21st century is not a community of modern nations as much as tribes in disguise.

Ameen Rihani was a courageous man who challenged the prevailing thought of his time by offering a vision of transcendence rather than adjustment to prevailing reality. He rejected the imperialist schemes of his time and clearly saw the call for pragmatism as masked submission. He was a visionary and unyielding rebel, a daring dreamer and activist who challenged the status quo and social and political authorities on behalf of his people whom he defined in broad humanistic rather than narrow and exclusive terms . He wanted Arabs to be united in their struggle to live in freedom and human dignity. As long as they continued to be divided, they would not be able to defend their basic rights. Without a dream and vision for the future, they would continue living on the fringe of world affairs exposed, vulnerable, dispossessed of their human and natural resources. Most unfortunately, Arabs continue to be divided and vulnerable to the whims of their rulers and external forces bent on domination in the service of their interests at the expense of others .

In support of my views of Ameen Rihani and his relentless efforts to the realization of his dream for the Arab World against all odds, I wish to focus on three of his major works: *Al-Qawmiyat*, the *Book of Khalid*, and the *Path of Vision*. In these works and others, he demonstrated his true intentions as a rebel on behalf of Arab unity from a secular perspective in opposition to traditional forces . He openly challenged realists who confined themselves to what they saw as possible and practical, and dared to think of the unthinkable. His dreams went beyond the confines of the established order and in opposition to it.

Ameen Rihani saw the predicament of the Arab nation as caused internally by a sectarian political system and externally by European imperialism. In a collection of his nationalist writings (*Al-Qawmiyat*), he was most concerned with notions of identity and defined himself as :

Syrian first, Lebanese second, Maronite third... respecting the source of my Arab language... I am a Syrian who... wishes to see a constitutional decentralized government in Syria whose pillar is nationalist geographical unity... I am a Syrian Lebanese who believes in the separation of religion from politics because I realized that the obstacle to national unity is religious partisanship (2).

In fact, he placed Arabism (Al-Uruba) first, before Islam and Christianity :

Al-Uruba is before anything else and above everything else... Each of our sects is a homeland on its own . Sunnism and Shiism in Iraq, Maronitism and its sisters in Lebanon, Al-Wahabiyya in Najd, and Zaydia in Yemen; they are all one and of the same sort in this respect. They all place their interests over and above the greater national interest.... Hence, my call for replacement of the sectarian idea with the nationalist idea.(3)

Following World War 1, Rihani warned against the partition of Syria as follows:

There are two groups, in fact two parties, in our midst. One party drew a narrow circle around itself and said : This is our country ; this is our circle. Another party drew a broader circle around the narrower one and said : This is our country ; this is our circle that surrounds yours and protects it... The first circle is Lebanon, and the second is Syria. The first is a symbol of the principle of the Lebanese awakening , and the second is the symbol of the principle of Syrian unity... The first principle is based on the sectarian idea... whereas the second principle is based on the correct social idea that weak people cannot survive and prosper except through unity... That is why we say that the Lebanese idea, in fact the national sectarian idea, is an old and impotent idea . If we adopt it, it will be a devastating blow to us . It was at the root of our defeat and misery in the past, and will be, if it prevails, the reason for our misery in the future... What a narrow conception of Lebanon!(4)

He also reaffirmed these beliefs in his letters to his many friends . In one of these letters, he stated,

The curse that inflicted Syria , indeed the whole of the Arab homeland is separation, which was created and promoted by sectarianism. Every sect is a state of its own.... the aim of my Arabic writings for over thirty years was to combat these social ills , and the creation of the spirit of brotherhood and cooperation between all sects ò(5)

Book of Khalid is an autobiographical novel in which Rihani debates controversial issues from a nationalistic and liberal perspective. Khalid rebelled against the dominant spirit among his people and the prevailing trends at the time. He saw disorder and tension, not harmony, in society and human life, and dreamt of the awakening of the East and the emergence of a great Arab empire at the cross point of East and West. With that goal constantly on his mind, he followed a collision road with the religious establishment and the clergy, and saw a close alliance between patriarchal family and clerical system against individual freedom and spiritual happiness, and believed in the sanctity of the individual rather than family and religious establishment.

Not unlike Khalid, Ameen Rihani yearned beyond the seen horizon for he had a vision though he knew well that when one dreams of Jannat (paradise), he must be prepared to go through Juhannam (hell). He also clearly pointed out that to reach the heights from which idealism is waving to him, he couldn't avoid going through the labyrinth or maze of reality.

In a speech at the heart of Damascus, Khalid challenged religious scholars by accusing them of being fanatics, and openly calling for the liberation of Islam from its old habits. He also challenged external forces. In a letter dated 1934 addressed to group of young Arab nationalists, Rihani wrote that barriers to Arab unity were both external and internal, and that it was difficult to overcome external obstacles through reaching an understanding with dominant states, namely England and France, for the truth in their view is might is right. The policy of cooperation between the weak and the powerful is not much of a help for the weak. (6)

In 1937 he proposed, in the same spirit, the establishment of a Syrian national college, neither protestant nor catholic, not American nor Jesuit, but national civil center of learning to raise the minaret of the right modesty and free learning in the Syrian nation (7).

Ameen Rihani was one of the pioneers who protested as far back as 1929 against the unfairness of American press dealing with Palestinian issues in support of Zionism. He led a group of Arab-Americans who met Sept 9, 1929 with Secretary of State Stimson to protest Zionist encroachments upon the rights of the overwhelming Arab majority. They characterized the situation as a conflict between the Arab nationalism of the native majority and the Zionism of a small minority of foreign Jews. As to Stimson's reply to the group, it was remarkable for its simple minded nature. He was receiving pressure from American Zionists to condemn the Arabs, and perhaps his political instincts dictated that he not address the substance of the Arab American argument (8). The American historian Lawrence Davidson who reached such a conclusion in his new book America's Palestine went further to say that while Zionists pictured the Palestinians as the equivalent of hostile frontier Indians fighting courageous American-style colonists, the Arab Americans identified those same Palestinians with American colonists fighting against imperial oppression.

In my opinion, Western concept of tolerance has not been inclusive enough of the different other. In fact it has historically dehumanized the different other. It has brutalized Africans, Native Americans, Arabs, and Asians. Social psychological empirical studies in

Michigan in the Sixties demonstrated that Americans who were most considerate of their neighbors in their local communities tended to be most aggressive and extremists in their views on Vietnam .

In a letter dated 1911, Rihani said in defiance, Ó I, as a Lebanese Arab, want to educate America...about some elementary facts about the Arab nation I belonged to and will continue to belong today and tomorrow and for ever. I want the New World, the Romans of the present era, to understand that there is other than America and Americans in the World, and they will inevitably fail if they maintain their ignorance Ò(9)

Usually, this is not the image that generally emerges out of expertise scholarship on Gibran or Ameen Rihani who along with other emerge writers benefited from the new milieu they found themselves in. Being exposed to different cultures must have served as a source of creativity. Clearly, they felt proud about serving as a bridge between cultures, and combated feeling of being uprooted outsiders to both or either of the two cultures. By doing so and by being in this peculiar position, they enriched both cultures. Cross-fertilization among civilizations, as in this case, had its enriching rather than stifling effects on Arab-American writers. It is in this context that we can understand Ameen Rihani's statement of his willingness to barter the poetry of the East for the airplanes of the West. His migration to America in 1888 at the age of 12 rendered him a pioneer in introducing prose poetry under the influence of Walt Whitman as shown in Hutaf Al-Awdiyah. Hence also his sigh, "When would you turn your face toward the East oh Freedom?"

On the other hand, and in a state of nostalgia for his country of origin , Gibran wrote to his friend Felix Farris saying, "It is necessary to be delivered from this civilization walking on wheels and embrace that civilization submitting to sun light". Rihani, a man of uncommon courage worried about drifting away from the path of vision by taking pragmatism and utilitarianism as his gods. He was not taken by mainstream America but by its critics such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. He chose the path of mystics and committed himself to the world of spiritualities of weak and oppressed nations and saw complaisance as a harbinger of moral decrepitude or weakness, and concluded that Ò some primitive men are more attractive to us than the most developed specimen of civilization (10)

Hence the central premise of his book *The Path of Vision* (1921) based on which he concluded that, "Weak and oppressed nations are fundamentally spiritual ; strong nations are, as a rule, chiefly materialistic". Hence also the drift of people in strong nations "away from the path of vision. We no longer find joy , as did the ancients, in pure thought. Pragmatism and utilitarianism are our gods. " (p.24). To that effect, Rihani stated that as idealists, Ò we are ever discontented with the present state of the Ego and the World" (p35). That is most central to critical thought across civilizations.

(1) Ameen Rihani, *The Path of Vision*, Beirut : The Rihani House, 1970, p 105

(2) _____, *Al-Qawmiyat*, Beirut : Dar Al-Rihani, 1956, vol.1, p 152

(3) , *Ibid*, p 147

- (4) Ibid, pp 145-147
- (5) Henry Milki, Ò The English letters of Ameen Rihani Ò (in Arabic),
Palma, vol. 7, no 2 , 2001 , p 30
- (6) Al-Qawmiyat, pp 86-87
- (7) Ibid, p ,vol. 2 , p155
- (8) Lawrence Davidson, America's Palestine, University Press of Florida,
2001 p 104
- (9) Henri Milki, op.cit., p 20
- (10) Ameen Rihani, The Path of Vision, pp 29, and 39