The Formation of a Universal Self: Rihani and Byron

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In its most meaningful purposes, a quest for the formation of a universal self is a means to willingly go *beyond* preconceived notions, limited ideological and religious beliefs, and traditional social norms. Self-liberation and self-formation are subsequent and cannot be achieved unless the terrain of the Self goes *beyond* its regional and national disciplinary boundaries and their contextual confinements to interact, rather participate and fuse, with difference. Only then Self becomes free; it redeems itself and the world around it; and it becomes conditioned to control the roots of the powerful unconscious attachments to self-boundaries. Consequently, the most effective procedures for personal growth and creativity are provided.

Modern psychoanalysts* assert that in its most essential stages the process of self-formation entails *inner* and *outer* journeys made by the Self in search for meaning, for certitude, and for higher values, all of which would liberate it from its own traditional confines. The major risk taken by Self is facing the unknown; but this risk is itself a positive one because it is the basis of knowledge. When Self starts understanding the unknown, it gains knowledge and accepts difference. Self, then, triggers the process of genuine participation with the Other, which seizes to be Other. In this respect, the Eastern Sufi thinkers, the first romantics ever,* used this process to unify with Nature and God far before modern psychology became a science. The formation of a universal self, then, starts with self-liberation from narcissism and immediate boundaries of the mind and soul. With literary thinkers, however, this process is manifested in two ways: in their personal travels and quests and in their literary pilgrimages. Both pilgrimages quite often aim at liberating the Self from *inner* and *outer* tensions and conflicts, which hinder the acquisition of universal knowledge and which aim at enhancing the fusion of Self with Other.

In this respect, Byron's and Rihani's perceptive growth and conditions of literary creativity are inter-related. Their personal travels and their creative travelogues—if *The Book of Khalid* and *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* can be identified, amongst other genres, as travelogues—should not be taken only as representing physical pilgrimages in the outer world only but also as spiritual and intellectual pursuits for liberating and reshaping Self. In this paper, I maintain that Ameen Rihani's literary self-formation does not only follow the above described process but that it is Romantic and Byronic in its demands of a universal Self, distinctive for its rejection of orthodoxy and of narcissistic desires and purposes, and for its acceptance of and participation with difference, in its search for meaning, certitude, and higher values. The Romantic pilgrimage, which M. H. Abrams refers to as the Romantic circuitous journey, in which "man must break out of the cycle of his present existence into the enduring vision of an integral and entirely human world,"[1] seems to be the underlying purpose of *The Book of Khalid*. I also contend that

Rihani's Khalid is a model Byronic hero. Like Childe Harold, Khalid sets on a quest in pursuit of a universal identity; he is charged with a radical type of romanticism and wrapped with a desire to break away from the systems to revolt against the orthodoxy of a world of man-made conflicts; he finally sparkles like a lonely star in his mysteriously powerful Byronic personality as he faces his doom. Khalid ventures outside his own milieu to unravel the truth about the world around him, as a means of understanding and shaping Self. He takes Nature as his main companion and as a standard of judgment. Further, Khalid's pilgrimage from the East to the West and back to the East parallels in many ways Childe Harold's pilgrimage from the West to the East and back to the West; both are typical romantic circuitous quests aimed at self-liberation and self-universalization.

However in discussions exploring comparative studies and literary influences, a scholar must find a link, a *nexus* between the influence and the influenced. This nexus, direct or indirect, must promote focal points in the personal lives and/or the creative works of literary figures. In Rihani's case, the Byronic nexus is detected in both; however, it is most certainly reflected on the Byron Marble, which, I believe Rihani got during a visit he made to Nottingham in 1912. In an unpublished manuscript, Rihani writes: "I am in the midst of the Byron country now. …[where] the Muses seem to take care of their children."[2] [Show the manuscript] Rihani visited Newstead Abbey, Byron's estate, and Hucknall Church, where Byron's body rests. The Byron Marble, which Rihani was proud to keep in his office in Freike, and which is still there, becomes a powerful symbol when Rihani writes in one of his metaphorically loaded letters:

> Are the tombs of friends and relatives more sacred than those of the poets? For me, the grave of Byron is a sacred spot. He taught me the science of sorting out flatterers and inquisitors. So I bury the letters of such people in a box on the left, and they die in it; and I place the letters of worthy people under the Marble [Byron's Marble], and they are revived! Such is one of the unique wonders of the Marble. Indeed, because of Byron I have become a man with dignity; I have become a disciple of God, who revives the dead. Praise the Lord, praise Byron and myself! (*Letters* 291)[3]

(Show the Byron Marble on an overhead projector)
To Rihani, the Byron Marble is not a mere stone used to hold significant letters on his desk; it represents Rihani's sanctuary of all that is worth consideration and contemplation. Also, the reviving capability of Byron's Marble represents the resurgence of the Self's interaction with the Other, since all letters not lying under the Marble are bound to dash this interaction. And in its most symbolic representation, Byron's Marble is a nexus binding the soul of one great Western thinker to another Eastern one.

Rihani's respect to and his keen knowledge of Byron, however, is further implied in another letter he writes to a friend and poetic critic:

> When Lord Byron wrote his epic poem, *Don Juan*, and sent it from Venice to his publisher in London, he received an answer from this publisher claiming that half of

> *Don Juan* is good poetry and the other half is not. Lord Byron wrote the publisher back saying that he was delighted at his judgment, because he never thought that his poem had so much good poetry (*Letters* 338).

If the above quotation tells anything, it tells of Rihani's enormous knowledge of Byron's voluminous correspondence and works.[4] In fact, in 1926, Rihani responded to a question about the writers and books which greatly influenced his youthful mind by mentioning Shakespeare first, and Lord Byron second; afterwards he listed the names of authors like Hugo, Paine, Thoreau, Voltaire, Carlyle, Rousseau, Huxley, and others.[5] And although Rihani does not disclose his reading of all of Byron's works, especially of *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*, it is wrong to assume that he did not read the work which made Byron famous overnight. This Byronic nexus in Rihani's literary career becomes quite tenacious when in *The Book of Khalid*, Rihani makes a significant reference to Byron and De Musset as "the inspiring geniuses" of one of the two rival wings and forces of the "Modern School of Arabic Poetry," science being the other motivating force (*Khalid* 133-134). Indeed, Byron's revolution against the dominant social, political and cultural traditions was inspiring to modern poets around the world. Rihani acknowledges Byron's universal impact by extending it to the Arab world, as well. [And indeed, Byron's impact on other Arab literary figures still awaits serious investigation]

It is also worth mentioning that Rihani was very well acquainted with Byron's personal life. Rihani must have been fascinated by Byron's personal interest in extending the domain of his world beyond his native country. At an early age, Byron decided to break away from the enclosed and limited confines of his native land and Self and to traverse and participate with the world of difference, as a means of forming a universal self. "—If we see no nation but our own," Byron writes, "we do not give mankind a fair chance, it is from *experience* not *Books*, we ought to judge of mankind.—There is nothing like inspection, and trusting to our senses"; "I would become a citizen of the world."[6] Byron was aware that as much as on-the-spot knowledge of the world liberates the self, lack of knowledge encloses and inhibits it. Rihani, who was no different than Byron, writes in *The Book of Khalid*, "I am a citizen of two worlds [the East and the West]—a citizen of the Universe."[7] And he writes to a friend: "You must prepare yourself for the future by attending the universal college of the world."[8] In another letter he writes to a fellow scholar, "Blessed is your exile, for it unlocked the truth of living-creatures to you."[9]

As mentioned above, by traversing the world of the other in actuality and/or in his imagination, a literary figure and thinker is capable of liberating himself from *inner* and *outer* agonies, which confine his soul and mind; only then he becomes obsessed with the mission of liberating others. Byron makes this clear when he asserts: "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow" (*Childe Harold*, II, stz. lxxvi). In Byron's attempt to universalize his knowledge and to advance the causes of freedom and democracy in the world, he left his native British island twice during his life. The first time in 1809 and for a period of two years, during which he lived with the Easterners of Albania, Turkey, and Greece, to return back to England with a mature and free self capable of breaking the chains of native traditions and oppression. The second time in 1816, when he left his homeland never to return for he died in Missolonghi, Greece, in 1824, fighting for the liberation of the Greeks from Ottoman oppression. After his death, Byron became a model of the universal revolutionary spirit. Such a literary personality would, indeed, attract the attention of Rihani and stimulated his passions for freedom and liberation from a common oppressor (Could be deleted). And like Byron, Rihani asserts, "The soul must be free, and the mind, before one has the right to be a member of a free Government, before one can justly enjoy his rights and perform his duties as a subject."[10] Rihani's and Byron's eagerness to embrace all that is without their worlds and to become one with difference is, then, an attempt to "tame the chaos," to use Coleridge's phrase, in their selves and to achieve fresh perspectives of the world and the Self. Towards this end, they utilize their personal travels.

And in much the same manner, both Byron and Rihani distance their creative characters from their native selves, since "Poetry, as a foray out of the self and into the world, 'brackets' that world, relocates its horizons of meaning, and temporarily liberates the poet."[11] Both literary figures physically distance their poetic characters from their own societies. Both, Childe Harold and Khalid, are sickened by the limited and enclosed traditions of their native lands, so they decide to break the chains of these confinements. Harold leaves Albion's Isle to the East:

> And now Childe Harold was more sick at heart,
> And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
> …
> And from his native land resolved to go,
> And visit scorching climes beyond the sea;
> With pleasure drugg'd, he almost long'd for woe,
> And e'en for change of scene would seek the shades below.
> (*Childe Harold*, I, vi)[12]

Khalid, on the other hand, leaves Baalbak to the Far West, to America:

> Khalid will seek the shore and launch into unknown seas towards unknown lands. From the City of Baal to the City of Demiurgic Dollar is not in fact a far cry. It has been remarked that he always dreamt of adventures, of long journeys across the desert or across the sea. He never was satisfied with the seen horizon, we are told, no matter how vast and beautiful. His soul always yearned for what was beyond, above or below, the visible line (*Khalid* 23–24).

This "sick[ness] at heart" to leave familiarity with the thirst for going "beyond, above or below," the traditional horizons, for both Childe Harold and for Khalid, is an eagerness to accept all the risks involved in facing the unknown (the beyond) and the mysterious (the bellow). Risk taking, one must confess, is indicative of a spirit endowed with the willingness to change, to learn, and to become different. This willingness, however, remains egocentric and fruitless unless nourished with pure Love, which is the only agent capable of diffusing all in one. Julia Kristeva explains, "in the rapture of love, the limits of one's identity vanish."[13] To Byron and the romantics, as well as to Dante,

> Love was the route by which the time-bound individual might learn a vision of ultimate truth, a glimpse of that world which stands behind [beyond] or above our meager existences. Hence love was a state of being that was eagerly to be coveted, not for purposes of physical satisfaction, but rather because the attraction of one soul for another was a guarantee that the entire universe was permeated with similar energy and spirit. [14]

Love then is associated with knowledge. Wordsworth makes it clear in his celebrated "Preface" that poetry, considered by the romantics to be the warehouse of knowledge, "is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love."[15] The Romantics believed that the medium for the search for Truth is Love; they would strongly agree with Roland Barthes's claim that "Love" opens the eyes wide and that it "produces clear-sightedness."[16] Shelley confirms: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own."[17] Thus, love leads to knowledge of difference. And concurrently knowledge of difference universalizes Self.

Childe Harold's and Khalid's laborious quests for universal identities are, then, quests for universal love, itself leading to knowledge of the other: of Man, of the World, and of God. Byron's ultimate willingness to become one with difference, with Nature, is made clear in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*, in the following stanza:

> I live not in myself, but I become
> Portion of that around me; and to me
> High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
> Of human cities torture: I can see
> Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
> A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
> Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
> And with the sky--the peak--the heaving plain
> Of ocean, or the stars, mingle--and not in vain.
> (III, stz. Lxxii)

To Byron and to most romantics, Nature becomes a superior other, a terrain of the ultimate freedom and liberty of the soul from the "fleshy chain." And the agent capable of freeing the soul through its union with Nature is Love. This idea reverberates in the following lines:

> Are not the mountains, waves and skies a part
> Of me and of my soul, as I of them?
> Is not the love of these deep in my heart
> With a pure passion?
> (*Childe Harold*, III, stz. lxxv)

Rihani links to Byron and the romantics in that he dedicates the three books of *The Book of Khalid*: to Man, to Nature, and to God, all three entities lying outside the terrain of Self, and all redeemed by man via Love. In "Book the First," Khalid confirms his Godwinian belief in the ultimate liberation of man from his self-centeredness via Love; he asserts that

> *No matter how good thou art, O my Brother, or how bad thou art, no matter how high or how low in the scale of being thou art, I still would believe in thee, and have faith in thee, and love thee* (*Khalid* 5).

Love, then, frees Khalid from the anxiety of revulsion and narcissism; it offers him limitless possibilities to participate with the other. Khalid confirms the above by saying: "Everything in life must always resolve itself into love. … Love is the divine solvent, Love is the splendor of God" (*Khalid* 295). In "Book the Second," Khalid reaffirms his belief in the divine wisdom of Nature and in the illuminating power of Love; and he indirectly alludes to all five British romantic poets, when he writes in his remarkably poetic dedication to Nature:

> *O Mother eternal, ... I come to thee, I prostrate my face before thee, I surrender myself wholly to thee. O touch me with thy wand divine again; stir me once more in thy mysterious alembics; remark me to suit the majestic silence of thy hills, the supernal purity of thy sky, the mystic austerity of thy groves, the modesty of thy slow-swelling, soft-rolling streams, the imperious pride of thy pines, the wild beauty and constancy of thy mountain rivulets* [These lines echo Wordsworth and Coleridge]. *Take me in thine arms, and whisper to me thy secrets; fill my senses with thy breath divine; show me the bottom of thy terrible spirit* [Byron]*; buffet me in thy storms, infusing in me of thy ruggedness and strength, thy power and grandeur* [Shelley]*; lull me in thine autumn sun-downs to teach me in the arts that enrapture, exalt, supernaturalize* [Keats]. ... *Anoint me with the chrism of spontaneity that I may be ever worthy of thee.—Withdraw not from me thy hand, lest universal love and sympathy die in my breast* [Wordsworth and Coleridge] (*Khalid* 97–98).

Nature, then, offers man the opportunity of immediate experience to communicate with divinity and provides him with a direct access to the beyond and above. Nature represents this outside other that is imbued with significance beyond itself; it represents God, who, according to Khalid's Hermit, "is the only reality" "for Man is supreme, only when he is the proper exponent of Nature, and spirit, and God" (*Khalid* 226 and 242). To Khalid the real Temple of God lies in the "Cellar of the Soul," which taught him that only through the love of the divine in Man, in the self, and in the other "that we rise to the love of our Maker" (*Khalid* 56). Khalid's Divine Temple is made of pine trees for "The first church was the forest; the first dome, the welkin; the first altar, the sun" (*Khalid* 162). Nature not only represents God's Temple but it also speaks the glory and grace of God and embodies His Spirit. This pantheistic concept of God reverberates all through Byron's *Childe Harold*. For instance, Byron addresses the stars as the poetry of heaven; they implant in our souls the seeds of love and reveal the divine truth, which "through our being then melts" "in a life intense" to produce an eternal harmony amongst all (III, stzs. lxxxviii–xc). Rihani's Khalid, on the other hand, writes that stars "are the embers of certainty eternally glowing in the ashes of doubt" (*Khalid* 234). Byron further reveals these strikingly similar pantheistic conceptions in the following stanza:

> Not vainly did the early Persian make
> His altar the high places, and the peak
> Of earth-o'ergazing mountains, and thus take
> A fit and unwall'd temple, there to seek
> The Spirit, in whose honour shrines are weak,
> Uprear'd of human hands. Come, and compare
> Columns and idol-dwellings, Goth or Greek,
> With Nature's realms of worship, earth and air,
> Nor fix on fond abodes to circumscribe thy pray'r!
> (III, stz. xci)

But both Childe Harold and Khalid must suffer before they can approach self-liberation. They must purify their souls by distancing themselves from all that stains their souls with selfishness and narcissism. To do this, they must seek seclusion to contemplate the purity, primitiveness, and beauty of the other. Their contemplation would nourish their souls with pure and genuine love; consequently, they would become more primed to mingle with the universe. This process starts with pain caused by separation and ends with joy activated by reconciliation.

Charged with a universal identity, Khalid, like Childe Harold, breaks the chains of orthodoxy when he revolts "against the ruling spirit of his people and the dominant tendencies of the times, both in his native and his adopted countries" (*Khalid* 131). He must become an exile and suffer the consequences of his revolution against and rejection of native tradition. In this sense, Khalid becomes a model of the Byronic Hero, who amongst Romantic heroes, is perhaps the most revolutionary universal figure. His self-exiled character provokes him to revolt against all religious, social, and political traditions. He abandons materialistic assets and social ties; and like a roaming dervish, he traverses the *outer* world of difference to end up in the sanctuary of Nature, where he isolates himself to delve deep into his *inner* self to tame his anger and to nourish and revive the freedom of his soul. The Byronic Hero is best described as

> a moody, passionate, and remorse-torn but unrepentant wanderer. In his developed form, as we find it in *Manfred,* he is an alien, mysterious, and gloomy spirit, immensely superior in his passions and powers to the common run of humanity, whom he regards with disdain. He harbors the torturing memory of an enormous, nameless guilt that drives him toward an inevitable doom. He is in his isolation absolutely self-reliant, inflexibly pursuing his own ends according to his self-generated moral code against any opposition, human or supernatural. And he exerts an attraction on other characters that is the more compelling because it involves their

> terror at his obliviousness to ordinary human concerns and values. … Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy,* gives a chapter to Byron not because he was a systematic thinker but because "Byronism," the attitude of "Titanic cosmic self-assertion," established an outlook and a stance toward humanity and the world that entered nineteenth century philosophy and eventually helped to form Nietzsche's concept of the Superman, the hero who stands outside the jurisdiction of the ordinary criteria of good and evil.[18]

Taking the above into consideration, a study of Khalid’s character and actions would project a typical representation of the Byronic Hero. Khalid’s contempt of his native social traditions renders him a moody and “remorse-torn” wanderer, who leaves his homeland carrying with him the torturing memories of his thwarted love. His gloomy spirit pushes him deep into the “Cellar of the Soul,” which renders him a tramp wrapped with his own distinctive moral codes. He then burns his peddling-box to become a dervish, a wanderer “who now wears his hair long and grows his finger nails like a Brahmin,”(p. 85) and who seeks the knowledge of the *beyond* and *below* in isolation. He sleeps under the stars in the Bronx Park, which awakens in him his love for Nature. He returns to civilization to revolt against the Cash Register, “the altar of every institution, political, moral, social, and religious.” (p. 130) He comes back to hi homeland to revolt against all native institutions and to banish himself to the pine hills of his native land, where he builds his temple. Thus Nature anoints his free spirit and liberates his soul, which marches “On the high road of the universal spirit, … chanting of freedom, faith, hope, health and power, and joy” (p. 245). When he leaves his temple to lecture against the tyranny and hypocrisy of social, religious and political institutions, he is driven toward his inevitable doom in the midst of the desert. Khalid’s character ties very well to the universal Byronic hero.

What links Rihani to Byron, then, are more than a simple marble and a few expressions. Rihani must have been fascinated with the universality of Byron and Byronism when he wrote *The Book of Khalid*. Like Byron, Rihani acknowledges quest as a means of disclosing Self and universalizing it; he lived a life of constant mobility; and he was fitted up with a free universal identity and adorned with the self of a free agent, both of which were capable of defying or assimilating cultural restraints and traditions. In this respect, his and, more obviously, his creative characters’ searches for standards of appraisal in the West and in the East represent Byronic self-inflicted attempts to establish a hold on the world.

Notes

[1] See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 195. For a full discussion of the Romantic circuitous journey, see Abrams, pp. 141–324.

[2] Ameen Rihani, "The British Woman," ms. (The Rihani Museum, Frieke). I would like to thank Dr. Ameen A. Rihani for locating the manuscript and providing me with a copy of it.

[3] This friend is Fr. Elias El-Khoury, who once visited Rihani with Dr. Najib Mahfouz in Freike.

[4] Byron's correspondence and journals are published in 12 volumes; see *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols., ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1973).

[5] See Ameen Rihani, "Books," in *Adab wa Fan* (Beirut: Dar Rihani for Printing and Publishing, 1957), 48. Among other poets, Byron is considered by Rihani as being kissed and attended to by the gods; see for instance p. 46.

[6] *L & J*, II, p. 173 and 247.

[7] Ameen Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban Publishers, 2000), 237.

[8] See *The Letters of Ameen Rihani: 1896–1940*, compiled and edited by Albert Rihani (Beirut: Dar Al-Jil), p. 49. [The translation of the Arabic letters is mine.]

[9] *The letters of Ameen Rihani*, p. 214.

[10] *The Book of Khalid*, p. 290.

[11] Robert Lance Snyder, "Byron's Ontology of the Creating Self in *Childe Harold* 3," in *Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Harry R. Carvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), p. 34.

[12] All Quotations from Lord Byron's Poetry are taken from *Byron: Poetical Works*. Ed. Frederick Page and Corrected by J. D. Jump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[13] Julia Kristeva's, *Tales of Love*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 2.

[14] Howard E. Hugo, ed., *The Portable Romantic Reader* New York: The Viking Press, 1975), pp. 8–9.

[15] *English Romantic Writers*. Ed. by David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, INC., 1967), p. 325.

[16] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 229.

[17] Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," in *English Romantic Writers*, p. 1076.

[18] See *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. Sixth edition, Vol. II (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), p. 480.