

Ameen Rihani's Vision of Globalization: A Matrimony, Not Hegemony

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Abstract

More than a century ago, Rihani traveled to the U.S. attracted by its urbanization, great working opportunities, and the promise of a better life. His self-education and experiences in America gave birth to the writer, reformer, and philosopher in him and set him out on a mission to bridge the East and the West and to call for the establishment of the “Greatest City”, one that embodies oriental and occidental values. In this city Rihani envisaged the rise of a leader who would awaken the Arabs from their slumber and revive their glory. Rihani's immigration to the U.S. made him a pioneer of today's call for globalization, one in which the Arabs play a leading role.

Introduction

Globalization is a concept that eliminates the barriers between countries of the world in the fields of economics, politics, ideology and technology. It is a main concern of world countries today; however, its promises and consequences are not optimistically viewed worldwide. To the West, globalization brings cultural hegemony and economic prosperity. To the East, it entails cultural domination and economic marginality since Easterners cannot yet match the Westerners in science, technology, and skilled labor (Jabri, 1). Still, globalization is imperative and inevitable in the East. The only way to reap its benefits, rather than suffer from it, is for the Arab countries to unite politically and develop scientifically, technologically as well as intellectually (Mehdi, 2; Abdul Nasser, 3). This is exactly what Rihani has repeatedly called for in his works. He strongly believed in globalization, but his version of it contradicts the prevalent understanding whereby the East meets and “melts” in the West. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to show how

Rihani viewed globalization as a period during which Arabs unite and safeguard Arab identity so that a united Arab “Empire” interacts with a technologically powerful West and actively participates in the global agenda.

East Meets West

Throughout his life, Rihani made frequent trips between the East and the West. If we agree with Dr. Huseby-Darvas, an anthropologist, that “our sense of who we are depends on and is the consequence of belonging to a society and participating in its culture” (18), then we realize that Rihani has struggled between his Eastern and Western sense of identity and for a while felt suspended between the East and the West. He raved at the American values of justice, equality, and freedom while yearning for “fidelity, simplicity, ... the lofty spirituality of the Orient” (The Book of Khaled, 311). Before Rihani could encourage a universal, global spirit and state of mind, where the East and the West blend on an equal footing, he preached nationalism and political stability among his fellow men.

He observed his fellow Syrian immigrants in the U.S. and saw that they were divided into factions and sects which allowed for a little sense of nationalism, so he attacked sectarianism and members of the clergy and called for national unity and “true citizenship”, concepts he undoubtedly gained from the West, having spent years reading the works of Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau, Irving, and many others (Naimy, 31). After World War I, the rapid assimilation of his compatriots in the American culture as a result of their poor sense of nationalism, their isolation from their homeland, and the increased sense of American nationalism alarmed Rihani (Suleiman, 43). He wanted Syrians to

retain their individuality in America while acquiring American values because he viewed the world as a place of healthy cultural diversity, not of melted identities.

A Call For Acculturation

Rihani's view of the world stems from his frequent trips between the orient and the occident, which helped him realize that no culture is superior to another. Each embodies positive qualities that should be preserved and negative ones to be discarded. The ideal situation would be to combine the two cultures and have a "universal" one that contains the best of both. This notion presents the early seeds of his philosophy of globalization. In his "Ode to Brooklyn Bridge", Rihani asks the ships sailing in New York harbor to "Take to the East some of the West activity and return to the West with some of the East's idleness. Take to India a bale of practical American wisdom and return back to New York with a few seed bags of Indian philosophy" (Ar-Rihaniyyat, vol. 1, 74). Moreover, in The Book of Khaled, he writes "I am a citizen of two worlds – a citizen of the Universe ... I am equally devoted both to the material and the spiritual" (258). In this respect, Rihani was a pioneer since in the late 19th century up until the middle of the 20th century, immigrants reacted to their immigration either by "ethnic isolation"- where ethnic minorities lived in ghettos and practiced their traditions and language- or by "ethnic denial"- where they denied their heritage completely and assimilated in the American one (Abraham, 21; Naff, 35). Not until World War II, did the Arab immigrants start to revive their roots and develop an Arab-American identity through the concept of acculturation - a concept where one culture ... takes on chosen aspects of another culture while retaining its integrity" (Huseby-Darvas, 18). This acculturation, or integration as Abraham (22) calls it lies at the base of Rihani's call for "universality", referred to nowadays as globalization.

Revival of Arab Roots

In an effort to counterbalance cultural denial and Arab assimilation in America, Rihani felt it necessary to lead his people in a process of “self-elucidation and acquisition” (Hottinger, 108). He longed to discover his Arab origins and to awaken his people to their roots so that they would safeguard their heritage. He also wished to familiarize the West with the Eastern mentality in order to foster better policies and smoother relations between the two worlds. Accordingly, Rihani traveled through Arabia and helped introduce Arab kings to each other, solve disputes and sign treaties, the details of which are documented in his famous book Muluk ul Arab (Kings of Arabia). Through his unrelenting efforts to fight Arab assimilation, Rihani managed to forge Arab solidarity and revive Arab culture which Arabs are asked to engage in today in the face of globalization (Mehdi, 2; Abdul Nasser, 3).

Rihani dreamt of a utopian city, which would rise in Asia in the future. It is the greatest city where “truth triumphs in word and in deed... It is where science, freedom, harmony, and loyalty reign. It is where spiritual and mental powers overcome material powers” (Ar-Rihaniyyat, vol.1, 133,135). He envisaged a leader “the real emancipator who is the soul of the East and the mind of the West” (The Book of Khaled, 322). This leader would awaken Arabia from its slumber, reclaim its land, revive its glory, and establish the Arab Empire. Thus, the East would meet the West and be an instigator of change, not a mere recipient of it. Rihani’s vision of globalization affords a place for the Eastern and Western cultures to co-exist because he believed that the one was incomplete without the other.

Give me, America thy hand; and thou, too, Asia. Thou land of origination,
where Light and Spirit first arose, disdain not the gifts which the nations of

the west bring thee; and thou land of organization and power, where science and freedom reign supreme, disdain not the bounties of the sunrise....And remember Europa, remember Asia, that foreign culture is as necessary to the spirit of a nation as is foreign commerce to its industries. Elsewise, thy materialism, Europa, or thy spiritualism, Asia, no matter how trenchant and impregnable, no matter how deep the foundation, how broad superstructure thereof, is vulgar, narrow, mean- is nothing, in a word, but limited (The Book of Khaled, 267).

Conclusion

Rihani played an excellent role in bridging the gulf between the Eastern and Western worlds because he was in close contact with both cultures and harbored sublime qualities of each. Today, advanced communications technology – the catalyst of globalization – can aid educated Arabs and Arab-Americans in achieving this same mission for technology is helping the Arabs to disseminate their values and their heritage to the West, while acquiring western virtues. (Abdul Nasser, 1). Their dual culture makes them “super” beings for “...the most highly developed being is neither European nor oriental but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both, the European genius and the Asiatic Prophet” (The Book of Khaled, 267).

Faced with globalization, Arabs are invited to follow Rihani’s example. They should neither suffer ethnic domination nor engage in ethnic isolation. They should embark on a process of self-discovery and revival of the roots so as to harness the forces of globalization to their benefit. Armed with a deep sense of identity, Arabs can receive the endless tide of new ideas – unleashed by globalization – with open hearts and educated minds, that would enable them to sift through the foreign baggage deleting the harmful and retaining the useful, just as their predecessor Ameen Rihani did, more than a century ago.

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