

Ameen Rihani and the Romantic Spirit of Change

By

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An in depth reading of the works and correspondence of Ameen Riani creates a problem of categorization. Is Rihani a mystic, a conformist, or a modernist in his philosophic expressions? Is he a satiric mannerist, or a sentimental symbolist in his essays and fiction? Is he a realist, an impressionist, or a Romantist in his poetry? These are only some of the puzzling questions one encounters when faced with Rihani because, indeed, he could be each and all of these at the same time. However, of immediate concern to this presentation is Rihani's Romantic spirit of change, which involves a quest to uncover the mysteries of Self and Other. This was not only prominent but also asserted during the Romantic period because the Romantics felt that it was their mission to bring about an organic change and growth to Self, which must liberate itself from orthodoxy and conformity, and to the prevailing traditional cultural, political, economic, and social norms, which they considered outworn canons of the preceding ages. Ameen Rihani, who studied the British Romantics and their movement, fell under the spell of their spirit of change. His letters and his poetic and prosaic works testify his eagerness to start a cultural, political, economic, social, and spiritual revolution, one which would destroy all the fixed, traditional norms of the Eastern world and to replace them with a universal system of thought that would lead to a kind of Romantic apocalypse. His adaptation of the Romantic quest as an out lit to his revolutionary spirited desires are to be discussed rather

briefly in this presentation, which will involve only, and for the sake of brevity, *The Book of Khalid* and Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

It may be necessary, however, at this point to note that Romanticism has been discussed rather indirectly by scholars who investigated the enormous impact of the American transcendentalists, especially that of Walt Whitman and of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walter Edward Dunnivant and Anas Sheikh-Ali had already proven the kinship of Rihani to the transcendentalists, who represented the Romantic movement in America. This presentation emphasizes the impact of British Romanticism on Rihani. Besides, it is not intended to over shadow the fact that Rihani was a pioneer modernist in the Arab world. Several scholars like Wassef Baki, Munif Moussa and Adnan Hassan, Edouard Honein, Arnold Hottinger, and Jamil Jabre analyzed Rihani's modernist discourse and his significant impact on promoting modernism in Arabic literature. But here again and for the purposes of this presentation, I must note that no one critic can deny the fact that modern theorists and poets like T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and E. Pound embraced many of the features of Romanticism, especially those that suited their thematic and aesthetic purposes.

This presentation, then, will try to show that among the isms that influenced Rihani, Romanticism is paramount. Why? Simply because in his personal life and in his major works, Rihani, unlike the modernists, is a Romantic pilgrim seeking liberation and awareness of Self and Other. In its most meaningful purposes, a Romantic quest for self liberation is a means to willingly go *beyond* and *bellow* preconceived notions, limited ideological and religious beliefs, and traditional social norms; i.e., Self must transcend its regional and national disciplinary boundaries and its contextual confinements to interact, rather to participate and to fuse, with

difference. Only then Self becomes free and, consequently, the most effective procedures for personal growth and creativity are provided.

Modern psychoanalysts, like Stephen Mitchell, Robert Rogers and James Masterson,¹ 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 ceases to be Other. In Romanticism, this process is manifested in two ways: in personal travels and in literary pilgrimages.

In this respect, the Romantics and Rihani's perceptive growth and conditions of literary creativity are inter-related. Wordsworth in his *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, Coleridge in his "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Lord Byron in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound*, and Keats in his *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* can be identified, amongst other genres, as travelogues representing physical and spiritual pilgrimages traversing the inner and the outer worlds to liberate and reshape Self and become aware of the other. Here, I maintain that Ameen Rihani's Khalid, in *The Book of Khalid*, meets the Romantic demands for a quest seeker, distinctive for his rejection of orthodoxy and of narcissistic desires and purposes, and

¹ See Stephen Mitchell. *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Robert Roger. *Self and Other: Object Relations in Psychoanalysis and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1991); and James Masterson. *The Real Self* (New York: Mazing, 1985).

for his acceptance of and participation with difference, in his search for meaning, certitude, and higher values. M. H. Abrams refers to the Romantic quest as a 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.”² Is not this what Khalid does? I believe that Rihani’s Khalid is a model of the Romantic hero, and particularly of the Byronic one. Like the Romantic heroes, Khalid sets out on a quest in pursuit of a radical change in himself and the world; he is wrapped with a desire to break away from traditional systems and 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. All throughout his pilgrimage and like the Romantics, he takes Nature as his main companion and as a standard of knowledge and judgment.

Both Byron and Rihani physically distance their poetic characters from their own societies. Childe Harold and Khalid, are sickened by the limited and enclosed traditions of their native lands, so they decide to break the chains of their physical and spiritual confinements. Harold leaves Albion’s Isle for the East:

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*].

² 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.