

## **BREAKING FREE OF SHACKLES: KHLIL GIBRAN'S PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN**

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### **Abstract**

*In the face of modernity's failure to come to grips with the world of women, it was left to feminists to take up the cudgels and strenuously deconstruct the dominant patriarchal ideology and to construct a discourse that would reflect their concerns. This quest, though pre-dominant in the West, finds its echo in the East and not the least in the Middle East too. Of the Arabs who spoke up for the emancipation of women, Kahlil Gibran was a towering personality. Though male, he could eschew all pretensions to male-domination and empathetically enter into the world of women and mirror the inner surge of every woman for love and freedom. In this endeavor, he is willing to challenge the institutions like marriage – made holy by religion and society – and argues for breaking free of the 'golden cage' that shackles women in perpetuity. The present paper "Breaking Free of Shackles: Kahlil Gibran's Perspectives on Women" is an attempt to sketch the contours of Gibran's 'feminist' thinking and his visions for womanhood as expressed in his novel and short stories. Starting from his early formative influences, the paper moves on to present some of his controversial views portrayed on behalf of the dignity of women at the same time calling into question some of the hallowed views of the social institutions.*

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the surging of scientific and material rationalism. Modernity's optimism about the future was based upon the absolute certainty that the progress of science, technology, and reason would solve all human problems that centered on economic and political realms. But the feminist issues did not adequately find its place under socio, political revival of the time. A few feminists all over the world recorded in their writings the problems faced by women in the patriarchal society. The feminist movements and campaigns indeed brought about a few radical changes in the West. While American feminism has produced a historiography that traces the movement through different waves, rarely does one hear a discussion of waves of women's rights activism or feminism in other parts of the world, yet it is a reality that it existed in the Lebanese contexts, though one sees the obstacles binding Lebanon's struggle for women's rights.

Lebanese women's movement took up the issues and problems of women in the 1920s. Although the Lebanese women's organizations were one of the pioneers among Arab women's movements, they could not bring about significant change in the status of women due to the Turkish domination and the Lebanese civil war that lasted for fifteen years. The civil war stressed on the general interests of the war torn country that indeed pushed the interests of the women's movement back to pastoral functions. Moreover, the patriarchal Lebanese social system laid on the foundation of discrimination against women proved to be too difficult to uproot. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legal protection of women and children mainly depended on the institutions that were thoroughly

patriarchal. This again put the women's rights activists in dilemma and it is clear that the patriarchal state was responsible for the delay in achieving a dignified status for Lebanese women.

At this juncture, the economically developed countries like North America attracted immigrants from all over the globe. Amidst the multi-faceted voice of America, the Arabic literature reverberated its unique voice through the arrival of the immigrants largely Christians from Syrian province controlled by the Ottoman Empire. The Arab American literature emerged as a unique literature in the late 1800s. A group of Lebanese writers gave rise to Arab-American literary tradition. Christian elites like AmeenRihani, Mikhail Naimy and Kahlil Gibran from the Syrian Province combined their Eastern wisdom with the Western thought. Amidst many revolutionary Arab American writers, Kahlil Gibran emerged as the most acclaimed and eminent writer and artist, who recorded in his literary work his passion for liberty, thirst for social justice, and emancipation of women. His writings concentrated on the oppressive social and religious conditions of Lebanese women and exposed the ugly scenario of inequalities that existed between men and women. In his drawings as well as in his writings he portrayed vividly the heart rending scenes of women's oppression in his society.

Gibran insists in his works that in every society it is the discriminatory legislation that paves way for the discriminatory practices and the most unfair practices against women are embedded in the family law. The law demands obedience of wife to her husband in return for her maintenance and protection. He says that the

Lebanese family structure is patriarchal and the inferior status of women is legitimized by various religious texts. The customary laws permit that marriages could be finalized without the explicit consent of the woman. He laments in his writings about the early marriages that do not respect individual sense of true liberty and at a young age one can seldom make decisions on important factors of life.

One such situation is presented in Madame Rose Hanie, one of the stories from the book of Kahlil Gibran's *Spirits Rebellious*. The story is the typical example of the disadvantages of the early marriage and it also highlights the rebellious spirit of a woman who refuses to yield her life to the man-made laws. Through the character, Rose Hanie, Gibran unearths the foundations of patriarchal biases. When the society condemns her, he sympathizes with the woman who is trapped by the myth of marriage and is unable to love her husband who adorns her with jewels and showers upon her all his wealth. After a prolonged struggle the heroine leaves her husband for another man whom her heart desires. Gibran, in the story, lets the woman follow the course of true love and he attempts to spiritualize the love of a woman who is condemned by the world as a prostitute. In the words of Rose Hanie, "Today I am one with the man I love, he and I sprang out as one torch from the hand of God before the beginning of the world. There is no power under the sun that can take my happiness from me, because it emanated from two embraced spirits, engulfed by understanding, radiated by love and protected by heaven" (438).

The story in its entirety is an outpouring of Gibran's deepest yearning for women's emancipation and social justice. The story has as its theme the feminist quest for the authentic self and its fulfilment. Gibran openly attacks the hypocrisy of marriage and brings to light the silent mourning and the deep sigh of women in his own country in the name of marriage. His strong and powerful message, coated in a melancholic tone, leaves a soothing and healing effect but with a feeling of bewilderment at the cruel strategies of the society and the religion that oppress women. What matters to Gibran is the rebellious spirit that unchains the shackles of slavery and the old tradition. Gibran advocates a liberated life. Hence Gibran affirms with Madame Hanie proudly when she speaks of the consequences that she met due to her adventurous flight with her lover, "They have exiled me now from their society and I am pleased, because humanity does not exile except the one whose noble spirit rebels against despotism and oppression. He who does not prefer exile to slavery, is not

free by any measure of freedom, truth and duty" ("Spirits Religious" 441).

In contrast to Hanie's rebellious spirit that stretches its wings towards spacious firmament of freedom from the clutches of the society, Gibran's novel, *The Broken wings* portrays the protagonist Selma, a woman with innate rebellious nature yet does not rise above the moral standards set by the society. Gibran in his semi-autobiographical novel skillfully applies the imagery of broken wings all the way through the novel. His stunning imageries that are charged with emotions help the reader perceive its inner meaning. Selma Karamy, the protagonist of the novel is compared to a bird with broken wings. Selma, the only child of the wealthy Farris Effandi was the choice of the Bishop Bulos Calib as a bride for his nephew Mansour Bey Galib. Though Selma and his father know the evil intension behind the will of the Bishop, they were forced to abide by it because no Christian could disobey the Bishop. As the narrator of the novel comments, "Thus destiny seized Selma and led her like a humiliated slave in the procession of miserable oriental woman, and thus fell that noble spirit into the trap after having flown freely on the white wings of love in a sky full of moonlight scented with the odour of flowers" (519).

Certainly Selma is not the woman character envisioned by Gibran, yet it is through her Gibran wants to highlight the oppressive power structures that can deprive the individual of freedom and genuine contentment in life. Unfortunately the novel ends in frustration and disappointment as Selma confines herself to the enslavement of tradition and marriage. Selma represents all the oriental women who are the victims of the forced marriage. The narrator unable to stomach the bitter sorrow of Selma, raises a few questions to the readers:

"But my dear readers, don't you think that such a woman is like a nation that is oppressed by priests and rulers? Don't you believe that thwarted love which leads a woman to the grave is like the despair which pervades the people of the earth? A woman is to a nation as light is to a lamp, Will not the light be dim if the oil in the lamp is low?" (532)

These lines reveal Gibran's deepest reverence and concern for women and he is the noble soul who wishes to ennoble and sanctify the womanhood. To him, women married by force become commodities for men and the marriage bond is nothing but sheer mockery in the drama of human life and such spiritual disease of human kind, threatens the very married life. As the title of the novel denotes a bird with broken wings that cannot fly, it certainly

is denied access to the spacious firmament which the bird only longs for. Its movement is limited to a narrow space.

Gibran aspires wholeheartedly to destabilize such repression of women in the society. When Gibran speaks of marriage in the book, *The Prophet*, he insists on the importance of togetherness and at the same time the importance of letting the other free. In the name of wedlock no one can possess each other. For Gibran, love and freedom go together. And so he says: "Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping. For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together yet not too near together; for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow" (9).

Gibran's protagonists earnestly search for self fulfillment even at the face of risking their own lives. Gibran thrusts in his woman characters the courage to stand up high against the tempest and the mockery of the world. His characters do not hesitate to face the obstacles and hardships in order to achieve their goal. It is evident in the story, "The Ambitious Violet". When the violet turned rose is ravaged by the tempest, the reaction of the other violets is negative and deprecatory. If only this violet remained a violet and did not aspire to be a rose, she would not have been ravished by the storm and remained unaffected as the other lowly violets escaped the fury of the storm! Though in the eyes of the society, the violet was ambitious and foolish, Gibran elevates the rebellious attitude of the violet. For the violet it was the question of changing its destiny and dying in peace for having fulfilled its life's ambition. Gibran's heroines do create disquiet in the world of patriarchy. They take the armor of courage in their quest for freedom. He envisioned a new woman much earlier based on the very concept of Nayantara Sahagal in the article, "Meet the Author": "Traditional Virtue lies in staying but, suffering. The new woman does the opposite. No more sati. She is determined to live and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences" (83).

Gibran's literary labour is a plea to accept women free of dogmas and power structures. Gibran is one of the few men who through his literary works empower women. Joseph Sheban in his *Mirrors of the Soul*, a biographical study on Kahlil Gibran records what Gibran once wrote:

I am indebted for all that I call 'I' to women ever since I was an infant. Women opened the windows of my eyes and the doors of my spirit. Had it not been for the woman-mother, the woman-sister and the woman-friend, I would have been sleeping among those who disturb the serenity of the world with their snores. (95)

To conclude this paper, one can say Gibran's experience of the feminine touch in his life via his mother, sisters and friends made him throw away the masculine-tinted glasses and view women through new glasses of both courage and tenderness. He could fathom the deepest sentiments of women, their finest feelings and their innate rebelliousness against all the male-centered norms, precepts and practices that in every way dehumanize them. He not only empathizes with them but also justifies their rare moments of breaking free of the shackles of marriage – a sacred social institution, and explore new avenues in man and woman. Thus Gibran himself gives vent to his own rebellious spirit through his female characters and challenges the established masculine discourses of power and domination.

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