

Questioning of Stable Gender Roles in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Song of Death*

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Abstract

This paper is a critique of conventional gender roles in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Song of Death*. The research presents Hakim's challenge to the masculinity especially in Arabian Islamic culture that is guided by revengeful motive of mother. Being a woman, Asakir is guided by the patriarchal motif of revenge i.e., an eye for an eye. It is Asakir, a widow who ironically thinks that version of masculinity has to be preserved by her in order to do so she makes her son Ilwan take revenge on his father's murderer but in vain. Ilwan is represented as one of the modernists guided by social norms, decorum and laws. In order to critique the conventional notion of masculinity, the research makes use of theoretical insights of Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam and some ideas from others. Finally, the research concludes that Hakim is critical of conventional masculinity. The mother is presented as a strong advocate of masculinity but her failure at the end of the play ironically displays the implacability of gender-based roles in modern society like that of Cairo.

Keywords: Gender, Masculinity, Tradition, Islamic Culture, Conflict, Gender Role.

Introduction

This project dealing with the social issue like status quo, focuses on Tawfiq al Hakim's *The Song of Death* which challenges the conventional masculinity. Asakir and Mabruka are the representatives of older generation whereas Ilwan stands for the younger generation. They have different mindsets which causes the contradiction in their respective beliefs. Older generation people like Asakir and Mabruka want to stick with the Egyptian norms and values but younger generation like Ilwan tends to shift from tradition. This research explores the failure of conventional masculinity through the study of Asakir and her motive of taking revenge on her husband's murder. This project shows the ongoing conflict between two ideologies. One is of older generation of people who want to remain and preserve old Egyptian tradition and other is new generation of people who believe that the Egyptian rural society can do better in dealing with different problems of people of rural Egypt with help of modern way of thinking. The present study seeks to analyze the characters to bring into the frame of critical analysis that represents the tendency of the then Egyptian rural society.

Gender role is a social role encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for people based on their actual sex. Gender roles are usually centered on conceptions of femininity and masculinity. *The Song of Death* is set in domestic context. The play is a story of revenge and a generational conflict between a mother and her son in the Egyptian family. Asakir, the main female character of the play wants her son Ilwan to revenge his father's murderer. But her son strongly refuses her. The disappointment leads the mother up to the stage of killing of her own son. Asakir orders her nephew, Simeida to kill her son, Ilwan. The Tahawi had killed Asakir's husband for killing his father. It means that the revenge is set as a cycle from generation to generation between the two families, Azizes and Tahawi. The turn of revenge comes to Ilwan but he

wants to stop this revenge and wants peace, prosperity and harmony between the people. The generational conflict seems apparent here in understanding level of mother and son.

The protagonist of the play, Ilwan represents the modern and educated man. On the other hand, his mother, cousin and his aunt represent the traditional and uneducated people. They give important value to the revenge and familial dignity but Ilwan gives value to the modern way of life, humanity and peace which is the main contradiction between them. Every society has the feature of contradiction between two generations in different levels.

Robert Bly for example sees masculinity as being damaged by the conditions of modern society, and prescribes a remedy in the form of men only retreats and bonding rituals. "In contrast, from the more critical, academic perspective of the social sciences, masculinities are understood as a form of power relation, both among men themselves and between men and women" (35). Masculinities are argued to arise from the social contexts in which men live for example from their positions in the various institutions and social organizations of their society and or in the context of the socially available discourses about gender.

Theory and Textual Analysis

This research is the critique of masculinity. Through the analytical tool of masculinity and gender role the present research unearths how two different and successive generation are in continuous turmoil while transforming from agrarian life to the urban life in the mid twentieth century Egypt. It is conflict between old values, norms, culture and new ones. However, in the play in period of this transition Ilwan, the representative of young generation tries to change and accept new values of modern Egypt but becomes the victim of his own new opinion towards the modern society. The old generation cannot accept his concept of society in the modern age. Outside the village, the masculinity affects the thinking of the people but in the rural village people have deep rooted beliefs on tradition. So that the protagonist of the play, Ilwan has to sacrifice his life in the name of tradition and culture of

revenge. Egyptian society in the mid-twentieth century was in a big flow of cultural conflict. There was conflict and mental tension within oneself whether should remain with Egyptian old beliefs, values and norms or should change thinking of gender. People had a big dilemma whether to remain with their religious limitation or go with modern social justice and technology invented by western society. On the one hand, there was old generation of people who always wanted to remain with their own religious, cultural, social, political and familial values and on the other ,there was new generation of people who always sought newness and attracted towards the invention of modern way of thinking as well as the new beliefs of westernization and modernization. Therefore, it is obvious that we can see big conflict between these two generations on beliefs.

Gender roles play an important role in society whether it is for good or for bad. These roles have been placed in society since the beginning of time. The term gender is socially created and it therefore differentiates men from women. How is gender defined, and what makes it different from the term sex? Sex refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish women and men. Gender refers to the social and cultural characteristics that distinguish women from men. It is completely social construct where biological differences have no any concern. Gender role is grounded in the supposition that individuals socially identified as males and females tend to occupy different ascribed roles within social structures and tend to be judged against divergent expectations for how they ought to behave.

The terms sex and gender are sometimes used interchangeably, although there is a clear distinction between the two. Gender is known to be socially constructed and is learned through social interactions and through the influences of the people around us. Gender roles are therefore set of behaviors that are considered appropriate or acceptable for a man and for a woman, exclusively. These roles are socially created as well. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."(30). For example, men play football and women play volleyball.

Gender neutrality on the other hand is a term that is trying to push out these socially constructed roles. In most of the cases, urban people are shown themselves as modernist whereas rural people as traditionalist. Even within the people themselves there we can find a kind of quarrel whether they should call themselves as modernist or traditionalist because those new urban people sometimes identify themselves as urban people and some other time they get nearer to rural values. The discrepancies with new values and old values were seen in Egyptian societies in the mid twentieth century.

Hakim shows a kind of quarrel or disagreement explicitly in his play *The Song of Death*. In the play, Asakir wants to continue the tradition of revenge which she thinks is a very honorable for her family. So, she says to her son, “Of course you have not come here for food or drink. You have come to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood” (57). Here, in her speech we can easily know that she wants to continue the tradition of revenge which is very easy and safe because of the culture of revenge they had been practicing for a long time. It is the reason that she directly tries to convince her son to revenge his father’s murderer. But the son asks for the proofs of his father’s murderer.

I know you have told me that. You have told that name to me over and over again,
whenever you came to visit me in Cairo. I was too young to think then or to argue.

But now my reason needs to be satisfied. What’s the evidence? Have you ever tried to go beyond perusing me? I don’t think this is the job of mine. Did the police ever look into the crime? (83)

In surface it seems that mother is the protagonist of the play who is guided by the male motifs. Asakir has adopted the male decorum fully in her life. The above-mentioned words of Ilwan are very strong enough to show his clash with the older generation and their thought of revenge. He strongly believes in the social justice. Ilwan complains to his mother that from the times past he was compelled to listen and get ready for the revenge with the one who

killed his father but Ilwan is firm that the action of poetic justice should be taken by police. In the play, the kind of conflict between old generation and new one is set between mother and son as the representative of the two different generations but it is Ilwan, who seeks the total change and hopes to lead other people towards modernism. In this reference he says, "It's important for me to meet the villagers. Haven't I just told you that I have come to do something truly great?" (286). Mother, Asakir is always seen faithful to Egyptian culture and her tradition, and she is unwilling to accept the reality, but younger generations specially her son, Ilwan is attracted towards newer way of life and he has shown disregard to the old Egyptian traditional values. The theme of the generation gap is patterned out impressively in the play, *The Song of Death*.

The two generations differ vastly in their expression of things and ideas. Younger people like Ilwan express whatever they think and feel in a different way than older generation of people like Asakir and Mabruka do. New generations think and act differently from old ones. They behave differently, express things differently and do things differently which is directly against the behavior of older generations. As in the play Ilwan, the leading character is in direct contradiction to Asakir and Mabruka. Old people like Asakir thinks for culture and family background; and younger people like Ilwan think for modern norms and values and mental sharpness. Judith Butler in her *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* makes a claim,

The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts one, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. (23)

Butler is of the view that society has misconception regarding the gender. The phrase ‘gender is a social construct’ itself is biased. There shouldn’t be one who makes other wear the gendered cloths cut in his own fits. No gender is prior or inferior to other. As a result, “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/ cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (24). Ilwan rejects his mother’s familial law of tradition in the following conversation with his mother:

Ilwan: [raises his head and takes courage] Mother, I will not kill.

Asakir: [tries to conceal her distress] What do I hear?

Ilwan: I will not kill.

Asakir: [in rough voice] The blood of your father!

Ilwan: It’s you yourselves who left it split and wasted by hiding the crime from the government. It’s up to the authorities to punish. (339)

The aforementioned conversation is the crucial illustration of how Asakir who is guided by male notions of revenge. Thinking in the pattern of male she is firm to make her son take revenge but that goes in vain as Ilwan does not only reject his mother’s plan rather he blames his own mother for concealing the case from government authorities. As a modern man he wants the punishment from legal court. So, he dislikes the culture of blood feud against the expectations of society from a male.

Carlyle’s fantasy of male-bonding is not without its problems. Every conception of gender is constructed and it is inherently problematic and can be inverted and challenged in different ways. “Maleness, potentially progressive, is also innately diseased. The very spring of male identity is also potentially the source of its destruction as dissolution” (24). Our very understanding and discourse of one gender can be the source of its own unmaking. One possible interpretation is that the woman in masquerade wishes for masculinity in order to

engage in public discourse with men and as a man as part of a male homoerotic exchange. And precisely because that male homoerotic exchange would signify castration, she fears the same retribution that motivates the ‘defenses’ of the homosexual man.

Furthermore, Asakir is very distressed about her son as she does not convince him in her project of revenge. At the same time, she is able to convince her Nephew, Simeida to kill her own son who finally becomes their enemy. In this context it is very applicable to bring a short conversation between Asakir and Simeida:

Asakir: Our hope is now in you, Simeida.

Simeida: A nephew can stand in for a son.

Asakir: But in this case the son’s alive. It’s his duty before anybody else to avenge the shedding of his father’s blood. He’s alive...

Simeida: Just try to tell yourself that he’s dead.

Asakir: I wish he had really died, drowned in the sluice of the waterwheel when he was a child...I wish he had truly died. We would have been able to live honorably then, and not be wearing our garments of shame. But he is alive, and it has been broadcast in the market places and in the whole neighborhood that he is alive. Oh, the shame. The ignominy. Disgrace! (404)

As traditional people always try to convince young generation of people in traditional values and beliefs Asakir also tried her son to bring him in her way of thinking but she failed in her mission. So, she laments about her son’s birth and curses his birth. At that time her nephew comes to support her and works as her son in her favor. In this way, Simeida seems as a lost young generation who becomes the victim of traditional belief and ruins his brother’s and his own life in vain.

In the play too we can easily notice the cultural transition as Ilwan wants to adopt the urban culture which he has been internalizing for a long period of time in Cairo. We also see

the dilemma in Simeida too; he is in the confused situation whether to support Ilwan or to support his Aunt's view of familial dignity. But unfortunately he takes the side of his Aunt and kills Ilwan who is the powerful advocator of social order and law. Here Ilwan who never surrenders against the social values and belief but he sacrifices his life. It seems in the play that the tradition is winning over the modern beliefs but in face Ilwan rejects the culture of revenge and stops the dead tradition of his society that's why it is a victory even though he loses his life.

The very notion of gender as construct is very much applicable to mother, Asakir. Her motive of taking revenge using her own son is very approval of conventional masculinity. She wants to take revenge even at the cost of life. Conventional masculinity believes that male and female are social construct. They have to act in accordance with social values offered upon them. But here in the play, Asakir is mirrored as the daughter of a traditional father and his ideals. It is very important to bring the lines here from the play to prove, how the old generation of people are static and blind in their traditional beliefs affirming gender role, Asakir proves this in the following conversation:

Asakir: You are talking the language of books. You can keep that for later. For when you have your evening talk with Sheikh Muhammad Isnawi. He can understand it – I can't. As for the present, there's something more important we have to do, Ilwan.

Ilwan: [Shocked] What is it that's more important?

Asakir: No. Don't go to the mosque to pray tonight. I will fetch water from the water pot for you to prepare for your prayers. Put on the cloak and help me sharpen the knife. (318)

This shows the thought pattern of Asakir filled with masculine dumps. The yoking of words like "prayer" and "sharpen the knife" in a single sentence is very thundering. How one can

think of meditation amidst of war scene? Such thoughts of mother are all loopholes that are fasten to strengthen the conventional masculinity but that ultimately goes in vain. In the conversation, Asakir, the mother of Ilwan stands for traditional religion, Islam but her son is against her religion. So, she says that her son talks about his book but in reality, it doesn't work. She tells him to follow her traditional religion in which ritual washing before prayer is obligatory. She is static in the level that she does not believe on her son's study and believes that her son is only speaking the language of the books. Her son Ilwan, changes his traditional religion and becomes Sheikh which the mother never takes positively.

There is conflict between older generation and new generation because old people are attached to their culture, tradition and their roots. This orthodoxy has its own system that cannot be changed overnight. Culture is way of life and it changes as people change with time. It takes a long span of time to change these beliefs. Generation gap, educational quality, modern inventions are some of the factors which bring dispute in the people clinging to tradition. In the play, Ilwan challenges the conventional social concepts of rural Egyptian society by not following the tradition of taking revenge though he is victimized because of rejecting the tradition. To sum up, though there is conflict between traditional and modern way of thinking among different people, change occurs at the passage of time. There is the complete end of tradition of revenge between the two families, the Azizs and the Tahawis. In addition, young people of the society also to some extent assimilate themselves with old and useless tradition but get their life ruined at the end. In the play when Simeida being a member of young generation following the order of traditional people like Asakir kills his brother, Ilwan and ruins his life as a murderer. Here again changes occur with the passage of time due to assimilation of tradition. Obviously, the process of modernization tends to break down the remaining vestiges of social functions. This kind of social change also leads to the weakening of the stability of the traditional gender roles and the social expectation associated with them.

Deep-rooted attitude of Egyptian people regarding their Egyptian tradition gets completely changed at the end.

The play, *The Song of Death* by Tawfiq al-Hakim presents the critique of conventional masculinity via clash between mother and her son. The two generations have conflict, confusion and disparities that are created by time and space. It also depicts their hardships and struggles. The new generation having modern way of thinking is also affected by the traditional and conservative society. Attitudes of new generations are highly suppressed by the traditional Egyptian culture. All the new generations have the stories of sufferings, obstacles, hardships and tragic moments due to the traditionally biased society of rural Egypt so it is clear that gender biased convention cannot give justice to the empowerment, betterment and development in the traditional rural Egyptian society. And the generations are being victimized by the traditional norms and values. The people of new generation wish to implement the western way of freedom but the traditional Egyptian society looks them derogatorily and the people from the society treat them as oddities. Humankind is changeable and it changes according to time and space. There is certainly conflict between two different generations that represent different time span, and it is there in *The Song of Death*.

In the play, protagonist, Ilwan who hopes to lead other people of his generation ideologically to better way of life is in conflict with the people of his preceding generation like Asakir and Mabruka. He is dealing with a new kind of philosophy in life. He advocates it even for other people. He hopes to interrogate all the rural Egyptian Traditional Institutions of education, social, moral, ethical or of conceptual dimensions. Ilwan faces the challenge from culturally restricted tradition. In various aspects, Ilwan reflects the oppositions between convention and his rural Egyptian society. He thinks that his duty is to transform Old Egyptian social values. So that he questions it repeatedly and thinks to dismantle it.

Throughout the course of the play, he is in disparity with his mother and he puts new ideas in front of his preceding generation. Ilwan, who wants to be a pioneer of new philosophy of life that is realistic aspect which questions everything that exists in the society? Older generation of people is attached with their tradition and they hang on it. But they see changes in their sons and lament over the loss of traditional values in them. They think that their Egyptian roots are in the verge of collapse. Moreover, Younger people like Ilwan follow and advocate change in traditional Egyptian society. But being the part of rural traditional society, Asakir, blind to anything and her unyielding passion for vengeance, destroys her own family more effectively than her supposed enemy, Suweilam Tahawi, ever could have done. She has wiped out the new generation of menfolk so the family line has come to the end. She forces her cousin, Simeida to kill her own son, Ilwan after being irritated by the refusal of her son to take revenge of her husband's murder. She has waited for years for the murderous action that will restore honor to the family and avenge her husband's death. She wishes Ilwan to be an avenger of family honor. But Ilwan, brought up and educated in Cairo, has turned to religion and law. In other words, from parochial to universal values, believes in brotherhood, not vengeance. He utterly fails to fathom his mother's traditional values. He misunderstands his own traditional culture, stands for modern progress, for enlightenment and a social order that rejects the blood feud and in which the responsibility for justice is transferred from the family to the civic community. In this context masculinity represents violence and femininity represents peace and harmony.

Feminine or masculinity is socially constructed terms which vastly differ from biological difference. The term feminine masculinity literally refers to the blended qualities of male and female that the society assigns to people. Asakir has totally adopted the male culture of revenge and fights. The play presents her lack of feminine qualities as her motto is to take revenge of her husband's murderer. Her motive of revenge using her own son is very

devastating. It does not befit a woman to be so brutal as per our conventional understanding of gender.

At last, in the play, the protagonist, Ilwan is murdered by his brother, Simeida when his mother forces him to kill her own son. The face of mother after killing her own son is in a sense counter to conventional masculinity. The tradition here becomes the curse for people and especially for the new generation like Ilwan in traditionally biased society of rural Egypt. Simeida is the son who stayed behind and he also is a tragic figure. His future is entirely destroyed by Asakir. He is certain to be punished, perhaps executed, for the murder of Ilwan. So that, he is an example of a lost generation denied the chance of the enlightenment of the new ideology of the state and of the city. In Simeida, we see the relentless pendulum logic of the tribal vendetta law. Here also we can see the clear effect of tradition in the case of Simeida. In the play he is compelled to kill his brother because of the force of her aunt in the name of masculinity. Being of young generation he was compelled to kill other young generation because of the traditionally conservative unyielding passion for vengeance.

In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam takes aim at the protected status of male masculinity and shows that female masculinity has offered a distinct alternative to it for well over two hundred years. Providing the first full-length study on this subject, Halberstam catalogs “the diversity of gender expressions among masculine women from nineteenth-century pre-lesbian practices to contemporary drag king performances” (80). This shows there are multiple manifestations of masculinities and it is always possible that women can act like men and men kind behave like women. The roles played by the mother and the son in the play are clear examples of that.

Conclusion

Killing of Ilwan by Simeida is the proof Hakim presents very tactfully to critique the conventional masculinity that is based on revenge. Asakir is represented as one of the failures to uphold the male convention in face; it is the failure of conventional masculinity. She is unable to make her son walk in her dream of revenge means the complete disaster upon all the notions based on biased conventional masculinity. Among many issues, challenge to masculinity is the major issue the research has delved into. The play ends in abhorrent surprises for both Asakir and the readers. Ilwan surprises his mother who was waiting for seventeen years for avenging her husband's murder, refusing to kill. His own mother surprises him by ordering his cousin to kill him. The son abstains from killing despite being a male and the mother is in favor of killing despite the fact that she is a woman. This is against our understanding of traditional gender roles and serves to challenge the stability of traditional gender roles. The act of order to kill his own son is very much meaningful in the play. The research finally concludes the actions of both mother and son jointly prove the failure of conventional masculinity.

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