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Role of Literature in Arabic Society: Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi as a Model for Romantics

Abstract

Literature is an integral part of cultural heritage that plays a vital role in reflecting the reality of any society on the intellectual, social, political levels with its all virtues and vices. Literature is a medium of communication of bringing the past and present for the future to understand the faults that have occurred and to redress it accordingly. Literature helps in developing the society and changing its political systems as well. Poetry as a social representative, its major purpose is to work for the humanity at large, to spread the awareness and morality to purge the society from corruption. In Arab literature, poetry was called Diwan Al-Arab (Register of the Arabs) because it preserved their culture and political heritage. Poetry was the pride literary genre of the Arabs and the source of their knowledge. This paper aims to present an overview of role the literature in Arabic society.

Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi is Tunisia's foremost modern poet and one of the prominent Arab poets in the twentieth century. He takes up an important place in the Arab modern poetry. He led the Arabic romantic current and paved the way towards new dimensions and trends regarding literature, politics and life as a whole. He was neither a politician nor a member in any political party but a revolutionary poet who devoted his poetry against the foreign occupation and human situation. Through his intellectual and literary activities he attempted to revive and renew different aspects of social and political life of Tunisia. His poetry is a slogan of inspiration of the Arab revolutions from

gulf to ocean. In this context, this paper is going to explore the role of Al-Shabbi's poetry in the Tunisian society in particular and Arabic society in general.

Keywords: Literature, Arabic Society, Al-Shabbi, Tunisia, role.

Introduction

Literature is a constituent part of cultural legacy that plays a significant role in reflecting the reality of any society on intellectual, social, political levels. It is a form of art that portrays a manifestation of social life in all its different virtues and vices. As a mirror of society, it has a close social relationship which greatly helps to recognize its issues and aspirations. Literature is also a register that tells us about the ancient civilizations and nations. It is a link between the past and present to recognize the mistakes of the future and amend them accordingly. It can be defined as an artistic expression of a human position or experience that artist conveys and seeks pleasure and benefit from.

Literature includes main forms like poetry, story and novel which act to mirror the values and customs of a particular nation or society. Arabs as other nations celebrated their literature and gave it an extensive place in their life. It was the only prided Arab thing throughout the history. "Moreover, the Arabs have always prided themselves on their poetry, which they regarded as their greatest and most congenial mode of literary expression" (Badawi 14). Poetry for them was the great source of their knowledge and the most wonderful genre of their literature. "The poetry is the greatest source of Arabic knowledge and the most delightful part of their literature" (Meraj 49). They regarded it the only weapon of their pride and dignity. "Since pre-Islamic times, poetry had been the supreme Arab art and was one of the few weapons of pride and distinction that the Arabs could use with self-esteem in the face of the apparent omnipotence of Western Europe" (Badawi 83).

Indeed, poetry was the only medium to express Arab thoughts, rites, inner life, and emotions as well historical epics. Arabic poetry was described as 'Diwan Al-Arab' (Register of Arabs) because it maintains Arabs life and culture. According to the well-known Scholar, Ibn Khaldun, "The art of poetry among literature was a good sort for the Arabs therefore; they made it the Register (Public record) of their knowledge and wisdom" (qtd. in Yasmin 8). "Literature is the brain of humanity and it records and preserves the experience, knowledge, idea, for human race" (Anjana & Bhambhra8).

Literature mainly helped in development of societies. It strongly changed the political systems as happened recently in Arab countries. They were repeating the revolutionary words of Al-Shabbi's poem "The Will of Life": If one day the people should choose life, fate is certain to respond (406 1). AL-Shabbi placed himself in the circle of responsibility as a social reformer and philosopher of change. He was the ambitious young man who carried the complex concerns of his society upon himself to plant the seeds of change and transfer the human from world of slavery to world of freedom. "Al-Shabbi's verses have been called upon as a catalyst for the changing Arab landscape, especially when poetic words are needed to supplement the subversion of despotic regimes in the Arab world, particularly Tunisia" (Elbousty 160).

The reality of Al-Shabbi's poetry lies in his appeal to freedom, and his absolute belief in ability of art to change society. One of the basic motivations in his life was his realization of the necessity of change through revolution. He felt a deep frustration with social and political restrictions in his country and once awakened to the retarded conditions in Tunisia at the time under French occupation. He could do nothing less than join the few forces of change in order to achieve his dream. His poetry was not confined to Tunisia, but a universal and resounding scream against injustice wherever it was. Literature has the vital role in civilizations' building. It basically regarded as the investigator to reveal the social injustice that societies are and were suffering. It can be regarded as the lighter that

illuminates the societies against the darkness of savagery. Literature is a good translation of human behaviors, actions, beliefs and experiences. Moreover, it has the real power to change the way of thinking of the society which opens new horizons that drastically change the human prospective towards life. As well, it may be the suitable teacher of morals, modesty and behaviors.

Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi (1909- 1934) was born in Tunisia in Al- Shabbiya village near Tauzer town. He is a Tunisia's foremost modern poet and one of the prominent Arab romantic poets. Speight in his paper titled *A Modern Tunisian Poet: Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi (1909-1934)* writes that "Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi is one of the most attractive literary figures of twentieth-century North Africa, and probably the only Maghribi author of the modern period so far to attain the stature of greatness in the Arab world" (Speight 178). He takes up a distinguished place in Arab modern poetry. He also led the romantic current in his own country and paved the way to many new ideas and a wider vision of literature, politics and life as a whole. He was one of the important forces of change which influenced the Arabic poem as a genre in many of its aspects. His best literary works are a collection of poems, namely, '*Songs of Life*' and the literary criticism book '*Arab poetic Imagination*'. He devoted his poetry to criticize situation of his society in political, social and intellectual aspects in which his country was occupied by French.

With reference to ideological and political nature of modern Arabic poetry, its main role lies in resistance the colonialism in addition to its fighting the injustice and ignorance that Arab societies were lived. Al-Shabbi was not a political man, but a poet has nothing more than his heart and feelings. His poetry was in the ranks of the top soldiers and politicians of the Third World (the colonized). He strongly believed that the poet is a part and parcel of his people and society. Nonetheless, through his poetry, he showed that the role and duty of the poet towards his people can have as much as a politician. "He contributed through his intellectual and artistic activities to the nationalist struggle of

his country. He showed through his poetry that an artist or a poet can have as much responsibility to his people as a politician” (Husni, 81).

Al-Shabbi's poetry is as Kerro commented that: “Al-Shabbi was in all what has written of poetry and prose a torch that illuminate the pathways of life and record glory to those rebellious in violence, the vengeful in power, the aspiring to the summits, working to build the glory of art and an immortal literature” (51). Moreover, Anjana, Bhambhra in their paper entitled *Is Literature the Mirror of Society?* supporting Kerro's idea that “Thus literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves a beacon light which guide people to find the right path” (Anjana & Bhambhra 7).

The influence of literature on people's mobilization seems to be a source of strength as reflected in the poetry of Abu Al-Qassim Al-Shabbi. He in his revolutionary poem ‘*The Will of Life*’ which still sung and taught in most of Arab countries demanded for freedom and revolution against the colonizer. Badawi in his book *A Critical Introduction in Modern Arabic Literature*, comments on Shabbi's poetry that “he predicts the heroic struggle of his people against foreign occupation and tyranny and the certain downfall of the latter” (164). “The classic poem ‘The Will to Live’ is one of the strongest contributions made by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi in this type of cultural resistance literature” (Elbousty 159). This poem was the slogan of freedom and the main inspiration of the current revolutions in the Arab World from gulf to ocean. It is according to Mohajer Noei, “the anthem of liberty for his nation” (qtd. in Reisi and Bassir 1499]. It was translated into many foreign languages like English, French and Spanish.

If one day the people should choose life

Fate is certain to respond.

The night will surely retreat,

And fetters be broken!

He who does not like scaling mountains,

Will live eternally in potholes.

I bless those with ambition,

Those who brave danger.

Across the universe it was proclaimed:

Endeavor is the flame of life, the heart of victory.

If the spirit chooses life,

Fate is certain to respond (406-413 1, 2, 13, 15, 63).

Poetry is a criticism of society that criticizes positives and negatives of society as well as its social and political issues. The true poetry carries the spirit of the revolution by refining the souls and enlightening the minds planting the hope in their souls. In a poem, "My Mother's Child," which deals with two main themes: the importance of the freedom and the reality that people live, he declares that man was born free, stated that freedom is a legal right of all people and no one has the right to snatch it:

You were born without fetters,

like the spirit of the breeze,

free as the morning light in the sky.

You chirped, bird-like,

as you darted where you wanted,

chanting inspired prayers (220, 1-2).

Furthermore, in another poem "To the Tyrant", the poet shows his commitment towards the issues of his country through spread of awareness, and to awaken the people from their slumber to

open their eyes to what they are and what they should do to hasten the day of salvation. “Shabbi has shown his commitment to Tunisia, his pledge to continue to be the voice (‘the divine voice’) to awaken his country, whatever be the ill-treatment or persecution he might receive at the hands of his society” (Badawi 164). Through poem, the poet appears to be optimistic about the future of the people stressing the importance of revolution and believes all confidence that the oppressed people will inevitably gain the victory and the colonizer's fate is death and defeat. He strongly warns the colonizer of his continued persecution and humiliation for oppressed people.

Palace of injustice, woe to you of tomorrow,

if the oppressed got up and determined.

If the enslavers broke their chains you will,

know if they poured the fire of anger (119- 5,6).

Countries have deep links in the hearts of its people as appears in the poetry of the national poets who translate this love in their poetry. Al-Shabbi is one of them who came out and distinguished by his romantic trend in which his poetry combined between natural images and cunning of politics, between the spiritual of mysticism and materialistic struggle and between romanticism and nationalism. Al-Shabbi, the national, sensitive and romantic poet writes for his beloved, Tunisia. He writes in his poem “Beautiful Tunisia”:

Beautiful Tunisia! I ride the crest of the waves

in my love for you.[58, 9].

The true literature is that which calls for awakening feelings and sharpening souls and this vigilance is the only way towards freedom, glory and dignity. His love for his country has raised him to the degree of redemption, self-denial and the willingness to sacrifice himself to draw with his blood the light of freedom which reflects his loyalty to his country and commitment to the principles of romanticism. Ronak Husni comments that, "Like his counterparts in the West, [al-Shabbi] is true to the Romantic outlook in his devotion to an ideal society and expresses a feeling of spiritual and intellectual disappointment and alienation from existing society" (Husni 82).

I do not care if I shed my blood,
the blood of lovers is always permissible. (na)

In the political poem "The Roaring Storm", he screamed in the face of the injustice, looking for a decent life and dignity. "In this poem is manifested the eternal heroism of the human soul which did not bend for injustice and did not give up even to the fate and inevitable elimination" (Kerro 46-47). "And he (Al-Shabbi) realize the injustice that is happening to his people by enacting laws that deprive them of their rights and freedoms" (Ismail 16). He wanted to liberate his people from ravages of colonialism and occupation's pains and to overcome political, social, and intellectual restrictions that Tunisia was experiencing. He believes in his people who refuse the submission and love freedom.

O, tyrant who turn his cheek at people, calm down,
time builds and destroys.

Strong men in the land of battles will avenge
for the broken crown of glory (494, 1-2).

Al-Shabbi's Romantic trend was not a hindrance to present the issues and situation of his people, but added a distinctive color to his poetry that made it the most reading and influential which attracts hearts and souls. He was a social critic, and revolutionary poet where the most prominent characteristic of his language was his grief towards the situation of his people and the more trouble thing was their lack of understanding the bad condition that their society was living. In order to express the state of despair and subjugation that did spread between groups of society, he used symbolic language like cave, night and dark in the poem "My Mother's Child":

How is it you stifle life's strong

Voice in your spirit?

When it wants to resound?

You close your shining eyes

To the dawn's sweetness.

Where is anthem, where is pride,

How you accepted the life in caves? [220- 221, 7, 8,9].

He revolted against his people asking how oppressed people enjoyed their life and tasted the happiness in spite that they have no desire for a better future or even to plant the hope. Al-Shabbi did not stop his criticism and blame, but took from his poetry a weapon to look to an alternative reality, freedom and decent life. He called for awakening and revolution against the humiliation and subjugation. He also worked to raise morale by encouraging and motivating his nation to confront colonialism as in the poem "My Mother's Child":

Are you afraid of heaven's hymns?

Do you dread the brilliant song of light?

Get up! Go looking for life-

Do you think it waits for sleepers?
Do not fear what lies beyond the mountain,
There is nothing there but
the fresh light of morning. [221, 10, 11, 12]
He who does not like scaling mountains
will live eternally in potholes. [The Will of life, 13].

Al-Shabibi's poetry was not confined to spreading the spirit of resistance in the souls, but to reveal the atrocities of the colonizer and expose his true face. He portrayed the bloody image that reflects the ugliness and the injustice of colonizer. It summarizes how the colonizer despised the innocent people and shed their blood and this did not prevent Al-Shabbi from his challenge and threaten the colonizer that one day you will be defeated and he is no longer in safe from the popular anger. He writes in "To the Tyrants of the World":

Hey you, the unfair tyrant...
You the lover of the darkness...
you the enemy of life.
Beware! there is a flame underneath the ashes.
if men sow thorns, wounds will be their harvest.
The torrent of blood will sweep you away,
and the flaming storm will consume you.

[457-59, 1-9]

Conclusion

Literature in general and poetry in particular conserved the civilization and history of the Arabs which was their supreme art genre. Poetry, as a register of Arabs, was their only means to record and document their cultural and political heritage including their inner lives, beliefs and rites through time. Thus, literature played the big role in the formation of the political systems of Arab countries in which Al-Shabbi's poetry was the slogan of these recent Arab spring revolutions. Abu Al-Qassim Al-Shabbi- the romantic poet, was not a flash in the history of Arabic literature, but his short life was a turning point in modern Arabic poetry. He was one of the greatest innovators in modern Arabic poetry in the twentieth century. His poetry was standing in the ranks of the top soldiers and politicians of the Third World (colonized). Al-Shabbi is one of the greatest revolutionary poets who devoted his poetry against the tyranny and colonialism, committed to the issues of his society and calling for freedom and independence. For him, poetry is a sacred message and the poet has to preform it sincerity and honesty, its main goal is to illuminate the way for the humanity towards the high ideals and decent life.

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