

# Ameen Rihani: An Arab- American Pioneer of Migrant Literature

Dr. Taybur Rahman Choudhury ALT, Asimia Senior Madrassa, Karimganj, Assam Email.Id

trahamphd@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

Ameen Rihani was founding father of Migrant literature and Migrant literature was influenced on the Modern Arabic literature. He was also a man who believed passionately in the oneness of the world's religions and the brotherhood of all nations, devoting his entire life to prompting the cause of East-West understanding. Virtually able to claim dual nationality he assimilated two widely differing cultures to an extent perhaps never achieved before him profound through his grasp of the modern west was, Rihani never lost sight of the rich cultural heritage into which he was born, and which was bequeathed to the world by Arab civilization. As a pioneering futurist he recognized that the issues now facing humanity demand a new set of answers, arising from a new pattern of faith and belief. Rihani gave to dynamic engagement with the world as a path to self-transcendence and social reform.

## Introduction

Ameen Rihani is considered by all "the father founder" of Arab-American literature. He was born in a Maronite Christian family on 24th November 1876 in Freike, Lebanon, a few miles to the north east of the country's capital, Beirut, and died there 64 years later, on 13th September 1940. He spent his years moving between East and West, especially between Lebanon and his second home, New York and travelling in the world. His early English writing mark the beginning of a body of literature that is Arab in its concern, culture and characteristics, English in language, and American in spirit and platform. He was the first Arab to write English essays, poetry, novels, short stories, art critiques and travel chronicles. Perhaps Ameen Rihani was the pioneer poet of prose-poetry of free verse in Arabic literature. He wrote his first free verse poem in 1907 under the remarkable influence of the American poet, Walt Whitman, whose fans and followers spread in America and Europe. He was the first Arab traveler of modern times to discover the heart of Arabia and his writings influenced on the next Arab writers.<sup>1</sup>

## Major Arabic works of Ameen Rihani

Rihani mastered his hands both in Arabic and English languages. He composed 26 great books in Arabic. Being an Arab in origin Rihani intended to inspire and warm up his native Arabian people through his Arabic writings. During his time, Rihani felt that the Arab people were disintegrated and depressed under the tyrannical oppression of imperial power. Hence Rihani's Arabic writings were aimed at modernizing the Arab society and to integrate the Arabian countries under the theme of Arab Nationalism. Arabian people during the time were the victims of divisive tribal loyalties, political extremism and religious prejudices.

Rihani's writings served as the bridge between the Arab and the western societies. They acquainted the Arab with the contemporary western outlook in the tradition of intellectual liberty personal freedom and cultural achievements. They also focused the western application of science and technology, economic prosperity and political outlook. As a master artist Rihani tried his hand in almost all the spheres of literature like novels, essays, short stories, poetry, biographies and travel books. His translation work is also equally remarkable. The most noteworthy works of Rihani can be highlighted as under:--

### 1. 'Al-Rihaniyat' ( The Essays of Rihani ) :--

The essays of Rihani are the outstanding product of migrant literature. Though a new kind of its genre, the Essays of Rihani paved a mile-stone in the field of Lebanese-American literature and attributed the author as the father of migrant literature. Rihani came forward with the aim of awakening the people of Arab in an era of crisis.

'Al-Rihaniyat' resembles very much to 'Al-Nazrat', another great literary creation of Manfaluti of Egypt. Both the books brought a new dawn in social, political and cultural arena of Arabian countries. The contents of the books were woven on the idea freedom and human rights, intellectual movement and personal liberty. Naturally both the books provided the readers with a new fragrance of liberation against tyranny and they were mentally inspired towards a revolution against the existing system of life.<sup>2</sup>

However 'Al-Rihaniyat' is not confined within a particular theme, rather it focuses a variety of ideas and ideals. Being a collection of essays, lectures and prosaic works, the book deals with various issues like reforms, politics, economics, nature, movements etc. Originally, it was published in four volumes but afterwards Mr. Albert Rihani, Ameen Rihani's brother compiled the national lectures under the title-'Al-Qawmiyat' in two volumes. Again his prosaic and poetic writings were compiled under the title-'Hutuf Al-Awdiya' while his critical writings were titled as-'Adab Wal Fann'. The book 'Wajuh Sharqia Wa Gharbiah' carries the prominent personality of Ameen Rihani while 'Bujur Li Al-Zaraeen' is the collection of his philosophic lectures. 'Al-Rihaniyat' is a mirror that reflects Rihani's experiences of practical life, his personal vision regarding the contemporary Arabian countries in the prospect of American prosperity. It also reflects the religious and traditional extremism in Arabian societies. The book also reflects Rihani's love for his mother land and his close friendship with Nature.

The style and technique of the book is very much personal. Rihani depicted the scenario in such a manner that seems to be a bridge between the East and West. An intermingling of culture proves the work as a new kind of its genre.

## **2. 'Muluk Al-Arab' (The Arabian Kings) :-**

Rihani was much well acquainted with the political scenario of Arabian countries. He made a kin observation around the Arab peninsula from a philosophical view point. As a result his book reflects the Kings, Sultans and Amirs of Arabian countries in a praiseworthy style. Though the book is written on political back ground yet it is furnished maintaining all the aspects of literature<sup>3</sup>

'Muluk Al-Arab' is composed in two volumes. The first volume is comprises of Yaman and Yahya, Azir and Idrisi' Hijaz and Hussainm, Pilgrimage and Sultan while the second volume is written on Najd Bin Saied of Bahrain and relative of Caliphs, King Faisal of Iraq. Both the volumes carry detailed accounts regarding the rulers and their deeds. Arabian cities and remarkable places are vividly depicted in historical manner. King and their deeds are reviewed in a literary style that indicates the writer's skills as a master artist in literature. The contemporary manner and culture of Arabian society is truly reflected in both the volumes.

Rihani started his book as a narrator recounting his common observation on the prevailing social set up. But as he proceeds further he step by step analyses the political condition of the contemporary Arabian countries as a thoughtful critic or a political visionary. The controversial political issues are described in a sensitive manner from humanistic vision.

Finally, 'Muluk Al-Arab is a golden treasure of the contemporary history of Arab that treasures up the geography, history and socio-economic culture of Arab kings and people of the time within a single cover.

## **3. Al-Tataruf Wa Al-Islah (Reform and Extremism) :-**

Ameen Rihani wrote this book as a social reformer. The book conveys the message of reform using the method of persuasion and explanation. Rihani bitterly criticizes the contemporary social injustice, fear of oppression, ignorance and sectarianism. Side by side he also suggests the way of reform and extremism through which those social evils can be tackled. The book calls for equality and solidarity as the weapon to change the contemporary social condition of Lebanese people. In the words of Rihani --- "If I had in me something that inspires people towards the good that raises then one step on the ladder of mental and spiritual progress, I want to show it by example, indication and deduction."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in this book, Rihani appears as a reformative preacher who raises his voice against those who nourish ignorance, fear and oppression. In "Ila Talbati Al-Madaries"(To College Students) he shows the evils of sectarianism and calls it 'our greater infection'. It is not because he hated religion but because he heartily believes that national unity is more important than sectarian fanaticism. The book clearly shows that to unite the people under a strong national unity all kind of sectarianism must be eradicated. The author had a greater purpose behind his writings. The book is not merely a work for the sake of criticism but a true guideline or a remedial measure for the evils of the East. According to Rihani social or political progress can be achieved without reform. This idea is critically analyzed in 'Ela Islah Al-Ummah' (Reforming the nation). The author proves that only reform can quicken the process of natural evolution bringing about social development and moral progress. The book gives us the message of reform not in a violent way but in a smooth and peaceful way. The reform, according to Rihani should be based on intellectual arena that will peacefully eradicate darkness, fear, corruption and other evils of the society. The people should be directed to work towards the greater interest of the Nation instead of their own self.

In short, the book "al Tataruf Wa Al-Islah" is a guideline for the people of Arab countries to save their nations from all the contemporary evils and to re-structure the East on the light of European countries.

## **4. Hutuf Al-Awdia(Music of the Valleys) :-**

This book is a unique creation by Ameen Rihani which can be considered as mile stone Arabic literature. It is an anthology of Arabic poetry written on free verse. In that case Rihani did the same thing in Arabic literature what William

Shakespeare did in English. Though Shakespearean free verse was followed by some other distinguished English poets yet Rihani is the only poet in Arabic literature who introduced this type of poetic form in Arabic. Rihani started writing this kind of poetry under the influence of remarkable American poet Walt Whitman in the year 1907. The literary style and technique of this book is note worthy. The words used in poems are endowed with reason more than their tones. They have their distinct fragrance and colour. The poems convey more reasons than merely emotions and express thoughts with forceful rhythm without any rhyme. The poems are very rich with variety of symbols and imageries. The poet has used symbols and imageries from all walks of life. Images of deserts, rivers, oceans, birds, animals, mountains etc. are dealt with masterly artistic skill. Poems like 'Al-Hayat Wa Al-Maut; Al-Kharif WA AL-Giyab Al-Shams Fi Lubnan' (Life and Death, Fall and Sun set in Lebanon), 'Mabadi Fi Al-Wadi' (My temple in the Valley), 'Rih Samun' (The Simon Wind) bear an excellent blending of both Eastern and Western images. In his poems Rihani invokes an urge for freedom and the necessity to protect it at any cost. 'The Stories of Paris' is one of the glorious examples of them. Rihani makes an assessment of Arabian people and their glorious culture in his poems with suitable images from both flora and fauna. The peaceful living of the natives is highly praised in 'Ammil' and 'Alwayyate'. The beautiful co-existence of human and animal is masterly depicted in 'Kawkabah', 'Rashaya', and 'Mudn'. The safety and security of the mother land as a shelter is shown in 'My Temple in The Valley' while in 'New Yaers Eve' Rihani inspires the people to live a free and liberal life. In short this book proves Rihani as a master poet in Arabic literature.<sup>5</sup>

**5. 'Qalb Lubnan'(The Heart of Lebanon):-**

This book is a traveling account in the form of literature. It is a documentary work written at the last years of Rihani's life in which he has expressed his traveling experiences gathered during the tour of different countries. The book also deals with Rihani's early experiences at his mother land where he spent his last days of life.<sup>6</sup>

The book as its name signifies depicts the originality of his native land, its cultural heritage, ethical values, people and their life style. The country is painted with all its cities, villages, mountains and rivers, plains and hills, plants and animals. The narrative style allures the readers to the core of the subject and one gets introduced with the country like native inhabitant. Lebanon's history is reflected in details in this book on background of present period of chaos and darkness.

Like Jahiz and Voltaire Rihani wrote this book in a ridiculous manner. All the sorrows, grieves and anxieties are swept away by wit and humour. The readers while reading the book get in touch with a joyful pleasantness. The narration of this book swings some times from prosaic form to sensitive poetic style. It covers three dimensions at the same time – history, literature and travel documentary.

**6. Some other Arabic works of Rihani:--**

**(a) Literary criticism :-** I. 'Antum Al-Shuara' (You The Poets) Beirut-1932.

II. 'Qissati Ma-Mie'

(My Story With Me), Beirut-- 1940

**(b) Essays:--** I. 'Uzuhus-SharQia Wa Garbia' (Eastern and Western Figures), Beirut—1957.

II. ' Adab Wa Fan' (Art and Literature), Beirut—1957.

III. 'Writing of Early Days', Beirut--1940.

IV. 'Wasiwat' (My Will), Beirut—1942.

**(c) Short Stories, Novels and Plays:--**

I. Al Makkari Wa Al-Kahin (The Muleeter And The Monk), New York—1904.

II. ' Zambaka Al Ghour' (The Lily of Ghore), New York—1914

III. ' Wafa Al-Zaman' (Faithful Time), Beirut –1933.

IV. 'Sijlu Al-Tawba' (The Register of Report), Egypt—1951.

V. 'Al Muhalfa Al-Thulathiyatu Fi Mamkala Al-Haiwaniyah' (The trilateral in animal kingdom), New York—1903.

**(d) Historical and Political Analysis :--**

I. 'Al-Nukbat (Disaters)', Beirut—1928.

II. 'Qalb Al-Iraq' (The Heart of Iraq), Beirut—1956.

III. 'Al-Quwmiyat' (The Nationalism), Beirut—1934.

IV. 'Faysal Al-Awaal' (Faysal The First), Beirut—1934.

V. 'Mojizu Tarikh Al-Thoura Al-Franciah' (The Treatise of French Revolution), New York—1902.

VI. 'Tarikh Nazd Al-Hadith' (The Modern History of Nazd), Beirut—1934.

**(e) Travel Books:--**

I. 'Al-Magrib Al-Aqsa' (The Far Morocco), Egypt—1952.

II. 'The Illumination of Andalusia', Cairo—1952.

**(f) Sayings and Letters :--**

I. 'Buzur Lil Zaraeen' (Seeds for Planters), Beirut—1961.

II. 'Rasail Ameen Al-Rihani' (The Letters of Ameen Rihani), Beirut—1959.

**Major English Works Of Ameen Rihani :-****1. 'The Maker of Modern Arabia':--**

It is the first book in Trilogy in which Rihani Makes an elaborate assessment on the contribution of the great Arabian leaders, sultans, amees and imams of Nazd during the first few decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book is not only a biography of the leaders but also a faithful mirror of the contemporary Arab world. The book came to light in 1928 and gives an account of Saudi Arabia. Rihani spent a long period in the Middle East region on touring with diplomatic purposes. For a long period he was in company of Ibn Saud, the king and act as a mediator between the king and the British for negotiation of boundary dispute and oil transportation. The first part of the book deals with those issues.

The second part gives in detail the life and character of the king. It is a study of Arab people at a time of their adjustment with European outlook.

**2. 'The book of Khalid' :-**

This is an important English writing of Rihani that describes the influence of transcendentalism on Arabian countries. The idea of transcendentalism is reflected through the references of great American poets like Ralf Waldo Emerson and Thoreau. The two prominent features of transcendentalism --- idealism and social activism are beautifully reflected in the book. The major ideas of Emerson and Thoreau like primacy of intuition, the importance of the individual and spirituality are discussed in the book with full importance. In 'The Book of Khalid' Rihani shows that to bring about a social change one must undergo a deep spiritual change as one needs to oppose the conventional social order, religious belief and practices. Rihani shows that the political changes under king Khalid are not enough. With a parliament, Development Committee and Constitution, the people are not still free. The people of Arab may reach their ideals only by overhauling the present society. According to Rihani, the present social order must be changed for the multifarious development of the nation.

This book is a medium through which Rihani's social activism found its ways of expression. Many critics opine that this book is the foundation of a new trend in Lebanese-American literature. It is the pioneer of the trend in literature that paved the way to reconcile between matter and soul, reason and faith and the East and the West in quest of the unity among the whole humanity.<sup>7</sup>

**3. The Path of Vision (Collection of Essays) :-**

This is a collection of English essays written by Rihani pleading a harmonious co existence of the East and the West. The essays highlight the basic distinctions of life style between the East and the West, Christianity and Islam. Rihani thought that peace and development can be brought by learning from each other.

**Conclusion**

It is found that Ameen Rihani created a new style between English and Arabic where he comprises every knowledge and information, from history to geography, economic to social, colored with logical description. His traveling literature was a distinguish feature of his writing specially in "Qalb Lubnan". He used poetical style of free verse in Arabic history at first, his style was easy in sentence pattern, clear in meaning free from constraint and imitation arranged with peculiarity and spontaneously. Ameen Rihani was a natural lover, traveler, philosopher, optimist, freedom fighter, patriot and reformer. Rihani found out through his philosophy a special inner connection of religion, truth, human being and the society as a whole with Almighty and that was his philosophy. He tried his level best to create unity and integrity among the people of his country for its all round development.

1. Ameen Rihani has come to our vision as a distinct figure who has the parallel strength in writing both in Arabic and English. His remark able books in Arabic 26 and in English 29 in number. He could suck the juice and substance of both the literatures perfectly and studied all kinds of lives of both East and West that were vividly narrated in the all of his works. He left no stone of literature unturned. His national thinking and globalization mutual understanding are quietly seen in his writings. As he was a migrant and the pioneer globalization he narrated his feelings in his masterpiece "Al-Rihaniyat" where he is seen as a reformer and true lover of nature. Secondly on his motto be travelled around Arab Peninsula and wrote "Muluk Al-Arab" mentioning all aspects of Kingdom and Kingship. His "Al-Tatarruf W Al-Islah" enlighten the Lebanese another nations for getting information giving up all evils fear and sectarianism to build a strong nation. His love for nature is pictured truly in his writing historical travelling book "Qalb Lubnan" and "Hutuf Al-Awdia". In his English works we see the

same motto of his sawing the seeds of uniformity and a home of universe as nation. "The Book of Khalid" attempted to reconcile matter and soul, reason and faith and to create rigid links between East and West. His biographical writing "Maker of Modern Arabia" place the act mirror that reflects the lives of great Arabs. His easy writing is soul based on philosophy. In both of his writings he touched almost all the aspects of the literature very tactfully that gifted and awarded him a unique position among the migrant literature.

#### Notes

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