

Aspects of the Romantic Rebellious Poetry of Echebbi *A Literary Analysis Study*

مظاهر الشعر الثوري الرومانسي عند الشابي : دراسة تحليلية أدبية

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Abstract: Aboul-Qacem Echebbi, a romantic Tunisian poet of the thirties raises his voice against oppression and injustice which lay almost in every Arabic nation, at that time; and which impede the process of change by shaking people's souls to thrive for justice. His words, on one hand, unmask the French oppressor who creates unfair gaps between colonist and native social classes; and on the other, present an accurate image of his intellectual and social combat for change. This paper will highlight the necessity to re-read this almost known poet by the English reader; aiming at recording the voice of her poet against oppression. Data will be collected from different sources, then analyzed. This study will help us to shape the poet battle for change. It finds that when social evils like injustice run in a society, a revolution will take place.

Keywords: romanticism ,injustice , revolution , poetic, death.

ملخص:

أبو القاسم الشابي شاعر رومانسي تونسي من الثلاثينيات. ثار بحروفه و قصائده ضد القهر والظلم الجائين على صدر الأمة العربية آنذاك. إذ كانت غايته حشد الهمم لاجتثاث الحرية و العدالة من يد المستعمر الغاشم . ساهمت كلماته للكشف عن الظلم المستعمر الفرنسي الذي خلق فجوات مستبدة بينه و بين طبقات المجتمعات المحلية المستعمرة . كما قدم صورة دقيقة لكفاحه الفكري ، و الثقافي ، و الاجتماعي المستدام من أجل التغيير .

سوف تسلط هذه الورقة البحثية الضوء على ضرورة إعادة قراءة هذا الشاعر المنسي تقريبا من قبل القراء الإنجليز بهدف إظهار معاناة التونسيين وتخليد صوت شاعرهم ضد القهر . جمعت مادة البحث موضوع التحليل من مصادر مختلفة. و التي ستحلل تبعا للمنهج الوصفي التحليلي . كما ستساعدنا هذه الدراسة في إبراز معركة الشاعر من أجل التغيير ، وستكشف النقاب عن القمع الدسيس لفهم المعاناة غير المسموعة للتونسيين خاصة ، و للأمة العربية المستعمرة جمعاء . توصلت دراستنا إلى أنه عندما تنفشي الشرور الاجتماعية مثل الظلم وعدم المساواة في المجتمع ، سيبدأ التحريض وستحدث ثورة .

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرومانسية، الظلم ، الثورة، الشعرية، الموت .

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1 .Introduction:

Poetry is a yearning passion which has been since centuries used by poets to expound their feelings and dreams. Different poets deal with different themes in their poetry. Some poets use poetry for rebellious aims; while others are traditional voices of romance and beauty. Rebellious poets are of the opinion that the prior condition for humankind betterment is the battle for the social, cultural, and artistic change. In societies where people are demeaned and oppressed for long cannot speak of their misery; poets shoulder their responsibility to carry their voices against injustice and inequalities through their everlasting words.

Aboul-Qacem Echebbi is a Tunisian poet, mostly renowned for his indomitable passion to revolt against all anomalies and to annihilate all the evil forces around him. He wrote against injustice, inequalities, sexual racism, and the exploitation faced by his people, and had always spoken for their rights to be preserved in the nation. He is probably best known for writing the final two verses of the current National Anthem of Tunisia, *Humat al-Hima (Defenders of the Homeland)*.

Echebbi was not a rebel in his character, but also in his poetry; he created a new kind of poems in which he mixed between poetry and music. He created new techniques of meter and rhyme in his poetry, he evoked the souls of emotion of readers. In his romantic approach in poetry, he was tremendously impacted particularly by the modern literature of the mid nineteenth century, by the translated romantic literature, as well as Arabic classical literature. His poetic talent manifested itself at an early age and it covered numerous topics mainly glorifying the spirit of patriotism. His poem *To the tyrants of the world* has become a popular slogan chant during the 2011 Tunisian and subsequently Egyptian Arab Spring (Sobhi pp.221-234).

The main research question of this study is: What is rebellious poetry, and what are the purposes and the aspects of this romantic poet? How the poetry of Echebbi is revolutionary?

The objective of this study is to explore the poet battle for change, to underline the romantic aspects of Echebbi poetry, and finally to unveil the unseen oppression and unheard suffering of the Tunisian people. This humble research paper is worthwhile for other researchers. It may inspire them to explore and re-read Echebbi, as an Arab romantic poet of his time. Moreover, it will enhance their critical approach to evaluate his romantic themes such as love, nature, woman, life, and death.

2. Literature Review

Literature has been always considered as a vital pillar to light aggregate social, cultural, and political living conditions; and to revolt against all anomalies and to annihilate all the evil forces. Rebellious poetry, as a literary stream, is believed to be the outflow of a profound feeling that life is not what it should be, and endeavoring for something better and high.

Poetry of revolt has stained in many societies and cultures, such as the British, French, German, American and even Arab. This type of literature does not appear vainly, but it appears for several purposes. Among these purposes is revolting against the conventional and dogmatic flow which is a part of the romantic spirit; in which some writers tend to write the rebellious and protest literature. Another aim is related to the psychological life of the writer's rebellious love for a change. Whatever the objectives behind this trend, some submissive societies do not enhance this kind of literature, or even the rebel writers. Some of them have

been chased by the oppressive authorities, others are imprisoned, or, simply, hiding themselves and chose to live in obscurity.

One of the striking names representing this trend in the British literature is James Joyce. His famous collection of short stories *The Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), both pieces of writing embody the spirit of revolt in dealing with the various conflicts, anomalies and contradiction within the Irish society.

Arthur Rimbaud, a French poet, is a major figure of symbolism in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was considered as one of the revolutionary poets that lived a turbulent life. Since his childhood, his life had witnessed harsh realities and difficulties which "began when his father decided to flee from the house because of the stringency his wife; this episode has a great effect upon him" (Starkie 24). Because of that turbulent life, his poems reflect such cruel harshness and misery that made him one of the most important poets in his time.

Charles Baudelaire is another French figure in the literary history of the world. As Arthur Rimbaud, he began to feel the sense of rebellion when he lived a miserable, confused, anxious, blundering and difficult life. The most important works of Baudelaire that made uproar and confusion in the whole Europe was *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), (McGowan 4). *Flowers of Evil* was a testament to his disgust and hatred of all things.

Georg Büchner was a German writer of poetry and prose. He was known as a dramatist who had an ambitious spirit that did not recognize the borders or barriers, he also has the rebel spirit that rejected the political and social reality that dominated in Germany and Europe in general at the time in search of a new reality (Gardner 24).

The Beat group are intellectual writers who questioned all aspects of new culture in America, including its literature, race, class and gender roles as well as the general sense that all was not right with the world. Kerouac points that "Beat Generation" has simply become the slogan or label for a revolution in manners in America (The Origins 31).

The Arab world is full of rebellion and rejection writers as a result of their critical economic and social living conditions. Some of the rebellious poets who lived turmoil life in their country as a result of injustice and oppression that were portrayed in their poetry and writings are: Mohammed Maghout from Syria and Ahmed Matter from Iraq. This latter is being the most living revolutionary poet who has been living in exile for decades, most recently in London. He moved to Baghdad, when he decided to change his lifestyle, and leave the poverty and deprivation. This is because of the harsh life that he lived and political events in his country. Hence, he moved his poems from romantic to the political and rebellious ones. His poetry is very critical of the Arab rulers, the lack of freedom, the use of torture, and the clinging to power at all costs.

Most of the mentioned writers and poets, all sharing a poignant sense of rebellion, turn their literary writings to rebellious writings as a result of their low and wrecked social, political, and economic conditions. Their revolutionary poems thrive for radical transformation, the reinvention of reality and the subversion of the status quo.

3. Against the French Colonialism

Along his short living days, Echebbi was stamped by politics and the society, in addition to his personality and family life. His poetry must be seen within the socio-cultural context of his country during the thirties. Tunisia was under the French colonization, overwhelmed by the emergence of a movement of cultural and sociological ideas including the eagerness to reform schooling system, the adoption of egalitarian principle, patriotism, and the freedom of expression, known under the slogan of : Syndication (Faouzia, *La Press*).

Under the French colonization, the political and social situation of the Tunisian society had been disgusting and terrible for many years. It is obvious that Echebbi as a revolutionary poet, via his words, rebels against the social injustice by using the medium of poetry, and divulges such oppression, corruption, and exploitation imposed on the Tunisian common people. His poetic emotions are fiery with passionate enthusiasm and aflame alacrity; his words resemble to the fiery spirit of the romantic poets who speak for the oppressed and humiliated. He did his level best to expose the social evils in his poetry, sometimes through mingling his own feelings with his patriotic emotions.

Fathi pointed that “Echebbi had watered the forests of Tunisia with tears, and described the atrocity of the colonial in “To the Tyrants of The World” (Fathi 11)

Hey you, the unfair tyrant...
You the lover of the darkness...
You the enemy of life...
You've made fun of innocent people's wounds;
And your palm covered with their blood
You kept walking while you were deforming the
charm of existence
And growing seeds of sadness in their land
Wait, don't let the spring, the clearness of the sky
And the shine of the morning light fools you...
Because the darkness, the thunder rumble
And the blowing of the wind is coming toward
you from the horizon
Beware because there is a fire underneath the ash,
And Who grows thorns will reap wounds

(tr.Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 16.136)

The poet describes in this poem the colonizer as being the enemy of nature and human being, a friend of nothingness and annihilation, his fingers are covered with blood, and he keeps making fun of poor people, and deforming the charm of existence. He warns him to do not be fooled by the clearness and by the shine of the light of Spring. There will come a strong storm which will drift the waves of blood throughout the country turning them into a river of tears that will sweep him away. Through the usage of the accurate poetic structures such as : unfair tyrants , lover of the darkness , enemy of life, growing seeds of sadness, deforming the charm of existence, and your palm covered with blood; Echebbi shows the deprivation and suffering of the Tunisian people, and gives a real image of Tunisia during that critical period of time. It is obvious, that his contribution to the Tunisian revolution against the French colonists played an important voice in exciting the readers' souls to be a partisan within this noble combat.

The revolution implants in Echebbi a hatred for the French colonialism and shows explicitly his aflame patriotism. In his most known poem “*The Will of Living*”, he tends to flame his people emotions, and to revolt against his oppressor. He wrote:

When people choose a noble and worthy existence
The Fates will accordingly respond
Dead of night will lift and vanish
Fetters will break open
He who harbors no passion for life

Its heat dematerializes him, he is forgotten
Woe unto him who loses interest in life
Victorious void will deal him a slap

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.70)

Via these lines Echebbi arouses the feeling of revolting need in the Arabic nation's people, asking them to revenge oneself, to get back their dignity, and to destroy the French colonists throwing them beyond the sea. Tunisian people should never leave the death status quo to a state of life, unless a motivation to live is raised, showing their will to change and their determination to exist. If the people lose their ambition to exist and to live a dignified life, they become feckless living dead, or dead like being alive.

His dictions unmask both his strength and will to live (aspire, lofty goals, high hopes, and trepidation), in addition to his rejection to any kind of oppression or exploitation. He raised his voice saying:

When I aspire to lofty goals
I mount high hopes and discard trepidation

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.72)

Echebbi, a maverick, takes the essence of nature as a corroborator to decline and revolt against all kinds of injustice and oppression. Nature, as a pure and an innocent phenomenon, becomes a source of wisdom, a guiding mother who drives him fighting for freedom, justice, and equality. The whole universe with its "hidden Spirits" and "winds" whispers and crumps their comforting reassurances to pursue his noble way of revolution.

Thus, has the universe told me
Thus has its hidden Spirits intimated
The winds howled in the deep ravines
Above mountain peaks, under the trees

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.70)

"Avoiding rugged roads "and "Climbing the mountains" teaches him the power of facing and encountering all sorts of hindrances and obstacles in this life: otherwise, he will last "in ditches and holes":

He who has an aversion to climbing mountains
Will pass his days and nights in ditches and holes

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.70)

Being inspired by nature as a source of guidance , the " thunder" teaches him being fiery , "harkened to the sounds of wind and rainfall" teaches him to enjoy his revolt and to admire

embracing martyrdom ; mainly when his mother earth replied "I bless ambitious and aspiring souls" of people "who brave danger" but "condemn those who live, stone-like" unconscious, cowards, underdogs, denying their human rights, and accepting being humiliated by the oppressor "Content with a dull, callous existence". Simply, because the universe "is alive; it loves life" and "It despises the dead, great as it may seem".

Intently I listened to the thunder peel
But condemn those who live, stone-like, behind times

Content with a dull, callous existence
Behold! The universe is alive; it loves life
It despises the dead, great as it may seem

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.71)

Echebbi, while wondering, was expressing awe rather than wondering; he is not expecting answers, rather he is raising ideas and concerns that cause his confusion about himself as well as the world around him.

4. Echebbi's Social Romantic Revolution

The social life is a reflection to what is included within the society itself. for instance, the systems, the flexibility, the prosperity, or the underdevelopment in all its aspects of life. Artists in general, and particularly poets have always had an immediate impact on society. All poets pursue their own road towards truth and there is room for a whole spectrum and adventures (Michael 2). Traditional poetry has been limited to subjects of universal significance, general human appeal, and so on, even when the poems were romantically personal on their surface. But in modernist poetry, we read poems about any topic and theme” (Collins 20).

Echebbi, the romantic poet and the visionary thinker, and whose awareness of his uniqueness and exceptionality made him attentive and alert to everything around him including both positive and negative factors. He was one of those poets who could not live in isolation separated from his social environment, without being influenced or influencing the society he had lived in. His task was to voice the human spirit. Thus, when he was describing himself, he was indeed drawing a reflecting clear image of his society. During the thirties, the Tunisian society was terribly disjointed, where ignorance, intellectual darkness, and all kinds of anomalies and old-fashioned thoughts were spreading over such a small colonized country of north Africa. Being astounded by the eerie silence falling upon his people towards issues that target their existence; his loud revolutionary scream shattered that silence:

The storms hit over you till the sunset
Until you were about been reaked
The beats surrounded you, devoured you
You did not rage, nor felt the hurt
O my God! don't you feel? Don't you desire?
Don't you complain? Don't you speak?

(tr.Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 14.131)

What harmed more the heart of the poet was his people's submissiveness. People did not complain about; did not react, did not revolt against, otherwise they would feel the pain and suffering caused by the colonialism.

Through the previous lines, he blames his people's silence by accepting such devastating living conditions. Abiding by and surrender to colonialism which is visible through the usage of dictions like “storm”, “hit”, “been wrecked”, “beasts”, “devoured”, “did not rage”, and “hurt” that show the painful and harmful situation, the Tunisian society was enduring. Thus, the poet shouldered his responsibilities to carry their voice against injustice and exploitation.

He addresses intellectuals, academic, and clergymen to take part in this revolution, but in vain!

4.1 Intellectual Rebellion

During a meeting organized by the literary club of the Muslim Youth Association, he raises the theme of “The Poetic Imagination and The Arabic Mythology” where he points out that “The Arabic History did not retain much things of the Arabic mythology” (Abderrazak 95). He makes it clear when stressing the fact that “Contrary to the other civilizations, legends or tales are not found in any kind of collection, or manuscript. They remain dispersed in different books, or being transmitted orally, to a point that gathering and collecting them would be unreachable” (Abderrazak 95). In fact, his presentation would be a “harsh literary criticism of the Arabic poetic production since the first hegira century, and being considered a scandal at that time” (Tahar 15). A young man of twenty years old who “does not know any foreign language and (...) who had never left his country” (Faouzia *op.cit*). Moreover, the originality of his ideas and the audacity of his judgments lead him to insist on the fact that “Arabic poets had never expressed deep feelings, since they were not considering nature with a living and meditative feeling, as something sublime, but rather like one look with a satisfied eye at a well woven, colorful garment, nothing more” (Abderrazak 31). This extreme variation in evaluating issues between him and his opponents has made him feeling alienated, and becoming a passing stranger, an “outcast”, in once beloved homeland.

While his cardiac disease was corroding his body and soul, the submissiveness of his people was devastating his will for change. In his “*The Unknown Prophet*”, He decides to leave stage with heavy heart, expressing that clearly when writing:

I wish I can live this life in my solitude and isolation
Spending my days in the mountains and woods
Between the pine trees, not having worldly cares
Mocking the clouds, the rains, and the storms

(tr.Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 9.93)

4.2 Gender Rebellion

Woman is portrayed by Echebbi as a pure and a beautiful creature. She is so sublime, that she deserves high respect and admiration; far away to be simply a source of hedonistic passion. He stresses on the fact that gender issue has not been tackled over centuries head on so far. Moreover, he thinks that Classical Arabs “ had as an expression of beauty only that of the woman” (Abderrazak 99), blaming them that instead of mounting her “ on a pedestal venerating her with a noble and sacred sight, a good example is what the Greek used to did with their muses, the Arabic poets only used to evoke her as an object of their desire and their carnal lust” (Abderrazak 99). According to him, the portray of woman’s image in the Arabic literature was very poor, low and completely demeaned. Those words “gave birth to a chain of violent reactions against Echebbi, basically from conservative and Salafist poets of his era.” (Faouzia *op. cit*). Though, when underlying the negative aspects of the ancient Arabic poetry; he insists on the adoption of the romantic approach that stresses on a literature that corresponds to real life. Mongi Chemli put Echebbi’s criticism against the ancient Arabic poetry as “The ineluctable divorce with the former, the irreversible rupture with the traditional” (“*Un Poète*”) Nonetheless, Abou el Kacem Chebbi stresses that “If I am claiming my wishes of renewing (...) it is not for disparaging the literature of our ancestors” (“Pour”).

Echebbi reports that “this discussion represents the beginning of the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, that has given birth to controversial and fruitless disputes among the partisans of the past and the renovators” (Abderrazak 32). Despite the fact that he was completely demeaned by his adversaries, his fiery and rebellious spirit would, from time to time, rebel and revolt, stressing on his stickability, he insists on that in his “*The Chant of the Giant*” or “So, Prometheus Sang”:

I will live, despite the gnawing disease
And the assaulting opponents
As an eagle on the peak
Staring at the sun light,
Mocking the clouds, the rains, and the storms

(tr. Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 1.11)

In his poems, he used to mingle between her description and the one of pure nature. Her purity and beauty pushed him to raise his defending voice claiming not only for her social rights, but also to clean up her portrayed image in the Arabic traditional literature.

To uphold the right and respect of the woman, in one of his poems entitled “*Prayers Within the Temple of Love*”¹, he introduced her as “a beautiful rose in the wood, but surrounded by thistle and worms”. This flower, a source of joy and happiness, deserves more than respect and admiration. Unfortunately, it is being surrounded by worms which crave it as a simple “nourishing dish”; and ignore its real emotional value, as being a symbol of fidelity, optimism, joy and mums. This poem was considered as a revolutionary step towards the foundation of a new literary school, in which woman is given her worthy social right, he wrote:

You are as fresh as a child as dreams
Like a tune, like a new morning
Like a laughing sky, like a lunar night
Like roses, like a newborn smile

(tr.Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 7.60)

As all romantic poets, through these verses, the poet paints a double dimensions painting, on which one consists of spiritual side expressed through dictions like “child”, “dreams”, tune of new morning” which are all emblems of innocence and ecstasy. And the second dimension which is the external physical appearance expressed by “rose”, “sky”, “lunar night”, and “newborn smile”. Both dimensions embody new analogies “spiritual and physical” as opposed to traditional and classical poets.

A great number of Echebbi’s poems that deal with gender issues are examples of his strong will for stranding by her, by promoting and putting her social status right, and trying to erase those handicaps that tied her up (Abou Senna 1985).

4.3 Death as a Poetic Theme

Poets have considerably presented death as a dilemma that arouses terrible anxieties. Others presented it as an avenue toward acknowledging themselves. For many rebellions, like Echebbi, death wish appears a prevalent theme in some of their works. As a symbolic phenomenon, it permeates the majority of his poems. It carries a wide spectrum of symbolic

¹ Being attracted by a European beautiful tourist young girl of twenty years old seen at one of Tozeur Oasis; he wrote his *Salawat fi hakel al-Hob*, (1931), (prayers at the temple of love)

connotations and literary images which are aligned with thoughts of retreat in solipsism, salvation, and ultimately. The reader can grasp his persistent desire for death; that darkness in his poems emerges from his painful disease, social outcast rejection, and the overall circumstances in his contemporary society. It is a desire for freedom from suffering connected by a will to depart from life, rather than a will to solve life traumas within the framework of realism. Nazek Al-Mala'ika pointed that "the manifestations of Echebbi's love of death are spreading throughout his poetry" (Nazek 41). Hence, his claim for death comes not as something he likes, but rather a solution to get rid of his misery, troubles, and pains. The death theme of his poems seems to allow him embracing it, not only as a means of escaping from his disease and other forces that imprison his soul, but to allow him embracing his marginality and avoid despair (Arbi 42). In his "Toward Death", he is explicitly exalting the coming death":

To Death, death is a beautiful soul
Fluttering over those clouds
To Death, death is a refreshing silver pot
For whom the desert winds make him thirsts after

(tr .Aboul-Qacem Echebbi 6.55)

It is clear that death here is literally represented, it has taken a metamorphic form as "the refreshing silver pot", and "baby cradle". Death, for the poet, is seen as a desired matter, and a welcoming guest. And since the dismay of death seems to depend on two ideas, the finality of death and the uncertainty of what follows, and with diversity of views in different societies; Echebbi conscious of all the mission and responsibilities toward his society, his nation, and even himself had been fulfilled; thus, death becomes his salvation, his relief, and his final cradle where he will enjoys the rewarding of his deeds.

5. Conclusion

Echebbi was a gifted poet who has a soft feeling of life, and does not shy away from his reality, although his physical and psychological pains. He used poetry as a sublime means to express noble human experiences, and not only as a means of satire, praise, and other traditional poetic themes. His multicultural background had helped intellectual genius poetic maturity, since he did not acquire his cultural knowledge only from the traditional and modern Arabic cultural heritage, but also a great part of his knowledge was enriched from the western culture via translation.

His poems show clearly the impact of romanticism on his style, diction, and music. He exploited some of these artistic principles and techniques to what fit his romantic principles. So that, his poetry could be free of traditional restrictions and handicaps.

The national revolution against the French colonist's cruelty and injustice was one of persisting and sustained battle in his life. Whenever he used to meet oppression, imperialism, and corruption impeding the prosperity of his society and nation. The perfect choice of words, style, and music witness his loyal and profound patriotism.

His indomitable passion to revolt against all anomalies and to annihilate all the evil forces throughout his society has been a good example for the next generation to emulate. Because of his social and cultural renowned revolution against the frozen status quo, mainly in the matter of cultural and academic reforms, many opponents stood against him, rejecting his new-fangled opinions, all in all questioning his poetic value and position. The upshot, he had to meet his fate within his mother earth as being a pariah.

Echebbi revolted against the low-born position and state of woman, not only in her social environment, but also against the way she has been portrayed and depicted by traditional Arabic artists and poets.

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