



## The Issue of Woman in Ghasem Amin's Political Thought

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**Abstract:** Ghasem Amin is known as a harbinger of women's social and cultural rights in the world of Arabs. Primarily, he centered his ideas on three axes: a; women's education to the primary level, B; necessity of women's free will and decision making in issues like marriage, c; religious veil (covering all the body except the face and the two palms); although the outcomes of his ideas require more discussion and deliberation. He considered the problem as the ignorance that attacked women more than it attacked men. Amin believed that the solution to this problem lies in education. For him, education is the development of instinctive power of human being, and that the education can be applied by the individual himself, and this self training makes miracles, because it relates human beings to civility. This civility upholds the position of human beings through education and changes him/her to the supreme creature.

**Keywords:** Ghasem Amin, Woman, Veil (Hijab), Egypt, Underdevelopment, Development.

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### Introduction

Al-merata va ma adraka maa al-merat (Woman, and how do you know what/ who the woman is). This is the key sentence in the book "Tahrir-al-Merat" (Liberating women) which is based on some of the Koranic Verses style, and was the indicator of Ghasem Amin's worries and efforts as a social and legal pathologist. Amin was more a social theorist than a political writer. Amin had recognized two problems of "what is our situation in comparison to others"? And "what should be done"? And tried hard to explore and elaborate the issue and look for a solution for the present condition: woman is the center of the freedom of the society of Egypt from any kind of wickedness, mischief, and inadmissibility. In this article Amin's point of view about social role of women is put into discussion.

### Speculative Atmosphere about Women

#### A. Social and Thought Developments

Amin was the first child of the family born in 1863 in the area of Torreh around Cairo. His father, who was an officer correspondent of the city during the time of Khadiv Esmaeel, was originally from Soleimanieh, Iraq. This made some Kurds to call him a Kurdish thinker (Ahmad Khalil, 2009). He spent his primary education in Alexandria, during the time that his father as a military person was assigned to this city. He then entered the law School and graduated in 1881. Becoming the top student was the reason for him to be sent to France along some other Egyptian students. He studied law in France. He stayed there for four years and studied politics, literature, and art at

that time and even after that time. There he made a close and deep relations with the ideas of Nietzsche (Super human), Darwin (The theory of evolution), and Marx (The Capital). Since that time he started his education about actualization of social justice for human beings. His clear question was that to establish social justice, how a woman who makes half of the society, to whom the consolidation of family and society depends, can liberate herself from obstacles she is dealing with.

When he turned back to Egypt started his activities as a lawyer and a judge, along with his friend, Fathi Zaghlool. After a while, he became the head of the association of the lawyers of the cities of Swif and Tanta. According to Heikal, Amin attempted logical Ijtihad (Jurisprudence) when in some cases he found Islamic or even French sources insufficient, and when most of the judges of his time were trying to terminate a case, he cared about people who were, in one way or another and sometimes with no specific reason, involved in a legal dispute, and tried to issue a decree to make the hearts of people involved in a case, closer to each other, much before the disputing issue was solved (Heikal, 1948, P.66). Apparently, Amin was sorrowful about people who, as he said, were neither eager to learn what they didn't know, and nor willing to listen to the knower (Amin, 1908, p20). He died in the 1908 April as wished for women's freedom from ignorance and darkness.

### **B. Nationalism and Fighting the Ignorance**

In addition to recognizing Amin as a liberal/secular character, especially in regard of women in Egypt, it can be understood from his works that he was, also, a nationalist. Yet, his nationality can be judged from the political and ideological perspectives. In fact, more than noticing the Egypt, he noticed the Egyptian society. In his nationalistic discussions, he places the issue of women in the center. As he believes the issue of

women's freedom is the central problem when talking about the freedom of Egypt. If it is supposed that Egypt get liberated from foreigner's dominance, and access its own Arabic and ethnic nature, it is necessary, more than anything else, that Egyptian woman access her freedom. The reason is that any social reform which is to initiate other reforms is in one way or another related to women and the family. He stated that the reason of underdevelopment of the Egypt in thinking, culture and civilization turns back to the lack of independence and dictatorship which are manifested in the issue of insult of and domination over women (Sakakini, 1965, p 32). He wrote some articles in the journal of "Almoayed" under the title of "reasons and outcomes", anonymously. In these articles he claimed that the main problem of Egypt and Egyptians were the ignorance and lack of Education of the women. He, also, wrote that "there is no use to find fault with others when we ourselves are full of faults." It is better now to solve our own problems first. (Ibid) for him, there is no obstacle, except illiteracy and disability in the training of Egyptian women to prevent them from getting involved in affairs like science, technology, literature, trade, and industry, that western women are involved in, except, (Amin, 1988, P. 8).

Amin considers illiteracy as the main problem that has entangled the society of Egypt, and believed that the solution to this social problem was education, especially for women. For him, education meant developing the instinctive power of human beings by anybody. He says "This is the education of the man that does miracle." And this education is nothing more than civility.

This is where Amin, generally, refers to the family and then, specifically, to the issue of women. He believes that education with the above mentioned meaning is not necessarily embodied in schools or in preserving scientific rules, but it is accessed in the family, and because of that family is considered as the basis of each society (Ibid,

41). This foundation makes development of other affairs possible. In other words, when he talks about the society of Egypt, he, in fact, talks about family. He, also, warns that the Education of women should be for the sake of them themselves not for their instrumentality ... it is necessary for them to get educated in way to become a suitable member of the society, not an idol to be shown in a way the man requires. She should get educated in a way her happiness and prosperity is decided by her herself, not by anybody else” (Amin, Zane Emrooz, P.70).

He accounts for the three principles as the fundamentals of the family that make the foundations of human education. The first principle, as he calls, is the feeling of religion. Religion is the sole job that pictures the real perfection for him”. In this way family should cultivate religiousness in the mind and in the heart of a child, from the very beginning”, in a way the child shows this inclination toward virtuosity in his behaviors throughout his growth. The second principle is patriotism. This feeling is born with the child; if it is supposed that the feeling of patriotism and its teaching be rendered at school and the time of education, it leads to no result. “A child should be thought that whatever s/he does becomes meaningful, only, if it is related to love for his hometown, otherwise, it is null. This is the debt we have toward our ancestors, and our children should have toward us. “The third foundation, however, is controlling the inner self; “this is called an individual’s ethical and moral development, and Europeans consider it as “court of conscience” which is supposed to guard the individual at any time. It is sometimes believed that sense is an instinctive affair depicted in human institution, but this is not true, inner control can also, be achieved by education and training.” This process leads to the appearance of responsibility. Only in this situation, the person might feel responsible for his actions and there is no need for police and guardians (Amin, 1894, pp.40-41).

## The Social Role of Woman

### A. The Definition of Woman

Amin presents the issue of woman embodied in the decline of a society both in the negative and positive manner in the family and her education in the family, and suggests that the only way to prevent the decline of the society is that the family be considered as the basis for education. For familial education, he points to two objectives and mental causes. The mental causes of a proper and constructive education of the family are those which are mentioned under the name of principles and means, but the objective cause is the woman. This issue itself arises from another mental affair.

Vedad Sakakini, the writer of the book “Ghasem Amin” in the collection of (Navabegh-al-fekr-al Arabi) (Arabian intellectuals), writes:”it should be stated that, for Amin, love is the originator of all understandings. He was in totality in love with woman (mother, sister, daughter and wife) and he has illuminated this love in all his works. This love guided him to reality and goodness. Amin recognized that the absence of woman from the social domain and her unawareness of her rights in that society will make the family, originally, and later the whole society meet the consequences. Thus, any movement which is supposed to lead to reformation should start with woman” (Sakakini, *ibid*, P.43). In other words, Amin requests not only reformation and development, but also prosperity, for women (Alkhasiri, 1978, P.3).

For Amin, it is necessary to define the entity “woman” before anything else. To the question about (woman and what defines her) he responds that woman is a human as a man is, a being who is not different from man in regard of having organs, responsibilities, feelings and thought, the only difference lies in the types of human beings” (Amin, *Tahrir al merat*, P.17); and Amin tries to give the Egyptian woman’s human self, back, theoretically. “ If it is observed that men are supe-

rior because of the physical power and mental capacity, it is because they have tried for centuries and ages to access these achievements, i.e. the achievements women have been deprived of, and this has caused her ongoing weakness” (Ibid).

In other words Amin had a two sided view toward women: first liberating her from what has chained her limbs, mind and language, and second empowering her to play her role in educating the family members who will someday, not far from today, play their social roles; in turn. Amin was desperately complaining about this idea that women (have) been internalized that their eyes should not see anything beyond their surrounding of their houses. For this concept he used the Turkish word of Harmalak, and he believed that this idea was left by the ottoman’s Islamic caliphates. This was just the time he had observed women, around his home, who were working in agricultural affairs like men, and in order not to divert the attention of men, how they covered their faces. He had seen women from the upper levels of society who were allowed to come to the street and market, but in black clothes and white (borg-ha). He had seen that women in tribes had khalkhal (anklet) around their feet ankles, and he considered them as chains, and had seen women, who covered their noses in a way they could not breathe easily, from villages. It is clear from these examples that Amin considered liberating women from Hijab, from those amounts of clothes which deprived her from any social and educational activities.

## **B. Woman and Religion**

The question to be asked here is that how does Amin look at the role of religion? “Even today, people are in the idea that woman’s training and education are not necessary, in fact they pose the question whether women’s training, in a way to learn reading and writing, is allowed or prohibited, according to the religion. It is evident, and they might know that one of the consequences of

women’s literacy is that “they learn the religious principles in a better way, and they get wiser in receiving the correct ideas and putting away the superstitions which have surrounded their life and their wisdom” (Ibid, P.17). Amin reprimands his contemporary society indicating “if we have done anything obligatory according to our religion in women’s education, if the Koran’s verse indicating whether those who cannot talk and listen to are those who don’t understand” can be applied to the women in our society”, on the other hand he considers the kindness of man to woman the effect of God’s grace on human beings’ and he considers it as “the greatest blessing that God has bestowed on us” (Ibid, P.50). Although Amin tries, in general, to document his discussions and ideas through religious teachings, he does not consider this border, formally, when talking about Hijab, specifically.

“If there is any obligation in Islam for women’s Hijab (as there is such an idea among some Muslims) I confine myself to not discussing about it at all, and not even writing about it, because God’s orders have to be followed with no discussion. But the problem is that we cannot find any clear text necessitating Hijab as it is currently practiced. This type of Hijab which is used in Egypt is the result of mixture of this nation with other nations, and since they accepted it as a good one, they tried to use it in its best possible way and decorated it with the religion identification. Since the religion keeps itself away from the concept of Hijab with the present meaning, thus, it is not only not prohibited, but also necessary to talk about Hijab and explain to people the religious decree about it and make people understand that they can change this present form of Hijab” (Ibid, P.56).

Amin attempts to investigate the problem logically, instead of dealing with the orders of the religion. His reasoning is expressed as the belief in equal rights for men and women, and also for their social and legal conducts. The question to be asked is that if it is possible for the woman to

arise for her religious duties with this cumbersome veil. Can a woman who is confined in the walls of the house, and who is not free to decide for her marriage, which are all outcomes of using such Hijab, be active in any field? How can a woman with such veil (Hijab) practice business and trade? How can a woman, whose face is covered (and her identity is not clear), be present in a court as a claimant or as a witness, while religion has prescribed woman's presence with an uncovered face" (Ibid, P.56). Two points should be mentioned here: Amin accounts limitations for unveiling which includes uncovering the face and two palms, and of course the limitation of unveiling is understood as a debatable topic. Despite this, Amin refers to religious teachings in some cases, too. "All religion followers agree that a bridegroom should see the Ansar who proposed to a woman, if he had taken a look at the woman's face, and he negated. The Prophet told him to look at her face, because it was necessary for marriage. (Ibid, p57)

As Amin states the idea that unveiling the women causes chaos, is nonsense and unacceptable; this problem arises from the fearful hearts of some of the men, and women are not supposed to bear it. If any man feels restless by using a woman's uncovered face, he is advised to close his eyes and prevent himself from looking at her face; the same is true for women who are afraid of looking at men's faces". Amin continues by asking surprisingly, that why Koran has not ordered men to cover their faces if they get afraid of the sedation of women; Does it mean that men have weaker free will than women, and consequently women are stronger than men? If anybody accepts this message, then he is reasoning against himself, indicating women are more talented than men, thus she should not be dominated by men and if there is any reason, beside it, the statement about women's Hijab should not be considered seriously. After this reasoning Amin states that Borgha and shield which are used to cover Egyp-

tian women's faces, are the causes of chaos, much more than unveiling is; forehead, eyes, and lips which are covered by veil and are shown in one way or another are more intriguing for the men who are eager to know what is there behind the veil ... yet the cause of sedation should not be sought in how the face of the women appears but to her body movement, the way they walk and the way they behave, and veils can be chosen as important instruments by which a women can show off, because it covers the surface and she can show off without fearing from being recognized as the daughter or sister of any known person ... and when her face is uncovered in a way to make her recognized by others as belonging to a family, it might lead her to honesty and chastity" (Ibid, P.58). he indicates that there is no virtue except the application of wisdom, and one of the applications of wisdom is to attempt to train and educate women and consider them as friends to ourselves. "This is what humanity and religion have necessitated; this is not only humanistic and religious, but also a national affair" (Ibid).

### C. Women's Freedom

Considering the society's signs of sickness, he suggests his solution as the freedom of women. He claims that he paid attention to an issue not many did before, and at the same time he believes that the problem was not investigated from all aspects to show the real dignity of the women. He considered his discussions as seeds to be grown in the minds of the future generation. He said "one who needs this idea and gets informed of its content, knows that I have been looking at a far distance, because the issue of women's liberty is a tough and time consuming affair, and cannot be achieved overnight. Actualization of the issue should be gradual, and that the Egypt is living under the present condition is not unfortunate, because people of each period are responsible for their own activities. Disgrace is when a nation presupposes that they are complete and there is no



fault in their actions and claims that it is the best nation everywhere and at any time.” (Ibid, P1). This shows that he was not hopeful about his generation and stated explicitly, that to deal with the issue of unveiling in an abrupt way, might lead to unpleasant consequences.

His approach for liberating women can be presented in the following three stages:

1. Priority of training over teaching.
2. Public teaching of women through building frequent schools all over the country.
3. Variety in women’s teaching and education.

The third approach indicates that women should not be assigned to specific fields of study. Because of this idea Amin is considered like those who invited the idea of establishing new universities in Egypt. In October 1906, Saad Zaghloul’s house became the bearer of good news of establishing universities for both women and men in this country. Amin in a lecture in the same place mentioned: “today our thought and ideas push us toward popularizing science and education for our people ... we are going to inject understanding and awareness to the society by moving beyond the current limitations to achieve the arenas of thought which had preoccupied European scientists minds; the temptation we are just murmuring about” (Sakakini, Ibid, P.49).

4. Motivation for the Women to Get Educated and Learn: This motivation is embodied as learning just for the sake of science and love for acquisition of facts and joy for discovering the unknown affairs and scientific attempts to find the beauties of life. This discussion arises from the unpleasant situation that Amin observed in the west. “Western women learn science not for gaining awareness and learning the culture but to get a job and make money.” (Ibid, P.47). According to him, the purpose of freedom for

women is the access to the liberty of thought from the boundaries that society, and history has put on their way to make possibility for their prosperity and to remove the thousands of years tyranny imposed on them. “Therefore, our purpose of expansion of science in Egypt is not to guide the students to enter the field of industry or to find a job, only; but it is enough to make joy of science among them; science for the sake of science and interests to discover the unknown” (ibid, P.49). Amin knew that Egypt was exploited; there was no opportunity for acquiring science to enter industry and technology, but was hopeful for the future for which to train the present acquirers of science to meet the national objectives of Egypt.

5. Lack of promise to equalize education for both men and women.

For Amin each woman and man follows a specific objective in education. This, of course, refers to the developed stages of education meaning that for learning the basic concepts, they are both considered equal. “It is not necessary to account for equal education for men and women, what I am looking for is that for the primary level education they should be considered equal; i.e.-girls also learn the same concepts boys learn at schools, of course, the objective of education should not be to give women the ability to read and write only; but it is the minimum instrument for improvement, while the idea states that the reality is the lost object of human, and should be applied to woman too thus, women should try to find the reality, as men do ( Amin, Tahrir al merat, P.44).

6. Women might have more talent for liberating their society and themselves. “When a woman accesses the science, as those who prevent her do and try to accomplish educational objectives, they

can, also, live along them and improve to the higher levels” (Sakakini, Ibid, P.48).

#### **D. Social Participation of Women**

Amin believes that only by women’s participation, their positive and active social role can be depicted and only in this case the society can meet luck, development, and prosperity. The reason is that women make half of the society and overlooking this half, imposes undeniable defects on society (Amin, Tahrir al merat, P.75). “If women enter the society of live people and improve their logical and physical powers they will turn to a more suitable power for their country.” (Ibid, P.18). Amin notices some developments in the social situation of Egyptian women. In one way or another it can be stated that Amin’s audience in his book “Tahrir al merat” is men; those who dominate illiterate and oppressed women, while it seems that his audience in the book “Almerat al Jadidah” is Egyptian women; those who have benefited, to some degree, from the primary education, and the least possibility in reading and writing. The simple diction of the book indicates that it is written for a person at the lower levels of reading. He asks, again the same question, in this book, and says what the grace of Egyptians for growth and development is? Is it in veiling or unveiling the women? And then responds that common sense tells us that women with ought Hijab is beneficial for us, religion also defends this position (Amin, Almerat al- Jadideh, P. 62). Here, Amin cannot get away from his religious preoccupations. Amin strictly says that Hijab is an instinctive obstacle on the way of women’s liberty and a preventive force for both women and men to benefit from a logical and literary life.

#### **E. Development in the Social Roles of Woman**

While Amin’s thought, at the beginning, was centered on three axes of a: women’s education to the primary level, B: Women’s freedom in mak-

ing decisions in the affairs like house holding and marriage and C: the religious Hijab (whole body’s coverage except for the face and two palms), his final stage of ideas can be considered liberal, in a way that seems Amin has experienced all three different viewpoints. He approached religious novelty in “tahrir al-merat” from ancestral in his book “Almesrioon”, and only after one year he changed his viewpoints in “Almerat al Jadideh” and by getting influenced from the customs of the west, he tried to look at the problems of Arab Muslim women from modernism and new civilization perspectives and announced, explicitly: “I hope that our children get familiar with the customs of the West, as soon as possible, in order to access the fact, before hand and understand the real value of the western civilization” (Abbasi, 1385/2006).

Here again, Amin compares the Egyptian woman with the western woman and considers ‘Hijab as incongruent with freedom’ (Amin, Zan-e-emrooz, P.109). To respond to those who worry about the outcomes of misuse of Hijab and women’s liberty, he himself warns that Muslim women’s condition should not be like that of western women. For him the Egyptian women will follow the same process the western women did and underwent in achieving their freedom in thinking and action and their rights, and states that the problems assigned to European women are not of the unsolvable types, and we do not need to worry about them, Naturally, these problems will be solved in future by the help of the application of wisdom and, for sure, human beings will move toward improvements, very fast (Ibid, P.108).

For Amin, Egyptians who lived for years under the dictatorship, and tyranny to women is the outcome of this situation, now try to reproduce the same concepts through Hijab. “To escape from this condition, there is no other way except understanding the real meaning of freedom”. (Ibid, P.69). To actualize this freedom (for both women and men) it is necessary for women to access log-

ical training in addition to primary education: that is they learn science and technology and learn a foreign language, and also know natural sciences, social science and history, the same way she learns cooking and housekeeping, and at last learn fine arts, music, and painting (Ibid, PP.159-163).

## Conclusion

In the Arab world, there were other people before Amin who also worked on the issue of women's liberty Petrus Albostani, Ali Mobarak, Rafeah, Rafe Tahtavi, and also Mohammad Abdoh wrote about the issue. Bostani by publishing an encyclopedia in 1875 could open a window to the modern science in the world of Arabs, a window through which developments in the situation of Arab women could be observed, as well. Rashid Reza in his two books entitled as "The rights of women in Islam" and "a word for the feminine" tries to deal with the issue of women from a traditional perspective, similar to the teachings of Mohammad Abdoh. This indicates that not only Amin, but also other Arab authorities, have chosen the Muslim woman as one of the most important criteria in their analysis in an attempt to provide answer to the question of "what should be done" in the previous century. In this domain the special place of Amin and his difference with others cannot be ignored.

According to one of the investigators, Amin has mixed his looks at the women's rights from nationalistic and humanistic perspective taken from the West and found them in the works of writers like Ahmad Fares, and Farah Antoon, and mixed it with Islamic perspectives taken from thinkers like Tahtavi, Asad abadi, Abdoh, Kawakebi, and Rashid Reza. On the basis of this combination and with the review of Mohammad Amareh from his works, Amin's thought has developed greatly from writing the "the Egyptian" to the publication of the "Almerat al Jadidah".

Amin has presented three different viewpoints in his three books. In his book "the Egyptians"

(1984) which is written in French, he criticizes the gender based culture of the Egypt, and while criticizing the negation of instinctive under- development of Egyptians, criticizes, also, gender integration, encouraging the education of women and expressing the human rights for women in Islam. Amin in this book talked about the rights of ownership for women, certification of men marring several women in emergency and developing and establishing peace and justice among them, the absolute right of men in divorcing wives, and the necessity of following the formal Hijab in Egypt which is harder than religious Hijab. Amin in this book takes a completely traditional view point. But in the book Tahrir al- merat (1898) he continues to follow innovations proposed by Abdoh, and presents issues such as equality of women and men in humanity, suggests kind behaviors with women, talks about women's education and its relation with deterioration of the Islam, denying the relation between the Muslim women's deterioration with Islam, the necessity of following religious Hijab and no more, the right of girls to marry, conditionality and limitation of polygamy for men, assigning the right of divorce to women through legal courts, attempting to train kids, supporting the private education for women and men and abstinence from gender integration from the innovative view points. The third book of Amin, Almerat al jadidah (1900) talks about women's freedom by adopting a modern view point to the issue of women, and by taking a historical, political and social class perspective and comparing the Arab woman with the western woman. Amin's innovative view points, in this book, include the responsibility of women toward themselves, toward others, their condition in the family, their education, their relation with men, the eternal removal of Hijab, and planning movements for women's freedom in Egypt and then in the world of Islam, similar to those happened in the West.



Tarabishi, believes that the developments in the viewpoints of Amin in his books indicate this Eastern writer's wounded ontology when he met the west. Bo Ali Yasin, says that the new condition of Amin indicates the change in his position from the state of ethnic and religious "P" against the criticism of "others" to his internal criticism of himself because of his increase in awareness and his reformation.

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