



# An Arab–American Intellectual Engaging East and West

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In his 1993 BBC Reith Lectures, the late Edward Said (1935–2003) describes the intellectual as:

*An individual with a specific public role in society . . . endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role . . . cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma . . . to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d'être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.<sup>1</sup>*

This paper discusses the role of the intellectual as exemplified by the Arab–American writer and activist Ameen Rihani (1876–1940). The career of this pioneering intellectual during the late colonial era and early decolonisation was characterised by a progressive secular humanist vision and an abiding interest in engaging both the Arab world and the West, particularly the USA, Great Britain and France.

In my other studies on Rihani,<sup>2</sup> I examine the dialectical link between his life experiences in Lebanon and the USA, his extensive travels in the Arab world and Europe, and his socio-political thought and activities within the context of the current post- and neo-colonial discourse. Highlighting the





dynamic relationship between his thought and his pragmatic activism, I analyse his ideas on, and concerns about the need for Arab societies to achieve progress, social justice, democracy and national unity, and for mutual respect between the Arabs and other nations and cultures, particularly the West.

This article highlights Rihani's main achievements as a leading literary figure and a most engaging Arab humanist intellectual of the twentieth century. It aims to demonstrate that while Rihani was the pioneer of Arab–American intellectual humanism—which reached its zenith with Edward Said—he remains an outstanding exemplar of the Saidian intellectual. I particularly argue that in the light of today's momentous world events and the search for global peace and cultural dialogue, Rihani's secular vision of progress, liberal democracy and Arab–Western mutual respect is a balancing counterpoint to the obscurantism of both ideological fanaticism and the 'clash of civilizations' paradigms.

Rihani's intellectual humanism is particularly pertinent in the light of today's quest for genuine change in the Arab world. Surely Arab societies have struggled to achieve social, cultural and political change since the early nineteenth century. But the aims of this process (known as 'Arab awakening' or 'rebirth' / *nahda*) continue to be unfulfilled. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, and more than ever before, Arab societies find themselves overwhelmed by helplessness in a world dominated by others. Some Arab intellectuals have even lamented the futility of struggle for change. The many current 'crises' in the Arab world (especially in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine) seem to have deepened the Arabs' scepticism about their ability to remake their own society.

External 'assistance' has been ostensibly extended, most conspicuously in March 2003 when the American forces (with British and Australian help) invaded Iraq with a declared aim (among others) of liberating the Iraqis and establishing a 'democratic model' in the Middle East.

In his criticism of the US foreign policies before the invasion of Iraq, Edward Said argued thus: 'They are trivializing the notion of democracy by proclaiming that that is what they are trying to do in the Middle East. I don't think it's ever happened in history that democracy is brought in



by conquest and bombing . . . What we export from this country, aside from consumer goods, is something very different from the democracy and freedom the United States talks about. I think we are headed for really bad times'.<sup>3</sup> Many Arabs today, including Arab intellectuals in the Diaspora, could easily identify with Edward Said's contention. The Western colonialist legacy of the past century is still fresh in their minds and in the Arab collective memory.

Over seventy years earlier, Ameen Rihani (born in Lebanon and migrated to New York in 1882 at the age of twelve) had evinced a similar message to his country of adoption and to Western powers in general. Although proud to be an 'adopted' citizen of the USA, Rihani warned, in a public lecture at New York in 1930, that 'the politicians of Europe and America can not right the wrongs of the world. They have done enough already to make this international task an official impossibility'.<sup>4</sup>

An 'unorthodox and unconventional' intellectual by his own definition, and an 'outsider, "amateur" disturber of the *status quo*', in the Saidian sense,<sup>5</sup> Rihani often warned that freedom and democracy in the Arab world could not be imposed by force, whether by a revolution from within, or occupation from without. A man who felt at home in both the Middle East and the West, and a 'grateful beneficiary' of American democracy, he wished to see a new Arab society established, with some kind of Western assistance. However, he insisted that this should be based on rational, universal principles of human progress, freedom, justice, equality and mutual respect. He actively and intellectually endeavoured to help his fellow Arabs build such a progressive and democratic society so they could contribute once again to world civilization. But he was adamant that this could not be forced on them from the outside. It had to be born from within.

Speaking as a public lecturer at a number of American institutions of higher education during the 1930s, Rihani cautioned Western nations against forcing their notions of liberty and democracy on the Arabs and Muslims. 'Not until their intellectual faculties are awakened and developed . . . *nor is it altogether safe to force a change* [italics are mine]'. He argued that 'the only safeguard to peace and progress' is when all people,



‘irrespective of class or creed or race or color’, begin to understand and respect each other. In his own sophisticated English style, he told his Western audience that ‘to force’ a ‘point of view and point of direction upon me by legislation or by religion, is to make of me a slave, or a hypocrite, or an ass—that is, if I obey your law or accept your creed. If I do not obey, however, and you resort to force, there will be trouble—a conflict, a revolution, a war’.<sup>6</sup>

Considering Rihani’s deep concern for the humanistic principles of justice, equality and freedom, his criticism of Western policies in the Arab world cannot be interpreted as ‘anti-democratic’, ‘unpatriotic’, or ‘anti-American’ as they might be interpreted in the present mood. Rihani lived during a time when Western imperialism in the Arab world (in the form of military occupation, protectorate or mandate) was at its zenith. His firsthand experiences of colonialism, and the Western ‘civilising mission’ in the Arab world, convinced him that those Western principles, with which he was fascinated, had not been extended by Western powers to apply to non-Western nations—an assessment which was later reiterated by, among others, Edward Said.<sup>7</sup>

Arab countries have experienced and struggled against Western hegemony for over two centuries. In his life and work, Rihani himself exemplified significant aspects of this ‘collective’ experience and struggle in a profound way. Thus he considered Western cultural and political domination of the Arab world as the greatest calamity in the Arabs’ modern history.

The Arabs’ struggle against foreign rule didn’t distract Rihani from the domestic battle for political liberty, socio-economic justice and cultural progress. He became a dual critic of Western imperialism and Arab stagnation. Equipped with extensive knowledge and living experiences in the Arab and Western worlds, he hoped to effect some change in the thinking and mutual perceptions of both worlds. While consistently warning his fellow Arabs against any sense of resignation, he optimistically trusted that his Western brothers and sisters in humanity would help realise the ‘dream’ of the ‘Great City’, ‘where East and West meet’, and ‘must meet . . . on the higher plain of mutual understanding and mutual esteem’.<sup>8</sup> Rihani was a true child of his time. He was convinced that world



developments would take a positive course, particularly inter-Arab and Arab-European rapprochement (British and French), and what he saw as ‘positive’ politico-economic American ‘intervention’ in the Middle East (developments to which he contributed in some sense). Ever the inveterate optimist, he predicted that the world was entering a new phase, not of ‘clash of civilizations’ as Samuel P. Huntington was to announce half a century later,<sup>9</sup> but of ‘dialogue of cultures’, in which Rihani himself was actively taking a significant part.

### Literary Innovator

When Rihani died in 1940, he had become one of the most acknowledged figures in the Arabic literary and intellectual renaissance. He was an innovator in more than one sphere, and certainly as a man of letters he marks many ‘beginnings’. In addition to his leading role in the Arabic migrant (*Mahjar*) literary movement generally, Rihani was specifically the first modern Arab to write in English. His intellectual, autobiographical novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911) marks the beginning of an original genre both in English literature and modern Arabic letters. Not only was it the first ‘Arab narrative’ authored in English by an Arab (as opposed to Western representations of Arabs), but also because of its novelistic form—itself a novelty in Arabic—and its progressive ideas from Eastern and Western perspectives.<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Khalid* heralded a series of ‘prophetic’ books including two in English by his fellow Arab–Americans, Gibran’s *The Prophet* (1923) and Mikhail Naimy’s *The Book of Mirdad* (1948), and in Arabic Antoun Ghattas Karam’s *Kitab ‘Abdallah* (The Book of ‘Abdallah, 1969).<sup>11</sup> The latter shares Gibran’s prophetic tone and Rihani’s universal commitment to ‘the wretched of the earth’. Rihani’s social and political discourse (as articulated in *The Book of Khalid*), his dual criticism of Western materialism and Eastern traditionalism, and his advocacy of East–West meeting in mutual respect initiated an increasingly growing trend in modern Arabic thought.

On another level, and apart from his well-known books on Arabia, Rihani’s books on his penetrating journeys into the heart of Lebanon and in Iraq and Morocco may be considered as biographies of city and



country,<sup>12</sup> in the sense in which ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933–2004) talked of a ‘biography of a city’ in his work on Amman (1994). Munif complained that earlier modern Arabic authors did not talk about their experiences or memories in the Arab city. In fact Rihani did just that in the 1920s and 1930s. And above all, half a century before Munif, Rihani was interested in the ‘humanity’ of the city.<sup>13</sup>

On another significant plane, Rihani was the first to compose ‘free verse’ or ‘prose poetry’ in Arabic, a practice inspired by his appreciation of the American Walt Whitman’s poetic experimentation (and also his political views).<sup>14</sup> The significance of Rihani’s contribution in this area goes far beyond the poetic structure and his vision of ‘peace and East-West reconciliation’ in prose poetry as is acknowledged.<sup>15</sup> Rihani actually saw a strong connection between freeing Arabic poetic creativity from the restrictions of old prosody, metre and rhyme on the one hand and liberating Arab societies and political practice from the shackles of the past and the tyranny of authoritarianism, on the other. For him advocacy of free verse went hand in hand with advocacy of democracy, individual liberty and social and political freedom.

Rihani embarked on another creative literary genre, the writing of fiction (novel, drama and short story) in both Arabic and English.<sup>16</sup> Following *Kalila wa Dimna’s* style (by the eighth-century Ibn al-Muqaffa’), Rihani revived the allegorical Eastern story to articulate a socio-political message. His first Arabic fictional work, *The Tripartite Alliance in the Animal Kingdom* using animal characters to critique the orthodox ecclesiastic thinking and to debate the role of religion and reason in society,<sup>17</sup> is the first of its kind in modern Arabic literature. One of the earliest Arabic writers who attempted the novel genre in the modern sense to represent his futuristic vision of a new Arab society, Rihani was also the first Arabic playwright to experiment with political drama (one play was staged in Beirut in 1909). Apart from stylistic innovation and originality, Rihani’s fictional works embodied his avant-garde ideas, especially his vision of a just world free of all forms of discrimination on the basis of religion, race or gender. His fictional narrative may be counted the earliest literary Arab ‘feminist’ narrative, and remains, in my opinion, among the most



empowering of the Arab woman.<sup>18</sup>

In acknowledgement of his encyclopaedic knowledge, wisdom and humanist concerns, Rihani became known in his own lifetime as ‘the philosopher of Freike’ (his birth place), a title similar to that of Tolstoy, ‘the sage of Yasnaya Poliana’,<sup>19</sup> and—in the Arabic literary context—that of eleventh-century poet Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma’arri, ‘the philosopher of al-Ma’arra’ (both of whom Rihani admired for their universal concerns). Rihani may not be a philosopher in the strict sense of the word. But he certainly was a profound thinker. In his holistic intellectual vision of a universal human society, and his fight, in words and deeds, to bring this vision to light, Rihani lived up to what he admired in Abu al-‘Ala’ and Tolstoy. Rihani’s life motto was ‘say your word and proceed’ (*qul kalimatak wamshi*). He did not mince words. His own assessment of al-Ma’arri is aptly true of himself: ‘an intransigent with the exquisite mind of a sage and scholar, his weapons were never idle’.<sup>20</sup>

### Committed Humanist

As an intellectual with an abiding mission of ‘engaging’ East and West, Rihani concerned himself both with conditions and cultures of East and West and with promoting positive relations between them. This is clearly demonstrated in his writings, lectures, travels, and contacts with his contemporaries. His living experiences of both cultures enabled him to appreciate their strengths and their claims for glory; but this didn’t blind him to their respective problems or weaknesses. His double fascination with the East and the West was thus coupled with a preoccupation with their contemporary affairs and commonweal. As an Arab–American, he felt strongly attached to both worlds and devoted his intellectual and practical endeavours to serve them both within an international context. In a way, Rihani became ‘entangled’ in the challenges and intricacies of the Arab world and the West, and obviously in their differences and contradictions. Thus he undertook the difficult task of bringing them closer to each other, urging, persuading and inducing readers, audiences and leaders of opinion to meet on ‘a common measure’ of ‘mutual tolerance’ and ‘mutual respect’. With this lofty intention Rihani engaged in the promotion of a ‘dialogue of



cultures’, not unlike that of his fellow Arab–American Edward Said half a century later, although by Said’s time the geo-political and cultural landscape had changed considerably.

We may well celebrate Rihani’s search for East-West reconciliation, his reasoned Arab-West dialogue, and his humanist vision of universal peace. But we should not lose sight of his moral courage and commitment to defend the human dignity and the rights of the oppressed and the weak. That these happened to include his own Arab people doesn’t make his concern less important. In his ever hopeful idealism, Rihani never tired of saying that he was an Arab nationalist who wholeheartedly believed, as he once put it to Imam Yahya of the Yemen, that ‘no matter how much we let ourselves go in the absolute love of Humanity, we can not forget . . . the love of our own homeland’.<sup>21</sup> Being an optimistic visionary, however, he ‘looked to a day when all nationalities disappear or become incorporated in one nationality: the nationality of Humanity, the nationality of the World’.<sup>22</sup> But this was not to be at the expense of the rights of ‘small nations’, including the Arab nation.

Far from being an ivory-towered thinker, Rihani was an engaged, committed, and realist intellectual and political activist. His writings and thought reveal both mystic affinities and pragmatic tendencies. The latter is reflected in his vision for democratic change in Arab society and his advocacy of East-West reciprocity, especially British-Arab and American-Arab bilateral relations. But his commitment to the cause of Arab rights and dignity never faltered. As Halim Barakat has recently observed ‘Rihani never wavered . . . in the name of pragmatism, consensus, and reconciliation. He sought not resignation and compliance in the face of Western domination of the Arab world but confrontation and dissent’.<sup>23</sup>

Rihani is the father of modern Arab humanism, as distinct from that of pre-modern Arab Muslim philosophers and scholastic humanists of the classical Islamic age.<sup>24</sup> And he remains one of the very few bilingual Arab humanists who have distinguished themselves in both the Arab and Western worlds. What make Rihani particularly unique are the self-confidence, courage and vividness with which he negotiated his dialectical identity and advocated an Arab-humanist outlook in a world





of peak imperialism and at a time when the Arabs were the subordinated ‘other’. Moreover, far from pure disinterested scholasticism or interested officialdom, Rihani was a writer and activist who engaged two completely different, and at times hostile, audiences, each in its own language, without being a mere translator. Rather, he strove to have his two worlds engaged with each other in the broader world context.

Rihani was not simply ‘a spell-binding orator’,<sup>25</sup> or an author who mainly addressed a ‘cultured avant-garde’ Western, primarily American, audience.<sup>26</sup> As a prolific writer and communicator in both Arabic and English, he was equally able to communicate his ideas in Arabic to a wide range of audiences and interlocutors. To do this, he had to master the culture of the ‘master’ language, and at the same time re-discover and re-acquire the culture of Arabic, his mother language. Moreover, he was the first modern Arab, and remains one of the very few, who could produce an engaging discourse and an ‘Arab narrative’, and in a real sense a ‘counter-narrative’—to borrow another concept from Edward Said. He did so both in the leading language of the dominant West and in that of the dominated Arab East. Thus his counter-discourse also addressed the Arab political social, cultural, intellectual and literary context. This is seen in his critical attitude to the past and the problems of the present; in his diagnosis of Arab ineffectiveness in international relations and slackness in political reform; in his damning assault on social ills such as sectarianism, religious intolerance, hypocrisy and authoritarianism; and at another plane in his candid and scathing reproach of traditional poetic techniques and Arabic stylistics in general. Through his advocacy and his own example as a writer, he was able to engage in the challenging venture of breathing a new ‘spirit’ (*ruh*) into the venerable old body of classical Arabic.<sup>27</sup>

Rihani’s sense of engagement is characterised by his success in employing the language of the human ‘self’ and of the ‘other’ in order to reach that other and to facilitate productive inter-cultural communication. He also did this through a creative ‘integrated approach’ based on striving for ‘integrated knowledge’. In his manifold interests Rihani was a true humanist intellectual of Renaissance calibre. He contributed significantly to different creative literary genres in both languages: poetry, short story, novel, drama, essay



and creative translation. As an intellectual, his fields of interest included the visual and performing arts as well as philosophy, literary and cultural criticism, history, politics, sociology, travel and so on. Influenced by certain classical Arab thinkers who attempted to combine the various branches of human knowledge, and whom he read at a young age, and by his extensive readings in Western literature in English and French, Rihani's integrative approach succeeded in placing 'ethics, politics, and aesthetics . . . together on the track of modernity'.<sup>28</sup> In a real sense he was the first to modernise (rather than simply revive) an old Arabic tradition of integrated knowledge, without demonstrating any of the hang-ups of most other Arab intellectuals of the *nahda*. He remains one of a few modern Arabs who could express this universal creativity in equal measure and with the same ease in two world languages, Arabic and English.

The question of identity—at the individual, group, national, or broader level—is a difficult and complex problem in the cultural, lingual, religious and political contexts. It has attracted much discussion and different interpretations. The question has particular existential dimensions for those who experience migration or exile, particularly creative individuals and intellectuals. Different intellectuals have responded to the challenges of migration and exile in different ways, as Edward Said has articulated.<sup>29</sup> It seems to me that Rihani represents a more positive and integrative example of Said's concept of the 'Arab' intellectual. For, he refused to be contained by any establishment and always maintained an intellectual independence and ability for dissent and non-conformity.

### **Source of Hope**

Both the issues he engaged in and his method of engagement earned Rihani the reputation of an 'energetic dissenter' in the Saidian sense.<sup>30</sup> Convinced that ignorance and religious fanaticism were the main causes behind the Arab world decline and the lack of cultural impact of the Arab immigrants in the West, he launched his relentless advocacy for secular rational humanism as early as 1900. In that year, he delivered his first known speech in Arabic at a Maronite Society's celebration of St Maroun's day (9 February) in the presence of religious and community leaders in New York.<sup>31</sup>



From then on, Rihani continued his consistent and systematic anti-clerical campaign against religious fanaticism, appealing for religious tolerance, mutual acceptance and rational thinking in all matters of social and political life. His pronouncements earned him the wrath of 'his' Maronite Church. He was excommunicated and one of his books, *The Tripartite Alliance in the Animal Kingdom*, was burnt. His allegorical fiction, the first of its kind in modern Arabic literature, and his evocative symbolism were well ahead of his time to be tolerated by the religious establishment. However, his defiance and his critical ideas and activities confirmed him as a celebrated intellectual dissenter and intrepid writer, both in the Arab world and the Diaspora.

Rihani's interest in Arab nationalism and his preoccupation with progress and liberation in the Arab world went hand in hand with his 'patriotic' anxieties about social justice and peace in America, and with his universal concerns, including East-West dialogue and the global impact of the West's materialism and cultural and political hegemony. It was partly due to this national-universal commitment or, in Said's words, the 'interaction between universality and the local',<sup>32</sup> that Rihani earned the nickname of 'the philosopher of Freike'.

Despite his disappointment with certain aspects of Western culture (especially merciless materialism), Rihani remained deeply imbued with it through the wide-range of his reading in Western literature and his own writings in English. On the other hand, his knowledge of Arabic culture and literature deepened his appreciation of the Arabic heritage. *The Quatrains of Abu'l-Ala* (1903), his translation of selected poems by al-Ma'arri, was the debut of his career as a leading representative and interpreter of Eastern culture in the West. The summing up of his humanist concerns was *The Book of Khalid*, which was the first English book authored by an Arab–American, and Rihani's best expression of his aspirations to universal citizenship.

This universal outlook didn't stop Rihani from fully re-embracing his Arab identity. This happened while he was in New York, despite—or perhaps because of—his close interaction with Western literature and American culture. His rich but at times painful experience in the West contributed to his 'cultural' transformation from a Maronite from Mount Lebanon to an



Arab nationalist in the heart of America. His readings of Western literature on the Arabs and Arabia opened his eyes to the Arabs' cultural glories and urged him to explore the Arab homeland. It was this rediscovery of his cultural Arab identity that caused the rift in his American relations, especially with his American wife and the newly established Arab migrant literary association, *al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya*, led by his friends and associates Gibran and Naimy. Reclaiming his Arab identity ultimately motivated Rihani to undertake his Arabian travels (1922–23), which proved to be the most important journey of his intellectual career. Firstly, his writings on Arabia established him as the leading authority on Arab affairs throughout the whole Arab world and in the West. Secondly, these travels helped crystallise his Arab national identity and his pan-Arab concerns which remain, perhaps, the most enduring and influential in his Arabic discourse.

This journey clearly reinforced the Arab dimension of Rihani's identity, but not in isolation from the broader universal-human dimension. The Arab cause, including the liberation of Lebanon and Syria and the question of Palestine, became the axis of his national-universal preoccupations. And from his position as a humanist, he became a prominent advocate of the Arab national movement and the first Arab ever to publicly defend Arab rights in Palestine in the international arena, a position that retains its relevance today. When between 1929 and 1939 Rihani undertook three separate lecture tours across North America, his aim was to counter-balance Zionist claims and counteract Zionist propaganda and defend the cause of Arab Palestine. He did this as a true believer in justice and freedom as basic human rights, and as a humanist who firmly believed, 'that the peace of the world depends in a measure upon peace in the Holy Land'.<sup>33</sup>

Rihani's works evince a strong sense of hope and optimism without intellectually overlooking inherent practical difficulties, obstacles and the shortcomings of human efforts. Against this gloomy picture, Rihani maintained the hope that the justice of the Arab cause had the chance of being vindicated. Despite occasional pessimism of the intellect, his constant optimism of the will continued to inspire hope (eg. The Palestinians asked him to mediate between them in an earlier version of their fraternal squabbles). At the individual level, he remained a source of hope for many



of his friends, including Mayy Ziadeh, the Palestinian-Lebanese writer, who found in him the only person who could understand her situation as an independent outspoken and single Arab female intellectual and creative writer.<sup>34</sup>

The sorry state of Arab affairs (at home and in America) intensified Rihani's engagement in activism. He wrote and lectured, convened literary and political societies, negotiated with politicians and activists, planned and organised days of action, and participated in peaceful disobedience activities such as strikes and boycotts. He was exiled and marginalised. The French mandate authorities in Lebanon expelled him from his home country. The Germans were infuriated with his criticism of their archaeological digs in Iraq. And some Arab countries banned his books. Nevertheless, this 'amateur' 'outsider' political activist, who did not belong to any ideological party or political power, continued to express his free mind, to question and to express 'a language that tries to speak the truth to power'.<sup>35</sup>

Rihani's activist campaign was not confined to the political arena, but extended to culture, literature and aesthetics. In one of his famous works of literary criticism, *Ye Poets*, Rihani attacked the 'sobbing' Arabic literature of his time. He launched an earnest call for a new poetry of power so much needed for a strong national spirit.<sup>36</sup> In Rihani's mind Arab writers and poets should stop being what Said once called 'humourless complainers'. This is why, as an 'organic intellectual' in the Gramscian sense, Rihani became involved in a constant struggle to change minds and attitudes. He was always on the move, always trying to persuade leaders of opinion both in the West and in the Arab world. All this he did with 'self-irony' rather than 'pomposity'.<sup>37</sup>

As a committed intellectual who never tired of searching for alternatives, Rihani believed that the writer should strive for a better society, and that understanding history was an important factor in achieving this. Arab social realities faced him with the challenging task of questioning Arab history and Arab attitude to the past. In his mind, any national renaissance had to start with examining the past. His early readings on the French Revolution helped develop his analytical and critical sense of history. For example, he criticised



Thomas Carlyle's indifference, detachment and cynicism, and he wrote his own *Short History of the French Revolution* from a different perspective.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Carlyle's *On Heroes*, especially his positive assessment of the Prophet Muhammad, motivated Rihani to further explore Arab history, and to travel through Arabia doing precisely what Said called 'reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories'.<sup>39</sup> He compared histories, old and new, native and foreign; he examined and cited secret documents; interviewed leaders and ordinary people; he observed movements, witnessed actions and took part in historical events. Thus in his books on Arabia, which he wrote in both Arabic and English,<sup>40</sup> Rihani produced an 'alternative' Arab 'narrative' that remains to the present perhaps the most compelling and impressive history of modern Arabia.

Rihani's most important contribution in this area remains his daring challenge of the prevalent glorification and romancing of the Arab past, and his fresh reading and critical attitude towards the writing of Arab history. In an age of heightened chauvinistic ideologies, both in the East and the West (eg Arab, German, Italian, Spanish, and Turkish nationalisms), and although he was a nationalist himself, Rihani didn't overestimate the Arabs' role in history. He was actually the first to advocate a dialectical approach to the Arab past, seeking to reject its negative influences while learning from its positives. Edward Said talks of the intellectual's activity that 'involves a sense of the dramatic and of the insurgent, making a great deal of one's rare opportunities to speak, catching the audience's attention, being better at wit and debate than one's opponents'.<sup>41</sup> Rihani never missed the opportunity to speak his mind and debate his opponents as well as his friends. The publication of Muhammad Kurd 'Ali's history of Syria, for example, led Rihani not only to appreciate the efforts of a close friend who was a leading literary figure,<sup>42</sup> but also to criticise his friend for painting a shiny dynastic history and ignoring the people's 'oppression', which Rihani saw as the real cause of Arab political decline. This was also a chance to pave the ground for a new critical approach to writing and reading Arab history.

This is the context in which we must read Rihani's alternative short history of Syria, *al-Nakabat* (the Catastrophes),<sup>43</sup> which he portrayed in his



vivid, witty and ironic style, as a series of disasters. In a somewhat sarcastic and at times didactic tone, Rihani urged Arab historians to search, question and criticise, because failure to understand the catastrophes of the past was deadlier than the catastrophes themselves. Rihani's historical approach opened the way for later Arab historians to look critically into their past in order to learn from its lessons. Less than twenty years after Rihani's *al-Nakabat* (and his warning of an ominous *nakba* in Palestine), a series of books with similar titles were written in an attempt to understand why and how the '1948 Catastrophe' happened (the loss of most of Palestine and the Palestinian exodus after the creation of Israel is known in the Arab national memory as *al-nakba*).<sup>44</sup>

In Rihani's opinion, a writer with the responsibility to shed some light on the present and to help people build a better future, should be a searcher for the 'truth', an objective 'critic' of the past and in a sense a 'teacher'. This conviction was at the basis of his ideas concerning Arab progress, unity and liberation, and his resolute determination to influence the expected change in human society, both at the intellectual and practical levels. For someone who was not in power, it was just his sense of purpose and willpower which impelled him to reproach Ibn Sa'ud in person (politely of course) for his 'blind imitation' of his ancestors. Seeing a descriptive and a prescriptive role for his writings (like Ibn Khaldun), Rihani's discussions of Ibn Sa'ud's achievements in the areas of justice, law and order and settlements of Bedouin tribes, for example, were an opportunity to draw the Sultan's attention to the complex problems of ignorance and manifestations of poverty surrounding his capital. He would even outline for him a practical blueprint for progress and modernisation, reminding the founder of the Sa'udi state that 'if strength and justice are the foundation of the state, education is its shield'.<sup>45</sup>

There is something fundamentally unique about Rihani whose dual identity and genuine interest in the welfare of the people amongst whom he lived, in the East and West, was combined with his confidence and duty to be equally critical of the societies and cultures of both. In the Arab world he consistently criticised all primordial affiliations, all forms of fundamentalism: sectarian, religious, tribal and regional. He criticised



Phoenicianism and Pharoanism, political Maronitism, or what has been called the ‘Lebanese idea’ (i.e. Lebanon as a country for the Christians), as well as the idea of Syrian Islamic nationalism, and pan-Islamism. He saw all these as isolationist and exclusivist ideologies, in the same manner as he criticised European supremacist and colonial propaganda. He criticised the divisions among the Arabs who have succumbed to Western cultural and political imperialism, as he criticised aspects of the Orientalist discourse and the foreign and missionary education systems ‘invading’ the Arab world. He criticised Western powers for their ‘divide-and-rule’ policies, double standards in upholding universal values and principles of self-determination, human rights and liberty, while at the same time failing in their self-declared civilising mission in the East and promoting their own Western imperialist ambitions in the Arab world.

Rihani was a champion of revolutionary change in society, a dissenter and a campaigner for people’s rights to struggle in order to attain liberty and self-government. He urged the Arabs to engage in a struggle (he actually uses the term *jihad*—yes *jihad*!) for the sake of liberty and self-determination, which he identified as ‘sacred universal human rights’ as early as 1931, that is seventeen years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).<sup>46</sup> But he always favoured the ‘spiritual struggle’ and ‘peaceful revolution’ which should come from within the people, men and women. Above all, it was profound change brought about by ‘modern education’ that he advocated; an ‘intellectual revolution’ based on the principles of human rationalism, freedom and secular democracy in politics and culture. It was clear in his mind that Western ‘armies and navies and air forces’ could not liberate the Eastern nations. Nor was military action, national or confessional, enough to gain freedom. This was the responsibility of the intellectuals, who are, as Edward Said put it, ‘the fathers and mothers’ of revolutionary movements and, in Rihani’s own words, ‘the educators of us all, in the East and the West’.<sup>47</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, London, Vintage, 1994, p.9.
- 2 Nijmeh Hajjar, ‘Ameen Rihani’s Humanist Vision of Arab Nationalism’, in N.C. Funk, & B.J. Sitka





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  - 9 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Shuster, 1996.
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  - 12 On Arabia, published by Constable and Co., London, *Ibn Sa'oud of Arabia: His People and His Land*, 1928; *Arabian Peak and Desert*, 1930; *Around the Coasts of Arabia*, 1930; in Arabic, *Qalb al-'Iraq*, CAW-4; *Qalb Lubnan*, CAW-3; *Al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, CAW-2; *Nur al-Andalus*, CAW-2.
  - 13 On this theme, see Nijmeh Hajjar, 'The Humanity of a Modern Arab City: a Novelist's Biography of Amman', in *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (December 2005), pp.75-89.
  - 14 Rihani, 'Ta'rif bil-Shi'r al-Manthur', *Hutaf al-Awidiya: Shi'r Manthur*, CAW-9, p.16.
  - 15 Terri DeYoung, 'The Search for Peace and East-West Reconciliation in Rihani's Prose Poetry', in Funk & Sitka (eds), *Ameen Rihani*, pp.25-34.
  - 16 He wrote four novels in Arabic and four in English; in drama, he wrote two plays in Arabic and one in English; and in short stories, he wrote four in Arabic and eight in English.
  - 17 Rihani, *Al-Muhalafa al-Thulathiyya fi al-Mamlaka al-Hayawaniyya*, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, 1989.
  - 18 See for example his Arabic novel *Kharij al-Harim*, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, 1989; and English play *Wajdah*, Washington, DC, Platform International, 2001 [written in 1908].
  - 19 Mikhail Rodionov, 'Leo Tolstoy and Ameen Rihani: The Interaction Between Two Creative Worlds', in Funk & Sitka (eds), *Ameen Rihani*, p.75.
  - 20 Rihani, *The Luzumiyyat of Abul-'Ala*, Beirut, Albert Rihani, 1978, p.21.
  - 21 Rihani, *Muluk al-'Arab*, CAW-1, p.130.
  - 22 Rihani, 'al-Sharak al-Jamil', in *al-Qawmiyyat*, CAW-8, p.257.
  - 23 Halim Barakat, 'Ameen Rihani: Daring to Dream', in Funk & Sitka (eds), *Ameen Rihani*, p.103.
  - 24 For example al-Mas'udi and Ibn Khaldun. See Ahmad Shboul, *al-Mas'udi and His World: A Muslim Humanist and His Interest in Non-Muslims*, London, Ithaca Press, 1979; Tarif Khalidi, *Classical Arab Islam*, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1985.
  - 25 Irfan Shahid, 'Amin al-Rihani and King 'Abdul-'Aziz Ibn Sa'ud', in G. Atiyeh & I. Oweiss (eds), *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses*, New York, State University, 1988, p.231.
  - 26 Geoffrey Nash, *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 1998, p.21.
  - 27 See in particular, 'Ruh al-Lugha', *al-Rihaniyyat*, CAW-7, pp.581ff.
  - 28 Adonis, 'Preface: A Cultural Symbol', in Funk & Sitka (eds), *Ameen Rihani*, p.xiii.

- 29 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*; idem., *Reflexions on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000.
- 30 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p.xv.
- 31 See Rihani, 'Religious Tolerance', *al-Rihaniyyat*, CAW-7, pp.55-63.
- 32 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p.xii.
- 33 Rihani, *The Fate of Palestine*, Beirut, Rihani House, 1967, p.30.
- 34 Rihani, *Qissati Ma' Mayy*, CAW-9; Salma Haffar al-Kuzbari, *Mayy Ziadeh aw Ma'sat al-Nubugh*, Beirut, Mu'assasat Nawfal, 1987.
- 35 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp.xiii-xiv.
- 36 Rihani, *Antum al-Shu'ara'*, CAW-9, pp.170.
- 37 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp.xv, 3-4.
- 38 Rihani, *Nubdha fi al-Thawra al-Faransiyya*, CAW-6.
- 39 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p.xv.
- 40 In addition to the books cited above, he wrote *Tarikh Najd al-Hadith*, CAW-5; and *Faysal al-Awwal*, CAW-4.
- 41 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p.xv.
- 42 Kurd 'Ali was the founding president of the Arab Academy in Damascus of which Rihani became a corresponding member.
- 43 *Al-Nakabat*, CAW-6.
- 44 These included the celebrated historian Constantine Zurayq's *Ma'na al-Nakba* (the meaning of catastrophe), Qadri Hafiz Tuqan's *Ba'd al-Nakba* (after the catastrophe) and Walid al-Qamhawi's *al-Nakba w-al-Bina'* (catastrophe and reconstruction). Again Zurayq would write *Ma'na al-Nakba Mujaddadan* (the meaning of catastrophe revisited) after the 1967 Arab defeat in the war with Israel.
- 45 Memorandum to Ibn Sa'ud from Riyadh, 9 Jan. 1923, *Rasa'il Amin al-Rihani*, ed. Albert Rihani, Beirut, Dar Rihani, 1959, pp.201-203.
- 46 See in particular, Rihani, *Wasiyyati*, CAW-8, pp.498ff.
- 47 Rihani, *The White Way and the Desert*, p.31; Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p.8.