

Leo Tolstoy and Ameen Rihani: The Interaction Between Two Creative Worlds

Both were prolific writers, fearless thinkers and unbending prophets. Each one created an inner self and left us a unique world of his own. The elder never knew about the existence of the younger who, in his turn, always held him in the highest esteem. Their worlds, however, are not unilateral, and the interchange between them is much deeper than one could imagine at first sight. Moreover, these worlds form a three-dimensional space with points in Russia, the Arab World, and the USA.

When very young, Leo Tolstoy took a great interest in Near Eastern culture. He started to learn Turkish and Arabic, successfully passed his entrance exams in 1844 and has become for a while a student of the Turkish-Arabic section of Kazan University, then the best Oriental studies center in Russia. Much later a private physician of Tolstoy recalled among a flood of letters coming all over the world to his estate in Yasnaya Poliana those written in Arabic or a similar script from the Ottoman Empire, Persia and other Muslim countries.¹ There were artless messages with expressions of love and respect like the Russian letter of a Lebanese girl, Ramza Awawini from Zahle, or an erudite epistle of Muhammad Abdo, Mufti of Egypt, with whom Tolstoy discussed the ways of universal religious reformation.²

In his answer to Muhammad Abdo Tolstoy incidentally demonstrated a favorable attitude to the Bahai religion. A staunch supporter of rational thought, he

censured what he called the arrogant intolerance, formal rites and obscure superstitions of official religions, claiming that classical Islam in its outward shape stood much higher than the contemporaneous Orthodox Christian Church.³ Even more he was attracted in 1898-1909 by the Bahai movement, and for some time he fostered an idea of writing a book about this radical offshoot of Islam. There are sources on Bahai history and doctrine in Yasnaya Poliana's library, including the research of F.C. Andreas and a Russian translation of Bahauulla's *Kitab-i Aqdas* by A. Tumansky.⁴

Tolstoy could not help but sympathized with the Bahai sayings coined by Abd al-Baha when they asked God to unify mankind and illumine the world of humanity -

Gather all people beneath the shadow of Thy bounty and cause them to unite in harmony, so that they may become as the rays of one sun, as the waves of one ocean, as the fruit of one tree. May they drink from the same fountain (...)

Let the religions agree and make the nations one, so that they may see each other as one family and the whole earth as one home (...)

O God! Raise aloft the banner of the oneness of mankind.

O God! Establish the Most Great Peace.

Praise be unto Thee for kindling the fire of divine love in the Holy Tree on the summit of the loftiest mount: that Tree which is «neither of the East nor of the West [Quran 24: 35]». ⁵

Tolstoy maintained indirect contact with Abd al-Baha, or Abbas-effendi, son of the late Bahauallah, via a Bahai messenger, Azizullah Djazzab, a Jewish merchant from Meshhed, who left a detailed account of his journey from Akka to Yasnaya Poliana.⁶ However, Tolstoy was disappointed by *The Most Holy Book* (Kitab-i Aqdas) of Bahauallah and some writings of Abbas-effendi because of its ‘empty Oriental rhetoric’, the intricacies of dark Sufi style, replacing ancient prejudices with new ones. So, he decidedly concluded, this religion has no future.⁷

Despite all his ebbs and flows of enthusiasm for certain Middle Eastern trends, Tolstoy always appreciated the Arabic folk legacy; he admired Arabian proverbs, aphorisms, wise and funny stories. In artistic influence he compared Arabian fairy tales with Japanese painting and Indian architecture.⁸ He meant in particular Ali-Baba and the forty thieves and the story of prince Qamar al-Zaman from *The Arabian Nights* which he included into the list of most impressive books of his childhood and adolescence along with Russian epic *Bylinas*, the Gospel of Matthew, the *Sentimental Journey* of Stern, and *Confession* and other writings of Rousseau.⁹ Arabian tales were mentioned many times, e.g. when Tolstoy light-heartedly described a horse of his son like a cross between a camel and a chicken, a poor creature presumably being a bewitched prince, or when he recommended that all young men read Arabian tales rather than modern articles on liberalism.¹⁰ Today this oblique pattern that connects Tolstoy with Rihani has become more distinct with the publication of Rihani’s book on the lore of the Arabian Nights.¹¹

In one of his last private letters Tolstoy marked as a *very good book* a reader for peasant children entitled *The Sayings of Mahomet* [Prophet Muhammad.- M.R.] *not included in the Koran* (Moscow 1910) which was compiled by Tolstoy on the basis of an English selection made by Abdallah al-Suhravardi, an Indian layer.¹²

Beside his other works, the *Sayings* were translated into Arabic by Salim Qobain as *The Wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad presented by philosopher Tolstoy* and published in Cairo in 1915 and 1987. The structure and content of the Russian original were examined by Arabian scholar Makarem al-Ghimri as well as the interactions between Tolstoy and the Arab world in general.¹³

Undoubtedly, one of the key figures in this process from the Arab side is Amin Rihani. His essay, along with that of Mustafa al-Manfaluti,¹⁴ written at the very end of Tolstoy's life, reflects the common idea of the Russian thinker as shared by educated Arab readers and, at the same time, alters it. A pedantic observer would find some factual mistakes in Rihani's essay. Thus Tolstoy did not divide all his property and land between his peasants and friends. The famous *Kreutzer sonata* was completed in 1889 (and published two years later) when the author, so to speak, was not young any more. Besides, Tolstoy's original style is far from dry, and his novels are not at all void of persuasive power, subtlety of description, diversity and perspicacity as Rihani argues, presumably owing to mediocre translations. And, finally, Tolstoy never borrowed his political, economical and social views from Karl Marx. These shortcomings, however, cannot eclipse Rihani's certainty in the magnitude of his hero. The greatness of Tolstoy, he points out, is a sheer example of the greatness of Jesus Christ, for both spoke and acted in opposition to petty reformists full of envy and lust, dreaming to replace the rich of their time; a preacher of that kind is better to be hanged than to be glorified. Intuitively Rihani grasped the essentials of Tolstoy's philosophic outlook, namely his *dogmatic candor* as shaped by Isaiah Berlin.¹⁵

The artistic world of Tolstoy appears to be much more diverse and multicolored than his ideas. Hence comes the inner conflict in Tolstoy himself

between the creative artist, whose work is more real than reality, and the destructive thinker who advocates a single vision of a simple soul, a bitter struggle between his vital insight and theoretical convictions. In his last, religious, period Tolstoy publicly denied poetry for its vagueness and artificiality of expression. Privately, however, he still admired the poems of Pushkin, Tiutchev and early Fet. The sad wisdom, skeptical irony and religious tolerance of Abul-Ala al-Maari's verse as felicitously translated by Amin Rihani might have pleased Tolstoy as well.

Afearing whom I trust I gain my end,
But trusting, without fear, I lose, my friend;
 Much better is the Doubt that gives me peace,
Than all the Faiths which in hell-fire may end.

.....

A church, a temple, or a Kaba Stone,
Koran or Bible or a martyre's bone ☹
 All these and more my heart can tolerate
Since my religion now is Love alone.¹⁶

Although Tolstoy most likely did not come across the English versions of Abul-Ala's poetry Rihani started to publish in 1903, the three names are tightly interrelated. In his long elegy on the death of Tolstoy (1914), Egyptian poet and playwright Ahmad Shawqi brought Abu-l-Ala and Tolstoy together, the mediaeval

Arab thinker inquired about the present condition of humanity and his Russian counterpart sadly explained him that there had been no positive changes ever since.¹⁷ For Rihani, too, Abul-Ala and Tolstoy stand side by side in their search for the universal religion of mankind. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that like Tolstoy Rihani was curious about Bahaism, as revealed in *The Book of Khalid*.¹⁸ By that time, after the first two parts of *Al-Rihaniyat* had appeared, he was called by the Egyptian press ‘the philosopher of Freike’, not unlike ‘the sage of Yasnaya Poliana’ as the international media addressed Tolstoy.

Among the many points of similarity between Tolstoy and Rihani (in their life and literature, in religious, philosophical and social beliefs and concerns), suffice it to mention here but few.

Due to their anticlerical attitudes and appeal for religious tolerance, both were excommunicated by their Churches, Tolstoy in 1901, Rihani in 1903. In their writings they perceive beyond the conventional and generally accepted: thus the method of *estrangement*, or seeing familiar things as strange, demonstrated by the way in *War and Peace*, echoed in Rihani’s poetic principle of *defamiliarization*, or innovation in the treatment of subjects to make them look new.¹⁹ Both were inspired by Rousseau and regarded American transcendentalists as their intellectual comrades-in-arms.

Both were rational idealists in search of truth, love, freedom and universal unity. Seeking the brotherhood of man, both experienced personal solitude and fostered loneliness as the pledge of their spiritual independence. Russian aristocrat and Arabian emigrant, they are akin, sharing a sort of intellectual exile, if we understand it, together with Edward Said, as metaphorical condition of living outside of all privileges and superstitions of a given society and inherited culture.²⁰

Incidentally, the last letter Tolstoy started to dictate when he had quitted his house in Yasnaya Poliana was in English. He began and left unfinished the phrase: «On my way to the place where I wished to be alone...»²¹ The last entry in his intimate diary which he had interrupted in mid-word, was in French: «Fais ce que doit, ad[vienne que pourra]» (Do what you ought, let come what may).²² It was the motto Tolstoy had been guided by all his life. Since the deeds of a writer are his words, one may recall in this respect a saying of Rihani «Say your word and go your way», the motto borrowed from him by Russian philologist Ignaty Kratchkovsky.

Kratchkovsky was not a writer who could have taught freedom and equity by his word. He was a scholar and translator who saw his task in bridging Russia and the realm of Arabic culture. This task became especially clear to him after Tolstoy's death. Kratchkovsky indeed personifies freedom of judgment and dignity of conduct for those whoever knew him. This impact paradoxically follows from his nature, since he defined himself as 'the bondsman of duty': that is the title of the book his disciple Anna Dolinina wrote about him.²³ Based on documentary materials, including diaries, private and official letters, etc., the book reveals the drama of a scientist who never ceased to struggle against the dogmatic pressure of authorities and kept his door open to cultural contacts in spite of the iron curtain. And again Rihani appears as one of the most important figures in the fight.

It is well-known that Kratchkovsky in the first decade of the 20th century translated many of Rihani's writings in prose and poetry.²⁴ In 1910 he met Rihani accidentally at a newspaper editor's office in Beirut and left a description of a pale, thoughtful, slightly sad man, completely free of effusiveness, whom he started to identify only by the already mentioned motto.²⁵ This was a part of the preface to Rihani's *Selected works* published by Kratchkovsky in 1917, just before the

Bolshevik upheaval. According to his diary, in the dramatic years of 1918-1920 he had been trying to take comfort in reading Tolstoy. In 1922 his translation of Rihani's poetry in prose appeared in a Russian magazine *Vostok*.²⁶ Shortly after Kratchkovsky clashed for the first time with Bolshevik censorship: in 1923 they banned the printing of his book *Arab Emigrants in America*, a huge volume comprising essays, speeches and poems of Ameen Rihani, poems and fragments of three novels of Kahlil Gibran, a novel by a Brazilian émigré Shukri Khoury, sociopolitical and critical articles by Suleiman al-Bustani, Louis Cheikho. Amin al-Greyib, and Nasib Arida. A censor, Volkov, based his prohibition on the authors' mysticism, individualism, naive nationalism and protest against Party spirit and social life; Kratchkovsky's preface was branded as rather superficial with respect to the social motivation of the chosen works.²⁷ At that period average readership associated the word *emigrant* with White Army refugees. As for Rihani's essay *The Descent of Bolshevism*, where he denounced its pseudo-messianic anti-human nature,²⁸ we cannot assert for certain whether it was known either to the officialdom or to Russian Orientalists of that time. If the latter knew they kept silent about it until recently in their effort to save Rihani, Gibran and other Syro-American writers as officially acceptable figures. And they succeeded in this struggle. Rihani earned a separate entry in the Soviet Encyclopedia (vol. 21, p.606), and a special book entitled *The Philosopher of Freike* was published in Russia and translated into Arabic.²⁹ The only tribute to Communist authorities was obligatory pledge that Rihani greeted the Great October Revolution. At that price the disciples of Kratchkovsky managed to publish his works in various selections and, finally, in a special volume.³⁰

In 1944 Kratchkovsky wrote a brief article where he quoted the philosopher of Freike who addressed him on the occasion of the Russian publication (1932) of Abul-

Ala's little known work *Epistle on the Angels*. Thus, concluded Kratchkovsky, Abul-Ala a thousand years after his birth by his name alone strengthens the ties of brotherhood between different countries.³¹ After all, Tolstoy, Rihani and Abul-Ala drew no boundaries within the universal realm of human culture and refused to delineate our legacy into parochial fiefdoms.

¹ Makovitsky, D.P. *Tolstoy in private life (Observations and notes)*, in *L.N. Tolstoy in the memoirs of contemporaries*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1955, vol. II, p. 364 (in Russian); see also enlarged and reshaped selection by G.V. Krasnov, Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1978, vol. I-II.

² Shifman, A.I. *Leo Tolstoy and the East* [Second edition, revised and altered]. Moscow: Nauka, 1971, p. 383-386 (in Russian); Tolstoy, L.N. *Complete works*, Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1928-1958, vol. 75, p. 92 (in Russian).

³ Tolstoy, *Complete works*, vol. 79, p. 118.

⁴ Bazilenko, I.V. *L.N. Tolstoy and Bahaism*, in *Russia, the West and the Muslim East in New time*. St. Petersburg: Andreev i Synov'ya, 1994, p. 155-167 (in Russian); Tumansky, A.G. *Kitabe Aqdes, The Most Holy Book of modern Babids*. St. Petersburg: Edinstvo, 1899 (in Russian); canonical edition of the Bahai community translated into Russian by M. Rodionov, see: Bahauallah *Kitab-i-Aqdas*. The Universal House of Justice 1998. 376 p. Another important part of the Bahai scripture was recently translated and published in Russia twice, as the canonical version translated by M. Rodionov (*Bahauallah. Kitab-i-Iqan*. St.Petersburg: Edinstvo, 2000. 214 p.) and as scientific edition (*Bahauallah. Kitab-i-Iqan*. Academician translationj from Persian, preface and commentary and textual appendix by Ioannesian, Yu.A. St.Petersburg: Peterburgskoye Vostokovedeniye, 2001. 272 p.). See also M. Rodionov's translations of Bahais works into Russian: *Bahai prayers and selected epistles* (St.Petersburg: Edinstvo,1993. 125 p.); *The Holy sayings of Bahauallah* (St.Petersburg : Edinstvo, 1993. 66 p.); *Bahauallah. The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* (St.Petersburg: Edinstvo, 1996, 60 p.); *From the Bahauallah Writings* (St.Petersburg: Edinstvo, 1994, 213 p.).

⁵ *Baha'i prayers: a selection of prayers revealed by Baha'u'llah, the Bab, and Abdu'l-Baha*. Translated from Persian and Arabic. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the US, 1991, p. 101-102, 200-201.

⁶ Bazilenko, *Op. cit.*, p. 157-160.

⁷ Tolstoy, *Complete works*, vol. 79, p. 214; vol. 80, p. 139-139, 219.

⁸ Tolstoy, *What is art?* in, *L.N. Tolstoy on literature*. Moscow: Khudozhesrvennaya Literatura, 1955, p. 399 (in Russian).

⁹ Letter of October 25, 1891, in, *L.N. Tolstoy on literature*, p. 259.

¹⁰ *L.N. Tolstoy in the memoirs of contemporaries*, vol. II, p. 36.

¹¹ Rihani, A.F. *The Lore of the Arabian Nights*. Washington: Platform International, 2002.

¹² Letter of October 24, 1910. *Ibid.*, p.612.

¹³ Al-Ghimri, Makarem. *Mu'atharat 'arabiyya wa islamiyya fi-l-adab al-rusi*. Al-Kuwait 1412/1991, # 155, p. 203-244.

¹⁴ Cited in Shifman's book *Leo Tolstoy and the East*, p.400-402, complete Russian translation of al-Manfaluti's *Hommage to Tolstoy* was published in *Arabic romantic prose of the XIX - XX centuries*, Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1981, p. 80-84 (in Russian).

¹⁵ Berlin, I. *The Hedgehog and the Fox. An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*. Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1993, p.16.

¹⁶ Al-Maari translated by Ameen Rihani, in *Anthology of Islamic Literature*. Ed. by J. Kritzeck. Penguin Books 1964, p. 139.

¹⁷ For Russian translation of Ahmad Shawqi's elegy by V. Zhuravlev see *Verses of Egyptian poets*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1956, p. 36 (in Russian); also Shifman, *Leo Tolstoy and the East*, p. 402-403.

¹⁸ Nash, G.P. *Mediums, Mystics and Messiahs: Rihani, Gibran and the East-West Cultic Milieu*, in *Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani: Prophets of Lebanese-American Literature*. Ed. by Naji Oueijan,

Assaad Eid, Carol Kfoury, Doumit Salameh. Beirut: Notre Dame University Press, 1999, p. 30, 33-35, 37.

¹⁹ Shklovsky V.B. *Material and style in Leo Tolstoy's novel 'War and Peace'*. Moscow: 1928; Faddoul, A. *Ameen Rihani's Concept of Poetry: A Precursor of hadatha*, in *Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani*, p. 66.

²⁰ Said, E. *Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals*, in *The Edward Said Reader*. Ed. by Moustafa Bayumi and Andrew Rubin. Vintage Books, N.Y. 2000, p. 380-381.

²¹ Chertkov, V.G. *About the last days of L.N. Tolstoy*, in *L.N. Tolstoy in the memoirs of contemporaries*, vol. II, p. 339 (in Russian).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

²³ Dolinina, A.A. *The Bondsman of Duty*. St.Petersburg: Peterburgskoye Vostokovedeniye, 1994 (in Russian with brief English and Arabian summaries).

²⁴ See below: *Russian translations of Rihani's works*.

²⁵ Kratchkovsky, I. Preface to Amin Reihani's *Selected works*, in Kratchkovski, I. *Selected works*, vol. III, Moscow and Leningrad: The USSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1956, p. 137-138.

²⁶ *Amin Reihani. Poems in prose*. Translation and preface by I.Yu. Kratchkovsky, in *Vostok*, Petrograd, 1922, # 1, p. 48-54.

²⁷ Dolinina, *Op. cit.*, p. 183.

²⁸ Rihani, A. *The Descent of Bolshevism*. Boston: Stratford, 1920; Vasillopoulos, Ch. *Rihani and the Unmasking of Bolshevism*, in *Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani*, p. 213-220.

²⁹ Levin, Z.E. *The Philosopher of Freike*. Moscow: Academy of Sciences Press, 1965 (in Russian). Second edition 1974, Moscow. Translated into Arabic by Khalaf al-Jarrad, Damascus, 1992.

³⁰ Amin al-Reyhani. *Selected works*. Translated from Arabic and English. Compiled, prefaced and annotated by A. Dolinina. Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1988, 447 p.

³¹ *Al-Maari, al-Reihani and Leningrad*, in Kratchkovski, I.G. *Selected works*, vol. III, p. 261-263.