

The image of the teacher in Arabic poetry

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Abstract

The paper proposes that in Arabic poetry, poet teachers who experienced teaching have intense perception of the teacher and find teaching hard, depressing, and full of suffering, and creating low social status because of his low income, whereas poets who never experienced teaching hold the religious idealized image of the teacher and find teaching a sacred, interesting, and honorable job, disregarding his low income. The research compares both points of view, in the light of the teacher's lower social status and income, which imposes a sarcastic image of the teacher on the society. The two perspectives draw clashing images that have been on ever since there were teachers in the world. Ahmad Shawqi, poet laureate and Ibrahim Touqan are two famous poets representing the two opposing views.

Key words: teacher, Arabic poetry, image of the teacher, sarcastic poetry.

1. Introduction: Poetry, teaching and society

Teaching/learning is an originally social process that is needed in socializing people because they are part of the society. Language is the container of the human thought represented in culture (Barnouw 1973; Seelye 1982; Boas 1986; Hodge & Kress 1993). Languages represent the general human thought with some culture specific aspects. Poetry is the emotional expression of thought in a musical container. Poets talked much about the teacher for the serious and useful job he performs in the society.

"Like many other ways of being human, poets provide imaginative and compelling insights for those who wear the mantle of teacher. Both poet and teacher deal with worlds of self and other" (Berman 1999:18-23).

"Quality, authenticity, and integrity are qualities that may be shared by poets and teachers." (Berman, 1999)

"No man was ever yet a great poet,

without being at the same time a profound philosopher.

For poetry is the blossom and the fragrance of all human knowledge,

human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language."

([Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#))

2. The teacher's image: glimpses from history

In history, the social status of the teacher depended on two things: first, the need for teachers in special situations like when they were needed by caliphs; secondly, the financial status based on his pay.

In a manuscript about teaching and the teacher it is mentioned that the teacher has to be ideally respected, so the student should seek his appreciation, avoid his anger and obey him without disobeying what God wants from him (Al-Azzi, 1989:73) In Hadeeth, Prophet Mohammed said, *"I have been sent to you as a teacher"*; however, teachers were looked down at during the Abbaseen period because of the arrogance or ignorance of governors or because of some bad teachers (Al Obeidi and Al Dulaimi, 1989:95-97).

Some Arab poets magnified the ideally honorable image of the teacher when others were sarcastic about him as we see in what Al-Jahez wrote of Abu Al Ala'a Al Ma'arri who said in his poetry about teachers that *"he felt low because he was content to teach kids"* (Al Obeidi and Al Dulaimi, 1989:98).

The noble image of the teacher in Islam stems from Prophet Mohamed's saying: *"Scholars are the inheritors of prophets."* (Sunan Al Darimi, Hadeeth #353). From the beginning of Islam, the teacher was referred to as a scholar who teaches rules of Islam, literature, and philosophy, and the teacher of kids. In modern poetry the same image kept the difference based on the teacher's economic situation and living conditions.

3. The teacher, the honorable: The honorable image of the teacher in Shawqi's poetry

In Modern poetry, Ahmad Shawqi (1905-1941), Poet Laureate, an Egyptian poet, represents the poets who give a refined ideal image of the teacher, perhaps because he was not a teacher. He wrote a long poem about the teacher and teaching. He mentioned that the job of teaching is sacred, with great aims, and teachers have to be given special appreciation and high status, so he starts his poem by asking us to

"Rise up to the teacher and pay him his dues of respect and reverence; he (the teacher) could almost have been a prophet" (Shawqi, 1987:136-140).

His poem about teaching and the teacher comes from a religious background referring to what Prophet Mohamed says: *"Scholars are the inheritors of prophets"*. The poem is about teaching and its relationship with knowledge. The first line of the poem sets the scene for all the meanings that follow.

Shawqi's poem is a kind of reflection that relates to the teacher, a person who spends a lot of his time contemplating with the book, thinking about ideals and trying to formulate an image of what should be. He describes an educational stage where the teacher and the student respect each other. He stresses that Egypt has to reform a new educational system that has to contrast the Dunlop concept of education. He imagines that the teacher's responsibility resembles the prophet's: building and establishing minds.

He addresses God saying that *"He is the best teacher who taught people in old ages how to use the pen, so the human mind (of the teacher) was taken out of darkness and was gifted the light that guided others to the safe way."* He says that *"God sent the teacher to shape up the human mind. He also sent Moses with the Old Testament and Jesus to teach the Bible. Then Mohamed came with the spring of real knowledge to enlighten others' minds."*

Shawqi keeps talking about examples of teaching in the history that God guided nations for, including learned Greeks and Egyptians who vanished, and then their followers started to seek learning again. Shawqi

mentions Socrates who died for his learning. He comments that *“few people of minds are brave enough to face pressure like the pressure that Socrates faced from the tyrants”*.

Shawqi addresses the teachers of the Valley and those who are responsible for planning for its generations and their hopeful future, and those who carry the burden of honesty and may be called to teach people to be responsible in the future; he says that *“Egypt advanced a finger length in knowledge when other nations advanced miles, and that was in the negative effect of Dunlop’s teaching. Most people remained illiterate similar to people at the age of Khofo, and that led to ignorance which did not allow a group to live but a life like death.”* Shawqi says that *“without the tongues and minds of teachers who influenced young people’s minds in all areas and invaded their despair and implanted hope instead, Dunlop’s teaching would not have given any good to Egypt. They recognized their areas of ignorance and continued providing them with the water of knowledge from their water spring and rainy clouds, benefiting the country, not asking for any praise for this.”*

Dunlop, the British consultant to the Egyptian Ministry of Education during the British occupation of Egypt (1888-1922) implemented an unsuitable educational system which was modeled on the British experiences in British India.

Shawqi adds that *“they (Real teachers of Egypt) taught young people of the country how to be just, because only the teacher is the one who builds behavior to be straight and the personality to be just. He is the one who can show the logic of things to those who have illogical opinions and attitudes.”* Shawqi warns that *“if the teacher is not just, the spirit of justice in the young people’s minds will be unnoticeable. And if the teacher does not have the correct insight into things, insights of all people will not be correct.”*

Shawqi refers to the large percentage of illiteracy in Egypt saying that he *“doesn’t blame teachers who carry a heavy burden without the help of any one especially mothers, because if mothers are illiterate, their children will inherit ignorance and laziness from them.”* He asserts the role of the educated parents on the education of children, so he says that *“the orphan is not the one whose parents died and left him to face hard life alone but the one who has a mother who does not care and a father who is too busy for him.”* He was so optimistic, ending his poem saying that *“the young can achieve aims, even if far away.”*

4. Teacher poets’ perspective: The teacher, the sufferer: The sarcastic image of the teacher in Touqan’s poetry: a contrast

Ibrahim Toqan (Born in Nablus, 1905), a Palestinian poet and teacher, represents those who contradict Shawqi. He worked as a school teacher (Jarrar, 1985:93) and later at the American University of Beirut. His perceptions come from his work as a teacher who suffered all the aspects of the job of teaching. He resigned after teaching for one year.

Touqan’s poem about the teacher was read in a farewell party to him at Nablus School for Boys. In his poem, Touqan sounds depressed and frustrated and like he is talking to a companion or even to himself. He depicts a tragic profession for the learned man in society. He lived in an era when the teacher got his salary every three months.

Shawqi wrote his poem in 1924 and Touqan wrote his in 1933. In his poem, *‘the teacher poet’*, Touqan responded to what Shawqi said about the teacher and his great status. Touqan bitterly says that *“Shawqi*

says 'Rise up to the teacher and pay him his dues of respect and reverence' without knowing about my distress." He was talking about his distress of being a teacher. He continues that "one should not rise up to the teacher but should sit because someone who is always with kids can never gain honor." This is taken from the sarcastic concept Arab society had in the past about teachers (Al Obeidi and Al Dulaimi, 1989:99). Arabs in the past even recommended not asking the teacher of kids for advice as he is usually not mature enough, without insight in matters of life, and unwise. because he usually meets with women at home and children at school and does not mingle with all society members, so his life experiences do not qualify him to be smart or a man of opinion.

Touqan was indignant saying that

"The Poet Laureate was about to make me burst for saying that the teacher could almost have been a prophet. If Shawqi had experienced teaching for one hour, his life would have turned into a miserable and lazy life.' It is enough for the teacher to see notebooks in the morning and afternoon to become depressed and distressed, and if they were all corrected, they would cause blindness for sure."

Touqan draws the image of the teacher (himself) as "someone sitting on notebooks correcting with a lot of impatience and boredom". With full despair he stresses that "if correcting notebooks was really useful, he would sacrifice his eyes for correcting".

Although Touqan admired Shawqi, he was very mean and not considerate in responding to him (Taha, 1992:201) and in selecting his vocabulary talking about kids. He sarcastically talks about his job and kids' response saying

"I correct a syntactic mistake for example and use the book for a reference, taking supporting examples from the Quran and Prophet's Hadeeth in addition to examples from well-known old poetry, taking famous linguists as a reference; however, I find a donkey messing up the syntactic structure of a sentence. No one should be surprised if I cried and then fell dead among the pupils' desks."

Touqan actually satirizes the profession of teaching and not Shawqi in his poem. He addresses Shawqi saying that "the teacher is usually depressed and frustrated as he explains but never receives signs of understanding from his pupils"; and he warns the audience that they "should not be surprised if he, the teacher, may commit suicide one day because his pupils do not get what he teaches and explains."

He ends his poem by advising "those who are thinking about committing suicide to work as teachers because the teacher never lives long".

The reality expressed in Touqan's poem is more credible than Shawqi's poem, which I believe is better than Touqan's in terms of organization, powerful phrases, and well chosen diction. If a teacher reads Shawqi's poem, his self-esteem will be heightened. If he reads Touqan's poem, his self-esteem will drop because of the negative image the teacher is given. This will burden the teacher with a psychological barrier that creates concerns towards the profession and the life of practitioners who have to expect the worst suffering. This can also make the teacher feel inferior to the other professions.

For Touqan, the teacher is the sufferer who always lives in a dilemma. However, Touqan agrees that the teacher carries a great responsibility, but he draws a gloomy image of the teacher from a teacher's perspective, blaming the bad conditions of the profession and their influence on the psychology of teachers. Therefore frustration comes from the fruitless effort they pay without gratitude from the ministry or the pupils. The image is imposed forcefully because of the degraded social situation of the teacher.

5. Other no-teacher poets

Al Rasafi(1875-1945)) (an Iraqi poet) presents the teacher as a doctor of ignorance, and a planet whose light guides those who are looking for glory in the sky. This is why he has to be given his right of respect which is as righteous as the right of respect of parents. Although this sounds idealistic, it is imposed from the past image which stems from the religious concept of scholars who are the inheritors of prophets.

Gibran (1883-1931) was a Lebanese American poet, philosopher, and artist. His most famous work is his short book "The Prophet" (1923). Gibran was a spiritual poet who wrote about teaching, expressing a human philosophy that belongs to the human thought and not only to an Arab poet. Gibran believes that the teacher, like a spiritual person, *"walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and lovingness."* (Ukasha, 2000:60). This reminds us of Shawqi who considers the teacher like a prophet. This is an image of a loving person who teaches his faith and wants his pupils to be like followers of a prophet. Another image Gibran draws for the teacher is related to the wise leader who *"leads you to the threshold of your mind"*

6. Other teacher poets

Abdul Mutalib (1871-1931) an Egyptian teacher poet, depicts the sad image of the teacher in real life *"when he is the one who enlightens Egypt and its people and saves them from ignorance. He gets smaller and other people get bigger."* (p.111) He addresses the people of Egypt saying that

"If they ask the night about him, they will find him staying up working and very tired when the stars are sleeping in the sky. Not only that, but also he is working with books all night as if he is a stranger away from his family when everybody is around him" (Abdul Mutalib, pp.111-112). The poet continues saying *"you can find many of his friends who have become rich when he lives in poverty. The teacher is always complaining in his life but he receives troubles with patience."* (Abdul Mutalib, p.112).

Ahmad Taqiyeddeen (1888-1935) (a Lebanese poet and teacher) depicts an ideal image of the teacher who is like an invader of minds with the light he sheds. He adds that the teacher is the greatest person working in the nation.

Al-Bussairy (1213-1295) was an Egyptian poet who worked as a teacher believing it would be an easy job out of which he would make his living, but his experience of teaching kids showed how difficult it was to be a teacher. He describes his *"house as a pigeon house where kids come to it like pigeons"*. He talks about his pupils describing the type of interaction with them, *"I give them my mind and take their minds; I trade my light for their darkness."* (Kilani, 1973:254).

7. The teachers's financial and social status

The low financial income and social status are the reasons why few people like to be teachers but will keep looking for an opportunity of another job (Al-Khawaldah, 2007).

Teachers have no career satisfaction, any motivation, or sense of belonging to their profession. They no longer have any influence on social change. Moreover, faculties of education at universities accept those who are not accepted in other majors for their lower grades. Therefore, teachers are not well chosen in terms of intelligence, academic achievement, or personality (Al Farhan, 2000:47). The only reward expected for the teacher is being admired for the noble job he is performing (Khawaja, 1993:5).

The teacher is in reality a weak character among his students who are mostly against him inside and outside school, challenging and making fun of him. He feels insecure because of violence at school. He is hated as a representation of the authority and power of the institution. The teacher has been threatened and beaten with no real teacher protection procedures (Khawaja 2009).

In Jordan In Jordan, Abdulrahman (2008) complains about the discrimination against the teacher who did not get special allowance like others. However, there is a call to answer the hope that late King Hussain expressed for the teachers to have a promoted allowance of 100% by 2010. The Queen launched a yearly award called "Queen Rania Teachers' Award for Excellence in Education" (www.queenraniaaward.org 2008) for the purpose of establishing a new image of the teacher who deserves respect with financial incentives.

We may assume that the responsibility for the low status of the teacher lies on many factors: the family, the school, the teacher himself, the student, the ministry of education, the society, and the media.

8. Conclusion:

Poets gave various clashing images, both bright and gloomy images based on whether they are idealistic or realistic. As long as we have more poets with different experiences talking about the teacher we will receive clashing images. So the concept of 'the teacher' can be seen as elastic.

Today, the change in the image of the teacher has caused a societal shock which might make everybody think about the changes that have taken place in the image of all other personalities in the society, not only the teacher alone.

Shawqi's poem is longer, wiser, more serious and comprehensive and deeper in addressing the image of the teacher, whereas Touqan's poem is shorter and depends more on quick sarcastic excitement and emotional reaction (Taha, 1992:202). However, Touqan's has a pragmatic perspective.

Teachers everywhere were leaders and remain leaders in all times. (Usdan et al, 2001:7). The teacher is presented in poetry as an intellectual who loses his intellect for the dark brains of the school kids. However, the teacher will continue to suffer and he is the only one who experiences the sweet and the sour taste of teaching.

In spite of the fact that teacher poets have a negative image of the teacher in their poetry, both categories of poets admit that, even if there is an explicit and implicit criticism of the teacher's low status in his social context, there is no way to forget the honorable job he performs. Deep in poetry we can find the glimpse of hope for the teacher to be recognized explicitly in every social context.

To sum up, the teacher's image shows him as

- a wise leader and a prophet with followers
- the manager of social morals related to parents and families
- the savior from failure at school points,
- the state collaborator who has to keep pushing the cart forward
- the main recipient of the complaints of the young and the old for problem solving,
- a school without the need for a book, .
- who does not die and stays alive in the hearts of the nation,
- the one who forms the brains and cultures and determines the values and attitudes; and in other words, he is the one who draws the framework of the future of the nation
- the honest advisor,
- the caring father to the young and the older ones,
- the light for those on the road,
- an invader of minds with the light he sheds, changing them strongly,
- doctor of ignorance,
- a planet whose light guides those who are looking for glory in the sky,
- the knowledgeable,
- he works hard all his life when others live in aimless luxury.

The teacher is also seen as

- the sufferer
- the one whose heart was full of sadness,
- a losing trader of mind for darkness,
- a poor and funny character, wearing funny clothes,
- a stranger away from his family when everybody is around him
- the teacher of kids

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