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The Politics of Cultural Essentialism: Bint Al-Shati' and the Cult of Authenticity

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Tradition and heritage entail a historical sense, …
a perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence.
T.S. Eliot

Disconnection from the past to surge from the void is a distortion
to the concept of evolution.
Bint Al-Shati'

I. Introduction

The fundamental premise of the politics of essentialism is the attempt to ground and build identity on the essence of a group. This essence is the core truths that define what a particular group is and means for its members. The strategy of essentialism usually entails trying to find these core truths by tracing them back to some immutable characteristics either in the biology of the group or the particular history and practices of the group. The modern world, the argument goes, has taken away the group's access to these sources of identity, destroying the natural access the group would have had to the rich sources of identity that existed in some lost idyllic past. The politics of essentialism holds that true identity can be regained by reviewing some of these values and practices, a reawakening that will allow the group's members to be healed from the wounds caused by their previous subordination.

This strategy of essentialism asserts that members of the group have a particular culture or way of being that is generally not open to outsiders. The struggle for recognition within the politics of essentialism means wresting enough freedom from forces oppressing the group so that the group members may either recoup or reform their true identity. It also means achieving some recognition from oppressors or the dominant group in society of the validity and worth of the group's identity.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin say that

"The argument suggests that in different periods the employment of essentialist ideas may be a necessary part of the process by which the colonized achieve a renewed sense of the value and dignity of their pre-colonial cultures, and through which the newly emergent post-colonial **nation** asserts itself. However, as critics such as Edward Said have argued, the early National Liberation theorists such as Fanon, Cabral and James were always fully aware of the dangers of essentialism, and were always critical of the application of such essentialist discourses as nationalism and race in the construction of the modern **post-colonial state**"**.** (79-80)

The debate maintains that in different periods the engagement in, or utilization of essentialist ideas may be indispensable as part of the process by which the colonized procures a renewed sense of the value and grandeur of their pre-colonial cultures, and through which the newly arising post-colonial nation proclaims itself.

'Aisha 'Abdel Rahman's (1913-1998) quest for an authentic identity, and for an authentic voice is the paradigmatic basis that stems from the center of a whole culture and not just from the historical, intellectual, and ideological legacy that proceeded from that tradition in previous generations. This is a rather urgent quest, necessary to counter the effects of the hegemony of colonial (Eurocentric) paradigms that continue to dominate after military or physical colonialism. In this context a self-generated notion of identity becomes an imperative.

II. A Quest for Authenticity

Bint Al-Shati' (pen name for Abdel Rahman) advocates essentialist politics, that acknowledges the energies and potentialities released by re-valorizing the religious culture in its native, national aspects. She is pre-occupied with cultural identity in the light of an uncontaminated culture, that is, cultural purity. She clings

to the authentic self. She accentuates an intact tradition accrediting the place of history, language and culture in the construction of an authentic essential indigenous subjectivity. A major concern in her agenda for constructing and maintaining cultural identity is the protection of the Arabic language and preserving, its purity against linguistic hybridity and the invasion of foreign words. Bint Al-Shati' was for a 'monoglot language' which is not influenced by another language from a different culture. She was against 'the appropriation, re-working and imitating of … another's language, another's style, another's word' (Bakhtin 77).

'Aisha's social background and religious upbringing had a direct influence upon her career. She belonged to a generation of women who had to fight their way for education. Born into a religious family in the rural province of Dumyat, she was supervised in religious education by her father who opposed her enrollment in the modern school system. In her autobiography '*Ala Al-Jisr* (1966), Bint Al-Shati' narrates her life story examining major influences in her life, which were expounded later in her works: women's right for education, the Egyptian peasants' dejection and her religious beliefs and principles. When she expressed to her father her wish to join Al-Lozy regular girls school she heard the unexpected, as if her request was an utterance of hereticism. His answer was sharp, scathing, brusque and definitive:

"It is improper for the girls of Ulama Sheikhs to join those pervert, degenerate, immoral schools. They have to be educated in their homes" *(26).*

At that very early age, Bint Al-Shati' felt all the bitterness of the world accumulated in her heart. She felt subjugated, dispossessed and divested of a right that her peers were enjoying. However, her maternal grandfather, who was also a renowned Sheikh, interfered to get an approval from her father to join this 'secular' or modern school on a condition that she will pursue her religious studies at home.

Those governmental modern schools were one of the forms of civil education that was not really accepted by all members of the society at that time. This mode of education first appeared during the reign of Mohamed Ali in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In spite of the fact that the language of learning was Arabic, however, it was rejected by the Egyptians, at the outset. Students were forced to join those schools. Later, people witnessed how graduates from those schools were offered good jobs and given good salaries. At this point, people began to enroll their children in public schools. Yet, children were still joining 'Al-Kutab' before deciding whether to go to Al-Azhar or to a governmental school. In *All the Pasha's Men*, Khaled Fahmy states that until 1882, there was a fair competition between both modes of education. With the British occupation in 1882, there were thousands of schools all over Egypt and about 150 thousand students studying mathematics, physics, chemistry, history and geography in Arabic. In addition, students would choose a foreign language to study whether it is English, French or German. Education was until this moment free. But with occupation, the study of Arabic language and its culture was eradicated, Al-Alsun school was shut down, free education was abolished and missions to Europe stopped (Fahmy). Towards the end of the 19th century the British occupiers realized that women formed a good portion of the consumers in the country and therefore began to point out the lack of education of Muslim women, education then meaning Western-style education, not religious education (many Muslim women were educated in religious learning). Marsot thus affirms that the push to educate women was to turn them into consumers of European Western education (Marsot).

Hence, English and French became the basic languages for education. Therefore, interest in the Arabic language diminished and retreated from the curriculum. At this point, national newspapers advocated a return to Arabic education to face this foreign cultural invasion. This was at the beginning of the 20th century when the government began to respond to the people's demands to give Arabic language and culture more space. On the other hand, Al-Azhar with its Ulamas and Sheikhs had their conservative stance from the very beginning towards public or state education. They conceived of the danger that would affect Arabic Islamic culture. As a result, they kept their children distanced from those schools, especially girls, because secondary girls' schools that were established by Lord Cromer were aiming at offering English education to young women, thus, having generations of English educated mothers. Some Egyptians were thus suspicious of those schools and their objectives. This explains 'Aisha's father attitude towards modern state education preferring a purely religious one.

This duality in the system of education constituted part of the national question at that time and it had its deeper and more dangerous implications in the socio-political arena. Education was a point of contention which the nationalists were after in the liberation of the nation. They sought military, intellectual and cultural freedom. Those conflicting systems of education bred generations embracing distinct convictions and creeds. Therefore, instead of having a homogeneous whole showing the same cultural heritage within the same society, there was a division that discerned the difference in education and therefore in vision. Graduates of civil schools and universities mastered foreign languages and modern sciences, whereas graduates from religious schools as well as Al-Azhar were totally indulged in religious studies unaware of the development that was taking place outside their institutions. Actually, they discarded such modern sciences, among which were the foreign languages, considering them a fraud. Unfortunately, within the same society, there were graduates who did not share the same culture or the same objectives. Bint Al-Shati' actually believed that this variance in the system of

education was a pre-mediated colonial plan which meant to dislocate and destabilize the unity and uniformity of the society. The conservatives were busy attacking all forms of modernization in education and did not bother to reform their traditional system. They resisted every effort that went for development.

Modernisation constituted a kind of threat to traditionalism. Modernism promises new opportunities for individual advancement, but the freedom it brings from the constraints of communal ways of life can also introduce a sense of loss, a longing for tradition, the security of long-established folkways. Bint Al-Shati' was involved in the twentieth-century cultural project of Islamic Arab countries seeking a way out of this subordinate colonial condition. This, she quested through emphasizing and validating cultural heritage and unique cultural identity. Being in this sub-altern condition makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity, culture and heritage). As a result of this fear of subordination Bint Al-Shati' professes that authentic learning is the study of our pious and virtuous ancestors. She adds in *'Ala Al-Jisr*

" 'I was always proud of my knowledge of the sciences of my ancestors. All through my way to the university I was reassured of the worth of that valuable reservoir of ancestral erudition. It gave me uniqueness and authenticity among my peers' (67)

'I was always boastful of the authenticity of my knowledge of the ancients' " (71).

Evidently, her passion was the Arabic language and the Islamic culture. At one point, in her autobiography she claims that "My reality empowered me with an order that I assimilated not only as a heritage but as a creed" (77).

She also believed that

"Our future is invested with an intellectual struggle after our liberation from military colonialism. We cannot ignore or evade this battle since our very existence cannot be pursued without protecting Arabic language. This language, which is soldered to our religion, being the language of the Holy Koran, has been part of the historical struggle between the Arabs on the one hand, and colonialism, Zionism and the Crusaders on the other. Our predecessors have protected our Arabic intellectual/cultural heritage in their conflicts all through history in order to maintain their individuality and their essentiality as a people. Now, it is our turn to protect our existence against this foreign cultural invasion that we are undergoing". (*New Values* 12)

Bint Al-Shati' was afraid of appropriation, which is

"A term used to describe the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities. This process is sometimes used to describe the strategy by which the dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys and invades ".(Spurr 93)

Bint Al-Shati' believed that our reality exists as it is created corporately through culture, language and history. Therefore, the

"writer who loses contact with his/her history and with the heritage of his/her nation is unable by all and every means to express its conscience, because being incapable to read through its character makes him/her estranged to its authentic identity. He/she could no longer comprehend the essence of his/her community. Consequently, he/she becomes like an intruder or a settler". (*New Values* 184)

She cites examples of some of our writers who lived alienated in their own country because they assimilated and reproduced Western thought. She criticizes Ismail Mazhar's stance who is against the religious Reformist movement led by Al-Afghani. She also attacks Salama Moussa, who did not foresee any good in the Arabic cultural heritage and found nothing in Islamic cultural history that is worthy of sustenance. Then she moves to Zaki Naguib Mahmoud who in his book *Al-Shark Al-Fanan* adopts the most intolerant and atavistic theories in Western thought concerning the division of the world into East and West. The East, according to Mahmoud epitomizes spiritual learning while the West is the quintessence of scientific teachings. That is, the East keeps its strategic position in the necropolis of the prophets and the West maintains the forefront of science and development. Therefore, the East is deemed with backwardness in the slate of fate (*New Values*).

She had this romantic concern for the authenticity of culture and tradition in the face of modernism. This is especially the case since, while some features of modernism amount to obstacles to identity politics, other features of modernism actually tend to encourage and reinforce romantic longings that lead to identity politics. She wanted the individual to realize his/her potential with an accreditation of one's cultural heritage. Bint 'Al-Shati' did not denounce modernity or development. However, she says that

"our real existence imposes upon us a necessity to add what is new to our heritage since this is an inevitable feature of development. Yet, our past is the starting point for a new present, pointing forward to a more vivid and open future – all forming one complete whole. In fact, neglecting and amputating our past, having a mere void as a springboard is a distortion of the concept of evolution which is a hierarchical process for real existence reaching completeness and perfection". (*New Values* 199)

Bint Al-Shati's essentialism was a product of the pervasive power of colonialism. Language was for her, a form of existence, actually of national reality that would stand against any attempts of cultural disintegration. Noticeably then, she had a sense of threat from what the city, as a symbol of modernity, can affect; a threat from the changes brought by modernity which can be especially acute when modernism seems to be imposed on a community by outsiders, which is the case here. Thus, there is a tension in the politics of an 'essential' identity between the desirable features of modernity and a kind of romantic longing for an older more authentic way of life which modernity threatens. It is a defence of tradition and collective heritage, over and against the universality of modernism. Bint Al-Shati' speaks in '*Ala Al-Jisr* about 'the falsity and emptiness of city life.' She wants "to unmask and dismantle city life to expose its ugly face, its exanimate spirit, its muted consciousness and its numbed conscience" (84).

In another instant she adds:

"I was determined to resist the charm and the glamour of the city. I created an insulated frontier between my 'self' and this world, to protect my being from disfigurement, distortion, defacement and falsification. I was afraid to lose my real, authentic essence in the commotion, clamour and tumult of the city" (77-78).

Like Fanon, Bint Al-Shati' regarded the forces of modernism as equivalent to Western colonialism. These forces had caused the death and burial of [blacks] local cultural originality, the deprecation, or erasing of African cultural accomplishments, the terrible debasement of black identity, and their replacement by a cold 'rationalism' that would not recognize the emotional claims of the blacks' lived experience of suffering.

In fact, she was against assimilation, integration or appropriation since this will endanger the quest for authenticity, resulting in conformity to the identity of the dominant which would eventually eradicate the subordinate, less powerful identities. Moreover, she was deeply concerned with Arabic language and its ineluctable affiliation to our lives. In *Our Language and Life* (1969), a study which was procured after Egypt's defeat in 1967, Bint Al-Shati' was trying to defend the Arabic language from any foreign invasion. Going back to history, she tried to prove the uniqueness of the Arabic language which despite the recurrent and successive foreign invasions to that part of the world, that later became the Arab world, the peoples there rejected to mingle with invaders whether they were Persians, Romans, Greeks or Wends. However, with the advent of Islam those same peoples accepted and assimilated Islam and became arabicized sharing one language with a common, comprehensive nationalism. In her attempt to emphasize the exclusiveness of Arabic against the language of invaders she writes that, "the language of the colonizer remained only the language of divans and their culture was always that of an outsider. Its subsistence was only protected by the power of imperialism" (*Our Language and Life* 14).

Hence, Arabic as a language epitomizing a whole culture was, is and will be a basic dimension of identity and a marker of cultural difference. It is the most important means by which the West has been able to colonize other nations. Moreover, since language is the means by which people understand the world and themselves, to take on the language of a colonizer really results in having one's consciousness colonized. Actually, to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, and it means above all else to assume a culture and to support the weight of a civilization.

III. Renewal of Religious Thought: A Conservative or a Puritan

'Aisha Abdel Rahman's preoccupation with the cult of authenticity; indigenous subjectivity; recognition of cultural heritage and its uniqueness generates an involvement in other issues that revolve around her basic concern: language and cultural essentialism. However, in her autobiography she allows us to listen to what Sheikh Desouky Gohary says about her professor Amin Al-Kholy (who later became her husband). He says that Amin Al-Kholy is for "renewal of religious thought, liberating it from the shackles that seize its vivacious spirit, hindering it from surging progressively through time and space" (87).

He adds by saying that

"This generation has to add to the knowledge of their predecessors. They have to begin where their precursors have ended. They have to enhance our bygone legacy with their rejuvenating concepts and aspirations. We should not live in a closed circle". (89)

Bint Al-Shati' did not argue with him. Yet, at another instant she declares that:

"I suffered intellectual estrangement during my first year at the university, searching for what might surpass my authentic knowledge or what might abrogate it. Nothing was there to offer me an alternative to my Sufi Illuminism, that has never let me down". (72)

'Aisha Abdel Rahman stood fast for her cultural heritage, but she had an eye on what modernism could impart to her. She looked at modernity critically, not accepting all its premises.

Before encountering Sheikh Amin El-Kholy she affirms that

"when I lectured or wrote, I was never influenced by what I studied from the books of chemistry, physics, algebra or geometry. Even what I have read in English literature like Charles Dickens, Shakespeare and

Charlotte Brontë; and in French literature like Chateaubriand, Molière, Victor Hugo and George Sand had no impact upon me. I used to lecture and speak using a cultivated and refined language as a result of my modulation of Al-Korān. In writing, I relied upon my profound and intense knowledge of Arabic rhetoric, eloquence and diction". (94)

However, on meeting Amin Al-Kholy, 'Aisha Abdel Rahman declares that she was reborn on November 6th, 1936 (*'Ala al Jisr*). This was an intellectual genesis. She says that

"the modern sciences that I used to study and that were dormant in my sub-conscious, because I rejected them, moved to the forefront, to the field of mental activity, to the sphere of consciousness and perception. I felt the need of this well-spring to enrich my intellectual being, forwarding my faculty of reason to a realm beyond the bolted, muted borders which I thought were the demarcation line of the world of knowledge". (104)

The journalist Sami Dawood comments on her character saying that:

"She wears her clothes according to Islamic shari'a; she drives her own car; she teaches; she gives public speeches; she represents her people in the local council; and she is an authentic writer who defies all great contemporary writers with her ideas. Moreover, her voice is very pleasant and sweet, yet her arguments are ferocious and fierce". (Al-Ahram 7, 1961)

Actually, a lot has been written about Bint Al-Shati'. The puritans consider her a liberal, while the liberals regard her as old-fashioned and intolerant. Trying to answer people's bewilderment she says:

"I am a conservative, not a puritan and there is a great difference between both. I am for women's education and work. I reject her drinking, dancing with men and trespassing the proper code of behaviour and this I consider conservatism. So do not try to mix between a woman going out to work and her giving up her ". (Al-Ahram 7, 1961)

At the end of this interview the writer concludes by saying that his conversation with Bint Al-Shati' ended with a request by her about a true and real understanding to the spirit of Islam. She talked and talked and he got more perplexed because what she urged and insisted upon was not absolute but proper freedom. Yet, she clung to the past and her cultural heritage. She believed that this same heritage bestowed women with all their rights, not that which was imposed upon them in the dark ages. She believed that losing contact with our heritage led our nation to lose trace of proper development (Dawood). Her discourse could be described as that of a humanist modernist. She rejected the Western paradigm of modernization concerning women's liberation, evading compromising our cultural heritage.

Therefore, while validating cultural heritage, cultural identity and Islamic culture, Bint Al-Shati' asserted the difference in trying to deal with the modernization of her society. Actually, she is both liberal and conservative on many of the issues that she advocated, especially woman's cause. She was for women's liberation but through following an Islamic code of behaviour, a way that eschewed compromising our cultural heritage and overlooking the Western paradigm of modernization. In reworking the lives of the women in early Islamic periods, she aims at clinging to the authentic self. Biographies of these women re-interpret the purport of their lives in the light of contemporary conditions. She subsumes a pantheon of cultural heroines and places Moslem women within the tradition of these strong female figures. In fact, Bint Al-Shati' reconsiders the feminist heritage within the framework of Islamic tradition. Those biographies are a valorization and celebration of early Muslem women, without the radicalism of some women writers of her generation. In *Women's of the House of the Prophet* (1988), which is a compilation of the biographies of women in the early Islamic period, Bint Al-Shati' deconstructs the rigid stereotypes of Arab Muslem women. The resurrections of those constructions of the past present a definition of perfection. They point to the focalisation of family ties and identities as mother, daughter and wife in the construction of female subjectivity. They form an integral part of the Islamic polemics on gender, emerging as female role model to counteract the burdened colonial legacy and the incessant defeats Islamic societies were undergoing. Their life histories, which Bint Al-Shati' unravels, are sermons and moral lessons to be discerned by contemporary women who are overwhelmed by the ongoing Western civilization. Significantly, in '*The Arab Woman in the Modern Age*' (1967) she claims that the "new Arab woman could achieve her wholeness without resorting to men. Her freedom is actualized and established in our authentic Arab-Islamic culture" (4).

Then turning to the status of women in the world today she believed that the woman should pinpoint her role in society and she has to accomplish an awareness of her 'self' through comprehending the basic features of her being and the essence of her reality in the modern world. She goes on to say that this necessitates a true understanding of Islam which she elaborates in *The Character of Women in Al-Koran* (1975). At this point, the woman would be able to correct prevalent concepts concerning the woman's cause, specially those related to liberty and equality (*The Character of Woman in Al-Koran* 1975). She had this strong belief that women's present and future can never be severed from the past as manifested in Al-Koran, God's Holy Book. Besides, in *An Introduction of Methodology* (1970), she states that Islamic culture, for her, has always been the measure-stick against which she can conceive and judge the problems that face her nation.

Actually, reviewing the memory of ideal women from the ideal past is linked to debates on the essential cultural identity of the Arab woman and patterns of behaviour expected of her in the modern age. It is an act of realization and disclosure, a means of inciting female subjectivity and reclaiming forms of agency. Moreover, re-introducing and recapturing the lives of these women becomes a site of female empowerment. It augments female self-appreciation. The re-creation of this kind of past help energize and conserve tradition to establish a discourse of resistance.

IV. Conclusion

Herder, the German romantic who influenced Hegel, believed in the notion of authenticity. A people, Herder argued, should not try to conform to the culture of other nations but should instead cultivate their unique character and bring that to flower (Jones). He directed his people to join the cultural project of their ethnic or national group and in reinforcing the authentic character of their group, seek their own self-fulfillment (Herder). Essentially, man being an integral part of the life of the world; beliefs and institutions have roots in history, therefore should be judged in terms of their concrete setting. Besides, the individual is a product of historical development; hence, he/she contributes to the outcome of history. Similarly, Bint 'Al-Shati's re-writing and reconsideration of cultural memory is a counter-discourse in which questions of identity, authenticity, agency and subjectivity come to the fore. Her efforts aim at setting up an essential and unified self. She appropriates ethnicity to her purpose as a term that sanctions the locus of history, language and culture in the construction of the self. She adopts an authentic, essential, autochthonous individuality. Moreover, this essentialist cultural identity she promotes is employed to affirm not only difference but also distinction. She attempts to identify an immaculate native culture. She extols all cultural markers like religion, language and traditions, everything indigenous and native that distinguishes us from them. In *'Ala al Jisr* she writes that 'authentic learning is the study of the heritage of our pious and virtuous predecessors' (73). She calls this kind of knowledge 'my ancient treasure,' which becomes a powerful and creative force in the forms of representation. Her undertaking is a form of resistance. Her literary endeavours are part of the long and discontinuous process of decolonization. She aims at an essential and unified self accrediting the place of history, language and culture in the formation of subjectivity and identity. Bint al-Shati' stresses the need to renew and activate memory in order to preserve tradition, since 'the conscious present is an awareness of the past' (Eliot 25). The recreation of the past is a yearning for a distant tradition. History is a force and a presence for her. She wanted to construct an essentialist strategy that would eventually change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. This kind of identity, according to Charles Taylor should be characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and its capacity for *authenticity*.

However, the question persists: How can we formulate an adequate, complete, authentic identity that takes into consideration the realities of place and time?

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