Symbols in the Poetry of Revolutionary America and Algeria: Similarities though the Cultural and Religious Differences.

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Résumé: Les deux colonies nord-américaines et l'Algérie ont mené des guerres contre des puissances européennes colonisatrices respectives, à savoir la Grande-Bretagne et la France. Bien que les origines, les motivations et l'époque de leurs révolutions aient été différentes, les deux colonies d'Amérique du Nord et d'Afrique du Nord avaient engagé des poètes partageant plusieurs dispositifs communs pour renforcer la lutte des peuples pour l'indépendance, la liberté, l'identité et le progrès. Ils ont également transformé les héros en icônes nationales dont le sacrifice personnel pour une "cause noble et sainte" devait être idéalisé et imité. Alors que Francis Miles Finch représentait l'exécution par pendaison de Nathan Hale, un soldat colonial de l'armée continentale espionnant un camp britannique dans une Amérique coloniale, Mufdi Zakariah, nommé barde de la révolution algérienne, a décrit l'exécution par la guillotine du héros algérien Ahmed Zabana en termes religieux presque similaires. L'objet du présent article est de montrer non seulement les instruments littéraires partagés par les deux poètes, mais aussi la manière dont ils les ont utilisés pour susciter leurs émotions publiques et tirer parti des concepts de lutte, d'abnégation, de liberté et d'indépendance, sacrés. des principes

Summary: Both North American colonies and Algeria waged wars against their respective colonizing european powers being Great-Britain and France. Though the background, motives and time of their Revolutions were different, both colonies in North America and North-Africa had committed poets who shared several and common devices to enhance the people's struggle for independence, liberty, identity and progress. They also turned heroes into national icons whose self-sacrifice for a "noble and holy cause" needed to be idealized and emulated. While Francis Miles Finch depicted the execution by hanging of Nathan Hale, a colonial soldier from the Continental Army spying on a British camp in colonial America, Mufdi Zakariah, named the bard of the Algerian Revolution, depicted the execution by guillotine of Algerian hero, Ahmed Zabana in almost similar religious terms. The subject-matter of the present article is to show not only the literary devises shared by both poets but also the manner they used them to stir their public emotions and make from the concepts of the struggle, self-sacrifice, liberty and independence, sacred principles.

1- Introduction

The present subject-matter deals with the stylistic devices used by committed poets to describe both American and Algerian revolutions though separated by a huge time gap of about 185 years.

American Revolutionary poetry was generally characterized by the blank verse. It was written or produced by committed poets in the area of the revolutionary period of North America. During its early history, America was formed of a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, American poetry, though jejune and amateurish, bore unique characteristics that caused later its limited production to be considered a separate path and tradition. On the other hand, Algeria who had inherited a long literary tradition from Arabic from the early days of Muslim conquests did not have neither to emulate revolutionary Eastern writers in support of their national cause, nor translate their revolutionary poems to speak about her heroes. Though novelists in French surpassed their brethren in Arabic poetry, their commitment to the Algerian Revolution was not blatantly overt, plain, and highly critical of French colonialism. So outstanding Arabic speaking poets in Algerian Revolutionary poetry were Mohamed Laid El-khalifa, Moufdi Zakaria and Abdelhamid Ibn Badis.

2- Poetry of Revolutionary America

In colonial America, early literature had flourished in the New England colonies. During the revolutionary period, political writings were authored by various writers, essayists, and a group of young poets like The Harford or Connecticut Wits (also known as the Wicked Wits) at Yale University including Philip Freneau, Henry Hugh Brackenridge, John Barlow, Timothy Dwight, David Humphreys, Lemuel Hopkins, and eventually Richard Alsop. There were also Phillis Wheatley, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Francis Miles Finch. Most of the early colonial literary works relied on contemporary British models of poetic form, diction, and theme. However, this late colonial poetry is generally somewhat old-fashioned in form and syntax, deploying the means and methods of Pope and Gray in the era of Blake and Burns. Nevertheless, the colonists grew in maturity and confidence and the poetry they wrote increasingly reflected their drive towards independence. These young poets attempted to use blank verse to "*ignite the fires of Revolution*" against the British rulers headed by both King George III and Parliament who referred to Americans as colonials and later rebels but never as citizens. The American Revolution was often portrayed as a disorderly band of "rebels, bandits, high-way men, and ruffians." Its moment had inspired a vast body of literature, much of which, like Blake's poem, attempted to allegorize the fledgling nation's

heroes and cast their ultimate sacrifice in the language of archetypal struggles and timeless human theme of catharsis to redeem by offering their blood to save their folks through the fires of Revolution. *"America, a Prophecy"* is in some sense typical of early writings about American independence, which often strove to romanticize the clash between colonies and King George III often portrayed as an overbearing father, a tyrannical monarch and "a Nero", and British Parliament as an instrument of oppression.

Philip Freneau was not only a committed poet but also a political writer and newspaper editor. He had composed compelling verses about the American predicament, blurring the line between both rhetoric and poetry. In his poem "*A Political Litany*," composed in 1775, he declared:

Freneau celebrated America's newfound freedom in his poem "*American Liberty*," while also anticipating the spirit of expansion and manifest destiny that would shape the nation's self-image for centuries:

> "Happy some land, which all for freedom gave,
> Happier the men whom their own virtues save;
> Thrice happy we who long attacks have stood,
> And swam to Liberty thro' seas of blood;
> The time shall come when strangers rule no more,
> Nor cruel madness vex from Britain's shore;
>
> And swam to Liberty thro' seas of blood;
>
> The time shall come when strangers rule no more,
>
> Nor cruel madness vex from Britain's shore;"

Phillis Wheatley was the first African-American writer to publish poems that had critical acclaim but achieved widespread popularity throughout the country. Born in Africa, she was captured and sold into slavery as a child to a family in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1761. She was eventually emancipated by her owner Johan Wheatley after her pro-revolutionary writings that brought her notoriety and success. Her life and works were a testament both to the fiery spirit of revolution and the sins of America's colonial times under British oppressive rule. Despite her own mistreatment and lack of full citizenship, Wheatley composed verse that mainly praised American ideals and accomplishments. Wheatley's poem "*To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*" was written in the hopes that William Legge (new Earl of Dartmouth) who had been appointed secretary of state for the colonies. The colonists who considered him as an ally to their

grievances—he opposed the Stamp Act in 1766—would relieve the African slaves from the tyranny of his predecessor and change things for the better in the colonies. In her poem, she declares that her love of freedom comes from being a slave and describes being kidnapped from her parents' home.

"Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

No more, America, in mournful strain,
Of wrongs and grievance unredressed complain;
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain
Which wanton Tyranny, with lawless hand,
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land."

3- Symbols as literary devices in poems of revolutionary America

During all Revolutions, there was a quest of liberty and identity for the colonized people. American nations, as all those revolutionary countries have revolted against the colonizer with the weapons of soldiers and also the pens of their poets. Several popular American poets, such as Philip Freneau, used the imagery and deeds of the revolution as a way to offer their people's history epics, and entertainment. They managed to turn their heroes into national icons. The execution of American such as Nathan Hale, is vivid examples of their sacrifice as a nationalistic impulses for freedom of their nations.

Nathan Hale

'To drum-beat and heart-beat,
A soldier marches by:
There is color in his cheek,
There is courage in his eye,

Yet to drum-beat and heart-beat
In a moment he must die."

The six first lines depict an execution ceremony where Hale describes the execution of a soldier from the Continental army during the American Revolution. He volunteered to spy behind the British lines, in an intelligence-gathering mission in New York City. The British soldiers captured him and hanged him. He was militarily escorted to his death by public hanging. He knows he would die in a moment. The verb "must" indicates that his death sentences is firm, final and inevitable. Hale is courageous and does not seem upset by the processing death-scene because he would die as a "soldier" for his country's cause, a noble cause. His sacrifice would rather be deliverance than a sentence and his brave deed would rather be the best example of loyalty to his cause and country than an adventure. The hero is calm and awaits for his ultimate deliverance and end of mission[2] for the noble cause he is engaged in, as these lines illustrate:

"With calm brow, steady brow,
He listens to his doom;
In his look there is no fear,
Nor a shadow-trace of gloom;"

Before his hanging, Hale would have exclaimed: "*I only regret that I have but one life to loose for my country.*" He wished he could die and resuscitate to do again the same deed. This recalls the reader the biblical description of Jesus-Christ's execution on the cross. If for Hale resuscitation is not possible, however, it is possible for the Messiah according to the Biblical narrative. Yet, for both, their mission is interrupted by their foes. Both Hale and Jesus are condemned to death, one by hanging and the other by crucifixion to put down their respective messages, the one being worldly (liberty and independence) the other divine (liberation from earthly corruption and servitude to material things). Nevertheless, the poet evokes a "just and holy" cause linked with spiritual redemption.

In the following verses, Nathan Hale[1] accomplishes courageously a catharsis like mythical heroes who sacrifice their lives to redeem the masses and liberate them from the oppression of a bad ruler or a ferocious beast:

"By starlight and moonlight,
He seeks the Briton's camp;
He hears the rustling flag,
And the armed sentry's tramp;

[1] Nathan Hale, a poem by Francis Miles Finch. The World's Best Poetry.Volume VIII. National Spirit. 1904.

And the starlight and moonlight
His silent wandering lamp."

His tasks consist in observing silently the British camp and counting both the soldiers and the "battery guns" of the British camp:

"With slow tread and still tread,
He scans the tented line;
And he counts the battery guns
By the gaunt and shadowy pine;
And his slow tread and still tread
Gives no warning sign.

The dark wave, the plumed wave,
It meets his eager glance;
And it sparkles 'neath the stars,
Like the glimmer of a lance
A dark wave, a plumed wave,
On an emerald expanse.

A sharp clang, a steel clang,
And terror in the sound!
For the sentry, falcon-eyed,
In the camp a spy hath found;
With a sharp clang, a steel clang,
The patriot is bound."

With calm brow, steady brow,
He listens to his doom;
In his look there is no fear,
Nor a shadow-trace of gloom;
But with calm brow and steady brow
He robes him for the tomb.

In the long night, the still night,
He kneels upon the sod;
And the brutal guards withhold
E'en the solemn Word of God!

In the long night, the still night,
He walks where Christ hath trod.
'Neath the blue morn, the sunny morn,
He dies upon the tree;
And he mourns that he can lose
But one life for Liberty;
And in the blue morn, the sunny morn,
His spirit-wings are free.

But his last words, his message-words,
They burn, lest friendly eye
Should read how proud and calm
A patriot could die,
With his last words, his dying words,
A soldier's battle-cry.

From the Fame-leaf and Angel-leaf,
From monument and urn,
The sad of earth, the glad of heaven,
His tragic fate shall learn;
And on Fame-leaf and Angel-leaf
The name of Hale shall burn."

The link with the Biblical narrative of Christ's "crucifixion" is clear as shown in the words " E'en the solemn Word of God,"He walks where Christ hath trod," ; "But his last words, his message-words," ; "The sad of earth, the glad of heaven," and "on Fame-leaf and Angel-leaf." In the Biblical account, thus, Jesus Christ appears as the hero who treads the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem and courageously accepts to sacrifice himself for God's sake and the salvation of the saints who followed his message. The poem shows Hales various parts of his silent mission (he seeks/he hears) as a spy for the continental army at night, during the American Revolution considered by the "Black Regiment" (Patriotic Black Christian priests) as God's plan to be fulfilled by the hero through his ultimate sacrifice.

4- Symbols as literary devices in poems of revolutionary Algeria

Algerian revolutionary poet, Mufdi Zachariah, wrote a poem (the Ascending Martyr[2]) drawing on to Qu'ranic account of Jesus Christ's attempt to crucifixion. While the fires of the Algerian revolution were burning, Mufdi depicts the first death sentence through guillotine of Algerian hero, Ahmad Zahana, nicknamed Zabana at Barbarossa prison in Algiers on June 18, 1956. Zabana, the national martyr, became an icon too, for the Algerian nation and revolutionaries all over the world.

Revolutionary poems were important means of communication during the Revolution. Mufdi and he like Algerian-committed poets used the language akin to pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The national hero, like American spy Nathan Hale, needed both adversity, patience and determination. This would lead him to uprising and power to overcome such adversity and justify his revolt. Mufdi narrates Zabana's death in rhetorical terms to uplift the revolutionary spirits of the Algerian people combating the superior war-machine of French colonizers. In this tragic poem, Mufdi uses both similar mythical representation and symbols to depict this national hero's fate as Christ who calmly treads the path to his alleged death. In the following verses, Zabana, is also ready for the sacrifice. Mufdi boosts this hero's courage by chanting a hymn to the Revolution:

قام يختال كالمسيح وئيدا يتهادى نشوانَ، يتلو النشيدا
باسمَ الثغر، كالملائك، أو كالطفل، يستقبل الصباح الجديدا

Translated as:

"Like the Messiah Jesus, he rose up
Chanting the sacred hymn,
Smiling as an angel or a child
Welcoming the rising new morn"[3]

Mufdi attempts to influence his readers by using religious symbols that carry out expressive capacities, allowed by the rich Arabic rhetorical language. In fact, Zabana welcomes death as a beneficial reward but not as a punitive sentence, as innocently as the child who welcomes the rising morning with a smile. This rhetoric exerts both an impressive impact and an effective influence on the readers. Zabana, welcomes death as he struggles for a just and noble cause during the Algerian Revolution. Mufdi's use of rhetorical images from the Holy Qu'ran as to establish the link between Zabana, the messenger of liberty with the different messengers of God's word such as Jesus Christ and Moses as the following verses illustrate:

شامخاً أنفه، جلالاً وتيهاً رافعاً رأسَه، يناجي الخلودا

[2] Source: Omara El hams. Website:
[3] My translation of the verses from Arabic.

!رافلاً في خلاخل، زغردت تملأ من لحنها الفضاء البعيدا
حالماً، كالكليم، كلّمه المجد، فشد الحبال يبغي الصعودا
وتسامى، كالروح، في ليلة القدر، سلاماً، يشِعُّ في الكون عيدا
وامتطى مذبح البطولة مع راجاً، ووافى السماءَ يرجو المزيدا

Translated as:

"Raising up his nose with might and lifting his head, seeking eternity
And dragging his chains whose noise is echoed by the remote space
Dreaming like Moses, of the word of glory
And taking tightly the cords seeking ascension to Heavens
And like Jesus, during the Night of Power,
Sending messages of peace
That spread about the universe as moments of feast
And ascending the sacrificial plot of bravery
With much hopes to welcome even more sacrifices."[4]

The words "lifting his nose and his head (شامخاً أنفه، جلالاً وتيهاً رافعاً رأسَه، يناجي الخلودا" instead of bowing his head as a shamed murderer would do, shows the sense of the martyr's pride while taken to his death. The other words "far away space, الفضاء البعيدا" "looking for immortality, يناجي الخلودا", يناجي الخلودا " "ascension, الصعودا" "like the one who talked to God كالكليم" "as a the Spirit (Gabriel), كالروح" "The Night of Destiny, ليلة القدر" "the universe, الكون" and "heavens السماءَ" are typical images borrowed from the Holy Qu'ran and reflecting God's messages to his successive prophets/messengers, particularly the Holy Qu'ran on the Night of Destiny.

These divine messages revealed are linked to the one of the Revolution Mufdi, the poet, proclaims as a "holy" message "sent" to the Algerian patriots by God to "rise and struggle" to deliver the Algerian nation from the colonial dark "night" to the "new rising morning" of liberty, independence and progress. Zabana is reported to have said, like Nathan Hale, some words before his death: "O death, in what you judge, I am satisfied, if my people live happy." Also, he would have said: "If I die, Algeria will live, free and independent, you will not perish."

5- Conclusion

Finally, both Francis Miles Finch and Mufdi Zakaria, used poetry to amplify and proliferate historical and religious characters in order to create a stirring patriotic myth, during their respective Revolution. Sometimes, hardly known regional folk heroes are turned into national icons like Paul Revere in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" patriotic poem. Although such

[4] My translation of the verses from Arabic.

heroes are defined by their past, they remain, however, transcendental as they become the national identity of each country. Thus, each Revolutionary legacy continues to be shaped, interpreted, and recast. Each poetry on either revolution had set for itself the task of analyzing its nation's violent and radical Revolutionary upsurge of colonials.

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