

QASSEM AMEEN (1863-1908)

- A RESEARCHER WHO SOUGHT TRUTH FOR ITS OWN SAKE, NOT AS A STEPPING STONE TO AUTHORITY AND HIGH POSITION.
- A THINKER WHO PRECEDED HIS AGE IN RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMAN IN SOCIETY.
- AN IDEALIST IN HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD LOVE.

To introduce Qassem Ameen. It is appropriate to mention the following story about him:

When, in 1890, the Duke of Harcourt, a French writer, published a book about Egypt, depicting the backward condition of Egyptians and the low status of Egyptian women, Qassem retorted by publishing in French an article in which he debated the statements of the French writer. He wrote that Egypt granted its citizens all the rights proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man as propounded by the French Revolution, and that the Egyptian government was bound to apply in its decisions the principles of justice and equality.

Following his statement, Qassem Ameen, who was a lawyer and a judge by profession, proceeded to examine his conclusions seriously. Was he right in his refutation of the Frenchman's ideas? Or was he simply moved by national zeal? He then started a careful, objective investigation of the social conditions in Egypt and came to the conclusion that theories and sweeping general statements did not agree with reality. The recognition of the "rights of man" by the Egyptian government did not guarantee their application in practice. After long deliberation, he laid his finger on what he considered the chief cause of cultural backwardness: the inferior condition of women. "If half of the population", he argued, "lead a life of slavery, fear and ignorance, how can we expect any development for the entire nation?"

From these investigations about the true condition of women in Egypt, he proceeded to write earnestly. His books, "Emancipation of Woman" and "The New Woman" are remarkable monuments in the history of Arab feminism, revealing his sincerity of character, his wide scholarship, and his extensive culture derived from books and travel. In his works he used a scientific approach based on the logic of hypotheses, observed experience, data comparison and induced conclusions.

Qassem Ameen examined the rights which Islamic law confers on women and found that it gave them equality with men in civic rights, such as those of transaction, performance of sales and purchases, possession, donation, declaration of will and so on, without obliging them to obtain their husbands' agreement. But certain circumstances in later centuries that pervaded the Moslem World, brought about a despotic patriarchal rule on the part of the governors, thereby influencing their male subjects to adopt a similar attitude toward their womenfolk. Wives

were imprisoned in their homes by force. Men indulged openly in the practice of polygamy. Women slaves were kept as concubines. The right to divorce was abused and other social injustices enacted.

If men allowed their daughters to receive some education, they equally prevented them from practicing any form of work, thus encouraging them to forget what they knew, to lead a dull, useless life.

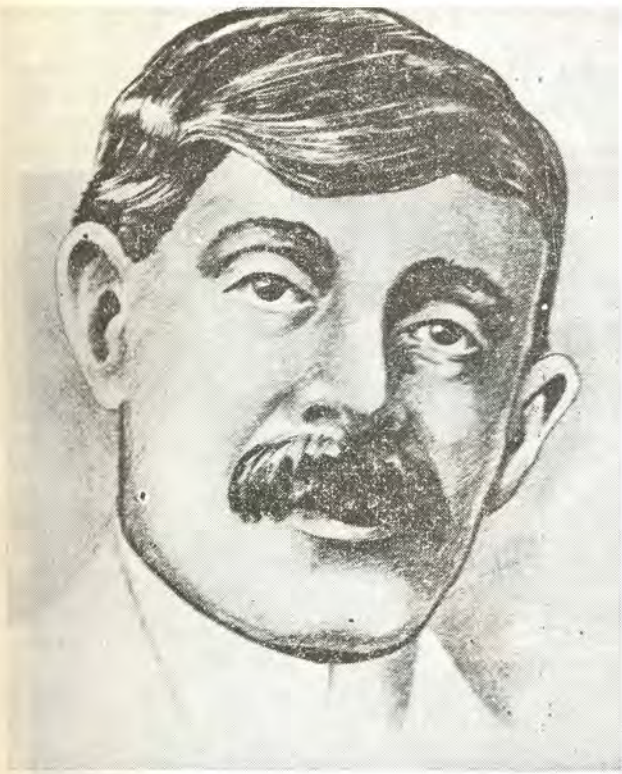
In his exposition, Qassem Ameen resorted to all kinds of religious, logical, and scientific arguments. He applied his knowledge of economics, for example, when he compared a woman who has been deprived of education and the ability to work with a large treasure stored in a chest, which the owner contemplates every day but fails to invest wisely for the full profit it could represent. Such ironies pointed out many cultural contradictions.

He also quoted economics when he said that a woman needs both education and work in order to be able to manage her property or to gain her living in case she remains unmarried. Or, similarly, if she is divorced or widowed, or married to a man who has suddenly become bankrupt or unable for other reasons to provide for the whole family, work is necessary for survival.

Besides economics, he used psychology as a source of argument, particularly when he asserts that education and work are both necessary for the development of a woman's personality. She could be, for her husband, a friend, a companion, or a counselor instead of being an obedient slave. For a truly cultured man, there is no greater happiness than that of sharing life with a woman who understands him, shares his ideas and his plans, and plays for him the role usually played by an intimate male friend. Such companionship was unthinkable in a culture of patriarchal despotism.

In discussing the traditional feminine veil, Qassem tries to show, by referring to Koranic verses, that the veil was never an Islamic institution. Moslem jurisprudence allows a woman to keep her face and her hands unveiled. Moreover, the use of the veil is harmful to a woman's health; often detrimental to her character. It interferes with the proper management of her affairs and retards her social development as a person.

"It is a great mistake to believe that the veil can be a safeguard of a woman's chastity. Experience has shown



that unveiled countrywomen who mix with men are more chaste and less inclined to betray their husbands than the veiled city women who remain secluded in their homes and develop an unhealthy attitude toward the other sex."

His deep understanding of religion led him to declare that a person who sins in thought is just as guilty as one who sins in action. If the veil could prevent actual adultery, it should prevent mental adultery which is punishable by divine law, though not by our common court laws. A woman's virtue, to be trustworthy, must come from within and not be imposed by oppressive means which may induce revolt. The veil is the outward sign of female bondage.

His investigation and experience lead him to assert that segregation of the sexes led both men and woman to suspect illicit relations or expressions of sexual desire in the most innocent motions, and in the simplest looks or utterances. Even now, in communities where segregation of the sexes is still practiced and the veil has been discarded, people suspect the existence of a love affair between a man and a woman who look at each other, exchange a passing word, or salute each other as a sign of recognition. For segregationists, no other communication could exist between a man and a woman except that with sexual connotations.

Writing of marriage, he compared two definitions: that of religious leaders who define it as "a contract allowing a man to deflower a woman"; and the Koranic definition that states: "One of His signs is that He created for you, out of yourselves, spouses in whom you will find repose and instilled between you and them friendship and kindness." The first definition, says Ameen, is coarse and

materialistic, whereas the second refers to a relationship of friendliness, kindness and mutual affection between husband and wife. No other definition surpasses it in beauty.

In handling his subject, Qassem Ameen proves to be not only a fair judge and a careful investigator but also a rare idealist. To him, sensual attraction between a man and a woman is of short duration, while attraction based on spiritual and intellectual ties is more permanent. Love cannot permeate a man's soul and form an essential part of it, unless he has discovered in his beloved those feminine qualities of gentleness, fine taste, intelligence, perception, dexterity, frankness, truthfulness and all the other moral virtues which are far more appreciated than physical beauty by intelligent and cultured men. For him, it is impossible for true love to exist between an ignorant woman and a truly educated man, no matter how beautiful that woman may be.

Qassem Ameen belonged to an elite who were not satisfied with mere words but took care to carry thought into serious and sincere action. "His writings", says Huda Shirawi, the late president of the Egyptian Women's Union, "expound ideas in which he sincerely believed. He spoke out of conviction which was free from any desire for gain or fame." His daring to say what he thought and to defy public opinion brought him violent criticism, refutations, and angry threats from the reactionary majority of his countrymen. Yet, he had the courage to criticize them in these terms: "Divine law prohibits many other sins which it considers just as bad as adultery. For example, assassination, which is considered by both divine and human law even more dangerous than adultery. Why did we not use against the former sin (assassination), the same strong preventive measures which we have been using against the latter? Why should we imagine that adultery is the worst possible crime and, therefore, that it should receive the worst possible punishment?"

Though Ameen died in early middle age, he found time to extend his plan of reform beyond that of woman's emancipation. He denounced certain social evils which prevailed in governmental administration and he even proposed some original ideas about the reform of the Arabic language.

Qassem Ameen's burning zeal and wide interest in Egyptian and Arab evolution and development reminds us of another reformer: Walieddin Yakan, who was Qassem's contemporary and shared his enthusiasm for women's emancipation but on a more limited scale. Yakan, a humanitarian poet and journalist, wrote a prayer for students at the American University of Beirut in 1921. This "Prayer of Humanity", one which they could all recite in private or in public, represented a sign of common feeling and mutual understanding. Humanity for Yakan included all Arab men and women equally.

At this period of our history, amid the suffering from severe political and social crises, it would help us to seek inspiration and guidance in the examples of former leaders who were witnesses through their words and their lives to the truth of spiritual values and the necessity of holding fast to them for a better life.