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## THE CONCEPT OF PLATONIC LOVE IN KHALIL GIBRAN'S THE BROKEN WINGS

### Article Particulars

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### Abstract

*The Broken Wings is a poetic novella by the Lebanese-American writer Khalil Gibran. Khalil Gibran is arguably one of the finest writers of the Arabic world, "In his writing, he raged against the oppression of women and the tyranny of the Church and called for freedom from Ottoman rule." (Amirani, Shoku, and Stephanie Hegarty. "Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet: Why is it so loved?" BBC World Service, 12 May 2012.) The Broken Wings is a tale of love, thwarted by the corrupt power. Selma Karemy the female protagonist of the novel, is forced into a marriage with the nephew of a nefarious bishop. Her fate is sealed with the misery of a loveless marriage yet her secret meetings with her poet-lover makes her wipe her tears and share her smiles yet the story ends tragically with her death in childbirth: "it seems as if the child had come to rescue his mother from her pitiless husband" (Gibran 74). The Broken Wings is an autobiographical novella and is considered to be the best book written by Gibran (Schuster, Shlomit C. The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study). This paper will try to analogize the love of Salema Karamy and the young Visionary with Plato's concept of love in The Symposium.*

**Keywords:** Platonic love, Oppression, Tyranny, Love, Church.

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### Introduction

Plato gave his concept of love in his dialogue *The Symposium*, in which a group of notable men is at a symposium, or dinner-party, given in honor of the tragedian Agathon. It is decided on the suggestion Phaedrus that each one of the men will give a speech in honor of the God of Love. One of the notable men is named Socrates, he talks about the various possibilities of love i.e., sexual and asexual love clear. Socrates relates the idea of platonic love to Diotima, the prophetess. According to Diotima Love initially can begin as a baser feeling towards a particularly beautiful person but its next

step is to move from this physical beauty to moral beauty to the absolute and divine beauty. Love for Diotima is a "means of ascent to contemplation of the divine." ("Platonic love." Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic love.) According to Plato, the most veracious use of love is to direct it towards the love of the one divine being. A beautiful and lovely person influences the mind of a person to seek other higher spiritual things. Plato's *Symposium* presents us with two types of love (Eros), one is the Vulgar Eros or earthly Eros and the other is the Divine Eros or the Divine Love. Vulgar Eros is driving satisfaction out of physical gratification of the physical body, it is connected more to physical pleasure and reproduction. It is more or less like the Id of Freud's tripartite structure of the human mind. Divine Eros, on the other hand, is a journey from physical realm of mundane love to the divine love, it begins as an attraction towards a beautiful form but ends up as a love for supreme beauty. This concept of Divine love is what later came to be known as Platonic Love.

Khalil Gibran initiates the novella with the young poet-visionary musing about the times when love had not altered his being, he remembers a time in his life when he was a sufferer without comprehending the cause of his suffering: I suffered without understanding the reason for my suffering. It is said that unsophistication makes a man empty and that emptiness makes him carefree. It may be true among those who were born dead and who exist like frozen corpses; but the sensitive boy who feels much and knows little is the most unfortunate creature under the sun, because he is torn by two forces. The first force elevates him and shows him the beauty of existence through a cloud of dreams; the second ties him down to the earth and fills his eyes with dust and overpowers him with fears and darkness.(2)

According to Plato, our soul is a knower it is intellectual in nature, it knows the true reality that reality which is permanent and unchanging but when it is inside our body it has a different situation to face because our physical bodies have limitations. The physical body cannot comprehend transcendental reality, it requires perceptions to experience something. In other words, it has to experience something physical first which will bring it near to that ultimate reality. The soul cannot be satisfied by hoarding after power, money or fame and even if it goes after such materialistic things it will only end up distancing itself from its ultimate goal that is the knowledge of true reality. The yearning and suffering of the soul won't end unless it reaches its ultimate source or intellectual light (Republic, Plato). Our protagonist in the story also suffers for no apparent reason but his suffering is the suffering of every individual who wants to walk on the road to self-actualization, this suffering are trials and tribulations which every wayfarer has to witness and these difficulties will only end once he finds something equivalent to that spiritual goal. Rumi in his "*The Mathnawî-yéMa`nawî*" (The Song of the Reed) says: Listen to the reed (flute), how it is complaining! It is telling about separations

(Saying), "Ever since I was severed from the reed field, men and women have lamented in (the presence of) my shrill cries.

"(But) I want a heart (which is) torn, torn from separation, so that

I may explain the pain of yearning."(Mathnawi I: 1-3)("The Song of the Reed (part One)." *THE SONG OF THE REED (part One)*. Trans. Ibrahim Gamard. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 June 2017.)

Reed or a flute is hollow inside, Rumi compares it to the soul emptied of desires and preoccupations. When we blow air through the flute it produces a sound akin to a lament, as if the reed is lamenting over the loss or separation from its source i.e., the reed field. The human soul like the reed or flute is always yearning for a union with its source. In the prelapsarian state, Adam and Eve were the inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Eden is that "reed field" for us to which we have to return ultimately. While living in this world our soul will yearn for that state of unity and perfection which we lost after The Fall. Khalil Gibran develops the same idea throughout *The Broken Wings*, the young visionaries yearning is the same as that of a man on the path of spirituality, he wants to know more and reach that truth which is ultimate and supreme in itself, and love shows him the way to begin his journey. This love is the Divine Eros discussed earlier, Selma Karamy is not just the writer's beloved but his spiritual companion, and she is the one person who inspires him from darkness to light. On one of the author's first meetings with Selma at her home, he describes her by saying that "Selma Karamy had both bodily and spiritual beauty, but how can I describe her to one who never knew her" (12).

Love is partially lust as well, lust is an integral part of love. In other words, the physical aspect of love is a stepping stone towards the attainment of that spiritual love. In one of the conversations between Meno and Socrates, Socrates says:

Well we've established that love is partly lust, but that lust is not solely what constitutes love. Therefore besides lust other things must be present. Indeed, bread is not solely comprised of wheat, but must be mixed with eggs and milk and so on, and then the resulting dough must be allowed to rise under sufficient heat.("Socratic Dialogue: What of Love?" *Socratic Dialogue: What of Love?* - *Wattpad*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 June 2017.)

Here Plato has compared love to a piece of bread. Bread is not made just out of wheat, it is the product of milk and eggs put together, similarly, love is not just the physical part of it but also the spiritual part of it. It requires both physical as well as spiritual love to get to that ultimate knowledge, the recipe of love like the recipe of bread requires proper efforts, patience and time. The love between the young poet and Selma karamy is of the spiritual nature because they never consummate it but it is not devoid of that physicality, it is the kind of love which we discussed in relation with

Plato, "Real beauty lies in the spiritual accord that is called love which can exist between a man and a woman" (Gibran 10).

The problem with regarding love as mere lust is that it reduces the object of affection to the category of animal. Then again romantic idolatry too has its flaws as it places the object of affection on a higher pedestal near to that of an angel. To choose the former over the latter or vice-versa will be a lopsided definition of love, body and soul are both essential components of humanity therefore both have to be combined to generate a synthesis which is more harmonized. John Donne gave a solution to this problem in his concept of idealized love, he gave this concept largely under the influence of Christian Platonism. Christian Platonism does away with the duality between hedonism and mysticism, it balances the two by giving due importance to the physical aspect of love as well. In "Valediction: of the Book," Donne regards physical beauty as the sign of the divine and heavenly beauty thereby concluding that physical love is the beginning of higher love:

Here Love's divines (since all divinity  
Is love or wonder) may find all they seek,  
Whether abstract spiritual love they like,  
Their souls exhaled with what they do not see,  
Or, loth so to amuse  
Faith's infirmity, they choose

Something which they may see and use;  
For, though mind be the heaven, where love doth sit,

Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it (Vv. 29-36; Carey 107). (Naugle, David. "John Donne's Poetic Philosophy of Love.")

Andreasen talks about Christian Platonism and its relation to his concept of love in these words:

Although human beings may enjoy and love transient physical beauty, it alone will never satisfy, and so they must also love spiritual qualities and ultimately the eternal and unchanging imago Dei which shines within the beloved; when people do love the image of God, their love helps them climb toward God; such love is lasting, because it is founded on something not subject to change; and because such love is selfless, sympathetic, and charitable, it produces an unshakable spiritual union between two partners (197).

Andreasen in the above lines states that what we need is a union of soul and body, for if we worship the body alone it will be idolatry, and we worship God alone we cannot reach out to Him without first loving His creation. Khalil Gibran in one of the inspiring moments within the novella tells us "it is wrong to think that love comes from long companionship and preserving courtship. Love is the offspring of spiritual affinity and unless that affinity is created in a moment, it will not be created in years, or even generations"(21). His love for Selma started off as a matter of spiritual affinity, which a person can even witness with a person with whom he or she has no intention of tying a knot, but in case of the author there was had an element of physicality to it as well:

Every now and then we would become calm and wipe our tears and start smiling, forgetting everything except Love; we embraced each other until our hearts melted; then Selma would print a pure kiss on my forehead and fill my heart with ecstasy; I would return the kiss as she bent her ivory neck while her cheeks became gently red like the first ray of dawn on the forehead of hills (57).

### Conclusion

Towards the end of the story, the Poet-Visionary asks Selma to leave the country with him, to escape the slavery of her married life but Selma doesn't agree:

No, no my beloved. Heaven placed in my hand a cup, full of vinegar and gall; I forced myself to drink it in order to know the full bitterness at the bottom until nothing was left save a few drops, which I shall drink patiently. I am not worthy of a new life of love and peace; I am not worthy of a new life of love and peace; I am not strong enough for life's pleasures and sweetness, because a bird with broken wings cannot fly in the spacious sky (Gibran 64).

She sacrifices her love lest the people may think of it as some sort of an extra-marital affair. She decides to stay and drink her bitter glass of vinegar in the form of her marriage. A woman like Selma is bound by the conventions and ignorance of the society which understands love not more than the consummation of it. She decides not to against the society and the laws of marriage. To conclude her love proves to be her source of self-actualization "Now I know that there is something higher than heaven and deeper than the ocean and stranger than life & death and time. I know now what I did not know before"(Gibran 20).

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