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A Heart Never Reclaimed: A Study of Hemingway Heroine, Catherine Barkley from the Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: To the present time, Catherine Barkley remains possibly the most controversial Hemingway Heroine. Loftily regarded as the “ultimate dream-girl” and at times blurred by the notion of being “amoeba-like”, most of the critics think of her in terms of male fantasy only. Interestingly, there are also critics who claim that “Catherine is a fully drawn character.” Supporting the claim, the present paper tries to confer how being enslaved to her own yearnings and desire, Catherine Barkley seems to bring about her own doom. Exhibiting that, it tries to explore the profound lessons Catherine Barkley and her relationship with Frederic Henry hold for a Muslim reader.

Keywords: Catherine Barkley, doom, lessons, Muslim reader

Introduction:

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* tells a gripping tale of love between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, during wartime. At first the young American lad, serving with an Italian Ambulance unit takes his relationship with the English nurse as a game. Gradually the relationship develops and their feelings for each other deepen. The turbulent atmosphere during the World War I compliments the tempestuous heart of the two lovers. It is the death of Catherine that leaves Henry at odds, without any direction. Ironically, it is Catherine's disposition and her relationship with Henry that seems to provide a Muslim reader, 'direction'.

There are critics who would force us to think of Catherine Barkley in terms of male fantasy only. But in order to be fair to her we need to understand the fact that she is a character who is able to stand on her own. “To do justice to Catherine, we must be fair

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to the text and acknowledge that, though always seen from Frederic's perspective, Catherine is a fully drawn character. ... Neither demeaned nor idealized by Hemingway" (Wexler, 1981: 112). Had not she been a fully drawn character she would not have been able to initiate her relationship with Henry by pronouncing, "Do we have to go on and talk this way?"* (p.17) on their very first meeting. A deep study of the initial reaction of Catherine towards Henry will reveal how capturing his attention and making him fall in love with her was her 'best laid plans'.

Having lost the "very nice boy" made Catherine miserable. And it seems since then she has been searching for a 'nicer boy'; as the vacuum had become intolerable and the empty space of her heart needed to be occupied by someone. "She devices a kind of therapy for herself by pretending to love Frederic in place of her fiancé" (Wexler, 1981: 114). It seems she was carrying the leather bound 'thin rattan stick' not that much to commemorate her lost fiancé but to attract Henry and get himself entrapped. Her plan seems to work, as Henry immediately asks, "What is the stick?" (p.18).

In order to understand Catherine's plan and her developing relationship with Henry, we need to comprehend her relationship with her unnamed lost fiancé. Catherine had been engaged for about eight long years, to this 'very nice boy', whom she grew up with, who 'was going to marry' her. She was so in love with him that she now regrets not marrying him and not giving him the 'thing'. Catherine utters, "I was a fool not to. I could have given him that anyway. ... I didn't care about the other thing and he could have had it all. He could have had anything he wanted if I would have known. ... I know all about it now." (p.18). But he went to the war and got himself blown 'all to bits'. Now, having nothing to do about her relationship with her fiancé, she wants to cut her hair off as a token of love. Since the death of her fiancé, Catherine seems to carry an empty heart, unoccupied, longing and yearning for someone. While her love for her dead fiancé is true, she seems to draw Henry's attention even more by narrating the reason behind becoming a nurse (V.A.D.). She had the 'silly idea' that 'he might come to the hospital where I was'. With this, having laid her plan, she awaits their next meeting.

Gradually her plan seems to work, as she so carefully executes taking all her time. As a part of her plan, she slaps Henry hard on his face, when he tries to kiss her during their second meeting; and makes Henry say, "You did exactly right, ... I don't mind at all." (p.24). Soon after that, changing her manner entirely, calling him 'sweet' and 'dear', Catherine declares, "I'd be glad to kiss you if you don't mind." (p.25). And soon after that crying and sobbing she asks, "You will be good to me, won't you?" (p.25), as if

visualizing part of her old lover in him. Slowly looking up at him she hints her secret design in a sort of veiled language, "Because we're going to have a strange life." (p.25).

Soon we find her carefully executed game in action. "Catherine set her game in motion in Chapter VI, in the hospital garden. After first receiving... with a formal, 'Good evening, Mr. Henry' ...- she shifts abruptly into a mode of heightened emotionality: 'You've been away a long time'" (Lockridge, 1988: 173). She makes Henry affirm that he loves her. She makes him proclaim, "I've come back to Catherine in the night. ... I'll always come back" (p.29), as if finding her lost lover in him entirely. She conceives, even after all these her plan did not seem to work fully; as deeply studying Henry she realizes, he still does 'not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her'. In order to inject the sense of guilt in him, she asserts, "This is a rotten game we play, ... You don't have to pretend you love me" (p.29-30), "as she entirely sees through... the game-playing and lying" (Lockridge, 1988: 171). That 'fine little show' seems to work well, as Henry starts having her thoughts soon after that. It seems, in order to intensify his feelings, Catherine does not see him the next day. And that does the magic! Henry speaks out inwardly, "suddenly I felt lonely and empty. I had treated seeing Catherine very lightly... when I could not see her there I was feeling lonely and hollow." (p.38). The next afternoon Catherine seems to comprehend her triumph by observing Henry's face. And as if like a trophy puts the Saint Anthony from her neck into his hand.

Time elapses as Henry gets attacked by a trench mortar shell in the 'show up above Plava'. The next meeting between the two takes place at the American Hospital in Milan. That is where their mutual love moulds and takes a proper shape and Catherine observes her plan properly executed, as Henry declares, "God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. ... But God knows I had" (p.85).

It is in Milan that Catherine's love for Henry reaches its climax as she is able to make Henry even a 'nicer boy' than her dead fiancé. We find her surrendering herself completely as she doesn't want to deprive her present lover of anything the way she did to her former lover. She doesn't want to regret and make a fool of herself twice. "Henry is wounded at the front and comes to Catherine in hospital- thus embodying her, "'silly idea' that [the fiancé] might come to the hospital where [she] was," with a "picturesque" wound- that she actually goes bed with him" (Lockridge, 1988: 174).

From now on Henry turns out to be something divine in the eyes of Catherine. "You've got a lovely everything", (p.93) she says. She gets furious about the idea of anyone touching him other than herself, no matter if the person is a male like Dr. Valentini. Her success depends on the amount of love she is able to shower on him, "I'll say just what

you wish and I'll do what you wish... I'll do what you want and say what you want and then I'll be a great success, won't I?" (p.96).

Catherine is so much in love with Henry, that her identity gets mingled with his. That is what she wants. She deliberately doesn't want to bear an individual self. "Catherine has been perceived as lacking in character because she has chosen to define herself in terms of a relationship. "There isn't any me any more. Just what you want", she tells Frederic" (Spanier, 2007: 140). On another instance, when Henry brings up the issue of marriage and says he wants it for her; she strongly replies, "There isn't any me. I'm you. Don't make up a separate me" (p.103). "Catherine acts as if she knows quite well where Frederic's love is coming from. She is hypersensitive to his ego; she is forever asking him, "What would you like me to do now?"; and she continually responds to their situation in terms of his needs" (Fetterley, 2007: 69).

Observing her love towards Henry, one might ask why she is doing so. Probing deep into her character would reveal the reason behind. And that is where the lessons lie. In order to understand Catherine's longing for Henry, first of all we need to understand the concept of soul according to the Islamic perspective . "Islam... does recognize that the soul of each child came into existence prior to its birth on earth" (Philips, 2005 : 61). The Prophet (SAW) stated that, (as cited in Philips, 2005 : 61):

When Allah created Adam, He took a covenant from him in a place called Na'man on the day of 'Arafah (the 9th of the 12th lunar month known as Dhul-Hijjah), then extracted from him all of his descendants who would be born until the end of the world, generation after generation, and spread them out in front of Him in order to take covenant from them also. (Part of a Hadith from an authentic narration of Ibn 'Abbas collected by Ahams. See al-Albani's *Silsilah al-Ahadith as-Sahihah*, Kuwait: ad-Dar as-Salafeeyah and Amman: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah. 2nd ed., 1983, vol. 4 p.158, hadith no. 1623)

The above mentioned hadith was part of the Prophet's explanation of the Qur'anic verse in which Allah asserted:

And whenever thy Sustainer brings forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, He [thus] calls upon them to bear witness about themselves: "Am I not your Sustainer?" - to which they answer: "Yea, indeed, we do bear witness thereto!"[Of this We remind you,] lest you say on the Day of Resurrection, "Verily, we were unaware of this"; or lest you say, "Verily, it was but our forefathers who, in times gone by, began to ascribe divinity to other beings be-

side God; and we were but their late offspring: wilt Thou, then, destroy us for the doings of those inventors of falsehoods?" And thus clearly do We spell out these messages; and [We do it] so that they [who have sinned] might return [unto Us]. (*The Message of the Quran*, Al-Araf: 172-174)

Doctor Bilal Philip's commentary regarding this issue might help in clear the concept further.

Since Allah made all human beings swear to His Godhood when He created Adam, this oath is printed on the human soul ... So when a child is born, it has with it a natural belief in Allah. This natural belief is called in Arabic the "fitrah". ... When the child matures in youth... the devils try their best to encourage him to... go astray. Evils are made pleasing to him and he must now live in the midst of a struggle between his 'fitrah' and his desires in order to find the right road" (Philips, 2005: 65-66)

Interestingly, this struggle between 'fitrah' and 'desire' has been wonderfully portrayed by William Wordsworth. He captures this prenatal existence and the subsequent forgetfulness astoundingly in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar. (59-62)

To combine the Islamic concept of 'fitrah' and Wordsworth's view, it can be explicated that, the maker would always put on a seal as a mark, on his/her creation. Our Maker has done the same. We bear the seal or the mark, not like the visible ones, of the products of this materialistic world; but an innate invisible one. And that has opted us to preserve a place deep inside our hearts, for the Creator only. Growing up in this world, makes us meet people, see things; which later on tend to occupy the 'reserved place'. To explain the concept further, the claim made by Wordsworth in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* within verse number 67 to 77, can be paraphrased. According to the poet's claim, during our 'infancy' we remain connected to our Lord. But as we start growing up the world, turned into a 'prison-house' with all the temptations it has to offer, gradually tries to imprison us. In our early years we seem to retain the connection no matter how slight the degree maybe. But soon as we give our heart to the temptations of the world, the connection 'die away, and fade into the light of common day'.

This is what has happened to Catherine. In the course of time, she lost her connection with God. While talking about the marriage issue she boldly declares, "You see, dar-

ling, it would mean everything to me if I had any religion. But I haven't any religion."(p.104). The vacant empty space of her heart, was looking for something/someone to fill it with. Her lust, yearning and desire got hold of her and she made the 'nice boy' (her fiancé) occupy the utmost portion of her heart. As none can predict future, she did not realize this relationship can come to an end so soon. Not even a year of the death of her fiancé passes that she gets impatient to fill up the vacuum. Hence she grabs Henry and places him on the throne of her heart. She let him occupy so much of her that he becomes almost 'God-like' to her, "You're my religion. You're all I've got." (p.104). Her faith centers around Henry; "I'm very faithful. You'll be sick of me I'll be so faithful." (p.104). Rightly then, "Daniel Schneider describes Catherine as "despair turning desperately to the religion of love" (Spanier, 2007: 140).

Eventually this relationship benefits none of them. Ephemeral passion, brief obsession, momentary laughter, temporary fun; a kind of short vacation in Switzerland, these are what characterizes their relationship. The night on which Henry was supposed to return to the front, he takes Catherine to a hotel across the station. There she seems to pronounce her inner concealed feeling. "I never felt like a whore before" (p.137), she says. Though soon she asserts in a cheerful tone, "I'm a good girl again" (p.138), her earlier thought seems to linger longer. Because of the 'God-like' stature that Catherine has given to Henry, she becomes extremely self-conscious during her pregnancy, "I know I'm awfully stupid now and I think you ought to get away so you won't be tired of me... I'm big now... maybe... a bore to you" (p.264-265). Even in the delivery room she feels sorry to keep her 'God' waiting; "I'm so sorry I go on so long" (p.280).

No matter how she calls herself 'brave' and her death a 'dirty trick', she actually seems to be afraid of death. Though the critics have made her the Hemingway code hero(ine) out of it, her repeated plea of not letting her die doesn't make her the least brave. She doesn't want any priest but only Henry beside her, as she realizes the present world is the only world she knows.

The relationship doesn't benefit Henry either. He neither had any "feeling of fatherhood" for the baby, nor any attachment or concern towards lost Catherine. "Through Catherine's death, then, Frederic Henry avoids having to face the responsibilities incumbent upon a husband and father" (Fetterley, 2007: 70). He seems to have loved the alive Catherine only, the dead one was nothing but a statue, not worth loving. That makes it easy on his part to leave the hospital and walk back to the hotel. "There is, moreover, a suggestion that she is a kind of "life lure" which attracts him to his doom" (Ganzel, 1971: 593).

Even this death scene of hers bears profound lessons for a Muslim reader. "Catherine and Henry discover together the great deficiency of romantic love when she is dying: ... Since their source of value is another person- ... - it is mutable" (Wexler, 1981: 122). Had it been a marital relationship things would not have been so. Out of love and kindness and most importantly out of fear of being accountable towards God, Henry would not have seemingly abandoned dead Catherine. As the Lord of the Worlds asserts:

And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!"
(*The Message of the Quran*, Ar-Room: 21)

This is true for his "feeling of fatherhood" as well. Had Henry been conscious of marital duties, he would have felt differently. As the Lord of the Universe states:

"... and who pray: "O our Sustainer! Grant that our spouses and our offspring be a joy to our eyes,⁵⁶ and cause us to be foremost among those who are conscious of Thee!"

(*The Message of the Quran*, Al-Furqan: 74)

The trouble with Catherine is that, she fails to distinguish between ownership and companionship. The dividing line is clear. Only our Creator should own us, own our hearts; and no one else. We need companions, in the form of spouses undoubtedly. But the owner should be only One, Whose mark we bear. She ceases to realize the dividing line and turns her possible companion into her owner; and that is what brings about the doom. Catherine never reclaimed her heart. Her heart is where desire is. Desire has always been her actual God, finding physical existence in her fiancé first and then in Frederic Henry. In this regard Dr. Rafee'uddeen as quoted by Khan asserts:

Allah created the human with knowledge of Himself. The greatest honor the human can have is to be the perfect slave of Him. But if you do not strive to achieve that goal, you will still be hungry. If you do not fulfill that hunger with obedience to Allah, you will fulfill that hunger through something else. Even if that food of disobedience is disgusting and harmful to your body. So you are either a slave to Allah, or a slave to the worthless creation." (Khan, Undated)

Spanier says it right, "Catherine Barkley is the "real thing." In creating her, he (Hemingway) was more successful than perhaps he knew and than most of his critics have realized" (Spanier, 2007: 148). With all those lessons to be learned, just from a single character, a Muslim reader cannot agree more.

Studying the character of Catherine Barkley from the Islamic perspective makes us feel that Hemingway has been successful in creating this very character because with all her dark experiences, she appears as a guiding star for a Muslim reader. She teaches a Muslim reader how s/he is supposed to reclaim her/his heart from the false attachments and deceptive bondages of this world and offer it to Al-Wadud (one of the names of Allah, which means The Most Loving) only. Because it is only Allah, who truly loves, thus has the rightful claim over human hearts.

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Note:

- * All the quotations of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* are from Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. London, United Kingdom: Arrow Books, 1994. Print.