

## INTER-FAITH LOVE IN THE HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT IN EDOUARD VALMONT'S THE MOON OF THE FOURTEENTH NIGHT

*Fariba Farhangi*

*Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is carried out on Edouard Valmont's, The Moon of the Fourteenth Night, to explore how the inter-faith love in this literary piece is conditioned by historical and socio-cultural contexts of the period. The Moon of the Fourteenth Night, a western novel, narrates the story of the forbidden desire, between a Christian and a Muslim, and the impossibility of inter-faith love during the Constitutional Revolution. This essay intends to found out how cultural, religious, and historical differences influence the love relationship of the people to an extent that can make it impossible.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Constitutional Revolution, Historical Context, Inter-Faith Marriage, Love, Socio-Cultural Context*

---

### **Article History**

**Received: 10 Nov 2017 | Revised: 24 Nov 2017 | Accepted: 02 Dec 2017**

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Interfaith is a concept that has been with man for a number of decades. Inter-marriages have always been one of the concerns of communities and societies. In multi-cultural societies, the more cases of inter-marriages may occur and it may even turn to a norm. Moreover, modern societies, specifically, experience such an issue due to the diversity of races, ethnicities, and religions more than traditional even social contexts and closed cultures. Like any other socio-cultural condition, this matter has been reflected in literature; representing the impossibility of inter-faith love.

There are different ideas about forbidden loves. Simon May in his powerful, successful new book entitled love: A Secret History traces the evolution of the idea of love in Western culture, from Plato through the various phases of Christian thinking, via German romanticism and Nietzsche to the present day. He claims that "man has a problem because the great freedom of sex and marriage during last century has gradually been unable to change in love instead of reinvention of it". And that human love consisted of getting what in the far past was through only divine love is able to get, that is the love is our perfect and best source of existence and happiness, and it is the power by which we can overcome suffering and disappointment. Such exaggerated hopes for love, he fears, can only set us up for failure. Seemingly, the impossibility of inter-faith love has its roots in the historical, socio-cultural and religious contexts rather than being the matter of emotional faculty charged by human agents. And perhaps this is where the folklore steps in.

## DISCUSSIONS

The Moon of the Fourteenth Night is regarded as a forgotten novel. Valmont the author of the book directly addresses to the readers the situation of Iran during the Constitutional Revolution and emphasizes a forbidden love between two people from different culture and religion. The Moon of the Fourteenth Night is the private life of an unmarried diplomat in Persia during the revolution, a real love story in the time of constitutional revolution turned into a novel by Eustache De Lorry and Douglas Sladen, published in 1910. This novel is a fictionalized real story of a non-Muslim politician who spends his commission in Iran and falls for an Iranian Muslim girl, Bibi Mah, whose beauty is compared to the moon. It is considered as a forgotten novel, where as it could be a very useful source of historical, cultural information of the time of constitutional revolution. In this novel Edouard Valmont wrote down the diary of his brief romance, eager for the novelty and excitement of life in the native style falling into a liaison with a native woman. Valmont's notes are full of the atmosphere and incidents of this strange life. This novel is a brief overview of Islamic law, Iranian culture and social aspects concerning the marriage between a man and a woman from two different religions.

Edouard Valmont during his stay in Iran has fallen in love with Bibi Mah. Meanwhile, he goes through difficulty in making contact with her, since Bibi Mah belongs to a culture that is faced with religious and historical restrictions. Edouard therefore, has to suffer the restrictions or rather meet Bibi Mah privately. Their love relation begins, when he was in terrace hearing a feminine voice. When he rose, he saw two women crossing the courtyard. Immediately he falls in love with Bibi Mah and regards her as fair as the moon in the dark of the yard (The Moon of the Fourteenth Night 33). Bibi Mah and Valmont go through stolen meetings on the terrace, the romantic flight, the days they spend together in the guest chamber of that old mansion.

This book shows native Persian opinion upon the various phases of revolution, which naturally forms its backbone more than Valmont's pictures of the two romances which influenced his life in Persia, and the quaint details of his life a la Perse. There must be many readers only moderately interested in the alarms and massacres; the thirst for liberty, the grouping in the dark for the fabric of a constitution, the sea of words, now sullen now stormy, which enveloped the Persian Revolution.

In the novel the readers are represented with every detail of the strange architecture, the strange furniture, the Korans and personal characteristics of Bibi Mah herself and also Edouard Valmont. Valmont's life is full of the atmosphere and incidents of strange life. He deals with the beautiful Bibi Mah in the decayed old mansion, waited on by the faithful Mansur he had brought him from Tunis, whose Sunnite Mohammadanism, a heretical in Persian eyes, prevented him from betraying the situation to the accursed Shiites, and the Abyssian Sunnite wife whom Mansur had from in Persia.

The Moon of Fourteenth Night focuses on the position of Muslim women in family and society, all the costumes and norms of their life, their situation as limited creatures controlled by men. Studying this book highlights, the fact that how extraordinary was the situation of the main character by the attention she receives from a non-Muslim man. This novel draw attention to the extraordinary account of a political sermon preached by the Mulla whose Valmont calls Seyyid Jamal-ud –Din, which shows, more than anything else in the book, the trend of thought and spread of education among the Persian constitutions.

Bibi Mah belongs to Islamic religion and culture that is deemed the most dominant religion of the majority of Iranians. In Islamic cultures a man can marry a woman of other religions without converting to Islam, this term is called temporary marriage but in the other one the woman must convert to Islam that is called permanent marriage. But a woman can only marry a man who has already converted to Islam. It may have different regulations in other religions. Bibi Mah cannot marry Edouard Valmont, because of the impossibility of inter-faith love. She is a Muslim that is prohibited of marrying the non-Muslim Edouard. Additionally, within the historical context of constitutional revolution in the mentioned novel Iran and the women therein face conflicts, therefore are conditioned in interacting and making connection with the Christians and Westerners.

It is argued that the impossibility of inter-faith love in this novel has its roots in the historical, socio-cultural and religious contexts rather than being the matter of emotional faculty charged by human agents. Marriage is a social institution that transcends most societies, and in Iranian society it is closely tied to religion. In *The Moon of the Fourteenth Night* there are some obstacles from religious point of view in marriage. In Islam a woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man. It's not only the historical context that brings about the impossibility of Bibi Mah and Edouard's marriage, socio cultural issue is the next point, which limits this marriage.

According to Iranian culture a marriage may not be consummated while the moon is in the sign of the scorpion, nor during a lunar eclipse, nor on the day of a solar eclipse, nor at mid-day, nor at the close of twilight, nor during the three last days of the month El-mohak during which, the moon is below the horizon, nor between dawn and sunrise, nor during the first night of any month except the month Ramadan, nor during the middle night of the month, nor during a Journey, a tempest, or an earthquake. As it is represented, the lovers are, therefore, faced with socio-cultural limitations and difficulties one of which befalls Edouard and Bibi Mah as well.

It is argued that the situation depicted in *The Moon of the Fourteenth Night*, was the emotional reality of many Iranian's lives in the constitutional revolution era. In those days Muzaffar-ud-din was the father of the constitutional revolution as the most prominent majesty in the novel, "it is thought that he was sufficiently extravagant during his life time; his travels to Europe have run the country into debt, and it is scarcely in a position to incur fresh liabilities over his final journey" (*The Moon of the Fourteenth Night* 34).

The Iranian Constitutional Revolution took place between 1905 and 1907. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament in Persia during the Qajar Dynasty. The Revolution opened the way for the modern era, so one of the main characteristics of constitutional revolution was the advent of modernism in Iran. The constitutional revolution created new opportunities and of course seemingly boundless possibilities for Persia's future. Constitutional literature, like the constitutional movement itself, reflected social, economic, and cultural developments in Persia in the course of the 19th century.

Before the revolution, women were suffered oppression in society. "Persian women since 1907 have become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world. That this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference... Having themselves suffered from a double form of oppression, political and social... they broke through some of the most sacred customs which for centuries past have bound their sex in the land of Persia". (W. Morgan Shuster 1912)

As Valmont describes his love towards Bibi Mah, he calls her as fair as the moon. Valmont identifies Bibi Mah in

his life “like a lady moon, a name well chosen because of her beauty she is comparable as a moon: “I made no attempt to analyze my feelings; my head throbbled and hummed, there was no one to whom I could open my heart”. Valmont finds himself with great happiness with the love of Bibi Mah, thus, the reminiscent of his diary in Iran abrupt suddenly. According to Valmont’s reminiscent Bibi Mah is another prominent character in *The Moon of the Fourteenth Night* who has strong religious faith. Valmont notes that “Bibi Mah knows several chapters of the Koran by heart, and what is more, she understands their meaning, not that she understands Arabic, but they have been translated and explained to her”. He also explains his own experience in terms of the position of Iranian girls in the Qajar era. As Valmont describes his situation in Persia:

In a word, I am in Persia! My house was once the residence of a Vizier, now in disgrace; and this great hall the talar, where I am now sitting, with its spacious front opening upon the formal garden, its moulded ceiling, hung with fairy stalactites, is the identical one in which he too sat, cross-legged, like this, upon just such a carpet, for the administration of justice. In this marble basin, beneath the spray of a miniature fountain, his very goldfish still disport themselves, forgotten in the haste of flight. And, forgotten likewise, his gardener, Jamshid, a young Parsee, now lingers among the rose bushes of the garden, whence the monotonous burthen of his song is borne to me on the breeze. “The Lily her breast hath stolen Repose from my heart; The Narcissus her eye hath stolen Wisdom from my head. Oh, my Heart, my Heart, my Heart....

Valmont has been familiar with Hafiz and Saadi, during his stay in Persia. He has been overwhelmed with love in these books, which has affected him completely. He has entered a life situation concerned with Hafiz and Saadi. His love has been the same, as Hafiz and Saadi has called upon. A love cannot be quenched and even cannot be reached. As Valmont notes:

I dined with Yvonne, who knowing my depression over the loss of Bibi Mah, had made me promise to spend the evening with her. She was so absolutely charming that, by the time Mansur came for me with the “Fanus”, she had almost succeeded in consoling me, and I was feeling really more like myself.

Valmont knows that he is faced with difficulty in his love life. He is in an era when the women are strictly restricted and controlled by male dominance. They are physically and emotionally restricted. First of all, Valmont is faced with a beloved who is different from his culture and country’s women. She is absolutely limited; physically women wear chadors. No man can see them unveiled. Valmont every time sees her veiled. Moreover, when Valmont wants to pay a visit to Bibi Mah, they have to meet secretly, since women in Iran could not meet strange men before their marriage.

In those days of Iran, a female, like Bibi Mah, is expected to seek a decent life through marriage. However, undoubtedly, it is based on the context of her family and society. For Bibi Mah, a beautiful girl, how can she change her destiny and gain happiness? Woman’s status in society is defined by some culture power and special society that can be challenged and changed. Bibi Mah confides her own fears, and feelings of anger, in justice and pain toward the Valmont. She questions why she is always the object of cruelty, suffering and continuously, with Turkan Khatun’s violence. She shows Valmont her hopeless life in all the odious horror (*The Moon of the Fourteenth Night* 32).

When Bibi Mah secretly meets Valmont, she confines to Valmont that Turkan Khatun wants to get rid of her and marry her to Mulla Ibrahim, who has already two legitimate wives and several sighas. Bibi is helpless in marrying Valmont, since she is forced into another marriage that she has no right to object. This implies the situation of women

before Constitutional revolution. Meanwhile, Valmont asks: "how I envied that tear! Bibi Mah if you weren't a Mussulmen, then we could wed and went to Shiraz... I am not a Mussulmen, my soul! It was not written in the book of fate" (The Moon of the Fourteenth Night 126).

Valmont's Christianity is a major restriction in his marrying the Muslim Bibi Mah. In fact, the religious context in this novel brings forth the limitations and conditions the love of Valmont and Bibi Mah. Therefore, they need to be separated or wait for changes that Bibi Mah seeks in Constitutional Revolution. It is argued that, despite religious restrictions, there has been social changes running during the revolution, therefore, bringing up social upheavals and changes that made women active in society and gave them rights to take part in majlis, politics and etc. This was the main reason behind Bibi Mah's consent in the current happenings of the society and the transformations in the mentality of women. She hoped that there would be a possibility of change but she was ignorant of the fact that the social conditions were not ready for that.

At that time, from socio-cultural aspects women were not expected to express opinions of their own outside a very limited range of subjects, and certainly not be on a quest for their own identity and aim to become independent. Women's rights for Iranian women and their legal status have changed during different political and historical eras. This includes marriage law, divorce law, education rights, clothing and Hijab, health and abortion-related issues, like family planning in Iran and abortion law in Iran, and the right to vote. (Encyclopedia of woman's right in Iran)

Iranian Constitutional Revolution has brought up the issue of modernism which brought up improvements that changed the socio-cultural atmosphere of the time. Modernism in Iran encompassed improvement in art and architecture, literature, and design that emerged in 1914. This movement started by development in modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of World War I. By the advent of modernism, students were sent abroad by the government, to learn the new sciences and technology and of course foreign diplomats entered Iran to fulfill their cultural and political missions, thus, it caused cultural difference and naturally, entailed inter-marriages, though it was faced with religious, social, and historical limitations that made this marriage and love impossible in most cases.

The concept of love in the West, probably more has been written about love than any other topic except the nature of God. There is, however, no consensus on what the word love or hundreds of other terms signify. It is clear, however, that it is more than a simple animal urge to procreate. Harry Harlow, for example, demonstrated that mother love was essential to the normal development of infant monkeys, and that infants deprived of love and nurturance became disturbed, unhappy adults, unfit for monkey society. But love is much more than the feelings of a mother for a child, although mother love has usually been regarded as much more intense than that of a father. Among other things the term love has been used to describe the feelings of a child toward a parent, one's feelings for friends and comrades, a religious yearning for transcendence, an entirely materialistic desire for physical sexual gratification, and the list could go on. (Encyclopedia of love)

Valmont is too much obsessed with his love towards Bibi Mah that he turns to love poems of Saadi and Hafiz. He has enclosed himself within this love. Since he is prohibited to marry Bibi Mah for his religion; he is helpless in going for his beloved and being reunited with her, whatsoever. It is only the love stories that help him come to terms, with his burning love towards her. While, he is busy reading Saadi he notes:

Today I thought that I should like to be alone with Saadi and lovely sunshine, alone with the Peris of space,

who are said here to carry on mysterious intercourse with worthy mortal, but I tried in vain to read; it was all I could do just to follow with my eyes the graceful, sinuous lines meandering across the precious parchment, my mind made no attempt to understand their meaning, being attracted elsewhere. (The Moon of the Fourteenth Night 41)

Valmont cannot comprehend Iranian limitations and compares it to his own culture. He explains the culture of marriage in France which is completely different from Iranian culture. It was somewhat surprising to Valmont. For Valmont love is a mutual relationship which is in contrast to Iran's religious restrictions in the couple's seeing each other after marriage. As he looks upon his culture, he explains: "the future husband and wife must know each other from childhood. In Iran marriage lacks the elements of romance, but under the laws of Islam, which prevent couples from making acquaintance before the marriage ceremony and it is called a safeguard against unpleasant surprises". Additionally, what astonishes Valmont most is Iranian houses and the cover of women which makes the relationship between a woman and a man:

The home of Iranian people in Qajar period was consistent of two, Andaruni and Biruni. Every Persian woman wears a similar silken "Chadur". The cover of Iranian Women in Andaruni and Biruni was different in those days. They covered the whole of their head with a Chargat, fell back over the shoulders. Persian Women in outdoor costume were covered with a huge "Cashmir" Shawl and "Chadur" and also "Rubands", in terms of covering all their bodies. Iranian people believe that, woman should wear a headscarf in the presence of strangers (The Moon of the Fourteenth Night 27).

Furthermore, Valmont points out the fact that, "Persian women are debarred by law from ever leaving their country it would simply have been a question of divorce later on, at our departure". Valmont is shocked with Iranian women being restricted by their cover and even their relationship with strange men. The love of men even depended on women's hijab. In this story which is narrated from a Christian perspective, it is worth mentioning how men had right to divorce women for their hijab. These cultures seem as the most bizarre and unacceptable for a stranger. These factors are of primary importance in making Valmont and Bibi Mah's relationship restricted and impossible towards each other. Furthermore, Bibi Mah lives in a society, where women are not expected to express opinions of their own outside a very limited range of subjects, and certainly not be on a guest for own identity and aim to become independent, let alone express their love towards a man who is a non-muslim.

Isfandiar's marriage within the story which is somehow parallel to love story of Valmont and Bibi Mah, represents the limitation of marrying in Iran at the time. When Isfandiar wanted to marry, he was willing to see his fiancé, so his mother wanted to find some way of showing him his fiancée, by concealing him in the andarun on a day, when the girl was expected there, and the good offices of Yvonne merely supplied the place of that absent maternal duty. Last year, when the marriage was first talked about, Isfandiar, on receiving her congratulations upon the beauty of his prospective bride, her excellent education and upbringing and her general elegance, begged her to contrive for him to see the young girl secretly, on some occasion when she might be visiting her professionally.

At first Yvonne refused point-blank. Such a scheme was fraught with danger if it were discovered, and besides, the idea of acting thus as a go-between was utterly abhorrent to her fine nature. But Isfandiar pressed the point so urgently, arguing truly that such "private views" were of most ordinary occurrence in Persia, and appeared so miserable at the idea of being obliged to unite himself for life to a woman who might prove physically antipathetic to him, that in the end she yielded.

During the constitutional revolution, the political activity of the women was raised. In the Qajar period women were in low position than men. They were under the control of men even in marriage. Women would gain a few minor rights but still remain viewed as the weaker sex. The Iranian women's movement is mainly based on the Iranian women's social motions and their struggle to gain their actual rights in society. Seemingly, this movement emerged first after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that the interfaith love in the Moon of the Fourteenth Night faced socio-cultural, religious and historical limitations and, therefore, is conditioned to the shore of impossibility. It is remarked that women in Iran were faced difficulties concerning their physical and mental freedom, human rights, marriage and more importantly active participation in public as well as politics. Therefore, they were faced difficulty dealing with male dominance, suppression and oppression that was inflicted by society and religion. A Muslim girl like Bibi Mah is forbidden to marry a Christian boy like Valmont due to religious barriers that make marriage difficult and impossible for lovers of different religion. This story is a representation of the forbidden love story between two lovers and also the theme based on the deprivation, intervention, suffering and disappointment beyond emotional and physical capabilities of human. To recap, this paper examined how and to what degree culture and religious policies and procedures as well as clergy's own personal and professional opinions and empathy affect the challenge to accommodate interfaith love.

## REFERENCES

1. *Amanat, Abbas. Constitutional revolution. New York: Columbia University, 1993.163- 176.print.*
2. *De Lorey, Eustache, and Douglas Sladen (1910) The Moon of the Fourteenth Night. London: Hurst & Blackett, Print.*
3. *Korotayev, Andrey (2008) "Love" Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions. Print.*
4. *W. Jones, Gavin, and Chee Heng Leng, and Maznah Mohamad, eds. Muslim Non-Muslim Marriage. Singapore: ISEAS. 2009. Print.*
5. *Kamshad, H (1966) Modern Persian Prose Literature, Cambridge.*
6. *Kazemimojaveri, Elmira. "A Short Introduction to Iranian Drama" p. 64-78.*
7. *Korotayev, Andrey (2004). World Religions and Social Evolution of the Old World Oikumene Civilizations: A Cross-cultural Perspective (First ed.). Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press. ISBN 0-7734-6310-0. P.1-8.*
8. *YouTube. "Marriage to Non-Muslim - Contemporary Issues - Bilal Philips", 2006. Pp. 12-14. Retrieved 2012-11-07.*
9. *Nineteenth-Century Qajar Women in the Public Sphere: An Alternative Historical and Historiographical Reading of the Roots of Iranian Women's Activism Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 25.2 (2005) 297-317.*

