

## The Status of Women in the Idea of “Rifa’a Tahtavy”

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### Abstract

Arab intellectuals in the nineteenth century during their travels to Western countries wanted to reform the social problems of their country, which mixed with religion and tradition. Some of these problems were Women’s issues, including education, dress, marriage, etc. The intellectuals included of diverse groups of people: poet, author, historian, etc. “Rifa’a Tahtavy 1801-1873 AD” was one of the scholars of the movement that believed in gender equality in the areas of personal and social. In his view of point, modeling from European countries in the field of education was critical. Rifa’a believed that there is a strong relationship between the progress of women and promotion of intellectual and cultural level. In his mind, achievement of nations depends on their respect for women. He knew mutual love as the primary condition for the marriage of girls and chastity and decency of women affiliated with the correct training. In this article, we will attempt to look at women’s issues, including education, employment, marriage, and dress in Tahtavy views.

**Keywords:** Rifa’a Tahtavy, Scholars of movement age, Women’s rights, social progress

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, Social development in Arab societies is owed to Scholars and intellectuals who traveled to European countries and seeing their academic progress. They wanted to reform and review the social problems associated with religion and tradition of their country. One of these most important issues is women and their need. The scholars are from different groups of society, such as poet, writer, and historian. Meanwhile, what gives more attention is that the Women’s issues were first raised by one who selected as head of the referred students to “Paris” in the era of “Muhammad Ali Pasha” (1769- 1849 AD). Rifa’a Tahtavy was a social reformer who investigated social issues according to his observations in Paris; he assumes women as men. He believes that women can learn, take social responsibilities, and have personal and social freedoms. In addition, Rifa’a places great importance for hijab and chastity and the right of choosing a spouse for women according to the laws of Islam. He also has pointed to the special social status which French women have, including cultural activities and the fact that they also take part in economic activities.

### 2. Literature Review

Tahtavy During his stay in Paris wrote his observations of Parisian women in “Takhliis Alibris in Talkher of Paris.” Due to his religious and Islamic growing, he accepts some customs, French take about women but does not agree with some of them (Yasin 1998:31). He believes that some of the Arab and French customs and habits are same and says: “French views in the field of honor and openness is closer to Arabs compared with the Turkish people and other nations.” They know reputation as a dignity, swear about the famous works, and are faithful to their promises. In Arabs, dignity is also of human characteristics, and disgrace is a shame (Tahtavy 2012). Rifa’a also mentioned that French men are, in fact, women’s slave, whether women are beautiful or not. They aren’t suspected to their wives, although women have many mistakes. One of the bad features of men is that they are unprejudiced, the thing which is called Enthusiasm in Islam. French women have always adorned with ornaments and go to Sightseeing with men. Paris is a paradise for females and limbo for males (Tahtavy 2012). In some aspects, such as assigning affairs with women, he criticized French men but finally addressed it in deeper perspective and what becomes more important to him is honesty that purity is also a part of it. Rifa’a believes that social conditions have a profound influence on a commitment to chastity and increasing promiscuity because of needs, lead to non-commitment (non-compliance) to virtue for poor women as, welfare and unemployment, lead to the distraction of the wealthy women. However, the appropriate economic and social

conditions are the most qualified state for commitment to chastity and avoid banality.

He says about honesty in their way: “honesty that is common with Arabs and French is a commitment to fairness and truthfulness and other virtues. On the other hand, the meaning of chastity is the concept of honesty evil doing is petite and the feature has a deep root and is one of the main properties of them” (Tahtavy 2012:214). Finally, Tahtavy wrote his reformist views about women that are formed by imitating the French community in books “Al-Amin” and “Manahej\_al Bab.” The article tries to explain the vision of the Egyptian intellectual in the following areas:

1-Education of women 2- women employment 3- Personal and social freedom of women 4- women’s marriage 5- hijab and chastity of women

Several articles and books have been written about women, For example, these two cases could be mentioned:

1-Rezaei et al., (2011) focused on women’s issues and demands in an article titled (Woman from the perspective of “Mei Ziadah”). What is important is that a woman has raised women’s issues. In the article “Mei Ziadah” didn’t go out of the circle of reason and studied social problems from the perspective of a social reformer, he studied the woman as a woman.

2-Dadkhah et al., (2013) in a research mentioned that Women of Contemporary Egyptian history not only did not have equal power with men in the social, cultural, economic and political field but also were deprived of fundamental rights such as elementary education. In the respect, though their efforts faced traditional Islamists reactions, but finally achieved success.

Their article explains the modernist literary “Rifa’a TAHTAVY” views on all aspects of women, which have not been conducted such study so far.

### 3. Research Method

In the study, the works of “Rifa’a Tahtavy” and the works of other scholars studied about him investigated. Then obtained data have been analyzed by the analytical and descriptive method.

#### 3.1 *The Status of Women in Contemporary Literature of Egypt*

Women constitute half of the population of each country. Thus, the progress of women has an important role in any society in its promoting. Arab women were recluse in houses during the past half-century, and social traditions dictated them to cover themselves by masks. Accordingly, they were deprived of many of their rights, but at the end of the last century, intellectuals such as “Rifa’a Tahtavy” (Morsi Abuzekri 1981:268) conducted efforts to revive women’s rights in Egypt. At that time women faced with many crises to participate in society. They weren’t quite disappointed like during illiteracy period and were not like Islam era in a high position. After the Ottoman domination on the Arab countries, no attention was paid to women’s rights and privileges that Islam imposed gradually were banned. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women were completely prevented from any social activities (Bashar Hasan Yousef 2000:25). Therefore, to improve the situation in the movement era in the mid-nineteenth century two factions of Women’s rights advocacy were formed in Arab countries. First Class is leaders of women’s rights advocacy based on religious principles, regardless of Western models that Rifa’a Tahtavy, “Jamal-al-din Asad Abadi (1839-1897),” and Muhammad Abdah (1905-1849), are some of these leaders.

The second category is those who follow the western culture to defend the rights of women, which of the leaders of the group are “Ahmad Fars Shadyac” (1877-1801), “Ghasem in” (1908-1863) (Yasin 1998:11).

Following these efforts, the congregation of “Ekhvan-al Moslems” with the leadership of “Hassan al-Banna” (1906- 1949 AD) in Egypt Stated their Opposition with women’s rights perspective based on Western-Europeans (same 85). Therefore, contemporary era and before 1960 of Egypt was between two views of tradition and modernism.

In these conflicts, he was suffering irreparable damages because some were following restrictive and even superstitious rules and were opposed any inclusion of women in society and believed that women should be submissive to men as in the past, Against them, modernity wanted women’s advancement consistent with social change. Among these intellectuals such as “Tahtavy” with an Islamic and cultural view in women’s rights, help to the inclusion of women in the community. However, moderns, which were seeking to spread Western culture, did bring nothing but destruction.

#### 3.2 *Biography of Rifa’a Tahtavy*

Rifa’a Rafi Ben Ali bin Badawi Tahtavy was born In “TAHTAVY” Egypt. His father’s lineage was Imam

Hussein ibn Ali (AS) and his mother was from Khazraj tribe. Tahtavy learned basic sciences from his uncles who adopted him after the death of his father. He entered "Al-Azhar University" when he was 16 and learned various sciences under the supervision of prominent masters like "Sheikh Hassan Attar" (1766-1835 AD). Rifa'a helping his master was employed as an imam in one of Egypt's military units. In the reign of "Muhammad Ali Pasha," Tahtavy had accompanied the first group of students of the Egyptian referred to France, as the imam of the group. After learning the French language, he starts to study history, geography, and other new western sciences and became interested in writing and translation. Moreover, after his return to Egypt Rifa'a was engaged in translation work in school, "al-Tobi" And after while established "history and geography" school.

He suggested the establishment of "Alalson" (Languages) school for teaching foreign languages, and Muhammad Ali Pasha agreed. Later, Rifa'a founded the Association of translation in the school. Then he became the -chief of the "Egypt times" newspaper and made massive changes in it. In the reign of "Abbas Pasha," Tahtavy was deported to Sudan and within four years of exile, translated the famous French novel called "Telemark events" as "an AFLAC in Vaghaye -al s Telemark and then returned to Egypt after the death of the governor" (Hejazi, 1974: 30). Among other works of Rifa'a is restarting "Egypt events" newspaper and chief of the "School Garden" cultural magazine. After he had written, the book founded the first school for women in Egypt (Abbas, 2001).

Among other works of Rifa'a include restarting the Egypt event newspaper and chief of the school's garden cultural magazine. He also after writing the book "right guidance for girls and boys" established the first school, especially for women (Abdoh, 1998). Finally, Tahtavy with all his Courageous efforts did for the promotion of culture and civilization of modern times died in 1873 when he was 72 (Dasughi, 2000).

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 *Woman from View of Rifa'a Tahtavy*

###### 4.1.1 Educated Women

Firstly, women Education founded in the vanguard books of the new Arabic movement. One of them is Rifa'a Tahtavy who emphasized on equality between men and females. He is one of the first scholars who believed in educating women and knew it as their legal right (Unal, 2015). He believed that one of the most important issues, which must be modeled from European countries in Egypt, is women's education and freeing them from ignorance. In his mind, there is an issue linked to equality of men and women. Therefore, she put calling to educating women as one of his national and religious duties and dedicated a chapter of the book "right guidance for girls and boys" to the participation of girls and boys in education. Rifa'a says about women's education in the book: It is worth to effort to educate girls and boys. Teaching, reading, writing and mathematics make the girls politer and wiser, and make them equal with men in speech and vision (Tahtavy 2012).

"Tahtavy" believed that education associated with social changes and not only did not consider the difference between men and women. However, he knew both essential to the development of the community. He also believed that learning, reading, writing, mathematics, and the Quran were useful for better education (Dadkhah, 2012). Tahtavy examined women's education from the perspective of Islam and believed that it was not harmful to society. He said, "Experience in many countries has shown that women's Education is beneficial and harmless." To prove his words, the wives of the Prophet (PBUH), "Aisha," "Hafsah" and "Omar's" girl, knew reading and writing, of course, these people were not alone, and there were other women in this way (Algahtani, 2016).

In fact, educating women is a practical implementation of equality perspective of Tahtavy. Before Rifa'a and even in his era, the medieval thought did not allow girls to be educated in science centers like boys. They had reasons for their views. Tahtavy even remarks some about opponents of women's education. He says opponents of women's education believed that: Learning to write is not acceptable for women and relying on the prohibition of education for women, in some books their training is detestable and abominable. Because deception and flattery are parts of their nature, and their wisdom is not reliable and maybe reading and writing, lead them to evil actions like writing letters to men. In addition, if God wanted to create them with perfect reason, he could, but it seems that women are just created to be housewife and Reproduction "(Tahtavy 2012:14)". Tahtavy talked about the horizons science open to women. He said that the education of women was guiding them, helped them to reach the goal of reading and writing, and having a good attitude and being aware.

An important thing we can understand from Tahtavy's words about women's education is that he did not call women to unveiling; he wanted women to stay at home but did not go out without hijab. In his view, science qualified woman to marry and serve his husband and children (Rezaei, 2002). It can be realized from Tahtavy's

words that woman's education is for reaching to three goals:

1. A perfect marriage with the man she wants.
2. Proper training for the children.
3. The ability to be employed.

#### 4.1.2 Women Employment

Tahtavy with mixing of European and Arabic life, not only brought equality between men and women, but also provided the possibility of participation of women in society. Arab women were always a hermit in the house until half of the nineteenth century and social traditions of the community kept his away from male strangers, but at the end of the century education and employment of women in Arabic countries were introduced by "Tahtavy". Without imitation and observing French women's cultural and economic and business activities, He concluded that women must be allowed to choose an appropriate job. Watching the status of the women in his time, he says, if a female wants to be a useful element in society and the cultural, social and economic fields and work alongside men, it will lead to nothing but blame from the community side. Although men admire virtuous women in practice, they do not consider the right of playing a role in their destiny, woman, can go out accompanied by one of his intimates and his primary task is staying at home, doing house works, and training children. Tahtavy concluded that there are two main obstacles to women's employment: 1- women's illiteracy 2- men's opposition. He wrote about the expression of female illiteracy: Illiterate women with hatred and jealousy against educated women accused them of being shameless. Tahtavy said about working with women has reformed and even revolutionary perspective compared to his era. He linked education of women to her job and believed in the ability of women to achieve the same level with the man. He said, "If a woman wants to work like a man and learn arts and science and literature like them and want to close his taste to men, are these possible?" Tahtavy did not limit women's education and her life to house and family, but associated woman's science to the practical job who had its ability. In the regard, he said, paying attention to the importance of girls' education, allows women to do jobs equal to men, and they make them feel valuable, so they became busy and didn't do evil things. Unemployment is bad among men and is worse among women. Unemployment women spend their time talking about neighbors, food, drinks, clothing, carpets and what they have and what she has, and so Tahtavy tried to understand the legality of women's work from the historical and religious view. Tahtavy elsewhere said, women of the period, it was better to serve their family at home and follow the Prophet (PBUH) husbands his companions because they served to their husbands and worked with them. Although Tahtavy focused on women's employment but did not endorse working women in political positions, judgment, and leadership. Because Islam prohibits women from accepting such posts, therefore, Tahtavy's view in the field was taken from the religious position.

#### 4.1.3 The Personal and Social Freedoms of Women

Tahtavy was one of the pioneers of the Egypt new movement and heads of thinking in the field of Arab national identity and women's individual and social liberties. We can divide contemporary thinkers into two groups: 1. fans of imitation of western culture, 2. opponents of western culture relying entirely on Islamic intellectual and cultural heritage. Fans of tradition modification and heritage restoration and reconstruction of religious thought and then Tahtavy can be categorized among the second group. He wanted to free women from the limitations and rejects the medieval theory that "considered the women only as a means of enjoyment and exploitation for the man, he believed that men and women are equal". He compared men and women physically and mentally and says without any differences, women regarding physiology, internal and external needs, feelings and traits are like men, and we can almost take into account women as men. And if the wise person with every aspect and communication, compare men and women face carefully will find only a small difference which is related to their gender, so the only difference between them is that they are different in sex and the things related to it (Tahtavy 2011:84). On the other hand, he admitted that being a woman might weaken her power, but Tahtavy brought results that were completely contrary to the opponent's views of equality of men and women. The idea of the candidates was that there were reasons for the physical weakness that leads to the lack of mental forces and ability to take certain actions, but Tahtavy beliefs against that. Tahtavy said, "Among the things found in women are: intellectual properties and the intensity of feeling and strong and stable perception" and these are the results of her weakness. You see the strength of feeling and perception of women can be regarded in the things, which initially seem to be alien to her, and superior of her understand the power, Women's intelligence is not limited to affection, but it is for understanding deepest meanings. Equality between men and women is considered a pivotal issue in Tahtavy's mind so that he focuses even on full equality between men and women in human traits and virtues. He gave opposition to those who knew women as the intriguers and the wicked; he

believed that woman was a human-like man and had her rights.

#### 4.1.4 Women and Marriage

He confirmed that love was religious and wants parents to respect their daughters in choosing husbands. The love in Tahtavy's mind arisen from the sense according to the day and her incredible progress of social knowledge; he believed that love was an art and leads to a good relationship between spouses.

About respecting girls for marriage, he said: "one of the best gifts for girls is allowing them to marry to whom they love". When Tahtavy equates the men and women regarding physical and psychological characteristics and the rights and duties, wanted them to try for their family's happiness and cooperate in training children, and relatives afford and have the patience to have love in family continuously. He said about the relationship between spouses: Relations between men and women should not be like the slave and masters since the love and respect are the main foundations of mutual life, there is a definite promise of marriage to try for training children. He mentioned polygamy too, and had the most progressive idea of 19 centuries about the issue. He knew polygamy abominable, detestable and recommends one wife for men. It was recommended men to have one wife. In his mind, God allows polygamy for men whose sexual desire is beyond of one wife and only if they could have justice in relationships. Tahtavy said: "if you cannot do justice, you must have one wife." And "everyone who has two wives and doesn't behave justly with them, he would be with an Incomplete body hereafter. He not only has such views about polygamy, but also his personal life was based on these principals. Thus, in the ceremony of his marriage with his cousin wrote a note to his wife: The author of these lines, Rifa'a shall promise in front of the chaste woman, his cousin to be loyal to her, beside his and no love and marry to another woman. In addition, if one day I did it, our religious marriage was canceled, and we will divorce. Thus, Rifa'a remained faithful to his covenant and lived with his wife until the end of his life. Rifa'a said here that polygamy was unlawful for him. He believed that marriage leads to severe physical, mental and social consequences and as long as men cannot afford that they are not allowed to do that.

#### 4.1.5 Women, Chastity, and Hijab

The issue of chastity of women spread among Egyptian intellectuals since the invasion of France in Egypt because they saw French women without hijab in public places. Furthermore, according to these observations, they considered French women are bawdy, but because Tahtavy had seen such scenes in Paris did not agree with this view. The issue of hijab has not been much discussed in the era of Tahtavy, but it was more introduced in the thoughts of "Qassem Amin" more than a quarter of a century after Tahtavy. Nevertheless, given his views on women's education and employment, he also had ideas about hijab and purity.

Rifa'a made a difference between the issues of the social status of French women and the habits of dressing or makeup. In his mind, training and development of the female character and commitment to the family's love and understanding between men and women were the main issues, while the revealing parts of the body and not having the hijab were not worthy. He also believed that social conditions had a profound impact on adhering to chastity and spreading Promiscuity. In this context, he said, "Chastity of women is not due to adhering to hijab or not having it, but its origin is good or bad training, abiding by the friendship of spouses and the impossibility of entering someone else's in their love and understanding between them." It is very common that French people accuse royal family's women who are called "Berben". Given the role of right training play in the chastity of women, Tahtavy permits incorporation of men and women in the workplace provided that both have good training. He gives an example of meeting the daughter of Shoaib (AS) and Prophet Musa (AS): Shoaib said to one of his daughters: Go and invite him (Moses). Therefore, Shoaib (AS) sent his daughter to Moses, while both were young because he found daughter is pure by revelation or good education and trusted his because proper training prevents speculation about their behavior. Given the importance of hijab and chastity, Tahtavy wanted those are responsible for educating women, to protect the virtues and qualities such as modesty among them because these features have an important role in their lives.

He said to their trainers: it is better for someone who does train girls and women's affairs, to prepare them, as they deserve, and it is better to have an inherent scare, however, men must have no scars. Tahtavy discussed the degree of purity of women and said: virtues like chastity and purity are more among women, compare the men so that it is perfect for women. A chaste woman avoids of sensuality movements, the thing that many men are unable to do. It can be concluded from his speeches that proper training of woman leads to growing chastity and prevents from doubt and bad behaviors in all locations.

## 5. Conclusion

This article studied achievements of a contemporary scholar "Rifa'a Tahtavy" who had so many efforts for

enhancing the lost rights of women in Arabic countries by considering the tradition and modernity. He was among those who, according to his religious and national duty, took active steps in the way of the progress of women and led to the growth and progress of reformist ideas in Arab countries, especially Egypt. According to the findings of this paper, it can be concluded that:

- 1- Having teachers like “Rifa’a Tahtavy” and feeling the necessity of providing the ability to education and employment for women and their equal right with men and the need for reforming marriage laws using legal and sociological new perspectives about basic concepts of their rights leads to many efforts.
- 2- Tahtavy efforts on the education of girls and opening schools for them, although was small and discreet, but was a big step for drawing community’s attention to this important issue.
- 3- Tahtavy resisted against the traditionalists who opposed the presence of women in society and modernists who wanted to spread the western culture and defender of women’s rights by indigenous and Islamic views.
- 4- Tahtavy combined European and Egyptian Arabic lifestyles and began to innovation without imitation of western countries and with training and employment of women and their partnership with men in all fields of life.
- 5- Such intellectuals’ efforts led to the participation of women in society’s activities such as social, cultural, economic and working beside men with equal rights. However, it is a long way to achieving the ultimate goal, but such efforts are effective.

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