

A Review of Kahlil Gibran's Major Creative Works

Ulasan Hasil Karya Kreatif Utama Kahlil Gibran

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Abstract

Kahlil Gibran is one of the most important writers of modern Arabic literature and one of the most successful poets of English in the twentieth century. He is undoubtedly a pioneer among Arab poets and novelists writing in English and the most important figure in the *émigré* literary movement. His world-wide popularity is due in large part to his universal spiritual message of love and compassion. This study, focusing on both his Arabic and English works, seeks to explore the various contextual aspects that affect all of Gibran's works since his birth in Mount Lebanon. It also presents a critical overview of all his works for readers and critics that seek a deeper appreciation and a more comprehensive understanding of this literary genius. The study highlights the spiritual element which serves as the link that unifies his Arabic and English works and propels them to enduring literary and popular success across cultures.

Keywords: Kahlil Gibran, *Amigré* Literature, Diaspora Writers, Spirituality, Perennialism.

Abstrak

Kahlil Gibran merupakan salah seorang penulis yang tersohor dalam kesusasteraan Arab moden dan salah seorang penyair Inggeris yang berjaya pada abad kedua puluh. Kredibiliti beliau tidak diragukan kerana beliau merupakan perintis dalam kalangan penyair dan novelis Arab yang menulis dalam bahasa Inggeris dan tokoh terpenting dalam gerakan sastera *Émigré*. Sebahagian besar popularitinya di seluruh dunia adalah disebabkan oleh mesej rohani universal cinta dan belas kasihannya. Kajian ini difokuskan kepada kedua-dua karya Arab dan Inggerisnya untuk meneroka pelbagai aspek kontekstual yang mempengaruhi semua karya Gibran sejak kelahirannya di Gunung Lubnan. Kajian ini juga memberikan gambaran keseluruhan yang kritis mengenai semua karya beliau kepada pembaca dan pengkritik yang mencari penghayatan yang lebih mendalam dan pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif tentang kehebatan sastera ini. Kajian ini juga mengenengahkan unsur kerohanian yang berfungsi sebagai penghubung yang menyatukan hasil karya Arab dan Inggerisnya dan mendorong mereka kepada kejayaan sastera dan popular yang berkekalan di seluruh budaya.

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Kata Kunci: Kahlil Gibran, Sastera āmigré, Penulis Diaspora, Kerohanian, Perennialisme.

Introduction

Kahlil Gibran was born at the heart of Mount Lebanon in Bsharrī, a northern town in modern day Lebanon that started as a Phoenician settlement. It grew with the advent of Christendom to become a historic bastion of the Maronite faith with a strong Syriac tradition. Bsharrī, nestled among the magnificent “cedars of God”, had traditionally relied on farming and silk production for the livelihood of its small population. It was noted by a papal envoy in the 16th century for its flowing and copious prosperity as it “abounded in corn, excellent wines, oil, cotton, silk, honey, wax, wood, savage and tame animals, and especially in goats” (Harris, 2012).¹ However, decades of misrule and instability ensured that this agrarian wealth eluded the majority and rendered most of it in the hands of the few: feudal lords, governors, and the clergy.

Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān, later Americanized as Kahlil Gibran, was born on the 6th of January 1883, to natives Khalīl Jubrān and Kāmilah Raḥmah, both of whom were Maronite Christians. The father was a tax collector and owned a walnut grove which generated a reasonable income that was squandered on gambling and alcohol. To exacerbate matters, Khalīl, who had an imperious temper, was accused of mishandling taxes and embezzlement. Consequently, his property was confiscated, and the family was evicted and forced to share a house with others.

In contrast, Gibran's mother, Kāmilah, was free-spirited and hardworking, an apt inspiration for his future writings about women. Thus, the difference was stark for young Gibran between the guiding loving mother and the domineering father who belittled Gibran's imaginative and reclusive nature. The ultimate failure of the father as the patriarchal breadwinner came when he was jailed for embezzlement, a few years after the seizure of their property.

The mother was left to fend for and feed her children. Kāmilah Raḥmah, strong-willed and caring, was up to the task and nurtured her young children while the father suffered his ill fate. Kāmilah's strong resolve as a single mother had been tested earlier in life when she immigrated to Brazil with her first husband, Ḥannā Raḥmah, the father of her

¹ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 94.

first son Buṭrus. Hannā died in the Latin country, and Kāmilah returned to Mount Lebanon.

After Khalīl was imprisoned, Gibran became free to pursue his budding love for the arts without stinging derision. Kāmilah, a priest's daughter, appreciated her son's superior inclinations to draw, dream and dance. In various letters written in the United States, Gibran described his early passion for drawing for hours on papers, walls, and snow. At this tender age, he spent hours adoring a few Da Vinci prints he received as a gift. In addition to drawing, he enjoyed casting images of molten lead and sand in small old tins. Gibran was fond of visits to the forests, to the scenic Mediterranean Sea, and to the city of Ba'albak (Heliopolis) with its ancient temples of the Sun (Bushrui and Jenkins, 2008).²

It can be noted that in some of the letters sent to his American friends, Gibran sometimes conveyed images of wealth, glory, and exoticism to these new friends. Given his underprivileged childhood, this cast a shadow of doubt on the authenticity of some of the sentimental anecdotes of his childhood. Nonetheless, for a boy living a plebeian life, deprived of his father and hometown at an early age, these memories appear as a conceivable compensation for the loss and hardship experienced at an early age (Waterfield, 1998).³ On the whole, the natural setting of Mount Lebanon and Qādīshah valley, coupled with Kāmilah's audacity and affection, should have played a profound role in nurturing the nascent talent of Gibran.

Gibran's quasi-formal education first started with studying Syriac and Arabic in a small old class run by the Monastery of Mār Sarkīs.⁴ The teaching was traditional and didactic but led Gibran nevertheless to know more about the Maronite faith and the teachings of Jesus which would have an enduring influence over his writings.

As years passed, the family, led by Kāmilah, realized that it was either to endure a hard life without its customary custodian and breadwinner or travel in search of a better life. The latter was their choice. With the aid of relatives in the US and a network of people smugglers, this became feasible. At the time of their travel, the dauntless family consisted of Kāmilah, Peter/Buṭrus Raḥmah (Kahlil's elder half-brother),

² Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, (Oxford: One World, 2008), 30, 31.

³ Robin Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), Chapter 1, e-book.

⁴ Mar Sarkis or Saint Serge/Sergius was a popular Christian martyr. This monastery has been transformed to house The Gibran Museum.

Kahlil, and his two younger sisters Mariana and Sultana. On board, or rather in the steerage of Dutch steamship *Spaarndam*, the five arrived at Ellis Island in June 1895, through Boulogne (Waterfield, 1998).⁵

After passing New York, the family settled in an impoverished neighborhood in Boston (Moreno, 2008),⁶ in the vicinity of Chinatown where predominantly poor immigrants from Asia lived in squalid rooms. Kāmilah started earning a living by peddling and sewing. Boutros also worked as a peddler and a storekeeper. Gibran was not asked to work but to dedicate himself to studying which can be taken as an acknowledgment of his bright potential. Gibran joined a local school and started learning the English language and imbibing American culture.

Soon enough, the pupil's artistic talent caught the attention of F. Holland Day (1864-1933), a respected publisher and creative photographer who was a pivotal figure in the artistic circles of Boston. He became Gibran's mentor and led him in discovering firsthand the intellectual and artistic life of New England. Gibran's immersion in American culture and discovery of English works was soon to be interrupted; Gibran set sail back to Beirut in 1898. His return to his native country was motivated by education, as the family believed that Gibran should seek a more traditional Arabic education before being exposed to the liberal culture of the West. Soon, he enrolled in 'Al-Ḥikmah school, a leading Maronite school founded by the eminent historian bishop, Yūsuf 'Al-Dibis (Hojairi, 2011).⁷

Back in Lebanon, he read various English books on fables, romantic poetry, and mythology by well-known authors of the 19th century such as Archibald Lampman and Thomas Bulfinch. At school, his favorite educator was Father Yūsuf Ḥaddād, who supported his free spirit and natural endowments, guiding him to read great works of Arabic scholarship and literature. Gibran was known during those school days for his strong artistic character. In view of that, he established a literary school magazine with his colleagues and won a poetry prize. He also met his old teacher, Salīm 'Al-Ḍāhir, who continued to be an inspiration to Gibran through his folk tales and traditional wisdom.

⁵ Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, Chapter 1, e-book.

⁶ Barry Moreno, *Ellis Island's Famous Immigrants*, (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 17.

⁷ Mouannes Mohamad Hojairi, "Church Historians and Maronite Communal Consciousness: Agency and Creativity in Writing the History of Mount Lebanon", (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 2011), 154.

Gibran fell in love during his stay in Lebanon with Ḥalā who came from a rich rural family. To the dismay of the aspiring young man, his proposals were rejected by the family due to his low income and status. The family was supported by the head of the local church in their refusal, fueling his detestation of an unjust church. This short-lived love affair reinvigorated his love for nature, as the lovers used to seek refuge in the beautiful surroundings of Bsharrī. The woods, where he would secretly meet Ḥalā became an everlasting symbol of freedom and harmony in his Arabic works. In the old village, Gibran also met his father who continued to look down on his poetic inclinations (Bushui and Jenkins, 2008).⁸

Gibran's stay in Lebanon would be cut short as he received news of an illness that has befallen his sister. He wrote back to his mother informing her of his imminent return to Boston, but he arrived too late after Sultānah had passed away. Sultānah died of tuberculosis at home on 4th of April 1902. Tragedies continued in short intervals as Buṭrus died of tuberculosis at home as well on 12th of March 1903 and his beloved mother, Kāmilah, died of cancer in hospital on 28th of June 1903. In little over a year, Gibran lost most of his family and only Mariana was left with him. The loss of his mother affected Gibran the most as she had played the leading role in shaping his character and charting the general path of his young life. The squalid and humid environment in which many immigrants lived, including Gibran's family, was undoubtedly a contributing factor to their quick demise.

The two siblings were left to care for each other, with Gibran taking charge of the indebted family store, while Mariana worked as a seamstress and earned more than her brother. Gibran sold their share in the store to focus on his artistic and literary work and began selling some of his artwork through the help of two faithful friends; Holland Day and the young poet, Josephine Peabody. In 1904, he met Mary Heskell, who became his ardent supporter and closest friend.

The following year witnessed the publication of his first Arabic work, *Music*, as small poetic treatise on the meaning and importance of music. As the sale of his paintings did not match his expectations, he had to have a better income. Thus, occasionally, he would write for Arabic newspapers in the US for a few dollars. Such writings, although financially disappointing, began to establish Gibran's name among Arab readers as a budding writer.

⁸ Bushui and Jenkins, 58.

His presumptive French friend, Micheline, played a role in drawing him to travel to France to refine his talent and gain more knowledge (Sheban, 2001).⁹ Mary Heskell supported him with 75 dollars a month to actualize this dream. Gibran would be grateful for Mary for her friendship, guidance, and support throughout his life, dedicating some of his works to her. In 1908, with great hopes and much gratitude to Mary, he left for the City of Lights. He enrolled in an art school and visited the artistic and cultural centers of the capital of the world at that time. He met and drew Rodin and other prominent figures in the city. He was also to gain great insights into the intellectual currents of Europe, reading William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche at that period, both of whom became great sources of inspiration for Gibran. His stay in Paris also marked the publication of his *Spirits Rebellious*, which caused quite a stir among Arab conservatives. He rejuvenated his friendship with Yūsuf 'Al-Ḥūwayyik, his old school friend from 'Al-Ḥikmah, and they studied together and exchanged views on all artistic and literary topics. Finally, during his stay in Paris his father died in Lebanon. This did not have a strong emotional impact on him.

In 1910 he visited London, and later in the year returned to the United States. Boston proved too small for his aspirations which led to him to depart to New York a year after his third arrival. In New York, he rented a small apartment he called the hermitage that became his home for around 20 years. During his stay in New York, he wrote for various Arabic publications that were blooming at that period, such as 'Al-Muhājir, Mir'āt 'Al-Gharb, and 'Al-Funūn. Some of these writings were political, calling for an end to Ottoman rule over Arab countries. He stressed that the people of the Levant needed to unite and rise above their religious differences. He also called for solidarity and assistance for the Levant during the severe repression period at the end of Ottoman rule.

In 1912, Gibran published *Broken Wings*, which remains one of his best-known Arabic works about unfulfilled love, frustrated by male chauvinism and tradition. In the same year, his famous correspondence with writer, May Ziyādah, started. This friendship lasted for years and became the most famous literary correspondence in modern Arabic. Additionally, he drew a portrait of Abdul-Baha, who was the eldest son of Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i Faith. Abdul-Baha succeeded his fa-

⁹ Joseph Sheban, "Mirrors of the Soul", in *A Third treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, edited by Andrew Dib Sherfan, (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), Book One, final chapter on The Women in the Life of Gibran, e-book.

ther as the head of the Baha'i Faith. Gibran was introduced earlier to the teachings of this faith, and such meetings with its leader strengthened the profound influence of Bahaism on him.

Although Gibran generated some income through his art, newspaper articles, and books, he remained financially troubled and unable to cover all his life expenses, modest as it was. This led him to accept more monetary assistance from Mary Heskell. However, his financial position changed gradually with the increasing popularity of his publications and success of his paintings, such as the exhibit at Montross Gallery on Fifth Avenue, which garnered good reviews and better sales.

The joy of success was soon to be overshadowed by larger than life events back in Syria and Lebanon as famine¹⁰ ravaged the Levant. Gibran called for an end to Ottoman rule over Arabs, condemning in strong words their tyranny and misrule, and spearheading donation drives to send funds to alleviate the crushing poverty in Syria and Lebanon.

In 1918, he published the *Madman*, a collection of mystical and sardonic stories. This was his first English publication, heralding the literary birth of the popular writer he would be. Two years later, the far reaching influence of Gibran as a modernizer of Arabic literature was to be cemented with the establishment of the Pen League in New York, a pioneering literary group with Gibran as its president. The same year witnessed the publication of Gibran's last original Arabic work of prose, the *Tempests*, which is shrouded in anger and permeated by Nietzschean nihilism, an apt vessel to convey his frustration upon the atrocities of World War One and the starvation and political turmoil in the Levant.

The defining moment in Gibran's literary career came with the publication of the *Prophet* in 1923 by Alfred A. Knopf, propelling its author to a fame that has endured for decades. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it has been translated into more than fifty languages, selling tens of millions of copies, and topping best-seller lists (Amirani and Hegarty, 2012).¹¹ Unfortunately, Gibran's health began to deteriorate around that year, and he paid many visits to the hospital, but no specific illness was diagnosed. Despite ill health, Gibran continued, with his increasing fame, to deliver talks and entertain invitations to meetings and events by various literary circles.

¹⁰ The Great Famine of 1915-18

¹¹ Shoku Amirani and Stephanie Hegarty, *Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet: Why is it so loved?*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17997163> (12 May 2012).

Gibran tried to invest the money he made through numerous successful publications in a real estate project, but his hopes were dashed, and he lost most of his money. His efforts to refocus on writing instead of investment were boosted by a new assistant, Barbara Young. She was a devoted fan, and later became one of his biographers. Nevertheless, his new publications did not match the success of the *Prophet* and received mixed critical reviews, although his fame continued to grow. Increasing literary and social commitments did not help alleviate his illness, which was taking a heavier toll on his health, boosted by Gibran's fondness for alcohol. As he refused any prolonged stay in hospital or any medical operations, his liver finally gave out and Gibran died in St. Vincent Hospital on 10 April 1931. He was buried in Boston, but his remains were later reinterred in Lebanon, where he was finally laid to rest in his birth town of Bsharri, after a voyage of forty-eight years.

A Critical Review of Gibran's Creative Works

Gibran's stream of creative imagination started flowing with a pamphlet in adulation of music, published in 1905. This poetic essay titled *Music* has five major parts that lay the foundation of many of Gibran's mystical views to be expounded in his later, longer works. In the first part, Gibran presents music, in a highly poetical language, as the energy that embraces the Platonic soul, setting it free to reach interminable heights. Music is also the language inspired from above. Gibran, in a Wordsworthian manner, states that the melody of a bird reveals more wisdom than classic volumes of knowledge. In the second part, Gibran invites readers on a historical journey to explore the status and mission of music across generations. Here he shows his knowledge of the myths and concepts of various cultures at his young age, such as the Greek, Hindu, Assyrian, and Islamic traditions. Gibran then presents descriptions on how music accompanies man throughout his life, from birth to death, giving life meaning and value. He illustrates how certain melodic modes used in centonization¹² can enhance and reveal sentiments and passions. The final part is an entreaty to the temple of music to guide men's hearts to the metaphysical world and reveal the essence of the Unseen. In short, this work offers glimpses of Gibran's latent talent and presents the seeds of his spiritual and romantic philosophy.¹³

¹² According to set melodic types, figures, patterns, etc.

¹³ Nadeem Naimy in *The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran* is of the opinion that this piece tells readers more about Gibran, the sentimental aspiring young poet, than about

Music was followed a year later by *Nymphs of the Valley* in 1906, which contains three fictional parables, employing a style that is figuratively ornate to present, or compensate for, an unsophisticated plot. The first story *Martha* revolves around the eponymous poor orphan girl who is seduced to depart from her valley of innocence to the city, where she is abused sexually and emotionally. Years later, the narrator is guided to Martha on her deathbed by her illegitimate son, who sells roses in the street. When she dies, she is refused burial in the Christian cemetery, where the Cross protects the graves of the clean and virtuous. The story shows Gibran's belief in the innate innocence and absolute value of a human being, which invites comparisons to French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Gibran emphasizes uncorrupted morals in the state of nature in contrast to the cruel, corrupting, and condemnatory city and church.

The second story titled *Ashes of the Generations and the Eternal Fire* has two timelines; one takes place more than a century before the birth of Christ at the temple of Ishtar,¹⁴ while the other takes place in the spring of AD 1890 in the ruins of the same temple. The holy setting in the city of Baal¹⁵ introduces a prostrating man, tearfully beseeching the gods to spare the life of his dying beloved. His prayers go unanswered, and he is left to wander aimlessly. Centuries later, the spirits of the same two hapless lovers encounter and recognize each other instantly, albeit they occupy different human receptacles. Evidently, the parable presents a concept of incarnation where spiritual powers, descending from the sublime realm, recognize each other in the physical plane, as a testimony to the supremacy of love.

The final parable titled *Yuhanna the Mad* presents a simple young man who unwittingly leads his herd to graze in a land owned by an ecclesiastical monastery. He is reprimanded and persecuted but released after he is declared mad by his own family. Finally, he is deserted by everyone after he helplessly denounces the corrupt church. The American poet, Robert Hillyer, believes that this parable "symbolizes the contrast between the hypocrisy of glittering formalism and that true religion which

the subject. The subject is not analyzed objectively but rather presented as a prose-ode of a nostalgic heart.

¹⁴ A most important Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of love, fertility, war, etc.

¹⁵ Baal, one of major gods in the ancient Levantine mythology, was especially revered by the Canaanites. References to ancient Semitic and Mesopotamian mythologies slowly gained popularity in modern Arabic literature.

is the treasure of the humble (Hillyer, 1948)."¹⁶ In short, the book as a whole presents a niche for the examination of Gibran's mystical and philosophical views such as the concepts of the nonmaterial soul, nature, innate goodness, love, sin and punishment, among others. Also, the book is example of Gibran's relentless assault on the church as an organization that has betrayed the true teachings of Jesus, replacing him with greed for wealth and power.

Spirits Rebellious, published in 1908, was a collection of four stories that had originally appeared in *'Al-Muhājir*. The defining feature of this work is its stinging social commentary in incensed pronouncements on the theme of women and justice. The first story is titled *Wardah 'Al-Hānī*, who is forced by social norms to marry a wealthy older man whom she does not love. Eventually, she leaves her house in Beirut to lead a poor life with the young man whom she truly loves. Stylistically, the story is characterized by the direct voice and value-laden commentary of the narrator, who nearly turns the narrative into an essay on marriage and tradition in historic Lebanon. Thematically, the heroine, who lends her name to the title of the story, represents the broken promise of urban life to women, where patriarchal traditions continue to suffocate the natural aspirations of women.

The second story titled *The Cry of the Graves* centers on a corrupt and tyrannical legal system, where a ruler sentences three innocent individuals to horrible deaths. In the few pages that encompass this short story, Gibran raises two fundamental questions about skewed justice and punishment in the light of his firm belief in the sacredness of human life. First, the narrator condemns the authority of law itself asking, "What is Law? Who saw it coming with the sun from the depths of heaven? What human saw the heart of God and found its will or purpose?" Second, he condemns the executors of law, asking "Who cut off the murderer's head? Are they divine prophets, or soldiers shedding blood wherever they go? Who stoned that adulteress? Were they virtuous hermits who came from their monasteries, or humans who loved to commit atrocities with glee, under the protection of ignorant Law?" The answers to these questions are to be found in all of Gibran's works, including the *Prophet*, formulating key tenets of his moral philosophy that relies on his perception of divine goodness and justice.

¹⁶ Robert Hillyer, *Three Ornamented Parables*, New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/13/specials/gibran-nymphs.html> (April, 18, 1948).

The Bridal Couch is the title of the third story, which deals with feminist themes similar to those resonating in the opening story of the book. It centers on Laylā, who furtively withdraws from her wedding party to meet her secret lover, trying to convince him to flee with her. He refuses, asks her to return to her bridegroom, and pretends that he is in love with a different girl. Laylā stabs him to death, but he confesses to loving only her, which leads her to commit suicide in his dying arms. The sentimental storyline mainly serves to highlight the catastrophic effects of archaic social norms on young women.

The final story is entitled *Khalīl the Heretic*, where the young orphan, Khalīl, grows up to be a rich monk in rich monastery in Lebanon. He lashes out against his fellow monks, accusing them of betraying the teachings of Jesus as they enjoy the limitless bounties of the monastery and leave poor villagers to starve and freeze, deprived of any sustenance in the harsh mountainous winter. Consequently, Khalīl is beaten, jailed, and finally exiled. The ruler of the village where Khalīl seeks refuge sets up a trial to convict him of heresy. However, Khalīl, through his oratory skill, manages to turn the crowds against the ruler, instigating a remarkable and peaceful civil obedience. The nonviolent revolution succeeds in toppling the ruler. It then distributes wealth and land among villagers and sets Khalīl as a new just leader. Thematically, the story is rich in references to the role of religion, the question of liberty and law, the meaning of true poverty and monasticism, the relationship between ruler and people, and the effect of modern servitude. All in all, the book *Spirits Rebelious*, through its four short narratives, reveals various aspects of Gibran spiritual and moral views, which will be further developed in his later works.

Gibran's following work was titled *Broken Wings*. It proved popular among Arabic critics and young readers upon its publication in 1912. Set in rural Lebanon and revolving around a story of doomed passion, *Broken Wings* explores themes of transcendental love, patriarchy, woman status, corruption, and anticlericalism. Thus, it is thematically similar to preceding publications. This novella, however, is Gibran's longest narrative, and contains clear resemblances to his unfulfilled love affair with Halā 'Al-Dāhir while he was in Lebanon. The protagonist, who is named Gibran in some movie adaptations, falls instantly in love upon meeting Salmā, the daughter of a wealthy and honorable man. However, their love faces a strenuous challenge when the local Bishop seeks Salmā as a wife for his nephew. Salmā dies in sadness due to her separation from her true lover. The importance of this novella lies neither in its plot, which is

sentimental with hardly plausible details, nor in its characterization, which is flat and underdeveloped, but rather in its revelation of various facets of Gibran's concept of romantic love. For him, love is the center of human life, and it is stronger and nobler than any other emotion or consideration. It should not be shackled with social traditions and conventional morality. Romantic love is fated and is a revelation of the infinite love that permeates the universe.

A collection of more than fifty short pieces that Gibran had written for *'Al-Muhājir* and *Mir'āt 'Al-Gharb* was published in 1914 under the title *A Tear and a Smile*. These pieces mainly comprised prose poems and parables with a wide range of topics such as the role of the poet, beauty of death, Jesus, friendship, the kingdom of imagination, Lebanon, etc. The major uniting feature is the strong romantic emotion and mystical spirituality that permeate all these pieces and tie them together in union.

The importance of the book is explained by Nasib Arida, a prominent émigré writer, who stated that at that time of Arabic literary history, writers and poets in Syria and Egypt were filling the pages of magazines and papers with inert and bland essays, poems, and letters that were void of emotions and detached from the heart. He further stated that Arab readers at the time thought that any versification is poetry. However, when Gibran wrote this work, people changed their conception of literature. They, according to Arida, became aware that a true poet is the one who caresses with magic fingers the strings of their hearts. Since then, young writers and poets have started to imitate this work, and the followers of Gibran began to gain momentum.¹⁷

Thematically, Gibran uses myriad romantic symbols such as the wind and sea along binary oppositions such as poverty and wealth, life and death, joy and sorrow, or tears and smiles to present his cosmic understanding of unity,

The cloud floats above the hills and valleys until it meets the gentle breeze, then falls weeping to the fields and joins with brooks and rivers to Return to the sea, its home... The life of clouds is a parting and a meeting. A tear and a smile. And so does the spirit become separated from the greater spirit to move in the world of matter and pass as a cloud over the mountain of sorrow and the plains of joy to meet the breeze of

¹⁷ Nasib Arida's introduction to the book, for which he was the publisher in New York.

death and return whence it came to the ocean of Love and Beauty----to God.¹⁸

Gibran's ontological views are thus inseparable from earthly life with its various states of happiness or sadness, combining the macrocosm with the microcosm in what the America poet, Robert Hillyer, describes as a "coinage of mysticism" (Hillyer, 1949).¹⁹

Gibran's following work, *The Procession*, was his only major work of poetry, adhering to some principles of classic Arabic verse. It was published in 1919, with philosophical connotations regarding the nature of good and evil vis-^{'azza}-^{-wa}jalla-vis man in the natural state and man in society. The poem has a central metaphor as its axis, the forest, representing the original peace and goodness of man. This theme is elaborated further through a dialogue of 18 parts between a youth and an old man. Nasib Arida described the setting of the poem, "an old sage, worldly-wise and ripened by experience, had left the city to wander in the countryside, and wearily rested himself at the edge of the forest; a naked, sun-bronzed youth emerged from the forest, reed in hand, to throw himself in abandon beside the sage, and the two unceremoniously commenced their discourse."²⁰

The youth uses a faster poetic meter to convey his message of innocence, freedom, and happiness, while the old man by contrast uses a slower and longer poetic meter to present his state of doubt, corruption, and ennui. This duality carries the whole poem, with considerable reliance on symbolic representations, to its conclusion where the old man seems to capitulate,

Had I the days in hand to string,
Only in forest they'd be strewn,
But circumstances drive us on,
In narrow paths by Kismet hewn.
For Fate has ways we cannot change,
While weakness preys upon our will.
We bolster with excuse the self,
And help that Fate ourselves to kill.

¹⁸ From Gibran's introduction to the book.

¹⁹ Robert Hillyer, Thoughts of a Mystic, New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/13/specials/gibran-tears.html> (April 3, 1949).

²⁰ Nasib Arida's introduction to the book.

George Kheirallah, who translated the work to English in the 1940s, believes that “the poem represents the unconscious autobiography of Gibran: Gibran the sage, mellowed beyond his years and Gibran the rebel, who had come to believe in the unity and universality of all existence and who longed for simple, impersonal freedom, merged in harmony with all things” (Sheban, 2011).²¹ Whether autobiographical or not, the poem echoes various romantic and mystical themes with its call for a simple and pure life, revolting against materialism, and its focus on the degradation of the self in a social setting against the unitive life of the natural goodness (Majdoubeh, 2002).²²

Although Gibran started publishing in English with Alfred A. Knopf in 1918, he nonetheless published a final Arabic work in 1920 entitled, *The Tempests*. It is a collection of more than thirty short pieces ranging from prose poetry, drama, short story, to newspaper articles, with various topics ranging from sociology, eremitism, politics, to literature. Naimy notes that a key feature of this work is the Nietzschean influence it exhibits, whereby Gibran addresses readers with a shovel in hand and offers no more than a grave in a valley strewn with bones and skulls (Naimy, 1974).²³ In the first piece of this book, the nihilistic Grave Digger advises that poetry must be forsaken for it has no benefit as men are dead since their birth, while religion, God, and prophets are hollow words invented in ages past. In other pieces of the book, echoes of the radjyallāhu
ānāhā *bermensch*²⁴ and Master-Slave Morality²⁵ are perceptible in Gibran's political commentary as he calls upon his countrymen to abandon humility and fear to take charge of Fate. He condemns some of his fellow Syrians as decayed teeth that must be uprooted en route to power and self-assertion. In contrast, other pages of the book use a tone that is less critical and has diverse mystical undercurrents. This is evident in a short story entitled, *'Al- 'āṣīfah*, which is about a hermit named *Yūsuf* who de-

²¹ Joseph Sheban, “Mirrors of the Soul”, in *A Third treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, edited by Andrew Dib Sherfan, (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), Book One, chapter on Gibran's Painting and Poetry, e-book.

²² Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh, “Gibran's The Procession in the Transcendentalist Context”, *Arabica*, Vol. 49, No. 4, (2002), 477-493, Refer to 491-492.

²³ Mikhail Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and his Works*, (Beirut: Naufal Publishers, 1974), 127.

²⁴ The Overman is the ultimate ascension of humans, according to Nietzsche. Refer to his 1883 work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

²⁵ Master-Slave Morality is a key theme of Nietzsche's. Master Morality stresses pride and power, while Slave Morality stresses kindness and humility. Refer to his 1887 work *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

clares to the narrator, ‘I sought solitude so that I would not have to sit with those who, having only partial knowledge, see the image of a science in a dream and imagine themselves in wisdom's inner circle. While alert and awakeful they see one apparition of reality and imagine that they possess its perfect essence.’” In short, the varied genres, themes, and styles used in *The Tempests* offer multiple perspectives on fundamental concepts shaping the Gibranian vision.

Although *The Tempests* is generally considered Gibran’s final Arabic work, *The New and the Marvelous*, was published in Cairo in 1923. It features varied pieces chosen by an editor from numerous earlier publications. In any case, Naimy opted to include this book in the anthology he edited of Gibran’s major works. The influence of Nietzsche is barely visible in *The New and the Marvelous* and Gibran expresses unanimity and compassion towards the poor and weak. Mysticism has a fair share in this book as evident in the piece dedicated to Avicenna’s poem on the soul, favoring it over works by Shakespeare, Goethe, and Shelley. Gibran also, in a separate piece, praises ‘Al-Ghazālī’s Sufism over St. Augustine’s mysticism and views the former as a bridge between Hindu mystics and late writers such as Baruch Spinoza and William Blake. Mystic poet, Ibn ‘Al-Fārīdī, is described as the prince of the realm of imagination and leader of the army of mystics that moves towards the city of Truth, casting aside all trifles and follies. The crowning jewel of this book is a play entitled *Iram: City of Lofty Pillars*,²⁶ which recounts the esoteric path to God through a conversation with a female Sufi saint. The saint experiences mystical gnosis and discloses her discoveries about the unity of being.

Gibran’s first publication in English was *The Madman* in 1918. It is composed of 35 prose poems, vignettes, and parables reminiscent of his earlier Arabic works, but with a sardonic touch to it. *The Madman* utilizes the well-known literary motif of madness which has been used by various mystical writers to solicit sympathy from readers, highlight the paradoxical nature of life, question the meaning of rationality and truth, and criticize a purblind and callous society (Rubik, 2014).²⁷ Mystics have often been described as madmen in works of literature as they are unable to communicate their mystical experiences and express the un-

²⁶ The title is a Quranic reference to an ancient city or tribe.

²⁷ Margarete Rubik, “Descriptions of Madness in English Literature and the Cognitive Empathy They Elicit”, *The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, Vol. II, No. V, (September 2014), 1-14.

covered wonders of the Unseen. In the works of Islamic mysticism, a well-known character is that of the *majdhūb* or *attracted madman/holy fool*, who is overwhelmed with the mystical experience and is in a state of intoxication that prevents any meaningful communication with people (Katz, 1996).²⁸ In Christianity, Jesus, in the words of Foucault, honored and sanctified madness as madmen show that wisdom is a grace from God. Jesus himself was thought mad, and accepting the cross was conceived as a mad act (Foucault, 2005).²⁹

Such mystic thematic concerns are evident in the first piece entitled, *How I Became a Madman*, where the narrator presents the fortunate turn of events that led to his madness, "I woke from a deep sleep and found all my masks were stolen... For the first time the sun kissed my own naked face, and my soul was inflamed with love for the sun, and I wanted my masks no more. And as if in a trance I cried, 'Blessed, blessed are the thieves who stole my masks.' Thus, I became a madman." This freedom and exposure to the symbolic light of truth is only possible after losing one's mask, after casting aside the material influences and norms of society. Gibran presents a mystical and ethical world where salvation is contingent upon finding the truth, regardless of appearances or consequences.

Various other pieces such as the *Astronomer*, *The Seven Selves*, and *The Fox* explore themes related to the soul, its solitary world and access to the Unseen. The effect of society on the soul and the defects of the ethical environment are presented in various other pieces. For example, a piece entitled, *On Giving and Taking*, criticizes man's greed and immersion in materialism, while *The Sleep-Walkers* objects to the dishonest nature of social relations. Similar to these two is the parable, *The Other Language*, that focuses on the negative influence of society on man's natural goodness which is lost after childhood. *The Wise Dog* and *War* address the consequences of blind mass belief and the injustice of man-made laws, while *The Two Hermits* explores man's propensity to evil and conflict. These are time-appropriate themes as the book was published during World War One. To summarize, the book explores the meaning of truth, its spiritual nature, and role played by society in covering it.

²⁸ Jonathan Glustrom Katz, *Dreams, Sufism, and Sainthood: The Visionary Career of Muhammad Al-Zawawi*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), XVI.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 74-77.

A slim volume titled *The Forerunner* that included a little more than 20 short pieces similar to *The Madman* in theme and style was published in 1920. The first lines of the book set its course - "You are your own forerunner, and the towers you have builded are but the foundation of your giant-self" - to navigate the mystical and moral world with the self as its foundation. Every man is on a course of mystical self-fulfillment. Additionally, a key theme in this book is *Love*, which is the title of the first poem,

O love, whose lordly hand
 Has bridled my desires,
 And raised my hunger and my thirst
 To dignity and pride,
 Let not the strong in me and the constant
 Eat the bread or drink the wine
 That tempt my weaker self.
 Let me rather starve,
 And let my heart parch with thirst,
 And let me die and perish,
 Ere I stretch my hand
 To a cup you did not fill,
 Or a bowl you did not bless.

Gibran seeks to spend life in devotion to Love, although the path to this perfect union is fraught with temptations as expressed by earlier mystical and ascetic poets. Other fundamental motifs of Gibran in the realm of spirituality and morality are present in this book, such as the noble status of the poor, the debilitating burdens of the material world, and the paradox of justice and fate. The seeds are sown in *The Madman* and *The Forerunner* that will come to full bloom with the publication of Gibran's masterpiece, *The Prophet*.

Since its publication in 1923, *The Prophet* has been a tremendous success among readers. It has been translated to scores of languages from English, becoming one of the best-selling books of the previous century (Time Magazine, 1965).³⁰ Much like the Biblical *Sermon on the Mount* or Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the book recounts the spiritually-universal sermons of a prophet named Almustafa, who has lived in a foreign city, Orphalese, for 12 years and is waiting for a ship that will carry

³⁰ *The Prophet's Profits*, Time Magazine.
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,834246,00.html> (Aug. 13, 1965).

him home after a long exile. The disciples of the prophet beseech him for final words of wisdom which the book reports in around twenty five prose poems. Each one of these prose poems revolves around a certain subject such as love, marriage, giving, eating and drinking, work, joy and sorrow, buying and selling, crime and punishment, laws, freedom, reason and passion, pain, self-knowledge, teaching, friendship, talking, time, good and evil, prayer, pleasure, beauty, religion, and death.

The setting of the book is a fortified seaside city named Orphalese, which some critics believe is an autobiographical reference to New York, where Gibran was orphaned (hence Orphalese from the Greek *Orphanos*).³¹ In this manner, Almustafa stands for Gibran himself, Almitra for Mary Haskell, and the Prophet's island of return for Lebanon (aṭwī, 1989).³²

Throughout its modest number of pages, the book explores in an idealistic tone a considerable number of spiritual, philosophical, ethical themes. Almustafa describes these themes as those moving within the soul, beginning with a description of the path of love, the hard and steep path to life in its true essence. The ascendant on the path of transcendental love must suffer the flames of its sacred fire before revelations can take place so "you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart". Henceforth, love is the underpinning for the different chapters of the book as it details the actions and occupations that one undertakes in life/path of love. Love is thus an irreplaceable foundation for the moral world represented by Gibran, as Almustafa wonders "Who can separate his faith from his actions, or his belief from his occupations?"

It can be noted that certain aspects of asceticism permeate *The Prophet* as it describes a transcendental journey, where the material is secondary to the spiritual. This is evident in the chapter where Almustafa is asked "Speak to us of Giving," and he answers, "You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow? And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the overprudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city?"

³¹ There are other suggested etymologies, such as Orpheus and Urshalim.

³² aṭwī, Fūzī. 'Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān: 'abqarī min Lubnān. Beirut: Dār 'Al-Fikr 'Al-'arabī, 1989, 49.

In short, through Almustafa's mantle of prophethood, Gibran presents a mystical atmosphere of seeking the ultimate end on a perilous road of temptations. According to Naimy, this extended mystical metaphor becomes the mold into which Gibran pours "the quintessence of his contemplations on men and their lives" (Naimy, 1974).³³

After the commercial success of *The Prophet*, readers waited three years for Gibran's next publication in 1926, which was a collection of aphorisms titled *Sand and Foam*. These pithy life-observations were not as popular with the readers as his previous career-defining book, yet that does not diminish their literary value. Unlike *The Prophet* which had a plot, setting, and characters, - albeit rudimentary and undeveloped - *Sand and Foam* was an undiluted collection of aphorisms such as "Humanity is a river of light running from the ex-eternity to eternity", "One may not reach the dawn save by the path of night", "Every seed is a longing", "You see but your shadow when you turn your back to the sun", and "Generosity is not in giving me that which I need more than you do, but it is in giving me that which you need more than I do." Accordingly, the thematic interests expressed here echoed those of the former work, with insights on the pursuit of meaning in life, art, virtuous living, incarnation, mysticism, etc. In short, this book is not bound by time or space; it addresses universal messages to every human, also from a prophetic standpoint.

Jesus the Son of Man, published in 1928, presents fictional portraits of Jesus through the eyes of various real and imaginary friends and foes. These include Mary Magdalen, Philemon, Luke, John, Salome, Barabbas, a shepherd in South Lebanon, Assaph the Orator of Tyre, a Persian philosopher in Damascus, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and others. Without a claim to historical fidelity, these portraits do not rely on a plot or complex characterization -- except for Jesus -- but serve as a gospel according to Gibran. The book comprises 78 poetical portraits, making it Gibran's longest work. According to Bushrui, these multiple accounts reconstructing the life of the Nazarene defy the narrow conception of his divinity and shift focus to his human nature and moral message,

The effectiveness of *Jesus, the Son of Man* lies in Gibran's examination of Christ from the viewpoints of many well-known characters from the gospels, thus giving a fresh angle on a number of familiar stories. Alongside the disciples, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene,

³³ Mikhail Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and his Works*, (Beirut: Naufal Publishers, 1974), 187.

there are also the views of “anti-heroes” such as Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, and Barabbas who makes the rueful remark that “his crucifixion endured but for an hour. But I shall be crucified unto the end of my years” (Bushrui and Jenkins, 2008).³⁴

Accordingly, the life of Jesus was a great source of inspiration for Gibran, who received his earliest education through church classes and through his devout mother, the daughter of a priest. The idealist image of Jesus was imprinted in the memory of Gibran at an early age. Since then, Gibran has been influenced by the example set by Jesus's noble life and altruistic teachings, and not by the institutions and hierarchies established in his name. In other words, the book is a testimony to the influence of Jesus over the philosophy and spirituality of Gibran. To summarize, the major concern of *Jesus the Son of Man* is to highlight the ideals of human perfection through the person of Jesus, a man who completed his ascendance and fulfilled his longing.

Gibran's final major publication was *The Earth Gods*, which was published a few weeks before he passed away in 1931. The work is an extended symbolic poem recounting a conversation between three gods, who stand for three natural human predispositions; namely, disillusionment and weariness, affirmation and will power, and belief in the omnipotence of love (Bushrui, 2010).³⁵ In any case, *The Earth Gods* remains as a final reflection of Gibran's views on metaphysics, life and its meaning. The *New York Times* in a review of the book upon its publication considered these views to be spiritual and reflecting,

Mysticism of the land of his birth, Asia Minor, which dictate his utterance... It would be our guess that "The Earth Gods" is something in the nature of a translation out of one of the author's Arabian works. It is something new, not grandiose but very nearly grand, sweeping and invigorating. In it the voice of older civilizations speaks to the upstarts of the West, albeit with something of sadness, yet with a large tolerance, like elders giving of their matured profundity to children concerned with small and perishable things (New York Times, 1931).³⁶

³⁴ Bushrui and Jenkins, 258.

³⁵ Suheil Bushrui, “Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān”, in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography: 1850-1950*, edited by Roger M. A. Allen, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 188-189.

³⁶ *The Earth Gods*, New York Times.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/13/specials/gibran-earth.html> (May 17, 1931)

The book upholds the absolute value of love and echoes the teachings of Jesus on love as the greatest commandment (Matthew 22: 35-40),³⁷ the idealism of Virgil's *omnia vincit amor*, and Alfarabi's emanative love (Abrahamov, 2003).³⁸ Gibran unites various strands on the topic of love to affirm its universality as the answer to unyielding questions about the meaning of existence.

Conclusion

In summary, Gibran published many successful and popular literary works in Arabic and English. Thematically, they reflect to varying degrees major aspects of his life. Accordingly, a possible reading can locate the roots of Gibran's search for a utopian moral world in his longing and anguish for his homeland which was ravaged by the corruption of its rulers and its clergy. Similarly, his search for a mystical metaphysical truth can be read as a reflection of his internal struggle to reconcile Western and Eastern values, and his disillusionment with Western materialism. Furthermore, Gibran's adoration for nature can be rooted, in addition to the influence of Transcendentalism and Romanticism, in his longing for innocent childhood in rustic Lebanon. In short, understating important biographical events and their context sheds new light and offers insightful readings of the works of Gibran.

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³⁷ Matthew 22:35-40.

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