

Volume 22, No. 1  June Issue 2025

**JOURNAL OF**

*Islam in Asia*

A Refereed International Biannual Arabic – English Journal

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

إِنَّمَا  
يُنشأ  
الله  
من  
عبادته  
العلماء



JOURNAL OF *Islam in Asia*

Volume 22, No. 1, June Issue 2025

ISSN: 1823-0970 E-ISSN: 2289-8077

# *Journal of Islam in Asia*

## **EDITOR-in-CHIEF**

Abdul Salam @ Zulkifli bin Muhamad  
Shukri

## **EDITOR**

Noor Azlan bin Mohd Noor

## **ASSOCIATE EDITOR**

Homam Altabaa

## **COPY EDITOR**

Nur Mashitah Wahidah binti Anuar

---

## **EDITORIAL COMMITTEE**

### **LOCAL MEMBERS**

Abdel Aziz Berghout (IIUM)  
Muhammed Mumtaz Ali (IIUM)  
Nadzrah Ahmad (IIUM)  
Rahmah Bt. A. H. Osman (IIUM)  
Saidatolakma Mohd Yunus (IIUM)  
Thameem Ushama (IIUM)

### **INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS**

Abdullah Khalil Al-Juburi (UAE)  
Abu Bakr Rafique (Bangladesh)  
Anis Ahmad (Pakistan)  
Muhammad Al-Zuhayli (UAE)

Articles submitted for publication in the *Journal of Islam in Asia* are subject to a process of peer review, in accordance with standard academic practice.

© 2025 by *International Islamic University Malaysia*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.*



E-ISSN: 2289-8077

## Representations of Key Sufi Concepts in Khalil Gibran's *The Madman* (1918)

### Perlambangan Konsep-konsep Utama Sufisme dalam Karya Khalil Gibran, *The Madman* (1918)

Nur Mashitah Wahidah Anuar\* and Homam Altabaa

#### Abstract

This study examines the representation of key Sufi concepts in Khalil Gibran's first English book, *The Madman* (1918). The study uses Sufism as its main theoretical framework and thematic analysis as its methodology to identify key Sufi concepts that appear recurrently across the book. Sufi concepts that are found throughout the analysis are categorised into four main themes that comprise various interrelated Sufi concepts and represent the most prominent aspects of Sufism depicted in the works. Based on the analysis, there are four primary themes that can be identified in the analysed which are madness, Truth (*haqiqah*), the soul (*nafs*), and purification (*tazkiyah*). Although the analysis of the concepts indicates a connection between Gibran's ideas and Sufism, this study observes numerous differences between them. This underscores that Gibran's philosophy is not a comprehensive representation of, nor adherence to, Sufism. While many of Gibran's perspectives align closely with Sufi thought, his works encompass a broader spectrum of spiritual ideas. This study enhances the understanding of Gibran's spiritual vision, which transcends the confines of any single religious tradition. Moreover, by analysing the Sufi concepts in *The Madman*, the study contributes to a more profound understanding of Sufism in literature.

**Keywords:** Khalil Gibran, *The Madman*, Sufism, Thematic Analysis, Madness, *Haqiqah*, *Nafs*, *Tazkiyah*.

---

\* Both authors are from Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia. Corresponding author's email: nmashitahwahidah@gmail.com

©International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

Article received: December 2024

Article accepted: February 2025

Publication date: June 2025

*Journal of Islam in Asia*  
December Issue, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2025  
E-ISSN: 2289-8077

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v22i1.1292>

### Abstrak

Kajian ini meneliti perlambangan konsep-konsep utama Sufisme dalam karya Bahasa Inggeris pertama Khalil Gibran, *The Madman* (1918). Kajian ini menggunakan Sufisme sebagai kerangka teori dan analisis tematik sebagai metodologi kajian bagi mengenalpasti konsep-konsep utama Sufisme yang terdapat dalam karya yang dikaji. Konsep-konsep Sufisme yang ditemui dalam kajian ini dikategorikan kepada empat tema utama yang merangkumi pelbagai konsep-konsep Sufisme yang saling berkait serta mewakili aspek-aspek terpenting dalam Sufisme yang telah dijumpai di dalam karya yang dikaji. Berdasarkan analisis yang telah dijalankan, terdapat empat tema utama yang telah dikenalpasti iaitu ketidakwarasan, Kebenaran (*haqiqah*), jiwa (*nafs*), dan penyucian (*tazkiyah*). Walaupun kajian ini menunjukkan perhubungan antara idea-idea Khalil Gibran dengan Sufisme, kajian ini telah memerhatikan beberapa perbezaan antara keduanya. Hal ini menunjukkan bahawa falsafah Gibran bukanlah perlambangan menyeluruh bagi Sufisme dan bukan juga menunjukkan pematuhan tetap bagi prinsip-prinsip Sufisme. Walaupun sebahagian besar daripada perspektif Gibran selari dengan prinsip-prinsip Sufisme, karya beliau menunjukkan bahawa falsafahnya merangkumi skop yang lebih luas daripada segi idea-idea spiritual. Kajian ini menambahkan lagi pemahaman terhadap pandangan spiritual Gibran yang melangkaui limitasi satu agama. Tambahan pula, dengan meneliti konsep-konsep Sufisme dalam karya *The Madman*, kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang sastera Sufi.

**Kata Kunci:** Khalil Gibran, *The Madman*, Sufisme, Analisis Tematik, Ketidakwarasan, *Haqiqah*, *Nafs*, *Tazkiyah*.

### Introduction

Khalil Gibran was a painter and poet who was well-known for his spiritual artworks and writings. He became a figure who intermediates the values of the East and the West as he experienced living in both

culturally different places. Gibran managed to produce a wide range of literary works from different genres, written in Arabic and English. His works had been translated into various other languages around the world making his literary works accessible to readers across the globe. The universality and timelessness of the themes and messages in Gibran's works made them highly appreciated and popular among readers since the first publication of the works up until this day. The success of his works had made Gibran one of the notable figures of literature during his time in America. Nevertheless, he was not regarded as a canon of English literature as many of Western critics view his works as "simplistic, naïve and lacking in substance".<sup>1</sup>

Even though Gibran's writings in Arabic and English addressed different audiences and social issues of the East and the West, the mystical aspect of his works has become the main bridge across the two cultures. Scholars of Gibranian study argue that Gibran's mystical understanding has been influenced by various spiritual traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Baha'ism. Previous studies have looked into various aspects of Gibran's mysticism, including the influence of Sufism in his works.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, there is still a lack of study that systematically analyses key Sufi concepts in these works. This research explores the development of Sufi elements such as the concept of madness, the Truth, the soul, and purification in Gibran's first English book, *The Madman* (1918). The representations of these key concepts are then studied to determine the extent to which Gibran's understanding of the concepts reflects or diverges from the traditional Sufi teachings by referring to the writings of major Sufi scholars,

---

<sup>1</sup> Shoku Amirani and Stephanie Hegarty, "Kahlil Gibran's the Prophet: Why Is It so Loved?," BBC News, May 12, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17997163>.

<sup>2</sup> Homam Altabaa, "Spirituality in Modern Literature: Kahlil Gibran and the Spiritual Quest," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 22, no. 2 (2017): 215–36; Ghania Arslane, "Modernity and Prophetic Speech: The Ethical as the Impossible in the Post-Religious Vision Kahlil Gibran," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 11–35; Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, A New Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); Vahan Tchaparian, "The Eastern Philosopher and The Westernized Prophet," *Armenian Folia Anglistika* 17, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2021.17.2.129>.

including Al-Qushayri and Ibn Ata'illah, whose works outline the basic mystical concepts in Sufism.

### **Khalil Gibran**

Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) was born on 6th January 1883 in Bisharri, Lebanon, into a family of Maronite Christians. Gibran started his early education by studying Syriac and Arabic. In 1895, Gibran and his family immigrated to the United States and settled in Olive Place, Boston, where Gibran joined a local school and was able to learn English. As he was growing up in Boston, his talent, specifically his artistic talent, caught the attention of F. Holland Day (1864-1933), a publisher and photographer who was also an important figure in the artistic circle of Boston. His encounter with Gibran had a significant impact on Gibran's artistic journey. However, as Gibran grew closer to Day, Gibran's family were concerned about the influence of liberal and Western culture on the young Gibran. Due to this, in 1898, Gibran's family decided to send him back to his homeland to seek a more traditional Arabic education and learn more about his roots. Gibran studied various Arabic literary works which influenced his writing.

Gibran's stay in Beirut was cut short due to the news of the poor health conditions that had befallen his family. After returning to Boston, Gibran lost three of his family members; his youngest sister, Sultanah, his older brother, Boutros and most importantly, his mother, Kamileh. Gibran and his surviving sister, Marianna, were left in a difficult state to make ends meet. Gibran started selling his artworks and wrote for Arabic newspapers in the United States to help with his family's situation. Due to his writing, Gibran began to establish his name among immigrant readers in the United States.

In 1904, Gibran's reputation as an artist grew when he participated in an exhibition in Boston. During this exhibition, he met Mary Haskell (1873-1964) who would become a very important figure in his life. Haskell became a close friend of Gibran and was continuously supportive of his artistic and literary journey. Haskell sponsored Gibran's travel to France in 1908 where he enrolled in an art school at the artistic and cultural capital of the world during that time. Gibran discovered the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) whom he

regarded highly. He also met Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) who introduced him to the works of William Blake (1757-1827). Rodin, Nietzsche and Blake had great influence on Gibran's thinking. Gibran extended his voyage to England where he was inspired by the artworks of William Turner (1775-1851).

After visiting France and England, Gibran returned to the United States. He rented a place in New York and became part of the literary circle there. He wrote for various Arabic publications at the time. Gibran was involved in a pioneering literary group in New York, called the Pen League. In 1918, with the help of Alfred A. Knopf, Gibran published his first English work, *The Madman*. In 1923, he published his most well-known work, *The Prophet*. Gibran's reputation as a literary figure continued to grow as he gained global recognition for *The Prophet*, the book which made him "the third-best-selling poet in history – behind Shakespeare and Lao Tzu"<sup>3</sup>. After the publication of his masterpiece, Gibran managed to produce another three written works before his demise at the age of 48 on 10th April 1931, due to cirrhosis of the liver and tuberculosis.

### ***The Madman* (1918)**

*The Madman* was Gibran's first published book in English. It was published in 1918 by Alfred A. Knopf, who continued to publish Gibran's works in English. *The Madman* is a book of 35 parables, fables and prose poems that was published at the end of World War 1. Each story in the book touches on issues related to social and religious life such as "malevolence, hypocrisy, injustice, conformity, ambition, blindness, and puritanism". Gibran expressed the "multiple levels of isolation"<sup>4</sup> that he faced throughout his life in this work. Being an artist, immigrant, child of a broken marriage and a Christian among Muslims back in Lebanon, he constantly felt alienated from the rest of the people around him. Gibran made use of the theme of madness and the characters such as the madman and the hermit, lone figures who were suitable to represent the

---

<sup>3</sup> Gus Mitchell, "Kahlil Gibran: Godfather of the 'New Age,'" JSTOR Daily, September 27, 2023, <https://daily.jstor.org/kahlil-gibran-godfather-of-the-new-age/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bushrui Suheil and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran, Man and Poet: A New Biography* (Oneworld, 2008), 168-170.

sense of isolation and alienation that Gibran was trying to portray. Gibran's parables took a similar form to Sufi parables in terms of their style, characters, and the use of the theme of madness.

### Sufism

Sufism is a generic term that has been used to represent the tradition and institution of Islamic mysticism, esoterism or spirituality. The term is a translation of the Arabic word, *tasawwuf*, which potentially derives from the Arabic word *sufiya* which means "it was purified". Purity is an essential element in Sufism. It is argued that the main goal of Sufism is "to return man to his original purity, to the state in which he was not yet separated from the spiritual world".<sup>5</sup> The word *sufi* in Sufism could derive from the Arabic word *suf* which means wool. The derivation of the term Sufism from this word is based on the argument that "the earliest Sufis were ascetical types known for wearing rough woolen garments".<sup>6</sup> Generally, Sufism involves "strict observances of religious obligations" as well as renunciation of the temptations of the world.<sup>7</sup> *Tasawwuf* aims for a spiritual life that deepens man's connection with God by purifying the heart (*tazkiyah*).

Gibran's spirituality is evident in many of his writings. Scholars suggest that Khalil Gibran's spirituality is partly influenced by Islamic mysticism or Sufism.<sup>8</sup> Gibran as an Arab from Lebanon was not only exposed to Christianity but was also exposed to Islam.<sup>9</sup> Gibran as a Christian was "re-visioning Christianity in the light of Islamic (Sufi)

---

<sup>5</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam* (World Wisdom, 2010), 4.

<sup>6</sup> John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2005), 229.

<sup>7</sup> Fethullah M. Gülen, *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism* (Kaynak (Izmir) A.S, 2000), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ghania Arslane, "Modernity and Prophetic Speech: The Ethical as the Impossible in the Post-Religious Vision Kahlil Gibran," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 11–35; Randa Cobin, *'Al-Naz'ah 'Al-Ruhiah fi 'Adab Jubran wa Na'imi* (Beirut: Dar 'Al-Fikir 'Al-Lubnani, 1993); Vahan Tchaparian, "The Eastern Philosopher and The Westernized Prophet," *Armenian Folia Anglistika* 17, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2021.17.2.129>.

<sup>9</sup> Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, A New Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 29.

mysticism".<sup>10</sup> By doing so, Gibran, as a poet who experienced living in both the East and the West, attempted to reconcile the two parts of the world spiritually and materially.<sup>11</sup> He acted as a "prophet" who brought Western values to the East and Eastern spirituality to the West. Bushrui and Jenkins further discusses the connection between Gibran and Sufism by suggesting that "his aphorisms, parables, and allegories closely resemble Sufi wisdom".<sup>12</sup> In addition to that, Gibran also expressed his admiration to Sufism through his short essays about the great Sufi figures, Ibn al-Farid, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Sina in his Arabic book, *al-'Awasif* (The Tempest). Gibran claims that these three Sufi figures are "nearer his own "spiritual inclination" than any other".<sup>13</sup> The influence of Sufism on Gibran was noted by several researchers and can be seen in many of his writings. In the context of this study, four main key concepts of Sufism are studied. The concepts are madness, the Truth (*haqiqah*), the soul (*nafs*), and purification (*tazkiyah*). Generally, the concept of madness concerns the representation of the experience of being a madman. The concept of Truth refers to the state where a person earns the ultimate Truth or Reality in life related to the knowledge of God that can only be attained by those who reach *haqiqah*. The concept of the soul refers to the inner aspect of life or the essence of a being while the concept of purification refers to the physical aspect of life that concerns practices or behaviours that can lead a person to become closer to the Divine.

### Thematic Analysis

In order to determine the main Sufi concepts that are represented in *The Madman*, this study employs thematic analysis as its main methodology. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used for "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" covering "a range of epistemologies and research questions".<sup>14</sup> This method is designed to transparently and

<sup>10</sup> Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, A New Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (2017), 2.

credibly “identify and examine themes from textual data” and develop codes to represent the identified themes. Olsen suggests that “theme is of the essence of literature” and “thematic concepts are constitutive of literary appreciation”.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, applying thematic analysis in the study of literature may help in identifying the significance of certain literary elements in the understanding and appreciation of a literary work as a whole. Braun and Clarke provide a guideline for conducting thematic analysis.<sup>16</sup> This guideline can be applied to the study of literary texts. Firstly, researchers should be familiar with the selected text of their study. The process of familiarisation can be done by re-reading the selected materials and taking notes of ideas regarding the texts. Researchers may document their thoughts which includes their “initial analysis thoughts, interpretations and questions” when going through the selected literary texts. The documentation of the researchers' thoughts marks the beginning of the data analysis process.<sup>17</sup> The next step that should be taken by researchers is to generate codes for the selected texts. The codes generated from the selected texts of the study become the building ground in the search for the themes of the texts. The themes must be refined by “generating clear definitions and names for each theme”.<sup>18</sup> The final step of thematic analysis is the production of a report which involves presenting a “selection of vivid, compelling extract examples” and relating the analysis to the research questions.<sup>19</sup> The examples must be taken from the selected literary texts to support the arguments made in the study. In regard to this study, Sufi concepts that are found in each story and poem are used as codes for the analysis. The codes are then categorised into several themes that encompass various interrelated Sufi concepts. Based on the analysis, the concepts of each story and poem can be categorised under four main themes which are madness, the Truth, the soul and purification.

---

<sup>15</sup> Stein Haugom Olsen, “Thematic Concepts: Where Philosophy Meets Literature,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 16* (1983), 78–83.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology 3*, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Nowell et al., 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology 3*, no. 2 (2006), 87.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

**Madness and The Madman (*Majnun*)**

A madman is a famous literary symbol that can be seen in various works of literature that include Christian and Islamic literature. Madness can be perceived in many ways, in which, some definitions may associate madness with disturbances of the mind that requires treating while some other definitions associate madness with excessive love that causes a person's wisdom to be hidden from the eyes of the public. Throughout the book, a madman is depicted as a "holy fool" who is often portrayed in Persian and Turkish poems as "a symbol of the mystic and his all-consuming love of God".<sup>20</sup> The character of a madman is often described as someone who is revealed to the Divine Truth and possesses the experience and knowledge that the others around him do not possess. Due to this, society views the madman as a fool or *majnun* because they are not able to understand the madman's thinking and perception. In addition to this, madness is also portrayed in scriptures such as the Bible and the Quran. For instance, the prophets in Islam such as Prophet Nuh and Prophet Muhammad are accused of being madmen due to their preaching and not following the lifestyles of the society during their time. Reflecting on this fact, the theme of madness and the character of a madman is a very familiar element in mystical literature including Sufism.

The first prose poem of the book, "How I Became a Madman", features the character of a madman who is telling others how he loses his masks and becomes a madman. The man wakes up from deep sleep and finds his masks stolen. He runs through the crowded street, shouting that his masks are stolen. Some people laugh at him while some fear him. When he reaches the market place, a youth shouts "He is a madman". When the speaker looks up, he finds his naked face kissed by the sun for the first time and no longer feels the need for his masks. When the madman loses his masks, he is depicted as being feared and laughed at by society. This depiction captures the theme of alienation which is the central theme of the entire book. The madman becomes no longer veiled from the sun once he loses his masks. The sun can be perceived as a

---

<sup>20</sup> Michael W. Dols, *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 12.

symbol of the Divine, another familiar symbol in mysticism. This portrayal can be viewed as a representation that the madman is revealed to the Divine Truth, leading him to possess the kind of knowledge that not everyone has. Gibran's description of the madman in this poem is similar to how Sufism describes the theme of madness and the character of a madman. Similar to Gibran's depiction, Sufi literature often portrays the character of a madman to depict someone who has an exclusive view of the Divine Truth. The experience of having this exclusive knowledge causes the person to be viewed as strange from the rest of the society, thus leading to the experience of alienation. Gibran's choice of using the character of a madman as a central character throughout the book is a great choice to represent his message on the feeling of alienation and aloneness as well as the experience on a spiritual path.

Another example of the use of madness and the character of a madman can be seen in the prose poem "My Friend". The speaker describes himself as mad while the friend is described as "good and cautious and wise". Madness is a common theme in literature. In spiritual literature, a madman is often associated with the person who has attained Divine love and truth. The speaker mentions that he hides or masks his madness and "would be mad alone". The masking of his madness can be understood as an act of keeping his experience private since other people are not able to understand it. The use of the theme of madness may indicate that the speaker has attained a unique connection with God that he seeks on the spiritual path.

### The Truth (*Haqiqah*)

The Truth or *haqiqah* in Sufism refers to the original essence of something<sup>21</sup> or "the inner reality of everything that has been created, of every Law, and of every religion".<sup>22</sup> In *The Madman*, the theme of Truth or *haqiqah* can be seen in more than a quarter of the stories and poems

---

<sup>21</sup> M. Fethullah Gülen, *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practices of Sufism* (Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2011), 56.

<sup>22</sup> Éric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 207.

of the book. The stories and poems include the opening parable of *The Madman*, “The Wise Dog”, and “The Three Ants”. In the stories and poems, Gibran’s use of the theme of Truth reflects his philosophy that there is a supreme or divine power that every human should seek.

Gibran believes in an “All-including Self” in which all human souls originate from.<sup>23</sup> Gibran’s narratives often mention the narrator’s longing to unite with the Divine.<sup>24</sup> Even though Sufism also has its belief in Divine Union, there is a significant difference between the two. Gibran believes that mankind will unite with God and become one with the Divine. While Sufism also believes in Divine Union, Sufism puts emphasis on the difference between the Creator and its creation instead of believing that mankind can unite and become one in essence with God. This distinction is important in Sufism to avoid putting any creature at the same level as the Divine. Additionally, Gibran believes that spirituality and the path towards the Divine transcends organised religion. This idea is reflected in his writing, “The Blessed City” and “God’s Fool”. He features the binary of *Shariah/Haqiqah*, highlighting that those who are fixed on following the rules and regulations in an organised religion may miss the Truth. While Sufism still puts emphasis on the role of mysticism in attaining the Truth, the Sufis still put importance to following the rules of *Shariah* as this is the basic guideline to all Muslims in the path of God.

The discovery of this divine power as the essence of life and the world, to a certain extent, is similar to the Sufi’s belief that God is the origin and essence of all things. However, Sufism, or Islam in general, puts emphasis on the belief in one God or *Tawhid* as what can be seen in the first part of the *Shahadah*<sup>25</sup>, “I bear witness that there is no god but God”.<sup>26</sup> The proclamation of *Shahadah* affirms the concept of

<sup>23</sup> Nadeem Naimy, “The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1974).

<sup>24</sup> “Out of My Deeper Heart”, “The Dying Man and The Vulture”, “Love” (*The Forerunner*, 1920).

<sup>25</sup> The *Shahadah* is an Islamic expression, bearing witness to the Oneness of God and the position of mankind.

<sup>26</sup> William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 5.

*Tawhid* that “there is no reality but the True Reality” and God is the “reality beyond all”.<sup>27</sup> Gibran, on the other hand, did not put emphasis on the existence of only one God throughout his works. In addition to this, his later work, *The Earth Gods*, portrays three gods that are governing the world at the same time. This shows that Gibran's belief in God is not entirely similar to the teachings of Sufism.

The broad theme of the Truth can be divided into several sub-themes such as Divine love, unveiling and Divine Union. Divine love can be perceived as God's blessing and acceptance that can lead a person to attain the Truth. The theme of Divine love can be seen in the book in the prose poem “God”. The poem “God” illustrates that the speaker, despite several vain attempts to communicate with God, strives to ascend the mountain repeatedly after every thousands of years in order to attain Divine love. This poem portrays the underlying feeling of yearning and longing for the Divine which in turn points to the theme of Divine love.

Unveiling is another important theme that can lead to the realisation of the Truth (*haqiqah*). Unveiling in Sufism refers to the stage where a person attains revelation of the Divine Truth. For this concept, Gibran's use of the theme of unveiling echoes the teachings of Sufism. For example, in “The Astronomer”, Gibran illustrates the astronomer as a blind man who is able to see the universe despite his blindness. Through this story, the astronomer is portrayed as an unveiled person as he manages to see the Divine secrets which are represented by the symbols of the suns, moons and stars. The ability of the blind astronomer to see the Truth highlights that the knowledge of the Truth goes beyond the limit of human senses.

In stories and poems such as “God” and “Night and The Madman”, Gibran expresses one's longing to be united with the Divine. For instance, in the prose poem “God”, the speaker ascends a mountain repeatedly in his attempt to converse with God. The speaker's attempts to converse with God meets no success. However, during the last attempt, when the speaker describes himself as being a part of the Divine, that God responds. The speaker describes himself as “I am thy yesterday and thou

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

art my tomorrow. I am thy root in the earth and thou art my flower in the sky, and together we grow before the face of the sun".<sup>28</sup> This description portrays the speaker as being part of the Divine or in other words, united with the Divine. Due to the speaker's longing for the Divine, he strived to climb the mountain repeatedly in order to achieve Divine Union. Divine Union can be perceived as being part of the theme of Truth as the characters in Gibran's works achieve the realisation that God is the only essence and reality to the creation of all beings and the ultimate goal in life is the Union with the Divine.

### The Soul (*Nafs*)

While the previous theme is majorly concerned with the subject of the Divine, this next theme is more concerned with the subject of man. The theme of the soul or self has emerged frequently across the book. Specifically, the stories and poems featuring this theme have made up around a quarter of the analysed work. Gibran uses the term "soul" and "self" interchangeably to represent the theme. In addition to these two terms, he also uses symbols such as masks and faces to represent the soul or self in his writing. Gibran's idea of the soul is similar to Sufism's perception in several aspects which are; the divine origin of the soul, the immortality of the soul, and the multifaceted nature of the soul.

In many of his works, Gibran presents his belief in the divine origin of the soul in which "the essence of the soul to be of the essence of God Himself" and the soul is originally in union with God.<sup>29</sup> This idea is presented clearly in one of his works, *A Tear and a Smile* where he writes, "The God separated a spirit from Himself and fashioned it into Beauty". The idea that the soul originates from the divine can also be seen embedded in the book. Gibran's belief that the soul has its divine origin is presented in the parables such as "The Other Language". In this story, Gibran follows the growth of the main character from infancy to adulthood. This story highlights the closeness of the soul to the divine

---

<sup>28</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Homam Altabaa, "Spirituality in Modern Literature: Kahlil Gibran and the Spiritual Quest," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 22, no. 2 (2017), 217.

realm when a person is a newborn and shows how the soul grows distant from the divine realm until the point that it is no longer able to understand the language of the other realm. Gibran's belief of the divine origin of the soul, to a certain extent, is similar to Sufism's belief. However, despite the belief that the soul originated from God, the Sufis do not believe that the soul shares the same essence as God. This is due to the belief in Islam that no other creature can be equated to God. Though the Sufis do believe that God created the soul and placed it in the human body, the soul is not considered as part of God as God is not constituted of multiple parts. The soul is viewed as having divine origin and it will return to the divine realm upon death. This belief can be seen in a Quranic verse, "Every soul will taste death, then to Us you will all be returned" (Al-Ankabut: 57).<sup>30</sup> Similar to Gibran's belief, death is viewed as a freedom to the soul from the body as it is able to return to the divine realm and unite with God.

Gibran often portrays the duality of the soul and body where the soul is eternal while the body is mortal, there are several depictions of the immortality of the soul that can be seen throughout the book. As mentioned before, Gibran believes that the soul is eternal while the body perishes after death. He believed that death frees the soul from the immortal body. In his works, Gibran demonstrates his belief in the immortality of the soul through the depiction of the cycle of death and rebirth. An example of the cycle of death and rebirth can be seen in one of the stories in the book which is "Said a Blade of Grass". In this story, Gibran depicts the cycle of rebirth by portraying an autumn leaf that falls to the earth and wakes up as a blade of grass. This depiction shows that the same soul wakes up in another body, representing that after death, the soul leaves the mortal body and settles in a new one. In regard to the immortality of the soul, Sufism does believe that the soul is immortal. However, the Sufis do not believe in the cycle of death and rebirth like Gibran. Instead, the Sufis believe that upon death, the soul will be free from its attachment to the world and will ascend to the divine realm to return to God. The soul will carry on to live for eternity in Heaven.

### Purification (*Tazkiyah*)

---

<sup>30</sup> Al-Quran, *surah* 29, verse 57.

Purification or *tazkiyah* is a process of cleansing and augmenting the soul in order to enable the soul to attain Truth and be in Union with God. Apart from the theme of the soul that is discussed previously, purification is another notable theme that can be seen across Gibran's writing. Purification is often depicted by Gibran through practices and behaviours that cleanse the soul and strengthen the connection between a person and God. The practices and behaviours that have appeared repeatedly across Gibran's works include asceticism, internal struggle, and annihilation of the soul.

Even though there is no specific condition to practice *tazkiya*, Gibran often sets the characters who practice *tazkiya* in solitude or seclusion. The practice of secluding oneself to deepen the connection with the Divine is akin to the practice of asceticism. Asceticism is often related to self-discipline and renunciation,<sup>31</sup> where the ascetics retreat from the society to focus on their spiritual life, renouncing their attachments to the world such as their attachment to wealth and reliance on other people. In "The Pomegranate", a pomegranate seed who lives amongst the noisy surrounding with many seeds moves into the heart of a quince, a dry fruit with few seeds. The seed's retreat to a quieter and simpler fruit hints to the practice of asceticism where a person retreats into seclusion and practices a simpler way of life. Gibran's perspective of asceticism is similar to the Sufi perspective. In Sufi literature, asceticism (*zuhd*) is often portrayed as a way to improve the condition of the soul. Ascetics, as depicted by Sufism, practices a lifestyle of solitude, abstinence, and strict self-discipline.

The travelers on the spiritual path, including the ascetics, face difficulties throughout their journey to God. This difficulty is usually caused by an internal struggle with the soul. In stories and poems such as "My Friend" and "The Seven Selves", Gibran features different dimensions of the soul, highlighting that what is seen is not necessarily the reality. In most of the stories, the souls or what Gibran also refers to as the selves, are portrayed to be existing all at once and the existence of these different dimensions of the soul becomes a cause for internal

---

<sup>31</sup> John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005).

struggle within a person. Gibran uses symbols such as masks and faces to demonstrate the different dimensions of the soul. In stories such as "My Friend" and "Faces", Gibran features the struggle between the inner and the outer dimension of the soul. The outer dimension is similar to a person's mask or persona that is created to conceal a person's true self. In the two stories, Gibran emphasises that people are not as what they seem. He likens the outer dimension of the soul to a "care-woven garment" that protects the person while the inner dimension of the soul is likened to Hell, madness and the darkness of the night. Gibran uses binary opposites such as day/night and Heaven/Hell to emphasise the unpleasant condition of the inner side of the self. Across the book, when featuring the subject of the inner side of the self, Gibran illustrates an inner struggle to portray the chaotic condition of the inner self. An excerpt from "The Perfect World" fittingly describes Gibran's view of a person's inner side of the self or a person's true self; "I, a human chaos, a nebula of confused elements".<sup>32</sup> This idea has also become one of the most prominent ideas of *The Madman* as a whole. The book features the inner struggle of man as well as the subject of aloneness as its main focus.

In stories such as "The Seven Selves", Gibran depicts seven different dimensions of the soul or in the context of this story, Gibran calls it as the self. The different dimensions of the self include the negative self, the joyous self, the "love-ridden" self, "tempest-like" self, the working self, the thinking self and the do-nothing self.<sup>33</sup> The seven selves argue with each other, trying to prove which of them deserves to rebel against the madman. The portrayals of the different dimensions of the self, point to the idea that all of the different dimensions exist at the same time, thus causing an internal struggle for a person to navigate through the different dimensions of the self. While Sufism also believes that there are different dimensions of the soul, the Sufis believe that the different dimensions exist as different stages of spiritual development. Though different scholars might argue on the different number of stages

---

<sup>32</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 69.

<sup>33</sup> Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, A New Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918).

of the spiritual development, generally, there are three stages that a person has to go through in order to be at peace with the soul.<sup>34</sup> The lowest stage is called *nafs ammara* or “the self that commands” which is often associated with evil and animal desires. The next stage is the *nafs al-lawwama* or the self-blaming stage where a person blames himself for his own shortcomings. The final stage is *nafs mutma’inna* or “the self at peace [with God]”, the stage where a person is able to “achieve spiritual balance” and realise his position in relation to God. In Sufism, the practices under *tazkiya* allow the seekers on the path to God to detach themselves from the evil of the world and find peace in their existence through annihilating the soul and subsisting through God.

Annihilation of the soul is an important theme under *tazkiya* that is featured across *The Madman*. The annihilation of the soul is viewed as a stage where a person loses his individual self and becomes absorbed in the Divine. When one goes through the annihilation of the soul, the person is described as coming alive again through God or what is called as subsistence in God.<sup>35</sup> Across the book, he depicts the theme of annihilation of the soul as the death of self. In “The Grave-Digger”, the speaker of the story is portrayed as burying one of his dead selves. The grave-digger comments that he likes the speaker because the speaker is the only one who comes and goes laughing while others are weeping. Through this depiction, Gibran shows a positive attitude towards the death of the self. This positive attitude may indicate the idea that when the self is annihilated, a person is now able to be one with the Divine. Sufi perspective on the annihilation of the soul is similar to Gibran’s. The Sufis believe in the dual concept of annihilation of the soul (*fana’*) and subsistence in God (*baqa’*). When the soul is annihilated, a person will become immersed and intoxicated in the Divine presence as the human soul or ego no longer hinders the access to the Divine Truth.<sup>36</sup> When a

---

<sup>34</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); Oliver Leaman and Kecia Ali, *Islam: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 309.

<sup>36</sup> Éric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 14.

person reaches subsistence in God, the person gains sobriety and consciousness of the world while being aware of the Divine presence.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

This research mainly explores the key Sufi concepts that are present in Khalil Gibran's first English book which is *The Madman* (1918). With the examination of the text through the lens of Sufism as the main framework, this study identifies the thematic similarities and differences between Gibran's philosophy and traditional Sufi perspectives.

The analysis of the two books reveals that various Sufi concepts appear recurrently across Gibran's works. With some of the concepts appearing more prominently than others, the Sufi concepts are classified into three overarching themes which are madness, the Truth (*haqiqah*), the soul (*nafs*) and purification (*tazkiyah*). Each of the themes consists of interrelated Sufi concepts that mirror traditional Sufi ideas throughout Gibran's work. The theme of madness depicts the unique experience of people who embark on a spiritual path. The theme of the Truth consists of Sufi concepts such as the Ultimate Truth, Divine Love, unveiling and Divine Union. The theme of the soul is composed of concepts such as the divine origin of the soul, the duality of the soul and body, and the immortality of the soul. Meanwhile, the theme of purification includes concepts such as reflection, seclusion, internal struggle and annihilation of the self.

Even though Gibran's representations are similar to Sufi teachings to a certain extent, this study contributes to the understanding of Gibran's broader spiritual philosophy that is developed from the influence of several religious traditions including Sufism, reflecting his belief in a universal spiritual journey beyond the limitation of any religious framework. The finding of this research differentiates Gibran's perspectives from the traditional teachings of Sufism which the scholars often associate him with due to his background as a Lebanese. This study

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 15.

emphasises that while Gibran's writings echo various Sufi themes, he should not be considered as a direct representation of Sufism. Gibran promotes his view of a spiritual journey that transcends the limitation of religious boundaries while Sufism strictly follows the teachings of Islam.

Reflecting on the limitations of this research, this study deeply analyses only one of Gibran's writings which may cause a limitation to a broader examination of the development of Gibran's philosophy across his literary corpus. Since Gibran writes in Arabic and English, an analysis that includes Gibran's writing in both languages might contribute to a more thorough examination of Gibran's philosophy, especially concerning the influence of Sufism on his writing. Future research should look into the representation of Sufism's key concepts across his Arabic and English writing. This may reveal the development of his thinking as he transitions from writing in Arabic to English. Studying Gibran's corpus in both Arabic and English can potentially provide a more detailed comparison between Gibran's perspective and the traditional Sufi teachings as well as examine whether the resonance between the two grows or reduces as Gibran matures as an author.

In brief, this research contributes to improving the understanding of Gibran's writing where Sufism serves as an important influence. By comparing Gibran's spiritual perspective and the traditional Sufi teachings, this study allows the readers to appreciate his writing as a bridge across diverse religious borders. Moreover, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the essence of Sufism in the hope that this study can clear some misunderstandings concerning Sufism and Islam.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Amirani, Shoku, and Stephanie Hegarty. "Kahlil Gibran's the Prophet: Why Is It so Loved?" *BBC News*, May 12, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17997163>.

Altabaa, Homam. "Spirituality in Modern Literature: Kahlil Gibran and the Spiritual Quest." *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 22, no. 2 (2017): 215–36. <https://journals.iium.edu.my/shajarah/index.php/shaj/article/download/561/267>.

Altabaa, Homam, and Ahmad Hamawiya. "The Life and Works of Kahlil Gibran: A Critical Review." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 13, no. 1 (2019): 103–18. <https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/ajell/article/view/1487>.

Altabaa, Homam, Wendy Faris, and Ahmad Hamawiya. "A Review of Kahlil Gibran's Major Creative Works (Ulasan Hasil Karya Kreatif Utama Kahlil Gibran)." *Journal of Islam in Asia* 18, no. 3 (2021): 231–53. <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v18i3.1082>.

Arslane, Ghania. "Modernity and Prophetic Speech: The Ethical as the Impossible in the Post-Religious Vision Kahlil Gibran." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 11–35.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Bushrui, Suheil, and Joe Jenkins. *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, A New Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.

Chittick, William C. *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.

Chittick, William C. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.

Cobin, Randa. *'Al-Naz'ah 'Al-Ruhiah fi 'Adab Jubran wa Na'imi*. Beirut: Dar 'Al-Fikir 'Al-Lubnani, 1993.

Dols, Michael W. *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Geoffroy, Eric. *Introduction to Sufism: The inner path of islam*. World Wisdom, 2010.

Gibran, Kahlil. *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918.

Gibran, Kahlil. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*. Translated by Anthony R. Ferris. Edited by Martin L. Wolf. New York: The Citadel Press, 1951.

Gülen, Fethullah M. *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*. Kaynak (Izmir) A.S, 2000.

Gülen, M. Fethullah. *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practices of Sufism*. Vol. 1. Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2011.

Gülen, M. Fethullah. *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practices of Sufism*. Vol. 4. Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2011.

Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Leaman, Oliver, and Kecia Ali. *Islam: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2008.

Mitchell, Gus. "Kahlil Gibran: Godfather of the 'New Age.'" *JSTOR Daily*, September 27, 2023. <https://daily.jstor.org/kahlil-gibran-godfather-of-the-new-age/>.

Naimy, Nadeem. "The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran." *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1974): 55–71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4182921>.

Nowell, Lorelli S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (2017): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

**Representations of Key Sufi Concepts in Khalil Gibran's *The Madman* (1918)** **340**

Olsen, Stein Haugom. "Thematic Concepts: Where Philosophy Meets Literature." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 16* (1983): 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0957042X00002947>.

Renard, John. *Historical Dictionary of Sufism*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2005.

Tchaparian, Vahan. "The Eastern Philosopher and The Westernized Prophet." *Armenian Folia Anglistika* 17, no. 2 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2021.17.2.129>.