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SPIRITUALITY IN MODERN LITERATURE: KAHLIL GIBRAN AND THE SPIRITUAL QUEST¹

Homam Altabaa

Abstract

This study explores the various mystical aspects that encompass Gibran's creative works in English and Arabic. It presents an overview of theistic mysticism followed by an examination of the mystical themes represented by Gibran such as Truth, Perfect Divine Being, mystic path, and spiritual morality with analogies from Islamic and Christian mysticism. The study finds that Gibran adopted mysticism as a universal answer to questions about the meaning of life and as a path that seeks to elevate man into a world of spiritual and moral perfection. Gibran uses a prophetic voice to guide the soul from its transcendental origin through a journey of purification, gnosis, and love to reach mystical unity with God. The study shows that the mystical element is the link that unifies his Arabic and English works, and propels them to enduring literary and popular success across cultures. In this, he places himself as a writer in a traditional context of mysticism, taking the esoteric heart and spiritual core of all religions to be one. Additionally, the moral values promoted by Gibran are based on his mystical outlook and his conception of a just and loving God.

Keywords: Khalil Gibran, mysticism, modern spirituality, Arabic, American literature, Émigré literature

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Introduction

Kahlil Gibran, a leading figure in modern Arabic literature and a popular writer in American literature, has introduced various mystical aspects into his works. Though the life and works of Gibran has been well studied, his views on spirituality could benefit from further critical attention. This study employs a thematic approach that encompasses relevant Arabic and English works of Gibran. It examines the mystical elements in the works of Gibran by using key religious and mystical concepts of theistic traditions that have played considerable influence in shaping the cultural milieu of Gibran.

Gibran's well-known literary works reflect to varying degrees major events of his life. This is true of spiritual and mystical themes and topics. 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 clergy. Similarly, his search for a 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.² This study elucidates the elements relating to the consciousness of God in his works by focusing on its mystical and traditional dimensions and manifestations.

The works of Gibran are characterized by invoking and seeking otherworldly truths, in the midst of the modernist apprehension of his times. The introductory pages of Gibran's *Music*, written in 1905, describe man in essence as a spirit that seeks to "fly" out of the "narrow prison" to "infinite space", carried by a language of music, a divine revelation, to what is "beyond matter" to reveal what the Worlds Unseen hide.³ This evolves in later works to be a favorite theme of Gibran's, namely the relationship between

² Refer to Raymonde Cobin, *'Al-Naz'ah 'Al-Rūḥiāh fī 'Adāb Jūbrān wa Nā'imī* (Beirut: Dār 'Al-Fikir 'Al-Lubnānī, 1993), 17-36.

³ For *Music*, refer to A. R. Ferris, as it appears in: Suheil Bushrui (ed.), *The Essential Gibran*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2013), 3-4.

body and soul. It seems that the soul naturally seeks knowledge and aspires to higher meanings that transcend the material.⁴

Gibran and the Soul

Gibran shows in almost all his works the essence of the soul to be of the essence of God Himself, primordial and without imperfections. However, the pivotal theme in this regard does not concern a philosophical or metaphysical argument about primordality, but rather concerns accentuating the divine origin of the soul and its original unity with God as a foundation for its transcendental journey. In a dedicated short piece in *A Tear and a Smile*, Gibran directly addresses the divine origin of the soul along with some of its other qualities,

The God separated a spirit from Himself and fashioned it into Beauty. He showered upon her all the blessings of gracefulness and kindness... And He gave her wisdom from heaven to lead to the all-righteous path, and placed in the depth of her heart an eye that sees the Unseen, and created in her an affection and goodness toward all things.⁵

Additionally, with its immaterial essence, these lines ascribe gnosis and the ability to differentiate good from evil to the soul itself through its quality of wisdom, a gift from God. Accordingly, the ability to grasp the infinite world is also unique to the soul through a special quality (eye of the heart) also granted by God. Thus, the divine origin of the soul has moral and mystical implications that render the soul in superior position to the body. Goodness is attributed in these short poignant lines to the soul, as inspired by God.

More than once, the metaphor of imprisonment within matter or body was used by Gibran to stress the less fortunate state of the

⁴ The views of Gibran on the soul have been greatly influenced by 'Ibn Sīnā, whose philosophical views are influenced by Neoplatonism.

⁵ Kahlil Gibran, *The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2012), First Chapter: Tears and Laughter, Creation. It is piece no.1 in the English translation. In the original Arabic it is piece no.7, titled "Al-Nafs".

soul that used to freely roam the perfect immaterial world.⁶ According to such qualities of the soul, man is essentially defined by the soul rather than the body. This is due to the uncreated and eternal nature of the soul, and its association with intelligence and higher orders. Gibran writes, “You are hastening toward eternity, but this body goes slowly toward perishment... You ascend high, through attraction, but this body falls by earth’s gravity... You are rich in wisdom, but this body is poor in understanding.”⁷ At this point, the body, it seems, is too inferior, a mere material prison that withholds the soul from achieving its potential and destiny.

In several of Gibran’s works, the image of imprisonment fully develops into the famous mystical motif of veiling and unveiling. For seekers on the mystical path, the body and other material preoccupations withhold the soul and veil it from reaching the Truth, whereby unveiling becomes the “principal mode of access to the supra-sensible world.”⁸ One finds corresponding references to unveiling of the soul and visions of the immaterial world in the early English works of Gibran. For instance, in the *Madman*, Gibran’s first English work, a veil prevents the Madman from becoming one with the symbolic night⁹ in peace and perception. The night speaks to him, “O, Madman... thy soul is wrapped in the veil of seven folds and thou holdest not thy heart in thine hand.”¹⁰ A similar reference is

⁶ “I was here from the moment of the beginning, and here I am still.

And I shall remain here until the end of the world,

For there is no ending to my grief-stricken being.

I roamed the infinite sky, and soared in the ideal world, and floated through the firmament.

But here I am, prisoner of matter.”

Kahlil Gibran, *The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2012), First Chapter: “Tears and Laughter”, Song of Man, e-book.

⁷ Kahlil Gibran, *The Treasured...*, First Chapter: “Tears and Laughter”, Have Mercy on Me, My Soul!, e-book.

⁸ Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: the Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010), 7.

⁹ The symbolism of night is rich in various cultures. For instance, in Islamic mysticism, the night symbolizes the Divine Essence. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Garden of the Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 67.

¹⁰ Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 49-51.

found in Gibran's second English work, where the Forerunner is praised by followers because "He sees with the light of God. He speaks like the prophets of old. He unveils our souls and unlocks our hearts".¹¹ Additionally, the King-Hermit in the same work criticizes those "who renounce the kingdom of nakedness and cover their souls", which renders them unable to behold "truth uncovered and beauty unveiled."¹² The veil thus essentially separates two regions: the material world or the domain of the body from the immaterial realm of perfection or the sphere of the soul.

Gibran introduces a more integrated perspective on the ascension of the soul. This is achieved through characters that have reached an advanced stage on the path of mystical knowledge, as in the case of Amena Divine. The unity of body and soul in Gibran's mystical play, *Iram: City of Lofty Pillars*, is elaborated by Amena, a mystic who has reached superlative stations of gnosis and agape. Initially, she was communicating and seeking guidance from the soul of her recently deceased father. His soul revealed secrets of the other world to Amena and guided her to the symbolic city of gnosis, a mystical oasis in the desert. This scene seemingly stands to show that the soul has the privilege of access to the immaterial world. However, Amena reveals her true discovery that "all on earth, seen and unseen, is spiritual states. I entered the Golden City with my body, which is merely an earthly manifestation of my greater spirit..."¹³ She does not imply a skeptical denial of the existence of matter, but rather reflects a well-established mystical belief in the ontological unity of being.¹⁴ Hence, Amena states, "he who

¹¹ Kahlil Gibran, *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ Martin L. Wolf, ed. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2011), Book Three, *Iram: City of Lofty Pillars*, e-book. A more faithful translation would be "My body is my overt spirit... my spirit is my covert body".

¹⁴ Ibn Sīnā advocated this unity in his cosmological philosophy, arguing for continuity between the First Principle and creation or rather the One Necessary Being and his manifestations. The body is a manifestation of the soul, which in turn is a manifestation of a higher principle, in a continued series of emanations. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi*, (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1997), 28-30.

endeavors to cleave the body from the spirit, or the spirit from the body is directing his heart away from truth. The flower and its fragrance are one.” She then declares, “Allah is great... there is no God but Allah... there is nothing but Allah,” and that everything is eternal within a cycle of rebirth.¹⁵ Accordingly, through Amena’s percepts of the soul, Gibran gives modern literary resonance to a vital mystical concept, unity of existence. This concept of oneness through divine self-manifestation thrusts readers into the depth of a philosophical and mystical understanding of the Reality.

CONTEMPLATION AND BEATIFIC DISCLOSURE

Various mystic schools have chartered different, albeit convergent, paths to the divine. This can be discerned in the famous saying “There are as many paths as there are human souls”.¹⁶ The writings of Gibran do not seek to present a detailed map for such a path, with depictions of its stations and states or the mantric alchemy for curing the subtle impurities of the heart. However, his works do suggest various possible ways that draw man closer to the consciousness of God. One of these ways is contemplation and meditation that leads to intuitive disclosure of the divine truth. This path of contemplation and meditation has been succinctly presented in a short parable about an “Astronomer” from the *Madman*,

In the shadow of the temple my friend and I saw a blind man sitting alone. And my friend said, ‘Behold the wisest man of our land.’

Then I left my friend and approached the blind man and greeted him. And we conversed.

After a while I said, ‘Forgive my question, but since when hast thou been blind?’

‘From my birth,’ he answered.

¹⁵ Martin L. Wolf, ed. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran...*, Book Three, Iram: City of Lofty Pillars, e-book.

¹⁶ Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2008), 76.

Said I, ‘And what path of wisdom followest thou?’

Said he, ‘I am an astronomer.’

Then he placed his hand upon his breast, saying, ‘I watch all these suns and moons and stars.’¹⁷

The setting of the parable in the shadow of a temple suggests its traditionalist religious connotation. As an allusion to the metaphorical blindness of mankind, the wisest of all is blind, to reinforce that his objective is not a matter of this perceivable world. The wise astronomer chooses the path of contemplation and meditation to reach his goal. He finds that the macrocosm of stars and planets is present in the microcosm of the heart, and the Truth lies within.

Gibran presents another example of the path of contemplation through Yusuf Al-Fakhri, the protagonist in a short story entitled *The Tempest*. Al-Fakhri could be the epitome of the Gibranian mystical search for the Truth through contemplation. He has become a hermit, living in seclusion at the edge of Qādīshah valley and Mount Lebanon after deserting the hustle and bustle of people and their urban life to the calm and peaceful bosom of nature.¹⁸ The result of his years of solitude is an exclusive and ineffable “awakening within the spirit”. This spiritual disclosure renders all the hopes and toils of mankind useless as “all is vanity upon the earth” and reveals itself as the only worthy aspiration of human endeavors.

Al-Fakhri, in a manner similar to the wise astronomer in the

¹⁷ Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 59. The Christian connotations are a reminder of the association of Wisdom and Logos in Christology. Also, according to Barbara Newman, “in Neoplatonic thought, Wisdom is the divine mind and womb of creation, holding the exemplars of every creature before they emerge in time.” Refer to Julia A. Lamm (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2013), 49 (Gender).

¹⁸ Aida Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy: East–West Interactions in Early Twentieth-century Arab Literature* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2009), 66-69. Imangulieva argues that Romantic motifs of individualism, rejectionism of church and society, thirst for solitude, and hunger for nature lay the foundation for the construction of Al-Fakhri’s character in particular and the short story in general.

Madman, places his hand upon his heart before recounting the overwhelming power that descended upon his consciousness. This mystical experience made him see “life amid a dizzying shower of brilliant music, surrounded by a circle of great light”, with his soul “ascending above the earth and hovering over the spacious sky” leaving him to “bewilder and disapprove” of all that opposes this revelation.¹⁹ In other words, these disclosures led to suprarational apprehension of reality and immediate intuition of the highest order of principles, with insights that were neither obtained through the five senses nor through discursive reasoning or intellectual processes.²⁰ Al-Fakhri’s solitude and contemplation led him to experience the wonders of a spiritual revelation.

Another figure that charts the interior mystic path to Truth in the writings of Gibran is Amena Divine. In *Iram: the City of Lofty Pillars*, Amena spends five years traversing the physical and spiritual desert to reach the Promised Land, the desert of Iram that symbolizes the annihilation of personality on a path of total seclusion and contemplation. Amena emerged from this experience in glory like a shooting star to reveal the secrets of the spiritual world. Amena discovered, after her long solitude, that one needs to look inside one’s heart rather than outside for God.²¹ She also realized that to find the light within, the soul must long, yearn, and ache for a return to the Divine. This longing tears away the veils blocking its vision to see within, and to grasp the bared Essence of Existence.²² Amena revealed that solitude and contemplation lead to beatific visions and intuitive disclosures that are internal in entirety, without any involvement from the five senses. The truth is internally comprehended, and is too sublime and magnificent to be chained in

¹⁹ Martin L. Wolf, ed. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran...*, Book One, The Tempest, part three - eBook. The Arabic original was published in *The Tempests* in 1920.

²⁰ Lindsay Jones, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, (Detroit: Macmillan/Thomson Gale, 2005), “Intuition”, 4525.

²¹ One could note here that for Amena and for other mystics, the desert became synonymous with spiritual progress and solitude. Refer to: Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 195.

²² Kahlil Gibran, *'Al-Majmū'ah 'Al-Kāmilah: Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān*, (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1961), 579, 585, and 587.

syntax and semantics or to be subject to the processes of discursive intellect.²³

The Poem “God”

The concept of God as the absolute truth permeates the works of Gibran. The mystical resonances of God consciousness in the writings of Gibran can be found in the first pages of his first English work, *The Madman*, in a prose poem evocatively titled, *God*. According to Gibran, this work was “the Key” to his thought, as it encapsulates his philosophical views and emotional experiences.²⁴ The following poem elucidates the Gibranian relation with God through prayer and contemplation:

In the ancient days, when the first quiver of speech came
to my lips,

I ascended the holy mountain and spoke unto God,
saying,

‘Master, I am thy slave. Thy hidden will is my law and I
shall obey thee for ever more.’

But God made no answer, and like a mighty tempest
passed away.

And after a thousand years I ascended the holy mountain
and again spoke unto God, saying,

‘Creator, I am thy creation. Out of clay hast thou
fashioned me and to thee I owe mine all.’

And God made no answer, but like a thousand swift
wings passed away.

And after a thousand years I climbed the holy mountain
and spoke unto God again, saying,

‘Father, I am thy son. In pity and love thou hast given

²³ Ibid., 592.

²⁴ Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, (Oxford: One World, 2008), 157.

me birth, and through love and worship I shall inherit thy kingdom.’

And God made no answer, and like the mist that veils the distant hills he passed away.

And after a thousand years I climbed the sacred mountain and again spoke unto God, saying,

‘My God, my aim and my fulfilment; I am thy yesterday and thou 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.’

Then God leaned over me, and in my ears whispered words of sweetness, and even as the sea that enfoldeth a brook that runneth down to her, he enfolded me.

And when I descended to the valleys and the plains God was there also.²⁵

The speaker of the prose poem ascends the mountain and addresses God directly. The solitary ascent of the mountain²⁶ itself has numerous mystical connotations; Moses spoke to God and received the laws on Mount Sinai,²⁷ Jesus went to a mountain to pray all night to God,²⁸ and the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations at “The Mountain of Light” while in seclusion.²⁹ Such references, preceded by Abraham’s Jehovah-jireh as the mount where

²⁵ Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman*, 9-10.

²⁶ There is quite a number of sacred mountains across human civilizations such as Mount Olympus in Greece, Hara Berezaiti (Zoroastrian legendary mountain), and Mount Kailash (sacred to Hinduism and Buddhism). In Christianity, Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon might be the Mount of Transfiguration, mentioned in Matthew 17:1-9, where the glory of God shined through Jesus while he was praying. The physical ascent is related to the symbolic ascent of the soul.

²⁷ Exodus 19 and 20.

²⁸ Luke 6:12.

²⁹ Saifur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet*, (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1996), 67-68.

the Lord is seen or will provide,³⁰ made the mountains a literary destination of choice for mystics - as in the favorite perennialist metaphor of the “paths that lead to the same summit”.³¹ Accordingly, the speaker is placed in a traditional context of prayers, appealing to the mystical tradition as a follower not as an innovator.³²

The act of speaking indicates an expectation of personhood; God listens and sympathizes. In this poem, God is not an impersonal force or an arbitrary mechanism. God, as presented in this prose poem, is intimate and conversational, Whom one can “please or displease by certain actions that one can choose to perform” with the anticipation that “God himself performs actions in turn in order to affect the world as he sees fit.”³³ This prose poem is somber and traditionalist, with no suggestions of any theurgic rituals or evocations.

The prayer, “Master, I am thy slave. Thy hidden will is my law and I shall obey thee for ever more,” highlights the Master-Slave relation, echoing the abject poverty of a religious servant in dire need in every respect for his Master.³⁴ The seeker here stresses his absolute need by calling God “Master”, and himself “slave”. Similarly, in any religious or mystical prayer, there are various discernable aims such as petition, adoration, and contemplation.³⁵ In

³⁰ Genesis 22:14

³¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), 213.

³² Gibran, generally seen as a nonconforming and a rebellious figure against orthodox authority, can be in fact a traditionalist in this mystical regard. The defiance attributed to Gibran was direct at exoteric aspects of external law and conventions and not at the esoteric heart of tradition, often obscured to oblivion by formal ostentations.

³³ These are the qualities of a personal God according to a chapter on Personhood, Transcendence, Immanence: T. J. Mawson, *Belief in God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13-14.

³⁴ According to one of 'Ibn 'Atā'illāh's famous aphorisms, “Nothing pleads on your behalf like extreme need, nor does anything speed gifts to you quicker than lowliness and want.” Ibn Ata'illah, *Ibn Ata'illah's Sufi Aphorisms*, (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1984), 42, no. 129. Translated by Victor Danner.

³⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), 251.

essence, the prayers offered by the seeker here contain elements of these three types for he is contemplating the supreme power and rule of God in adoration on the mountain, while latently attempting to obtain Gnosis. It can be noted that the seeker is not after any mundane rewards, and his full attention - on the mountain of solitude with the material world down and behind him - is focused on the Divine Truth. However, after ascension and prayers, "God made no answer and like a mighty tempest passed away".³⁶

The prayers continued with emphasis on the complete dependency of the seeker upon the Creator, in all aspects of existence and sustenance: "Creator, I am thy creation. Out of clay hast thou fashioned me and to thee I owe mine all." God is thus a Creator of essences, qualities, and actions, and everything is reliant upon God in every moment of its active or inactive existence, "to thee I owe mine all". Realizing these aspects of Divinity, such as Omnipotence and Creativity, contrasted to their human opposites of weakness and want, supposedly draws the seeker closer to knowing God. The duality of Master/Creator and slave/creature is sustained in the poem till this point. Yet, with all these supplications, still "God made no answer" and passed like swift wings.³⁷

The next prayers flowing from the heart of the seeker intricately revolve around love, and are interlaced with mercy and pity, "Father, I am thy son. In pity and love thou hast given me birth, and through love and worship I shall inherit thy kingdom." The familial relation of love and pity is exemplified by the father-son duality as exemplified in the Bible through the parable of *The*

³⁶ Here, the tempest with its invisible wind force, yet inescapable and manifest effects is an appropriate metaphor for the Divine Presence. The storm can either epitomize grace, when it bears the good tidings of rain or it can represent punishment as an instrument of destruction. The tempest can additionally be a projection of the inner state of confusion and doubt that confounded the seeker upon not receiving an answer. For exploration of such literary images, refer to Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 2749-2750, "Storm as Wind".

³⁷ This image of swift wings is less bleak than the image of a storm, which formed the answer in the previous station of prayer. The wings, for all purposes, represent departure and distance, but their illusiveness is coupled with the protection and tenderness they provided.

Prodigal Son.³⁸ In this context, the compassionate mercy and love of God are likened to that of a father. Creation is expressed as a metaphorical birth given in love, echoing the mystical stance that creation is a manifestation of the Father's divine love. Through this prayer, Gibran presents a path of love, one that was initiated and will hopefully be fulfilled by love. With three heartfelt prayers that stressed three fundamental pairs of divine-human relations, one would expect the longings to be rewarded. Nevertheless, the assertions that a slave/creature/son is in dire need and love for the Master/Creator/Father's charity and compassion still went unanswered. In this instance, the image of the veiling mist conveyed the dejected atmosphere of rejection.³⁹

The fact that the prayers went unanswered is arguably due to the state of the seeker, namely, his stress on oppositions and dichotomies in the relation between God and man. In his position of prayers, the seeker portrayed by Gibran has his foothold firm in the state of separation. In the fourth attempt, the seeker accomplishes the mission and attains the reward of his ascent and prayers. In this instance, the seeker "addresses God no longer as an entity separate from him"⁴⁰, but by stating that "I am thy yesterday and thou art my tomorrow". This implies that the seeker is in the course of becoming God, or reuniting with the Divine.⁴¹ The reference to the root and flower of the same plant enforces this idea, where man is presented as a divine seed that will develop into a divine flower.⁴² Thus, with its roots on earth and its corolla in the heavens of transcendence, the flower here is a powerful image of mystical realization and self-fulfillment.⁴³ Thus, the answer to the prayers came in the form

³⁸ Luke 15:11-32.

³⁹ Mist conveys a sense of uncertainty and confusion. One is left to wonder whether this mist is to bring rain and quickly dissipate, revealing the Hidden Treasure or will it become thicker and turn into a punitive tempest. However, the gradual softening of imagery from a tempest, to wings, and finally to mist in the three ascents of the holy mountain seems to favor the former possibility.

⁴⁰ Bushrui and Jenkins, 157.

⁴¹ Robert Elias Najemy, *Universal Philosophy: A Practical Philosophy for a Simple Life*, (Worcester, Massachusetts: Holistic Harmony Publishers, 2005), 225.

⁴² Najemy, *Universal Philosophy*, 2005, 137.

⁴³ James G. Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism: N-Z*, (New York:

of blissful unity, and the brook rejoined the great sea in an atmosphere of sweetness. Unequivocally, this union described by the seeker upon the fourth prayer is the ultimate goal of the mystic seeker. In describing the advanced grades of prayer, St. Teresa, likewise, writes of “a most distinct union of the whole soul with God”. She also speaks of comparable “pleasure, sweetness and delight” to the warmth and sweetness described by Gibran. Through this prayer, St Teresa continues, “true wisdom is acquired,”⁴⁴ which in this sense explains the sustained vision of the seeker upon descending from the mountain and witnessing God in the plains and valleys, not only on the holy mountain or in other words during the mystical experience.

As for imagery, one could follow the gradually more sympathetic sequence of images from an initial tempest, followed by fast-flying wings, then a penultimate image of mist, and the final words of sweetness and return to the sea.⁴⁵ Gibran similarly employs the image of the brook and the sea in *Jesus Son of Man*, when Jesus enjoins his followers, “Would that you seek the Father as the brook seeks the sea.” This expression of unity through the metaphor of the sea⁴⁶ is a favorite among mystical writers to “indicate the immense and unbounded character of the divine nature.”⁴⁷

In short, the prose poem *God* presents a glimpse into the mystical world of Gibran, with special focus on man’s relation to God. This is presented in the setting, both time and place, and in the exchange between Man and God. The subject matter is further illuminated with a series of well-known images and symbols, such as

The Rosen Publishing Group, 2002), Volume 2, 486, “Padma”.

⁴⁴ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St Teresa of Jesus*, (London Burns, Gates, & Co., 1870, Chapters XI & VII, 113-115 and 120.

⁴⁵ Najemy, *Universal Philosophy*, (2005), 255.

⁴⁶ Jungian psychology perceives the collective unconsciousness as a sea. The great sea or the ocean has important connotations in Hinduism as well. Indrani Datta, “The 'Blue Flame': An 'Elliptical' Interaction between Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore”, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. Vol 2, No 2, (2010), 110-122. Refer to 114.

⁴⁷ Bernard McGinn, “Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition”, *The Journal of Religion*. Vol. 74, No. 2 (1994), 155-181, refer to 158.

the flower and the sea. The experience expressed in the work is mystical, with a traditionalist mystic seeking union with an Omnipotent, Good, and Omnipresent Divine. The illustrative examples above from various works by Gibran indicate that prayer and contemplation are elements that facilitate man's consciousness of God. The resultant beatific vision and mystical experience lead the soul back to its original state.

Gibran and Divine Love

The importance of love in the relationship with God as conceived by Gibran is illustrated in the *Prophet*, the condensed guide to a perfected existence. Almustafa, who seems a thinly veiled Gibran, begins his illustration of the virtuous and blissful path of life with a sermon on Love. To begin the path with love highlights its primacy for the pilgrim to the Eternal. In this sense, Smith wrote, "It is Love, then, an all-absorbing love for God, which leads the mystic onward and upward and finally leads to union with the Divine."⁴⁸

The very first words spoken by the Prophet, Almustafa or the Chosen, in his first sermon are "When love beckons to you, follow him, / though his ways are hard and steep."⁴⁹ Almustafa finely indicates that the first spark that ignites the flames of love is not a matter of choice, acquisition or a result of hard work on the part of the seeker. It is rather a singular call, a beckoning, from the Divine to man that charts the path of love. Almustafa then describes the path chartered by love as hard and steep. The hardship and mortification inflicted by love upon travelers on the mystic path are thus presented,

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire...

⁴⁸ Margaret Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, (Oxford: OneWorld Publications., 1995), 203.

⁴⁹ Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996), 5-6.

The description of the path by Almustafa first highlights a unitive state with God, as “he gathers you unto himself”. Removing the husks and becoming naked can be seen as a reference to a type of purgation, the death of the materialistic ego. Likewise, the growth and pruning can refer to continuous purification of the soul and its progress on the path of passion. The anguish of love is not limited to transformative purification or mortification, but is more importantly a result of longing for the Beloved. When the soul begins to recognize the Divine in love and draws nearer to Him, longing and bewilderment become unbearable. This is the “sacred fire” of love that Almustafa refers to when describing the anguish of purification. He also poetically expresses this longing as the “pain of too much tenderness”, when lovers “bleed willingly and joyfully.” Almustafa issues a fair warning for those travelers whose hearts are not set to perish in the sun of love or who are not devout worshippers of love alone, “But if in your fear you would seek only love’s peace and love’s pleasure. Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love’s threshing-floor.” One might put this reminder, in other words: “if love is true, it will not decrease due to certain trials or increase due to certain benefits on the path.” A lover takes no heed of afflictions, for he/she has no will that is separate from the will of the Beloved. Seekers on the path who need pleasures or gifts to march on or who require deliverance from every form of injury are not in truth contented with Love. They might journey on a different path, for the pilgrims of love have only one occupation, an all-consuming love.⁵⁰ When love is understood in this manner, it is the true divine love besought by mystics of all religions and doctrines. It is love, not heaven nor hell, famously sought by Rābi‘ah and Fenelon among others, and referred to by Almustafa, “for love is sufficient unto love”.

The complete elimination of the ego-self and submersion in the ocean of love is the final stage of mystical proximity and unity the fathomless apprehension of ineffable Truth and discovery of Beauty. It is in this position that one might proclaim, as Almustafa advised, “I am in the heart of God”. The annihilation of the world, personal will and attributes, and the “extinction of individual consciousness,

⁵⁰ Margaret Smith. *Studies in Early Mysticism...*, 206-207.

recedence of the ego and obliteration of the self”⁵¹ in the divine is the final stage on the purificatory path of love. The great mystic Rumi highlighted this more than once, “No one will find his way to the Court of Magnificence until he is annihilated,” and “His Attributes have naughted my attributes; He gives me both purity and Attributes.”⁵² In short, for Almustafa, the annihilation of the seeker in the heart of the Beloved signifies the final transformation, the crowning jewel of the path of love.

Gibran and Nature

Gibran’s views about nature dominates and reverberates in all his metaphors and images. In his creative works, there is an abundance of natural references to trees, flowers, seeds, fields, birds, sun, skies, sea, rivers, breeze, wind, and seasons. It must be remembered that Gibran was a leading figure of Romanticism in the Arab world, embodying the influence of European Romanticism and its reverence for nature. The *Procession* remains one of the finest examples of Romantic poetry in Arabic, with the sublime value, veneration, and love Gibran accorded to the natural world,

Why do you not adopt the
Field as your heavenly shelter? Why
Do you not desert the palace of the
Noisome city and climb the knolls and
Pursue the stream, and breathe of the
Fragrance, and revel with the sun?
Why do you not drink dawn’s wine from
Her great cup of wisdom, and ponder
The clusters of fine fruit of the
Vine hanging like golden chandeliers?
Why do you not fashion a blanket of
The endless sky, and a bed of the

⁵¹ Andrew Wilcox. “The Dual Mystical Concepts of Fana and Baqa in Early Sufism”, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (April 2011): 95-118. Refer to pages 96-97.

⁵² William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 179.

Flowers from which to view the land
Of God?⁵³

The poem is an open invitation to embrace nature on the way to the Divine. In this state of nature, man is in harmony with his innate goodness and innocence, and is able to understand nature's great wisdom and perceive the glory of God.

One may further appreciate the views of Gibran on nature by examining the stark contrast unequivocally drawn by Gibran between the city and nature. To illustrate, the heavy-handed narrator in "Martha", in the *Nymphs of the Valley*, laments losing the pure beautiful life of the fields among rocks and tall trees to be drowned in the materialistic torrents of city life. The narrator leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader that city life is full of despair and fear while rural life is serene and uncontaminated with the evil of modernity.⁵⁴ Additionally, *A Tear and a Smile* abounds in such references to the magnificent and blissful nature in contrast to corrupt and evil cities. In one of its short pieces, the open fields are presented as the throne of the divine glory of God, while the city is depicted under the heavy smoke of factory chimneys as the center of weariness.⁵⁵ In the same work, a speaker conveys a conversation with a gentle breeze that complained of being destined to the city, where diseases and poisonous breaths will pollute its natural purity. On the other hand, the speaker feels spiritual illuminations drawing him closer to nature to reveal its secrets and remove any material veils that taint his soul.⁵⁶ Additionally, the inhabitants of the city are depicted as herds of frenzied animals, deaf to the faithful calls of nature.⁵⁷ In short, the city represents the materialistic greed that blinds man away from his

⁵³ Martin L. Wolf, ed. *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2011), Book Eight, The Procession - eBook. It has been noted that *The Processions* bears resemblance to the philosophical views of French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and to the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

⁵⁴ Kahlil Gibran, *'Al-Majmū'ah 'Al-Kāmilah...*, 59.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

innate aspirations, while nature represents purity, a home for the uncontaminated soul of man to grow and reach God.

Examining the contrast between the city and nature is only a first stage in appreciating how Gibran presented the natural world in a reality larger than the physical or the material. In general, the position adopted in the works of Gibran, most notably in his Arabic works, views nature as a divine symbol and manifestation, rather than a self-contained physical entity. More than once, Gibran describes the natural world as a sign that indicates the presence of and leads to the Truth. Accordingly, a person who is not aware of this Truth might be awakened from his spiritual slumber by a bird and led by its melodious warble to wonder about the secrets behind the creation of this bird and its melody.⁵⁸ More importantly, when one ponders deeply into nature, one finds the infinite treasure of all treasures, one finds love in nature.⁵⁹ In this sense, nature speaks on behalf of the Truth, as a poem dedicated to Earth illustrates this,

How perfect you are, Earth, and how majestic!

I have heard Eternity speak through your ebb and flow
and the ages return the echoes of your melodies over
your hillsides...

And I have heard Life calling to itself in your mountain
passes and along your valley slopes.

You are the tongue and lips of Eternity, the cords and
fingers of Eternity, the thoughts and words of Life.⁶⁰

As the figurative spokesperson of Eternity, nature has a magnificent role in the life of whoever is keen to draw closer to God. The awe-inspiring nature leads Gibran to adopt and uphold a path to the Divine through its beauty. Thus, those who are befuddled by the conflicting claims of religions and beliefs, those who are drowning in the quagmire of materialism, and those who are misguided by

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁰ Kahlil Gibran, *The Eye of the Prophet* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 83-86. From a poem titled Earth, published in Arabic in *The New and the Marvelous*.

fantasies and illusions are called upon to ponder the miraculously beautiful wonders of nature such as the break of dawn and coming of spring. They will find in the natural beauty a truth that expunges any doubt or suspicion. This natural beauty is a light that banishes the shadows of evil, and those whose hearts behold and ponder the signs of beauty are the rightly blessed and happy.⁶¹ In a piece entitled *Before the Throne of Beauty*, a nymph dubbed as the “symbol of nature,” expresses her concept thus,

Beauty is that which attracts your soul, and that which loves to give and not to receive. When you meet Beauty, you feel that the hands deep within your inner self are stretched forth to bring her into the domain of your heart. It is the magnificence combined of sorrow and joy; it is the Unseen which you see, and the Vague which you understand, and the Mute which you hear – it is the Holy of Holies that begins in yourself and ends vastly beyond your earthly imagination.⁶²

Here, apprehending natural beauty through spiritual senses is no longer a mere psychological response to a sensory experience, but is rather a mystical experience of divinity, a step towards the Godhead. The beauty of the Unseen is carried within man’s soul, the divine spark, and is mirrored in nature. There is an affinity between the soul of man and the beauty of nature for both are of the Divine.⁶³ To summarize, Gibran found God in nature rather than in church. The works of Gibran present a profound mystical appreciation of nature as a manifestation of the Divine.⁶⁴ Man is guided by its beauty to realize the Truth and draw closer to God. In short, the path of nature represents a major way for spiritual fulfillment in the works of Gibran. One could note that this Gibranian stance has been similarly adopted by mystics who have viewed nature as a book of

⁶¹ Kahlil Gibran, *'Al-Majmū'ah 'Al-Kāmilah...*, 260-261.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 274-275.

⁶³ For mystics, “unity of witness” is a major station on the mystic way to know and love God.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that nature can be taken as one level of a unity of being. This was represented by Gibran through Amena Divine in *Iram: City of Lofty Pillars*, who perceives nothing except God through forms of spiritual emanations.

mysterious words to be read in order to draw nearer to God. For these mystics, nature speaks a silent language that only pure hearts can grasp through the inexhaustible variety of its colors and sounds. The Divine Attributes are manifest in nature, which is a “dazzling exposition of Divine Power” and “the embodiment of a composition of Divine Names”.⁶⁵

Conclusion

It is difficult to offer a concise systematic presentation of the spiritual thought presented by Kahlil Gibran as it was poetically expressed in various creative works that spanned numerous genres and close to three decades of literary production within two cultures and languages. Yet, this can be overcome by focusing on the key themes that resonated in all his writings, such as consciousness of God and the ascent of the soul.

At the risk of oversimplification, one could summarize that Gibran presented the physical as a symbol or a representative of something far greater, of the Truth, which cannot be abbreviated into the realities of physicalism. God is not an irrational impersonal force or an arbitrary supranatural mechanism, but rather the Perfect Being who listens, sympathizes, and interacts. Thus, Gibran present God who is the benevolent source of goodness, justice, and beauty. Nonetheless, although the works of Gibran exhibit seemingly divergent influences, the one constant here is the great influence the concept of God has in his writings. Hence, man finds the meaning of life, the justification behind its pains and joys, in the relationship with God. In this, Gibran again relies on traditional mystic conceptions of man as completely reliant on God in existence and sustenance. The quest for divine unity by the soul can be also understood in terms of the unity of all beings, where the soul is taken to represent a level or a degree of divine manifestation. The soul seeks to depart from the density of the body to return to the essence of perfection, the First Principle. To summarize, Gibran presented

⁶⁵ Osman Nuri Topbas, *Sufism: A Path towards the Internalization of Faith*, 245 and 344.

various scenarios for the soul's journey of gnosis. The soul is essentially a divine spark that yearns for the Divine.

One could also note that Gibran's spirituality, in contrast to unyielding institutional religion, does not rely on doctrinal obedience or fear of sin, but rather on contemplative love and democratization of the sacred. The sacred itself is brought down from above the skies to be personally experienced everywhere. The mystical thread remained as true in his English writings as it was in Arabic. Mystical aspects remained as central features of his works. In this sense, Gibran advocated the unity of all traditions and doctrines at heart, for they all seek the same spiritual summit. Gibran viewed the esoteric heart and spiritual core of all religions to be one. These religions, together with the various approaches to reach God, are manifestations of the same Truth. This message of unity at the heart of doctrinal differences enables Gibran to transcend cultural or religious barriers to preach a universal mystic aspiration to reach the kingdom of God, both on earth and in heaven. Accordingly, the spiritual element remained constant in the Arabic and English works of Gibran, despite the variety of genres he employed because it is the common thread that unifies humanity in its search for truth and meaning.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	'	'	'	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ʀ	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	p	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ʃ	ه	h	h	h'	h'
ث	th	th	th	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ʃ	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ʒ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	'	'	'	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final
² – at in construct state
³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	īy (final form ī)	īy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
		uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ی	i	o or ö
	ی	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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