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Kahlil Gibran and Other Arab American Prophets

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

KAHLIL GIBRAN AND OTHER ARAB AMERICAN PROPHETS

By

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requirements for the degree of
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The members of the committee approve the thesis of Sana Mcharek defended on March 3rd, 2006.

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The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.

To my loving husband, Tarek, who broadened my horizons and supported me throughout this task.

and

To our precious little daughter, Cyreen, who brightened our world.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of a group of Lebanese writers who initiated the Arab immigrant literary tradition in America in the early 20th Century and established themselves as key figures in the history of modern Arabic literature. Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy produced enduring works that were dedicated to modernism and constituted a channel for new ideas, but remained Arab in essence. Ameen Rihani came to be known as the father of Arab American literature and also the father of Arabic prose poetry; Mikhail Naimy's name is associated with literary criticism that helped revive traditional Arabic literature. As for Kahlil Gibran, his writings penetrate to our emotional and spiritual awareness.

This study particularly focuses on Kahlil Gibran; the story of a visionary youth who turned out to be the most famous Arab American ever and one of the world's great writers, by virtue of the phenomenal success of his *The Prophet*. The study highlights Gibran's life, times, and contributions. It also draws attention to his major Arabic writings along with his chef-d'oeuvre *The Prophet*. Gibran is not, as many may think, a one-book legend. English-speaking readers who have enjoyed *The Prophet* will also appreciate Gibran's *A Tear and a Smile*, *The Broken Wings*, and "The Procession" among others. These works show the development of his thought and reflection through the years and present other sides of him, including the poet-rebel and the sensitive Romantic fired by ideals.

INTRODUCTION

The current atmosphere in the United States of celebrating ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism gave rise to a rich body of immigrant literatures, as evidenced in the syllabi of classes on ethnic literature. The English Department at Florida State University, for example, offers courses that cover various approaches to the study of ethnic literature, including African-American and Latino/a literature.

Among America's multicultural voices, Arab American literature, which goes back to the early years of the 20th Century, has been discovered. The emigrant school of Arabic literature was led by writers from Lebanon and Syria who sought to expand the cultural production of the early generation of Arab-Americans and served as a bridge between East and West. The inner core of early Arab-American literati was comprised of Christian elites like Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), and Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988).

The three writers started their literary quest as pioneers of al-Nahda and members of a literary society known as Al Rabita al Qalamiyah, or the New York Pen Bond. This organization contributed widely to the Arabic literary renaissance; its members even went further than their fellow writers in the Arab world in reforming and revitalizing Arabic letters.

Gibran, Rihani, and Naimy became citizens of the US and wrote both in Arabic and in English. As ambassadors of their homeland to the West, they celebrated the glorious past of the Arab world but attacked what they considered its backward present. In America, they were impressed with values of freedom and democracy in addition to scientific progress, but rejected what they saw as an excessive materialism at the expense of spirituality.

All three gave both America and the Arab world much to remember of themselves. Gibran, however, had the advantage of receiving the most attention and achieving the greatest fame of the three. He became well-known for his

paintings but far better for his writings, and many critics attribute his outstanding profile to the fact that his effect has been significant in both East and West.

Gibran, indeed, became one of the United States' most popular authors and also one of the most successful Arab writers in the world. Yet, despite the degree of self-confirmation and global reputation he reached, he is not yet part of the American literary canon. Many biographical works have been published, but Gibran has not been studied enough and most universities in America do not teach him in their English Departments.

Among English-speaking readers, Gibran is often referred to as "the author of *The Prophet*" because this is his most famous work ever. Yet his earlier writings are equally monumental. He produced powerful and profound works in Arabic. This study will endeavor to explore that neglected side of Gibran in order to add a dimension to the English-speaking readers' knowledge about Gibran the literary artist. Chapter One is an account of his life. Chapter Two examines his literary attainments and contributions. Chapter Three focuses on *The Prophet* and introduces Gibran's major Arabic works. Chapter Four pays homage to the two writers associated with Gibran's image: Rihani and Naimy, and places Gibran and his work within the broader context of the Arab-American literary tradition.

CHAPTER 1

BIOGRAPHY

Kahlil Gibran was born to a Christian family in the village of Bsharri in the North East of Beirut. After his father, an alcoholic tax collector, was disgraced in 1891 then stripped of all his property in 1894, the family immigrated to the United States in June, 1895, and settled in a ghetto in the center of the Syrian district in Boston. This was, at the time, the second largest Syrian community in the U.S. after New York. The father had remained behind in Lebanon.

The family was comforted by the new, yet familiar environment where the Arabic language was spoken and Arab customs were widespread. Gibran's mother Kamila (see Appendix B on page 57), a daughter of the village priest, supported her four children in Boston as a seamstress. And although she was not educated, she encouraged her son's artistic and literary talent he displayed from an early age. She even told him that she envisioned him becoming a great man one day (Waterfield, 1998, p. 27).

Gibran's English readers have always known him by a modified form of his real name. His full name in Arabic was Gibran Khalil Gibran, the middle name being, conventionally, his father's. When Gibran started as a student in the Quincy School in Boston in 1895, his English teacher suggested dropping his first name and changing the spelling of "Khalil" to "Kahlil" to suit the American pronunciation.

Gibran as Student

Young Gibran was attached to his books and drawings. He succeeded at school and won his teachers' favor. According to Waterfield (1998), his art teacher, Florence Pierce, recognized his burgeoning talents and had a hand in his acquaintance with Fred Holland Day, a prominent figure of the Boston avant-garde and a leader of a group of artists and poets known as the Visionists.

The 13-year-old Gibran frequently visited Day's studio as a model for some of Day's portraits, and also as an apprentice. Day cultivated the young immigrant's artistic talents; he commented on his sketches, and encouraged the spiritual tone of his drawings. Under Day's tutelage, Gibran came also to develop his love of literature. In the beginning, Day used to read aloud to his protégé, but as the latter became more fluent in English, Day lent him books to take home (Waterfield, 1998, p. 38).

Gibran came to know the Romantic poets and philosophers, who later had a considerable impact on his output. Gibran's writings, indeed, adopted an autobiographical tone and embraced such themes as the power of imagination, the natural world, and freedom from norms and established rules (these influences will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two).

As an artist, the young teenager was growing. He saw much potential in himself and became attached to the attractive aesthetic world around Day. In 1898, Gibran attended an exhibition of Day's photographs, some of which presented the 15-year-old as the model. The exhibition received positive attitudes and allowed the young teenager to gain a foothold within the atmosphere of Boston Society. Gibran was, for example, introduced to Josephine Preston Peabody, a young poet and playwright who attracted him with her beauty and cheerfulness, and later came to play a significant role in his life.

However, Gibran's mother and half-brother Peter decided to send him back to Lebanon to complete his education. They wanted him to absorb his own heritage rather than the Western aesthetic culture he was attracted to, in addition to the fact that his family put all hopes for a better life in him. So in August 1898, Gibran left for Lebanon, but he did so after he had drawn Josephine Peabody from what he remembered of her. He left the drawing for Day and asked him to give it to her (Waterfield, 1998, p. 52).

In Beirut, Gibran joined the Maronite Catholic College (Madrasat-al-Hikmah) from 1898 to 1901 or early 1902, where he cultivated his knowledge of Arabic language and literature; he read classical Arabic literature as well as modern Arabic Christian literature. He also became fluent in French.

Young Gibran was very successful. He was honored to win the “college poet prize.” Also, with the help of other students, he produced a student magazine called *Al-Manarah (The Beacon)* of which he was the editor, designer, artist, and main contributor. However, his relationship with his father was deteriorating, mainly because the latter discouraged the writer and the artist side in his son.

Gibran’s relationship with Josephine Peabody, on the other hand, was fed with an exchange of sweet letters. She thanked him for the drawing and praised his talent. One of Josephine’s comments was: “You have eyes to see and ears to hear. After you have pointed out the beautiful inwardness of things, other people less fortunate may be able to see, too and to be cheered by that vision” (J.P. Journal, December 12, 1898).

Gibran as Exile and Lover

There is evidence that Gibran started to see things with open eyes during his student years. For example, he took a position against “enforced” man-made laws; he had frequent arguments with school authorities, and as early as the age of nineteen he was not only excommunicated from the Maronite church, but also was sent to exile in France as a punishment for propagandizing his anti-establishment ideas.

In Paris, Gibran learned of his sister Sultana’s death in April 1902. Soon after his return to America, family tragedies succeeded. In March his half-brother Peter, who like Sultana had tuberculosis, died. Then in June of the same year his beloved mother died of cancer. Gibran received a lot of sympathy from Josephine, and their relationship became deeper and deeper. They exchanged letters and he showed her his drawings.

The young man was so in love with Josephine, he considered her a guiding light in his life as an artist. But this love was one-sided; Josephine saw him rather as a friend or fellow artist. She continued to introduce him to interesting people because she believed he was a genius, and even a prophet

(Waterfield, 1998, p. 18). But after Josephine's marriage, the two were not close friends anymore.

Gibran was still a protégé of Fred Holland Day. In 1904, he had his first exhibition in his mentor's studio, and it was very successful. His drawings, which presented a transcendental metaphysical vision, made a profound impression on influential members of Boston Society, and some of his pieces were sold.

During the exhibition, Gibran met Mary Haskell, a wealthy woman and the principal of a private school in Boston (see Appendix B on page 56). She was impressed by his talent and interested in his work. One of the questions she asked Gibran was, "Why do you draw the bodies always naked?" to which the young artist replied, "Because Life is naked. A nude body is the truest and the noblest symbol of life. If I draw a mountain as a heap of human forms, or paint a waterfall in the shape of tumbling human bodies, It is because I see in the mountain a heap of living things, and in the waterfall a precipitate current of life" (Naimy, 1964, p. 59).

Mary invited Gibran to join her circle of artists and educated friends. She soon became his confidante and was to follow him as his "guardian angel." She was so willing to cultivate his talents that she later paid for him to attend an art school in Paris and fulfill his aspiration to be a symbolist painter.

Gibran's stay in Paris was an important phase in his life, a phase of growth and self-discovery. He read Balzac and Voltaire and became more familiar with Rousseau and Tolstoy. Furthermore, he met prominent figures like the French Romantic sculptor Auguste Rodin who announced the young artist "the Blake of the 20th century" (Irwin, 1998, p. 1). He also became friend with Ameen Rihani, a Lebanese writer and political thinker he admired.

Gibran started to contribute to *Al-Mohajer (The Immigrant)*, a prominent Arabic-language newspaper in New York. Its publisher, Ameen Goryeb, had met Gibran and was impressed by his prose poems recorded on his notebook. Gibran's column had a popular appeal and was entitled "Tears and Laughter", the pieces of which later formed the basis of his book *A Tear and a Smile* (please

see Chapter Three, “*The Prophet and Beyond*” on page 46, for more information on this book).

Gibran’s relationship with Mary veered toward romance. His letters became increasingly intimate and he gradually shifted from addressing a mentor and a friend to expressing warm feelings. But upon his return to the States, they both remained undecided about the direction of their relationship. Eventually Mary confessed to Gibran her desire to keep him only as a friend and to bring his potential as an artist and man of letters to its fullest. In his biography of Gibran, Naimy writes: “What of Mary? She loves him dearly, values his talents, understands his ambitions and aspirations and looks condolingly on his weaknesses and sins” (Naimy, 1964, p. 99).

In Boston, Gibran made a living through his sketches, poems, and prose-poems. He started to contribute to other Arabic newspapers like *Mir’at al-Gharb* (*the Mirror of the West*). In 1905, *Al-Mohajer* published his first Arabic book entitled *Nubdah fi Fan al-Musiqa* (*On Music, a Pamphlet*) which eulogizes music and was probably inspired by Gibran’s visits to the opera.

Gibran’s writing, however, started to reflect a rebellious spirit against human oppression and injustice. *Ara’is al-Muruj*, published a year later and translated as *Brides of the Meadows* or *Spirit Brides*, but referred to by Gibran as *Nymphs of the Valley*, expresses the young writer’s anti-feudal and anti-clerical convictions. The book is a collection of three allegories which take place in Northern Lebanon.

Much in the same tone is *Al-Arwah al-Mutamarridah* (*Spirits Rebellious*), another collection of four short stories published in 1908. The book criticizes the power that both the church and the state display and was burned in public in Beirut for its revolutionary ideas. “Kahlil the Heretic” is particularly defiant. As the title of the story suggests, Kahlil is condemned by authority in the village for questioning the monks’ wealth in relation to the poor peasants, and for encouraging the latter to reject the authority’s control over their lives.

Through his publications and the political awareness he developed during his stay in Paris, Gibran became well-known within the American Syrian

community. He was invited by the Syrian Student Club to give a talk and he joined Al-Halaqat al-Dhahabiyah (the Golden Links Society), an international Syrian organization with US branches, the purpose of which was the improvement of the lives of Syrians around the world.

Gibran in New York: a Journey toward Greatness

Gibran moved to New York in 1912 with the encouragements of Mary and his friend Ameen Rihani who had already moved there and for whom Gibran had done the illustrations in his book *The Book of Khalid*. Gibran, too, was convinced that a wider audience awaited him.

In New York Gibran cultivated his contacts and was introduced to dealers of the galleries of art. He exchanged visits with Mary who remained his financial, intellectual, and emotional support for the most part of his life. Mary, indeed, saw Gibran as a higher person with prophetic qualities. In 1913, she encouraged him to move to a bigger studio so he would be able to work more comfortably, and she paid his rent.

The Broken Wings, which was published in Arabic in 1912 and dedicated to Mary Haskell, increased Gibran's fame in the Arab world. Then the Arabic newspaper *Al-Funun (The Arts)*, created in 1913, furthered his literary career. Its editor Nasib 'Arida, a close friend of Gibran, published his poems, prose-poems, essays and parables including a collection entitled *A Tear and a Smile* which won him a further public acceptance. Through *Al-Funun*, Gibran also met Mikhail Naimy, another Lebanese immigrant writer who was to become his closest friend.

Gibran expanded his influential acquaintances of painters, poets, and playwrights. He became a popular member of the Poetry Society where he sought favorable reception of his English writing by English-speaking readers. Gibran would read his parables that would become *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*, and then later pieces that would make *The Prophet*.

Among other members of the Poetry Society was Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, a sister of Theodore Roosevelt and an established poet. She, who

had described his read pieces from *The Madman* as “destructive and diabolical stuff...contrary to all forms of morality and true beauty” (*Chapel Hill Papers*, March 14, 1915), became a fan of Gibran and an admirer of his writings.

Gibran also met the novelist and poet James Oppenheim who led him to become a member of the advisory committee of *The Seven Arts* (1916). This was a widely acclaimed literary journal which published Gibran’s work along with other prominent writers like Sherwood Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, and Eugene O’Neil. It was, therefore, a vehicle for Gibran’s success in the English-speaking world, especially that he was the first immigrant to join its board.

Gibran was also developing as an artist. He started to work with wash drawings but remained faithful to a symbolist style that focused on naked human bodies delicately intertwined (and for which Gibran became famous, even though his art has received much less attention than his literary work).

Starting from 1914 and with Mary’s help, he arranged exhibitions in New York and Boston, and every time he was satisfied with the results. The painter Albert Pinkham Ryder is said to have visited Gibran’s exhibition of December 14, 1914, and to have praised the young artist’s work saying: “Your pictures have imagination, and imagination is art” (*Chapel Hill Papers*, April 11, 1915).

Gibran continued to give talks to the Syrian audience in New York which welcomed him as a writer and also as a spokesman for their causes, especially Arab nationalism and Syria’s independence from the Ottoman Empire. Gibran, indeed, was an advocator of Syria relying on herself and her resources to solve her own problems as well as unity among his people rather than sectarian divisions.

After the outbreak of World War I, Gibran’s political activism increased. He worked with the Syrian-Mount Lebanon Volunteer Committee, advising Syrian residents in the United States on how to join the French army involved in the war, and advocating Arab independence from the Ottoman Empire. This goal, Gibran maintained, should be achieved through revolution rather than “patience“ which he called “The Oriental poison” (qtd. in Bushrui & Jenkins 1998, p. 134).

Gibran also conducted fund-raising activities after the war to help his starving people in Lebanon in addition to writing political pieces. His two war poems of 1916 reveal a bitter tone of an angry young man; “Dead Are My People” mourned his dying countrymen and “In the Dark Night” appealed for help from the West. His English book *The Madman*, published in 1918, included a famous short prose-poem entitled “Defeat, My Defeat” in which Gibran converts his failure into a sharp sword:

“Defeat, my Defeat, my shining sword and shield.
In your eyes I have read
That to be enthroned is to be enslaved,
And to be understood is to be leveled down,
And to be grasped is but to reach one’s fullness
And like a ripe fruit to fall and to be consumed.

Defeat, my defeat, my deathless courage,
You and I shall laugh together with the storm,
And together we shall dig graves
For all that die in us,
And we shall stand in the sun with a will,
And we shall be dangerous”.

From 1915 onwards, Gibran’s writings started to reflect a more universal and metaphysical discourse. Gibran, indeed, developed what Waterfield refers to as an “evolutionary philosophy” (Waterfield, 1998, p. 195). He started to preach the role of poets and artists in developing human consciousness and helping the human soul in its journey towards a higher order, a more divine realm.

Gibran always thought of himself as a poet. He told Mary once: “Better a poor thought, musically said, than a good thought in bad form” (M.H. Journal, April 21, 1916). From the 1920s, he adopted the role of poet-as-prophet, confirming Josephine and Mary’s thought of him as a messianic figure. Gibran eventually became a mystical and isolated hermit; especially that he had already called his studio in New York “The Hermitage”. In a sense he isolated himself from society on the strength of his idealism.

His short story *Al-‘Awasif*, published in 1920 and translated as *The Tempests* or *The Storm*, celebrates withdrawing from society and civilization and joining the natural world. The book criticizes humanity and advises it to seek

self-transcendence towards a divine stage. Likewise, his famous volume of pictures entitled *Twenty Drawings* and which was published in 1919 reflects this philosophy.

Gibran started to write in English, and Mary was his main consultant. *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918) was his first book originally published in the English language. Writing in English definitely increased English-speaking readers' recognition of Gibran's abilities as a writer, since now they started reading his original work rather than a translated one.

Critics argue that *The Madman* represents a turning point in Gibran's career also in terms of the writing style; the sense of pessimism and irony in it reflect Gibran's own disenchantment following the war. The book embraces the Sufi notion of the poet as an isolated figure whose madness is a sign of wisdom. For Gibran, the madman in his book was "[his] only weapon in this strangely armed world" (*Beloved Prophet*, 1972, p. 89).

The following year "Al-Mawakib" ("The Procession") came out. It is a long philosophical poem accompanied by eight drawings by Gibran. It rejects civilization and suggests a simpler "recipe" for humanity to step into a better life. *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* followed in 1920 and is a reminder of the human's potential for progressing towards a greater self.

Gibran's studio had become a meeting-place for leading Arab-American intellectuals who were known as Al-Mahjar or "immigrant writers" like Naseeb 'Arida, Mikhail Naimy, and 'Abd al-Masih Haddad (see Appendix B on page 55). In 1920, they formed a literary society called Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya, translated as the Pen Club or the Pen League and sometimes The Pen Bond, which furthered their fame in the Arabic-speaking world. Gibran was elected President, and Naimy a Secretary.

The members would meet to talk about common goals like Arab nationalism and Renaissance of Arabic literature. Naimy talked about the first meeting when "the discussion arose as to what the Syrian writers in New York could do to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation,

and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations” (Naimy, 1850, p. 154).

Gibran worked hard to keep the Pen League group together, but he started to be less openly involved in politics. Indeed, having told Mary “Perhaps the best form of fighting is in painting pictures and writing poetry” (M.H. Journal, August 27, 1920), he wrote a famous prose-poem in 1920 entitled “You have your Lebanon and I have my Lebanon” the publication of which was banned by the Syrian government. In the poem Gibran contrasts the Lebanon he envisions, of beautiful nature and peace between its people, with the current Lebanon of political turmoil, the Lebanon he describes as the “chess game” between church and state.

Gibran relied less and less on Mary as editor and financier, but they stayed close friends even though their collaboration came to an end with the publication of *The Prophet* in 1923. In the same year Gibran told Mary in one of his letters: “I care about your happiness just as you care about mine. I could not be at peace if you were not” (K.G. to M.H., April 23, 1923).

It is worth mentioning at this point that Gibran was involved in a twenty-year literary and love relationship with May Ziadeh, an established Lebanese writer living in Egypt. The two, however, never met; their relationship was carried on wholly by mail and Gibran wanted to keep it secret.

In the beginning, Gibran and Ziadeh addressed one another as literary critics, seeking comments on each other’s work. From 1919, their letters became more intimate, more passionate. Ziadeh came to replace Mary’s role as consultant, editor, and conversant. She became for Gibran a remote soul mate and another guiding spirit in his life. He idealized her as a “spiritual being – almost an angel rather than a human being” (Waterfield, 1998, p. 163-164).

Gibran started to contribute to a new magazine, *The Dial*, which became his main vehicle for reaching the Western audience after the demise of *The Seven Arts*. Gibran was also still writing pieces for the Arabic newspapers and maintained solid relationship with the Syrian community both in the United States and abroad.

In 1923, Gibran's most famous book *The Prophet* was published and immediately received favorable reactions. Gibran knew it was his greatest achievement and the most important book he ever wrote. He had kept the manuscript for years before he had it published, seeking further moments of inspiration. He planned it to be the first of a trilogy; the second book was to be *The Garden of the Prophet* (edited and published in 1933 after Gibran's death) and the third, *The Death of the Prophet*, was left a fragment.

Barbara Young, a writer and a friend of Gibran, tells the story of her gathering with friends one January 6th, Gibran's birthday, in remembrance of him. Each person was to tell his/her first encounter with *The Prophet*. Young writes:

There was a young Russian girl named Marya, who had been climbing in the Rockies with a group of friends, other young people. She had gone aside from them a little and sat down on a rock to rest, and beside her she saw a black book. She opened it. There was no name, no mark in the book. It was *The Prophet*, which meant nothing to her. Idly she turned the pages, then she began to read a little, then a little more.

"Then" said Marya, telling us the story, "I rushed to my friends and shouted – I shouted, "Come and see – what I have all my life been waiting for – I have found it – Truth!"

Another young woman, a teacher in a private school, who is also a fine poet, had a curious story.

The room in which she was teaching was a hall-was a short distance from the outer door. One morning as she stood before her class the door of the room opened and a man, a stranger, entered holding an open book in his hand.

Without preliminary he said, "I have something to read to you, something of most vital importance," and he read aloud, forthwith, the chapter on children from *The Prophet*.

The young woman was so amazed at the proceeding, the swiftness and ardour of the visitor, as well as the words that she heard coming from his lips, that she was unable to utter a word. He closed the book and left the room. Thus had she come to know of the little black book."

(Young, 1945, p. 64-65).

Three years after *The Prophet* and at the height of Gibran's success, *Sand and Foam* was published in English. It is a book of beautiful sayings (322 of them) accompanied by seven illustrations by Gibran. *Sand and Foam* was followed a year later by another collection of aphorisms under the title of *Kalimat Jibran* (translated as *Spiritual Sayings*).

At the time, Gibran started also to contribute articles and drawings to a quarterly journal entitled *New Orient* and which had a universal appeal for East-

West understanding. The journal echoed Gibran's message of peace and unity in diversity, and gave him a more international exposure.

In 1928, the longest book Gibran ever wrote *Jesus, the Son of Man* was published. It is widely acclaimed as his second most important book, after *The Prophet*. It portrays the life of Jesus and its human rather than supernatural aspect, and reflects Gibran's inspiration by the teachings of the Christ. Then *The Earth Gods* came out in 1931. It is a dialogue in free verse between three titans on the human destiny. Gibran also wrote a play in English, *Lazarus and his Beloved* and *The Blind*, but it was not published in his lifetime.

In the later years of his life, Gibran suffered from a fatal disease, cirrhosis of the liver. He started to seek refuge in heavy drinking and solitude in his studio (see Appendix B on page 54). The man strong in mind and spirit became increasingly weak and knew that his abilities as a writer were fading away. In a 1930 letter to May Ziadeh he confessed: "I am a small volcano whose opening has been closed. If I were able to write something great and beautiful, I would be completely cured. If I could cry out, I would gain back my health" (*A Self-Portrait*, 1959, p. 91).

By 1931, Gibran spent most of his time in bed. According to Naimy, Gibran refused an operation that might have saved his life (Naimy, 1964, p. 218). He instead waited for death, and it came to him at the hospital, at 10.55 pm, on April 10, 1931, at the age of 48. Among other people close to Gibran, his sister Marianna and his best friend Naimy were by his side.

Gibran left behind a rich literary production and four hundred pieces he drew and painted. He bequeathed a considerable amount of money to the development of his homeland, Lebanon. His people mourned his death and honored him with a hero's funeral. The Lebanese minister of arts paid homage to his body with a decoration of fine arts. Gibran's body was buried in his birthplace, Bsharri, and his belongings and books were later sent to the Gibran museum in the Mar Sarkis monastery.

CHAPTER 2

GIBRAN'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Gibran the Romantic

Kahlil Gibran's unique poetic expression, characterized by beauty and spirituality, became known as "Gibranism." His language touches the inner souls of readers and his parables teach them spiritual lessons. His early short stories, prose poems, and later collections of aphorisms made him widely acclaimed as the greatest of Arab Romantics.

Mikhail Naimy recorded his fascination with his friend saying:

"Who shall inscribe the name of the present generation in the scrolls of Time, who they are and where they are? I do not find them among the many "nightingales of the Nile and the warblers of Syria and Lebanon," but among the few whose lips and hearts have been touched by a new fire. Of those some are still within the womb of Creative Silence; some are breathing the air we breathe, and treading the ground we tread. Of the latter --, nay, leading latter --is the poet of Night and Solitude, the poet of Loneliness and Melancholy, the poet of Longing and Spiritual Awakening, the poet of the sea and the Tempest – Gibran Kahlil Gibran."

(Naimy, 1950, p. 159-60)

Many critics think that Gibran's poetic genius predominantly lies in the use of metaphor. Gibran indeed creates beautiful images that are charged with emotions and that expand the reader's vision and imagination. He addressed various subjects about life and humanity like love, beauty, truth, justice, good and evil.

He, for example, described a kiss that is "a goblet filled by the gods from the fountain of love" and talked about love as "a trembling happiness" and poetry as "a flash of lightning; it becomes mere composition when it is an arrangement of words" or as "a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary."

The Lover of Nature

As Gibran's interest shifted to mysticism and primitivism, his writings returned again and again to the beauty and purity of nature. He romanticized nature and found in it an inspirational power for his poetry. He identifies the divine essence with the natural world, a pantheism he had absorbed from his readings under Fred Holland Day's tutelage.

Gibran's writings establish a mystical union with nature, a relationship of love and harmony. The natural beauty of Gibran's home village Bisharri was a strong source of inspiration and nurture to his imagination. His poetry is nostalgic of the magnificent scenery of his childhood. It portrays Gibran rejoicing in peace and freedom among the immortal cedars of Lebanon, the famous holy valley of Qadisha, and the mountains of Sannin and Famm al-Mizab.

Yet, inspired by Rousseau's ideas on the innocence of the natural man as opposed to the man corrupted by civilization and materialism, Gibran repeatedly points out to the contrast between the natural world and the human world. In the former there is peace, harmony, and innocence whereas in the latter there is chaos, injustice, and sorrow.

In a letter to Mikhail Naimy dated 1922, he writes: "...the future shall find us in a hermitage at the edge of one of the Lebanese gorges. This deceptive civilization has strained the strings of our spirits to the breaking point. We must depart before they break" (Naimy, 1964, p. 255).

The Poet-as-Prophet

According to Naimy, Gibran once said: "I shall be happy when men shall say about me what they said of Blake: "he is a madman." Madness in art is creation. Madness in poetry is wisdom. Madness in the search for God is the highest form of worship" (Naimy, 1950, p. 89). Such is Gibran's poetic expression: a spiritual and prophetic one.

Gibran's romantic philosophy was influenced by what Waterfield called "the Platonizing stream" (Waterfield, 1998, p. 226). As we have already seen, the autobiographical tone of his writings depicts him as a poet-prophet with a sacred mission to humanity.

In one of his aphorisms in *Sand and Foam* Gibran compares himself to Jesus saying: "Crucified One, you are crucified upon my heart; and the nails that pierce your hands pierce the walls of my heart. And tomorrow when a stranger passes by this Golgotha he will not know that two bled here" (p. 61-62).

Gibran often depicts himself as a lonely poet who is more sensitive than other people and who is capable of revealing eternal truths. Again in *Sand and Foam* he writes: "There lies a green field between the scholar and the poet; should the scholar cross it, he becomes a wise man; should the poet cross it, he becomes a prophet" (p. 64).

This more elevated role that Gibran started to play continued to live with him. It, however, reached its profoundest expression through *The Prophet* in which Almustafa seems to voice Gibran's own spiritual teachings. Indeed when in an interview Gibran was asked how he came to write *The Prophet*, he answered: "Did I write it? It wrote me" (Daoudi, 1982, p. 99).

Gibran's writings are known for their prophetic tone against the evils that reigned in his beloved homeland at the time and against other evils that bring humanity to decadence. His message, however, is a healing one. He asserts that this modern world, corrupted by conventions, oppression, and hatred is redeemable through love, good will, and freedom.

Gibran embraced the American Transcendentalists like Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau. His work bears the influence of their ideas of self-reliance, reincarnation, and the presence of a greater self that each individual is able to grow into. For Gibran human beings are able to progress toward a divine world. He repeatedly celebrates joining the metaphysical realm as the key to better understand the world and discover higher meanings of life.

Together with Nietzsche, William Blake's works also contributed in shaping Gibran's religious ideas. From an early age, he started to question the religion of his birth and the role of priests. He, however, never questioned the existence of some kind of God and continued to be fascinated with Jesus throughout his life.

Gibran, indeed, found in Christ a source of inspiration, an idea that was recurrent in his earlier stories like “Khalil the Heretic” and then later in his English book *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928). He considered Jesus a lasting leading figure of humankind. He once wrote in a letter to Mary Haskell: “My art can find no better resting place than the personality of Jesus. His life is the symbol of Humanity. He shall always be the supreme figure of all ages and in Him we shall always find mystery, passion, love, imagination, tragedy, beauty, romance and truth” (K.G. to M.H., April 19, 1909).

Although there are critics such as Najjar (1999) and Hawi (1972) who suggest that Gibran’s writing, which is characterized by a romantic mystical style, had little influence on American letters, his impact particularly on Arab-American literature is recognizable.

Gibran the Reformer of Arabic Literature

Kahlil Gibran was among a younger generation of Arab-American writers who contributed to the ongoing Arabic literary renaissance. This movement had started by the end of the 19th century with revivalist figures in the Arab world like Butrus al-Bustami, Kahlil Mutran, and al-Aqqad, among others who were attracted to Western poetry and particularly English Romanticism.

Living in the American environment undoubtedly helped Arab American literati in their quest to revolutionize the classically conservative Arabic literature. In a way, they reflected the culture of freedom they found themselves in. They freely developed new styles whereas their counterpart modernizers in the East had to moderate them. Arab-American modernists were highly influenced by Western cultures in attempting to reform the traditional use of Arabic language and applying new ideas to Arabic literature. They developed the prose-poem and also introduced Western themes like romanticism, individualism, humanism, and secularism.

It is interesting that Ameen Rihani was a pioneer of this revolution before Gibran, but Al-Mahjar or Pen League writers turned to Gibran’s own ideas and

experimentation with language as a source of inspiration. His literary beliefs shaped the views of colleagues. Indeed 'Abd al-Masih Haddad, a member of the Pen League, described Gibran's input on the issue as "the awakening of spring in a barren land" (Hawi, 1972, p. 113).

It is worth emphasizing at this point that before even the formation of The Pen League, *al-Funun* (*the arts*) contributed widely to the Arabic literary renaissance. Its main goal, indeed, was to lift Arabic literature from the stagnation it fell into. *Al-Funun* became the main channel for Gibran's Arabic writings as well as the work of other Lebanese immigrant writers (Waterfield, 1998). The journal sought to promote new forms of literature for the Arabic-speaking world. It spread a new orientation towards the renewal of the Arabic language, and drew attention to what Arabic literature should be like, not what it currently was like (Naimy, 1967, p. 112-13).

Gibran, as well as other members of the Pen Bond, did not promote a radical linguistic reform of the Arabic literature or a destruction of the "sanctity" of formal Arabic. He rather advocated breaking out of traditional patterns in favor of an individual style. As Popp puts it, "[it] was not to be equated with the felling of a tree, but the pruning away of the tree's dead branches and leaves" (Popp, 2000, p. 132).

In a prose poem entitled "You Have Your Language and I Have Mine," a response to the old school Arab critics' attack and what they labeled as "excessive sentimentality...and weak style" (Badawi, 1975, p. 182-3), Gibran writes:

"You have of the Arabic language whatever you wish
And I'll have what pleases my thought and emotions.
You have its words
And I'll have its hidden powers
You have its preserved stiff corpse
And I'll have its soul
You have its dried up rules of grammar
And I'll make of it melodies that echo in the mind and
Overwhelming dashes of affection that calm the senses".

(qtd. in Najjar, 1999, p. 93).

Gibran's early works written in Arabic popularized the already burgeoning Romantic tradition. They are considered crucial to the development of modern Arabic literature as they paved the way to a new kind of creativity. Critics even went further in drawing a similarity between Gibran's impact on 20th Century Arab Romantic writers and that of 19th Century Western Romantic figures on their fellow writers.

Gibran's Arabic pieces were part of a new literary culture that experienced what Waterfield (1998) calls a shift from craftsmanship to inspiration. Gibran indeed sought the beauty of thought more than the beauty of form. He created new imagery and seemed to adopt a Blakean approach to imagination as the "Divine Vision".

His writing did not match traditional forms of the past that the neoclassical poets of the 19th and early 20th Centuries were faithful to. Gibran, for example, rejected complex grammar, flamboyant rhetoric as well as meters of classical Arabic poetry. In his Arabic poem *Al-Mawakib* (*The Procession*) for example, Gibran promoted the idea of using more than one meter in a single poem. The delicate tones of the lines, however, are deeply felt.

Gibran challenged what was considered to be criteria of great poetry. He preferred a free and spontaneous verse, and blended classical Arabic with colloquial Arabic. He embraced a simplified diction and a language that unsophisticated audience could understand and relate to.

Yet, his simple style is elegant, resonant, and able to communicate profound thoughts. It touches on aspects of our experience as humans. It appeals to our hearts as well as to our minds. Gibran's writings strikingly create an element of timelessness and universality that penetrate even the translated work.

In *The Broken Wings*, for example, Gibran talks about love as: "the only freedom in the world because it so elevates the spirit that the laws of humanity and the phenomena of nature do not alter its course" (*The Broken Wings*, p. 35). Also in *A Tear and a Smile*, Gibran describes the Poet as:

"A link
Between this world and the hereafter;

A pool of sweet water for the thirsty;
A tree planted
On the banks of the river of beauty,
Bearing ripe fruits for hungry hearts to seek.

An angel
Sent by the gods to teach man the ways of gods.
A shining light unconquered by the dark,
Unhidden by the bushel
Astarte did fill with oil;
And lighted by Apollo”.

(From *A Tear and a Smile*, p. 134-135).

Gibran’s early publications are also characterized by bitter realism, and unlike traditional Arabic writings, they dealt with challenging themes. For example *Arayis Al-Muruj (Nymphs of the Valley)*, reflects Gibran’s anti-clerical ideas. One of the issues “Martha”, “Yuhanna the Mad”, and “Dust of Ages and the Eternal Fire” dealt with was religious persecution.

For Gibran, true religion is not an organized but a liberating and personal one. His poem “The Crucified” echoes his life-long belief that the mission of Jesus was not to build institutions and structures, but to build the human spirit. Gibran writes: “Jesus was nor sent here to teach the people to build magnificent churches and temples. He came to make the human heart a temple, and the soul an altar, and the mind a priest” (*Secrets of the Heart*, 1947, p. 215).

Nymphs of the Valley, in addition, addresses social injustices in Lebanon like the exploitation of women and the poor by the rich and the powerful. Gibran’s early other Arabic writings also point out to the ignored rights of Arab women and call for their emancipation and education. *Al-Arwah Al-Mutamarridah (Spirits Rebellious)*, for example, portrays a married woman’s emancipation from her husband and a bride’s escape from a forced marriage through death, themes that had remained untouched in Arabic literature.

Gibran’s attempt at bridging the gap between Arabic and Western literature in terms of both form and content presents him as a mediator between both worlds. Gibran communicated a message of reconciliation between his own heritage and the new environment he grew in. He imported Western themes and

infused an element of avant-garde experiment into Arabic literature, but he in return had something to offer to the West.

Kahlil Gibran: Bridging East and West

Former US President Woodrow Wilson once told Gibran: “You are the first Eastern storm to sweep the country, and what a number of flowers it has brought!” (qtd. in Daoudi, 1982, p. 11-12). Gibran, indeed, brought to his adopted land flowers of Eastern spirituality which balanced America’s emerging values of materialism and progress.

Inspired by his own experience as an immigrant writer, Gibran aimed at uniting East and West and creating an intercultural reconciliation that transcends the barriers of language, religion, and politics. Through his contributions to magazines and journal, *The New Orient* in particular, Gibran advocated peace and understanding between the Arab and Western world. Syrud Hussein, editor of *The New Orient*, wrote about Gibran: “There is no more sincere and authentic or more highly gifted representative of the East functioning today in the West than Kahlil Gibran” (qtd. in Gibran & Gibran, 1981, p. 382).

Gibran considered himself as a spokesman of both cultures. He admired America’s achievements and its values of individualism, dynamism, and freedom. On the other hand, he praised the Arabs’ contributions to the world, but advised them to evade the past and build one’s own future, and to adapt the good aspects of Western civilization instead of blind imitation. Gibran appealed to the new generation of Arab Americans to be proud of both their Eastern and their Western background. In his famous poem “I Believe in You,” also known as “To Young Americans of Syrian Origin,” 1927, Gibran writes:

“I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream, a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America.

I believe you can say to the founders of this great nation, “Here I am, a youth, a young tree from the hills of Lebanon, yet I am deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful.”

Barbara Young recorded Gibran's impact on the Arab-American community saying:

"To the younger generation of his countrymen, those born in the West of parents who had grown up on their native soil, Gibran was one of the elect of God. They went to him in their perplexities, and he met their problems with quick understanding and divine gentleness that won their undying gratitude and devotion." She added: "I have never entered one of these [Syrian] restaurants without hearing some mention of him, without someone knowing, and saying, 'You are the friend of Gibran?'" (Young, 1945, p. 135, 139).

Waterfield, however, argues that the cultural dualism Gibran experienced made him act out different roles among his Western friends of literary circles and his Syrian compatriots. The first were often radicals and socialists, whereas the latter were rather nationalists. He describes Gibran as a "chameleon" who adapts himself to the demands of both worlds (Waterfield, 1998, p. 149)

Nevertheless, it could be argued that Gibran balanced both the Eastern and Western sides of his identity and came to resolve his cultural division. Mostly in his early Arabic writings, such as *The Broken Wings* and *A Tear and a Smile*, Gibran perfectly blended his being an exotic Easterner with being a wounded Romantic. But, broadly speaking, he harmoniously merged his mystic beliefs in a sense of continuity among various faiths and in an inner, personal experience of the divine with his Romantic ideals of universal love and unification of the human race. As a firm believer in the "Divine Unity", his work addresses the common and the universal.

This can be traced to the Poet-Prophet image that Gibran started to evolve into in the 1920's. For Waterfield this "Romantic fusion of poet and prophet was undoubtedly Gibran's best opportunity for bringing East and West together" (Waterfield, 1998, p. 238). This is because Gibran is known in the Arab world mostly as a sensitive poet, whereas to his English speaking readers, he is rather a wise philosopher, a prophet.

In his lifetime Gibran created his own spiritual philosophy that relates to different faiths and religions. He called for cultural and religious tolerance and a

Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular. Bushrui points out that “Gibran’s name, perhaps more than that of any other modern writer, is synonymous with peace, spiritual values and international understanding” (Bushrui, 1996, p. 4).

Also Robert Hillyer, an American poet and critic who occasionally visited Gibran in his studio recorded his memory of him as “a man who had devoted his life to Contemplation, to Peace, to Love, to the Life of the Soul and the myriad forms of Beauty” (Hillyer, 1949, p. 7).

Gibran’s finest work, *The Prophet*, for example, is written in the language of unity in diversity. It carries with it themes of unity of religions and oneness of mankind. Almustafa’s message in the book, as Bushrui asserts, is “a passionate belief in the healing power of universal love and the unity of being” (Bushrui, 1987, p. 68).

Many critics point to the autobiographical dimension of *The Prophet*. The fact is there is evidence that Almustafa is a mouthpiece for Gibran’s own teachings. According to Mary Haskell’s journal, Gibran said, while in the process of writing the book, “In *The Prophet* I have imprisoned certain ideals, and it is my desire to live those ideals...Just writing them would seem to me false” (M.H. Journal, May 12, 1922). This, however, does not seem to be a turning point in Gibran’s life. As early as 1912, he had told Mary: “I have to live the absolute life, must be what I believe in, practice what I preach, or what I practice and what I preach are nothing” (M.H. Journal, April 3, 1912).

CHAPTER 3

THE PROPHET AND BEYOND

The Prophet

The Prophet is Gibran's literary and artistic masterpiece. It remained during the 20th Century America's best selling book, after *The Bible*. As of 1998, it has sold 9,000,000 copies in North America alone (Waterfield, 1998, p. 257). It has been translated into at least twenty languages and has become one of the greatest classics of our time. The book is said to be a testimony to the genius of Gibran.

Before *The Prophet* was born, Gibran told Mary Haskell of his aspirations to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the world: "The world is hungry, Mary, and I have seen and heard the hunger of the world; and if this thing is bread it will find a place in the heart of the world, and if it is not bread it will at least make the hunger of the world deeper and higher" (*Beloved Prophet*, 1972, p. 264).

Although there are critics like Najjar who argue that Gibran's idealistic symbolic message of balancing Eastern spirituality and Western material progress did not relieve human suffering around the world (Najjar, 1999, p. 156), readers have found themselves returning to *the Prophet's* pages to reabsorb its wisdom. Its beloved poetry is commonly read at weddings, baptisms, and funerals throughout the world. The *Chicago Evening Post Literary Review* said of *The Prophet*:

"Truth is here: truth expressed with all the music and beauty and idealism of a Syrian...The words of Gibran bring to one's ears the majestic rhythm of Ecclesiastes...For Kahlil Gibran has not feared to be an idealist in an age of cynics. Nor to be concerned with simple truth where others devote themselves to mountebank cleverness...The twenty-eight chapters in the book form a little bible, to be read and loved by those at all ready for truth"

(qtd in Young, 1945, p. 61).

The book presents Gibran as a writer of prophetic vision who shares his spiritual sensitivities with his readers. It portrays the journey of a banished man

called Almustafa, which in the Arabic language means the chosen one. As he prepares to go back to “the isle of his birth,” he wishes to offer the Orphalese, the people among whom he has been placed, gifts but possesses nothing. The people gather around him, and Almitra, the seeress, asks him to “give us of your truth” and the man’s spiritual insights in twenty-six poetic sermons are his gift.

As a wise sage and man of great vision, Almustafa teaches moral values, the mysteries of life, and timeless wisdom about the human experience: marriage, children, friendship, pleasure, death ...He, for example, calls for balancing heart and mind, passion and reason, and for giving without recognition because the giver’s joy is his reward.

Almustafa describes the yearning of the soul for spiritual regeneration and self-fulfillment. He teaches that man’s purpose in life is a mystic quest towards a Greater Self, towards Godhood and the infinite. He talks about “your larger selves” (p. 91) and pictures “together stretch[ing] our hands unto the giver”.

Then at the end of the book Almustafa closes his farewell address saying: “A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me” (p. 96). This image reflects a romantic vision of eternal rebirth, reincarnation, and continuity of life. It evokes the Unity of Being which Gibran believes in rather than fragmentation. Almustafa’s soul, hence, will return again to its mystical path towards a greater soul.

The Prophet’s words are lucid and beautiful, powerful and inspiring in such aphorisms as “Work is love made visible,” “Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding,” “The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals,” and “Thought is a bird of space, that in a cage of words may indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly” (pp. 28, 52, 55, and 60 respectively).

Bushrui remarked that the secret of the book’s success is “Gibran’s remarkable ability to convey profound truths in simple yet incomparably elegant language” (Bushrui, 1996, p. 4). Yet, this is no surprise; simplicity and delicacy of language are distinguishing aspects of Gibran’s writings. In his sermon on Joy and Sorrow Almustafa says:

“When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.”

(p. 29)

The positive and optimistic teachings of the book are appealing.

Almustafa strongly believes in the power of the human soul. He speaks with a tone that is consoling and filled with hope and compassion for humanity, seen to be in need for self-realization. Speaking of God and Evil, Almustafa has this to say:

“You are good when you are one with yourself
Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil.
For a divided house is not a den of thieves; it is only a divided house.
And a ship without rudder may wander aimlessly among perilous isles yet sink not to the bottom.”

(p. 64)

Gibran also beautifully combines his Romantic thoughts of nature with his teachings. In his sermon on Reason and Passion, for example, he writes:

“Among the hills, when you sit in the cool shade of the white poplars, sharing the peace and serenity of distant fields and meadows – then let your heart say in silence, “God rests in reason.”

And when the storm comes, and the mighty wind shakes the forest, and thunder and lightning proclaim the majesty of the sky, -- then let your heart say in awe, “God moves in passion”

(p. 51).

Critics agree that *The Prophet* is partly autobiographical. Mary is often said to be the inspiration for Almitra, and America or New York for the city of Orphalese. The twelve-year wait Almustafa experienced before returning home from the land of the Orphalese seems to equal Gibran’s own twelve-year stay in New York City.

In regard to Almustafa’s departure for the land of his birth and his gratefulness to the people who have given him his “deeper thirsting after life” (p. 88), it reflects Gibran’s everlasting dream to go back to his homeland and his gratefulness to the country which he made his home for the last twenty years of his life.

While creating the prophecy of Almustafa, Gibran undoubtedly considered his own experience as an “exotic Easterner” living in America and his interest in

teaching Eastern spirituality to the West. Bushrui and Jenkins emphasize the image of the wise man coming from the East and argued: “the idea of a sage dispensing wisdom among the people of a foreign land no doubt appealed to Gibran” (Bushrui & Jenkins, 1998, p. 99).

The book apparently also draws on Gibran’s readings, thoughts, and contemplations through the years. It is inspired by Biblical literature, Christian and Sufi mysticism, Buddhism, Hinduism...But we can also trace the influence of the Romantics and Transcendentalists.

Talking about *The Prophet*, Mary Haskell promised Gibran that “in our darkness and in our weakness we will open it, to find ourselves again and heaven and earth within ourselves” (M.H. to K.G., October 2, 1923). Mikhail Naimy added: “Such books and such men are our surety that Humanity, despite the fearful dissipation of its incalculable energies and resources, is not yet bankrupt” (qtd in Bushrui & Gotch, 1975, p. 9).

The Prophet seems to reflect Gibran’s efforts to unite various faiths and religious. Gibran himself declared that *The Prophet* wrote him instead of him writing *The Prophet* (Daoudi, 1982, p. 99). Behind Almustafa’s global vision of a harmonious universe healed by the power of love and unity, there is an underlying theme of the unity of all religions and the essential oneness of humanity. Gibran communicates a universal humanist message and truths relevant to all cultures and times. In *The Prophet*, according to Bushrui & Jenkins, “East and West meet in a mystic union unparalleled in modern literature” (Bushrui & Jenkins, 1998, p. 228).

Gibran’s reputation in the Western world rests on his masterpiece *The Prophet*. He is looked up to as a master of philosophy whose teachings are immortal. The fame of *The Prophet* in terms of its worldwide readership, however, has shadowed the fame of Gibran’s earlier Arabic writings through which he had already established a literary name for himself as a distinguished writer in Arabic.

It should be noted that experts in modern Arabic literature have noticed that some of Gibran’s translations into English may sound artificial and

inadequate, mainly because Arabic and English belong to two different families of languages, but they do not sound as such in the original Arabic.

For example, with the English translation of Gibran Arabic poem “The Procession,” which was his first attempt at writing in classical Arabic with its rhetorical decoration, metric patterns, and musicality, a certain charm and elegance seem to fade. It is evident that the original flavor of a literary work stands alone. It must be emphasized, however, that a fair degree of grace and greatness penetrates the translation task and Gibran’s message can still be captured.

The Broken Wings

First published in 1912, *The Broken Wings (Al-Ajnihah al-Mutakassirah)* is one of Kahlil Gibran’s early experimental works through which he sought to reform the Arabic literature and culture. In a manner unknown in traditional Arabic writing, it is free from rhetorical flourishes but more importantly, it debates the issue of the oppressed Arab woman in the Middle Eastern society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The novella was, naturally, attacked by conservatives, but overall it received a wide vogue and favorable reviews in the Arab world which at the time was thirsty for new ideas. It even boosted Gibran’s literary career. According to Gibran himself, *The Broken Wings* was welcomed as “a wonderful work of art,” “perhaps the most beautiful in modern Arabic,” and as “a tragedy of subtlest simplicity” (K. G. to M. H., May 6, 1912).

It is Gibran’s longest sustained narrative, written in the tradition of “Romeo and Juliet” and based on oriental settings and images. Inspired by his own first love and bitter experience in his home village Bsharri, *The Broken Wings* gives the taste of the bittersweet, of the beauty and pain of young love. It is an alive and profound story characterized by beautiful prose and evocative imagery, a tale of passion doomed by the restrictions of society and the power and greed of the clergy.

From another romantic perspective, Gibran once again describes the beautiful nature in North Lebanon which fired his imagination and stirred his homesickness up to his death. In the "Forward" we see him rejoicing in spiritual exaltation from remembering "those valleys full of magic and dignity," and "those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky" (p. 18).

Young Kahlil is introduced to Faris Karama, a wealthy widower, and immediately falls in love with Selma, Karama's only child. Selma is equally attracted to Kahlil. But a powerful priest, who is after the family's fortune, puts pressure on Faris Karama and demands Selma's hand for his nephew Mansoor Bey. Despite Selma's protests, her father accepts the match and sends his daughter to a loveless life.

With Fares' death, Mansoor Bey takes over Selma's inheritance and begins to waste it in gambling and other thoughtless spending. Meanwhile, Selma resumes her chaste relationship with Kahlil. But when Mansoor Bey becomes suspicious, he demands that Selma gives him an heir. She chooses to confine herself to her new life and thinks of her future infant as a guide out of the unhappiness that imprisons her. Selma's baby dies minutes after birth and she follows him because of weak health. Kahlil finds himself alone in agony by Selma's tomb.

Gibran's narrator delicately paints his feelings when describing the blossoming of his love. He talks about Selma's unparalleled beauty and virtue, her sweetness and nobility of spirit. She lives inside him as a "supreme thought, a beautiful dream, an overpowering emotion" (p. 52).

He believes in the transcendental power of Romantic love and in its ascendancy over tradition. For him, true love is a supreme way of achieving self-realization and is the noblest of human attainment. It becomes a spiritual accord that brings him heavenly inspiration, for through Selma's eyes he sees the angels of Heaven looking at him (p. 20).

Selma, however, tells her beloved that the true nature of a woman's soul is a mixture of love and sorrow, affection and sacrifice (p. 105). Her understanding of the situation is deeper and more complicated. Unable to

overcome the values of her society, she chooses commitment to her father and unloving husband over running away to Kahlil's love, and so she sacrifices true love for social customs. She prays: "help me, my Lord, to be strong in this deadly struggle and assist me to be truthful and virtuous until death" (p. 77).

Powerless and resigned, she is convinced that "a bird with broken wings cannot fly in the spacious sky" (p. 114). For Waterfield, the "broken wings" of the title are "the wings of love on which the young couple first explore the exalted domain of love, only to find themselves brought abruptly down to earth by harsh realities" (Waterfield, 1998, p. 60).

Gibran's narrator also sees himself as a wounded bird, but takes a stronger stance against convention, male chauvinism, and corruption of the Lebanese aristocracy. His criticism is especially harsh when it comes to the heads of religion whom he accuses of maintaining the oppression of women. He says: "the Christian Bishop and the Moslem imam and the Brahman priest become like sea reptiles who clutch their pray with many tentacles and suck their blood with numerous mouths" (p. 62).

Gibran sympathetically describes women in his native Lebanon as victims of a despotic patriarchal system. They are prisoners of social expectations and are treated as a commodity to be purchased, like in the case of Selma whose function was to take her father's riches to a husband who treated her like another possession. Gibran draws attention to "the miserable procession of the defeated" and "innocence defiled" (p. 84).

He urges Selma to liberate herself from the chains of social norms and to run away with him from a world of suffering, or what he calls "slavery and ignorance" (p. 113) to another world across the oceans (presumably the West) where "real freedom and personal independence...can be found" (p. 114-115).

In *The Broken Wings*, Gibran is not just a story teller but a culture analyst and a reformer who seeks to correct the wrongs. Najjar writes "that Gibran's purpose for that story was to satirize in order to reform is evident in his frequent didactic intrusions by which he introduces his dissenting views regarding the conditions of the Arab woman" (Najjar, 1999, p. 168).

The story, however, illustrates Gibran's attempts at approaching universal truths. He reflects on the meaning of the human existence and portrays himself as a champion of women and of the values of human freedom and dignity. For Shahid, Gibran's works that speak of women "have a ring of modernity about them as they deal with issues that are still burning and being addressed in our times" (Shahid, 2002, p. 15).

Gibran's other earlier stories also touch on similar native themes and classify him as a rebel against old culture. In "The Bridal Couch" in *Spirits Rebellious*, Gibran depicts an oppressive patriarchal system that caused bloodshed. Laila is trapped by her father's social ambitions and is misled by the society's lies. On the evening of her wedding to an arranged husband, Laila sees her beloved Salim and asks him to run away with her. But bound by social expectations, he refuses and asks her to go back to her new husband. She stabs him to death and then kills herself over his body after she gives a sermon on life and love.

In "Rose al Hani", another narrative in *Spirits Rebellious*, we meet Rose as another victim of forced marriage. But unlike Selma Karama, she breaks her social image of a good wife when she leaves her husband to live with her beloved. Rose tells the narrator the story of her bitter past, but at the same time she seems to tell the story of the plight of the Arab woman in general. She says: "It is a tragedy written with the woman's blood and tears which the man reads with ridicule because he cannot understand it; yet, if he does understand, his laughter will turn into scorn and blasphemy that act like fire upon her heart" (*A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, 1951, p. 186),

A Tear and a Smile

A Tear and A Smile (Dam' ah wa-Ibtisamah), first published in 1914, is an anthology of Gibran's youthful writings in the Arabic-speaking Émigré newspaper *Al-Mohajer (The Immigrant)*. Gibran's column, "Tears and Laughter," attracted a

wide attention from his readers both in the Arab world and among the Arab literati in America.

The book contains 56 poetic prose pieces close to the aphoristic, and illustrated with 4 of Gibran's paintings. In a beautiful and splendid language, the poems, stories, and parables included exhibit the youth's world of imagination; his self-reflective thoughts and romantic philosophy of life and death, which although at the burgeoning stage, is quiet insightful and universally appealing. Gibran's reflections in *A Tear and a Smile* are especially pleasing to those sensitive and emotional souls which are his most fervent admirers.

As the title evokes, the book is a mixture of tears and smiles, mourning and celebration of a wounded lover and solitary poet. But the tears seem to be much more abundant than the smiles. The poet lives in agony and longing for his beloved, for a restoration of beauty in the world, and for a peace of mind, but is convinced that human life is a world of suffering to be lived through until death.

Gibran, indeed, sings of the glory of his tears (p. 48) and the beauty of sorrow. He tells us that a person experiences joy only if he or she has experienced sorrow. Tears have illuminated his heart and mind; they have given him sight and deeper knowledge of life: "A tear to purify my heart and give me understanding of life's secrets and hidden things" (p. 3). In other times, however, the poet seeks transcendence. In "Have Mercy My Soul," for example, he asks his soul how long she will continue to torment him.

Gibran strikingly expresses a romantic fascination with death. For him death marks the end of suffering and becomes a life-giver, a transcendental and eternal world where the spirit rests in timelessness. In "A Poet's Death is His Life," the dying youth addresses death as "sweet" and "beloved" friend (pp. 19, 20 respectively) which alone can set his soul free from the sorrow of the world and take him to a greater life.

In addition to "A Poet's Life is His Death," other selections in the book like "A Poet's Voice" and "The Poet" suggest a familiar emphasis on the prophetic role of the poet and, chronologically speaking, these pieces seem to anticipate

Gibran's ripened philosophy in the later years of his career (Hillyer, p xx, in "introduction" to *A Tear and a Smile*, 1972).

Gibran portrays the poet as the one who brings society to a state of harmony and sacrifices his life for the redemption of humanity. In his homeland he is in exile, a stranger in a strange land because his people undervalue his teachings and fail to see his virtues.

The poet is a visionary and, unlike the rest of humankind, clear and universal perceptions are his gift. He is the one who bears ripe fruits for the hungry souls (p. 134) and is capable of opening people's eyes into eternity and enlightening generations. For Gibran the poet is a "singing bird" (p. 134), "A shining light unconquered by the dark" and even an "Angel sent by the gods to teach man the way of gods" (p. 81).

The poet lives somewhere between a real world and a transcendent world. He is the final stage in the evolution of man which he describes as a process from descent into the material world to alienation to a return to the spiritual universe. Hence he reveals his passionate belief that men are capable of discovering their inherent divinity because humanity is the spirit of divinity on earth (p. 191). He emphasizes the deeper power of the soul, for true light comes from within man.

Gibran rejoices in feelings of self-fulfillment through a mystical union with God who is "the Ocean of Love and Beauty" (p. 4). He invites us to a contemplative life rather than the comfort of materialism. He opens "The Playground of Life" saying:

"A minute moving among the patterns of Beauty and the dreams of Love is greater and more precious than an age filled with splendor granted by the weak to the strong" (p. 120).

Gibran accomplishes transcendence also through union with nature. In several of the selections he expresses an aesthetic and spiritual affinity to the valleys and the flowers, the shore and the wind. In "Meeting", for example, he describes the glorious valley of the Nile and its magical cedars and cypress trees. He associates nature not only with beauty but with purity and friendship.

He tells us that nature's sweet words and tender smile fill the spirit with joy (p.113).

The hard edge to the book, however, represents Gibran's frustration and anger with the corruption of humanity. In bitter and ironic tones, he describes a world that glorifies power and the pursuit of richness rather than human values. He expresses his sympathy with the poor and the wretched who are being exploited and abused by the rich and the powerful.

In the same mode as *The Broken Wings*, Gibran rejects orthodoxy and organized religion. He attacks priests for he believes they embody falsehood, immorality, and evil. He writes: "I beheld priests, sly like foxes; and false messiahs dealing its trickery with the people" (p. 40).

In his famous poem "A Vision," Gibran reemphasizes his concern for individual freedom in society. He uses an allegory between a caged bird and a caged human heart that laments the imprisonment of men by convention and civilization. The human heart reflects Gibran's criticism of the oppressiveness of man-made laws which he believes strip the human being of his life and essence.

From a biographical point of view, it is probable that Gibran's relationship with Josephine Peabody at the time inspired his thoughts in the book. This probability seems consistent with Waterfield's argument that the poet's painful love for Josephine created "the melancholy habits and wounded eyes of the Romantic hero" (Waterfield, 1998, p. 88).

We can also find a parallel to the feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction with humankind in Gibran's own life. Nadeem Naimy sees the book as a bridge between a first and a second stage of Gibran's career, the poet's longing for his homeland evolved into rebellion against humanity in general. Naimy points out that the tears in *A Tear and A Smile* "are those of Gibran the misfit rather than of the rebel in Boston, singing in an exceedingly touching way of his frustrated love and estrangement, his loneliness, homesickness and melancholy" (Naimy, 1974, p. 59).

CHAPTER 4

AMEEN RIHANI AND MIKHAIL NAIMY

Ameen Rihani (1876-1940)

Contributions

While Gibran is the most celebrated Arab American writer and most familiar to US readers, Ameen Rihani is “the father of Arab American Literature.” He was the first Arab American to write a novel in English and hence the first to address himself to a Western audience and an international audience at large. He is regarded as the founder of “Adab Al-Mahjar” (Immigrant Literature) and one of the pioneers of the movement of modern Arabic literature and thought.

Among readers of Arab American literature, Rihani is indeed known for being “the father of prose poetry.” Through his *Hutaf-ul Awdiya (Hymn of the Valleys)*, he was the first Arab poet to introduce free verse to the traditional Arabic poetic canon, although with less imaginative and emotional intensity than Gibran’s poems. This new free verse style of poetry reached his fellow Arab poets both in the US and the Arab East, and continued to have an impact on modern Arabic poetry throughout the 20th century. Rihani also had an impact on the development of the art of the essay in modern Arabic, which built his reputation as a forward thinker and a visionary.

During Rihani’s lifetime, Arab American literature gained in prosperity and strength. By 1919, there were nine Arabic-language newspapers, many of them dailies, supported by 70,000 immigrants. Nada Najjar added that, with Rihani, Arab American literature witnessed a more sophisticated stage in which writers were more familiar with Western thoughts (Najjar, 1999, p. 154).

Rihani can be classified as both a Romantic idealist and a Realist. He was a rebel who dealt with the abstract and the spiritual, but was at the same time socially committed. As a political analyst and activist, he advocated East-West understanding, particularly a dialogue of peace between the US and the

Arabs, and worked for the liberation of Lebanon and Syria from the Turkish rule, as he was an opponent of the Ottoman regime.

Rihani had a keen knowledge of both East and West and constantly talked about the virtues of both. In *The Path of Vision*, for example, Rihani celebrates intercultural exchanges and emphasizes East-West synthesis that unifies the spirit of the East and the mind of the West. According to Najjar, Rihani once said: “the most highly developed being is neither European (including the Americans) nor Oriental, but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both” (qtd. in Najjar, 1999, p. 133).

Among his many accomplishments, Rihani was the one to revive a tradition of travel works in Arabic literature in the twenties and thirties. He was the first Arab traveler of modern history to present a counter-Orientalist perspective. He portrayed the realities of Arabia including the spiritual and intellectual heritage of this land.

Rihani, in fact, remained faithful to his Arab roots. He reconciled his Christian and Muslim Arab background and believed in a rich synthesis of Christian and Muslim heritage, a synthesis that rejects fanaticism and extremism. As a person with a bicultural identity, as both an Arab and an American, he brought Western ideas, such as personal freedom and cultural accomplishments, to his Arab audience, and applied Western literary concepts to Arabic themes. In return he enriched the English language through his translations and transmitted elements of Eastern spirituality to his English-speaking readers.

The Path of Vision, for example, reflects a Western discourse that values individual freedom. Rihani writes:

“If we are concerned in breaking the fetters that are fastened upon our bodies and souls by external agencies only, we are doomed to failure. But if we become aware of the fetters, which we, in the sub-consciousness of centuries of submission, have fastened upon the spirit within us and strive to free ourselves of them first, then we are certain to triumph. For freedom of the spirit is the cornerstone of all freedom. And this can be attained only by realizing its human limitations and recognizing its divine claim. It might be said too that freedom is to spirit what gravity is to matter. It is inherent in it and limited, yea, fettered by it. To know and recognize this truth, is to rise to the highest form of freedom.”

(From *The Path of Vision*, qtd. in Bushrui, 1990, p. 8).

In the same collection, Rihani celebrates the multiculturalism that America represents saying:

“The Melting Pot certainly has a soul. And this soul will certainly have a voice. And the voice of America...is destined to become the voice of the world. Its culture, too, its arts and its traditions, which...are being coloured and shaded, impregnated with alien influences, will embody the noblest expression of beauty and truth that the higher spirit of the Orient and the Occident combined is capable of conceiving. They will embody also a universal consciousness, multifarious, multicolour, prismatic...While every people has its own traditions, which differ more or less according to the national, social and historical influences acting upon them, they all find a common soil in America and an uncommon hospitality. And from these traditions, developing gradually into a homogeneity all-embracing, will spring the culture and the consciousness that will make America, not only a great national power, but, what is greater, an international entity.”

(From *The Path of Vision*, qtd. in Bushrui, 1990, p. 1)

Rihani's American education and readings of Western culture had an impact on his literary career. Like Gibran, Rihani's family immigrated to the United States for a better living. According to Walter Dunnavent (1991), the twelve-year-old Rihani was sent to a church school in New York City for one year, then was taken to help in the family's bookstore. While working there for the next four years, Rihani devoted a big part of his time for his readings. He became familiar with Shakespeare, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Washington Irving, and Carlyle. He later added Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau to the list.

At the age of 19 Rihani joined a touring stock company and played various roles including Hamlet and Macbeth. Then after the failure of the company he started law studies in the New York Law School. A lung infection, however, interrupted this new direction (Dunnavent, 1991, p. 14). He returned to Lebanon in 1898 where he taught English in a church school and had a similar experience to Gibran's four-year-break in Beirut, studying Arabic and discovering the richness of the Arab heritage.

After he went back to New York City in 1899, Rihani started contributing to Arabic-language newspapers like *al-Hoda*, *al-Islah*, and *al-Ayyam* where he

wrote about social traditions, religion, and politics in Lebanon. He later joined several literary, artistic, and political associations.

In 1905 Rihani returned to Lebanon for a five-years-period during which he met with Arab writers and journalists (Dunnavant, 1991, p. 20). He also developed an interest in political activism mainly in regards to the issue of Syria's independence from the Ottoman Empire, a cause which Gibran strived for.

During his early acquaintance with Gibran, he wrote to the *Al-Mohajer* newspaper praising one of Gibran's articles which criticized Arab writers for imitating their traditional predecessors and for using poetry for financial gains. In 1910, Rihani and Gibran planned to have an opera house built in Beirut for the promotion of the arts.

Along with the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, the Sufis influenced much of his style. Sufism, or Islamic Mysticism, focuses on an inner spiritual experience of a union with God and the unity of existence. His Sufi poetry included in "*A Chant of Mystics" and Other Poems* sings of the spiritual oneness of all things. The following is an extract:

"We are not of the East or the West;
No boundaries exist in our breast:
 We are free.
Nor Crescent nor Cross we adore;
Nor Budha nor Christ we implore;
Nor Muslem nor Jew we abhor;
 We are free".

(From "*A Chant of Mystics" and Other Poems*, 1921, p. 106)

Rihani wrote about a wide a range of topics like Arabic Renaissance, political and social issues, modern American painting, Russian ballet, etc. He produced 26 volumes in Arabic (poetry, short stories, literary criticism, and historical and political analysis...) and 29 in English (poetry, collection of essays, travel chronicles, novels, translations of classic Arabic poetry...).

The most distinguished of his English writings are his novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911) which influenced many of his successors like Gibran and Naimy and his translations of the 11th Century Arab poet Abu'l-Ala al-Ma'arri which

appeared in *The Quatrains of Abu'l-Ala* (1903), then in a revised version under the title *The Luzumiyat of Abu' l-Ala* (1918).

Also notable are his *A Chant of Mystics and other poems* (1921), his social and reformist essays in *The Path of Vision* (1921), and his travel trilogy, *Ibn Saoud of Arabia: His people and His Land* (1928), *Around the coasts of Arabia* (1930), and *Arabian Peak and Desert: Travels in al-Yamen* (1930).

In the early 1920's, however, Rihani shifted from his mystical themes in *The Book of Khalid* and *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* towards a more overtly political literary approach. His image of the exotic mystic disappeared in favor of another image of a spokesman for the Arabs and their causes.

Rihani actually did not join his fellow writers for the 1920 formation of al-Rabitah-al-Qalamiyah (The Pen Bond) while he was a member of the 1916 formation. Scholars attribute Rihani's withdrawal to his anxiety regarding Syria's situation after World War I and his increasing involvement in politics.

Rihani indeed chose to return to his homeland where he started his travels throughout the Arab world. He continued to write in English but, interestingly, his writings were Arab in their culture and issues. Rihani developed his interest in Pan-Arabism and the situation in Palestine, while Gibran and Naimy continued their transcendental course which focused on the imaginative and the lyrical and went beyond the real world.

Nadeem Naimy notes that Rihani's Arab nationalism was a "departure from the mahjar (emigrant) literary tradition he himself initiated" (Naimy, 1985, p. 30). Najjar argues, in contrast, that his Arab nationalism actually fostered the literary path he had already taken (Najjar, 1999, p. 132). This seems consistent with Nash's argument that while maintaining his bi-cultural identity, Rihani focused on Arab unity in a world where the Orient and Occident have a reciprocal relationship" (Nash, 1998, p. 78).

Rihani's Arab identity was not an enclosed one but had a universal dimension. He articulated Middle Eastern issues to Western figures and remained faithful to the cause of East-West understanding and the liberation of the Arabs from foreign dominance. Bushrui asserts that Rihani "firmly believed in

his country, Lebanon, and saw it in the context of the great Arab heritage, as he saw the Arab world in the wider context of the family of nations” (Bushrui, 1990, p. 2).

Rihani is a thinker who envisioned a revived Arab world that reaches out to the Western world. He dreamt of building Arab unity through a confederation and urged the Arabs to reform their political system and build a true democracy in addition to a new interpretation of the Quran. He attributed the decay of Arab societies to sectarianism, fatalism, and stagnation. Rihani also wrote much about Palestine vis-a vis the growing Zionist movement. He believed that spiritual Zionism could prosper peacefully in Palestine but warned that political Zionism would lead to violence in the region.

Because of his importance in the new literary culture of the Emigrant School, I concentrate next on the spiritual and mystical concerns of Ameen Rihani as reflected in his masterpiece, the first novel written in English by an Arab American: *The Book of Khalid*.

The Book of Khalid

Rihani wrote *The Book of Khalid* in his mountain solitude back in Lebanon. It was later published in 1911 after he returned to New York. The novel reflects Rihani’s philosophical thought and his spiritual and sentimental tendencies. Though written in English, it is predominately Arab in its themes and concerns in addition to the fact that it borrowed many words and expressions from the Arabic language.

Critics view *The Book of Khalid* as a book of ideas. Dunnavent, for example, notices that story becomes a vehicle for introducing the ideas (Dunnavent, 1991, p. 112). The book is an account of the immigrant experience and of the liberated Arab mind in its quest of spirituality, reconciliation of East and West, and of reform.

The plot is divided into three parts, each one called a “book” and each representing a different stage of Khalid’s spiritual quest. “Book the First: In the Exchange” tells the story of Khalid from his boyhood in Lebanon to his tiredness from materialism in America as well as his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual

confrontations (his readings, his realization of the existence of the soul or his “inner divinity” ...).

Khalid’s hope that America is the Promised Land where the spirituality of the East and the prosperity of the West coexist ends in disappointment. He understands the need for America and the Old World to build a cultural bridge and decides to go back and do something for his home country.

“Book the Second: In the Temple” tells the story of his return to Lebanon and his experience of spiritual rebirth in the woods. Khalid retreated from the world after being excommunicated due to his problems with the church. “Book the Third: In Kulmakan” covers Khalid’s life from his one-year hermetic life in the hills of Lebanon to his flight to Egypt and his eventual disappearance.

After his return to society, Khalid decides to be reformer and founder of an Arab empire that would blend the best of both East and West, the soul of the East and the mind of the West. He was, however, chased by authorities and forced to flee. A final tragedy, the death of his lover Najma and her baby, stops Khalid’s dream and causes his disappearance.

The Book of Khalid is thought to be semi-autobiographical. Many critics relate Khalid to Rihani’s personal growth in the U.S and his post-immigration experience in his homeland. The book, however, has universal dimensions as well in the sense that it expresses universal thoughts. It was actually dedicated, it must be emphasized, to “my Brother Man, my Mother Nature and my Maker God”.

In New York, Khalid realizes his prophethood and talks about the spiritual values of the East. He considers himself as his country’s “chosen voice.” He says: “For our country is just beginning to speak, and I am her chosen voice. I feel that if I do not come to her, she will be dumb forever” (p. 128).

Khalid believes in the power and potential of the soul. In order for spirituality to become fuller, the soul has to be free from social order and restrictions. He says: “There is an infinite possibility of soul-power in every one of us, if it can be developed freely, spontaneously, without discipline or restraint” (p. 71). During his transcendentalist retreat to the woods, he rejoices in the

beauty of nature which he sees as a projection of the spiritual and the invisible. He hears “the voice of the dawn, the dawn of a new life, of a better, purer, healthier, higher spiritual kingdom” (p. 236).

The Book of Khalid paved the way to a new trend within Arab American literature, a trend toward a discourse of prophecy and sageness, reconciliation of matter and spirit, and the unification of East and the West to a larger unified universe. Nash notes that through *The Book of Khalid*, Rihani “had invented a fictive messiah, and produced an appropriate prophetic discourse for him” (Nash, 1998, p. 29). Also Ameen Albert Rihani points out to the achievement of *The Book of Khalid* in terms of being a springboard to *The Prophet* as another major prophetic work in Arab-American literature (Rihani, 1999, p. 1).

Ameen Rihani was a mentor and an inspiring example to Khalil Gibran. The latter seemed to have the image of the prophet in mind when he did the illustrations for *The Book of Khalid*. Some of the drawings represent such images as a sphinx with wings, a person carrying a torch, and human bodies following a leader.

The prophetic aspect and vision of Khalid reminds the reader of Al-Mustafa and his teachings in *The Prophet*. His life-long aim of balancing the material and the spiritual is dictated by wisdom. He speaks with a Messiah tone like when he says: “Light, Love, and Will – with corals and pearls from their seas would I crown thee, O my City. In these streams would I baptize thy children, O my City” (p. 247).

Both Khalid and Al-Mustafa dealt with topics such as truth, human existence, knowledge, love, friendship, democracy...and they both had their disciples (Shakib and Al-Mitra respectively) who play the role of pupil and interviewer. Also interestingly, both Khalid and Al-Mustafa preached Eastern spirituality among the people of a foreign land.

Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins (1998) support this comment by drawing attention to the image of the wise man coming from the East which we encounter in both works: “the idea of a sage dispensing wisdom among the people of a foreign land no doubt appealed to him (Gibran).” They elaborate, saying that:

“Rihani’s book may be said to have foreshadowed Gibran’s *The Prophet* in that it conveys the teachings of the East in the language of the West, and was written by an Arab who appreciated the best of both worlds” (Bushrui & Jenkins, 1998, p. 99).

In another place, Bushrui has this to say about Gibran and Rihani: “It is no exaggeration to say that these two men made the most important intellectual and literary contribution to the revitalization of Arab intellectual life in the first quarter of the 20th century” (Bushrui, 1990, p. 6). Mikhail Naimy, it can be argued, might be added to the list as another major pioneer in bringing about a revolution in Arabic literature.

Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988)

Contributions

Mikhail Naimy is widely recognized in the Arab world as one of the most important figures in modern Arabic letters. Like Gibran and Rihani, Naimy’s work and thought are a blend of East and West. In addition to Eastern Christianity and Eastern Mysticism, his language is evocative of the Russian mystics and American transcendentalists.

His name is connected with many Arab American periodicals, especially *Al-Funun (The Arts: 1913-1918)* which he referred to as “the beautiful and fragrant journalistic lily” (1964, p. 153). He was a regular contributor and, along with Nazmi Nasim and Raghieb Mitraj, he helped Nasib Arida, the editor, administer the journal. After its demise, however, only Naimy’s name became well-known to the Arab American readers. Richard Popp attributes this to Naimy’s many contributions to *Al-Funun* which reached 28 in total (Popp, 2000, p. 96).

Naimy was also a secretary and active member of the Arab American literary society al-Rabitah-al-Qalamiya (The Pen League). He also composed the manifesto at the time of its formation in 1920. The following is an extract:

“...Not everything that parades as literature is literature; nor is every rimester a poet. The literature we esteem as worthy of the name is that only which draws its nourishment from Life’s soil and light and air...And the man of letters is he who is endowed with more than the average mortal’s share of sensitiveness and taste, and the power of estimation and penetration together with the talent of expressing clearly and beautifully whatever imprints Life’s constant waves leave upon his soul...”

(Naimy, 1964, p. 155-156).

Naimy is known for literary criticism. As a champion of reform, his critical writings opened doors to a new concept of literature among his fellow Arab writers. In his first critical article “Fajr al Amal” (“The Dawn of Hope”), published by *Al-Funun* in 1913, he rejects traditional Arabic literature as a literature of decoration and imitation. He even goes further to call it “mummified literature”. For him the poet should focus primarily on imagination rather than language, essence rather than form.

The sources on Naimy’s education and background are limited. But it is known that when he was a law student at Washington State University and before even he met Gibran, the 24-year-old Naimy was sent a copy of Gibran’s *The Broken Wings*. He wrote a long review of it in which he criticized the simplicity of the plot and characterization in the sense that the book conveys a passive attitude and does not give solutions to the problems, but saw it as a departure from the approved canons of Arabic literature and appreciated the fact that it dealt with “native” social issues. The publication of the review by *Al-Funun* marked the beginning of Naimy’s career as writer and critic.

Naimy developed a close relationship with Gibran through *Fatat-Boston* and *Al-Funun*. Gibran lovingly called him “Mischa,” and in his letters he addressed him as “My Dear Mischa” or “Brother Mischa,” and sometimes “Beloved Brother Mischa.” Naimy also admired Gibran and became influenced by him. In the introduction to his biography, he emphasizes the fact that Gibran sought to make his soul “as beautiful as the beauty he glimpsed with his imagination and so generously spread in his books and drawings” (Naimy, 1964, p. xxx).

Naimy produced a significant body of literature: novels, short stories, drama, poetry, critical essays, but his most familiar works are his biography of

Gibran (1950), *Al-Ghirbal (The Sieve)* 1932, and *Muzakarat Al-Arkash (Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul)* 1949. Also famous is his *The Book of Mirdad* (1946) which was written in English, and in which Naimy picked up on his predecessors by adapting a prophetic tone in conveying timeless wisdom.

Most of his essays are collected in *Al-Ghirbal (The Sieve)*. “Al-Habahib” (“The Firefly”), for example, severely attacks Arab culture, including its literary conventions. He describes the Arab society as a society of stagnation and resignation which hopes to make progress by prayer rather than education and hard work. In the beginning of his career, indeed, Naimy expressed a negative attitude towards Arab culture and a firm belief in Western cultural superiority. This might be attributed partly to his Western education in Russian missionary schools in his native village of Baskinta and Ukraine before he immigrated to the United States.

Again in *Al-Ghirbal* (1932) he claims that Arab classic poets and philosophers are insignificant compared to Western figures such as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Hugo, and Tolstoy (p. 48-49). Because he considered Western literature to be the highly admired prototype of literary excellence (Naimy, 1967, p. 55-56), Naimy advised Arab writers to translate it. In “Let us translate” he writes: “Our contact with the West has alerted many of our spiritual needs...that our writers and intellectuals cannot satisfy...let us translate and exalt the translator who introduces us to the bigger human family” (*Al-Ghirbal*, 1932, p. 127).

Naimy’s earlier realistic literature dealt with the situation of the Arab woman vis-à-vis the repressive old traditions. This is evident in “Her New Year” and “The Barren Women.” Also his earlier play *Fathers and Sons* (1917) addressed the issue of social expectations and the generation gap in Lebanese society. More importantly, it is considered one of the first attempts to introduce drama into Arabic literature.

Naimy then chose a more mystical approach to life. His writings became grounded in Eastern philosophies and metaphysical experiences. Like Gibran’s, they emphasize the importance of individual spirituality and embrace the doctrine

of the unity of being and the power of universal love. Naimy advocated a universal mystical philosophy which, in Najjar's opinion, helped him harmonize his bi-cultural identity as was the case with Gibran (Najjar, 1999, p. 150).

Also interestingly, later in his career Naimy rejected his former belief in Western superiority and started to criticize Western civilization and its neglect of spirituality. This is best represented in a poem written in 1922 where he says:

“Who are you and what are you to rule over mankind
As if even the sun and the moon were under your control”

(qtd. in Najjar, 1999, p.149).

Like Rihani, Naimy did not get his merited recognition in the United States, although he was once nominated for the Noble Prize in Literature. Naimy did not reach the American mainstream probably because he wrote mainly in Arabic. Najjar points to the fact that, when his first English book was published, he had already left the United States for Lebanon (Najjar, 1999, p. 152). In 1932 Naimy settled in Baskinta where he continued to write and lecture and fulfilled the dream he shared with Gibran which consists in retreating into the nature of Lebanon.

I focus next on Naimy's "Sa'at al-Cuckoo" (The Cuckoo Clock), a short story in a collection entitled *Once Upon A Time* and also on his novella *Muzakarāt Al-Arkash* (Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul) since they both reflect Naimy's shift to a more contemplative universal message and spiritual discourse.

The Cuckoo Clock

In *The Cuckoo Clock* Naimy rejects Western civilization and embraces the spirituality of the East symbolized by his native Lebanon. Khattar Mas'ad, a Lebanese farmer was to be married to "Zumurud" but "Ferris," an immigrant from America, charmed her and the whole village with his Western clothing and English language, and especially with his cuckoo clock he brought from America. Khattar becomes confused and convinced that a better life awaits him there. So he immigrates to America where he becomes rich but realizes that his wealth did not bring him happiness.

He finds out that his wife married him for his money, but more importantly that his wealth drove him away from the spiritual qualities he used to have.

Khattar is now aware of the value of a simple spiritual lifestyle as opposed to a materialistic one. He imagines himself working in the fields again and enjoying the clean and fresh air. He becomes disgusted with the city which he describes as a “monstrous tower of Babel on wheels descending, with demonic speed, a mountain whose top is hidden in the clouds and whose base is a bottomless pit” and gets deceived by the “grand clock from which a large mechanical bird emerged periodically crying out “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” (p. 39).

He eventually returns to his village and develops a strong relationship with his people who name him “Abu-Ma’roof” (the kind/generous one). He advises them to love their land and village and preaches his belief that “in the soil is an aroma that is absent in the perfumer’s shop” (p. 14).

From an autobiographical standpoint, Khattar Mas’ad foreshadowed Naimy’s eventual return to his homeland where he strived to educate his people against the mechanical and artificial Western urban culture (Najjar, 1999, p. 148). Naimy’s *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul* also echoes his love of simplicity, freedom, and the pursuit of spirituality.

Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul or The Pitted Face:

Pitted Face is a thirty-year-old Argentinean of Lebanese origin. After three years of working as a waiter at a Syrian restaurant in Manhattan, he disappears leaving behind his memoirs which happen to fall in the narrator’s hands. Pitted Face’s memoirs are an account of his life of silence and meditation. Being mentally detached from society, he examines the meaning of human existence and his place as an “obscure, insignificant, and uncomely man” (pp. 9, 14). He expresses his disenchantment with what he thinks to be a world of greed, hatred, and wars.

Pitted Face is driven by two different forces: a physical one (his worldly pursuits) and a spiritual one (his meditative course). His portrait of this dilemma is as follows:

“I must be two Pitted Faces in one: the first is a man who has withdrawn from the world of men and wrapped himself in silence that he may reach a world of a higher order and move with it in an orbit other than that of the earth; the second is a man cut off from the main human current by some human side-currents, and striving to rejoin the herd.

He is of a lower world and is ill at ease excepting in that world, with which, so it seems, he has many accounts to settle" (p. 67).

Because he believed in the continuation of life in death and wanted to reach a higher state of being and completely unchain his soul, he killed his bride Najla at the end and then killed himself. The novella hence embodies the human struggle between the physical and the spiritual. It exhibits Naimy's mystical philosophy which emphasizes the importance of the spiritual side of life and the fact that the purpose of the human being is to be unified with the divine. Nadeem Naimy makes a believable connection between Pitted Face and the author by saying that the book reflects the isolation and alienation that Naimy himself experienced in New York (1967, p. 173). It must be mentioned, however, that the intensity and tragic turn of the book cannot be traced in Naimy's own life.

Naimy and Gibran overlap. The above works remind us of Gibran's bitterness towards the ills of society, his idea of death as a release from the sorrow of life, his Rousseau-like belief in the natural goodness of man away from the corrupting civilization...

In his famous poem "Al-Mawakib" (The Procession) 1919, for example, Gibran expresses his outrage about man's laws and material pursuit as opposed to the natural flow of life. The poem is a dialogue between a youth who sings of the virtues of the natural world and an old sage who mourns the futility of the world and civilization which he believes is an obstacle for humanity to fulfill its spiritual self.

In Gibran's short story "al-'Asifa" 1920, translated as *The Storm or The Tempests*, the protagonist Youssuf El-Fakhri very much resembles Pitted Face and might actually have inspired his creation. He is self-emancipated from society and lives in a hut alone in the mountains of Lebanon. He explains himself to the narrator on why he chose a hermitic life:

"...I did not seek solitude for religious purposes, but solely to avoid the people and their laws, their teachings and their traditions, their ideas and their clamour and their wailing."

"I sought solitude in order to keep from seeing the faces of men who sell themselves and buy with the same price that which is lower than they are, spiritually and materially."

“I sought solitude in order that I might not encounter the women who walk proudly, with one thousand smiles upon their lips, while in the depths of their thousand of hearts there is but one purpose.”

“I sought solitude in order to conceal myself from those self-satisfied individuals who see the spectre of knowledge in their dreams and believe that they have attained their goal.”

“I fled from society to avoid those who see but the phantom of truth in their awakening, but shout to the world that they have acquired completely the essence of truth.”

“I deserted the world and sought solitude because I became tired of rendering courtesy to those multitudes who believe that humility is a sort of weakness, and mercy a kind of cowardice, and snobbery a form of strength.”

(From *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, 1951, p. 17-18).

CONCLUSION

Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy are like-minded Lebanese intellectuals who fostered a new sense of identity among their Arab readers and revitalized Arabic literature in both form and content. They belong to a generation of Arab exiles who constituted the first record of an Arab American literary voice in the early years of the 20th century. All three started as Western modernizers who borrowed a great deal from Western culture, but remained faithful to their origins. They enriched the literary field in the US with works from their native Arab East and were dedicated to an intercultural reconciliation, an East-West understanding.

Among these three awe-inspiring literary voices, Kahlil Gibran holds a unique place as the leading representative of Arab American literature. His literary achievements as well as artistic talents are appreciated all over the world and remain representatives of his legacy. Gibran is a Romantic but visionary, a madman but wise man, a revolutionary but peacemaker. He constantly expressed his love of freedom, of nature, of humanity...His doctrine is of the brotherhood of man, and of justice and universal love. His writings stay beautiful and timeless. They are as insightful and relevant in our present time as when Gibran first drafted them.

Gibran particularly moved his readers with *The Prophet*, the words of which eloquently carry deep truths of our human existence. *The Prophet*, which Gibran considered as his greatest achievement, remains widely popular; another *Bible* for millions of people around the world, and hence fulfilling Gibran's desire to be a "poet-prophet".

The English-speaking readers who are impressed by Gibran's *The Prophet* might want to add his Arabic works to their list. *The Broken Wings*, *A Tear and a Smile*, and "The Procession" are enduring in terms of their beauty and lasting influence over Arabic literature.

Yet, despite his significant place in world literature, Americans do not know Gibran enough. He has not been studied extensively by scholars nor given his deserved attention from the American literary establishment. While his works are now taught as classics in the Arab world, he is outside the canon of American literature.

Gibran is seen as a gift from Lebanon to America and to the world at large. This is definitely true, but Gibran also certainly owes the title of “the genius of his age” to his adopted country which helped him prosper, and particularly to the generous patronage of Mary Haskell who steered his career.

This study is meant to be a contribution, an attempt to explore the richness of early Arab American literature and provide a fuller understanding of Kahlil Gibran’s career, in particular. It, however, suggests further research into the field of Arab American literature.

APPENDIX A

The following is a list of some of Kahlil Gibran's writings. The list is a bouquet of Gibran's themes which, as this study emphasizes, allow readers to explore different sides of Gibran. The following books might be useful for High School English teachers as they address the students' emotional and spiritual awareness and give them the opportunity to get familiar with another multicultural literary voice.

Title	Description
<i>The Prophet</i>	A book of 26 fine poetic essays, illustrated with some of Gibran's mystical drawings. Almustapha, the prophet, gives of his timeless wisdom and insights on topics of life.
<i>The Broken Wings</i>	Gibran's only novel. A delicate story of young love that vanishes away in tradition. Gibran angrily depicts the plight of the Arab woman in his time.
"The Procession"	A long ode in classical Arabic. Two metaphorical characters, Age and Youth, analyze the human society with its laws and aspirations, and embrace the fullness of the self in nature.
<i>The Madman</i>	A volume of illustrated parables and aphorisms, mostly in a tone that is ironic and rebellious against humankind. Gibran instead follows his inner true self.
<i>A Tear and a Smile</i>	An anthology of Gibran's early newspaper prose poems and stories, illustrated with four of his drawings. The poet finds solace in his tears and in nature, and sings of his prophet-like role.
<i>Sand and Foam</i>	A book of captivating and inspiring aphorisms and parables, all in Gibran's beautifully cadenced language.
<i>Spirits Rebellious</i>	An early collection of four short stories: "Rose-Al Hani", "The Bridal Couch", "The Cry of the Graves", and "Khalil the Heretic." They all portray people who defy authority and social tradition in Lebanon.

APPENDIX B
PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1: One of the last photographs of Gibran
(from Robin Waterfield's *The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*).



Figure 2: A 1920 photograph of four prominent members of The Pen League (from left to right): Nasib 'Arida, Kahlil Gibran, 'Abd al-Masih Haddad, and Mikhail Naimy.

(from Robin Waterfield's *The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*).



Figure 3: A portrait of Mary Haskell by Gibran, pencil on paper, 1910
(from Suheil Bushrui & Joe Jenkins' *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*)



Figure 4: A portrait of Gibran's mother, Kamila Rahma, pencil on paper
(from Suheil Bushrui & Joe Jenkins' *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*)

APPENDIX C

LETTERS

These letters are from Mikhail Naimy's *Kahlil Gibran: A Biography*, 1964.

Letter 15.—(Boston - New York) Thursday Evening (1921).

Brother Mischa,

Having read the last number of the Damascus Arrabitah's magazine, and reviewed the previous ones, I am convinced that between us and them lies a deep gulf; we cannot cross to them, nor they to us. No matter how hard we try, Mikhail, we cannot free them from servitude to literary trinkets. Spiritual freedom comes from within, never from without; you know that better than any man. Do not attempt to awaken those whose hearts, for some hidden wisdom, God has put to sleep. Do for them what you like, and send them what you like, but don't forget that you shall cast a veil of doubt and suspicion upon the face of our Arrabitah. If we have any power, it lies in our independence and aloofness. If we must co-operate with others, let it be with people who are our peers, and who say what we say. I believe that Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad—(A well known Egyptian writer.—Author) though one man—is nearer by far to our tastes and literary inclination than anything that came out, or may yet come out, of the Damascus Arrabitah. As a worker in Arrabitah I submit—and submit gladly—to the voice of the majority. But I, as an individual, do not and cannot concur in any literary and artistic agreement with that Damascus group who would weave royal purples out of mucous materials.

I was affected, and very deeply, by what you told me of Saba. (N. Arida's brother.—Author) I wish I could do something for

that friendly and loyal young man. "But the eye is far of sight, while the arm is short of reach."

You have done well to stir up Rasheed, Nadrah and Nasseeb a little. If we go on delaying the Anthology of Arrabitah will remain in some pocket of the ether until 1923, or 1924! Send me—and this is not an order—six copies of the anthology and debit my account for the amount; else draw on me!

My health, Mischa, is better than before. The doctors tell me that if I give up all kinds of work and exertion for six months, and do nothing but eat, drink and rest, I should be again my normal self! Allah, help me, Mischa!

So you are on the verge of madness. This is a piece of news magnificent in its fearfulness, fearful in its magnificence and beauty. I say that madness is the first step towards divine sublimation. Be mad, Mischa. Be mad and tell us of the mysteries behind the veil of "reason". Life's purpose is to bring us nearer to those mysteries; and madness is the surest and the quickest steed. Be mad, and remain a mad brother to your mad brother

Gibran.

Letter 17.—(Boston - New York) 1922.

Brother Mischa,

Saba's passing away affected me deeply, tremendously. I know that he has reached the goal, and that he is now immune to all things we complain of. I also know that he has obtained what I wish every day and every night to obtain. I know all that; yet strange to say that such knowledge on my part is powerless to remove that lump of sorrow now dangling between my throat and my heart. What may be the meaning of that lump?

Saba had hopes he wished to have fulfilled. His share of hopes and dreams was equal to the share of any of us. Is it because he left before his hopes blossomed forth and his dreams came to fruition that we feel that heavy lump in the heart? Am I not, as I sorrow for him, sorrowing in fact for some dream of my spent youth which failed of realization? Are not sorrow, regret and grief but phases of human selfishness?

I must not go back to New York, Mischa. The doctor has ordered me to stay away from cities and city life. For that reason I have rented a cottage near the sea and shall move there with my sister in two days; there I shall remain until this heart regains its orderly course, or else becomes a part of the higher order. Yet do I hope to see you before this summer is over—how, where, and when?—I do not know. But the thing must be arranged some way or another.

Your thoughts on "renouncing" the world are exactly like mine. Since long ago I have been dreaming of a hermitage, a

small garden, and a spring of water. Do you recall Youssof El-Fakhry? (The principal character in Gibran's Arabic story "The Tempest".—Author) Do you recall his dark thoughts and his bright awakening? Do you remember his views on civilization and the civilized?

I say, Mikhail, that the future shall find us in a hermitage on the edge of one of the Lebanon gorges. This deceptive civilization has strained the strings of our spirits to the breaking point. We must depart before they break. But we must remain patient and forbearing until the day of departure. We must be patient, Mischa.

Remember me to the brethren and say to them that I love them, and long to see them, and live in thought with them. May Allah protect you, and watch over you and keep you for your brother

Gibran.

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