

Literary Influences of Gibran Khalil Gibran

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Abstract

Gibran Khalil Gibran, one of the earliest figures of Mahjar literature, is a notable Arab intellectual of Lebanese origin who influenced both Eastern and Western thinkers and luminaries thanks to mystic and philosophical thoughts crystallised in his literary works. Hereby study explores the roots of his philosophical and mystic ideas, duly reflected in his emotional literary works, in East and West.

Keywords: Mahjar literature, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Anglo-Saxon culture, eastern mysticism

Introduction

Gibran was born on 6 January 1883 in Bsharri¹ village near Kadisha Valley, Lebanon, mostly habituated by the Maronite, to a middle-class conservative family.

Bsharri had a huge influence on personality of Gibran. His early works particularly bear the traces of this place where he spent his early life. In this village, Gibran found out the meaning of misery, pain, grief and worry. Also in Bsharri, he opened his heart for love, and fell in love with beauty and freedom in the arms of nature. This is where he met the wonders of Italian Renaissance and learnt the facts about Bible, Psalms, mythological stories and Lebanese history.²

Bsharri and its surroundings contributed to the cultural development of Gibran thanks to not only the natural colours, melodies and scents, but also the conservative structure, modest lifestyle, and warm relationship between religious-feudal traditions and daily life.³ Gibran appears as a pure Lebanese in his works, especially those in Arabic. In fact, the protagonists and the physical environment of stories are entirely taken from the place where he lives. Therefore whoever wants to know Gibran better should visit and see the environment which he always refers. Even in his English works, he occasionally mentions his personal experiences in eastern lands full of timeless legends and spirituality.⁴

Since his early school years, Gibran outstood with his acute mind, as well as his reactive character against discipline in terms of both courses and etiquette.

Gibran was five when he began studying at St. Elisha governed by Chaplain Germanus at a lower quarter of Bsharri town. Gibran used to spend summer holidays with his grandfather Stephen, and he often came across Italian men of cloth living at St. Sarkis Monastery. Even back then, Gibran was interested in the icons with the priests, since they revealed the glory of Italian Renaissance; in other words, his artistic soul began to wake in his childhood.

¹ Bsharri is the deformed version of “Bayt al-Ashterut”, literally, “House of Ashterut”. Its history dates back to Phoenicians. Nonetheless, the influence of the latter is less than that of Greeks and Romans.

² Cebr, Cemil, Cübrân fî ‘Asrihi ve Âsârihi’l-Edebiyye ve’l-Fenniyye, Müesseset-ü Nevfel, Beirut, 1983, p. 64.

³ Kubba’în, Raymûnd, en-Nez’atü’r-Rûhiyye fî Edebi Cübrân ve Nu’ayme, Dâru’l-Fikri’l-Lübânî, Beirut, t.y., p. 35.

⁴ Cebr, Cübrân fî ‘Asrihi ve Âsârihi’l-Edebiyye, p. 64.

Because of his exultant character, St. Elisha School turned into a restricted and boring place for Gibran. Consequently, he had a strong desire for continuing his education at a bigger school in Beirut. Nevertheless, the modest income of Khalil the father could barely afford the minimum requirements of his family of 6 individuals; thus, the ideal of Gibran was actually an impossible dream. Gibran attempted to attend a big school in the city through financial support of a rich family, but he wouldn't succeed.⁵

On 25 June 1895, his mother Kamila and four siblings (Peter, Gibran, Mariana and Sultana) emigrated one of old Chinese quarters in Oliver, Boston, where a Lebanese ghetto also took place. This was a typical settlement for immigrants, including people of any religion, race and culture, enabling them to live comfortably all their cultural values and riches, yet very insufficient in terms of life standards. Having left Khalil the father in Lebanon, the Gibran family moved in a tiny, modest house of a kitchen, a bedroom and a saddle roof in the neighbourhood.⁶ Once they settled, each family member rapidly chose his or her own task. Gibran's was to accord with the local school where he was enrolled.

In early autumn, Gibran started a public school that primarily consist of poor Irish, Jew, Chinese and American kids;⁷ after school, he began to visit a centre of art and culture where several poetry, theatre and fine arts activities were held. After a short while, the curious boy grabbed attention of Florance Beers, who also was a regular at the culture centre. In a letter to the director of Boston Public Library, Florance Beers told about the skills of this youngster, ever-present at the centre. The Library Manageress informed Fred Holland Day about the situation and asked for assistance especially in terms of drawing skills, for this immigrant Lebanese boy who lived on selling newspapers and matches. In the eyes of Day, Gibran was an eastern model, an innocent child of nature, and breathed this innocent oriental climate in his drawings.⁸

Gibran spent most of his time in the library, which became a kind of office where he conducted his studies. At the same place, he imitated the paintings of authorities such as William Blake⁹ (1757-1822), stopped by weekly exhibitions as occasion served,¹⁰ and was trying to establish a comprehensive repertoire for his future career.

In autumn 1898, Gibran returned his homeland, to the “*al-Hikma Institute*”¹¹ in Beirut, for a solid education on Arabic;¹² he was enrolled for the Institute in December. Yusuf al-Haddad, the professor of exposition at the Institute, realised how big ideals Gibran had despite his young age. Wishing to make use of such brilliance, Yusuf al-Haddad takes Gibran among his students, and soon finds out the accuracy of his decision. Indeed, Gibran does not content himself with the courses prescribed in curriculum, but tries to study *Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, *Kitab al-Aghani* by al-Isfahani, *Nahj al-Balagha*, *ed-Durer* by Edib Ishak, collected works by Al-Mutanabbi, and *Torah*, all recommended by his teacher, as well as many works in natural sciences, social sciences and humanities such as ethnology.¹³

An impatient and appetent reader, Gibran read the Bible, works by leading figures of *Nahda* movement such as Edib Ishak, Francis Marrash (1836-1873) and Shibli Shumayyil, the epistles and canons by Arab Sufis, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, as well as Rousseau, Voltaire (1694-1778) and Balzac (1799-1850) at a relatively young age. Following his education at al-Hikma, Gibran was enrolled for no official school, and continued his studies on his own, within common learning traditions. It is worth noting that Gibran exclusively paid attention to literature and language during his school years.¹⁴

During his time at al-Hikma, Gibran received successive letters from Boston, indicating that family members underwent various diseases. Above all, the knell of his sister, Sultana, gave him a deep shock; from then on, he began to live with a series of diseases – and evidently fear of death – which he could not evade.

⁵ Cebr, Cemil, *Cübrân Halîl Cübrân fî Hayâtihi'l-Âsife*, Müesseset-ü Nevfel, Beirut, 1981, p. 21.

⁶ Kettânî, Süleymân, *Cübrân Halîl Cübrân fî Medârihi'l-Vâsi'*, Mektebet-ü Nevfel, y.y., t.y., p. 67.

⁷ Gibran started studying in this school on 30 September 1895, and left after three years.

⁸ Cebr, *Cübrân Halîl Cübrân fî Hayâtihi'l-Âsife*, pp. 22-23.

⁹ The English poet and illustrator with highest impact on the literary and artistic comprehension of Gibran. Gibran named his book *Dam'a wa Ibtisama* (A Tear and a Smile) after Blake.

¹⁰ At one of such exhibitions, Gibran met Josephine Peabody, who would contribute him greatly in his career.

¹¹ A well-known local high-school level educational institution that belongs to the Maronite.

¹² Apart from modern and classic Arabic, he was closely interested in and studied Literary Movements in Arab world.

¹³ Moreh, Shmuel, *Studies in Modern Arabic Prose And Poetry*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, p. 6.

¹⁴ Cebr, *Cübrân fî 'Asrihi ve Âsârih*, p. 66.

Nonetheless, saying ‘pearl lives in sick oyster,’ he tried to remain optimistic about his disorders, considering them as a possible source of prosperity and inspiration. In this respect, the complex of death did not alienate Gibran from life; instead, it even provided him with psychological prowess.¹⁵

In the meantime, Gibran found time to analyse Torah and the prophets therein. He tried to learn the theories of Plato on society and aesthetics, found the opportunity to meet with high-rank people in Boston thanks to his friends, as well as with elite poets who opposed the traditional approach.¹⁶

He studied the works of notables such as Ralf Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Maurice Maeterlinck in order to satisfy his curiosity on metaphysics. Maeterlinck was a Belgian author who used magical words in an aesthetic style. He was able to depict marvellously secret evil forces and the obscure psychological states arising from cruelty. His only concern was death and afterlife. Gibran expresses the irresistible influence of Maeterlinck as follows: “*He was my idol from the age of fourteen to eighteen. Now, however, I see that I was wrong; since he does not reveal to reader his thought, his specific experience, but introduces the opinions of others. Besides, his life is not really in accord with his writings.*”¹⁷

Another influential figure on moral sphere of Gibran is Emerson. Emerson has mostly shied away from the danger of worshipping material things. He describes the objective of life as purification from sensual egocentrism and desires, and unification with God. According to him, religion is an inner, individual experience, and the nature, everywhere, manifests us what is individual and existential. The relation between nature and man is very strong, since whatever is present in matter is also present in the soul. Nature itself is a symbol of the universal spirit.¹⁸

The literary personality of Gibran comprises the traces of Anglo-Saxon culture in Boston, a cultural centre in USA, as well as of the European culture, dominant in Lebanon.¹⁹ In the following chapters, we will treat the influence of these two main cultural sources on Gibran.

1. Western Influences on Gibran

a) Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

The theory put forth by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Of the Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right* influenced many writers and men of letters of the time; Gibran also treated this work in details in his *Al-Mawakib*. Even though he rarely mentions the name of Rousseau, his opinions are under heavy influence of the French philosopher.²⁰

In his qasida *Al-Mawakib*, Gibran calls man back to nature, symbolised by the forest, through the mouth of a youngster. In the eyes of Gibran, nature is a kind of womb, denoting power and happiness. This is where essence and truth of reincarnation, which constitutes the basis of the art and thought of Gibran, are hidden.²¹

In the stories *Yuhanna al-Majnun* and *Khalil al-Kafir*, Gibran refers to New Testament and Bible, asserting that the society may get better, but only through man.²²

Gibran, in his *al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira*, claims that such transformation should be towards human nature as a whole, without division and disruption, against the laws asserted by man in order to regulate nature. The man, however, has tried to destroy the nature and prevent such transformation for the sake of exploiting his fellow creatures, sometimes through the domination of men of God and feudal lords.²³

Gibran does not get the ideas of Rousseau as they are; rather, he prefers using them once processing in his personal pot of thought and art, and making them his.

¹⁵ Cebr, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, p. 38.

¹⁶ Cebr, Cübrân fî ‘Asrihi ve ‘Âsârih, p. 68.

¹⁷ Kubba‘în, en-Nez‘atü‘r-Rûhiyye, p. 31-32.

¹⁸ Cübrân, Halîl Cübrân, Dem‘a ve İbtisâme (Dirâse ve Tahlîl, Nâzik Sâbâ Yârd), Müesseset-ü Nevfel, 4th edition, Beirut, 1995, p. 212.

¹⁹ As is known, Gibran studied at al-Hikma, where reverends and teachers under European influence worked.

²⁰ Badawi, M. M., Modern Arabic Literature, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1997, p. 98.

²¹ el-‘Azma, Nazîr, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân fî Dav‘i‘l-Müessirâti‘l-Ecnebiyye, Dâru Tîlâs, Damascus, 1987, p. 178.

²² Hatîf, Kâzım, A‘lâm ve Ruvvâd fî‘l-Edebi‘l-‘Arabî, Dâru‘l-Kitâbi‘l-Lübânî, Beirut, 1987, p. 442.

²³ el-‘Azma, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, p. 178.

The main philosophy of Rousseau, which inspired Gibran, can be formulated as follows: Man is good by nature; nevertheless, human civilisation has seduced human nature. What man should do is to return to nature, thus to retrieve the birth.

b) Ernest Renan (1823-1892)

French philosopher Ernest Renan has often discussed with Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani regarding the importance of faith and philosophy, and their role in terms of thought and civilisation.

Renan wrote a biography of Jesus Christ, *Life of Jesus*, which was translated in Arabic by Farah Antoun. In this work, Renan rewrote the life of Jesus with a scientific method, and tried to approach in a more realist manner, avoiding the long-lasting superstitions around Christ. This work positioned Jesus Christ in his rightful place regarding history and civilisation thanks to objective assessments, and eliminated as much as possible all myths about his birth, growth, childhood, youth, maturity and message.²⁴

In his *Jesus, the Son of Man*, Gibran has a similar objective, and tries to describe Jesus as a human and a child of nature, overlooking popular myths on him.

Both Gibran and Renan emphasise that it is not metaphysics but historical birth which will ensure comprehension of the life and message of Jesus.

c) William Blake (1707-1827)

Gibran and Blake have a lot in common. Gibran personalities realised some of these similarities, witnessed the presence of certain unusual aspects of his character in Blake and how they were put down on paper or canvas. Gibran mentions the themes of dream, silhouette and fog in almost every writing, and expresses his admiration for a work by Blake as follows:

What an attachment there is between us, whereas I always felt all alone. Therefore, Blake came in order to eliminate my solitude. I used to feel lost, but here is Blake, walking ahead of me. I would be happy if people said for me what they say for Blake. He is a crazy man. Everyone knows that madness means creativity in art and wisdom in poetry. As for the madness about God, it is the ultimate worship.²⁵

Probably, the crucial importance ascribed by Gibran to the self and divine world is a consequence of the thoughts, deep spirituality and mysticism of Blake.²⁶ The strong emphasis on spirituality and moral values is transferred by Gibran to all members of *Al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah* [*The Pen League*], where spirituality has been subject to serious contemplation and reflection.

Like Blake, Gibran asserts that all religious laws should be eliminated and that a new moral system should be established instead. According to both, hearth precedes reason, and madness is the peak of reason. Presumably, Gibran named his *Dam'a wa Ibtisama* [*A Tear and A Smile*] under inspiration of a poem by Blake.²⁷

d) Ralf Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

The writings and drawings by Gibran clearly put forth the unification of nature and man in rocks, clouds, trees, rivers and waterfalls. All these principles are explicitly defended by Emerson as well.

According to Emerson, there is a universal substance which rules the nature and appears in its every piece. This substance is present in trees, winds, rains and flowers.²⁸ Man is also a part of nature. Therefore, we have to discover this inherent power of man who can evaluate any question with a scale of reason and knowledge. Emerson believes that the self and disposition leads man on the true path and prevents him from erring. Therefore, Emerson and his followers bore an absolute confidence in man, and defended the freedom of belief, expression and labour. All these issues constitute the background of all stories by Gibran. Principles such as self-confidence, individual freedom, liberty of thought and labour, resistance against traditions or authority that restrict or harm such freedom are regular themes of Gibran, who is under explicit romantic approach of Emerson.²⁹

²⁴ el-'Azma, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, p. 181.

²⁵ Kubba'în, en-Nez'atü'r-Rûhiyye, p. 29.

²⁶ Ashour, Radwa, Gibran and Blake a Comparative Study, el-Hey'etü'l-Misriyyetu'l-'Amme li'l-Kitâb, Cairo, 1978, p. 20.

²⁷ Kubba'în, en-Nez'atü'r-Rûhiyye, 29.

²⁸ Nu'ayme, Mihâil, fi'l-Gırbâli'l-Cedîd, Müesseset-ü Nevfel, 4th edition, Beirut, 1988, pp. 122-123.

²⁹ Kubba'în, en-Nez'atü'r-Rûhiyye, p. 31.

e) Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Nietzsche became the first mentor, the greatest supporter and friend against the solitude of Gibran in his thirties.³⁰ He virtually entirely got lost (indimaj) in Nietzsche, and began to find his existence in Nietzsche's. By the help of the German philosopher, Gibran fought against the feeling of solitude and alienation that drew him away from his past; thus, he was able to demolish the weak old and to build the strong new. Gibran expresses this transformation as follows:

I used to see life through tear and smile. Today, however, I see man from behind a magical and golden gleam that provides him with strength, the heart with enthusiasm and the body with dynamism.³¹

Gibran inaugurates his new period with *Al-Awasif*. This work is a product of the psychic crisis due to deep impact of Nietzsche. In *Ghaffar al-Qubur*, the first story of the book, one of the protagonists is Gibran, while the other is a mad deity. The deity comes across Gibran in the valley of shadow of life with abundant skulls and bones, and recommends him to renounce poetry and to begin digging a grave.³²

Influence of Nietzsche is also apparent in Gibran's *The Madman*. In his own words, the work is a solid ring of iron.³³

The philosophy of Nietzsche has two primary aspects: Firstly, it is destructive in terms of smashing the obsolete traditions and spoilt values, as is indicated through *On Human Prudence*³⁴ and *The Shadow*³⁵ in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Secondly, his thought has a constructive side, telling the religion of *superman* to people and the eternal return. Gibran agrees with Nietzsche in the former. Indeed, in his *Ara'is al-Muruj*, *Al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida*, *Al-Awasif*, *Al-Majnun* and *Al-Mawakib*, Gibran revolts against dilapidated values and outdated traditions.³⁶

2. Eastern Influences

In addition to Western thinkers, Eastern mysticism has influenced Gibran. He wrote five articles, namely *Sukut al-Inshad*, *Ibn Sina and Qasidatuh*, *Al-Gazali*, *Ibn al-Farid*, and *Iram Zat al-Imad*, about mystic problems in *Al-Bada'i' waal-Tara'if*.

a) Avicenna (980-1037)

The article by Avicenna on "nafs" [self] grabbed attention of Gibran. As is known, Avicenna is one Islamic thinkers who engaged in philosophy throughout their life, but finally steered for Sufism and mystical life. In this respect, Avicenna reminds of Ghazali, since the latter studied fiqh and other traditional sciences, before opting for Sufism as well.³⁷

The mystic views of Avicenna can be observed *Ya Nafs*, a qasida in the form of prose poetry under 'ishraqat' genre by Gibran.

Gibran makes the following remarks about the qasida on nafs by Avicenna, who is from Ishraqi school:

Above all, the qasida is an expression of the faiths and inclinations of Avicenna. No qasida written by any former philosopher resembles the one on nafs by Avicenna. His views are the closest to mine in terms of faith and nafs.³⁸

³⁰ el-Makdisi, Enfs, el-Fünûnu'l-Edebiyye ve A'lâmühâ fi'n-Nahdati'l-'Arabiyyeti'l-Hadîse, Dâru'l-'İlm li'l-Melâyîn, Beirut, 1977, pp. 325-326.

³¹ Kubba'in, en-Nez'atü'r-Rûhiyye, p. 38.

³² el-Fâhûrî, Hannâ, el-Mûcezz fi'l-Edebi'l-'Arabî ve Târîhih, I-IV, Dâru'l-Cil, Beyrut, 1985, IV, 278.

³³ el-Kuzberî, Selmâ el-Haffâr-Buşrûî, Süheyl, eş-Şu'letu'z-Zerkâ Rasâil-ü Cübrân Halîl Cübrân ilâ Mey Ziyâde, Müesseset-ü Nevfel, II, edition, Beirut, 1984, ps. 65

³⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, Böyle Buyurdu Zerdüşt, (Turkish Translation by A. Turan Oflazoğlu), Asa Kitabevi, Bursa, 1999, pp. 152-154.

³⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich, Zerdüşt Böyle Buyurdu, (Turkish Translation by Osman Derinsu), Varlık Yay., 8th edition, Istanbul, 1999, pp. 217-220.

³⁶ en-Nâ'ûrî, 'Îsâ, Üdebâ mine'ş-Şark ve'l-Garb, Menşûrâtü 'Uveydât, 2nd edition, Beirut, 1977, p. 78. Also see Kubba'in, en-Nez'atü'r-Rûhiyye, p. 34.

³⁷ el-'Azma, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, p. 212.

³⁸ Cübrân, el-Bedâi' ve't-Tarâif, "İbnü Sînâ ve Kasîdetüh", (Edited by Dr. Nâzik Sâbâ Yârd), Müesseset-ü Nevfel, 2nd edition, Beirut, 1987, p. 109.

Gibran also lays stress on the psychological and spiritual development which Avicenna starts with matter and ends with nafs. Having studied the attributes of hyle and the secrets of substances, Avicenna reverted from universe to God. By means of matter, he discovered the secrets of the soul, and attained the truth of the reasonable via the apparent. Therefore, his qasida is an explicit evidence for the life of ilm (knowledge) and aql (intellect). Thanks to this knowledge, one attains rational theories prior to scientific experience, before reaching spiritual conscience, and finally, God.³⁹

b) Ghazali (1058-1111)

Gibran likens Ghazali to famous philosopher and theologian St. Augustine (354-430). According to Gibran, these leading figures represent two aspects of a principle, which is:

An inclination within nafs takes its possessor from the apparent to the reasonable, then to philosophy and finally to the divine.⁴⁰

In a sense, hereby expression is a variation of what Gibran says about the qasida *Nafs* by Avicenna.

According to Gibran, Ghazali is a golden link between preceding Indian mystics and later theologians. Ghazali had a bias in thoughts attained by earlier Buddhists. In later periods, we can observe certain approaches similar to the emotions and views of Ghazali in the works by the likes of Spinoza (1632-1677) and William Blake.⁴¹

c) Ibn al-Farid (1181-1235)

Ibn al-Farid, a productive poet in a barren era, used to be on his own in order to write down immortal poems that connected the apparent and mystical aspects of life; he shut his eyes in order to see what is beyond hereby world, and fell on deaf ears in order to hear the ballads of eternity.⁴² His poetic style was unimaginable for his predecessors and unattainable for his successors. What approaches Gibran to Ibn al-Farid is that the elements, absent in dominant culture till then, are transferred from mystic human experience to the culture. In this respect, Gibran considers him as the emir of poets.⁴³

As is seen above, many strong personalities from East and Western such as Avicenna, Imam Ghazali, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Ralf Waldo Emerson, and William have served as architects to build the intellectual and moral world of Gibran.

Conclusion

The literary personality of Gibran comprises the traces of Anglo-Saxon culture in Boston, a cultural centre in USA, as well as of the European culture, dominant in Lebanon. Besides, the most notable architects, who built his intellectual and moral sphere, include remarkable figures of Eastern and Western civilisations such as Ibn Khaldun, Avicenna, Imam Ghazali, Abu Nuwas, Al-Mutanabbi, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Ralf Waldo Emerson, and William Blake. Gibran, however, emphasises that he always longs for concretisation of “spirit of the East” in himself, saying, “*I heard the doctrines of Confucius, I lent an ear to Brahma, and sat nearby Buddha*”. On the other hand, he follows the path of Emerson in his pantheistic view, whereupon he believes in a universal substance that rules the nature and is apparent in every part (tree, wind, rain, flower, etc.) of it.

³⁹ Cübrân, el-Bedâi‘ ve’t-Tarâif, pp. 109-110.

⁴⁰ el-‘Azma, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, pp. 215-216.

⁴¹ ‘Abdü’l-Dâyim, Sâbir, Makâlât ve Buhûs fi’l-Edebi’l-Mu‘âsir, Dâru’l-Ma‘ârif, Cairo, 1983, p. 70; Cübrân, el-Bedâi‘ ve’t-Tarâif, p. 115.

⁴² See İbnü’l-Fârid, ‘Umar b. ‘Ali, Dîvân-ü İbni’l-Fârid (edited by Dr. ‘Abdu’l-Hâlik Mahmûd), Dâru’l-Ma‘ârif, Cairo, 1984, p. 132.

⁴³ Cübrân, el-Bedâi‘ ve’t-Tarâif, “İbnü’l-Fârid”, pp. 143-144. Also see, Cübrân Halîl Cübrân, Münâcâtü Arvâh, el-Mektebetü’s-Sakâfiyye, Beirut, ts., pp. 29-30.

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