

## **The Influence of Walt Whitman's Nation-Building Poetics on Kahlil Gibran: A (Comparative Study)**

**Dr. Raja'a Al Khalili<sup>\*</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The following research is a comparative study of the influence of Walt Whitman on the Lebanese-American poet Gibran Kahlil Gibran. When Gibran came across the works of Walt Whitman, he found in Whitman's nation-building poetics an inspiration to reform Arabic poetry and society. Therefore, he emulated Walt Whitman's suggestive style and thematic emphasis on social and political reform. The resemblances between both poets stem from their personal involvement in building their societies and from the belief of a poet's dedication to national aspirations. They also believed that a necessary step begins by attempting to reform poetry itself. As to the differences between them, they are mainly attributed to the sense of urgency of reform which Gibran felt is necessary for the Arab world that was under a foreign rule. Gibran in his poems wanted to show his fellow countrymen that liberation should come from their inner strength. In conclusion, Gibran stands out as a unique writer of that period and appears more committed than any Arab American writer to problems in the Arab world.

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<sup>\*</sup> Department of English- Hashemist University- Jordan

To obtain a perspective on contemporary Arab American writings, one can draw on the earlier achievements of the first wave of Arab American writers. In a survey of Arab-American literature, Tanyss Ludescher explores the historical as well as literary productions of what is identified as three waves of Arab American immigrants and a corresponding three generations of writers.<sup>1</sup> After providing a lengthy analysis of the most influential first wave of Arab American writers and their contribution, Ludescher examines the second wave of Arab American writers who belong to the next wave of immigrants. Most of the writers of the second wave came from a larger group of Muslim immigrants and found themselves no longer interested in problems in their native countries. The group of writers belonging to this period includes Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, and Eugene Paul Nassar and they remain largely obscure from critical attention. The irony is that the focus of their writings is on problems dealing with assimilation to American culture even though at the time of their literary publications the Arab-Israeli conflict was at its peak. Their literary works include novels that deal with the immigrant experience such as *The End of My Life* (1947) and *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960) by Vance Bourjaily. William Peter Blatty wrote about his negative attitude towards his Arabic background in *The Exorcist, Which Way to Mecca Jack?* (1960), and *I'll Tell Them I Remember You* (1973) and Eugene Nassar wrote *Wind of the Land* (1979) on Arab Americans way of living. Out of the third wave of immigrants who arrived after the 1967 war with Israel a list of writers appeared, who were engaged in a similar experience of the previous group except the shift was on a discussion on the Arab American images. The literary productions of this period include, Joseph Jaha *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990), Elamz Abinader *Children of Roojme: A Family's Journey* (1991), Diana Abu-Jaber in *Arabian Jazz*, and other contemporary poets and writers. The role that Arab American writers of later waves play in dealing with issues related to the Arab world and how that influences their role in the Arab American community is an important area of study. However, earlier Arab-American poets had a

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1 Tanyss Ludescher. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature." *MELUS*, 31. 4 (Winter 2006).108

clearer relationship with their new American environment and their country of origins.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century an Arab Renaissance occurred in Arabic literature. Arab writers in the Arab world and in the Americas began to boldly experiment with various forms and themes and to assert their ethnic as well as national identities. Arab writers found themselves compelled to be open to modern trends that were already revolutionizing Western literature as well. One of those writers was Gibran Kahlil Gibran, who was born in Lebanon in 1883 and migrated to the United States.

Gibran, along with other members of the Pen League, shared the common traits of being receptive to new ways of expressing their creativity.<sup>2</sup> They were also known as the Syro-American School because most of them came from Lebanon and Syria. This group of writers lived in the United States and were exposed to modern American literary works.

Gibran Kahlil Gibran, the most famous member of the group for many American readers, was influenced by Walt Whitman. Suhail Hanna, in an essay entitled "Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue," states that Whitman inspired Gibran for the creation of new techniques in Arabic poetry.<sup>3</sup> Other critics have also noticed thematic and technical similarities between Gibran's work and that of Whitman. However, Whitman's main inspiration for Gibran is not merely one of themes and style. Whitman's poetics of nation-building inspired in Gibran the need for poetic and social reform in the Arab world. As an Arab immigrant living in the West and writing extensively in Arabic, Gibran had a patriotic purpose of addressing the Arabs and specifically, the Lebanese people. Gibran as a writer belonged to the first wave of Arab American immigrants who were empathizing with Arabs' aspirations in renouncing foreign rule and in being considered as nationals of the Ottoman Empire. This small group living in a strange land was, like many Arabs, refusing the Ottoman rule. The group of expatriate poets, however, found their position like their fellow nationals

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<sup>2</sup> The name of Kahlil Gibran is written with variations.

<sup>3</sup> Suhail Hanna, "Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue," *Literature East and West*. 12. 1968, pp174-98.

in the Arab world unable to act on their belief of achieving self-autonomy. Therefore, the group believed that their purpose was to uplift not only Arabic poetry but also Arab individuals from their deplorable state.

Gibran was exposed to the works of Walt Whitman by reading an article on Whitman written by Richard Hovey entitled "Decadence-or Renaissance." In this essay Hovey praised Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter for their poetry and individuality and considered them as part of the *vers libre*.<sup>4</sup> The effect the essay left was remarkable since the work of Walt Whitman was especially prevalent and influential in Boston where Gibran was staying in the 1890s. Later on Gibran embraced the principles laid down by the article and made them fundamentals in his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Gibran was deliberately choosing Walt Whitman as a poet to be emulated. After he moved back to New York, John Oppenheim asked Gibran to become a member of the advisory board of a new magazine entitled, *Seven Arts*. The magazine wanted American writers to carry on the spirit of Whitman and especially the theme of regeneration that Whitman believed could be facilitated by literature.<sup>6</sup>

There are a number of distinct qualities in Whitman's later writings that can be detected in the works of Gibran. Whitman's suggestive style, spiritualized idealism, and intense political interests are attributes that we find in the works of Gibran. In style, both poets were revolutionary in establishing a new way of expressing their themes. Gibran, like Whitman used the prose poem, which became Gibran's medium of expression. A prominent feature in their poetry is mysticism; and in their reference to God as one who exists in his creation. For example, in "Song of Myself" Whitman sees God in all of nature and especially in man: "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand

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4Gibran, "vers libre" French word for "free verse" and means throwing off all traditional forms of rhyme and meter, p. 57

5 Jean Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*. (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974), pp. 58-60.

6 Suhail Bushri, *Kahlil Gibran : Man and Poet*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), p.159.

God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.”<sup>7</sup> In a poem by Gibran entitled, “Song of the Soul,” the persona says: “What human dares sing in voice/ The song of God?”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *The Prophet*, Gibran sees God through His creation. He says to an old priest: “You shall see Him smiling in flowers, / Then rising and waving His hand in trees.”<sup>9</sup>

The poets, moreover, believed that the poet should share with his fellowmen their feelings and reactions to the prevalent social and political times. It is imperative to consider the circumstances that surrounded each poet individually in order to understand the impact that certain historical moments left on their poetry and those circumstances that aid in understanding the closeness of the two poets’ aesthetics.

The prevalent social and political atmosphere shaped Whitman’s belief that a modern, democratic age necessitated an appropriate method of writing English poetry.

Reynolds in his essay, “Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s,” notes that the prevalent political corruption and the collapse of the party system in the 1850s in America clarified for Walt Whitman the belief in the power of the individual to change his social environment.<sup>10</sup> In the presence of corruption, therefore, Whitman saw his role as a member of society and as a poet playing the role of a self-appointed rescuer from the stagnation of the deteriorating situations that surrounded him. In “Song of Myself” as well as in other

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7 Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *The New Anthology of American Poetry*. S. Alexord, et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p.492. All the other poems by Whitman will be taken from this anthology.

8 Kahlil Gibran, “Song of the Soul,” *The Treasure Writings of Kahlil Gibran*. (New York: Castle Books, 1980), pp42-3. All other poems by Gibran will be taken from this anthology.

9 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*. (New York: Knopf, 1973), p.79

10 David Reynolds, “Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s.” *The Cambridge Companion to Whitman*. Ezra Greenspan. Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp-66-92.

poems Whitman emphasized the belief that democracy is the hope for a nation and its citizens.

Whitman and Gibran both shared a belief in the power of the individual in initiating social change and their passion could be detected in their early poems. It was only after the deterioration of the socio-political situation that the poet took his position as a Bard in the healing of a nation. It is Whitman's belief in the idea of nation building that mostly attracted Gibran. Whitman believed that a nation state should encompass a unity of crowds bounded by the principles of equality and vibrating with diversity. He further emphasized the idea of movement and continual construction of a compact organism in which democracy molds together. What made the model of Whitman more appealing for Gibran is that Whitman believed that the poet could use that model for every nation suffering from deterioration.

Gibran conceived himself a bard and felt compelled to react to the deplorable situation that dominated the Arab world in early twentieth century. Around that time, the Arab world was greatly suffering from an oppressive Ottoman rule. Though the Ottomans were Moslems by faith; Arab Moslems and Christians alike equally hated them. The consequences of their rule left the majority of the Arabs poor, sick, and illiterate. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire was constantly engaged in war, and this meant the recruiting of many young Arab men to fight in foreign lands for extended periods of time. Their strict rule meant enormous repression. Any form of resistance usually ended up by severe punishment; and eventually the death penalty became a standard for any dissenter. Even Arabs who were living outside the Arab world were not immune from any retaliation.

In his poetry, Gibran reacted immediately to the emerging socio-political situation in the Arab world by writing poetry. His poem, "Dead Are My People," was written at that time of famine that was a sequence of being under the neglect and oppression of the Ottoman rule. In this poem Gibran begins with lamenting the appalling state of the daily death due to famine:

Gone are my people, but I exist yet,

Lamenting them in my solitude...  
Dead are my friends, and in their  
Death my life is naught but great  
Disaster.<sup>11</sup>

In the poem, Gibran begins with a patriotic desire to help his friends because he can not accept the death of people, or, more precisely, for him as “my people.” Unfortunately, his lamentation is done in solitude because his efforts could not be accomplished as there were many political obstacles even in providing charitable aid to Arab citizens living in the Arab world. As it is mentioned in the poem, their death is not only the result of “hunger” because “he who did not perish from starvation was butchered with the sword.” The whole poem, “Dead Are My People,” builds on a complex set of images of despair in an attempt to justify the inability and almost impossible task of offering both humanitarian and emotional aid. Nevertheless, he goes through a period of self-questioning on his specific role in this crisis. He follows by comparing his situation to those of his people. This stanza states that because of being away in a distant land he is immune from physical death. In the following stanza, he comments on the death of his people as “painful and shameful” while, he is living “in plenty and in peace.” Yet, this good standard of living provides him with no comfort because the tragedy of the people is unsettling and he can no longer be happy in his current state. In fact, he feels that his burden would probably be less if he shared their agony and “when he dies with them innocent with his fellow innocents.” He moves on to a self-reflexive meditation on his role:

What can an exiled son do for his  
Starving people, and of what value  
Unto them is the lamentation of an  
Absent poet?<sup>12</sup>

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11 Kahlil Gibran, “Dead Are My People,” pp. 217-223.

12 Ibid., p. 219.

His frustrations came from his inability as an individual to exert any influence on the course of events even when it comes to providing basic human necessities such as food. In the poem, Gibran wishes to transform himself to images of food as “an ear of corn,” “a ripe fruit,” or “a bird flying” to feed his starved people.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, as an immigrant he feels incapable of providing help as they are in their inability to solve their dilemma. The feeling of helplessness is emphasized by the repetition of words related to exile and absence, which are frequently used in most of his poems and prose. The repetition intensifies his obligation to solve problems in his native country, and at the same time indicates his failure to do so.

The poet responds to people trying to calm him by saying that the deplorable situation of his people is nothing new in the history of humanity, and Gibran answers that the tragedy is more than famine and describes the circumstances as “a crime conceived by the heads of [s]erpents.”<sup>14</sup> He also believes that their death, an almost sacrificial death like that of Jesus Christ, is due to the fact of their submission and weakness. As far as the poet is concerned, in the end their death as was described in the poem a result of the willingness to compromise and be “peace[m]akers.”<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, the poem finally ends with a religious entreaty to his countrymen to contribute in saving their starved countrymen in Lebanon instead of resorting to others for help. The plea by Gibran comes from his belief that his fellow countrymen should be able to help themselves. Furthermore, it also carries the connotations that aid should also be in the form of political support because their troubles are a result of political oppression.

It is an important characteristic of a poet and especially one who assumes a prophetic role to show his sympathy to people in need. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman shows his sympathy for the poor people of his times as well:

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13 Ibid., p. 219.

14 Ibid., p. 220.

15 Ibid., p. 222.



I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,  
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Whitman, Gibran was not mild in urging others to join him in a quest for a

better life and a better nation. Whitman when addressing individuals in "Song of Myself"

says:

A call in the midst of the crowd,  
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.  
Come my children,  
Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,  
Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass'd his  
prelude on the reeds  
within.<sup>17</sup>

Whitman also offers himself for the trodden man and states:

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,  
O despaired, here is my neck,  
By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon  
me.<sup>18</sup>

Whitman sees hope for fellow citizens through a belief in political reform and upholds democracy as an ideal to aspire to for individuals. In "One's-Self I Sing"<sup>19</sup> Whitman states: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."

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16 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself." P. 420

17 Ibid., p. 421

18 Ibid., p. 420.

19 Walt Whitman. "One's -Self I Sing." *The New Anthology of American Poetry*. S. Alexord, et al.(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003,) p. 458

However, Gibran, who was assuming a prophetic role as a poet, was more passionate in addressing social and political problems. In his poem, "My Countrymen," Gibran commences by rebuking his fellow countrymen and by stating his difficult mission of awakening them to realizing their political situation<sup>20</sup>:

What do you seek, my countrymen?  
Do you desire that I build for  
You gorgeous palaces, decorated  
With words of empty meaning, or  
Temples roofed with dreams? Or  
Do you command me to destroy what  
The liars and tyrants have built?  
Shall I uproot with my fingers  
What the hypocrites and the wicked  
Have implanted? Speak your insane  
Wish!<sup>21</sup>

Gibran in "My Countrymen" is addressing an important topic not only in Middle- Eastern politics but also in Arabic literature as well. A great deal of Arabic writing in the past and because of the revival of classical themes and ways of composition in the twentieth century is composed of highly elevated poetics. The themes as well as the techniques emphasized that it should be pleasing to the ear, mellifluous, and most importantly should focus on praise to the point of hypocrisy. It was a well-known fact among writers in the Arab world that those who wrote works supporting or praising governments usually earned a good reputation. Gibran's group of immigrant poets had deliberately decided to

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20 Gibran, Kahlil. "My Country Men," *The Treasure Writings of Kahlil Gibran.* (New York: Castle Books, 1980.) pp184-90.

21 Ibid., p.184.

change technique in order to change themes and distinguish themselves from other writers in the Arab world.

Gibran's tone in "My Countrymen" is a sarcastic one. He makes fun of literary conventions that are considered as standard in Arabic literature. In terms of technique, he parodies their uses of ornate words and phrases to make fun of their appeal for highly elevated diction. The great majority of his sarcasm is directed against the subject matter of these poems. Gibran comments on the contradictions that an Arab poet has to address when writing about national themes in particular. He wonders whether he should "sing and weep at the same time"<sup>22</sup> to please politicians and common people, an oxymoron that is customarily expected from a poet in the Arab world. Gibran felt that in order to address national problems one should not fill his countrymen's ears with false praise. He uses a series of images that indicate a strong person should not "purr like [t]he kitten," but instead "roar [l]ike the lion." Furthermore, he knows the reason behind their inability to exert action; for in response to his cries to be stronger individuals, they refuse to wake up from their slumber because they are "locked in fear."<sup>23</sup>

He also expresses his disillusionment in sympathizing with his fellow countrymen because they are extremely passive and do not share his beliefs in the beauty of nature. Like Whitman, Gibran urges his countrymen to play a stronger role by going back to nature, a powerful source of inspiration and strength. Therefore, Gibran sees the deplorable social circumstances as a natural outcome of their own neglect in observing the beautiful in nature. He chants:

And I said unto you, "Let us climb  
To the mountain top and view the  
Beauty of the world." And you  
Answered me, saying, "In the depths  
Of this valley our fathers lived,

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22 Ibid., p. 184.

23 Ibid., p.184.

And in its shadows they died, and in  
Its caves they were buried. How can  
We depart this place for one which  
They failed to honour?"<sup>24</sup>

It was part of the sensitivity to the prevailing turbulence of the times the Arab world was undergoing that urged Gibran and Whitman to turn into nature for a cleansing effect.

However, Gibran realizes that an appeal to reform is pointless. Instead of going to nature for a source of rejuvenating their souls, his countrymen have found another religion in falsehood and hypocrisy. He says:

Hypocrisy is your religion, and  
Falsehood is your life, and  
Nothingness is your ending; why,  
Then, are you living? Is not  
Death the sole comfort of the  
Miserables?<sup>25</sup>

Gibran's rejection of his countrymen is based on the fact that he can not exert change no matter how hard he tries to call them to revolutionize their ways of thinking. He feels desperate because even though their living conditions are miserable, they are not able to change. Therefore, they decide to keep on living the same way they have been entrapped for generations. He reaches a point where he believes that death is a better solution for those who are under their own spell of intoxication. The poem also ends differently from the all encompassing and loving embrace of Walt Whitman.

Whitman in "Song of Myself," unlike Gibran, does not feel despair, even though the political situation is unfavorable. Furthermore, Whitman believes in small steps as a way of reaching a goal.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.188.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Gibran ends his poem by loathing the inability of the people to take action to help themselves and seek a better life:

I hate you, my countrymen, because

You hate glory and greatness. I

Despise you because you despise

Yourselves. I am your enemy, for

You refuse to realize that you are

The enemies of the goddesses.<sup>27</sup>

The ending of the poem indicates that Gibran believed the answer to “his people’s” troubles would be in being mystical and achieving a union with God. Therefore, they should attaining spirituality, an idea that he found appealing in Whitman’s poetry. In this poem, however, his frustrations are real because any appeal seems to fall on deaf ears. He acknowledges that his people have been under the spell of superstitions for an extended period of time that they seem to have forgotten the glory of earlier times: a magnificence that emanated from their spirituality. There is also a third poem that along with “My Countrymen” and “Dead are My People” appears under the section entitled *Secrets of the Heart*. In this poem Gibran discusses the possibility of engaging in a relationship with the houri, traditionally defined in Arabic and Islamic culture as a beautiful woman in heaven.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the poem entitled, “The Enchanting Houri”<sup>29</sup> is his plea for a balanced relationship of ownership that does not

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26 Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” p. 431

27 Gibran, Kahlil. “My Country Men,” *The Treasure Writings of Kahlil Gibran*. (New York: Castle Books, 1980.) p.190.

28 “Houri” is defined as one of the beautiful maidens that in Muslim belief live with the blessed in paradise in the *Meriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Tenth edition, p.561.

29 “The Enchanting Houri” in the section entitled *Secrets of the Heart, The Treasure Writings of Kahlil*

possess and expresses a yearning for “a companion/ Who makes not slaves, nor will become/ One.”<sup>30</sup> The poems as a group, therefore, point to the importance of the realization by individuals of their own strength, through spirituality, to build a stronger nation. Gibran’s idea of nation building is influenced by Walt Whitman, who also believed that people should benefit from each others’ experiences and from nature.

Whitman’s “Passage to India” testifies to the adoration and respect that Walt Whitman had for the East which he considers as the cradle of human civilization and God’s purpose for “the Earth to be spann’d, connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,/ The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near,/ The lands to be welded together.”<sup>31</sup> Gibran also held this belief but found that political chaos destroyed the spirits of his people.

Moreover, one feels a sense of urgency in Gibran’s poetry regarding the deteriorating situations of the citizens of the Arab world. Gibran, however, managed to promote poetry as part of a literacy program which he considers as essential in nation building. He along with other members of the Pen Group agreed on the importance of lifting up the individual to build an Arab nation and started implementing their ideas by changing the form of poetry so that it would be accessible to a wider public. Poetry for him is an incarnation of truth:

Poetry my dear friend, is a sacred incarnation of a smile. Poetry is a sigh that dries

the tears. Poetry is a spirit who dwells in the soul, whose nourishment is the heart,

whose wine is affection. Poetry that comes not in this form is a false messiah.<sup>32</sup>

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*Gibran*. (New York: Castle Books, 1980) pp 209-212.

30 *Ibid.*, p.211.

31 Walt Whitman, “Passage to India,”p.460.

32 In Gregory Orafalea and Sharif Elmusa. *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*. Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1988.

Gibran in this passage as well as in his work emphasizes the role of the poet as a bard of truth and does not attempt to mask any ugliness or to praise unworthiness.

Gibran as a man and a poet, unlike Whitman, had to battle with a complex set of

issues relating to the fact that he is an immigrant, who still has strong emotional ties to his native country. Gibran similar to other members of the first wave of Arab American immigrant writers were responding to social and political situations facing Arabs in the early twentieth century, specifically those living in what was called then Syria.

In short, it is evident that Whitman and Gibran share common goals and objectives. The similarities between the two poets are a result of their belief in the need to reform society and poetry. Both poets have been active participants in their societies and joined other poets to initiate reform both in poetry and society. Moreover, there are common traits in their poetry because Gibran followed Whitman's style, idealism, and political inclinations in his poetry. However, Gibran's poems are more political than Whitman's because Gibran believed that a poet should be a voice for his nation in renouncing tyranny and oppression. Both poets shared a strong conviction in the power of the individual who can initiate reform and believed that a strong nation comes from group unity as well. Therefore, each one of them had sought reform and managed to find ways to implement it. Moreover, both had left an impact on their societies. It is the spirit of mutual interaction between poet and society that pervades both of their works but it is the sense of exigency that gives Gibran's poetry its distinctness. Gibran was a patriotic immigrant who sought social and political reform so desperately because reform

was needed in the Arab world. His zeal for poetic and social reform is exceptional among Arab-American writers both past and present.

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