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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS UPON FICTIONAL  
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KHALIL GIBRAN**

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# A Comparative Analysis upon Fictional Affects and Prose Style 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.**

**The present paper intends to study Gibran Khalil Gibran's literary style in writing prose. Style in literature is the literary element that describes the ways that the author uses words –the author's word choice, sentence structure, figurative language and sentence arrangement all work together to establish mood, images, and meaning in the text. Style describes how the author describes events, objects, and ideas. But, in addition to the personal attitude, sometimes the writer's style is not as personal as the definition of style suggests. It means that in many cases the style of an author is influenced by the general and contemporary attitudes of the era.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Gibran was born on 6 January 1883 in Bsharri 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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;<sup>7</sup> 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.

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 Blake<sup>9</sup> (1757-1822), stopped by weekly exhibitions as occasion served,<sup>10</sup> and was trying to establish a comprehensive repertoire for his future career. In autumn 1898, Gibran returned his homeland, to the "al-Hikma Institute" in Beirut, for a solid education on Arabic; 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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. 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.

Since Ghalil Gibran was the most famous Arab Writer, it is significant to consider the stylistic features of his works in general. As Jenefer M. Robinson explains in her article Style and personality "the ordinary conception of style is that it consists of nothing but a set of verbal elements such as a certain kind of vocabulary, imagery, sentence structure, and so on. Gibran's style bears the traces of another author whom he was a great admirer, i.e. Francis Marrash (Shmuel 1976, 45) whose works he had studied at al-Hikma school in Beirut (Moreh 1988, 95). According to orientalist Shmuel Moreh, Gibran's own works echo Marrash's style, many of his ideas, and at times even the structure of some of his works; Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins have mentioned Marrash's concept of

universal love, in particular, in having left a "profound impression" on Gibran (Bushrui 1998, 55).

Many of Gibran's writings deal with Christianity, especially on the topic of spiritual love. But his mysticism is a convergence of several different influences: Christianity, Islam, Sufism, Judaism and theosophy. Although brought up as a Christian, Gibran, as an Arab, was affected not only by his own religion but also by Islam, and especially by the mysticism of the Sufis. His knowledge of Lebanon's bloody history, with its destructive factional struggles, strengthened his belief in the fundamental unity of religions (www.nytimes.com). He wrote: "You are my brother and I love you. I love you when you prostrate yourself in your mosque, and kneel in your church and pray in your synagogue. You and I are sons of one faith—the Spirit" (Najjar 2008, 150).

### **GIBRAN KHALIL GIBRAN : RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE**

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.

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. 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.

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".

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 antiestablishment ideas.

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.

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".

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.

### **WESTERN AFFECTS ON GIBRAN**

**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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

**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.

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.

**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.

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. 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 lbtisama [A Tear and A Smile] under inspiration of a poem by Blake.

**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. 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.

## EASTERN AFFECTS

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.

**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.

The mystic views of Avicenna can be observed in *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.

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.

**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.

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.

**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.<sup>42</sup> 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.

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.

Gibran Khalil Gibran, the most outstanding Arab author has a distinguished literary style that contains both personal features and the dominant attitudes of the literary trends of the era, like romanticism and symbolism, religious, cultural, and historical reflections to expand a kind of humanistic convergence and to achieve the results of artistic pleasure and propounding the need of the different human beings for peace and spiritual salvation. His simple prose echoes poetic tendencies and benefitted many poetic techniques like dreamy descriptions of nature, spontaneity, brevity, repetition, imagery and so on. His style represents his attitude as an alert writer who intends to mingle prose to poetry classic literature to modern one, East to West, Christianity to Islam and Sufism, romantic manner to real life skills. In this way, his prose is a crossroad of characteristics that on the surface seems to be contrary but in Gibran's hand they are inseparably relevant issues reinforcing the effects of one another.

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