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A Relative Viewpoint of Spiritual Revival and Sociable Rebellion in Gibran K. Gibran and W. Blake

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Abstract – *There is evidence that Gibran was familiar with some of Blake's poetry and drawings during his early years in Boston. However, this knowledge of Blake was neither deep nor complete. Kahlil Gibran was reintroduced to William Blake's poetry and art in Paris, perhaps in Auguste Rodin's studio and by Rodin himself. It was then that Gibran read Blake's works more completely and studied his biography and also viewed many more reproductions of his drawings. In Paris, Gibran was called "the twentieth-century Blake," and from that time on, Blake played a special role in Gibran's life. Their reading of the Bible, their rebellion against church corruption, and their sociopolitical visions were very similar.*

Both Gibran and Blake were poets and artists. Both rebelled against the decayed and rigid laws of church and society. Both rejected Reason in the name of Imagination and read the Bible in its "Diabolical form." Above all, the two poets shared a basic prophetic vision and apocalyptic view of the universe. Throughout their works, the messianic mission of the poet and the function of the artist is clear. Poetry is to lead the people back to Eden, and painting must be a step from nature toward the infinite.

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INTRODUCTION

The worlds Blake and Gibran inherited have similarities outnumbering their differences, one may assume because of their living in different countries, culture and times. Both were poets, painters, mystics and visionaries. Both were romantics and like all romantics valued nature, children, emotions, intuition and discarded reason giving foremost importance to imagination. Both poets considered themselves as one with the bard and the prophet. More so, they viewed themselves as the witness of the absolute truth, the spectators of all time and existence. Blake and Gibran through their writings fought for the rights of women and criticized the patriarchy and religious institutions for suppressing the weak. Both the writers vehemently criticized orthodox religions taking an example of Christianity for it committed wrong against humanity by propagating false morality.

Gibran's writings were influenced by varied elements. Boston's literary world, William Blake, Nietzsche and all that he read and observed helped him to be one of the great creative masters with a prophetic tone, style and vision. He like English Romantics was interested in imagination, nature, childhood, revolution, love, beauty, liberty etc. Gibran was also influenced by American romantics like Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau. His work bears the influence of their ideas of 'self-reliance', 'reincarnation' and a presence of

'greater self' that each individual is able to grow into. But among all the writers American as well as English, William Blake's romanticism, Mysticism, symbolism and prophetic vision had a great impact on his mind and his influence can be seen in both his writings as well as drawings. Najjar says, "Gibran identified with Blake's expressionistic symbolism, his rejection of slavish imitation of nature, his dream like fascination, the mythical content and almost mystical quality of his art, and his vision of a last union to be regained."²³ Blake's work contributed in shaping Gibran's thoughts. From an early age he started inquiring about the religion of his birth and the role of the priests. He reckoned Jesus as a leading figure of human kind. For Gibran true religion is not organized and orthodox but liberating and personal. Gibran like Blake was a rebel as well as a reformer. He abhorred conventions. He lived a life of a lonely poet believing resolutely in his imagination. Paul Nassar writes, "Gibran was of the mold of William Blake: both angry social reformer of old cultural contexts and the prophet of an expanding cosmic consciousness beyond any need of a given cultural context. Most often and fundamentally, however, he emerges as a lonely poet finding solace only in the poetic consciousness or imagination."

Gibran was a man who loved beauty in all its manifestations. He shares the romantic trait of beauty worship with Keats as well as with Wordsworth. He

writes in *The Prophet*, "... Beauty is life when life unveils her holy face." He like Blake was a great advocate of liberty and raged in opposition to man-made laws for they afflict severe injuries. Gibran was a man of immense imagination, a great dreamer and an exponent of love. In one of his prose poems "The Goddess of Fantasy" from *Thoughts and Meditations*, Gibran like Blake writes about the importance of dreams. He also highly praises the power of imagination because it is through the power of imagination that one reaches the realm of gods and sees the reality face to face. There is nothing base in the kingdom where thoughts dwell and imagination rules.

Gibran's criticism of society and state, his rebellion against the authority of both the Prince and the priest should be traced back to Blake's writings. Also, his understanding of God and the Bible betray a strong Blakean influence. Gibran did not rebel against the Church because of Nietzsche, nor did his concept of Christianity or of Jesus parallel that of *The Antichrist*. His faith in and love of Jesus, like that of Blake, was firm and everlasting. Nietzsche, on the other hand, blamed Christianity and the social institutions for the "dehumanization" of the individual and the occurrence of "slave morality." He preached strength, force, and self-assertion to the point of brutality. In *Zarathustra*, written in the middle of a period of profound despair and disillusionment, "Nietzsche's hero-worship reaches its highest ecstasy and finds its final satisfaction in a self-created hero." Also in *Zarathustra*, he delivered the first shock against Christianity's Eternal God by declaring Him dead and proclaiming the Superman, and in *The Antichrist*, he condemned Christianity and waged an endless war against it. Nietzsche condemned the church as an institution, and he raged against the priests and against the Church's promise of redemption through pity.

BLAKE AND GIBRAN WHILE MYSTICS

Mysticism is more or less a spiritual discipline which assists a human soul to make contact with the divine reality and a mystic is a person who has had a mystical experience on a very personal level. A mystic tries to make his vision comprehensible because he knows that it is only a chosen few who are granted divine consciousness and the perception to see beyond the material world. In the words of F. E. Supergeon: "The mystic is somewhat in the position of a man who, in a world of blind men, has suddenly been granted sight, and who gazing at the sunrise, and overwhelmed by the glory of it, tries, however falteringly to convey to his fellows what he sees."¹ Intuition, insight, instinct, visions, dreams, revelations and prophesies have a great role to play as a person goes through a mystic phase of his life. A mystic always seeks a communion with the ultimate reality. As he gains the conscious awareness of the presence of divinity, he identifies himself with the spiritual truth and finally with God. In the opinion of William Philip Downes, "The mystic believes it is possible to pass

beyond the sphere of logical thought, that is, he believes it is possible not only to infer that God is, but, that it is possible to feel, to touch, to become actually one with God."² Mystics have a firm belief that there is a deep reality which lies beyond the physical and mundane day to day world of affairs. The physical reality in their view is a superficial phenomenon and one has to delve deep in order to reach the spiritual treasures that can lead a mortal to the fundamental truth. Mystical experience is generally understood as the communion of a spiritually awakened human being with God on an individual level rather than on a collective level. A mystic perceives an ultimate unity, a definitive oneness in all things present as well as absent; but one cannot make sense of this unity and oneness using his or her physical senses and reason. A mystic sees this unity as the very heart of the creation and it becomes his life experience. F. E. Supergeon very aptly states: "The true mystic then, in the full sense of the term, is one who knows there is unity under diversity at the centre of all existence, and he knows it by the most perfect of all tests for the person concerned, because he has felt it. True mysticism – and this cannot be over-emphasized – is an experience and a life."³ After going through the mystical experience, a mystic always feels the sensation that some higher and greater truth or power has laid a hand on him. The mystical experiences which are a part of mystic's life are marked by varied feelings and insights. A mystic feels a sense of timelessness as he sees a vision of infinity and eternity. He feels the sense of blessedness as he sees himself in the presence of eternal truth. He has a sense of unity and totality as he observes the things around him and feels that there is a common thread which goes through all the entities of the universe. Since mystical experience does not come within the ambit of rationality a mystic cannot describe the merits and meaning of his experiences sufficiently.

One of Blake's main thoughts was that of duality of creation. In his view our life and this world works with the help of contraries and each is indispensable for subsistence. Blake sought man as the end of his search. According to Blake all of us reside in each other. He is of the view that after the fall Man lost his unity with God and in this world Man is craving for that lost unity all the time. Blake's mysticism is deep rooted in the practical side of his nature and touches the problems of his life. Whatever he experienced, he experienced directly. Blake claimed that the spirit of his dead brother used to come to him in visions and prompted his writings as well as his illustrations.

Though Gibran is not a mystic proper, there are moments when he seems to be a mystic of a higher order who appears to be under the guidance of Jesus, Socrates and Gautama Buddha. After reading Gibran one can feel that he never fears to spread his wings in the vast and open firmament in order to reach the boundless, infinite and limitless spiritual world. Gibran's mysticism is not far removed from spiritualism. He is more of a prophet and a visionary. According to Najjar, "This inspired man was different

from all the others; he was made of the stuff of prophets." One can read a spiritual philosophy in most of his works. Gibran considered him a soul serving heavenly messengers.

BLAKE AND GIBRAN SEEING THAT SOCIABLE REBELS

Though William Blake and Kahlil Gibran were born at different places, in different times and in a particular social milieu quite different from each other's, the affinity between these two writers is surprising and at the same time illuminating and enlightening. Both these writers despite being mystics were in Sartre's term "engaged" (committed). They were intensely aware of the social and political structure of their society and could identify the wrongs which were besetting the society. They were extreme social critics. They were rebels at odds with the social setup which encouraged corruption, hypocrisy and materialism. Both Blake and Gibran strongly opposed slavery and racial prejudice. Both the writers convey truths which are universal in their scope. Their message transcends cultural barriers. They never favored a particular race, color, class, nation and religion. History is witness that writers like Blake and Gibran, in all ages have striven hard to awaken the dead conscience of the masses. Blake and Gibran taught people the lessons of rebellion by singing the sweet melody of love. Both Blake and Gibran rose in rebellion against the rigid laws of church and society. They rejected reason and gave high praise to imagination. They read and interpreted Bible in a way that was not acceptable to a common Christian. Kahlil Gibran like his predecessor, Blake, felt that the foundations of the old order were crumbling down and it needed to be replaced by a new order. The old order had grown stale and the people in power were taking recourse to outdated customs, rituals and traditions in order to suck the blood of common people. Blake's and Gibran's interpretation of the holy book, their rebellion against church and its corruption and hypocrisy, their concern for the underdogs and the repressed, their sociopolitical as well as spiritual visions were similar in so many ways. Gibran after reading Blake at a very young age was deeply influenced by his views, ideas and ideals. Gibran saw in Blake a kindred spirit whose opinions and thoughts on socio-political matters were similar to his own views and beliefs in more than one way.

The religious beliefs of both Blake and Gibran were at odds with the common people as well as with the religious authorities. Blake believed that orthodox religion was a mere hypocrisy and was a source of all cruelty. He was of the view that institutionalized religions preached virtues but seldom practiced what was sermonized. He protested against the age old decayed norms of society. Blake in "The Everlasting Gospel" does not present Jesus as a religious preacher or a traditional prophetic figure who delivered

lectures on religion but as a supremely creative being, above dogma, logic and even morality. Blake in this poem presents Jesus as a social rebel and a revolutionary and symbolically urges people to raise their voice against social evils and ills. Blake says that Jesus was not gentle or meek the way priests make us believe. He was a man of authority, resolution, courage and passion. He was a man of action. He could never bow his head to oppressors. He never gave up. He stood firmly against all sorts of oppression and detested meanness. Jesus spent all his life opposing the false ideals of bogus rulers. He hit hard at tyrants and dictators. He was very humble to men but very severe on dishonest rulers.

BLAKE AND GIBRAN: BELIEFS, SYMBOLS AND STYLISTIC ENHANCEMENTS

Myths, symbols and imagery are indispensable for communicating higher truths because these images, myths and symbols are always present in human thinking and human expression and without taking help from these devices any direct description of a poetic experience is near impossible to man. Poetry generally suggests or hints and always tells the truth indirectly. When the symbols which are used in poetry have greater suggestive quality, they evoke in readers more answering emotions and convey truths quite easily. They also add to the curiosity of readers to know more and more. Effective symbolism, for that reason, is more than mere diagram or mere allegory. It is vibrant, vigorous and lively. Good symbolism brings with it hints of mystery and wonder. It enchants with its magic the mind to which it is addressed. Its appeal is not to the clever brain, but to the yearning and longing heart and to the intuitive sense of man. In the rich and varied history of English literature it is the Romantic Movement which contributed significantly to the field of myths and symbols because almost all the romantic poets had a great fondness for them. Romantic poetry by and large works its magic with the help of myths and symbols. The most obvious and important function of myths and symbols is that they help in explaining abstract facts, both natural and cultural, which otherwise are very difficult to explain. They also help in making comprehensible supernatural phenomena which pervade the whole universe. Though poets in all ages have employed myths and symbols in order to convey their insightful thoughts but the case of William Blake is extraordinary and astonishing in certain ways. He invented his own mythology and his symbols are equally innovative, fresh and original. They are a landmark in the history of English poetry. With the help of his mythological vision Blake created an original cosmology and a new world order. While being aware of the limitations of language it seems that Blake enjoyed exploring the potential ambiguity inherent in his craft. He adopted the problem of linguistic ambiguity itself and made it his spiritual

mission to use the force of language against the power of reason. Through the manipulation of his language Blake forges ahead in his mission to communicate spiritual truths as far as his craft will allow.

Blake uses myths and symbols to imbue the metaphysical and religious concepts with life, gives them a form, and clothes them in gigantic humanity. All this helps him to give a secular and a humanist colouring to religious concepts. Religion becomes more of a human issue rather than an institution detached from the affairs of the world. Metaphysics in his hands becomes a day to day reality.

Gibran was not a great poet in verse, and most of his writing in poetic prose cannot be viewed as poetry proper, however he opened doors to a new kind of creativity. He makes use of interrogatives, repetitions, and the vocative very often. According to Najjar "... the fluidity of his sentences, his use of parallelism, repetition, antonyms, his profusion of allusions and allegorical images charge his writing with emotion and poetry."

Though Blake and Gibran had many similarities in terms of the subject matter and themes of their works but their styles don't match except for Blake's earlier works. The poems of Songs of Innocence and Experience have the simplicity of diction and the melody which we find throughout Gibran's writing. Bowra referring to Blake's earlier works writes, "Indeed, no English poet, except Shakespeare, has written songs of such lightness and melody." In the same way as Blake, Gibran's language is rich, layered, harmonious, and full of musical qualities and highly electric, while often at the same time appearing quite uncomplicated. It was his simple and imaginative style which made his work famous in both Arabic speaking and English speaking world.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to examine two poets William Blake and Kahlil Gibran with the intention of reading and comparing them and finding common threads of thought between them. Blake and Gibran lived in different countries, grew in different cultures and traditions and this study was undertaken to compare the two in order to see how they had strong affinities in terms of their social rebellion, social reform, spirituality, mysticism, romanticism and also in their style of writing to some extent.

The present paper of Blake and Gibran is itself a representation of a small corpus of work in comparative and interdisciplinary literature: much more research can be carried out in the interdisciplinary field of mysticism and poetry of rebellion.

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