CHAPTER II

JIBRĀN KHALIL JIBRĀN: AN OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE
SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS NAME

Jibrān Khalil Jibrān, among English readers is always known by a modified form of his real name. His full name in Arabic was Jibrān Khalil Jibrān, the middle name being, conventionally, his father’s. When Jibrān started as a student in the Quincy School in Boston in 1895, his English teacher suggested dropping his first name and changing the spelling of “Khalil” to “Kahlil” to suit the American pronunciation. The root of the name “Jabr” had been linked to the word “al-gebra”, based on the introduction to a thesis on equitation by a 9th century Arab mathematician al-Khawarizmi. The few records mentioning the Jibrāns, indicate that they arrived at Besharri towards the end of the 17th century. A family legend links them to Chaldean sources, an ancient Semitic people who were the dominant element in Babylonia.

HIS EARLY LIFE

Jibrān Khalil Jibrān was born to a Christian family in the village named Besharri which is situated on the top of one of highest mountains of Lebanon, near the holy cadres which grew at an attitude of four thousand meters.

Jibrān’s father, Khalil Jibrān was an alcoholic tax collector and a gambler. He was a man of Lordly pretentions, short tempered, extravagant

and preferred to gamble instead of hard work. He was disgraced in 1891 then stripped of all his property in 1894, the family immigrated to the United States in June, 1895, and settled in a ghetto in the centre of the Syrian district in Boston. This was, at the time, the second largest Syrian community in the U.S. after New York. The father had remained behind in Lebanon. The family was comforted by the new, yet familiar environment where the Arabic language was spoken and Arab customs were widespread. Jibrān’s mother Kamila, a daughter of the village priest, supported her children in Boston as a seamstress. And although she was not educated, she encouraged her son’s artistic and literary talent he displayed from an early age. She even told him that she envisioned him becoming a great man one day. Her open mindedness allowed him to meet other people and explore the adjacent neighbourhood. Kamila realizing the talents and ambition of his son consented to send him to Beirut for further studies.

JIBRĀN AS STUDENT

For the first twelve years of his life, young Jibrān was denied formal schooling since no one in Jibrān’s household was interested in providing him education. Those days public schools in Besharri were non-existent. Among men the level of literary was low and women never learned to read or write. The only source of education was from the priest, who taught Arabic and basic calculations. The reason behind this education was to train

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1. Nu'aima, Mikhā'îl., Khalil Jibran, p. 26-35

2. Nu'aima, Mikhā'îl., Khalil Jibran, p. 26-35
young boys so that they may become familiar with the scriptures and assist the clergy during masses. It is true that Jibrān’s primary education never included a teacher or a classroom, yet there was a person to whom he turned for information and guidance and that person was his tutor named Selim Dahir. He taught Jibrān Arabic and showed him the atlas, describing the shapes of continents, the seas and mountains. The debt that the poet owed his tutor was acknowledged when in 1913, he wrote an elegy to Selim Dahir:

The son of the Cedars had died
Arise, o youth of the Cedars
The son of the mountain has died
Gird him with his father’s sword
Do not lament him
Do not flood his corpse with tears.

At the time when Jibrān reached Beirut, he spoke Arabic fluently and understood perfectly, he could read it fairly well, but he could barely write it.3

Jibrān choose مدرسة الحكمه “Madrasa al-Hikma” as the college where he would complete his education, established in 1875, by Yousuf Dibs, a Maronite priest. This college offered a strongly nationalistic curriculum

based heavily in favour of church writings, history and liturgy. Jibrān was put into the most elementary class, because of his weakness in Arabic grammar. Jibrān complained to Father Joseph Haddad, a resident teacher, who explained him patiently that learning was like climbing a ladder. Exaggerating his background, Jibrān told Father Haddad that he had just completed his English lessons in America and adamantly stated that since he, and not his parents were responsible for his own studies. If he could not choose his own curriculum, he would go to the American University in Beirut. Those days the Maronite madrasas were vigorously competing with Protestant run American University and Jibrān’s upbringing lent weight to his heart. Father Haddad made special efforts on his behalf and secured the headmaster’s agreement in allowing Jibrān to choose his own curriculum. Jibrān’s seriousness of purpose and his unusual self-confidence resulted in rapid development of his Arabic consciousness. Father Haddad encouraged his creative efforts at writing and assigned him Arabic literature that would fill the appalling gaps in his background. Prominent were selections from the Arabic language Bible, especially the Gospels in whose style Jibrān immersed himself.

Father Joseph represented to the embodiment of prestige and culture. He was a nephew of the Maronite Patriarch and enjoyed all the privileges accorded to a relative of an influential churchman. Easy going and

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4. Abbud, Marun, Judad Wa Qudama, pp. 118-121
sophisticated he was open and responsive to the intense spirit of young Jibrân. Together the two started a magazine called al-Manarah. This literary venture allowed Jibrân assume a certain leadership and enabled him to offset his inferior economic and social position with a talented performance and it was a source of satisfaction to him. Father Joseph’s later memories of Jibrân included a description of magazine which they have conceived and for which Jibrân wrote and drew illustration. He also recalled Jibrân as lonely obstinate and strange in appearance. Jibrân resisted the routines thrust upon the student y the priest. He skipped classes filled his school notebooks with drawing and satirical sketches of his teachers, he flouted religious duties, and when forced to receive communion he would forgo the obligatory confession. It was the understanding of Father Joseph, that he recognized the ambitious boy as more than a defiant student. However Jibrân’s relationship with Josephine Peabody, on the other hand, was fed with an exchange of sweet letters. She thanked him for 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”.

During childhood young Jibrân found Solace along the Cliffs, in the gorges and under the dark shadow of the cedars. His friendship with the

5. Khalil S. hawi, Kahlil Jibran, His background Character and works, P. 87
6. Ibid, p. 87
7. J.P. Journal, December 12, 1988
poet-physician Selim Dahir also sustained him more than ever. He began to record in his newly learned calligraphy, the stories and poems that Dahir recited. Dahir’s deep knowledge about local history and memorable personalities enriched Jibrān’s understanding of his background and provided him with the colloquial vocabulary which he used in his writings.

In Besharri, Jibrān was dependent on the hospitality of friends and relatives. Often he visited the house of an influential person Tannous Asad Hanna Dahir, who was related to both Raji Bek and Selim Dahir. In this house, warmth and material comfort, offered Jibrān a pleasant refuge and in the bargain, Jibrān helped Hanna Dahir’s daughters. The eldest daughter Hala Dahir was the most attractive to Jibrān. She responded to the poetic youth, walked with him and listened to his stories. The friendship blossomed but unfortunately was noticed. Gossips began to speculate on the possibilities of marriage which was impossible. Not only was Hala older than Jibrān, but her brother Alexander, who was a town official, strongly discouraged the marriage.

**Jibrān as Exile and Lover**

There is evidence that Jibrān 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.

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

The young man was so in love with Josephine, he considered her a guiding light in his life as an artist. But this love was one-sided; Josephine saw him rather as a friend or fellow artist. She continued to introduce him to interesting people because she believed he was a genius, and even a prophet. But after Josephine’s marriage, the two were not close friends anymore.

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

During the exhibition, Jibrān met Mary Haskell, a wealthy woman and the principal of a private school in Boston. She was impressed by his

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8. Waterfield, 1998, p. 18
talent and interested in his work. One of the questions she asked Jibrān was, “Why do you draw the bodies always naked?” to which the young artist replied, “Because Life is naked. A nude body is the truest and the noblest symbol of life. If I draw a mountain as a heap of human forms, or paint a waterfall in the shape of tumbling human bodies, it is because I see in the mountain a heap of living things and in the waterfall a precipitate current of life”

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

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

Jibrān started to contribute to Al-Mohajer (The Immigrant), a prominent Arabic-language newspaper in New York. Its publisher, Ameen

Goryeb, had met Jibrān and was impressed by his prose poems recorded on his notebook. Jibrān’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*.

Jibrān’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 Jibrān 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 Jibrān, Nu’aima writes: “What of Mary? She loves him dearly, values his talents, understands his ambitions and aspirations and looks condolingly on his weaknesses and sins” \(^{10}\)

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

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

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

Through his publications and the political awareness he developed during his stay in Paris, Jibrān became well-known within the American Syrian community. He was invited by the Syrian Student Club to give a talk and he joined Al-Halaqat al-Dhahabiyyah (the Golden Links Society), an international Syrian organization with US branches, the purpose of which was the improvement of the lives of Syrians around the world.
JIBRĀN IN NEW YORK

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

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

*The Broken Wings*, which was published in Arabic in 1912 and dedicated to Mary Haskell, increased Jibrān’s fame in the Arab world. Then the Arabic newspaper *Al-Funun (The Arts)*, created in 1913, furthered his literary career. Its editor Nasib ‘Arida, a close friend of Jibrān, published his poems, prose-poems, essays and parables including a collection entitled *A Tear and a Smile* which won him a further public acceptance. Through *Al-Funun*, Jibrān also met Mikhail Nu‘aima, another Lebanese immigrant writer who was to become his closest friend. Jibrān expanded his influential acquaintances of painters, poets, and playwrights. He became a popular member of the Poetry Society where he sought favourable reception of his English writing by English-speaking readers.
Jibrān would read his parables that would become *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*, and then later pieces that would make *The Prophet*. Among other members of the Poetry Society was Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, a sister of Theodore Roosevelt and an established poet. She, who had described his read pieces from *The Madman* as “destructive and diabolical stuff...contrary to all forms of morality and true beauty”, became a fan of Jibrān and an admirer of his writings.

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

Jibrān was also developing as an artist. He started to work with wash drawings but remained faithful to a symbolist style that focused on naked human bodies delicately intertwined (and for which Jibrān became famous, even though his art has received much less attention than his literary work). Starting from 1914 and with Mary’s help, he arranged exhibitions in New York and Boston, and every time he was satisfied with the results. The painter Albert Pinkham Ryder is said to have visited Jibrān’s exhibition of

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December 14, 1914, and to have praised the young artist’s work saying: “Your pictures have imagination, and imagination is art”

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

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

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

In your eyes I have read

That to be enthroned is to be enslaved,

And to be understood is to be levelled down,

And to be grasped is but to reach one's fullness

And like a ripe fruit to fall and to be consumed.

Defeat, my defeat, my deathless courage,

You and I shall laugh together with the storm,

And together we shall dig graves

For all that die in us,

And we shall stand in the sun with a will,

And we shall be dangerous”.

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

Jibrān always thought of himself as a poet. He told Mary once: “Better a poor thought, musically said, than a good thought in bad form”.11

From the 1920s, he adopted the role of poet-as-prophet, confirming

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11. Mary Haskel Journal, April 21, 1916
Josephine and Mary's thought of him as a messianic figure. Jibrān eventually became a mystical and isolated hermit; especially that he had already called his studio in New York "The Hermitage". In a sense he isolated himself from society on the strength of his idealism.

His short story Al-‘Awasif, published in 1920 and translated as The Tempests or The Storm, celebrates withdrawing from society and civilization and joining the natural world. The book criticizes humanity and advises it to seek self-transcendence towards a divine stage. Likewise, his famous volume of pictures entitled Twenty Drawings and which was published in 1919 reflects this philosophy.

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

Critics argue that The Madman represents a turning point in Jibrān's career also in terms of the writing style; the sense of pessimism and irony in it reflect Jibrān's own disenchantment following the war. The book embraces the Sufi notion of the poet as an isolated figure whose madness is a sign of wisdom.

For Jibrān, the madman in his book was "[his] only weapon in this strangely armed world". The following year "Al-Mawakib" ("The
Procession") came out. It is a long philosophical poem accompanied by eight drawings by Jibrān. It rejects civilization and suggests a simpler “recipe” for humanity to step into a better life. *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* followed in 1920 and is a reminder of the human’s potential for progressing towards a greater self.

Jibrān’s studio had become a meeting-place for leading Arab-American intellectuals who were known as Al-Mahjar or “immigrant writers” like Naseeb ‘Arida, Mikhail Nu‘aima, and ‘Abd al-Masih Haddad. In 1920, they formed a literary society called Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya, translated as the Pen Club or the Pen League and sometimes The Pen Bond, which furthered their fame in the Arabic-speaking world. Jibrān was elected President, and Nu‘aima as a Secretary.

The members would meet to talk about common goals like Arab nationalism and Renaissance of Arabic literature. Nu‘aima talked about the first meeting when “the discussion arose as to what the Syrian writers in New York could do to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations”. Jibrān worked hard to keep the Pen League group together, but he started to be less openly involved in politics. Indeed, having told Mary “Perhaps the best form of

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12. Nu‘aima, 1850, p. 154
fighting is in painting pictures and writing poetry"\textsuperscript{13}, he wrote a famous prose-poem in 1920 entitled “You have your Lebanon and I have my Lebanon” the publication of which was banned by the Syrian government. In the poem Jibràn contrasts the Lebanon he envisions, of beautiful nature and peace between its people, with the current Lebanon of political turmoil, the Lebanon he describes as the “chess game” between church and state.

Jibràn relied less and less on Mary as editor and financier, but they stayed close friends even though their collaboration came to an end with the publication of \textit{The Prophet} in 1923. In the same year Jibràn told Mary in one of his letters: “I care about your happiness just as you care about mine. I could not be at peace if you were not”.\textsuperscript{14}

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

In the beginning, Jibràn and Ziadeh addressed one another as literary critics, seeking comments on each other’s work. From 1919, their letters became more intimate, more passionate. Ziadeh came to replace Mary’s role as consultant, editor, and conversant. She became for Jibràn a remote soul

\textsuperscript{13} Mary Haskell Journal, August 27, 1920
\textsuperscript{14} Kahlil Girân to Mary Haskel, April 23, 1923
mate and another guiding spirit in his life. He idealized her as a “spiritual being – almost an angel rather than a human being” 15

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

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

Barbara Young, a writer and a friend of Jibrān, tells the story of her gathering with friends one January 6th, Jibrān’s birthday, in remembrance of him. Each person was to tell his/her first encounter with *The Prophet*. Young writes: There was a young Russian girl named Marya, who had been climbing in the Rockies with a group of friends, other young people. She had gone aside from them a little and sat down on a rock to rest, and beside her she saw a black book. She opened it. There was no name, no mark in the

book. It was The Prophet, which meant nothing to her. Idly she turned the pages, then she began to read a little, then a little more.

"Then" said Marya, telling us the story, "I rushed to my friends and shouted - I shouted, "Come and see - what I have all my life been waiting for - I have found it - Truth!" Another young woman, a teacher in a private school, who is also a fine poet, had a curious story.

The room in which she was teaching was a hall-was a short distance from the outer door. One morning as she stood before her class the door of the room opened and a man, a stranger, entered holding an open book in his hand. Without preliminary he said, "I have something to read to you, something of most vital importance," and he read aloud, forthwith, the chapter on children from The Prophet.

The young woman was so amazed at the proceeding, the swiftness and ardour of the visitor, as well as the words that she heard coming from his lips, that she was unable to utter a word. He closed the book and left the room. Thus had she come to know of the little black book." Three years after The Prophet and at the height of Jibrān’s success, Sand and Foam was published in English. It is a book of beautiful sayings accompanied by seven illustrations by Jibrān. Sand and Foam was followed a year later by another collection of aphorisms under the title of Kalimat Jibrān (translated as Spiritual Sayings).
In 1928, the longest book Jibrān ever wrote Jesus, the Son of Man was published. It is widely acclaimed as his second most important book, after The Prophet. It portrays the life of Jesus and its human rather than supernatural aspect, and reflects Jibrān’s inspiration by the teachings of the Christ. Then The Earth Gods came out in 1931. It is a dialogue in free verse between three titans on the human destiny. Jibrān also wrote a play in English, Lazarus and his Beloved and The Blind, but it was not published in his lifetime.

JIBRĀN’S DEATH

In the later years of his life, Jibrān suffered from a fatal disease, cirrhosis of the liver. He started to seek refuge in heavy drinking and solitude in his studio. The man strong in mind and spirit became increasingly weak and knew that his abilities as a writer were fading away. In a 1930 letter to May Ziadeh he confessed: “I am a small volcano whose opening has been closed. If I were able to write something great and beautiful, I would be completely cured. If I could cry out, I would gain back my health”16

By 1931, Jibrān spent most of his time in bed. According to Nu‘aima, Jibrān refused an operation that might have saved his life.17 He instead waited for death, and it came to him at the hospital, at 10.55 pm, on April

16 A Self-Portrait, 1959, p. 91
17 Nu‘aima, 1964, p. 218
10, 1931, at the age of 48. Among other people close to Jibrān, his sister Marianna and his best friend Nuʿaima were by his side.

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