Chapter-2

Kahlil Gibran: Poet Laureate of Oriental Romanticism
Kahlil Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, in Besharri. It is a hilly and a mountainous area in Northern Lebanon. Psalmists have sung and poets have composed verses of exquisite beauty in praise of this place and the famous cedars which grow in the foothills of Mount Lebanon. Gibran’s family was very poor and for that reason, he had no formal early education. Nevertheless, he received a strong spiritual legacy from his ancestors. His mother came from a respected religious background. He was frequently visited by priests who taught him basics of Bible and other sacred scriptures. They also gave him lessons in Arabic and Syraic languages. One of the priests recognized Gibran’s inquisitive and observant nature quite early in his childhood and began teaching him the basic principles of language and letters. With the help of this early exposure to learning and language Gibran started exploring the world of history, science, art and literature with great interest and tremendous zeal. Gibran was very perceptive and insightful from the very early days of his youth. He grew up in the greenest and verdant region of Besharri and he loved to live in the company of nature from the very childhood. He was fascinated by the beauty and majesty of natural world surrounding him and he would spend most of his time observing the natural world. He was an introverted and contemplative child who relished and exulted in the beauty of cascades and mountains. Such was his love for nature that he would forget his meals and spend the whole days playing amidst the green cedars. All the natural wonders of his homeland fascinated him. In the words of Alexandre Najjar:

Can one say enough about the influence of Bscharri on Gibran? Everything: the sun, the storms, the shepherds, the wheat, the myrtle, the mist, the wind,
the streams, the ‘secret hills and songs of forests’, the plough, the flute, the reed, the gesticulations of the villagers who were selling, folding, stifling their merchandise... all of these images are inherent in each of his books, and in particular in The Prophet, where all the symbols find their origins in the author’s native village.¹

Gibran’s father was arrested in Lebanon for tax evasion and his property was confiscated. As a result his family was left homeless. Gibran’s family including his mother, his two sisters and his half brother, with the exception to his father moved to America in 1895. The motive behind this emigration was to guarantee a healthier prospect for the children and to have some economic security. The family settled in Boston’s South End. At that time this place provided a refuge to the second largest Syrian community in America after New York. The family was in an impoverished state and the pain which Gibran felt in these early years of immigration left a permanent mark on his mind. These experiences compelled him to visit his childhood memories again and again. Visiting his childhood memories he would try to dispel the dirt, the poverty and the humiliation of those difficult and harsh days. During the early period of his hard life and even after settling in America Gibran used to live quite in isolation from society. This intensified his already gloomy temperament. It was with his strong willed mother Kamileh’s help that he overcame his deep melancholic sadness. She took the responsibility of the whole family on her shoulders. She was very much aware of her son’s taste for art and literature, therefore, she allowed him to intermingle with Boston’s social life and discover its flourishing world of art and literature.

Although without formal education, which at that time was considered useless, if not dangerous, for women, she possessed an intelligence and wisdom that had an enormous influence on her younger son, who later said of her: 'It is her mothering me I remember – the inner me'. Fluent in Arabic and French and artistic and musical by temperament Kamileh ignited Kahlil’s imagination with the folk tales and legends of Lebanon, and stories from Bible.²

Gibran’s inquisitiveness led him to discover the cultural side of Boston. He observed and took a profound interest in its thriving world. He frequently visited the theatre, opera and artistic galleries. His mother sent Gibran to a school meant for immigrants and later to an art school. His teachers came to appreciate his flair for art on noticing his primary drawings. It was his favorite activity from the very childhood and he would spend hours drawing pictures of different hues and colour. According to Suhel Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, “From an early age Kahlil was consumed by a love for drawing. If there was no paper to be found in the house he would go outside and spend hours sketching shapes and figures on the fresh snow.”³ Gibran joined school on September 30, 1895, just two months after his arrival in America. Since, he had no earlier formal schooling; he was admitted in an ungraded class which was meant for immigrant children. The class was ungraded because these children did not know anything about English language. In the school, a registration error changed the spelling and shortened his name forever from Gibran Khalil Gibran to Kahlil Gibran, which remained unchanged for the rest of his life.

In America itself, Gibran met an artist by the name of Fred Holland Day. In the words of Suhel Bushrui and Joe Jenkins:

³ Ibid., p. 30.
Fred Holland Day, one-time bibliophile, publisher, man of letters, and devotee of Oscar Wilde, was a leading light in bohemian Boston. During his thirty-six years he had explored many of the alternative fashions of his time. Flamboyant in appearance, Day had spent his working life challenging the conformist attitudes of his peers. He was infatuated with English literature and on his many visits to England had ardently collected literary and illustrative material, a pastime that was to earn him a reputation as an artistic bridge between American and English letters.4

Day was a great supporter of artists. He discovered Gibran’s enthusiasm and eagerness for literature and art. Day found him a natural genius and became his mentor. It was he who later in his life set him on the path to artistic renown and raised his self esteem. He introduced him to the writings of various famous writers which were quite in accord with Gibran’s literary taste and temperament and later on had a great impact on him. According to Paul Nassar, “It was Day who introduced Gibran to Blake, Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, and various turn-of-the century British, American, and continental poets.”5 It was under the guidance of Day that Gibran started exploring the world of Greek mythology, world literature, writings of contemporary authors and even photography. Day was extremely liberal, avant-garde, and unconventional. He believed in unregulated adoption of the strange for the sake of novelty and for his own personal interest. The temperament and personality of Day had a strong impact on Gibran who later on in his life came to abhor the conventional and the orthodox. He incessantly encouraged Gibran and helped him improve his

4 Ibid., p. 45.
drawings and sketches. Quite early in his artistic career Gibran began to develop his own technique and style, encouraged by Day’s enthusiasm and wholehearted support. Slowly and steadily Gibran entered the Bostonian circles and his artistic talents brought him recognition at an early age. At this time his family decided to send Gibran back to Lebanon to finish his education and learn Arabic. In 1898, Gibran arrived in Beirut speaking poor English and even little Arabic. Though he could speak Arabic fluently, he was very poor at writing the language. To improve his Arabic, Gibran chose to register in the college by the name of Madrasat-al-Hikmah. This college offered a nationalistic curriculum which was limited to church writings, history and liturgy. Gibran because of his rebellious and individualistic nature, refused to follow this insular and inadequate curriculum. He asked for an individual curriculum which would cater to his educational needs and suit his artistic temperament. His overconfidence and pride was not less than a heresy keeping in view the orthodox mindset of the then society. However, the college accepted his demand and edited course material to Gibran’s liking. He chose to engross himself in the Arabic-language Bible and was greatly impressed by its style and diction. The stylistic features of the holy Book reverberate in many of his works. In this college he read classical Arabic literature as well as modern Arabic Christian literature. Here, he also became fluent in French. Gibran’s teachers had a great liking for him because of his rebellious and unconventional nature as well as for his writing and artistic skills. He gained enough proficiency in Arabic and French at Madrasat-al-Hikmah and did very well in his studies and excelled in poetry. Gibran completed his studies in 1902 and he left Lebanon in the same year. After returning back to America Gibran met Mary Elizabeth Haskell who became his patron and tutor in English for two decades. She was a highly educated, resolute and independent woman and an active champion
of women’s emancipation. Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins writings about the relationship between Gibran and Haskell say, “...It was Mary Haskell, a school teacher from Carolina, his ‘guardian angel,’ who reassured him that he was ‘not a stranger in a strange land,’ and who became his patroness and confidante. ... Mary Haskell’s role is crucial to Gibran’s development that at times biographers find two destinies woven in one.” Mary was indeed a great help to Gibran in those hard and difficult years of his life. She supported him both financially as well as at an emotional level and after a while Gibran started enjoying her company and was most comfortable in her presence. She also provided Gibran with intellectual support. It was she who convinced Gibran to give up translating his Arabic works into English and focus instead on writing directly in English. Mary cooperated with Gibran in editing his various English works and helped polish Gibran’s work. She would spend hours with Gibran, examining his manuscripts, correcting his errors and even suggesting new ideas especially related to the linguistic aspects of his works. She also encouraged him to explore the treasures of English literature and Gibran read many great works of English literature in her company. English authors and poets highly impressed Gibran and he found them very enlightening. It was especially English Romantic poets who captivated his interest. He found that they mirrored his personality and his temperament. He found a perfect muse in them and they inspired him throughout his literary career.

Gibran, whose English was improving all the time, was awestruck when he heard the utterings of the great English poets, and his reverence for them remained with him all his life. He saw in Keats one of the ‘very few true worshippers of true Beauty – Beauty which is the only Truth .... [a] flame

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dancing in the immeasurable sky’; in Shelley: ‘a world by himself. His soul is that of an exiled god who, being sad and weary and homesick, passed the time singing his memory of other planets’; and in Blake the ‘God-man,’ whose work represented for Gibran ‘the profoundest things done in English – and his vision... the most godly. 7

From 1908 to 1910 Haskell provided resources for Gibran to study painting and drawing in Paris. Gibran was enthralled by the enormous French cultural panorama, and he spent his days and nights exploring and examining paintings at the various art museums and exhibitions. It is in Paris that Gibran met Auguste Rodin, the famous French artist who is generally considered to be the progenitor of modern sculpture. It is commonly believed that he saw some of Gibran’s paintings and appreciated them. And it was Rodin himself who as some biographers of Blake write, introduced him to Blake’s writings and called Gibran, ‘the William Blake of modern age’. Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins write, “In Paris Gibran met Rodin who introduced him to the art and poetry of William Blake. Gibran immediately felt a ‘kinship’ with the visionary Englishman, and the benign shadow of Blake was to fall on virtually all of his English writings, as well as many Arabic works.”8

In 1905, Al-Mahajar (The Emigrant), an émigré newspaper meant for Arabic speaking public, published his first Arabic book entitled Nudah Fi Fan al-Musiqa (On Music, a Pamphlet) which eulogizes music. A book in Arabic and translated into English by the name of Nymphs of Valley was published in 1906. The Nymphs of the Valley is a collection of three allegories having Northern Lebanon as their setting. The allegories – “Martha”, “Yuhanna the Mad”, and “Dust of Ages and the Eternal Fire”-

7 Ibid., p. 47.
8 Ibid., p. 5.
deal with subject matter pertaining to prostitution, religious persecution, rebirth and predetermined love. These allegories were profoundly influenced by the narratives he had heard during his childhood in his birthplace Bsharri and by his own interest in the Bible and the spirituality. The nature of love as treated by Gibran also contributes to make this book profoundly solemn. This book also expresses the youthful writer’s antagonism against feudal order and clerical institutions.

In autumn of 1906, Gibran published The Nymphs of Valley, an anthology of three allegorical stories in Arabic. ...The work coloured with romanticism, exposes themes dear to the author’s heart: the greatness of Christ contrasted with the pettiness of the Clergy; madness as a source of truth and liberty; ...⁹

*Spirits Rebellious* is a compilation of four short stories and it was published in 1908. It is an early collection and the titles included are “Rose-AlHani”, “The Bridal Couch”, “The Cry of the Graves”, and “Khalil the Heretic.” All of these stories portray people who confront and resist authority and social tradition. The book censures the authority that both the church and the state force on people. The book was burned in Beirut for its revolutionary and anti-establishment thoughts. Najjar, referring to the book says, “It is a work marked with such commitment and romanticism, one is tempted to compare it to the works of Victor Hugo.”¹⁰ The *Broken Wings* published in Arabic in 1912 augmented Gibran’s reputation in the Arabic world. The book is one of the longest of his Arabic books and it deals with the story of Selma Karameh’s ill-fated love affair with a young man, her subsequent marriage against her own wishes and her death as she gives birth to a dead child. This is Gibran’s only novel. It is a delicate story of young love that vanishes away and is

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⁹ *Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet*, p. 57.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 63.
ruined by the evil forces of tradition, custom and ritual. Gibran angrily depicts the predicament of the Arab woman of his time. After the success of *The Broken Wings*, the Arabic daily Al-Fanun (The Arts) published Gibran's collection of prose poems and essays entitled *A Tear and a Smile* and titled in later translations as *Tears and the Laughter*. It is an anthology of Gibran's early newspaper prose poems and stories. The poet finds consolation in his tears and in the company of nature. He sings of his prophet-like role. Najjar writes about the book, “The fifty-six articles are inspired by a humanistic outlook and contain reflections on life, love and the situation in Lebanon and Syria. Gibran was certainly one of the pioneers of poetic prose, a literary form that was still a novelty in Arabic literature.”

*Tears and Laughter* is full of romantic themes, ideas and aspirations. In the prose piece “Life of Love” the poet calls his beloved to be with him in all seasons so that they can share the rich banquet which pristine nature has to offer. He wants to appreciate the rich variety and beauty of nature in the company of his beloved. He calls his beloved so that they can both together enjoy the crystal clear features of beautiful nature. This prose poem reads like a romantic ode. It has all the beauty and splendor one can find in the odes of English romantics especially Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth. The language used by Gibran is simple and melodious. The message of Gibran in this prose piece is that love never dies. It grows stronger with the passing seasons. Peace can be attained only in close association with the beloved. If one wishes to live life in real terms, he is to live in the company of one’s beloved.

Come away my beloved, let us walk amids the knolls,

For the snow is water, and life is alive from its

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11 Ibid., p. 111.
Slumbers and is roaming the hills and valleys.

Let us follow the footprints of Spring into the

Distant fields, and mount the hilltops to draw

Inspiration high above the cool green plains.\textsuperscript{12}

In “The Play Ground of Life” Gibran expresses his view that one hour of true love and pursuit of beauty is as good as living a life of eternity. It is love and beauty which make life worth living. What is the use of struggle and what to strive for if our heart has not something beautiful to adore, worship and love? He says that restoring the confidence and peace of the weak is worth infinity. He believes that it is only our spiritual deeds which matter in the eyes of divine power. Here once again we come across Gibran’s romantic and transcendental thought currents which constituted the fabric of his personality.

One hour devoted to the pursuit of Beauty

And love is worth a full century of glory

Given by frightened weak to the strong.\textsuperscript{13}

In ‘The Poet” Gibran exalts the poet and calls him divinely inspired. He believes that the poet’s character is chaste both within and without. Gibran believed that divine inspiration is necessary for a poet as he embarks upon writing about sublime thoughts and profound feelings. A poet acts as a bridge between men and gods. He spreads happiness and mirth everywhere. His message is full of hope. It acts as a balm on the wounds of suffering masses. The poet quenches the thirst and satisfies the hunger of craving hearts. This poem in its beauty resembles Shelley’s melodious lyrics. When


\textsuperscript{13} The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran , p. 26.
Gibran talks about poet as a solitary figure and lover of nature, we are reminded of Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s theory of poetry. Gibran talking about the poet writes:

He is a solitary figure, robed in simplicity and
Kindness; He sits upon the lap of Nature to draw his
Inspiration, and stay up in the silence of the night,
Awaiting the descending of the spirit.\textsuperscript{14}

He further writes:

He is a link between this and the coming world
He is a pure spring from which all thirsty souls may drink.
He is a tree watered by the River of Beauty, bearing
Fruit which the hungry heart craves;
He is a nightingale, soothing the depressed
Sprit with the beautiful melodies.\textsuperscript{15}

Wordsworth in his Preface to the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} says that poet quite instinctively loves solitude and peace and nature provides him with inspiration. Poetry comes to him spontaneously but he has to wait for the right moment. Wordsworth’s very famous words about poetry are: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.”\textsuperscript{16} Gibran’s ideas related to poet and poetry are not different from Wordsworth’s ideas on poetry. Shelley’s concept of poet is also similar to Gibran’s. Shelley compares the poet with a nightingale and believes that the poet possesses a celestial power and he creates great melody by the help of words. Poetry transports by virtue of its rhythm, music and sublimity. Shelley writes in his \textit{A Defense of Poetry}:

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 39.
A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.\textsuperscript{17}

"Yesterday and Today" is a story of a gold hoarder who compares his past with his present. In his past life he was a devotee of nature and lived a life of love and innocence. But his present state is one of greed and ambition. His past life was the life of peace but now he has grown restless with the increase in wealth. He was free when he had little but he is a slave now of his own pomp and wealth. This story seems to have a stamp of \textit{Songs of Innocence and Experience} on it. For Blake innocence is a blissful state and experience is a state where man grows greedy, ambitious and restless. Innocence is allied with truth, sincerity and honesty; experience is related to falsehood, duplicity and corruption. The gold hoarder of the story says loudly

\begin{quote}
Yesterday I was grazing my sheep in the green valley, enjoying my existence, sounding my flute, and holding my head high. Today I am a prisoner of greed. Gold leads into Gold, then into restlessness, and finally into crushing misery.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Gibran wrote extensively in Arabic, because as a native of Lebanon, Arabic was his mother tongue and he also had learnt the language from great teachers at Madrasat al Hikmah. Living in America he achieved an expertise in English language and most of his writings and works published after 1918 are in English. As Gibran started writing in English, his mentor and close friend Mary Haskell was always there to encourage, help and guide him. \textit{The Madman: His Parables and Poems} was published in 1918.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 699.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran}, p. 58.
Gibran had started working in 1913 on *The Madman* and he was preoccupied with the subject of madness from the very early age when he learned about the stories of how mad men were treated in Lebanon. He heard that in his hometown people who had gone mad were thought to be possessed by the spirit of the jinn (the devil) and the church had the sole authority for exorcizing the devil out of the haunted people. It was his first book originally published in English language. It contains illustrated parables and aphorisms and its tone is ironic, satirical and rebellious against erring human race and its transgressions. Gibran’s message in this book is that one should follow the inner voice of the self. This book is full of Sufi thoughts and these thoughts have been illustrated by Gibran in beautifully written allegorical tales and maxims. *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* followed in 1920 and is a reminder of the human being’s latent potential for progress towards a higher self. Like *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*, in this book also Gibran finds expression for his mystic thoughts and once again he makes ample use of parables and aphorisms.

With his immense contribution to the field of art and literature Gibran became best known of the “Mahajar poets” or the Immigrant Arabic writers. He became president of Arrabitah Al-Qalamyiah, a literary society founded in New York in 1920. Its aim was to infuse a new life in modern Arabic literature. Throughout the years that it was active, Arrabitah was guided by Gibran’s call for greater artistic autonomy as he always encouraged writers to smash the rules and seek out individual styles. The members of Arrabitah immensely praised lively Western ideas and rebelled against the dead traditional values in Arabic literature. In the words of Joseph P. Ghougassian: “On April 20, 1920, the immigrant Arabic writers headed by Gibran as their president, formed a literary circle called "Arbitah" (Pen Bond), whose purpose was to update Arabic literature ‘from the state of sterility and imitation to the state of beautiful
originality in both meaning and style. According to Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, "Gibran's pervasive influence on his colleagues in Arrabitah made them reassess their own work, and his Romanticism answered a latent need in them to liberate their own Romantic expression."

_The Prophet_ which made Gibran a celebrity and a legendary figure across the world was published in 1923. _The Prophet_ is a spiritual chronicle related to the journey of a man who is in exile and who is called Al Mustafa which means the Chosen One. It is a book which consists of 26 sublime poetic essays, illustrated with some of Gibran's sublime mystical drawings. Almustafa, the prophet, shares his timeless wisdom and insights on varied topics related to life. Three years after _The Prophet_, _Sands and Foam_ was published in English. This book consists of captivating and inspiring aphorisms and parables which Gibran has presented in marvelously musical language. This book contains gems of wisdom expressed in very precise and perfect apothegms. In 1928, the longest book Gibran ever wrote was published entitled _Jesus, the Son of Man_. To write the story of Jesus was a great ambition which Gibran harbored from his youth. His aim was to portray Jesus as no one else has done before. For Gibran, Jesus was like any other human being acting in natural surroundings, living a life full of enthusiasm and love. For him Jesus was a man of passion who could love immensely and suffer immensely. Jesus had a fine humor, he had human weaknesses too, but he was the most sensitive human being who could empathize and lay down his life for humanity. _The Earth Gods_ came in 1931. Gibran was 48 when he died in New York on April 10, 1931. The Arabic world sang praises of him and commemorated him as a genius and a patriot.

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Kahlil Gibran’s writings infuse our emotional and spiritual consciousness with new zest. He comes out as a poet-rebel and as a sensitive soul full of romantic ideals. Like a typical romantic writer, his writings have an autobiographical tone. He had a firm belief in the superior power of imagination. He exulted in the beauty and the variety of the natural word and craved for freedom from age old rigid norms and established rules. His early short stories, prose poems and later collections of aphorisms made him famous far and wide as he was celebrated as the greatest of Arabic Romantics. According to Suheil Bushri, “Few would contest Gibran’s status as the greatest of Arabic Romantics and father of a 20th-century Romantic tradition whose impact on Arab writers has been at least as strong as that of 19th-century figures such as Wordsworth and Keats on their English-speaking counterparts.”

Gibran introduced western romanticism and a freer style to the extremely pompous and ostentatious Arabic poetry. He brought freshness and novelty in the Arabic literary style. He helped Arabic poetry break away from the conventional norms of prosody. Najar says, “The word ‘tradition’ was anathema to him. He gave free reign to his unbridled imagination without attaching much importance to the constraints of the prosody or the stringent rules governing Arabic which he often came to ignore in his writing.” He developed a new poetic form called “prose poem”. Gibran’s poetics was a shift from the sterility of imitation to the poetics of originality in expression, style and meaning. Gibran’s works both in Arabic and English are full of lyrical outbursts and express his profoundly spiritual and mythological bent of mind. Almost all his works and in particular later works were influenced by legends and Biblical stories which were narrated from generations in the picturesque vicinity close to the primeval cedars of his homeland, Lebanon. He had a great knowledge of myths and

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21 Suheil Bushri, “Kahlil Gibran of America.”
22 Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet, p. 124.
legends in general but the legends, myths and folklore of his homeland had taken a
deep root in his psyche and can be found both in his literary works and paintings.

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

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23 Ibid., p. 127.
fundamentally, however, he emerges as a lonely poet finding solace only in the poetic consciousness or imagination.\textsuperscript{24}

Gibran's works venerate individual autonomy. He valued choice and free will. He abhorred and strongly condemned sectarianism and class oppression. His observations on brotherhood of men and man's unity with nature and God appeal both to the youthful as well as to elderly readers. His Biblical style presents an invigorating, new way of looking at the world that has a worldwide appeal. Gibran worked to unite various religious sects as he believed that it will help eradicate the religious egotism, discrimination and violence which were widespread in his age. He advocated and preached lasting human, ethical, moral and sacred values which are essential to the creation of a world vision based on mutual understanding, brotherhood, love and unity of all. He raged against the evils that reigned in his beloved homeland as well as against all ills that contaminated human life and brought humanity to disgrace and decadence. Much of his writings deal with Christianity but he hated religious bigotry. He was a secular saint and appreciated all the religions of the world. Gibran wrote on spiritual and religious themes adopting a somewhat pagan theology. His spirituality is essentially pantheistic undermining cultural barriers. What he appreciates most in Christianity or in any other religion is spiritual love. Gibran loathed false civilization. He was preoccupied with the themes like equality between man and woman. He preached and all his life fought for justice, freedom and democracy. He had a firm belief in faith and reason. The themes related to ecology and environment find ample place in his writings. He craved for universal peace and unity of all religions. He fought for common people's rights and persuaded them to awaken from the deep slumber. Andrew Sherfan writes, "His work reflects fully his rebellion against both

\textsuperscript{24} "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran", p. 24.
civil and religious authorities. He considers himself a kind of a ‘prophet’, with a special mission to speak up for the masses and liberate them from the various evils that had befallen them as a result of their inertia, customs and traditions.”

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.

Truly I say to you that thoughts have a higher dwelling place than the visible world, and its skies are not coloured by sensuality. Imagination finds a road to the realm of gods, and there men can glimpse that which is to be after the Soul’s liberation from the world of substance.

He further writes:

He who passes not his days in the realm of dreams is the slave of the days.

Gibran’s poetic genius primarily lies in his use of figures of speech. He is a specialist at using metaphor. The simplicity of his language is unmatched in its sublimity and

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26 *The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran*, p.89
27 Ibid., p. 75.
28 Ibid., p. 75.
majesty. Gibran indeed creates beautiful images that are charged with emotions and that expand the reader’s vision and his horizon of imagination. He dealt with varied subjects related to life and humanity like love, beauty, truth, justice, good and evil etc. Gibran’s interest swung to mysticism and primitivism in his later writings but his writings turned again and again to the beauty and purity of nature. He romanticized nature and found in it an inspirational power for his poetry. He identifies the divine essence with the natural world. He was more of a pantheist as he saw God and nature as one phenomenon. He repeatedly points out to the contrast between natural world and the human world. In the former there is peace, harmony and innocence whereas in the latter there is chaos, injustice and sorrow. Gibran laments that modern man runs away from serene nature and takes refuge in concrete structures which are in so many ways like prisons. He writes in *Voice of the Master*:

> Nature reaches out to us with welcoming arms, and bids us enjoy her beauty;
> but we dread her silence and rush into the crowded cities, there to huddle like sheep fleeing from a ferocious Woolf.  

Gibran often depicts himself as a solitary poet who is more receptive and sensitive than other people and who is proficient at revealing eternal truths. In the prose piece “The Lonely Poet” from *Between Night and Morn*, Gibran subscribes to the romantic view of the poet where a poet is an isolated and a solitary figure. The narrator, who is a poet, is lonely and stranger in this world. He says that people don’t seem to comprehend his language. But the poet has hope that his dreams are eternal and one day he will have the glimpse of that which he has never seen. The strain of mysticism also runs throughout this prose piece as the poet craves for the union with the ultimate

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reality and thinks that he can attain peace. He calls this world a dark world and wants to escape into the world which belongs to his dreams and imaginings.

I am a stranger in this world, and there is a severe solitude and painful lonesomeness in my exile. I am alone, but in my aloneness I contemplate an unknown and enchanting country, and this meditation fills my dreams with specters of a great and distant land which my eyes have never seen.³⁰

He has a solid belief that the modern world corrupted by convention, oppression and hatred can be redeemed through love, goodwill and freedom. Kahlil Gibran was among the younger generation of Arab American writers who contributed immensely to the current Arabic literary renaissance and revitalization. Gibran along with other literary members of the Pen Bond did not endorse a sweeping linguistic restructuring of the Arabic literature. He could never think of profaning the holiness of formal Arabic. He rather campaigned for breaking out of conventional patterns in favour of an individual style. His early works in Arabic popularized the romantic tradition in Arabic arts and letters. He paved a way for the new kind of creativity. Gibran's writings and especially his Arabic pieces were part of a shift from craftsmanship to inspiration, from imitation to expression. Irfan Shahid writes:

Although his creativity as a man of letters took place in America, he and his group of Arab-American writers revolutionized the course of Arabic literature in the Arab homeland as representatives of the new school of Romanticism in Arab literature antedating and preluding the rise and development of the romantic movement in the Arab world, through the Divan school and the Apollo school, both in Egypt. Thus, from their base in America, the Arab-
American writers presided over by Gibran, proved to be the catalyst in the literary renaissance of the Arab world in its vast Afro-Asian extent. \(^{31}\)

Gibran sought beauty of thought as well as beauty of form. He created new metaphors and adopted a Blakean approach and method in treating imagination as the divine vision. He did not corroborate to the traditional norms of the past. Gibran like Blake preferred a free and spontaneous verse and blended classical Arabic with colloquial Arabic, hence gave birth to a new style. He embraced a simplified language that even unsophisticated audience could relate to. In the words of Joseph P. Ghougassian:

> If today’s Arabic literature feels at ease with the rules of rhyme and rhythm, it is because Gibran, along with some other literary friends, broke away from the stagnant traditional prerequisites of the Arabic verse by proposing as early as 1920 a new poetic form called ‘prose poem’. \(^{32}\)

He followed the same rule and method in his English writings. They have the simplicity of Biblical psalms and remind us of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Gibran’s work draws from two cultural traditions, English and Arab, but it is not bound by any biases, prejudices and restrictions favoring one culture over the other. In his work the two distant cultures and traditions find a perfect synthesis. His early work, though later translated into English, was originally written in Arabic. From Arabic language and literature he drew the majesty and grandeur of his language. And his exploration of English art and letters, above all his reading of the Romantic poets taught him to rely on personal experience and individual style. He came to saw individuality as the benchmark of poetic expression and spiritual


\(^{32}\) *A Third Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, p. 189.
transformation. His simple style is graceful, reverberating, lyrical and able to communicate profound thoughts and feelings. His thoughts appeal to our hearts as well as our minds. Gibran believed in a romantic idea of eternal birth, reincarnation and continuity of life. He had a great faith in the transcendental power of romantic love and its ascendency over custom and ritual. Gibran as a man as well as a literary artist devoted his life to contemplation, to peace, to love, to the life of the soul and the varied forms of beauty. Gibran loved nature, especially the natural beauty of his homeland and used it as a setting for all his literary works. He all his life in nostalgia went to his homeland while living in America. He constantly felt an irresistible pull for his native land. According to Najjar, "Throughout his life, out of nostalgia for his country and his childhood, Gibran would delve voluptuously back into his past." Gibran despised the Americans' greed for money, property and luxury. He yearned for the majestic mountains, the graceful cedars and for the air and the light of the Lebanon. Gibran is most Wordsworthian poet when it comes to the portrayal and depiction of nature. He raged against the degradation of pristine nature and the exploitation of natural resources and he knew that severe injuries were being inflicted on environment in the name of scientific progress. Gibran opposed Darwinian science and its materialistic stance, for Gibran always believed that matter and spirit are inseparable realities. Gibran saw in nature a divine presence and used it as an example to counter Darwinism.

Writing as he was when Darwinism was at its height, Gibran's extraordinary receptiveness to the appeal of nature may in many ways be seen as offering a

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33 Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet, p. 21.
positive counterpoise to the Darwinian metaphor. The most powerful imagery in his work is borrowed from nature, her rich and beautiful store of symbols providing him with the emotional and intellectual apparatus of his poetry and intensifying his most dream like moods with the 'unfathomable mystery of Nature's secrets'.

Like all the romantics he distrusted materialism and civilization for their ignorance of the importance which spirituality has for a human being. Gibran believed that it is in spirituality that the real essence of beings and non beings can be experienced and it is spirituality that gives meaning to the world of matter and substance. *Between Night and Morn* starts with a prose piece called "The Tempest", in which Gibran shows his romantic tendencies in their full bloom. The influence of Rousseau and Wordsworth is evident because the main character Yusif shares their distrust of civilization and wishes a spiritual awakening both for himself and for the people. The narrator is impressed by a solitary person living in a forest and gets a chance to talk to him. This solitary figure is none other than Yusif who has fled from the civilization and has taken refuge in a forest and is now living a life of meditation and contemplation. Yusif lives in a self imposed exile and Gibran seems to appreciate his personality, and thereby showing his own faith in a romantic tendency to escape from the harsh realities of mundane world into the lap of nature, where one can seek a perfect communion with the divine reality. This story also shows Gibran's belief in global peace and through Yusif he strongly condemns the politics of bloodshed which is devouring the whole world. Yusif addresses the narrator and says:

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If you place belief in your own words you should leave civilization and its corrupt laws and traditions, and live like the birds in a place empty of all things except the magnificent law of heaven and earth.\(^\text{35}\)

The prose piece, “The Enchanting Houri” from *The Secrets of the Heart*, reads like a typical romantic ode. This is a poem about a dream which Gibran wants to follow in order to free himself from the shackles of the mundane workaday world. Like Shelley in “Ode to the West Wind”, Gibran is reminded of his own past when he was as free as a bird enjoying the beauties of nature. He is reminded of the times when he was as swift and agile as the elements of nature. Gibran’s poem resembles Shelley’s ode both in terms of style and content. Shelley and Gibran both lament the loss of strength which they had in their youth and want to relive those carefree and blithe moments. The way Shelley came under the spell of the West Wind, in the same fashion Gibran feels more and more attracted to the enchanting houri. Gibran like Shelley wants to reach the utopia of his dreams where he can live a life of complete communion with imagination.

Oh Houri, listen to me! I was as free as the bird, probing the valleys and the forests, and flying in the spacious sky. At eventide I rested upon the Branches of the trees, meditating the Temples and palaces in the city of the colourful clouds which the sun builds in the morning and destroys before twilight.\(^\text{36}\)

Shelley wrote in his Ode to the West Wind:

\begin{quote}
If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;

If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
\end{quote}

\(^{35}\) *The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran*, p. 105.

A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free

Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even

I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,

As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed

Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.

Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed

One too like thee: timeless, and swift, and proud. 37

As Gibran was a great idealist dreamer he wanted to revolutionize the world according to his own outlook and beliefs. According to Najjar, “The young man was ambitious and idealistic; he imagined he could change the world and tried to convert people to his ideas and theories on art, God and nature.” 38 Gibran being a reformer wanted liberty for every human being. For him rebellion is essential in order to attain freedom and love as well as life can flourish only in the free atmosphere. In “Vision” from Thoughts and Meditations, Gibran says that life, love, and beauty are three

38 Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet, p. 71.
persons in one. He also says that life can not be without rebellion. He again says that freedom and life are integral. For Gibran love, freedom and life are one with God. Man can reach God through love, beauty, rebellion and freedom.

Life without love is like a tree without blossom and fruit. And love without Beauty is like flowers without scent and fruits without seeds. ... Life, Love and Beauty are three persons in one, who can not be separated or changed.  

He further writes:

That which love begets,
That which rebellion creates,
That which freedom rears,
Are three manifestations of God.
And God is expression
Of intelligent universe.  

Gibran emerges as a Romantic poet as he realizes the necessity of creating his own unique individual style in order not to be enslaved or confined by those who came before him. For him instinct was a higher faculty than reason. His reading of English romantic poets sharpened his already rebellious nature. He regarded natural impulse and passions as ideal creative force.

Gibran’s Romanticism was a health-restoring revival of the instinctual life in contradistinction to the constraints that sought to sublimate human freedom in the united name of social tradition or religious conformity; in many ways his

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39 The Greatest Works of Kahlil Gibran, p. 60.
40 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
rebellion was akin to the beginnings of Romanticism in England a century earlier, when Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley strove to explore the literature of internalized quest and Promethean aspiration.\textsuperscript{41}

Gibran’s life was a romantic expedition. It was a progressive development from innocent childhood to disillusioned experience as he came to know the world and its corrupt practices. However, he finally achieved higher innocence and found solace in the world of knowledge and wisdom. Gibran’s belief in sorrow, suffering and pain as a means of purification and refinement grew up to be a dominant theme in his early writings. Romantic escape from the sordid reality of a mundane workaday world into the world of dreams became a favorite technique especially during the early phase of his artistic career. Gibran following Keats is seen calling upon sweet death in many of his poems and prose pieces. Whether Gibran speaks of nature as an independent entity of natural objects or their relation to each other, his firm belief that nature is a living being is always evident. Gibran laments with Wordsworth the brutality and inhumanity of ‘what man has made of Man’. Gibran rebelled against the decayed and rigid laws of church and society. He like Blake rejected reason in the name of imagination. Imagination for him was fundamental for he believed poetry is impossible without it. He had a prophetic vision and held an apocalyptic view of universe. He felt that the older order needed to be changed. Gibran’s Arabic heritage and legacy helped him to celebrate life and he would love to travel back to a time when people lived more fully and felt much more strongly. He celebrated the glorious past of the Arabic world but scathingly criticized what he considered its backward present. In the west he was impressed with the ideals of freedom and democracy, values which Americans cherished most, in addition to scientific progress, but he

\textsuperscript{41} Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet. p. 10.
rejected the excessive dependence of modern man on materialism and machine. In his later writings Gibran started to advocate 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. Deeply influenced by Greek mythology, Gibran expressed his concept of the artist and of Art. To him the artist and art are inseparable; they have a divine origin, and the poet’s self is an intermediary between the gods and humanity. Gibran’s inimitable poetic idiom characterized by beauty and spirituality became known as “Gibranism”. It is characterized by a loose and flowing verse which is both rich and modern. Gibran’s writings establish a mystical union with nature and a relationship of love and harmony. His writings stay beautiful and timeless. They are as insightful and relevant in our present time as when Gibran first composed them. There is no question that Gibran’s work in Arabic was vital to the progress of twentieth-century Arabic literature and one can declare with confidence that Arab Romanticism begins with Gibran as he was the pivotal figure in the Mahjar movement of émigré Arab writers centered in New York. Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins quite aptly write:

In his ‘outpost’ of New York, Gibran initiated a Romantic movement and school in Arabic literature that echoed a generation’s instinctive call for change and renewal. Living five thousand miles away from the stern and sanctimonious gaze of those whose vision could not transcend the inherited and inhibitive methods of their age, this first true rebel in Arabic literature enjoyed an unparalleled freedom that allowed him to revolutionize the literary sensibility of the time.\(^{42}\)

\(^{42}\)Ibid., p. 11.
Even a common reader of Gibran can find that Gibran is generally romantic, meditative and spiritual. His works brought hope and happiness to millions as he emphasized necessity of religious tolerance, cross cultural understanding and human love. Gibran is a writer who irrevocably changed modern Arabic poetry, and who is probably the one modern Arab writer known throughout the world. He gave modern Arabic literature a new and creative impulse. He was full of energy and youthful vigor; he was daring and he brought to Arabic literature an entirely new and inventive vocabulary which challenged the formalized language of tradition. He is the only poet who truly represents Arabic Romanticism in all its forms and shades and is definitely a poet laureate of Oriental Romanticism.