Chapter IV

Mikhail Naimi: The Shifting Paradigm

Mikhail Nuaymai or Naimi (1889-1988), Lebanese poet, critic, essayist, biographer, fiction writer and dramatist, is a major figure of modern Arabic literature, and particularly within what came to be known as the Mahjar School, referring to the literary movement which evolved in the US among emigrant Syro-Lebanese poets and writers, who operated through a literary gathering in New York by the name al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya, (the Pen Association) during the second and third decades of the 20th century, and until the death in 1931 of Jibran Khalil Jibran, its guiding spirit. Naimi began his education at the elementary Russian school in his native village in Lebanon, Baskinta, before going on to the Russian teacher training school in Nazareth, whence to the Diocesan Seminary at Poltava in the Ukraine (1906-1911).

In 1911 he joined his two elder brothers, already settled in the US, and enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle, graduating in 1916 with two bachelor’s degrees in the Arts and Law. Soon after he moved to New York, and in 1918 was drafted in the US army and sent to the frontline in France.

On his return he continued to pursue his literary interests while earning a meager living from working for a commercial business.

In 1932 he returned to his native Baskinta, where he led a quasi-hermetic life, devoting himself to literature until his death.
During his study years in Seattle, he first learned of the belief in the transmigration of souls through a Scottish roommate and member of the Theosophical Society; a belief that he was to embrace with unwavering conviction all his life, and which was to have a profound effect on his life and writing, eventually turning the man into a near ascetic, and injecting into his writing a strong element of Emerson Transcendentalism, and a kind of pantheistic mysticism.

Mikha il Naimi’s arrival in America in 1911 was a deviation from the original plan to continue with his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. He had been persuaded by one of his elder brothers, mentioned above, to join them in the US for financial reasons. (Mikha Naimi, al Majmu a al-Kamila, p. 284). This he accepted only reluctantly, as he did not want to go to the US. He explains how he felt in his autobiography, Sab un: Hikayat Umr (Seventy: the Story of a Life, 1959):

‘Whenever I thought of the new World, I felt that a wide gulf existed between me and it. For the dollar, which attracted millions of people form all corners of the earth, did not attract me because I was looking for things that the dollar could not buy.’ (P. 68)

It appears that he arrives in New York, already predisposed against modern civilisation. This attitude had already formed in Poltava, which he describes as a mere village, compared to New York. Civilisation had led man astray onto paths of greed, devoid of compassion, justice and love, he tells us. Thus rather than being dazzled by New York on first sight, the city’s ‘huge buildings and feverish movement’ oppress him, and leave him nostalgic for the Lebanese mountains where he grew up.
As Naimi’s account of those early impressions was written in 1959, nearly half a century after their occurrence, it would be difficult to accept that it was not coloured by the author’s subsequent experiences, readings and adopted stance in life. To my mind, it is in fact difficult to separate Naimi’s attitude towards America from his well-known romantic stance which characterised his poetry and general outlook on life, as it has many of his cotemporary fellow compatriots in the Americas, the so-called poets of the mahjar or emigrant poets. On visiting the plains of Walla Walla, he witnesses for the first time of his life the practice of mechanized agriculture:

‘machines to sow wheat, and other machines to harvest, winnow, and collect it in bags…’ This puts him in mind of his farmer father’s plough, shovel, and scythe in the plains of his native Shakhrub. He laments the loss of communion with nature in the modern world and man’s surrender of his life to the rule of the dollar and the machine. (Mikha il Naimi, Sab un, in al-Majmu a al-Kamila, vol. 1, pp.294-5).

What we have here is nothing particularly anti-American or anti-estern; only the romantic stock-in-trade argument against urbanisation, industrialisation, mechanisation, and the movement away from nature. Naimi’s decision to return to Lebanon in 1932 after twenty odd years of living in the United States is presented in a highfalutin language, steeped in romanticism, and a mystical sense of vision or calling that was the hallmark of the author’s notion of himself expressed, sometimes directly sometimes indirectly, in his autobiographical writing. The idea of the poet or artist as visionary or prophet is of course one that has been central to romanticism in general, and that has found expression elsewhere in Naimi’s critical writing, notably in his famous iconoclastic critical essays, Al-Ghirbal
(1923), where he proclaims, ‘a poet is a prophet because he sees with
the eye of his spirit what not all humans see …’ (Mikha il Naimi, Sab
un, in al-Majmu a al-Kamila, vol. 1, pp401)

What he theorises about in Al-Ghirbal, he embodies in his
perception of himself as a visionary, as a writer with a prophetic
voice, with a duty to proselytise; an unmistakable note in his oeuvre
generally, and particularly in the one work in which he poured in
cryptic allegorical form and high poetic language his vision of life and
eternity, namely The Book of Mirdad, at once reminiscent of
Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, Nietzsche’s thus spoke Zarathustra,
and Gibran’s The Prophet. It is in this light that we need to understand
his attribution of the decision to leave New York and return to
Lebanon to ‘reaching a state of satiety with civilisation,’ and the way
he depicts the period leading up to his departure from America as
‘rich in signs and intimations that I was approaching a turning point in
my life.’ He recounts how during that period he had asked a friend to
open the Bible and place her finger at random on a verse that would
serve as a pointer for the future.

Conveniently, the verse she picks is ‘Return to your home, and
declare how much God has done for you! (Luke) The same friend, we
are told, had also seen him in a dream ‘digging a solitary road for
myself in the mountain.’ Nor was he without his own pictorial
epiphanic dreams, invoking spectacular visions of angelic choruses
singing in peaceful unadulterated woods, complete with sparrows
chanting the name of God in Spanish, a language Naimi did not know,
to add to the sense of mystery.( Mikha il Naimi, Sab un, in al-Majmu
a al-Kamila, vol. 1, pp. 584-6).
A more cynical reading however of other ‘signs’ with which Naimi’s text is replete may suggest that his life in America appeared to have reached a stalemate, which demanded radical choices to be made. Sixteen years after graduation from university, he did not seem to be getting anywhere.

No permanent, self-fulfilling job or source of income, and although he had established his literary fame in exile, the Rabita Qalamiyya or Pen Association, whose guiding soul was Jubran and in which Nu yama was probably the one with the most intellectual clout, appeared to have spent its force.

Literary activity and publication in Arabic was becoming increasingly difficult, as was much else in the US during the years of recession. Then came the death of Jubran in 1931, signalling the end of an era. All this is fully detailed in the author’s autobiography, but none of it is given the faintest credit as a force behind the decision to return to Lebanon. It is far too practical and banal to fit the bill. What is needed is a profound explanation that reaches beyond appearances and practicalities; an interpretation in terms of the rejection of a false civilisation to embrace again the innocence and simplicity of a culture still closer to Nature. And that is what we are given.

During his life in the US, Naimi had fallen in love with two married women at different periods, and entered into extended, consummated relationships with them, the stories of which and the burden they placed on his conscience and puritanical ideals he relates at some length in his autobiography. In each case, he ends the relationship to regain his peace of mind. The second severance
coincides with his decision to depart from the US. At the age of only 43 in 1932, this relationship, we are told, marked the end of his carnal knowledge of woman. His return to Lebanon was to open a new chapter in his life, where ‘lust had no power over my body; only the spirit that sought to unify man and woman into the complete human being, whole and stronger than all desire. The gratuitous symbolism available in the coincidence of his departure from America marking the beginning of the renunciatory phase of his life (i.e. the following 56 years, as he lived to be 99) where the spirit reigned supreme is perhaps more telling than any metaphor that Naimi may have created by design.

In the concluding chapter of his voluminous autobiography, Naimi reaffirms his central pantheistic belief, and his unwavering faith, as death approached with advanced years, in the eternal cycle of nature which belied the idea of extinction.

He laments however the failure of modern humanity to learn from the past, ‘to look for the essence in the froth.’ He asserts his belief that the evils of modern civilisation will not be dispelled save by a ‘voice to wake the human conscience and instil in it an awareness of the goal behind existence…’ That voice, he assures his readers, ‘shall come from the East.

The one work by that best characterizes his attitude to the West, and particularly the US is probably his short story ‘Sa at ak-Kuku’ (The Cuckoo Clock), written in 1925 according to the author, and first published in his short story collection Kan Ma Kan (Once upon a Time) in 1927.
The story is a simple allegory based on the binary opposition of East and West in terms of spirituality and materialism. The story is set in a small Lebanese village in the early 1920s. Its protagonist is a villager by the name Khattar, who worked in tilling the land. Khattar was in love with Zumurrud, the girl next door, and she with him. They had been promised for each other by their families since childhood, and at the start of the story, the wedding day was approaching. However, it is at that time that a native of the village who had immigrated to America returns for a visit. Villagers, including the young betrothed and their families, go to bid welcome to the returnee. In his house, they see on display some of the gadgets he brought back from ‘those foreign lands,’ including a cuckoo clock. The villagers, who had never imagined, let alone seen, such a thing were utterly fascinated by this mechanical, talking bird, especially Zumurrud, who, a few days later, was to be found nowhere on her wedding night. Such was the lure of the cuckoo clock that she eloped with the man who owned it upon his return to America. The shock leads Khattar to a reassessment of his life. For the first time, he sees everything around him ugly and shameful: his oxen and plough, his trees and vines…’ (Mikha il Naimi, Kan Ma Kan, p. 24)

He is unable to blame Zumurrud in his heart and decides to take up the challenge and seek happiness in the land of the cuckoo clock. After initial hardship in America, Khattar, realises that he is in ‘a country whose key is the dollar.’ He fights hard to possess that key, and with the aid of the Great War, he becomes a millionaire and owner of extensive stores within a few years.
However, twenty years of life in the land of the cuckoo clock come and pass leaving him an unhappy man. Coincidence brings him into a chance encounter with his erstwhile great love, now the wreck of a woman, working in a restaurant, having been dumped a long time ago by the man who lured her away with his cuckoo clock from simple but happy life at her native village in Lebanon. After some melodramatic developments and twists in the story, Khattar returns home to his village where he spends the rest of his life, preaching to his fellow villagers the beauty of their simple life and the horror of Western life.

It is interesting to note the extent to which the views expressed in the story were those of the author, and the way in which Khattar’s final act seemed to point the way to his creator:

Naimi was to leave the US after some twenty years of life there to return for good to his native village in Lebanon only a few years after writing the story, not to mention that he had originally written it to dissuade a younger brother of his, who at the time was still living in Lebanon, from immigration.

The story is indeed entwined with the author’s life in more ways than that. For its central symbol, i.e. the cuckoo clock was borrowed from his childhood. He recounts how his mother accompanied him on one occasion to visit a cousin of hers recently returned from the US. It was there that he and other equally astounded youngsters and adults, completely unaware of the gadgets of modern civilization at the turn of the century, made their first encounter with the cuckoo clock. In retrospect, Naimi was to employ in the story
under discussion this ‘magical’ gadget as a symbol of his, and by extension, his culture’s encounter with the material achievements of Western civilisation. Of his first intention in writing the story, he declares in his autobiography, ‘I shall write a story revolving round the cuckoo clock, and I shall use that clock as a symbol of the complexity of modern civilisation, and the happiness that people look for at its heart without avail.

By every account in the story, this encounter was a disastrous one. As Khattar preaches tirelessly to his fellow villagers in Naimi’s best poetic language, their life is one of ‘nature’, which is ‘pure truthfulness’, while ‘civilisation’ consists in nothing but ‘ornate pretence. In a series of parables, reminiscent of, if not directly modeled on, those of Jesus in the Gospels, he advocates attachment to the land, and to mother Nature as the ultimate and unfailing provider: ‘From soil is what you wear. From soil is what you eat. From soil is your shelter. How ignorant you are to try to deceive life to obtain your clothing, your food, and your shelter without touching soil… Blessed are those who take the soil as partner in their toil for livelihood for they shall sleep soundly… Trade is but a ruse to attract money, and money a ploy to swindle partners of the soil of the fruit of their toil, but it is a ploy that rebounds on the perpetrator. Happiness is within the soul and nowhere else; it is not to be sought through the change of continents or cultures: ‘The happy man is he who rejoices in his place, and unhappy is he who seeks contentment in other places. Let each man (and each culture?) be content with what they are: ‘How beautiful is the crow speaking with the tongue of a crow, and not
envying the nightingale its voice! And how beautiful is the nightingale speaking with the tongue of a nightingale, and not envying the crow its strength! (Mikha il Naimi, Kan Ma Kan, P.55)

To Naimi and his protagonist the West is the civilisation of cuckoo clocks, of mechanical cuckoos, while his own is that of natural cuckoos and crows and nightingales; his own is a culture of affinity with earth, with survival that is the fruit of human toil in nature, not by trade in the stock exchange.

Through the mouthpiece of his character, Naimi typifies East and West in terms of a metaphor where they are travellers in the pilgrimage of life, the East riding in the chariot of the ‘heart’, driven by horses of ‘emotion’, reigned in by timeless ‘faith and traditions.’ Conversely, the West rides in a chariot of ‘steel’, driven by ‘steam or electricity’, and powered by ‘conceit and arrogance.’ The speed and glamour of the West’s chariot dazzle the Eastern rider, who begs the West to let him hang on to the wheels. The meaning of the image is spelt out: ‘Thus speaks the East to the West when they meet. It casts aside its own chariot, and sells its soul in order to obtain a chariot like its co-traveller’s. That was Khattar’s error, when he ‘turned his back on his oxen and field and made his way «westwards » to the sea. He wanted to conquer ‘the cuckoo clock’, but instead it possessed him and turned him into one of its screws. For Nuayma the cuckoo clock (the material progress of Western civilization) can only be had at the price of one’s soul. It was too dear a price, in his view. On the personal level, he rejected the deal. On the public level, he devoted his writing to bring his personal conviction across to his Arab readers.
A narrower interpretation of the materialism of the West can be found in a negligible short story by the title ‘Ulbat Kabrit’ (A Matchbox), in Naimi’s collection Akabir, first published in 1956. Not unlike ‘The Cuckoo Clock’, the story is based on the binary opposition of two allegorical situations.

The protagonist recounts to his friend, the narrator, two separate events from his life in order to illustrate ‘which is more greedy for matter, East or West?’ The first event tells how on one occasion his car became stuck in the mud as he was driving at night on a mountainous country road during a heavy storm. The people of the nearby village to whom he was a total stranger rush to his help at extreme difficulty for themselves, and offer him hospitality for the night. In the morning, they free his car for him and refuse, despite their poverty, any recompense. The second event takes place in Paris, at the time when the protagonist was studying at the Sorbonne. He had stayed for years at a small hotel, with whose proprietor, his family and staff he had become on the friendliest of terms, buying them presents and giving tips on every occasion. He had even lent the proprietor at one time some money to pay back a debt and refused to accept interest. After emotional goodbyes on the day of his departure, having completed his studies, the proprietor runs after the protagonist’s taxi, and stops it to ask for the price of a matchbox that he had forgotten to add to the final bill. The story ends on this, with the protagonist leaving it to his friend (and to us) ‘to conclude what you want from these two episodes. The emerging opposite images of the two cultures is clear: one is generous and gallant (the East), the other greedy and ungrateful (the West).
Naimi’s literary representations of his ideas on East and West are underpinned by some clearly argued polemic in his essays. One of the earliest such essays goes back to 1922, i.e. prior to writing ‘Sa at al-Kuku’. The essay carries the title ‘The Rise of the Arab East and its Attitude towards Western Civilisation’, and was written in response to a questionnaire on the subject among notable Arab intellectuals of the day conducted by Cairo’s respectable literary magazine, Al-Hilal. (Naimi, al Majmua al-Kamila, pp.45-50).

Naimi works out a grand structure in which he fits minor questions as to the differences between the two cultures. This structure seems to attribute a static view of the world to the East, as opposed to a dynamic one to the West: ‘the East finds the world perfect because it was made by a perfect God, while the West finds in it many imperfections, which it seeks to “make better”.’ For him the West’s attempt at improving the world is a form of doomed ‘arrogance’, akin to ‘a fish in the sea trying to “improve” it and comprehend its secrets.’ He argues that the East has given the West immutable ‘revealed truths’, 23 while the West’s contribution consisted only in ‘scientific truths’, which changed everyday. If the West was compelled to discard all its books and keep only one, he argues, it would probably choose to keep The Holy Book which came to it from the East. By contrast, what would the East want from the West? His answer is: ‘Aeroplanes, trains, machines and many ailments and problems, which would not bring it any closer to the secret of life, nor give it the spiritual reassurance it obtained from faith.’ Naimi however seems well aware of the lure of Western
civilization, and is certain that its day would not be spent ‘until it has swept the whole world over’ including the Arab countries. Nevertheless, this awareness does not serve to abate his contempt for Western civilisation.

He is willing to live with the accusation of being ‘a reactionary who wants to take us back to the ignorance of religion and superstition’, rather than relinquish his ‘belief that the East with its faith is closer to the Truth than the West with its thought and scientific evidence.’ It is the West, he concludes, that needs to be a disciple in the school of the East. One should perhaps mention that some forty years later, Naimi added a little gloss on his position. In his autobiography, Sab un, he refers again to the circumstances in which he wrote his reply to the questionnaire in a chapter entitled ‘Thawra wa Hudna’ (Revolution and Truce), and points out that the “faith” which he ‘called on the East to hold on to did not mean submission, fear, and acquiescence in humility and poverty, but rather the ability to comprehend the limitations of the mind and transcend them to a spiritual wealth that outshines all material wealth’. (Naimi, al Majmua al Kamila, vol.1, p.482)

In a much later essay titled ‘al-Taw aman: al-Sharq wal-Gharb’ (The Twins: the East and the West), included in his collection, al-Bayadir (The Threshing Floors), published in 1945, Naimi can be seen to have maintained his polemic against Western civilisation. After waxing lyrical on the morphological genius of Arabic that produces from the same root such nouns as basar and basira, ‘sight’ and ‘insight’ or ‘inner sight’, respectively, he goes on to label the
West as the world’s basar and the East as its basira. These are terms not much different from their more familiar correspondents: ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’. Naimi argues that while the East gave the world prophets, the West gave it scientists. He diagnoses the illness of the modern world in terms of the ‘the supremacy of sight over insight,’ a supremacy that did not spare the East itself, which is ‘dazzled’ by Western civilisation that addresses itself to the senses and is therefore more accessible and pleasurable, according to him. The East, he argues, has sought from time immemorial the ‘eternal truth’. This quest however has been helped by the modern science of the West, which has made life easier with its inventions, nature less mysterious with its discoveries, the world smaller, and which has brought people closer together the better to concentrate on the great quest.

Naimi is clearly at pains to do justice to the role played by Western civilisation in humanity’s quest for the truth. However, the great prize is preserved for the East. For he predicts that when ‘the materialistic sciences of the West have reached their farthest … «the West» will have completed its role in this cycle of mankind’s life, and the East will take over anew.’ It is the East that will be able to build on the West’s achievements that rid humanity of ignorance and superstition, and lead it again with unwavering determination towards its ultimate goal. (Naimi, al Majmu a al Kamila, pp.560-585)

Like Gibran and Rihani, Naimy’s work and thought are a blend of East and West. In addition to Eastern Christianity and Eastern Mysticism, his language is evocative of the Russian mystics and American transcendentalists.
His name is connected with many Arab American periodicals, especially *Al-Funun* (The Arts: 1913-1918) which he referred to as “the beautiful and fragrant journalistic lily” (1964, p. 153).

He was a regular contributor and, along with Nazmi Nasim and Raghib Mitraj, he helped Nasib Arida, the editor, administer the journal. After its demise, however, only Naimy’s name became well-known to the Arab American readers. Richard Popp attributes this to Naimy’s many contributions to Al-Funun which reached 28 in total (Popp, 2000, p. 96). Naimy was also a secretary and active member of the Arab American literary society al-Rabitah-al-Qalamiya (The Pen League). He also composed the manifesto at the time of its formation in 1920. The following is an extract:

> “Not everything that parades as literature is literature; nor is every rimester a poet. The literature we esteem as worthy of the name is that only which draws its nourishment from Life’s soil and light and air...And the man of letters is he who is endowed with more than the average mortal’s share of sensitiveness and taste, and the power of estimation and penetration together with the talent of expressing clearly and beautifully whatever imprints Life’s constant waves leave upon his soul...” (Naimy, 1964, p. 155-156).

Naimy is known for literary criticism. As a champion of reform, his critical writings opened doors to a new concept of literature among his fellow Arab writers. In his first critical article “Fajr al Amal” (“The Dawn of Hope”), published by Al-Funun in 1913, he rejects traditional Arabic literature as a literature of decoration and imitation. He even goes further to call it “mummified literature”. For him the poet should focus primarily on imagination rather than language, essence rather than form. The sources on Naimy’s education and background are limited. But it is known that
when he was a law student at Washington State University and before even he met Gibran, the 24-year-old Naimy was sent a copy of Gibran’s *The Broken Wings*. He wrote a long review of it in which he criticized the simplicity of the plot and characterization in the sense that the book conveys a passive attitude and does not give solutions to the problems, but saw it as a departure from the approved canons of Arabic literature and appreciated the fact that it dealt with “native” social issues. The publication of the review by *Al-Funun* marked the beginning of Naimy’s career as writer and critic. Naimy developed a close relationship with Gibran through Fatat-Boston and Al-Funun. Gibran lovingly called him “Mischa,” and in his letters he addressed him as “My Dear Mischa” or “Brother Mischa,” and sometimes “Beloved Brother Mischa.” Naimy also admired Gibran and became influenced by him. In the introduction to his biography, he emphasizes the fact that Gibran sought to make his soul “as beautiful as the beauty he glimpsed with his imagination and so generously spread in his books and drawings” (Naimy, 1964, p. 111).

Naimy produced a significant body of literature: novels, short stories, drama, poetry, critical essays, but his most familiar works are his biography of Gibran (1950), *Al-Ghirbal* (The Sieve) 1932, and *Muzakarat Al-Arkash* (Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul) 1949. Also famous is his *The Book of Mirdad* (1946) which was written in English, and in which Naimy picked up on his predecessors by adapting a prophetic tone in conveying timeless wisdom.

Most of his essays are collected in *Al-Ghirbal* (The Sieve). “*Al-Habahib*” (“The Firefly”), for example, severely attacks Arab culture,
including its literary conventions. He describes the Arab society as a society of stagnation and resignation which hopes to make progress by prayer rather than education and hard work. In the beginning of his career, indeed, Naimy expressed a negative attitude towards Arab culture and a firm belief in Western cultural superiority.

This might be attributed partly to his Western education in Russian missionary schools in his native village of Baskinta and Ukraine before he immigrated to the United States. Again in Al-Ghirbal (1932) he claims that Arab classic poets and philosophers are insignificant compared to Western figures such as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Hugo, and Tolstoy (p. 48-49). Because he considered Western literature to be the highly admired prototype of literary excellence (Naimy, 1967, p. 55-56), Naimy advised Arab writers to translate it. In “Let us translate” he writes: “Our contact with the West has alerted many of our spiritual needs…that our writers and intellectuals cannot satisfy…let us translate and exalt the translator who introduces us to the bigger human family” (Al-Ghirbal, 1932, p. 127).

Naimy’s earlier realistic literature dealt with the situation of the Arab woman vis-à-vis the repressive old traditions. This is evident in “Her New Year” and “The Barren Women.” Also his earlier play Fathers and Sons (1917) addressed the issue of social expectations and the generation gap in Lebanese society. More importantly, it is considered one of the first attempts to introduce drama into Arabic literature. Naimy then chose a more mystical approach to life. His writings became grounded in Eastern philosophies and metaphysical
experiences. Like Gibran’s, they emphasize the importance of individual spirituality and embrace the doctrine of the unity of being and the power of universal love. Naimy advocated a universal mystical philosophy which, in Najjar’s opinion, helped him harmonize his bi-cultural identity as was the case with Gibran (Najjar, 1999, p. 150). Also interestingly, later in his career Naimy rejected his former belief in Western superiority and started to criticize Western civilization and its neglect of spirituality. This is best represented in a poem written in 1922 where he says: “Who are you and what are you to rule over mankind As if even the sun and the moon were under your control” (qtd. in Najjar, 1999, p.149). Like Rihani, Naimy did not get his merited recognition in the United States, although he was once nominated for the Noble Prize in Literature. Naimy did not reach the American mainstream probably because he wrote mainly in Arabic. Najjar points to the fact that, when his first English book was published, he had already left the United States for Lebanon (Najjar, 1999, p. 152). In 1932 Naimy settled in Baskinta where he continued to write and lecture and fulfilled the dream he shared with Gibran which consists in retreating into the nature of Lebanon. I focus next on Naimy’s “Sa’at al-Cuckoo” (The Cuckoo Clock), a short story in a collection entitled Once Upon A Time and also on his novella Muzakarat Al-Arkash (Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul) since they both reflect Naimy’s shift to a more contemplative universal message and spiritual discourse.
The Cuckoo Clock

In The Cuckoo Clock Naimy rejects Western civilization and embraces the spirituality of the East symbolized by his native Lebanon. Khattar Mas’ad, a Lebanese farmer was to be married to “Zumurud” but “Ferris,” an immigrant from America, charmed her and the whole village with his Western clothing and English language, and especially with his cuckoo clock he brought from America. Khattar becomes confused and convinced that a better life awaits him there. So he immigrates to America where he becomes rich but realizes that his wealth did not bring him happiness. He finds out that his wife married him for his money, but more importantly that his wealth drove him away from the spiritual qualities he used to have.

Khattar is now aware of the value of a simple spiritual lifestyle as opposed to a materialistic one. He imagines himself working in the fields again and enjoying the clean and fresh air. He becomes disgusted with the city which he describes as a “monstrous tower of Babel on wheels descending, with demonic speed, a mountain whose top is hidden in the clouds and whose base is a bottomless pit” and gets deceived by the “grand clock from which a large mechanical bird emerged periodically crying our “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” (p. 39). He eventually returns to his village and develops a strong relationship with his people who name him “Abu-Ma’roof” (the kind/generous one). He advises them to love their land and village and preaches his belief that “in the soil is an aroma that is absent in the perfumer’s shop” (p. 14). From an autobiographical standpoint, Khattar Mas’ad foreshadowed Naimy’s eventual return to his homeland where he
strived to educate his people against the mechanical and artificial Western urban culture (Najjar, 1999, p. 148). Naimy’s Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul also echoes his love of simplicity, freedom, and the pursuit of spirituality.

**Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul or the Pitted Face:**

Pitted Face is a thirty-year-old Argentinean of Lebanese origin. After three years of working as a waiter at a Syrian restaurant in Manhattan, he disappears leaving behind his memoirs which happen to fall in the narrator’s hands. Pitted Face’s memoirs are an account of his life of silence and meditation. Being mentally detached from society, he examines the meaning of human existence and his place as an “obscure, insignificant, and uncomely man” (pp. 9, 14). He expresses his disenchantment with what he thinks to be a world of greed, hatred, and wars. Pitted Face is driven by two different forces: a physical one (his worldly pursuits) and a spiritual one (his meditative course). His portrait of this dilemma is as follows:

“I must be two Pitted Faces in one: the first is a man who has withdrawn from the world of men and wrapped himself in silence that he may reach a world of a higher order and move with it in an orbit other than that of the earth; the second is a man cut off from the main human current by some human side-currents, and striving to rejoin the herd. He is of a lower world and is ill at ease excepting in that world, with which, so it seems, he has many accounts to settle” (p. 67).

Because he believed in the continuation of life in death and wanted to reach a higher state of being and completely unchain his soul, he killed his bride Najla at the end and then killed himself. The novella hence embodies the human struggle between the physical and the spiritual. It exhibits Naimy’s mystical philosophy which
emphasizes the importance of the spiritual side of life and the fact that the purpose of the human being is to be unified with the divine. Nadeem Naimy makes a believable connection between Pitted Face and the author by saying that the book reflects the isolation and alienation that Naimy himself experienced in New York (1967, p. 173). It must be mentioned, however, that the intensity and tragic turn of the book cannot be traced in Naimy’s own life. Naimy and Gibran overlap. The above works remind us of Gibran’s bitterness towards the ills of society, his idea of death as a release from the sorrow of life, his Rousseau-like belief in the natural goodness of man away from the corrupting civilization… In his famous poem “Al-Mawakib” (The Procession) 1919, for example, Gibran expresses his outrage about man’s laws and material pursuit as opposed to the natural flow of life. The poem is a dialogue between a youth who sings of the virtues of the natural world and an old sage who mourns the futility of the world and civilization which he believes is an obstacle for humanity to fulfill its spiritual self.

An Analysis of the Mystical Element in Mikhail Naimi’s Literary Works

Mikhail Naimi’s works are considered a turning point in the history of Arabic literature due not only to the eloquent language that he uses to express his thoughts but also because of the message that he tries to convey of his own genuine experience as a human being. Furthermore, Nuaymah was among the few Arabic poets to have spoken sincerely and directly of his feelings. Indeed, Nu’aymah himself saw language is the ideal medium for expressing the deepest
human emotion and thought, and not merely as an aesthetic vehicle. Hence it is not surprising to see that his works are mostly concerned with the basic issues of human life and especially social, philosophical or spiritual themes.

Naimi tried to avoid employing poetic forms that he felt were a betrayal of the principles of true literature, such as the ghazal (Love poetry), hija’ (invective poetry), ritha’ (elegy) or madh (panegyric poetry).

He defines a poet not as someone who plays with artificial language, but as a prophet who can see with his spiritual eyes what can not be seen by others, much as a painter capable of molding his innermost thoughts and feelings in beautiful verbal imagery, as a musician endowed with a special sensibility for delightful rhythms and harmonious sounds, and lastly as a philosopher or as a priest whose humanistic function is to serve the “God” of Truth, Justice, Goodness and beauty and to satisfy man’s spiritual need for these ultimate values. Therefore the true poets according to Naimi, will be aware of how important it is to express their ideas sincerely, honestly and realistically without being driven by an external leitmotif. In fact, Naimi’s works constitute a genuine expression of his own spiritual journey to seek the truth, which explains why so many of the issues he addresses are mystical in nature. In this chapter the discussion will be devoted to two of Naimi’s mystical themes, i.e. the notions of “oneness of being” and “the transmigration of soul.”
Oneness of Being

The seeds of Naimi’s inclination towards oneness of being, in the sense that he saw a unity between nature, mankind and the creator, were planted during childhood in his home village of Biskinta, Lebanon.

His personality differed from that of other children of his age, in that he was a boy who always felt closer to nature and was curious about the world around him. To discover the meaning behind natural phenomena demanded that he lead a solitary life, to allow himself to become closer to nature. This potential, which was nurtured in the course of various experiences in his life, especially after his experimentation with different kinds of beliefs and philosophies, enabled him answers to the Question he had, particularly after his return home from America. Therefore, most of the works that he produced in the final phase of his life feature more philosophical and spiritual motifs. These include such works as Mudhakkarat al-Arqash and the book of Mirdad.

The notion of “oneness of being,” which is a common theme in his works, is considered the centre point of his mystical thought.(AlNuri 380). While it is not easy to systematize his thinking on this topic, there are a number of technical terms he repeatedly employs, such as khayal (imagination), al-alam al-saghir (microcosm) and al-alam al kabir (macrocosm) haqiqah (the essence), al-nizam al-kawni (the cosmic order), which might help us to grasp what he is saying.
Naimi’s view of the relationship between nature, mankind and god is based on the notion of khayal (imagination). His understanding of the concept of oneness of being and the transmigration of soul cannot be separated from his understanding of this idea. By believing in the power of imagination, he rejects the dualist conception of the phenomenon of the world. For him, the differences, distinctions and contrarieties that human beings perceive result from the perception of the human reasoning faculty whose power is limited by what the sense tell it; this falls short of what the imagination is capable of doing, since the latter is able to go beyond the sense. (Naimi, AlBayader 71). He states further that thought imagination (khayal) it is possible for men to make blind men see, paralyzed men walk, and bring the dead to life, not by giving them sight, hearing or animation, but by the power to awaken the power of the imagination, which can replace all these faculties sight, hearing and breath of life. (Naimi, Zad alMaad. 17)

Nu’aymah treats the meaning of khayal (imagination) in a more philosophical and mystical context, rather than restricting it to the linearity plane. According to him, imagination is the faculty which enables human beings to see with their eyes closed, to hear while their ears are scaled, to smell while their nostrils are plugged, to taste while their lips are closed, or to touch while their hands are plugged, to taste while their lips are closed, or to touch while their hands are paralyzed. It is the power that provides the means for means for human beings to understand metaphysical truths which are beyond the power of the external senses. It is in fact the only means to comprehend reality (haqiqah). Though the imagination men are able to penetrate beyond
the physical world and free themselves from the limited faculty of senses. Therefore, the existence of the creator and his creations and other contradictory phenomenon e.g., life and death, good and bad, happiness and suffering, etc., are one in reality (haqiqah), because they come from it and will return to it.

Furthermore, he clearly equates imagination (khayal) with faith (iman). He states that imagination (khayal) and faith (iman) are like twins: both are at the highest limit of our understanding, and beyond what reason can attain due to its unreliability. This argument indicates that he places imagination (khayal) higher than reason. He says that reason can become imagination if one is open to enlightenment. Likewise, imagination will deteriorate into reason if it become closed to inspiration. (Naimi Zadamaad, 78)

By his philosophical and mystical explanation of imagination (khayal) Naimi tries to show that we are able to comprehend metaphysical worlds, such as the one in which we find ourselves one, one that does not exist yet, one which hasn’t any power to exist, or one that we will experience in the future. This is because imagination (khayal) will penetrate them in order to witness reality in a real sense.

Naimi seems to perceive reality (haqiqah) as having much in common with the essence (dhat). He states that there is only one haqiqah which is eternal and it is not subject to change or fluctuation. It’s existence cannot be indentified with time, place or any other attribute. But it’s existence is in every place and in every thing. (Naimi AlMarahel12)
Unlike other existing things, both reality (haqiqah) and the essence (dhat) are independent, meaning that their existence does not depend on other existence even though they share a common origin and will return to the same point as well.

In the languages of some Sufis such as ibn ‘arbi’, the essence does not have quiddity (mahiyyah). That is why the essence cannot have ascribed to it any attributes, because it is indescribable. Naimi identifies this essences as the power that comprehends all thongs all things as “allah,” that is god, the creator.(Naimi, ZadAlmaaad, 22)

Although he stresses that the essence or god cannot be described by any attributes, the name “allah” is attributed to the essence in order to allow us to discuss or talk about him. It is only one of the many other names applied to the essences. Some people may call him quwwah (power), or iradah (willingness) or namus (law of nature). They refer to him in accordance with their own understanding of the essence. However, the name “allah” god, according to him is the more perfect and more appropriate in meaning, because it is beautiful, respectable and well known among people.(Naimi,Book of Mirdad, 41)

Although Naimi does not seem to subject his concept of reality (haqiqah) to systematic review, he nevertheless consistently emphases that there is a true reality beyond this reality which cannot be reached by the human senses, yet its existence is sensible and discernable to a certain degree. He acknowledges the existences of this reality by stating that behind the order of this universe, which makes the stone fall when one drops it, or the sun rise from the east, etc., there is the
creator who creates this order of the cosmos (al-nizam al-kawni). (Naimi Almarahel114)

This order is only one and it is unchangeably established by the creator. Though the order of the cosmos, created beings will try to perfect themselves continuously, for example, It is by virtue of the cosmic order (al-nizam al-kawni), which determines that life comes from death or vice versa, that creation becomes perfect. Though the dialogue between Arquash (the central figure in his work mudhakarat al-arqash) and death, for example.

Nu`aymah elaborates that the task of “death” is to bring everything would grow endlessly and life become static. Furthermore, death makes the world constantly wider and larger, because in the circle between life and death, the world and its inhabitants become balanced.(Naimi Mudhakrat al arqash, 32)

Hence, for him death is not the end of a thing, but a pause in life and a bridge between one life and another, through which the world approaches perfection.

As was discussed earlier. Naimi’s basic idea of the real reality (haqiqah) or the essence (dhat), implies that the realities other than the essence are only forms (surah or amthal) of it. In his view when god creates his creation, he creates his essence in them. Hence the whole of creation that emanates from him is himself, meaning that human beings who originate in him are the image of allah, the source from which they come.(Naimi ,Albayader, 71)

He stated just such n idea, for example. On the occasion in the annual gathering of the school al-jamiah al-wataniyyah, Lebanon in
1932. He explained that the ultimate goal of human life is to know oneself. That was because in his view human beings represent the world in which other worlds, such as the universe, are united together therefore by knowing themselves, they actually know the whole of the world, whether seen or unseen. (Naimi Zadalmaad, 44)

From his point of view, furthermore, there is no difference between human beings and the universe; the partition between them is in fact engendered by human beings themselves. He consequently argues that at the very beginning of creation, there was the “I” (ana) and “universe” (al-‘alam) without any separation: *Ana is al-alam just as al-alam is ana*. However, when the first period of time began, the universe delivered a child, called a “human being” who was beautiful and perfect such that he was in full unity with the universe, Nonetheless, the separation resumed when the universe asked the human being:

The Universe: who are you? Human being: “I” is “I” The Universe: And who am I? Human Being: You are the Universe. (Naimi Almarahel, 128)

Here, human beings create a division between themselves and the universe. Naimi also insinuates the same notion in his poem addressing a worm, entitled “*Ila duadah*”:

In the eyes of life, thoug art not ugly, Nor thy the value is less than that of vultures and eagles By the troth, sister in your life There are no grades of worth of differences of value. (Naimi Hams Aljufun, 85)

When human being try to explore the division between them and the world (*alam*), Naimi says it is similar to those who look for the division between difference them, since the shadow is the thing
and the thing is the shadow; hence, man is the universe and the
universe is man, so that finally he says that the man is \textit{Ilaah}
“God.” (Naimi, Almarahel.128)

Although he does not use any specific term in expressing this
idea, it is obvious that he is relying on the idea of macrocosm and
microcosm in elucidating the image of essence. From his elaboration
it seems that he perceives the unwise as a large world or macrocosm
and human beings are as a smaller world or macrocosm and human
beings world become composed together in them. Again, using this
kind of explanation, he attempts to explain the close relationship
between the universe, men and god; he says that they are in their
reality one he expressed the notions, for example, in his poem \textit{al-
ta’ih} (the wanderer):

\begin{quote}
\textit{O my creator have mercy upon the creation of thing hands If I am
not thin echo whose voice may I be then?} (Naimi, Hams Aljufun,
54)
\end{quote}

Naimi’s main philosophical or mystical notion, i.e., oneness of
being, is obvious here. He expressed this concept in a number of
literary media not only poetry, novels, stories, and sermons but also in
his letters such as those written to his younger birthed Nasib.
Moreover, he sometimes draws analogies with any subject to prove
his idea of “oneness of being.” Naimi, for example, compares gnosis
\textit{(al-ma’rifah)} and Allah (god) in the following passage where he says:

\begin{quote}
Knowledge is similar to the existence of Allah, because He is in
every place. And those who seek knowledge only in a certain place
are similar to those who only seek Allah in the temples.
Ineed, almighty is not only in the templates, just as knowledge is not
only available in the academic institutions. (Naimi, Sabun
Almarhala, 46)
\end{quote}
In the above passage Naimi acknowledges that there is only one reality, that is, the reality of the essence, or god as a result he insists that god comprehends every single thing in his creations; in other words he believes that the image of god can be found in every place in universe and in all its contents, including men. (Naimi, Sabun Almarhala, 324)

The whole of creation, whether observable or not, is the living body of god, its creator; therefore when he sees the existences (al-wujud) in its totality, He says “hadha ana” (this is me). Indeed, this notion will be better understood from his poem entailed ibtihalat (supplications):

Anoint, o lord my eyes
With the rays of thy light
That I may see thee
In the whole creation: in the worm of the grave,
In the eagles of the sky, in the waves of the sea,
In the cisterns of the land, on the flowers,
In the grass, in the gold dust, in the sand if the deserts (Naimi, Hams Aljufun, 35)

Naimi’s conception of god may be seen as having two aspects, the one inspirable from the other. From the arguments that he offers in his work, one can say that these two aspects are transcendence and immanence. On the one hand he always insists that god is the essence to whom no attribute or description of any kind can be applied. He is the one beyond human perception, the one whose names are many but whose essence is one and only one on the other hand the universe, which encompasses both nature and humanity, is evident proof of his many-sidedness. However, these attributes do not contradict His
uniqueness. In order to prove his argument, Naimi draws an analogy with “thought” (fikr). He explains that many sentences, movements and actions employed when one communicates or expresses an idea do not necessarily portray the “thought.” They are only exterior aspects which may change. The “though” (fikr) itself that stimulates them remains separate, or in Naimi’s word (fauna huwa). (Naimi Sabun Almarala, 324).

In making this comparison he desires to say that the manifestation of the Essence cannot be perceived as the Essence Itself, any more than external appearance of thought fundamentally shows the thought itself (tilka mazahir fikrika wa laysat fikraka). (Naimi, Sabun Almarhala ,325)

Hence, the transcendence of God is not reduced by His manifestations because His Essence retains its absoluteness. God’s manifestation of Himself in His creation is in order to reveal Himself to His creation. Otherwise, according to Naimi, He would be an Absolute Silence (Sumt Mutaq). In his opinion, God’s self disclosure is by His “I”:

By it is the creator self-created. By it is the Formless One made to take on a multiplicity of forms though which the creatures shall pass again to form lessens. When God says I, nothing is left unsaid. Words seen and words unseen; things born, and things awaiting birth; time rolling by and time as yet to roll-all, excepting not a grain of sand, are uttered forth and pressed into that Word, By it were all things made. Yhough it are all sustained. (Naimi, book of Mirdad, 41)

The Transmigration of Soul

Naimi’s first encounter with the idea of the transmigration of the soul (or as other call it, metamorphosos taqammus) or
metempsychosis) may be traced to the period when he was a student at the University of Washington. Through his roommate – a young Scotsman who was a member of a theosophical society, and with whom he shared a room in his third year at the university. He became acquainted with theosophical beliefs, particularly the notion of metempsychosis. It was because of this belief, which left its mark on almost everything he wrote afterwards, that he acknowledged his meeting as a turning point in his life. (Naimi Sabun Almarhala, 45)

Indeed, the notion constitutes the eventual fundamental basis of his philosophical doctrine, i.e., that our life is governed by a “Cosmic Order death is on more than a “pause” in a continuous movement which will ultimately lead man to become one with the Absolute. In this respect, the notion of reincarnation is determined in the context of oneness of being, the concept which allowed him to disclose his dualist perceptions.(Alashtar,49)

With this new understanding, he come to perceive life and death, humankind and nature, and even God and the universe as a single perpetual chain.

If growth be the child of decay, and decay be the child of growth; if life be the mother of death, and death be the mother of life, then verily were they but one at every point of time and Space. The wheel of Time revolves in the voids of Space. Upon its rim are all the things perceivable by the senses which are unable to perceive a thing except in Time and Space. So Things continue to appear and disappear. What disappear. What disappears for one at a certain point of Time and Space appears to another at another point.(Naimi, book of Mirdad 92)

Naimi’s discussion of metempsychosis is, as is the case with his notion of oneness of being, scattered throughout a number of his works, particularly those written after his return home from the United
States. These include his autobiography, “Sab’un,” letters and short
stories, Such as Liqua, and al-Yawm al-Akhir, The most
comprehensive account of Naimi’s thought is nevertheless to be found
in his The Book of Mirdad which he himself considered to be the final
expression of the his philosophy.

Naimi’s notion of the transmigration of souls can probably be
best explained through his concept of death, which he mentions
also elsewhere in his works. In his Madhakkarat al-Arqash, for example,
Naimi views death not as the end the of life, but as something that
exists in order to bring human life to perfection. This can be seen from
the dialogues between Arqash (a central figure in this novel) and
death, in which Nu’aymah implies the impossibility of the universe
achieving perfection without the existence of death. (Naimi
Mudhakkarat Alarqash, 51) He argues that the span of life is too short
a period to achieve that aim.

Furthermore, he says that death is merely designed to put an
end to the physical desires of man, not to his unfulfilled yearnings for
justice, mercy, peace, love and other longings which aim at a kind of
life free from sadness, pain or even death. The yearning for
something, according to him, presupposes the existence of that thing.
As man’s life is insufficient for this task, he argues, so there must be a
continuation of life after death. “For how can you, or anybody else, be
sure that the earth is the only place where you fulfill your earnings, or
that your life is the only share you have of time, when in fact
compared with it the age we live is no more than a fleeting moment?
(Naimi, Sabun, 235)
As indicated above, Naimi’s notion of the transmigration of souls is developed in relation to the notion of oneness of being, according to which “there is not God and man, but there is God-Man or Man-God. There is the one. However multiplied, however divided, it is forever one.” (Naimi, The book of Mirdad, 58)

Nonetheless, since “man is a God in swaddling-bands,” (43) he should pierce the veils and break the seals in order to achieve the joy of perfect balance (al-tawazun al-kamil) (41) This is the task of man in his repeated lives, that is to say, to seek the key to self-unveiling and self-up sealing. For this purpose, man has to be conscious of being through his understanding of his own existence; he should understand his (ana), which Naimi calls al-kalimah al-mubdi’ah. For "I is center of your life whence radiate the things that make the total of your world, and whereunto they converge. If it be steady, your world is steady: then no power above, and no powers below can sway your right or left. If it be shifting, your world is shifting; and then are a helpless leaf caught in a angry whirl of wind.” (61) Hence, it is by his consciousness and then his understanding that man attains the joy of Balance, that is God, the Primal Consciousness (al-damir al-awwali) and the spirit of Understanding (ruh al-fahm).

A theme essential to the notion of the transmigration of souls as explained by Naimi is that of punishment and reward. It was Naimi’s belief that every day is Judgment Day. Man is rewarded or Punished daily according to his attitude towards God’s Law (Namus), Which, as we shall see below, is Love. in this respect, Nu ‘aymah explains three kinds of judgment Day, expressed in the dialogue between
Mirdad and Bennoon in *The Book of Mirdad*. In answering Bennoon’s question concerning Judgment Day, Mirdad Says:

> Your days are not alike, Bennoon. Some are serene. They are the harvestings of hours rightly lived. Some are beset with clouds. They are the gifts of hours half-asleep in Death and half-awake in Life. While others dash on you astride a storm, with lightning in Their eyes, and thunder in their nostrils. they smite you from Above; they whip you from blow; they toss you right and left; They flatten you onto the earth and make you bite the dust and Wish you were never born. Such day are the fruit of spent In willful opposition to the Law. (60)

The doctrines of oneness of transmigration of Souls, Combined With a belief in reward and Punishment helped Naimi to develop the notion of love for everything. For him, the oneness of being or more essential than other. Consequently, there is no enemy, only friends, for “what you dislike and cast away as evil is surely liked and picked up by someone. or something else as good. He goes on to say:

> Remember that the word is one. And you, as syllables in the Word, are in reality but one. No syllable is nobler than other, nor more essential than the other. The Many syllable are but a single syllable-even The Word [God]. Such monosyllable must You become if you would know the passing costars of that unutterable self-Love which is a love for all for everything. (64)

Naimi maintains that to arrive at self-Love man should be a tree of Life (*shajarat al-hayah*) and pour his whole heart in to every single part of the “tree.” Men should beware of dividing against each other. Like a tree, they should not set fruit, leaf against leaf, bough against bough, nor set the stem against the roots, nor set the tree against the mother soil, rather, men should not hate each other, since, according to Nu’aymah, hatred is the pus of death, while love is the sap of life. Accordingly, Man should always learn to love, for “no lesson is required of Man other than love.”
Naimi’s concept of love is determined in such a way that Man is able to find his real self. This can be attained so long as man should rid himself of hatred in his heart. The true love needs no rewards; it is the one of which man is not proud. Man should fill his every gesture, step, wish or thought with it. Since there is no separation between man and the Universe, so man’s love for others means his love to himself. Indeed, Naimi is of the opinion that no love is possible except the love of self.

A true love is the one by which man is not painted; it is not the one on which man prides himself. Hence, the love of a man for a woman is not love. Furthermore, being not-hating does not necessarily mean equal love, for “love is an active force.”

The concept of love is essential to Naimi’s notion of the transmigration of souls, since the former is the core of the moral message that should guide a man through his respective lifetimes.

Nu’aymah states that it is only with love that one can be freed from the wheel of time, that is, the chain of reincarnation. In his eyes, mankind would be weaned away forever from the Earth by loving the Earth and its contents. “When Love is the only residue of all your account with the Earth, then will the Earth acquit you of her dept.” (Naimi, book of Mirdad, 98)
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