CHAPTER IV

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There lies a green field between the scholar and the poet; should the scholar cross it he becomes a wise man; should the poet cross it, he becomes a prophet.

(Sand and Foam)

It is to be proud of being American, but it is also to be proud that your fathers and mothers came from a land upon which God laid His gracious hand and raised His messengers. Young Americans of Syrians origin I believe in you.

(To Young Americans of Syrian Origin 24-27)

Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese American poet and philosopher, is best known as the legendary author of The Prophet. Gibran achieved lasting eminence and fame as a writer in two completely disparate cultures. He infused Eastern mysticism into the Western materialism and represented the meeting of two worlds. A liberating voice in the Arabic literature, he became one of the most widely read authors in his adopted tongue. Though Gibran wrote his masterpiece and many of his better known œuvres in the language of the Western world, his style and philosophy were of the East, particularly of the Arab world. His constant
inspiration was his own heritage. He was one of those rare writers who transcend the barrier between East and West, and who could justifiably call himself a citizen of the world.

As discussed already in chapter II, Gibran came originally from a small village called Bisharri, perched on a small plateau at the edge of the cliffs of Wadi Qadisha that towers above Mount Lebanon. Lebanon, before Gibran migrated to America, was still under the Ottoman rule, and was threatened by poverty and devastated by sectarian violence that broke out in 1845. Nevertheless, Lebanon was seen as the meeting-point of East and West and a rich melting pot of religions and the most modern province of Ottoman empire.

As much as the social and political turmoil, the domestic strife within the Gibran family made it difficult for the poet to live the life of a normal boy. Gibran’s father was a tax collector, an autocratic man, who indulged in alcohol and gambling. He was a difficult man to live with and his family feared him. Gibran grew up with two younger sisters and a half brother, born to his mother’s first marriage.

In an atmosphere of bitter poverty and constant arguments, young Gibran found solace in nature and drawing.

To Gibran, boy and man, nature was invested with a life of its own, with spiritual, emotional, and intellectual dimensions; for him it was the link that binds us one to another, within it flowing a divine energy which is the perfect harmony of the internal rhythm of all being. To commune with nature was for him akin to a religious experience. (Bushrui, Jenkins 35)

Though he was brought up as a Maronite Christian, as an Arab he was influenced by Islam, and especially by the mysticism of the Sufis. Later in his life, he acknowledged that Lebanon’s disturbing history with its sectarian violence strengthened his belief in the fundamental unity of religions.

Growing poverty, a corrupt feudal system and a heavy and unfair tax system made life extremely difficult for ordinary folk. Many Lebanese, including the Gibran family decided to immigrate to the New World to escape domestic pressure and to ensure a better future for their children. In 1895, Gibran along with his mother, brother and two sisters migrated to the United States, leaving the father who faced charges of embezzlement. They settled in Olive Place at the edge
of Boston’s notoriously impoverished South End. At that time, Boston hosted the largest Syrian community outside New York. Gibran’s mother, Kamileh began working as a pack peddler, which was a way of life for Lebanese and Syrian immigrants. Peddling required less capital and little knowledge of English and they earned well a good profit too. At Quincy School for Boys, where Gibran was placed with the rest of immigrant children with no English knowledge, his name was misspelled and shortened from “Khalil Gibran Khalil” to “Khalil Gibran”.

Life in Boston was a difficult and an unhappy period for the young Gibran. He missed his previous life in the beautiful Lebanese countryside. In contrast to his elder, half-brother Boutros, Gibran was an introvert, withdrawn and solitary. His mother, who understood his son’s remoteness, strove to nurture in him a spirit of independence and a desire to develop outside the family’s limiting existence. Gibran’s life took a new turn when his school teachers encouraged him to attend art and craft classes at Denison House. His talents were quickly identified, and a social worker by the name of Jessie Fremont Pierce wrote to Fred Holland Day about this very talented young boy.

Day was infatuated with English literature and the publishing house he set up, Hebert Copeland, introduced writers such as Yeats and Oscar Wilde to the American public. In an increasingly artistic and creative atmosphere, Gibran discovered photography; book production in short a new, enthralling literary world. Day encouraged him to read Keats, Whitman, Blake, Emerson etc. Gibran was simply amazed by these English poets. For him, Keats was “one of the very few true worshippers of beauty”, and Blake, “the God-man”, whose work represented “the profoundest things done in English- and his vision...the most godly” (Bushrui, Jenkins 47).

At the age of fifteen, he returned to Lebanon, and completed his education at the Maronite college, Madrasat-al-Hikmah, the foremost Christian secondary school in the Arab world. In his last year, Gibran formed a literary circle with two of his classmates. Lebanon, the land of mystic beauty became his source of imagination. All of his early writings were set in Lebanon. He made a brief visit again to his place of childhood and adolescence, in 1902, but the rest of his life was spent in exile, away from Lebanon. In the same year, Gibran’s sister Sultanah died at the age of fourteen. The following year, Gibran lost his mother from cancer and half brother from tuberculosis. His other sister, Marianah was a
constant source of strength to him through out his life. Moreover, his relationship with Mary Haskell, Gibran's life long benefactress, was crucial for his development as a man, poet and painter.

The Arab-American community organized itself in launching several newspapers and journals as platform to both unite the community as well as to familiarize the Americans about the immigrant's culture and ethnic identity. Gibran published much of his prose and poetry written both in English and Arabic in these magazines. In 1920, Gibran along with Naimy, and a small group of like-minded émigré writers, expressed the desire to organize a unified, effective bond. The objective was to function as a new literary movement to lift existing Arabic literature from its medieval state, "in which substance had been sacrificed to form, to modern standards; to transport their literature from stagnation to life, from imitation to creation" (Bushrui, Jenkins 190). The organization that was to be called the Pen Bond Association or *ar-Rabitatu`l Qalamiyiah* in Arabic, marks a watershed in the history of Arab American poetry.

Gibran was elected unanimously the Chieftain, while Mikhail Naimy was named Counselor of this association. The members of the Pen Bond Association or *Arrabitah*, decided to publish the works of its own members and other Arab writers and to encourage translation of world literature. Also, it was to foster new talent by offering prizes for the best poetry and prose. It became a breathtaking success. The movement with its well defined aims quickly and forcibly struck the Arab world as an independent literary school.

The appearance of any special number was an event anxiously awaited and widely commented in the Arabic literary world. Much of the material was printed by the press both in the old world and wherever Arabic-speaking colonies were found in the new. Much of it went into new anthologies and school-books. Thus the name of Arrabitah spread wide and far becoming tantamount to renaissance, to rejuvenation in the minds of the younger generations, and more conservative ones. (Naimy, Khalil Gibran 157)

The Pen Bond Association with its novelty and revolutionary spirit symbolizes a new era and its influence on the modern Arabic literature was to be profound. Gibran's influence on his colleagues made them reassess their own work, and his Romanticism answered a latent need in them to liberate their own
Romantic expression. Much of the credit must go to Gibran for the propagation of the literary society's pioneering, innovative ideas. Just as Gibran's incantation prose poetry influenced writers of the thirties and the forties, and his fierce rebellion against ecclesiastical and political corruption inspired writers and artists of the fifties and sixties. His innovative ideas had a profound effect on generations of future writers.

The Pen Bond Association embarked on an adventurous literary experiment that affected a historic shift in, thus far accepted Arabic literature. Living in New York, thousands of miles away from the self-righteous gaze of those, whose vision could not transcend the inherited and inhibitive methods of age, Gibran initiated a Romantic movement and school in Arabic literature that echoed a generation's instinctive call for change and renewal. Gibran is seen as the first true rebel in Arabic literature and enjoyed unparalleled freedom that allowed him to revolutionize the literary sensibility at that time. Gibran was identified as an iconoclast and a corrupter of the purity of the Arabic language and literature.

Gibran wrote prolifically in both English and Arabic, which is a major feat for a non-native, non-English speaker. He is considered a literary giant in America and in the Arab world. He finds in English a medium complementary to his Arabic one and brings the East and West together. In the United States, Gibran lived in New York and in Boston. His exposure to the Western world nourished his already broadening vision and universal expression. During the period Gibran lived, these two great cities were no ordinary places, they were home to great writers like Walt Whitman in New York and Emerson in Boston. Moreover, New York is the harbor where immigrants from across the world flocked to seek refuge and a new life, which undoubtedly had an impact on his writing.

His first writings in Arabic were in small Arabic journals published by immigrants in New York City. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that many of his Arabic works too, possess a lasting appeal. Many of his aphorisms and epigrams, even when translated to English, retain a vividness and effectiveness that transcend cultural barriers. Unlike his contemporaries Eliot, Pounds, Keats or Yeats, Gibran did not wish to refine his English to meet the realities of age, but he yearned to include the priceless values of the eastern mysticism. "Gibran was indifferent to the dictates of an age in which creativity becomes mere reaction to
the shifting sands of the fashionable milieu; he was intent instead on expressing a timeless and universal literature: "I'll make a tree and pick the fruit for six hundred years ahead" (Naimy, Khalil Gibran 17-18).

From 1918, he wrote mostly in English and his first published work in English was The Madman, a slim volume of aphorisms and parables written in biblical cadence that falls somewhere between prose and poetry. He wrote only one novella, The Broken Wings, a story of love, thwarted by greed and convention and male chauvinism, was published in Arabic. A Tear and a Smile (1914) is an Arabic anthology of his newspaper poems and prose. Gibran's magnum opus, The Prophet (1923), a publishing phenomenon, outsold every book except the Bible, in the United States. Among his other works, The Forerunner (1920), Jesus, Sand and Foam (1926), Jesus, Son of Man (1928), The Procession (1920), are noteworthy and he published many prose and poems in both English and Arabic. The Wanderer and The Garden of the Prophet were published posthumously in 1932 and 1933 respectively. Gibran died in 1931 of liver cirrhosis and tuberculosis.

The Madman: His Parables and Poems, was not published until October, 1918 by Knopf. It expresses the kind of isolation Gibran felt throughout his own life, as a Christian in a predominantly Muslim region, child of an unhappy marriage, as a Lebanese immigrant in the United States, and finally, an artist living in a materialist society. As an émigré, he undoubtedly felt alien in his new surroundings. But as an immigrant mystic poet his isolation must have been double folded. In The Madman, he comments on the isolation of the artist and how he finds his freedom and safety in madness.

Thus I became a madman.

And I have found both freedom and safety in my madness; the freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us.

But let me not be too proud of my safety. Even a Thief in jail is safe from another thief. (Prologue 21-29)

There are thirty-five prose-poems and parables included in this work. It was published weeks after the end of World War I, and represents the pessimism
of a man who has just experienced one of the darkest periods of human history. Parables contain a moral and he discusses themes such as malevolence, hypocrisy, injustice, conformity, ambition, blindness and Puritanism. They are explored poignantly and although written lyrically, it's the sardonic tone that remains predominant. Further, the influence of Nietzsche is noticeable in the parables. Most of the parables deal ironically with the law, customs, religion etc. He attacks social values in their most extreme and extravagant forms. For example, in *The Sleep Walkers*, he illustrates the emotions hidden in our subconscious, like everyday civility, between a mother and a daughter who want to kill each other in their sleep.

Gibran’s condition as a writer was typical of the postcolonial diasporic writers. As a resident in the United States, the poet felt intense connection with his homeland. This connection was not simply sentimental; Gibran was active politically to voice the problems of his motherland. His works are proof of his love and concern for Lebanon. Though he lived in exile in the United States, his heart was in the country of his birth. During the First World War period, Gibran formed the Boston branch of the Golden Circle (al—Halqa al-Dhababiyah). This group which was created with aim of combating Ottoman rule, had branches around the world, including in Constantinople, Egypt, Lebanon, New York, Paris and London. In the inaugural speech, he stressed that Ottoman’s intention was to retain absolute rule over the Arabs and the Arabic speaking countries. “He told the Syrian emigrants in America to reject the belief that by acquiring American citizenship, they could save themselves, and not be deluded by the promise and the ambitions of foreign [i.e. European] states” (Bushrui, Jenkins 119).

The First World War period was really agonizing for the Lebanese. Ottomans imposed military conscription on them. Thousands fled the country. By 1916, the country that was struggling with a deteriorating economy was faced with a famine. For the Lebanese community in America, it was an intense time, for they were naturally worried about their relatives back at home. Relief committees and assemblies were set up in order to collect funds and food. Gibran, a passionate Syrian nationalist, was involved in soliciting funds, and was named the secretary of The Syrian-Mount Lebanon Relief Committee. He wrote his poem *Dead Are My People* (Written in exile during the famine in Syria), during this period and it was published in the Arabic journal, *Al-Funoon*. "The poignant piece
begins with an elegy dedicated to the victims of the recent genocide, then moves into a self-condemnatory mood before concluding with an appeal to the poet’s fellow exiles to support the relief effort” (Bushrui, Jenkins 159).

In his moving poem, he admits his helplessness before such a situation.

Dead are my people
Gone are my people, but I exist yet,
Lamenting them in my solitude…
Dead are my friends, and in their Death my life is naught but great Disaster. (1-6)

Though Gibran was in exile in America, he along with rest of his fellow Lebanese tried their best to help his fellow countrymen. His poem expresses also a guilty consciousness and he laments the situation. Further, it seems that he romanticizes their failure and their inability.

My people died a painful and shameful Death, and here am I living in plenty And in peace…. (22-24)

They relied on the American government to alleviate the famine, which was beginning to take biblical proportions. Gibran became the unofficial spokesperson of his community. Though they contacted the American State Department, Gibran knew deep down in his heart that the Americans had little time for his home country. In this case, we can draw parallels to the present day situation where the second generation Arab-American poets like Sam Hamod or Fawaz Turki who criticize US vehemently for its impartiality to the Arab cause in the Israel-Palestine tragedy. He writes passionately about the plight of his country men similar to the way the next generation poets would do, regarding the plight of Palestinians and other Arab nationals vis-à-vis Israel unilateralism.

What can an exiled son do for his Starving people, and of what value Unto them this lamentation of an
Absent poet? ...

My people and your people, my Syrian Brother, are dead... What can be
Done for those who are dying? ...
Hunger, and our tears will not quench
Their thirst; what can we do to save
Them between the iron paws of Hunger? ...

Remember, my brother,
That the coin which you drop into
The withered hand starching toward
You is the only golden chain that
Binds your rich heart to the
Loving heart of God ... (52-173)

The concluding lines are an appeal to all those, to help support people dying of hunger and thirst to contribute to the relief effort undertaken by the diaspora community. Similarly, it’s the present day diaspora writers like Turki and H.S. Hamod who fight for Arab cause.

Gibran, like Ameen Rihani, and other intellectuals of his time, was involved in the debate concerning the future of Lebanon. Lebanon’s future lay in the hands of major powers and was suffering from famine that almost annihilated its population. By 1915, communication between Lebanon and the rest of the world had become difficult. The French had blocked the Lebanese coast; Ottoman rule that threatened the lives of civilians in Lebanon made the immigrants fear for their relatives. Under the reign of terror, political and religious leaders were imprisoned and deported. Gibran became an outspoken critic, advocating Arab unity. The yearning for homeland, as in the case of Gibran, paves way for political activism. Social and political activism is sometimes linked to nostalgia.
At the heart of Gibran’s world were the neighboring giant Cedars of Lebanon. Notwithstanding his citizenship in the world in which there was a great fellowship of mutual understanding and empathy. Finally, to prove Gibran’s patriotism, I shall repeat his superb slogan: “Had Lebanon not been my country I would have chosen it to be”. (Labaki 130)

Though Gibran’s reputation is built mainly as a love poet, his literary strength also lies in his political and social works. In his poem, *My Countrymen*, he attacks Lebanese sectarians. It also demonstrates a profound wish to build up in Lebanon what the Ottomans had destroyed. Though the poem speaks of the totalitarian regime of the Ottoman Empire at the time of the First World War, it can be just as applicable to Lebanon’s contemporary scene. He exhorts his people to face realities of Lebanon, to rise and restore Lebanon to its former glory. A wealth of natural imagery displays perfect harmony in the universe, as well as the unyielding insensitivity of the people. There is also an allusion to the hypocrisy of their leaders.

What do you seek, My countrymen?
Do you desire that I build for You gorgeous palace, decorated With words of empty meaning, or Temples roofed with dreams? Or Do you command me to destroy what The liars and tyrants have built? Shall I uproot with my fingers What the hypocrites and the wicked Have implanted? Speak your insane Wishes! (1-11)

Gibran, though he first lamented the situation and sympathized with his fellow countrymen, later on he became very resentful. There’s a strong criticism that runs through out the poem not just of the people but of the Church as well.
Your souls are freezing in the
Clutches of the priests...
Hypocrisy is your religion, and
Falsehood is your life, and
Nothingness is your ending: why,
Then, are you living? ...
You, My Countrymen, were born old
and weak. (112-138)

Gibran, in his biblical style attacks his people. They have become insensitive to
nature, its call, and lost the splendor and vigor of life. The poet urges his people to
fight back, overcome their cowardice, lethargy, and stubbornness. He sums up his
attitude towards them, hurling insults at their incompetence and futility. Distortion
and deception have taken over his people and they are unable to surmount their
lowliness.

Gibran was sensitive to the pains and the pleasures of Lebanon. He could
not have been oblivious to what Lebanon came to represent, a combination, not
only concerning the matters of the flesh but of the spirit as well. The long history
of the East, drenched with the blood of martyrs and illumined with changes of the
spirit, is absorbed in him. According to Mikhail Naimy, Gibran was nurtured on
Lebanon. His love for the country was almost adoration. “It is no wonder that
Gibran would first celebrate the beauties of Lebanon and feel the pains of his
country reverberating in his heart...” (Sarru 51). He vehemently rebelled against
misery and oppression and called for restoration of the “individual
to his divine worth”.

Gibran’s early writings The Nymphs of the Valley, Spirits Rebellious and
The Broken Wings were inspired by the tragic situation in Lebanon and in the
East. Gibran wrote a moving poem to his young Arab-American compatriots, To
Young Americans of Syrian Origin. The poem is both inspirational and poignant:
I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream, a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America.

I believe that you can say to the founders of this great nation, “Here I am, a youth, a young tree whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon, yet I a deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful.” (3-7)

As we can see in this poem, the seeds of migration and multiculturalism can be traced back to the first generation poets like Gibran. As we read in his works, we sense that Gibran is deeply rooted in the hills of Lebanese mountains, though in reality he was living in the United States. Today, we see such themes recurring in the works of second or third generation poets such as Palestine-American writer Naomi Shihab Nye. Immigrant writers have dual identities. Gibran, along with Rihani, came from a generation of Christian Arabs who considered biculturality as a norm. The process of ethno genesis, a creation of something out of the conjunction of Arab and American cultures, is also evident. “Gibran’s writings in English do neither duplicate his themes in Arab is nor parallel those of his American counterparts; they culminate his concern in a human synthesis that combines both East and West. He was aware of the scene of the East as much as he was aware of the opportunities which the West provides” (Sarru 52). Though the immigrant writers were settled in the New World, they stayed loyal to their roots. Their poems can be understood as part American culture and part Arab culture.

In To Young Americans of Syrian Origin, Gibran talks about Abraham Lincoln, the towers of New York, Damascus and Babylon, the rich civilization of the East juxtaposed with the technological West.

It is to stand before the towers of New York and Washington, Chicago and San Francisco saying in your hearts, “I am the descendant of a people that builded Damascus and Babylon and
Tyre and Sidon and Antioch, and I am here to build with you, and with a will."

It is to be proud of being an American, but it is also to be proud that your fathers and mothers came from a land upon which God laid His gracious hand and raised His messengers. (21-26)

He has incorporated the concepts of nostalgia, biculturality, and exile in this poem, which he dedicates to young Syrian Americans. As early settlers, it's their responsibility, to nurture in the younger generation a love for their home country. His message is to exploit the opportunities offered in the New World, but always remembers that they belong to a rich eastern civilization, especially to a country where God has raised His messenger, and should always be proud of it. It was necessary to remind the younger generation of their roots, and to encourage them to come together as a cultural group and not to be drowned in the modern, free, technologically advanced American culture. So smell, sights and sounds of Arabia, both natural and human, provide rich imagery to his poetry.

All forms of innovation and creativity introduced by the Mahjar poets in to Arabic literature were faced with scathing criticism and intense emotional opposition from the traditionalists. Gibran, however, was aware of the fact that the major poets before him in Arabic literature had defied the rules of syntax and grammar in their brilliant innovative experimentation with poetic techniques. His experimentation in prose rather than poetry allowed him to perfect the prose-poem as a new genre, freeing him from the established poetic diction of the decadent period in Arabic literature. He was therefore able to create a totally new rhythm with a life of its own, emanating from within the syntactical framework, and, as such, his poetic prose, or prose poetry, constitutes a unique contribution to modern Arabic literature. (Bushrui, Jenkins 12)

A frequently asked question with regard to the Pen Bond Association is whether it was a political organization under the guise of an academy of letters and whether Gibran was a political activist with a specific political agenda. Naimy defended the stance of both the movement and its leader saying,
Gibran joined Arrabitah in the hope of participating in the process of education and enlightening the immigrants to achieve the liberation of Syria... He never had any political affiliations... Arrabitah's political stance... was to first and foremost to bring about, and as soon as possible, the independence and autonomy of Syria and the Arab world. (Bushrui, Jenkins 193)

Pen Bond Association found it expedient to enhance the French role in the area to a degree that it might help to achieve total liberation that was also the position adopted by Gibran himself. However, there were members who were politically active like Ameen Rihani who profoundly believed in the American democracy and its role in the region.

By 1921, Khalil Gibran's name was increasingly becoming well known in the Arabic and English worlds. The Madman and The Forerunner helped him establish himself as a writer in English with great skill. In 1923, Gibran published a small book of barely 20,000 words. It was philosophical in nature and mystical in tone. The Prophet was hardly a book one would expect to capture the attention of the reading public. Today, it occupies a unique place in world literature. It became one of the most published books of the century and was translated into more than twenty languages. It also represents the peak of Gibran's literary career.

In The Prophet, East and West meet in a mystic union, unparalleled in modern literature. It was inspired by the vision of Blake, the Bible, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Romantics, popular American schools of thought, Ralph Emerson, Walt Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ameen Rihani and Christian and Sufi mysticism. The Irish writer George Russell thought that the East had not spoken with such a beauty since Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali. Mikhail Naimy felt the passionate heart of his friend pulsating through every page of the book. He thought that the message of The Prophet is "...man's end was nothing short of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence and immortality and in that light compassion, gentleness, forgiveness and kindred virtues become necessities of living. To deviate from them is to inflict upon your self" (Bushrui, Jenkins 224).

Gibran's masterpiece is often judged unjustly as a romanticized version of universal, philosophical and religious teachings. The reality is that it is a work of remarkable compassion, insight, hope and inspiration with a timeless message. It combines the dignity of the Christian Bible and wisdom of the Sufis of Islam,
phrased with a simplicity and rhythmical quality that makes it accessible to a wide readership. The success of the book lies in the fact that its choice of praise, rather than criticism and its positive approach, appeal to the general reading public. The work’s unique mixture of poetry and insight, humanitarianism and inspiration also add to its advantage.

Almustafa preaches twenty-six poetic sermons on a wider range of subjects like love, children, marriage, beauty, pleasure and many more, before his final departure from the land of Orphalese. It is Almitra, the seeress, who although aware of his desire to return, asks him for his words of wisdom. Almustafa’s departure for the “isle of his birth” symbolizes his return to the unborn state from which, as is promised in the end, he will again be reincarnated. Gibran’s prophet like Krishna in Bhagavadgita, reincarnates not only out of the need for continued self-realization, but also to provide an example for the spiritually uninitiated. (Bushru, Jenkins 226) “A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind and another woman shall bear me” (114).

The Western critics have often not judged Gibran’s mysticism accurately. For, the Western mind has often been arrogantly unresponsive to mysticism, blatantly rejecting any vision of cultural unity. There is an extraordinary diversity of critical opinion about the literary and philosophical worth of Gibran’s works, particularly the English ones. On one hand, there are those who criticize him for being effusive, sentimental and melodramatic. And on the other, there are those who blindly worship him. Gibran’s masterpiece occupies an ambiguous place in the field of English literature. It is neither pure literature nor pure philosophy. Some critics suggest that we need to adopt new critical mechanisms to assess this kind of literature that derives from two separate cultural traditions.

Gibran had this uncanny ability to unify his mysticism with his personal and social reality. The Prophet for Gibran was almost like fulfilling a dream that was closest to his heart. It is obvious that when he wrote the book, he had Lebanon in his mind. Almustafa realizes his dream, when he returns to his homeland after twelve years’ absence. “Deep is your longing for the land of your memories and the dwelling-place of your greater desires...” (9). It is quite likely that Gibran speaks of his own nostalgia, his own desire to return to the land of his birth. His reference to the hills is indication that he is thinking about Lebanon.

These mountains and plains are a cradle and a stepping-stone...
And though I have eaten berries among the hills when you would have had me sit at your board... (104-105)

Homesickness, nostalgia, longing for the mother country, they are themes, almost all Arab American writers, old and the new, hold close to their hearts. Gibran once wrote, "My longing for my country almost melts my heart" (Bushrui, Jenkins 267). It is fascinating to see, even among contemporary writers, who quite often involved in ethnic and US citizenship issues, speak about mountains, gardens, Arab dance and music in their works.

In the book, when Almustafa, whose name means the “chosen one” in Arabic, sees the ship that will take him back to his own country, he is faced with conflicting emotions of joy and sorrow. The joy of being set free from exile and the sorrow of having to leave the people of Orphalese, whom he has come to know and love as his own.

And in the twelfth year, on the seventh day of Ielool, the month of reaping, he climbed the hill without the city walls and looked seaward; and he beheld his ship coming with the mist.

Then the gates of his heart were flung open, and his joy flew over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul.

But as he descends the hill, sadness came upon him, and he thought in his heart:

How shall I go in peace and without sorrow? Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city. (1)

Gibran could very well be talking about himself, a situation that he, himself might face one day. Gibran could be the prophet of Orphalese, New York and Lebanon the “isle of birth”. It applies to most immigrants, not just Arab-Americans, who after living in an adopted country for a long period of time, find it difficult to leave without pain and regret, though they are returning to their country of birth. “Long were the days of pain I have spent within its wall, and long were the nights of aloneness; and who can depart from his pain and his aloneness without regret?” (1). The people of Orphalese, realizing that the Prophet is about to leave, desert
their fields, vineyards and all their work to beg him to stay. They too, have come
know him and love him. But the voice of the Prophet is stern, but tears did fall
upon his breast.

This was the way Gibran chose to pour the essence of his contemplations
of men and women, their lives.

He created a mouthpiece called “Almustafa” endowing him with a
soul so enlightened that his hearers called him “prophet of God”. The
very name “Prophet” impresses with dignity and inspires reverence. A word said by a man clothed in prophetic majesty
carries much more weight and magnitude than when said by a
common man. Thus with that one word “prophet” Gibran the artist
raised to the dignity and height of prophesy what Gibran the poet
had to say, even before he said it. (Naimy, Khalil Gibran 186)

The secret behind Gibran’s mastery could be his own reservoir of spiritual life. Of
course, his background has so much to do with it: his identity as an Arab
immigrant in America, and his birth place, which is more than any other place, a
melting-pot of religions, cultures and ideas. His Maronite Christian upbringing
and his Arabic culture which was influenced not only by his own religion but also
by Islam, especially by the mysticism of the Sufis.

Since early childhood, he had been moved by the teachings of the gospel
and in particular by the figure of Christ, eventually producing his own unique and
powerful portrait in Jesus, the Son of Man. Christ is also one of the models for
Almustafa in The Prophet, and the form of latter’s teaching bears some
comparison to the Sermon on the Mount in its eloquent guidance for humanity.
Mary Haskell, Gibran’s lifelong benefactress, describes in her journals that for
Gibran, Christ was the most powerful personality in history, who “first perceived
the Kingdom of Heaven in man’s own heart, a world of beauty, of goodness, of
reality, of truth” (Naimy, Khalil Gibran 229). Similarly, Gibran’s depiction of the
essence of Christ’s teaching is close to the central message of The Prophet.

It is widely accepted that Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra has
influenced Gibran’s The Prophet. Consciously or unconsciously, Gibran seems to
have set his mind and imagination on the great German’s style and form. Gibran
first thought of the title “The Counsels” for his chef d’œuvre, which resembles
Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra. Both works are written in biblical language
and both have prophetic figures that speak of wisdom, retire to the land of birth
after a being in exile for a period of time. Though both books share a similar form
and style, they are far apart in substance.

The teachings of The Prophet correspond closely to the first level of Sufi
teachings, which concern personal behavior and the eternal and fundamental
subjects central to life. Gibran’s attachment to Sufi philosophy is seen very clearly
in The Tempest, where he wrote three essays describing the greatest figures of
Sufi literature. He could have been thinking about his own Almustafa in these
essays, which were written years before he wrote his masterpiece.

In The Prophet, though the language and the sentiment make us think
constantly of the Bible and the English Romantics, the spirit and the message is
Sufi to its very core. Again, Gibran brings the East and the West together through
his diverse ideology. The book is the sum of Gibran’s Sufi thought and social
creed. It contains, in one form or another, all the major Sufi ideas: the universal
self, unity of time and place, unity of religion, unity of human kind and collective
responsibility, the divine in the human soul, and the relationship between essence
and form. Both in this and in other writings, Gibran makes references to the Sufi
ideal of the “Great self”.

Above all, Almustafa can be interpreted as Christ and Mohammad merged
into one, the embodiment of al-insan al-kamil, the “Perfect Man” of Sufi tradition.
The Eastern concept of the perfect man is paralleled in the West by that of the
universal man and its variants that include Nietzsche’s superman. This concept of
universal man is derived from the Jewish mysticism that the idea of the universal
man or the universe as a single giant man composed of four elements is can be
clearly seen in the works of William Blake.

Blake’s influence on Gibran was enduring and lasting. He played a
specific role in Gibran’s life, for it was in his shadow, that the younger poet found
support and confirmation for his own early doctrines. Their reading of the Bible,
their rebellion against corruption in the church, and their socio-political visions
were similar. To them art and poetry were the same. Both poets interpreted the
Bible and Christianity in very much the same way.

They also shared the basic prophetic vision and apocalyptic view of the
universe. Throughout their works, the messianic mission of the poet and the
function of the art were clear.
The poet is to guide his people back to Eden, and painting has to be a step from Nature toward the infinite. The Bible remained for Gibran as it is for Blake, a constant and true source of prophetic inspiration that presented a visionary narrative of the life of man between creation and apocalypse. The philosophy of both men derived its essence from the teachings of Jesus, and never did it divorce itself from its Christian foundations. (El-Hage 141)

There are strong parallels between Gibran’s *The Prophet* and William Blake’s *Los*, the prophet of eternity in the epic poems *Jerusalem* and *Milton*. Like Almustafa, Los’s greatest task is to turn the eyes of man inward into the world of thought, into eternity, into ever expanding bosom of God. Another similarity is that Gibran’s prophet is the creator of a better tomorrow. His main concern was to improve the spiritual and physical relations of men, and as Gibran said, he was modeled after Jesus. Los was both the creator and the great champion of mankind, who also resembles and supports Jesus. Both prophets were revealers of basic truth, spiritual revolutionists and inspirers of the two poets. “They were visionaries and their vision was the most practical thing on earth, Gibran said, and also eternal, because in Eternity all vision is vision, Blake answered” (El-Hage 86).

The idea of writing about a prophet who loved the people and they who love him, started to grow on his mind when he was about sixteen years old. He spent the first half of his life writing it, and but actually lived all his life conforming to the idea. He devoted his life to the fulfillment of this promise. In the end, he came close to being the prophet himself. Gibran always claimed that it was not he but the Prophet.

The idea of God occupied Gibran’s mind until the end of his life and at various times he seems to have developed different, although related beliefs. In *The Prophet*, he appears to have maintained a pantheistic view of God and Nature. Almustafa says in his sermon on religion;

> And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles.

> Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.
And look into space; you shall see Him stretching His arms in the
lightning and descending in rain.

You shall see Him smiling in flowers, then rising and waving His
hands in trees. (91-92)

In pantheism, the central belief is that God is latent within everyone as a greater
self, and that this is attained through aspiration, which is comparable to prayer in
religion.

Almustafa says, “Like a procession you walk together towards our godself” (49). Life is a journey and God is the starting point and the destination. Thus
the journey represents a union with god. And the journey is an inner one, a
spiritual one, in contrast to the travels of the majority of the twentieth century men
and women. The idea of journey can also be traced to Sufism. The individual
begins from any point of the circumference and towards the centre; and he or she
will merge with the divine presence. In The Prophet, Gibran successfully brings
together the religions and the philosophies of the East and the West, in an effort to
create a religious unity.

Gibran’s magnum opus is a written for all times. The small black book that
made its appearance in an overcrowded New York book-market may have looked
unassuming. But the legendary writer knew how to make a perfect plant with its
roots buried deep in the soil of human life, thus assuring it of constant substance.
Gibran’s friend and fellow Arab American writer, Mikhail Naimy thus described
The Prophet:

So long as men experience birth and death; so long as they eat and
drink, love and hate, marry and beget children, laugh and weep; so
long as men are men, just so long will they seek the meanings of
birth and death, of love and hate and all the other relations that bind
them to each other and to the nature about them, and who will find
comfort in Gibran’s interpretation of those relations. The style of
the book may some day fade, or become out-dated; but the essence
of the book will neither fade, nor become outmoded. (Naimy, Khalil
Gibran 194)
The concept of unity of religions or bringing together religions of the East and the West, especially Christianity and Islam, is seen very clearly in *Khalil the Heretic*, in *Spirit Rebellious*. This book announced Gibran as a social and religious rebel. It was banned and Gibran was excommunicated from the Church and exiled from the country. At that time, Lebanon was under Ottoman rule, a typical corrupt state where the Prince and the Priest, both exploited the poor and the weak.

Hear us, O Liberty;
Bring mercy, Oh Daughter of Athens;
Rescue us, Oh Sister of Rome;
Advise us, Oh Companion of Moses;
Help us, Oh Beloved of Mohammad;
Teach us, Oh Bride of Jesus;
Strengthen our hearts so we may live,
Or harden our enemies so we may perish
And live in peace eternally. (336)

*Khalil the Heretic* is where Gibran, in a rebellious mood, launches his strongest and most direct attack against the Church as an institution. It is because of this story that the book was burnt at the market place in Beirut. More than anywhere else, in this book Gibran wages a holy war against the unholy trinity-State, Society and Church.

Khalil, the protagonist, is a monk, who enters northern Lebanon’s wealthiest monastery, and becomes conscious of the fact that the other monks are violating the teachings of Christ. Khalil is beaten and thrown out of the monastery for speaking out against them. The poem is an appeal to all, to Mohammad, Christ and Greek and Roman gods to save mankind from evil deeds, such as injustice and violence, especially among those who preache a religion.

Through their wickedness we were divided amongst ourselves; and better to keep their thrones and be at ease, they armed the Druze to fight the Arab, and stirred up the Shiite to attack the Sunnite, and encouraged the Kurdish to butcher the Bedouin,
and cheered the Mohammedan to dispute with the Christian.

Until when shall a brother continue killing his own brother upon his mother's bosom? Until when shall the Cross be kept apart from the Crescent before the eyes of God? (335-336)

It seems the situation has not changed since Gibran's time, for he could well be describing the happenings of present day. He condemns and attacks religious extremism, when people kill each other in the name of God. The poet's desire was to reconcile Islam and Christianity. Being practical, he foresaw the dangers of sectarianism in Lebanon, as well as in the West.

Gibran was a firm believer in religious unity. His creed, as we have seen in his works, involves different beliefs, which include Judeo-Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. Once, the poet declared that he "kept Jesus in one half of the bosom and Mohammad in the other" (Bushru, Jenkins 6). He forged his own personal spiritual philosophy in which he would connect all the traditions and join William Blake in declaring that all religions are one. He wrote: "In my thoughts there is only one universal religion whose varied paths are but the fingers of the loving hand of the Supreme Being" (El-Hage 156).

Gibran again writes in John the Madman, that Church is a corrupt institution hungry for power and prestige. Its members are politicians, investing their authority for the material and earthly gains. The priests not only ignore, but also misinterpret, willingly, the teachings of Jesus, to strengthen their position, and add to the ignorance of the people. This is also manifested in the parable, The Blessed City, in The Madman. Gibran believes all men and women are equal in front of God. He argues in The Broken Wings that we are all born religious but a truly religious man does not embrace only one religion.

A Tear and a Smile includes much of Gibran's early works, most of which were published in Arabic newspapers. Many critics believe that this book contains his basic doctrine. This book exhibits somewhat emotional philosophy in its most untamed form. If the parables and observations lack the serenity of The Prophet or The Madman, they have compensating vigor, almost a rashness of approach, natural to a young writer who had been born in the West. A Tear and a Smile
seems more “eastern” than his later writings. It is probable that these works written first in Arabic, meant for his countrymen at home and in exile.

Gibran viewed A Tear and a Smile as a retrospective work of his youth. The tears of the homesick young poet were more abundant than the smiles. The work reflects the estrangement of Gibran’s early years in exile and the smiles are the expression of the precious moments, when Lebanon becomes transformed in his imagination, into a metaphysical homeland. Gibran represents the idea of returning and homecoming, so evident in many of the mystical traditions of the world, with the metaphor of sea. Rain is the weeping of water that falls over hills and fields estranged from the “Mother Sea” while running brooks sound the happy song of homecoming and reveal a burning desire to return to homeland.

I emerge from the heart of the sea and
Soar with the breeze. When I see a field in
Need, I descend and embrace the flowers and
The trees in a million little ways...
I am the sigh of the sea;
The laughter of the field;
The tears of heaven.

So with love-
Sighs from the deep sea of affection;
Laughter from the colorful field of the spirit;
Tears from the endless heaven of memories. (Song of the Rain 19-37)

The theme of coexistence, of people of different religions, countries living in harmony, is dominant in this collection. Gibran sees all human beings as children of the same universe.

Speak not peoples and laws and
Kingdoms, for the whole earth is
My birthplace and all humans are
My brothers. (*Leave Me, My Blamer* 61-64)

Also tied to this theme is that of religious unity, which we discussed about, with regard to *The Prophet*. Gibran has established himself as a believer of more than one religion.

I heard the teachings of Confucius;
I listened to Brahma’s wisdom;
I sat by the Buddha under the Tree of Knowledge.
Yet here am I, existing with ignorance
And heresy...

Then I witnessed the might of Babylon;
I learned of the glory of Egypt;
I viewed the warring greatness of Rome.
Yet my earlier teachings showed the Weakness and sorrow of those achievements.

I conversed with the magicians of Ain Dour;
I debated with the priests of Assyria;
I gleaned with depth from the prophets of Palestine.
Yet, I am still seeking the truth.

I gathered the wisdom from quiet India;
I probed the antiquity of Arabia;
I heard all that can be heard.
Yet my heart is deaf and blind. (*Song of Man* 10-31)
Yet again, Gibran is bringing the East and the West together. In fact he refers to great civilizations of the world, Babylon, India and Egypt of the East and Rome of the West. Thus Gibran unfolds a universal vision and a timeless message. This book marks the beginning of more mature and more affirmative responses to life. Like many of the romantic poets of the East or the West, his youthful fights were towards eternity and away from a world that seemed largely in the hands of injustice and violence. The recoil of a sensitive mind from reality, frequently takes revolutionary forms of which political revolution is merely the most obvious. In this particular collection, Gibran’s revolt was not directed toward institutions so much as toward the individuals, who became the accomplices of greed, injustice and bloodshed. His usual methods, as we have seen earlier, are parable and allegory.

Most of the stories and tales in A Tear and a Smile take place in a field, a valley or in rural surroundings where the poet roams alone to escape the noise of the city. Unlike Blake who refused to see in nature a haven and an escape from the world of man, Gibran, more like Wordsworth and Emerson, rejoices in the fields. In the poem, The Life of Love, poet walks down the valleys with his beloved. Gibran conceives nature as full of love and it follows that every gift from her is an act of fulfilling nature’s promise to man.

Come my beloved; let us walk amidst the knolls,
For the snow is water, and Life is alive from its
Slumber and 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. (1-6)

Gibran loved the mountains. In his work, Before the Throne of Beauty, it is easy to identify the poet who flees from the clamor of the city and finds refuge in the mountains, the streams and the fields.

One heavy day I ran away
from the grim face of society and the dizzying
clamour of the city and directed my weary steps to
the spacious valley. I pursued the beckoning course
of the rivulet and the musical sounds of the birds
until I reached a lonely spot where the flowing
branches of the trees prevented the sun from touching
the earth. (1-8)

Between his soul and nature, the poet finds harmony and in the valleys, he finds
justice. He feels safer in the nature, than with humans, because man is a creature
who kills his fellowmen in the battlefield. For him, the city is corrupted and its
inhabitants are wolves of prey. Gibran believes that nature has healing powers and
when man lives with nature, he is in a state of original innocence like the first man
in the Garden of Eden. In contrast, man in the city is in a fallen state, which can
only be cured through love.

Although Gibran speaks of nature as a living being bearing the impression
of the Universal Soul and as the mother of all living beings that owe obedience to
her, nevertheless, in his beliefs regarding the relation between nature and man,
Gibran departs from Wordsworth as he did before from Blake. Like Emerson, he
projects his own moods and feelings on nature and makes her echo them again.
On many occasions, instead of Gibran’s mood being a reflection of nature, nature
instead reflects that of the poet, changing in appearance and significance with his
own state of mind. It is true that Gibran found both nature and the self to be
sources of true happiness; however, in this particular aspect, one of them has to
dominate the other. The poet was successful sometimes in establishing a harmony
between man and nature, but on many occasions the self emerges as the superior
power transforming nature into a mirror that reflects its own inner images.

It is not to be wondered that in almost all his works, written throughout his
life, memories of his ancient but beautiful country are woven into his biblical and
messianic rhetoric. Though he lived in exile, in Boston, in New York, he never
gave up his parent country. It is a well-known fact that he drew his references
from Lebanon. He was obsessed with mountains and trees, especially the Cedars,
the same way Naomi Shihab Nye is in love with Figs. He spoke with awe and
nostalgia, whenever he referred to the landscape. Lebanon is a unique country,
particularly in its geography and its ethnic composition.
Lebanon of the sacred grove, of the dreaming ruins of the temple of Astarte, of the lofty snow-capped great ocean-going vessels which carried the hardy cedar to the pharaohs, and the weaves, purple dyes, glass, sculpture, and alphabets to the Greeks; a land of poets, seers, and prophets who brought their moral revelations to a barbaric world. (Bushrui, Jenkins 5)

Gibran's hometown, Bisharri, is situated in a breathtaking mountain landscape. As a child he grew up playing among the hills, streams, and waterfalls. Trees and in particular, cedars had a special place in his heart. In the poem The Procession, Gibran uses the image of the tree to suggest peaceful continuity of nature contrasted with the clamor and confusion of urban living. Much of what Gibran gave to the world, he owed it to his homeland, especially, his awareness of interchange of culture and artistic influences by which Lebanon is very much rich. This land provided the master poet the social and geographical context for most of his works. Perhaps, most of all, he was indebted to Lebanon for his awareness of the harmonious coexistence of people of different faiths and also for his apprehension of the catastrophes that result from the breakdown of religious and social harmony. During his lifetime, he did witness the consequences of such breakdowns and he saw the reciprocal destruction and horrors of famine in his own country.

Nostalgia is a strong feature in Mahjar or immigrant literature. The memories of the home country, of the land they loved and left, the land where the ancestors lived and the land that ultimately became a frustrated dream, haunted the émigré writers through out their lives, especially in alien surroundings and in their isolation. In spite of the money they earned, there was emptiness and it was a bitter exile. Love and yearning for the home country, where simplicity and spirituality are a way of life, and hopes for political emancipation frequently found expression in Mahjar works. Affluence had attracted them to the West and they were forced to live in land with machines and technology. A new civilization geared towards scientific, industrial and material advancement at the cost of human considerations, as the immigrant poets pointed out, a sharp contrast to the life in Lebanon.

Apart from nostalgia, these poets were sensitive to suffering and to the spiritual dimension. Most of them, that includes Gibran, resigned to a philosophic
acceptance in the Eastern spirituality. Like Gibran, they introduced biblical themes. In spite of many Western ideas, immigrant poetry looked more Eastern in spirit. In comparison to the works of contemporary Arab American writers, their themes differ in spirit and in content. Although the longing for the home country that their parents or grandparents left is still part of their works, in essence, they deal with different themes such as Arab political activism or in the case of Fawaz Turki, the plight of Palestinians. The modern poets narrow down the universal oppression, sectarian violence or racism into specific contexts. And their rhetoric is aggressive and more outspoken in contrast to the prophetic and philosophical tone of Gibran. They write in a more simple language with a specific objective. In post 9/11 atmospheres, life has not been easy for Arab Americans. The diaspora writers take up the burden and the responsibility of raising their voices against unjust marginalization, American partiality or Israel unilateralism.

Gibran was an extraordinary man in his ability to penetrate into language and shatter its borders. He probed into the Arabic language with novelty and innovative style, a style that was simple yet salient, characterized with emotion. Gibran’s style and language secured for his writing a lasting fame. Further, Gibran’s English works were marked with unprecedented character, which attracted readers from across the world, and they remain popular till the present day.

In Gibran’s works the two worlds meet in a unique consciousness that destroy barriers between the East and the West. The West acquired a new flavor and the East a dosage of thought that helped bring forth an awakening from a deep slumber. Gibran strongly emphasized the concepts of justice, freedom, belief in faith, religious unity, peace and many more. Though he was truly a man with a universal vision, he remained loyal to Lebanon. As Mary Haskell writes in her memoirs, Gibran never applied for American citizenship. He was quite content to live with his permanent residence status. He died holding on to his Lebanese citizenship. (Zoghaib 3)

As Arab Americans, second and third generation writers continue the themes that he dealt with, even today. Gibran was a truly diasporic writer. Exile, nostalgia, biculturality are recurrent themes in most of his works along with religious unity and the union of the East and the West. His narrators and characters often speak for him, as in the case of the prophet Almustafa. Gibran
understood the emotions of an immigrant in isolation. Also, he wrote to the young Syrian Americans growing up in an adopted country. He reminds them that though they live in the New World, in their heart and in their conscience, they should remain loyal to the Old World. Gibran, himself set the example of never giving up the home country, even in the worst of times. Though he was best known as a philosophical poet, he was also a political activist who campaigned for his native country.

Today, Gibran is considered the most successful and famous Arab American writer in the world. All of Gibran’s writings express a passionate urge to improve the humanity, exploited and corrupt. Some exhibit a prevailing melancholy for the cruel waste of life lost to poverty, injustice and institutionalized violence. In an age when it was not fashionable to do so, Gibran spoke fervently for human rights. “With moving intensity that characterizes truly significant utterance, Gibran’s writings project timeless universal truths, expressing passionately the deep human yearning and hunger for true liberation” (Bushrui, Jenkins 22).

Gibran’s message to the world is a healing one, despite the technical advances, the human psyche is still left with a wound in the soul. The modern world needs visionary poets like Gibran. His quest to understand the tensions between spirit and exile anticipated the needs of an age witnessing the spiritual and intellectual standstill of modernity itself. His atmospheric writings reveal the penetrating vision of a seer, who without crusading or preaching, warns of the terrible dangers that befall an epoch intent on border consciousness, material greed, and blistering yet blind change. His work, set forth in the form of a simple lyrical beauty, contains profound depth of meaning for all who endeavor to take on the momentous challenges of today.