

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

The Notion of Acceptance and Experiencing Life: Al-Mustafa as a reformist Prophet in Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.1.07

Abstract

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, Arab writers began to come to America to escape the socio-political and economic hardships of their countries. They already had a strongly established literature from as early as the fifth century and brought with them valuable literary works. Their literature was borne of their views of real life, humanity, love and the beauty of nature. One of the Arab writers during this period was Gibran Khalil Gibran (1882-1931) the Lebanese writer, poet, artist and the famous Arab American philosopher. Gibran was influenced by the early Arabic writers, both intellectually and morally. The present paper will showcase how Gibran's masterpiece "*The Prophet*" accepts and experiencing life through Al-Mustafa as the protagonist throughout the story. Gibran views the world as a place that lacks love and peace, and where individual's life is deprived and corrupted. He wanted to free the world from corruption, oppression, hatred and domination and wanted to build a society based on models of stability and equilibrium.

Keywords- Humanity, Love, Stability and Equilibrium

Introduction

Such is the Prophet, who arrives
Veiled in the cloak of future thought
'Mid people hid in ancient garb,
Who could not see the gift he brought.
He is a stranger to this life
Stranger to those who praise or blame
For he upholds the Torch of Truth,
Although devoured by the flame. (*The Procession* 52)

The Prophet (1923) was written by Gibran Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese-American writer, poet, artist and the famous Arab American philosopher. He was one of the world's great

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

writers who woke the peoples of the world to the voices of a larger humanity. He was also the bearer of faith in the unity of all religions and oneness of all mankind. It is a volume of twenty-eight prose poems representing wise sayings, and wisdom of a prophetic quality. It presents Gibran's views on our day to day life and the universal problem as a whole. It is written in the language of unity in diversity. The chapters of the book deal with the universal theme of all aspects of life, love, marriage and children. It is also a theme of unity of religions and oneness of mankind. Gibran's writings are known for their prophetic tone against the evils that reigned in his beloved homeland that bring humanity to decadence. His message is a healing one. He wanted to free the world from corruption, oppression, hatred and domination. He wanted to build a society based on models of stability and equilibrium, to draw patterns of peace from all angles and to invigorate the call for spiritual lifestyle. His writings also penetrate to our emotional and spiritual awareness. Throughout the story, Gibran speaks through Al-Mustafa, his mouthpiece, by preaching commands, disciplines and rituals. Gibran allows the readers to feel that the Prophet (Al-Mustafa), who is the central figure, does not belong to this world, but he came to Orphalese to teach lessons on humanity and to correct the society. Gibran sees the world as a place that lacks love and peace, and where individual's life is worse and corrupted. He also wanted to reunite the barriers between the East and the West. He belonged to two different cultures, by showing a sense of self-alienation, injustice, and social responsibility. This is noticeable at both the beginning and at the end of the book. Waterfield regard Gibran's writings as an "evolutionary philosophy" (Waterfield, 1998, p. 195). Gibran played the role as a poet and an artist to develop human consciousness and helping the human soul in its journey towards a higher order, a more divine realm.

Joseph Sheban, in his biographical notes says; "Gibran has been described as The Mystic, The Philosopher, The Religious, The Heretic, The Serene, The Rebellious and The Ageless". (*Mirrors of the Soul* 1). His works reveal his familiarity with the works of the ancient Lebanese, the high priests of Eshtar, Baal and Tamuz.

Bushrui asserts that the language of *The Prophet* (1923) represents a unity in diversity and there is a "a passionate belief in the healing power of universal love and unity of being" (Bushrui, 1987:68). His writings are mostly based in matters of ethnicity, religion and cultural diversity. Similar to Blake, Gibran also thinks that the whole of the human soul is distributed to partial souls, and God rests in the mind and moves in the air. He told his trusted friend Mikhail Naimy; "I shall be happy when men shall say about me what they said of Blake": 'he is a madman'. Madness in poetry is wisdom. Madness in search for God is the highest form of worship" (Naimy 89).

In an interview, when Gibran was asked how he came to write *The Prophet*, he answered: "Did I write it? It wrote me" (Daoudi 99). During the time he wrote the book *The Prophet* (1923), his philosophical orientation represented the world as hierarchal, and his motive is to change the social relations of power and domination. In this regard, Ludescher

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

states that “Gibran was not interested in reforming the corrupt social system by replacing oppressive laws with progressive ones, but instead was advocating absolute freedom” (Ludescher 114).

As Fairclough points out, the text is not only concerned with language games and word-play, but also it has invisible sets of values, beliefs and ideas crystallized in myriad social circumstances. He states that; “the question of discourse is the question of how text figure (in relation to other moments) in how people represent the world, including themselves and their productive activities. Different discourses are different ways of representing associated with different positions” (170).

The Prophet (1923) begins with a man named Al-Mustafa who lived on an island called Orphalese. The nearby people consider him as a sage, but he is from a different place, and has been waiting for twelve years for the right ship to take him home. He sees his ship coming into the harbour, from a hill above the town, and realizes his sadness and loneliness to leave the people whom he knew. Before he leaves the place, he is asked to tell the philosophy of his life and to speak the truth to the crowd. *The Prophet* (1923) provides timeless spiritual wisdom and teachings on love, marriage, beauty, friendship, laws, pleasure, religions, complexity of life, egoism and also violent patterns of the dominating world, corrupted and oppressive. These are some of the moral drawings showcased in the novel. In a similar vein, Bushrui and Jenkins comment that “[i]n all his work he [Gibran] expressed the deep-felt desire of men and women for a kind of spiritual life that renders the material world meaningful and imbues it with dignity” (1).

Gibran wants to teach people and advise people on how to get rid of evil and vices, especially after the mankind had experienced the war’s destructive power. He also looks for the universal themes that bind human being with religion, race or political tendency. Hence, by emulating the words of Nassar and Gibran we can assert that “Gibran was of the mold of William Blake: both angry social reformer of Old Cultural contexts and the Prophet of an expanding cosmic consciousness beyond any need of a given cultural context” (Nassar and Gibran 24).

In the text *The Prophet* Gibran allows the reader to feel that the Prophet Al-Mustafa, who is the central figure, does not belong to this world, but he came to Orphalese to teach lessons on humanity and to correct the society under the principles of all the major religions. The book has been divided into chapters dealing with universal themes such as love, marriage, children, joy, sorrow, reason and passion, family, education, self-reliance and death. It also focuses on human relationships with nature and with God. He sees the world as a place that lacks love and peace, and where individual’s life is worse and corrupted. The self-explanatory note of Gibran’s teachings can be seen in this story through the mouthpiece Al-Mustafa who preached spiritual teachings, commandments, disciplines, and rituals. Al-Mustafa has, in fact, taken and amalgamated the messages from all religions.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

Gibran rejects the materialistic world, and believes in a peaceful world with mutual happiness and understanding towards humanity. He deals with the invisible spiritual dimension of human and deeply looks into the inner feelings and listens to spiritual call by paying great attention to people, nature and soul. In the text *Reason and Passion* Gibran has this to say:

Your soul is oftentimes a battlefield, upon which your reason and your judgement Wage war against passion and your appetite. Would that I could be the peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and the rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody. (*Reason and Passion*).

The Prophet is Gibran's literary and artistic masterpiece. It remained during the 20th century America's best-selling book, after *The Bible*. The book is said to be a testimony to the genius of Gibran. Before the Prophet was published, Gibran's desire was to satisfy people's spiritual hunger of the world by telling Mary Haskell:

The world is hungry, Mary, and I have seen and heard the hunger of the world, and if

this thing is bread it will find a place in the heart of the world, and if it is not bread it will at least make the hunger of the world deeper and higher.

A prophet thinks of his mission to save people, humanity and civilization. His prophetic ideas teach that man created God, heaven and hell are but a creation of the human mind, and above all, religion should reconnect man to the universe. Gibran a sage poet has become the personification of a romantic vision- a vision that posits the interconnectivity of the human and non-human soul. His immigrant status has made him a living link between the East and the West. His works mostly traces the unity beneath the various forms of religions. He has become the voice of global consciousness and his works continue to remain an inspiration to millions throughout the world. He has a spiritual quest towards a universal humanity. Whatever he wrote or painted it triggers in humans, ultimately leading to a spiritual quest and realization, capable of establishing universal humanity. As Sartre has put it:

A writer is committed when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective. (57)

He harmoniously blended his mystic beliefs by continuing various faiths and in an inner, personal experience of the divine with his Romantic ideals of Universal love and unification of the human race.

As a firm believer in the "Divine Unity", his work addresses the common and the universal. This can be traced to the poet-prophet image that Gibran started to evolve into the 1920's. For Waterfield this "Romantic fusion of poet and prophet was undoubtedly Gibran's best opportunity for bringing East and West together". (238).

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

Al-Mustafa believes in the power of human soul. His tone is filled with consolation, hope and compassion for humanity, seen to be in need for self-realization. Just as, Nietzsche speaks about good and evil, Gibran too has this to say:

You are good when you are one with yourself
Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil
For a divided house is a den of thieves; it is only a divided house
And a ship without a rudder may wander aimlessly perilous isles yet sink not
to the bottom. (73).

Gibran was an Arab immigrant, who was a pioneer of Modern Arabic American literature. In *The Prophet*, he seeks to influence his readers to reject sectarian and nationalistic uses of religion and to embrace the unity of the world with religions and ethnicities. He traced the cultural and literary influence of both the East and the West on his writing. Translator and editor Joseph Sheban observes that:

Gibran's thirst had taken him to the fountains of Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, Voltaire, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Jefferson, Emerson, and even to Lincoln" (Sheban 54).

He became a mediator between the East and the Western Worlds, attempting to bridge the gap between the two. He advocated a joining of his heritage and his new environment. He incorporated Western themes into his Arabic literature, while making his own contribution to the West.

Gibran was influenced by the early Arabic writers, both intellectually and morally. In *The Prophet* he endowed his writings with spiritual, emotional and intellectual properties: "forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair". (12)

Most of his Gibran's writings and drawings put forth the unification of nature and a relationship of love and harmony. He stressed the sanctity of nature and our duty to protect and sanctify nature. He condemned the harmful effects of industrialization and urbanisation with materialism. Man is also a part of nature. Nature is also the link that binds us one to another. He romanticized nature and found it an inspirational power for his poetry. He regards human life and the life of nature as complementary. "Sustaining each other in a perfect symbiosis". (SusheilBushrui "Kahlil Gibran: Poet of the ecology of life"). The village of Bisharri played a significant role in Gibran's romantic formation as a poet, painter and a worshipper of nature. He reinforces the idea that those who live amid the excitements in the city know nothing of the life of the mountain villagers. In his village Gibran found out the meaning of misery, pain, grief and worry. He opened his heart for love, and fall in love with beauty and freedom in the arms of nature. His poetry is nostalgic of the magnificent scenery of his childhood. It portrays Gibran rejoicing in peace and freedom among the immortal cedars of Lebanon, the famous sacred valley of Qadisha, and the mountains of Sannin and FammalMizab. Yet, inspired by Rousseau's ideas on the innocence of the natural

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

man as opposed to the man corrupted by civilization and materialism. The relation between man and nature is very strong, since whatever is present in matter is also present in the soul. Gibran repeatedly points out to the contrast between the natural world and the human world. In the former there is peace, harmony, and innocence whereas in the latter there is disorder, injustice and sorrow. He reiterates, "Every time I close my eyes I see those valleys full of magic and dignity and those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky." (Susheil Bushrui, Kahlil Gibran of America).

His aspects on environmentalism is of the fact that man has tried to destroy nature and therefore trying to prevent such destruction by inviting all people to go to the nature and to worship and respect it. He condemns the harmful effects of industrialization and the preoccupation with materialism, but he idealizes and worships nature. The nature is a mediator between God and man. In the text "*Good and Evil*" Gibran writes:

But you who are born of the mountains and the forests and the seas can find their prayer in your heart.

But in some of you that longing is a torrent rushing with might to the sea, carrying the secrets of the hillsides and the songs of the forest. (Good and Evil)

Gibran's the finest work, *The Prophet*, for instance, is written in the language of unity in diversity. It carries with it the themes of unity of religions and oneness of mankind, Al-Mustafa's message in the book, as Bushrui asserts is "a passionate belief in the healing power of universal love and the unity of being" (Bushrui, 1987, p.68).

Gibran glorifies nature in "*The Prophet*" where he advice people to return to the simplicity of life since civilization is but a part of nature corruption and misused. He considers the imitation of nature is a divine. Bushrui and Jenkins allege that for Gibran:

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 another, within it flowing a divine energy which is the perfect expression of the internal rhythm of all being. To commune with nature was for him akin to a religious experience. (1998, p. 35).

Gibran sees the world as ethnically and morally deformed, where the societies have been affected by the violence psychologically and spiritually as well. His desire to build a perfect society was not a means to achieve power or political position in society, but to build a peaceful society. Society may get better, but only through man. Gibran in the *Broken Wings*, claims that:

Such transformation should be towards human nature as a whole, without division and disruption, against the laws asserted by man in order to regulate nature. The man, however, has tried to destroy nature and prevent such transformation for the sake of exploiting his fellow creatures, sometimes through domination of men of God and feudal Lords.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

He yearns to teach them the ethics based on certain religious ideas. He did not teach them the morals and ethics for any desire for political or other power, as some priests and politicians did, but instead he wanted to strengthen social stability to bring peace to society and help to develop a life style of spirituality.

Ludescher evaluates Gibran's works claiming that:

Gibran's early works depicts a world in which the transcendent power of Nature is contrasted with the innate corruption of human society. For Gibran, Nature is both a living spiritualized being and a manifestation of God's universal law. Although humans in their natural state are pure and uncorrupted, they will only return to God and achieve their divine nature after they have evolved through the course of many lives on earth. (Ludescher, 2010, p. 113).

Gibran uses the word 'love' in the text *The Prophet* in sixty four times. He tries to define love that brings knowledge and moral assurance. He shows a progressive change from fear of God to love of Him in the ideal worship of the people. In all of his works he appeals to the simplicity of life since all civilization is a part of corruption and misuse of nature.

Taken as a whole, Gibran's book is a metaphor of the mystery of life. His writings are known for their prophetic one. He gives us a healing message by saying that though the modern world is being corrupted, oppressed and full of hatred, but it has a reformatory power through love, good-will, peace, understanding and faith. His language affects the souls of the readers and teaches them strong spiritual lessons. His teachings are immortal and are meant to foster an East- West understanding. His ideas are mostly based on life and humanity like love, beauty, truth, justice, good and evil. The fame of his work *The Prophet* shadowed his earlier Arabic writings which earned a name for himself as a distinct Arabic writer. Bushrui remarks the secret of the book's success as; "Gibran's remarkable ability to convey profound truths in simple yet incomparably elegant language" (Bushrui 4).

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The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

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