

Michael Joseph Naimy: A True Literary Confidant to Khalil Gibran

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An Outline on Naimy and Gibran

Michael Joseph Naimy (1889- 1988)

arabicized Mikhail Nu'aima,¹ the iconoclast Arab Christian Romantic poet, great critic and apologist, mystic, essayist, biographer, translator, novelist, famous orator and dramatist, is a major figure in modern Arabic literature, and particularly within what came to be known as the Mahjar School, referring to the literary movement which evolved in the U.S. among emigrant Syro- Lebanese poets and writers, who operated through a literary gathering in New York by the name "The Pen Association", during the second and third decades of the 20th century, and until the death of his maestro Jibran Khalil Jibran,² its guiding spirit in 1931 A.D.

He had an interesting and varied education. Born in Biskinta³ in the Lebanon, on November 22, 1889, he received his primary education in a Russian school. At thirteen he went to Nazareth to the Russian Teachers' Training college where he showed such promise that in 1906 the college elected him on scholarship to attend the 'Diocesan Seminary' in Poltava, Ukraine. In Poltava he studied the great works of modern Russian literature and became an admirer of the social ideas of Tolstoy and began to write poetry in Russian. He himself inclined to the Russian literature and was influenced studying the poems of Tormontov; Pushkin; Nadsen; Tolstoy; Gnaedch; Danilevski; Nikitin; Gorky; Oornburgski; Zulothariv; Ostervski; Gogol; Dostoyevsky; Torginev and others.⁴ He joined in the freedom movement of Syria, an organization which operated for the freedom of Syria from the yoke of Uthmanids in Turkey.⁵ Nu'aima showed an early flair for poetry and composed his first poem "The Frozen River" in Russian.

After five years in Poltava, Nu'aima returned to the Lebanon in 1911. In 1912, he moved to the United States to join his two elder brothers Adib and Hykal, already settled in the U.S., and enrolled as a student of Law and English literature in the University of Washington; Seattle, graduating in 1916 with two bachelor degree in the Arts and Law. During this period he became acquainted with theosophy, which left a deep imprint on him and his work. He himself indulged in literary activities but due to financial reason he was forced to find employment with the Russians mission purchasing arms at the Bethlehem Steel factory, until the Russian revolution intervened. He was then drafted into the US Army and sent to France, reaching the front

line a few days before the Armistice of 11 November 1918.⁶

Nu'aima's first venture in literary criticism was a review of Jibran's book "The Broken Wings" which, in spite of its critical impartiality, expressed enough of the author's revolutionary spirit to make Jibran seek to develop his acquaintance.

In 1918, he joined the American army and was sent to the French front, where he had first-hand experience of the horrors of the First World War. After the war he was awarded a government scholarship which enabled him to study French history, art and literature at the University of Rennes.

Drawn to Jibran by a spiritual affinity, Nu'aima became very attached to him during the twelve years they were together in New York all through Jibran's tragic illness till his death. Nu'aima's biography of Jibran, written with all the love he had for him, is a beautiful testament to their friendship.

Though, as a litterateur, Mikhail Nu'aima did not deserve the same popularity and quality in the United States as much as Jibran and Rihani had, yet, he was once nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature.⁷ A playwright, writer of fiction, journalist and poet, he was politically temperamental during his days in the Pen League, setting standards against superficiality and hypocrisy in literature. Featured often on the pages of "The New York Times," his most familiar works are his biography of "Jibran Khalil Jibran" and "The Book of Mirdad", written after he had turned to Eastern philosophies for solace and guidance in 1932. While his poetry was written in the United States, it was never translated into English, except in anthologies, such as 'Grape Leaves', 'a century of Arab- American Poetry' (1988), edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa.

After Jibran's death, and Nu'aima only forty-two, preferred to retire from civilization and society. Returning to the Lebanon, he settled at "Shakhrub",⁸ his modest family farm to lead 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, mentioned above, through a Scottish room-mate 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 'Emersonian Transcendentalism', and a kind of 'pantheistic mysticism'.

Nu'aima wrote around 99 (ninety nine) titles of works belonging to almost all literary genres such as - poetry, narrative prose, drama, biography, autobiography, literary criticism, novels, book of parables, short stories, and essays.

Mikhail Nu'aima, the simple man and a great literary figure in Mahjar as well as the Arab World, was died on 28th February (in another version 1st March), 1988 A.D. Nu'aima was a man of versatile quality and an icon of a great Ideologist and Thinker.

On the other hand, **Khalil Gibran** known as Jibrān Khalil Jibrān (1882- 1931) in Arabic literature, the Mahjar poet, prose writer and artist, played a crucial role in developing 'Mahjar literature', was born in Bishirri (North Lebanon). He was brought up in the conditions of Squalor and poverty. His father was indolent and alcoholic whose frequent anger terrified the children. His mother, the daughter of a priest, was an intelligent and resolute woman but helpless in the atmosphere of tension and brutality.⁹

Unable to improve their lot at home Jibrān emigrated with his mother, his step- brother Butrus and his sister Sultana and Marianna to Boston and settled in its Chinatown in 1895 where they lived in poor conditions. Jibrān returned to Lebanon from 1897 to 1899 to improve his knowledge of Arabic. He joined 'Madrasa al- Hikma' (The Law School) where he also took lessons in French, Arabic and the Bible.¹⁰

At this time Jibrān fell in love, but this was an unfortunate experience for him: because he was rejected by the father of the girl. Hence, he was courting because of the disparity in their situations.¹¹

Again, Jibrān returned to Lebanon in 1902 as the guide of an English family. In 1902 and 1903 Sultana, Butrus and his mother died of tuberculosis and Jibrān all by him had to take care of his sister Marianna who earned as a seamstress.

Around this time Jibrān took painting and also started writing. In 1907 he found a protectorate in Marry Haskell, owner of a private school for girls, who admired Jibrān's paintings and enabled him to go to France to study art. Jibrān was unimpressed with the modern schools of painting, judging cubism as 'insanity'; while in Paris, however, he became acquainted with the works of Nietzsche, which left an imprint on his later literary works. He returned to Boston in 1910 and in 1912 went to New York.¹²

In New York, Jibrān met several émigré writers from the Lebanon. In 1920 with Mikhail Nu'aima, Nasib Arida and Abdul Masih Haddad he established the 'Pen Association' of Arab writers, "Al-Rabita al- Qalamiyya" to become its moving spirit. This was the most productive period of Jibrān's life. His writings in English and Arabic started winning him wide acclaim.

Jibrān's prose poems, which he began to write in 1903, were subsequently collected in "Dam'a wa- ibtisama" (1914); other works in Arabic include "al- Musiqā" (1905), "Ara'is al- muruj" (1905), "al- arwah al- mutamarrida" (1908), "al- Ajniha al- mutakassira" (1912), "al- Mawakib" (1918), "al- `Awasif" (1920) and "al- Badai' wa- al- tara'if" (1923).¹³

After 1920, Jibrān wrote mainly in English, producing eight books in eight years. These brought him instant success and watered down his disappointments and bitterness. The books published in New York in the first editions, including (in order of appearance) were: *The Madman*; *The Forerunner*; *The Prophet*; *Sand and Foam*; *Jesus, Son of Man*; *The Earth Gods*; *The Wanderer*; and *The Garden of the prophet*. Jibrān's most famous work is 'The prophet' (originally published in English, New York, 1923), which has been translated into many languages and is still in print. One of the key notions, both of this book and of Jibrān's writing in general, is the idea of reincarnation and the migration of the human soul.

The artist in Jibrān, his passion for truth, his mystic stance and the impetus he gave to new literary trends marked him out as an outstanding man of letters, commending universal acclaim. By 1924, his health began to fall. He was bed ridden and lingered for years till his death in 1931 A.D.

The Soul Mates: Misha and Gibran

Khalil Gibran in many letters sent to Mikhail Nu'aima lovingly addressed him as "Misha" and by this we understand that there was the closest relationships between them. The apparent proof of this reality is the famous book of biography on Khalil Jibrān, ever written by Mikhail Nu'aima in Arabic entitled "Jibrān Khalil Jibrān: Hayatuh- Mautuh- Adabuh- Fannuh" as a symbol of love to Gibran, was published at first in Beirut in the year 1934 A.D., but the English version written by the same author entitled "Khalil Jibrān: A biography" published by the philosophical library, New York, in the year 1950 A.D. The book has been divided into four sections and covers thirty- two chapters: "Al- Shufuq" (Twilight or Evening-Glow) contains nine chapters; "Al- Gasaq" (Dusk) contains eight chapters; "Al- Fazar" (Dawn) contains eight chapters and "Al- Mulhaq" (Appendix) contains seven chapters.

In fact, Jibrān Khalil Jibrān, one of the finest books in Arabic, is a sensitive account of Jibrān's

philosophical and artistic traits. Nu'aima, in this book, followed the style of the 'biographie romancée' developed by Maurois, Strachey et al; the book, which spoke freely about Jibran's weaknesses, was interpreted by some as an attack on him.¹⁴

Nu'aima shocked his readers with a critical candour not used in biographies of great men which are usually complementary. This book glorifies Jibran, the man whose greatness appears in the innocence of his spirit. Nu'aima wanted to put things in their proper perspective. When he wrote on Jibran, people were raising him to the level of God. Although this book was written in 1934 A.D. it remains radiant and fresh.¹⁵

According to Mikhail Nu'aima, the author of Jibran's biography, Jibran's outpourings in "Al- Ajnihat al- Mutakasirra" helped him to end the period of agony and grief. His will power was restored and he held back his tears.¹⁶

Mikhail Nu'aima developed a close affinity with Jibran through "Fatat- Boston"(Maids of Boston) and "Al- Funun" (The Arts), the two magazines. Jibran lovingly called him "Misha" mentioned above, and in his letters he addressed him as "Misha Azizi" (My Dear Misha) or, "Akhi Misha" (Brother Misha), and sometimes "Akhi Al- Habib Misha" (Beloved Brother Misha). Nu'aima also admired Jibran and became influenced by him. In the introduction to his biography, he emphasizes the fact that Jibran sought to make his soul "as beautiful as the beauty he glimpsed with his imagination and so generally spread in his books and drawings."¹⁷

To understand the divine thought of Jibran the point of **Mary Huskel** is necessary to quote here. So to say, Jibran, in his exhibition of paintings in 1904, met Mary Haskell, a wealthy woman and the principal of a private school in Boston who was to change the course of his life and thereby helped him to go to Paris where he studied art under Rodin.

Mary Haskell was impressed by Jibran's talent being interested in his painting and writing. Once she asked Jibran, "Why do you draw the bodies always naked"? The young artist replied, "Because life is naked. A nude body is the truest and the noblest symbol of life. If I draw a mountain as a heap of human forms, or paint a waterfall in the shape of tumbling human bodies, it is because I see in the mountain a heap of living things and in the waterfall a precipitate current of life".¹⁸

Jibran's relationship with Mary veered toward romance. His letters became increasingly intimate and his addressing gradually shifted from a mentor to a friend to express warm feelings. Both of them remained

undecided about the direction of their relationship. To understand their relationship here is an extract:¹⁹

By God, Mary, Mary ! Really, my helplessness and joy for you- do not know its end, who were we and where were we before this life? Whether you were my mother and I was your son, or were you my sister and I was your brother? Whether you were a prophetess and I was a prophet in the service of Astarte²⁰ or Minerva²¹ putting forward together our sacrifices on the same Altar?"

Eventually, Mary confessed to Jibran her desire to keep him only as a friend and to bring his potential as an artist and man of letters to its fullest. Nu'aima, in his biography of Jibran, writes: "what of Mary? She loves him dearly, values his talents, understands his ambitions and aspirations and looks condolingly on his weaknesses and sins"²²

The main spirit of North American literary forum was Khalil Jibran. His Studio had become a meeting- place for leading Arab- American intellectuals who were known as al- Mahjar or "immigrant writers" like Nasib Arida, Mikhail Nu'aima and Abdl Masih Al- Haddad. In 1920, they formed a literary society called "Al- Rabita al- Qalamiyya" translated as 'The Pen Club' or 'The Pen League' and sometimes 'The Pen Bond', which furthered their fame in the Arabic-speaking world. Jibran was elected President, and Nu'aima a Secretary.

The members would meet to talk about common goals like Arab nationalism and Renaissance of Arabic literature. Nu'aima talked about the first meeting when "the discussion arose as to what the Syrian writers in New York could do to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation, and to infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations."²³

Really, Nu'aima was true friend to Jibran. He was like a shadow for him. By 1931, Jibran spent most of his time in bed. According to Nu'aima Jibran refused to an operation that might have saved his life.²⁴ He instead waited for death, and it came to him at the hospital, at 10.55 P.M, on April 10, 1931, at the age of 48. Among other people close to Jibran, his sister Marianna and his best friend Mikhail Nu'aima were by his side.

Mikhail Nu'aima recorded his fascination with his friend saying: "Who shall inscribe the name of the present generation in the scrolls of Time, who they are and where they are?" I do not find them among the many "nightingales of the Nile and, the warblers of Syria and Lebanon, but among the few whose lips and hearts have been touched by a new fire. Of those some are still

within the womb of creative silence; some are breathing the air we breathe, and treading the ground we tread. Of the latter- nay, leading latter- is the poet of night and Solitude, the poet of Loneliness and Melancholy, the Poet of Longing and Spiritual Awakening, the Poet of the Sea and the Tempest- Gibran Khalil Gibran.”²⁵

In a letter to Mikhail Nu'aima dated 1922, Jibran writes: “... the future shall find us in a hermitage at the edge of one of the Lebanese gorges. This deceptive civilization has strained the strings of our spirits to the breaking point. We must depart before they break.”²⁶

According to Nu'aima, Jibran once said: “I shall be happy when men shall say about me what they said of W. Blake: ‘He is a mad man’. Madness in art is creation. Madness in poetry is wisdom. Madness in the search for God is the highest form of worship.”²⁷ Such was Jibran being attributed with these attributions cited above.

Mikhail Nu'aima was the best friend of Khalil Jibran. He had 28 (twenty- eight) letters from Jibran, in a period of 10 (ten) years from 1920- 1929 so far. Nu'aima recorded these letters in his famous book entitled- “Khalil Jibran: A Biography”²⁸ under the chapter “Rasael Jibran Ilaiyya” (Jibran’s letters to me).

Jibran, in these letters expressed to Nu'aima and other literary personalities of “Al- Rabita al-Qalamiyyah”, about the literary mission, mutual understandings and his thoughts and ideologies as to promote and revive Arabic literature from its quagmire of stagnation and set up in an equal position to the world literatures. Here, the letter no. 15 has been quoted below only to understand the friendship between Misha and Gibran:²⁹

Boston- New York Thursday Evening (1921)

Brother Mischa,

Having read the last number of the Damascus Arrabitah’s magazine, and reviewed the previous ones, I am convinced that between us and them lays a deep gulf; we cannot cross to them: nor they to us. No matter how hard we try, Mikhail, we cannot free them from servitude to literary trinkets. Spiritual freedom comes from within, never from without; you know that better than any man. Do not attempt to awaken those whose hearts, for some hidden wisdom, God has put to sleep. Do for them what you like, and send them what you like, but don’t forget that you shall cast a veil of doubt and suspicion upon the face of our Arrabitah. If we have any power, it lies in our independence and aloofness. It we must co-operate with others let it be with people who are our peers, and who say what we say. I believe that Abbas Mahmud Al- Aqqad – (A well known Egyptian writer- Author) though one man – is nearer by far to our tastes and literary inclination than

anything that came out, or may yet come out, of the Damascus Arrabitah. As a worker in Arrabitah I submit – and submit gladly – to the voice of the majority. But I, as an individual, do not and cannot concur in any literary and artistic agreement with that Damascus group who would weave royal purples out of mucous materials.

I was affected, and very deeply, by what you told me of Saba (Nasib Arida’s brother- Author). I wish I could do something for that friendly and loyal young man. “But the eye is far of sight, while the arm is short of reach”.

You have done well to stir up Rasheed, Nadara and Naseeb a little. If we go on delaying the Anthology of Arrabitah will remain in some pocket of the either until 1923, or 1924! Send me – and this is not an order; six copies of the anthology and debit my account for the amount; else draw on me!

My health, Mischa, is better than before. The doctors tell me that if I give us all kinds of work and exertion for six months, and do nothing but eat, drink and rest, I should be again my normal life! Allah, help me, Mischa!

So you are on the verge of madness, this is a piece of news magnificent in its fearfulness, fearful in its magnificence and beauty. I say that madness is the first step towards divine sublimation. Be mad, Mischa. Be mad and tell us of the mysteries behind the veil of “reason”. Life’s purpose is to bring us nearer to those mysteries; and madness is the surest and the quickest steed. Be mad, and remain a mad brother to your mad brother- Gibran.

Letter No. 15 (fifteen) from Mikhail Nu'aima’s Khalil Jibran: A Biography, 1964.

Conclusion

At last but not the least, we can opine on the above mentioned studies that Jibran and Nu’aima are overlapped and so to between Mary Huskel and Gibran. It is clear from Jibran’s letters sent to Nu’aima that really he loved him from the core of his heart. Similarly, Nu'aima also loved him too much. He passed twenty years with him in U.S.A. and was fully aware of his thoughts and ideologies and accordingly he did. At the behest of Jibran, he launched the literary mission “Arrabitah”. Nu’aima, after the death of Jibran, wrote in his memory the famous book entitled – “Khalil Jibran: A Biography, 1934”, which made him popular and immortal in the East and the West.

References

1. Variant spelling of his nick name is ‘Naimy’, ‘Nuaymah’ and ‘Na’ma’; Mikhail Nu’aima, Sab’un, vol. I, Beirut, 1959, P. 32. In the “Bachelor of Law and Arts” certificates his

- name is written as 'Michael Joseph Naimy'. Ibid, vol. II, Beirut, 1960, PP. 64-5. Jibran Khalil Jibran friendly addressed him as 'Misha'; Mikhail Nu`aima, Jibran Khalil Jibran , hayatuh, moutuh, adbuh, fannahu, Beirut, 1964, PP. 283-304.
2. A variant spelling of his name in English is Jubran Khalil Jubran.
 3. 'Biskinta' – means 'Bait al- Sukun' (The peaceful house) or, 'Bait al- Qaza' (The gratification house). It is 50(fifty) Kilometres away from Beirut in the East and 2700 (Two thousand seven hundred) metres height on the rocky surface of Sanneen mountain; Mikhail Nu`aima, Sab`un, vol. I, Beirut, 1959, P. 42. ⁴ Thuriya Malhas, Mikhail Nu`aima: al- Adib al- Sufi, Beirut, 1964, P. 186. Ibid, P. 187.
 4. Ibid
 5. As quoted by Abinader Elmaz in his article, "Children of Al- Mahjar: Arab- American literature spans a century". P.2
 6. 'al- shakhrub': It means 'Azmul fiqar' (vertebra or backbone). It was a modest family farm of Nu`aima where he led his literary activities like a Hermit. Hence, he was known as "The Hermit of Shakhrub". It is 5 (five) kilometers away in the East and 300 (three hundred) metres height from Biskinta. Mikhail Nu`aima, Sab`un, vol.I, Beirut, 1959, PP. 44-5.
 7. Ismat Mehdi, Modern Arabic Literature, Da`ir al- Ma`arif Press, Hyderabad, 1983, P. 144 ff.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Ibid.
 10. J. S. Meisami and P. Starkey: Encyclopedia of Arabic literature, vol. I, London and New York, 1998, P. 415 ff.
 11. Ibid, PP. 415-6.
 12. J.S. Meisami and p. Starkey, Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature, vol. II, London and New York, 1998, P. 589.
 13. Jurj Saidah, Adabuna wa Udabauna fi Mahajir al- Amrikiyya, Beirut, 1964, P. 262.
 14. Mikhail Nu`aima, Jibran Khalil Jibran, Hayatuh , Mautuh, Adabuh, wa- Fannu, Beirut, 1964, P. 147.
 15. Mikhail Naimy, Khalil Jibran: A Biography, Beirut; KHAYATS (1964).