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Arabic Migration Literature of America

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Abstract

In between 1st and 2nd world wars, a new genre of Arabic literature flourished in North and South America by the Arab origin immigrant community over there. This new form of Arabic literature is known as “Mahjar Literature” or the migration literature. This is a hybrid of both the English as well as Arabic literatures. The Mahjar writers were influenced by the western literature. They brought a new revolution in Arabic poetry advocating the usage of free verses and simple language without much intricacy. In this article efforts have been made to analyze the historical perspective of Lebanese migration to America in late 19th and early 20th century. Some of the characteristics of Migration literature have been dealt with along with a brief introduction to Gibran Khalil Gibran, the most celebrated Mahjar poet and philosopher.

“.....Arab-American literature.....has discovered America and America has discovered Arab American writers.....”

Says Almaz Abinader, a Lebanese origin Arab-American female writer and poet. Like many other literatures of the world, Arabic literature has also undergone some significant developments outside its geographical territory. Many of the revolutionary writers, across the world have been forced to leave their own homeland and settle down over a host country temporarily or permanently. These immigrant writers though they left their mother land but they did not leave their own distinct identity and belongingness to their mother tongue. Migration literally means movement of people from one place to another for various reasons like socio-political, cultural, religious and tourism etc. When a migration is carried out in large number it is dubbed as

exodus. Migration for the purpose of livelihood generally takes place from a weak economy to a relatively stronger economy. Migration influences both the immigrants as well as the local inhabitants. Apart from demographic changes, migration results in a cross-cultural interactions. Generally what happens is that in a new environment the immigrant community finds themselves helpless. They naturally strive hard to earn their livelihood and make their presence visible. The immigrant community makes a significant contribution to the enrichment of art and literature.

Historically migration had long been a part of life of the Arabs in general and of Lebanese people in particular. Lebanese people are known for their adventurous life. In this article efforts would be made to deal with various aspects of Lebanese immigrants in America, the land of opportunity and dollar and their contribution to the

enrichment of Arabic literature in a non-Arab land.

Factors Responsible for Migration:-

Syria (which comprises present Syria, Lebanon and a part of Palestine) in the past was a home to the large Christian followership till shortly before the advent of Islam. Mention may be made here that most of the immigrant poets and writers in from Lebanon were of Christian origin. In the course of history, Lebanon fell under the rule of Ottoman caliph Sultan Abdul Hamid. Being oppressed by the despotic regime of the caliph the oppressed people had no other option but to humbly leave their country. In the last few decades of 19th century and early decades of 20th century, a group of Arab writers especially those of Lebanon migrated to North and South America and produced there a literary form known as Mahjar literature or migration literature. These writers of Arab origin not only wrote in Arabic but also in English, Spanish and Portuguese languages. Gibran Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Ilya Abu Madi, Mikhail Naimy etc. are the prominent figures of Arabic migration literature.

During late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lebanon witnessed the despotic regime of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid. His regime was that of oppression, lack of freedom as well as respect for human dignity along with bad economic condition. In such a harsh condition, people were often detained or imprisoned on one pretext or the other. Due to such an unhealthy environment people started migrating to Egypt and other North African countries. But when they felt that in these North African countries also the Ottoman rulers have some sort of dominance they changed the direction of their migration towards Europe and America. The undergoing colonization of African countries at that time was not a favorable situation for the migrants. Coincidentally, the European and American countries, at that time were undergoing the phase of industrial revolution. There were ample opportunities before the migrant community. Peaceful

situation that was prevailing in America and Europe was a reason of attraction. Describing the political factor behind the migration Anees Al Muqdisi, a famous Arabic writer said:

“The greatest factor that led to the emigration (of the Syrians) is the devastating economic situation of the Ottomanic rule characterized by corrupt and autocratic styles to the extent that security arrangement became weak, chaos triumphed, educational pursuance obliterated and life became unbearable.”

Among the economic factors that led to the massive migration of the Lebanese people was heavy taxation on the citizenry by the autocratic regime. There was taxation on farming which compelled people to abandon productive activities. Even one had to pay tax for his/her garments. On the other side there was the lucrative expanding economy of America which attracted the Lebanese folk. Extracting the benefit of this opportunity the emigrant community started business in the host environment and supported their family. Cooperation of the US authority with the immigrant community is something deserves to be mentioned specially. There was unhindered freedom of migration which facilitated the Syrians to travel to America. Actually Syrian migration started in 1854 to be precise. It is reported that in between 1870 and 1900 around 1/3rd of the total Syrian population migrated to the foreign lands. Lion share of the immigrants went to U.S and North America with only a few of them to the African countries for the reasons that have been dealt with in the previous paragraphs.

Mahjar School of Modern Arabic Literature:-

The term “*Mahjar*” is derived from the Arabic root “Hijrah” which means migration. Here in the context of Arabic literature the term mahjar denotes a school of modern Arabic literature that was developed by the migrant Arabs in North and South America in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries. They were predominantly Christians who migrated to America due to socio-political and economic unrest that prevailed in their own country Lebanon. The Lebanese emigrants engaged themselves in literary activities along with their struggle for livelihood. Some of them started working as journalists to raise their voice. By means of literature they tried to play the role of a pressure group which encouraged the freedom fighting movements against the Ottoman dictatorship in their homeland. The Lebanese emigrants founded two literary societies viz. Arrabitatul Qalamiyah or (The Pen League) in North America and Al Usbah Al Andalusia in South America. English and French literature in general and that of Long Fellow, Walt Whitman and Edgar Alan in particular greatly influenced the literary activities of Mahjar writers. Despite large influence of the western literature on Mahjar school, it was equally influenced by the earlier modern Arabic literary schools like the “*Neo Classical School*” pioneered by Mahmud Sami Al Barudi and nurtured and developed upon by Ahmad Shawqi and Hafiz Ibrahim, the “*Diwan School*” of Shukri and Al Mazini and the “*Apollo School*” of Abu Shadi. Actually, this Mahjar, the new school of Arabic literature is a hybrid of both English and Arabic literatures.

Al Rabitah Al Qalamiyah was established on the evening of 20th April, 1920 at the house of two brothers Abdul masih Haddad and Nudrah Haddad. Abdul Masih Haddad was the publisher of periodical Al Sayeh. The main concern behind the formation of this literary group was to lift the Arabic literature from the darkness of stagnation and imitation and to infuse a new life in to it so that the literature plays a greater role in building the Arab nations.

Modernity and the Mahjar:-

Mahjar literature is known for its adoption of modern literary styles. It has been said earlier that the Mahjar literature is greatly influenced by western literary works. There was a sea shift in the approach of

Mahjar writers towards modern Arabic literature. Western ideas got prominence over the traditional values. As we see Gibran Khalil Gibran saying:

“If the meaning of beauty of thought requires the breaking of rules, break it. If there is no known word to express your idea, borrow or invent one. If syntax stands in the way of needed or useful express, away with the syntax.”

Arabic poetry has traditionally been governed by the classical metric measurement styles. The Mahjar poets literally revolted against this literary orthodoxy and adopted free verses in poetry. Verses free from the compulsion of metres, simple as well as easy language, theme and style were employed by the Mahjar writers. They wanted to make Arabic literature more people friendly, fascinating and easily understandable. Members of the literary society Pen league brought a new revolution in Arabic poetry. Simple diction, style and stanzaic form with short metres and techniques of expression borrowed from drama and narratives are the hall marks of Mahjar poetry. Apart from poetry Mahjar writers paid their attention towards journalism as well. By the initiative of the Mahjar scholars the first Arabic newspaper “*Kawkab Amerika*” started its journey in 1892. By 1919, there were nine Arabic newspapers in the land of America. El Huda was one among the most popular Arabic dailies. *Syrian World* played a pivotal role in literary evolution of Arab Americans.

Among the prominent literary giants of mahjar literature is Gibran Khalil Gibran, the author of the “*prophet*”. Gibran is the most celebrated and widely read Arab origin American writer. Gibran’s “*prophet*” remained bestselling for more than half a century. Another Ameen Rihani is considered as the “*Father of Arab American Literature*”. Let me present here a glimpse of the life and works of Gibran Khalil Gibran.

Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931 A.D)

Gibran Khalil Gibran was a

Lebanese-American writer, poet and artist. He was born in Bisharri in Lebanon in 1883. At the age of 12; he immigrated with his family to Boston in 1895 and later settled in New York City. He is chiefly known in the English speaking world for his 1923 book *The Prophet*, a master piece of philosophical essays, written in poetic English prose. The book became extremely popular in 1960's and sold in millions of copies and has been translated into at least 20 languages. Gibran is the third best-selling poet of all time, after Shakespeare and Lao-Tzu, the Chinese philosopher.

His writings and paintings have fascinated peoples of diverse cultures and colors. His belief in humanity, his awareness of spiritual continuity, his call for universal fellowship and the unification of the human race, all stand relevant today, as do the messages of all great people. Khalil Gibran, best known as the author of *The Prophet*, is widely regarded as a man of the East who brought a much needed element of spirituality to the materialistic West.

His English writings, especially *The Prophet*, represent the best of both worlds, a richly harmonious blend of East and West. Khalil Gibran tried to infuse some eastern mysticism into western materialism. He was of the opinion that humanity would be best served by "giving and taking" between both the cultures of the East and the West, by each acknowledging the virtues of other. Gibran, however, was not only a man from the East who brought a much needed element of spirituality to the West. He equally became a man of the West, benefiting from an environment in which freedom, democracy and equality of opportunity opened doors before him as would have been possible nowhere else in the world. He spent only the first twelve years of his life in Bisharri, the village in Lebanon, where he was born in 1883, before immigrating with his family to the United States. Apart from two brief return visits to Lebanon and a two-year studentship in Paris, he lived out the remaining two-thirds of his life entirely on

American soil. It was in New York that he died at the age of 48.

Gibran is considered as the greatest literary personality in Arabic literature during the first three decades of 20th century. In fact he is the writer who invited the attention and interest of the western world to the Arabic literature. This Lebanese origin, America based celebrated prophet was an unparalleled leader of the Mahjar (immigrant) literature, which flourished between the two world wars in North and South America. Prophetic sayings of this spiritual mystic made him popular to the millions of his fans in a dozen of languages.

Gibran Khalil Gibran and Spirituality:-

Spirituality has a strong appeal in Gibranian philosophy. Gibran is called a prophet by his fans and followers because of the fact that his teachings, even in this technocratic 21st century, educate the minds in spirituality, as did the teachings of earlier prophets during their times.

Elements of spirituality are found scattered in the writings of Gibran. For example, in "*Tear and a smile*" (1914) Gibran argues that human existence revolves around two metaphysical conditions viz. joy and suffering. Gibran adopted a mid-way approach of life saying that life is both a "tear" and a "smile". He is of the opinion that pain and joy are complementary and interrelated. For instance, love can never be achieved without some sacrifices; there is no happiness unless the soul has undergone some sort of bitterness. In 1918, at the age of 35, Gibran summed up his meditations in "*The procession*". In this book in a dialogue between a youth and an aged sage Gibran communicates that beauty, love, religion, justice, knowledge; happiness, gentleness etc. are veiled by false pretenses. *The prophet* (1923), a masterpiece of Gibran has become a second Bible for the readers. Gibran had long meditated on "*The prophet*" and rewrote it three times. He was just fifteen years old when he composed its first version. At the age of 20, he revised "*The prophet*" in Arabic. In between 1917-1922,

he rewrote the book for a third time: finally in 1923 he released it to the press. Basically, all the sermons of the prophet emphasize more on a particular aspect of human reality that is authentic social relations. That's why; we find that, in the prophet, marriage, law, children, friendship, giving etc. social issues have been dealt with extensively. In "*The Earth Gods*", Khalil Gibran explains man's relationship with God. Man desires to be close to the divine. As per Gibran's philosophy, man ascends to God "in," "through" and "with" love only. Love occupies the most important place in Gibran's philosophy. Gibran's theory builds up from the dynamics of love. To him, love

is the core of human life. In his novel "The Broken Wings" Gibran described love as "the law of nature." This Prophet from the Lebanon says:

**Love one another, but make not a bond
Of love;
Let it rather be a moving sea between
The shores of your souls.**

Love in itself is the expression of the spiritual meaning of being. It is a mystical attitude oriented towards the value of being. A vast combination of pain, ambition and hope contributed to Gibran's vision and creativity.

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