

The Personality of Gibran Khalil Gibran: A Psychological Study of his Life and Work

Among the numerous books published this year on the occasion of the "International Year of Gibran", Nahida Taweel Ferzli's study of the life and work of this renowned writer, poet, and artist stands out. Not only because it is one of the rare books that devotes a large part to Gibran's relationships with women, but also it is the first of its kind to use psychology to analyze his work, unlike the conventional approach that tends to perceive him solely as a great humanist philosopher.

This study of 382 pages in Arabic is an illustrated, revised, and enlarged edition of a thesis written by the author for her Diploma of Higher Education in Psychology, at the Lebanese University in 1973. It is divided into 2 parts. The first part consists of 3 sections:

- 1) Gibran's relationship with his family
- 2) Gibran's relationship with women
- 3) The influence of the West on Gibran's personality.

The second part, illustrated by his drawings and paintings, consists of the psychological interpretation of his ideas, dreams, and the themes recurring in his work. Among the main themes analyzed are:

- the image of the "sacred mother" and his reverence of motherhood,
- his longing for the mother's bosom and return to mother earth,
- the concept of the "hero" or "superman", presented in many of his books,
- the rejection of the father and all father figures like priests, governors lawmakers,
- his reverence of Christ, and his profound identification with him.

What comes out of this study of Gibran is a fascinating portrait of a man continuously pulled between conflicting forces:

- Between his love for life and worldly pleasures and his deep longing to escape the material world and take refuge in the inner one.
- Between his idealization of "mother figures" and his rejection of anything that represents the "father".
- Between his desire to emulate Christ, and constant wish to reach perfection of the soul and



Self portrait of Gibran

his knowledge that "man" is weak and far from being perfect.

I would like to look now at one of the most interesting chapters in the book, chapter three, which analyzes Gibran's relationships with women and the influence of the mother figure on these relationships.

Biographers of Gibran and those who knew him closely, like Michael Naimy and Amin Rihani, point out that Gibran had relationships with many women. But here one should distinguish between the close relationships that do not exceed four and the numerous social ones with American upper-class women says Ferzli.

Gibran's ambition to be successful explains the vast number of social relationships with rich American women who admired his work, his drawings, and his interesting personality. About these he once wrote: "Dinner parties every Friday at Mrs. Ford are infinitely delightful. At them I always feel I can say whatever I wish ..." (1)

Gibran's relationships with American women influenced his opinion about women in general and Lebanese women in particular whom he

(1) Otto, Annie, S. *The Letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskel*. Houston, Texas: Southern Printing Company, 1970, p. 621.

criticized as not being open enough to the world. What he liked in women was not only kindness and purity but also courage and intelligence and the love of life and its pleasures. He described his "Ideal Woman" as being a mixture of Beatrice and Messalina. Beatrice being Dante's pure love in the Divine Comedy and Messalina a Roman Empress renowned for her lust and political intrigues.

As for the women who were close to Gibran, the author mentions:

– **Sultana Thabet:** A young widow Gibran met in 1901 when he had returned to Lebanon to study Arabic. He was seventeen years old. They exchanged letters for fourteen months till she died at the age of 22. Her friends sent Gibran a silk scarf which belonged to her and 17 love letters she had written to him but never sent. Gibran was deeply affected by this gift and wrote: "You cannot imagine how deep was my sorrow. Why didn't she send them to me before?"⁽²⁾ Taking this incident into account, the author concludes that Gibran's relationship with Sultana Thabet was a platonic one because Lebanese society at this time did not allow men and women to mix freely, nor to send letters to each other.

– **Emilie Michel or Micheline:** An attractive teacher few months older than Gibran whom he met in Boston in 1904 and whom he painted a number of times. She was the "personification of femininity" and their love relationship was transformed into a friendship when Micheline married in 1914. When Gibran was in Paris studying with Rodin, Micheline came to see him a number of times. He never proposed to marry her but they always remained on good terms.

– **Charlotte Teller:** A suffragette and a play-wright who wrote under a masculine pseudonym. In a letter to his friend Jamil Maalouf in 1908, Gibran depicted his relationship with Charlotte as being a temporary one. He describes her as "loving everything that is beautiful and pleasurable". Eventually, Charlotte married the writer Gilbert Hirsh in 1912 and went to live in New York.

– **Mary Khoury:** Whom he met during his first years in New York. She was the one who inspired his literary piece: "The Enchanting Fairy". In this work of prose, Gibran reveals what he felt for her by saying: "Will you be satisfied with the love of a man who considers love a friend and who refuses it to be a master? Will you accept me as a friend who does not enslave nor wishes to be a slave?"

– **May Ziadeh:** After publishing his book "Broken Wings" in 1912, Gibran started



Portrait of Gibran's mother

corresponding with the famous Lebanese writer May Ziadeh who was a leader of Women's Liberation in the Arab World and was renowned for her literary salon in Cairo. Gibran and May Ziadeh exchanged letters till Gibran died but they never met in person. Biographers of May Ziadeh agree that she loved Gibran dearly. This was apparent in the tender and sometimes passionate letters she wrote to him. When she died they found a photo of Gibran among her papers on which she had written: "This has been my unhappiness for years". As for Gibran he never wanted to get tied to one woman only and he wrote to her once: "I know that a little love does not please you. I also know that a little love does not please me either. Neither you nor I are satisfied with little. We both want much. We both want everything. We want perfection."⁽³⁾

However, the woman who meant most to Gibran was **Mary Haskell**, whom he met in 1904 after he had returned from studying Arabic in Beirut. He was then 21 years old and she was 31. She ran a boarding school for girls in Cambridge. From the beginning, Mary recognized Gibran's unique literary and artistic talents and proposed to become his provider of financial security all his life. He accepted. Their friendship and platonic love, unknown to many until the discovery of their correspondence, lasted 27 years until he died in

(2) Ferzli, p. 48.

(3) Bushrui, S. and Al-Kazbari, S.H. **The Blue Flame. The Unpublished Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran to May Ziadeh**, London: Longman, 1983, p. 176.



Portrait of Mary Haskel

1931. In one of the 325 letters he wrote to her he said: "Beloved Mary, God has given me much through you. How blessed it is to be one of God's hands. And how fortunate, how more than fortunate I am to know that hand and to touch it and to take from it. It is so good to be a little willow on the bank of a great river".

According to Ferzli, Mary's care for Gibran made him feel a reborn man, especially after he had suffered loneliness and poverty in a foreign land with no close companions except his sister Mariana. Moreover, the author describes Gibran's love for Mary as a mixture of a lover's love and of love towards a "sacred" mother.

Mary Haskell was the only woman he proposed to marry despite the fact that he was very much opposed to the institution of marriage. She was his "angel", his "beloved", and when he wrote the following thought he was probably thinking of her: "Women opened the windows of my eyes and the doors of my spirit. Had it not been for the woman-mother, the woman-sister and the woman-friend, I would have been sleeping among those who disturb the tranquility of the world with their snoring". (5)

In conclusion, Ferzli's chapter on "Gibran's Relationships With Women" is informative but not analytical enough. After citing the names of the women he was close to, Ferzli stresses the passive side of Gibran's personality and how all these relationships were characterized by a longing for motherly love, especially his relationship with Mary Haskell. We never really know why Gibran was afraid to get committed to one woman nor do we have a psychological analysis of his non-committal attitude.

We are left to guess why and to look for answers in other studies. When we do that we realize that Gibran did not see a woman as a sexual partner as much as he saw her as mother, ... nature ... goddess ... source of abundant life and symbol of beauty. What proves this point is a sentence he wrote: "Every man loves two women. One that his imagination creates and another that has not been born yet". (6)

However, Ferzli analyzes thoroughly Gibran's deep attachment to his real mother and the effect this attachment had on all his relationships with women. She also backs her analysis by demonstrating how much Gibran's paintings of other women were inspired by the face of his real mother, so that even when he painted the Virgin Mary it had his mother's features.

Wafa' Stephan

Note from the editor

So far, Al-Raida believes that the best biography that has been produced about Gibran is the one written by Jean and Kahlil Gibran, **Kahlil Gibran, His Life and World**, published in 1974 by the New York Graphic Society, Boston. The author Kahlil, Gibran's namesake worked on it with the help of his wife Jean. He is a well-known sculptor in Boston and was the son of Gibran's first cousin N'oula who emigrated to the States with his family. The book contains 442 large-sized, illustrated pages; it is based on research on a number of original documents owned by the author and collected over a twenty-year period.

-
- (4) Hilu, Virginia (ed). **Beloved Prophet. The love letters of Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell**, London: Quarter Book, 1972, p. 389.
- (5) Ferris A. R. **Kahlil Gibran: A self Portrait**. Translated from the Arabic. New York, Bantam Books, 1970.
- (6) Bashir, An onios. **The Complete Collection of Gibran's Work in Arabic**. Beirut: Sader Publishing House, 1964, p. 167.

APOLOGY

Due to severe electricity shortages during the months of Sept. – Oct. – Nov., 1983 Al-Raida was delayed for one month. We apologize to our readers for the inconvenience it has caused them.