

Tracing the mystical ascension of Khalil Gibran in *The Prophet*: An in-depth analysis

Titto Thomas and Bidyut Bhusan Jena*

Abstract: Throughout history, mystical writers have consistently inspired humanity. Kahlil Gibran stands as a prominent figure in this tradition, revered for his celebrated work, *The Prophet*. The perspective offered in his book transcends ordinary, mundane concerns and evokes a sense of the mystical and the sublime. Gibran's reflections encourage readers to consider their lives from a higher, more transcendent viewpoint, aligning with mystical practices that seek to elevate consciousness and connect with a higher reality. This study aims to identify the mystical elements in Gibran's works, thereby establishing his significance as a mystical writer. Moreover, it employs conventional understandings of mysticism from various mystical traditions to explicate the concept. A chronological analysis of Gibran's major works, culminating with *The Prophet*, is conducted to examine the progression and maturation of Gibran as a mystic.

Keywords: Khalil Gibran, mysticism, *The Prophet*, mystical writers, literary analysis

Introduction

Mysticism as we normally understand is awareness, experience or an intuitive knowledge of an ultimate reality attained through a progression of personal conviction and experience. Wide variations are found in the form and intensity of mystical experiences. The mystical experiences that have enabled the writers and artists to be valued them as the mystical writers or artists are an area of great interest. There have been numerous studies made on the mystical elements and features found in the English literature and writers that qualified them to be considered mystic. William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, and William Blake are regarded as prominent representatives of nature

* Titto Thomas; Bidyut Bhusan Jena
Department of English and Cultural Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University),
Bengaluru, India

mysticism. (Jones 2022, 25) Khalil Gibran is a twentieth century writer who is considered to be a mystic with respect to his writings. Altabaa studies Gibran as a mystical writer by analyzing his writings along the line of 'theistic mystical elements' such as search for truth, acknowledgment of self (soul), divine union etc. (Altabaa 2017, 216) This paper aims to identify the elements in Gibran's writings that qualify him as a mystical figure and compare these with the common features found in other works traditionally associated with mysticism. By examining the distinct quality of mysticism present in Gibran's works and exploring how his religious beliefs and experiences influenced his writing, this study seeks to investigate the realm of mysticism, focusing specifically on Khalil Gibran's progression as a mystic through his most prominent works. But to make it very specific to the analysis of the person of Gibran this paper would be looking at the progression of Gibran as a mystic through his most popular work culminating in the composition of his most popular work *The Prophet*.

The conventional understanding of mysticism, various mystical elements of mystical writings are taken into account to relate them with the features found to be mystical in the work of Gibran. The analysis of the meaning and implication of mysticism is to be taken with high priority as the term today goes through a series of misinterpretations at the very beginning. The requirement of the conventional and appropriate understanding of the mystical features both from the religious and literary realms are placed for serious consideration.

Initially, mysticism was deeply intertwined with Christian doctrines and institutions. Richard H. Jones states that Christians first adopted the term 'mysticism' to denote the mysteries of bodies of Christ and later to the mystical teaching of the *Bible*. But in medieval times, through the introduction of the concept 'mystical theology' by Dionysius the Areopagite it was gradually considered to be a way of spiritual path (Jones 2022, 13). However, in modern times, scholars began to view mysticism more in terms of individual personal experiences. This shift, described as the psychologization of mysticism, was notably influenced by William James and his work *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James emphasized four key characteristics of mystical experiences: transiency, passivity, noetic quality, and ineffability (James 1996, 294). As an extension of these four, Douglas W Shradar adds another three characteristics by integrating the studies by Happold and presenting a series of examples

from secular poetry (English literature) as well as Christianity, Islam, Daoism, Hinduism, and Tibetan Buddhism. His additional three characteristics of mystical experience are unity of opposites, timelessness, a feeling that one has encountered the true self. Despite this focus on personal experiences, the definition of mysticism remained varied and debated. While Inge, towards the end of his career in 1947, defined mysticism as “communion with God,” viewing it as the essence of Christianity, Underhill described mysticism as “the art of union with Reality” with more of an inclusive perspective. Building on the concepts of mysticism and the characteristics outlined by the above scholars, this study traces Gibran’s mystical progression, as detailed in the following analysis.

Mystical dimensions of Gibran

Gibran’s progression to a mystical poet can be traced with his prominent works that reflect his own self when examined chronologically. Naimy identifies two stages of Gibran’s writing with a progression in maturity. According to him, between the publication of *The Music* in 1905 and *The Prophet* in 1923, Gibran’s literary output and intellectual development can be demarcated into two distinct phases. The first phase, characterized by his early Arabic works, includes *Nymphs of the Valley*, *Spirits Rebellious*, *Broken Wings*, and *A Tear and a Smile*, which were published between 1907 and 1914. This period reflects Gibran’s youthful and formative stage. The second phase marks a progression towards greater maturity, evident in works such as *Processions*, *The Tempests*, and his initial English publications, *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*. This evolution in his thought and writing culminated in the creation of *The Prophet* (Naimy 1974, 56). *The Music* can be considered to be a prelude to all the works of Gibran being his first debut into the world of letters. While Naimy tells that *The Music* is more about a ‘school boy’s prosaic ode to music’, Francesco Medici (2023) praises Gibran’s ‘sublime poetic style and evocative power’, and even considers it as a prelude to his masterpiece, *The Prophet*.

The Music reveals a Gibran who is a flowery sentimentalist immersed in vague nostalgic sadness and the one who sees in music an ethereal embodiment of all that a nostalgic heart is not and yet yearns to be. But we also see another side of Gibran whose mystical yearnings at their infancy. According to Altabaa (2017, 216), the early mystic visions of Gibran is seen in this first work - a man whose spirit is

striving to escape the confines of a “narrow prison” and soar into “infinite space.” This journey is facilitated by the language of music, seen as a divine revelation, guiding the spirit beyond the material world to uncover the hidden truths of the unseen realms. Following portion quoted by Naimy, it reveals the mystical affinities of younger Gibran who aspires to a world beyond material:

Oh you, wine of the heart that uplifts its drinker to the heights of the world of imagination; you ethereal waves bearing the soul's phantoms; you sea of sensibility and tenderness; to your waves we lend our soul, and to your uttermost depths we trust our hearts. Carry those hearts away beyond the world of matter and show us what is hidden deep in the world of the unknown. (Naimy 1974, 56)

An acute awareness of the ‘world beyond the matter’ by acknowledging the eternal existence of the soul shows Gibran’s mystical sensitivities. The youthful stage of Gibran’s growth as a mature writer could be read evidently in his following three works; *Nymphs of the Valley*, *Spirits Rebellious* and *Broken Wings*. In these three works we see the mystical consciousness of Gibran with his themes of morality and justice that is in contrast with his contemporary world view. *Nymphs of the Valley* is a collection of three short stories; *Spirits Rebellious* consists of another four, while *Broken Wings* can easily pass for a long short story. Overlooking names and dates, the three books can safely be considered as one volume of eight collected short stories that are similar both in style and conception (Naimy 1974, 57). Placed in different situations and with different names, the heroes of all three of these stories seem to be the same in essence and spirit. They are undoubtedly Khalil Gibran the youth himself, who at times take the extreme to reveal his identity, speaking in first person singular. Khalil Gibran often portrays a youthful version of himself in his works, occasionally using first-person narration to express his individuality, such as seen in *Broken Wings* and “Khalil the Heretic” from *Spirits Rebellious*. This protagonist is known for challenging the authority of the Lebanese aristocracy and the church, leading to conflicts that drive the narratives of his stories.

In *Broken Wings*, Gibran the adolescent and Salma Karamah experience passionate feelings for each other. Their expressions of love, far from the usual flowery sensual ways, reveal the mystical dimension of Gibran whose conception of love is extraordinary. When Selma confesses her love as a strange feeling of “an unfamiliar

commingling of love and fear”, he replies saying, “This emotion ... is the law of nature that guides the moon around the earth and the sun around the God” (Gibran 2020, 127). His ability to see extraordinary in the most basic human emotion can be considered as the neotic quality - a characteristic of mystic as identified by Happold (1991, 45) i.e. “an insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect, insights which carry with them a tremendous sense of authority”.

Spirits Rebellious tells the story of a Khalil, who is expelled from a Mount Lebanon cloister for his radical Christian beliefs, finds refuge with a widow and her daughter, whom he influences with his anticlerical ideals. Captured and tried as a blasphemer, Khalil’s defence inspires the villagers to revolt against the church and feudal lords, leading to the local lord’s suicide, the priest’s flight, and a harmonious, egalitarian village life with Khalil marrying his rescuer’s daughter. The voice of Gibran is heard through Khalil, saying “You cannot believe in all these things, because if you do you will be denying the justice of God who made us equal, and the light of truth that shines upon all people of the earth. What makes you struggle against yourselves, heart against body, and help those who enslave you while God has created you free on his earth?” (Gibran 2020, 326) Wanting to be free of the ties of social life and probing the people to be open to the realities of the world beyond, a world where the justice of God is in reign Khalil reflects the mind of a mystic. He goes beyond institutions and instincts and redefines them with insights and revelations. Here Gibran- the Mystic have a firm conviction that there is a profound reality which lies past the physical and commonplace everyday universe of issues.

“John the Madman” in *Nymphs of the Valley* is just about a copy of Khalil the blasphemer. Kept with his calves by the abbot and priests of a religious community essentially in light of the fact that the calves have interfered with its property, John, the poor calf-attendant, blames his persecutors and every single other man of the congregation of being the foes of Christ, the present-day Pharisees succeeding on the destitution, wretchedness and decency of the very individuals like himself in whom Christ withstands. “Come forth again, o living Christ,” he calls, “and chase these religion-merchants out of your temples. For they have turned those temples into dungeons where the snakes of their cunning and villainy lie coiled.” Because he was enlivened with genuine truth under an overbearing social request

uniformly adversarial to earnestness and truth, John was rejected as a madman.

Gibran's heroes in these early works have invariably been heretics, madmen, wanderers and revolutionaries. Analysing these heroes and themes, many think that all his early works are the immature way of self-protest from a halfway come writer. But there are also many like Auguste Rodin and Irwin who take his rebellious writing as a mature reaction to the corrupted society when reading along the lines of William Blake and Nietzsche. Nidaa Hussain Fahmi Al-Khazraji et al. (2013) see it as The Prophetic nature of Gibran that "sees the world as ethically and morally deformed, and wants to advise and teach people how to dispose from the evil and vices deeds". The mystic in Gibran is revealed when he takes this moral responsibility upon himself, for a mystic tries to make his vision understandable in light of the fact that he realizes it is just a chosen few who are conceded divine awareness and the observation to see past the material world. In the words of F. E. Spurgeon (2011, 18), "The mystic is somewhat in the position of a man who, in a world of blind men, has suddenly been granted sight, and who gazing at the sunrise, and overwhelmed by the glory of it, tries, however falteringly to convey to his fellows what he sees." Barbara Young (1970, 40) writes about Gibran: "Like all great mystics Gibran was intensely religious. And it was because he was intensely religious that he rebelled against all bounds and limitations which would estrange the soul from its legitimate and free share of participation of the divine". From the above statements it could be argued that Gibran was a mystic in the making in his early writings. In his vision and insights about the higher realms of truth he was determined to question the faulty functions of the society that went against the ideals. He starts a revolution to rectify the system that ultimately results in his own progression and rectification.

Mystical maturation in Gibran

The stage of revolutionary and rebellious writing was succeeded in Gibran's development by a mature stage, that of *The Prophet*. His heroes, easily agitated by the social injustice are now replaced by a Prophet who speaks from a spiritual dimension. He shows that man's mission on this planet is a spiritual journey towards a 'More noteworthy Self', towards 'God hood' and 'the Infinite'. It is evident that Almustafa, the central character in *The Prophet*, represents Gibran himself. Upon closer examination, Almustafa symbolizes the

individual who, in Gibran's perspective, has attained a higher state of freedom; he has transcended the human condition to reach the divine, making him prepared for liberation and reunification with absolute life. The metaphor of his ship, described as the 'ship with the mist,' signifies death, which comes to transport him to the 'isle of his birth,' representing the 'Platonic world of metaphysical reality' (Naimy 1974, 64). Gibran's transformation starts with his mystical vision of life in his entirety. Here Gibran's mystical experience of 'timelessness' is manifest at the very beginning of *The Prophet* as we see his words reflect "A break through the world of time and history into one of eternity and timelessness" (Happold 1991, 19). He preaches to the people of Orphalese, from his conviction of existential realms, "timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness" (Gibran 2020, 691). The people of Orphalese represent mankind as a whole, where individuals, separated from their true spiritual essence and God, require guidance for their progress towards the divine. They need prophetic direction to move beyond their human limitations towards spiritual fulfilment. Gibran with his mystical vision gives that direction to the people which enable them to embark on that spiritual journey.

The central mystic principle, Gibran adheres to in *The Prophet* is that God is latent within every life form. Gibran sees a world as a perfect unity and life as a timeless harmony. For he says, "you who are born of the mountains and the forests and the seas can find their prayer in your heart" (Gibran 2020, 698). Such a conceptualization of unity of all beings of existence can only be resulted from a "consciousness of the Oneness of everything", a key characteristic of mystical experience (Happold 1991, 46). This characteristic is the most significant one considering its transforming effect on the person resulting in the awareness of the unity of not just everything but the unity of even the opposites. A mystic is finally freed from the faulty dualist dimensions of reality being granted the vision of 'Undivided unity'. This is a stage where one attains the "deepest spiritual instinct to break through the polar opposites and find again the Primal Meaning" (Ibid, 47). We see a Gibran of this mystical state as he demystifies the myth of good and evil, the unresolved 'polar opposite'. With insights into reality, he speaks:

Of the good in you I can speak, but not of the evil.
For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?
Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and
when it thirsts, it drinks even of dead waters.

You are good when you are one with yourself.

Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil. (Gibran 2020, 693)

This ultimate vision, the primal knowledge that light and darkness, good and evil are nothing but different dimensions of the same unitive reality is something that transforms an amateur Gibran to a mystic. A hero, who earlier showed his irresistible protest against all unjust religious establishments and social systems, now speaks of religion in a most acceptable manner. The transformation of Gibran into a mystic is the transformation of his rebellious and revolutionary heroes into a prophet and saint.

Conclusion

The classical mysticism systematised by scholars like Evelyn Underhill and others advocate three stages of mystical progression; first stage is 'purification' where the individual struggles to understand the nature of one's own self as against the worldly identities and cleanses all impurities. We see the rebellious nature of Gibran going through this stage of purification in his early writing. In the second stage of 'illumination', one comes in reconciliation with oneself, others and the entire being along with the universe by the infused wisdom he gets from the mystical experiences and insights. Gibran's identification with this stage of progression we see in his following writings that culminate in the composition of *The Prophet* which manifests the third and final stage of any mystical maturation that is the experience of the union with the ultimate reality/God. Hence it could be concluded that Gibran's mysticism and maturation as a mystic could be traced along with his work. And his work *The Prophet* reveals the unique elements of his mysticism which attains its peak as compared to the rest of his works. No mystic is completely identical with their mystical experience and its manifestation through their compositions or expressions, so too vary the experience of their readers. There are scholars who find Gibran less mystical in the proper sense. As each reading leads to new perspectives and layers of understanding, there open new possibilities of understanding Gibran with varied dimensions.

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