

# Characteristics of 'Mahjar' in Arabic Poetry: A Subjective Study

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## **Abstract**

The Mahjar literature in the Americas is a new dimension in modern Arabic literature and its significant contribution was in poetry. Mikhail Noaima, an iconoclast and outstanding poet, played a major role in the development of Mahjar Literature in North America in general and modern Arabic poetry in particular. Therefore, the work is an in-depth study into the philosophy of his life, highlighting his thoughts and Ideologies in the development of Modern Arabic Poetry. Noaima was an Arab- Christian writer being nurtured and bred up in the Christian Culture. He was virtually motivated by the Russian and European literatures and American 'Transcendentalism' and thereby, he was not in close contact with the ancient Arabic literary heritage and the fundamentals of Arabic language and literature. On the contrary, he was fully westernized in thoughts and belief, and his works made the Mahjar literature revitalized creating a new chapter in the development of modern Arabic literature to a great extent. This research article is consisted on Abstract, four sections, i.e: Appearance of Mahjar poets, Definition of Mahjar poets and its exponents, Reasons for Migration, Important Features of Mahjar Poetry, Conclusion and Bibliography.

**Keywords:** Mahjar, Transcendentalism, romantic poetry, neo-classical, satire

## **1 -Appearance of Mahjar Poets:**

The Christian Arab writers including Khalil Mutran hailed from Syria and Lebanon emigrated in substantial numbers during the late nineteenth century to the land of Egypt, Sudan and others. Many of these emigrants came from the mission schools in Lebanon and were looked upon favorably by the British authorities in Egypt and the Sudan, as they were benefited to a great extent with French, English and their mother tongue Arabic. However, a large number of them went to North or South America, or to Australia or West Africa, and they established thriving merchant communities in major cities such as New York, Rio de Janeiro and San Paulo. These migrations were not without far- reaching cultural effects, because the material wealth

sent back to their villages and families by those emigrants who prospered was often accompanied by new ideas and attitudes.

Anyway, by a happy chance, during the first two decades of twentieth century there came together in New York a group of these Syrian and Lebanese emigrants who had a general interest in literature and in poetry in particular. By cooperating and helping each other in their work and ideas, they were able to form a coherent group with common characteristics, and some of them had the talent to produce work of a quality and originality which became a vital stage in the development of romantic poetry in Arabic.<sup>1</sup> These writers were initially brought together through the journalism of the Arabic-speaking community in New York, and by one literary monthly magazine in particular "الفنون" (The Arts), edited by Nasib Arida. Due to financial problems it appeared only from 1913 to 1918 and then it disappeared, having produced only twenty-nine numbers in all. Another important outlet for the Mahjar writers was the twice-weekly paper "السائح" (Al-Saih) which had been established in New York in 1912 by Abd Al-Masih Haddad. After the collapse of (Al-Funun), the writers decided to organize themselves into a group in order to preserve themselves as a literary movement, and this led to the formation of "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association) in 1920: Jibran Khalil Jibran was the first president and Mikhail Noaima became the secretary.<sup>2</sup> "السائح" (Al-Saih) took the place of (Al-Funun) as the medium through which their works and ideas would appear, and it was hoped that a special edition would be produced at the beginning of each year dedicated to the group. Thus it was that the first genuine literary school in modern Arabic was created. In this regard the Mahjar remarkable poets such as Amin Rihani, Khalil Jibran, Noaima, and Iliya Abu Madi from northern hemisphere. On the other hand, Iliyas Habib Farhat, Maaluf and Qunsul brothers played a significant role in standardizing the Mahjar poetry, without whose ideas and works the development of Arabic Romantic poetry inside the Arab world would certainly have been deficient. This is a brief account, how the Mahjar poets appeared and westernized Arabic Mahjar poetry in the Americas and thereby they modernized Arabic literature and placed it in the equal position of developed literatures in the world.

## **2. Definition of Mahjar poets and its exponents:**

The word "مهجر" (Mahjar) pl. "مهاجر" Mahajir (place of emigration) derived from "هجر" - hajar<sup>3</sup> (abandonment) is not a new word or phenomenon that it confined merely around the literary activities of the Arab writers in the America rather, the word Mahjar is generalized to the aspects of human beings concerned for. But, here, the present search is only within the concern of Arabian aspects. That is, these are those Arabian poets who immigrated from the land of Syria, Lebanon and other Arab countries and settled in the

North as well as the South Americas and produced "أدب المهجر أو شعر المهجر" (Adab ul Mahjar or Sher ul Mahjar) thereon.

According to M.M. Badawi, "The Mahjar movement in literature refers to the body of work produced by Diaspora writers in North and South America during the early part of the 20th century. The South American branch of the Mahjar group was centered in Brazil. On the whole, the group was more conservative than its Northern counterpart and produced few innovations that would challenge the prevailing neo-classical tradition of poetry in the Arab world."<sup>4</sup> The North American branch of the Mahjar group was centered in New York and revolved around the forceful personality of Khalil Jibran. Unlike the Southern branch, it showed no reverence for traditional Arab culture.<sup>5</sup>

Freed from the conservative constraints of Arab world and bred on the American ideals of liberty and progress, the Northern Mahjar writers challenged Arab cultural norms in the ways that was heretofore unimaginable. Under the influence of western Romanticism and American transcendentalism, the group inaugurated a new age of Romantic literature in the Arab world.<sup>6</sup>

The outstanding writers of Northern Americas were- جبران خليل جبران (Jibran Khalil Jibran), عبدالمسيح حدّاد (Abdul Masih Haddad), ميخائيل نعيمة (Mikhail Nu'aima), ندره حدّاد (Nadara Haddad), إيلياس عطاءالله (Iliyas Ataullah), وليم كاتسفلين (Walim Katisflis), رشيد أيبوب (Rasheed Ayyub), نسيب عريضة (Nasib Arida), أمين إيليا أبو ماضي (Iliya Abu Madi), وادي باحوظ (Wadi e Bahoot), ریحانی (Ameen Rihani), نعمة الحاج (Nimatul Haaj), مسعود سماحه (Masood Samaha), محبوب الخوري الشرتوني (Mahbub ul Khauri Al-Shartuni), اسعد رستم (Assad Rustam), أحمد زكي أبو شادي (Ahmed Zaki Abu Shadi) and others<sup>7</sup>. The first ten persons in the serial were the members of the الرابطة القلمية (The Pen Association), a literary school in North America, came into existence in 20th April, 1920 A.D. They manifested their individual thoughts, ideas and visions throughout their works especially in poems. They made an in-depth study of western literature and were influenced by the Poets like- long-fellow, Emerson, Poe and others. Consequently, the poetry like eulogy, satire, self-praise etc. was no longer usable into the concept of their poetry. They freed the poetic theme and language from the classical language rigidity and gave importance of vision in poetry and thereby they could able to sow the seeds of modernity into Arabic literature in general and the poetry in particular.

On the other hand, the Latin American Mahjar school was known as العصبة الأندلسية (the Andalusian league). The exponents of this school were إيلياس فرحت (Iliyas Farhat), رشيد خوري (Rasheed Khuri), فوزي مالوف (Fauzi Maaluf), جورج صيدح (George Saidah), شكر الله الجر (Shukrullah Al-Jur), زكي قنصل (Zaki Qunsul), إيلياس قنصل (Iliyas Qunsul) and others. The

authoritarian Arabs on the main land tended to be critical of Mahjar poetry. It's diction, grammatical license, structural flaws and deviations from the accepted norms of poetry. Other Arab writers, more tolerant of the liberties taken by the Mahjar poets were greatly impressed by the innovations in form and content and found their poems inspiring and full of imagination.<sup>8</sup>

### 3-Reasons for Migration:

The Arabs wherever they went either in Spain, Europe, and Africa or in Americas produced wonderful poetry which came down to them from their ancestors. Since the end of 18th century till now the Arab writers from Syria, Lebanon and other Arab States flew to North and South Americas to get rid of many a trouble that they had been suffered from. Those who settled in New York and Washington were known as the North American Arab writers. They founded an association called (The Pen Association) run by the members like- Khalil Jibran, Nasib Arida, Mikhail Noaima, Rasheed Ayyub, Abd ul- Masih al- Haddad, Nadara Haddad, Walim Katisflis, Iliya Abu Madi, Masood Samaha, Mahbub al- Khuri al- Shartuni, Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi, Dr. Ibrahim, Najib Arbeli, Naum Makarjal, Najib Musa Dayyab, Nazmi Naseem and others.

On the other hand, the South American emigrants settled in Sao-Paulo, capital of Brazil and Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina. They founded "العصبة الأندلسية" (The Andalusian League) therein. Its members were Nazir Zytun, Nasar Samaan, Daud Shakur, Husni Gurab, Yusuf Asaad Ganim, Iskandar Kurbaz, Antun Saleem Sa'ad, Shukrullah Jar, Qarwi Rasheed Khuri, Shafique Maaluf, Sheikh Habib Masood, Tawfiq Zaun, Iliyas Farhat, Riaz Maluf, Qaisar Saleem Khuri, Na'ama Qazan, Zarij Husun, Fawzi Maluf, Jurj Saidah, Zarij Saidah, Zarij Suaya, Iliyas Qansul, Zaki Qansul, Sheikh Faiz Samani, Hannan Zakhria, Wahib Andah, Eusuf Ibrahim Khuri, Musa Karim and others.

The Mahjar writers in America attached with, their literary activities and published news papers, Magazines and books therein. They had an eagle eye in protecting Arabic and, viewed that it, being their mother tongue must not come under the sway of English in North- America and of Spanish and Portuguese in South- America. To enliven the spirit of their language one of the poets says:<sup>9</sup>

لغة يهون على بينها أن يروا  
يوم القيامة قبل يوم وفاتها

(It is such a language that to behold the day of its destruction is more preferable than before seeing the day of its death).

It is well known to all that most of the Mahjar writers were belong to Christianity and hence, they had a positive attitude towards the new creed and culture to humanity. The European propaganda coming from the end of French had not been an influential matter on them. They persuaded the

Christians of Lebanon and Syria that actually they had been the children of Phoenicians and Syrians and not hailed from Arab family. The Islamic conquerors imposed their language, culture and political influence on them and thereby they lost their original identity along with their Christendom, the Greater Syria. But, in spite of this false European propaganda there the Christians comprehend themselves as Arab and the children of Gassan tribe. Hence, they became proud of their Arabic language and literature and virtually the fruitful Mahjar movement in the Americas came into being. Masood Samaha one of the Mahjar poets who describes the reasons for his migration to America in 1913 A.D. as such:<sup>10</sup>

سأترك أرض الجدود، ففيها  
حياة الجبان و موت الجرى  
تقييد أقلام أحراره  
وتطلق أيدي ذوى الميسر

(Very soon I would leave the land of my ancestors wherein there is life to the coward and death to the brave men. In it the freedom loving pens are to be banned and get it free into the hands of wealthy man)

The poet Shukrullah Jar said at his departure to the land of South America:<sup>11</sup>

فيا ليت شعري! أبغضى المهاج  
ر فيها يرجيه من هجرته

(Would that it had been known to me that will the emigrant be fortunate at what he intends through migration)

In this connection a Syrian Mahjar poet says:<sup>12</sup>

"نحن جننا المهاجر مستجيرين مسترزقين"

( We arrived here to find out our asylums and livelihood.)

Hence, it is clear that most of the migrants migrated to America in quest of justice, freedom and livelihood. But, there were some immigrants who came to U.S.A. only to acquire adventure and an extra- ordinary impression to be had from it. Iliya Abu Madi describes such kind of migration as like the high soaring eagle that hovers in the vast atmosphere and by this flight their hopes escape from the prison of clay (earth) and become a prey of concealed pearls. Therefore, addressing his birth place Lebanon, he says:<sup>13</sup>

لبنان! لاتعذل بنيك اذا هم  
ركبوا الى العلياء كل سفين  
لم يهجر ك ملالة، لكنهم  
خلقوا لصيد لؤلؤ المكنون

(O Lebanon! Don't blame your children while they rode all the ships way to the heaven (elevation). For they have not left you being disgusted rather they have been made to prey the hidden pearls.)

Ahmad Abu Zaki Shadi, an Egyptian Mahjar poet, felt regret of humility (strangeness) in his motherland- i.e. he did not find any associate whose thoughts and ideologies could be able to satisfy him. So, he left his birth place in 1946 and settled in America. He expresses his longings towards motherland in this way:<sup>14</sup>

و غربة الفكر في دار يمجدها  
أقصى على الحر من فقدان ناظره

(The thinking of wretchedness in the land of majesty, It is more disliked for a brave man than becoming blind.)

The above mentioned reasons, for what the Lebanese and Syrian poets migrated to America and settled therein, are found copiously in their poetry. In short, it can be described in this way- that during the Turkish reign in Syria and Lebanon the financial, political, social, cultural and religious conditions were too piteous which compelled its poets and authors to undertake such an adventurous immigration in the strange land of America.

#### **4-Important Features of Mahjar Poetry:**

There is a difference between the Christian poets who had been educated by missionaries and who had one to Egypt, and their compatriots who immigrated to America: the former had to moderate their Christian influence upon diction, symbols and ideas, whereas the latter were able to develop this influence to the full. In Muslim societies which venerated its literary tradition and poetic heritage, the Christian poets were obliged to serve prevailing literary taste in order to survive and to be accepted. The freedom which the Mahjarites enjoyed and their partial seclusion within an American Christian society which was struggling to stem the tide of materialism and agnosticism, uninfluenced by a conventional society such as the Egyptian, cleared the way for such a revolution.

Thus, in Mahjar poetry, the Christian tradition in literature, which had flowed from the influence of the Western missionaries, was not fractured, as happened with the Christian emigrants to Egypt. The features of Christian Arabic style with its emphasis on clarity rather than eloquence, its grammatical correctness, simple diction influenced by Biblical style, a tendency to use new words appearing in colloquial expressions to replace the hackneyed and obsolete pseudo- classical expressions, its sincerity in expressing deep religious emotions, were the main features of Mahjar literature.<sup>15</sup>

The Arabic Mahjar literature in America got its immense and swift development that had not been witnessed ever earlier. The development of Arabic literature in the Arab world was in slow motion but deliberately. When the Mahjar literature got the bounce in its development, then the Arabic literature sprang up and could be able to reach to its culmination as it

was in the parallel position of developed world literatures. The outstanding features of Mahjar literature are as follows:

### **1-Gravity of individual viewpoint**

The Mahjar literature is considered on its authors' personalities. The vital traits of the litterateurs are expressed in it. The positions of the Mahjar authors are determined on the basis of individual shares and what they endeavoured in the development of the aims and objectives of the Mahjar literature. The literary features of each of them are of different. Each of them focuses himself independently from others following the particular character in his thoughts and ideologies.

The marks of distinguishing personalities were the lofty attributions attributed to the concerned authors. The Mahjar litterateurs were not concerned amongst them- because, they were divided into two groups of languages- i.e. the poetic language and the prosaic language. Their languages always remained a source of consolation with the acute interpretations, pictorials and thoughts. Its prose style turned into a beautiful poem having musicians' appeal in them. They tried their best efforts in moulding exact words and let them sweet echoes to pacify the readers' mind.

It was Jibran Khalil Jibran who described the words with a spirit of rebellious and agitated way against all the traditional rules and regulations. Fauzi Maaluf attributed with clear explanations, beauty of comparisons, metaphors, and acuteness of thoughts and fine choice of the words which indicate on its meaning keeping in view with the conservative measures in respect of clear poetic interpretations<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, Mikhail Noaima attributed with a beautiful plain language and his emotional meditations, while al- Qarawi ascribed with the melting feelings in his longings and his ever outburst for patriotism.

### **2-The spiritual meditation**

As for the spiritual meditation is concerned- the North American Mahjar writers- such as Khalil Jibran, Mikhail Noaima, Nasib Arida and Iliya Abu Madi had contributed a lot of contribution in this field and thereby "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association) eliminates the Mahjar movement to a great extent. It has an outstanding majesty which distinguishes it from the Mahjar literature as well as the whole Arabic literature of past and present.

التأمل (The spiritual contemplation) is also to be noticed in Fauzi Malufs odes entitled- "على بساط الريح" (on the carpet of Air) and "شعلة العذاب" (punishment of flame) are the more delicate poems of modern Arabic poetry. بين الطفولة والشباب (Between the childhood and youthful) is one of the wonderful odes composed by Iliyas Farhat.

As for Mikhail Nu'aima is concerned, his all poems are of spiritual meditative and also most of his prose works are of this kind. (The

Procession), composed by Jibran Khalil Jibran, deals with the philosophy of human life. It is a collection of two hundred and three verses<sup>17</sup>.

### 3-Free from the ancient rigidity

In view of freeing the Arabic literature from the ancient rigidity there had been continued attacks against it as well as the whole structure of Arabic literature, but, there was no any change to the trend of its modernization. Nevertheless, by the passing of time Arabic literature became free from the bondage of imitation and rigidity introducing new thoughts and ideologies to the human life. Actually, the, unfamiliar words and ancient out dated style which prevented the progress of this literature and thus; its movements became paralyzed.

The Mahjar literature particularly the North American Arabic Association "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association) brought the treasure house of vast thoughts, the liberal human compassion and the substantial energy to the souls of which echoes are not but the means of joy to the souls of the minds of a musician fastening him vigorously to its innovations and colors appealing to the human mind to a great extend that had not been ever produced in the Arab world.<sup>18</sup>

### 4- Longing for the motherland

The Arab Mahjar nostalgia for motherland played a major role in modern Arabic literature. It can be highlighted with vehemence, sternness and profoundness in the North as well as the South American poetry. The Lebanese and Syrian Arabs who migrated from their birth place bearing longings with them which were more spacious than the atmosphere. They left behind the tearing, forbearance and the spirituality which made them dandled.

The Mahjar authors had to be clashed with material clamors and the troublesome instrumental life which the Arab world had never witnessed. Na'ma Qazan "نعمة قازان" says in his Muallaqa-"الأرز" (The Cedar):

وكننت مع الله في قريتي  
فصرت بلا الله في غربتي

"I was with Allah in my native land, and I have become without Him in my alien"

Verily the strange life had burnt to ashes the longings of the emigrants. So, they had unlimited longings towards the East, their motherland. Hence, it compelled them to compose poetry being burnt in melancholy, suffered from pang of mind, infuriated with feelings and the ghost like magicians.<sup>19</sup>

### 5- Inclination towards humanity

The Mahjar litterateurs tried their level best in enhancing the true love to all the existed and non-existed beings and their earnestness for the absolute good to all the creatures. All the members of "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association) were attributed with the attribution of humanity. To them, the

value of humanity cannot be enhanced without a free and blissful motherland where the human feelings of the dominated and degraded people changed towards the vicious adversity. So, keeping in view, the weak and oppressed people should be brought under the shadow of justice and humanity. The concept of human feelings and the effective deeds in collaboration are very essential to make the lofty edifice of humanity. It is the main proof of vast human love. The sympathized and affectionate call - such as "يا رفيقى", "يا أختى" published in Mahjar Arabic literature, touched the core of the heart and thereby took the birth of affection and love therein. Thus, the Mahjar poetry became high interpreting about the inclination of liberal and an exemplary universal life of humanity.<sup>20</sup>

The Mahjar litterateurs in general and the members of the "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association) particular were the sincere sons and lovers of nature. They had profound feelings, love and union with it. It was a quite new way of thinking to them. A new thing - that mingled with the sweetness of Sufism. Love to nature is a spiritual growth which can influence into the mind of an echoing dreamer. It flows with sweetness, happiness and soars high with the spirit over the delusive cosmos and the bondage of material possessions.<sup>21</sup>

### **6-Portrayal and the description**

The Mahjar school relied to a great extent upon the beauty of representation (i.e. the portrayal and the description) in poetry and prose as well in spite of having human liberty, acute feelings of daily life, the human society, the union between burning feelings and the guided thinking for freedom, the fruitful winged phantasm with profoundness and vitality. It is noteworthy that both the portrayal and the description had the tremendous influence all over the past Arabic literature.<sup>22</sup>

### **7-The de -facto Character**

Literature is a mirror of human life wherein it soars within the state and scope of it or as like it. Mikhail Noaima said: "An ever watchful observes and then permits, while a heart throbs with the throbbing of life wherein it has been changed as to touch the distress of souls," and the literature which portrays the perceptible de- facto matters with the artistic expression and then its message reaches to the society being provided with conviction and the beauty of arts.

According to Dr. Taha Hussain: "The arts, is not but it is the progress with belongings of the practical human life without having out from it." Further, both of them said: "Verily the exemplary beauty has become weaker than the human condolence happened from the catastrophe of life, and the human life is more affluence, diversified and significant than a piece of thoughts or, one of the dreams or, a concealed whisperings"<sup>23</sup>.

### **8-Interpretational simplicity and the musical delicacy**

Nobody can escape from the troublesome of the poetry. "Poetry is the art of life, neither is it mannerism nor the custom" -this popular belief became deep rooted in the minds of Mahjar litterateurs. To them simplicity, delicacy and musical appeal are the fundamental pillars of poetry and arts as well. That was why, what c their poetry possessed became fast and more significant and the style of their prose writings is equally easy and endear to the readers of the East (Arab World) as well as the Mahjar. This faith, by the passing of time, is on the race and prevails over the Arab World reaching to its high water- mark of development and it was the main target of the Mahjar poets and litterateurs<sup>24</sup>.

Religious freedom is a dominating theory that happened in Mahjar literature either it had been the principle tenets of idealism, sectarianism and socialism or the expression and the art of speech. The religious freedom has a great and effective influence. It is one of the fundamental elements which make the Mahjar literature successful with esteem and wonder in every place. Hence, there was freedom of thoughts, ideology, argument and interpretation for the majesty of religion among-the Mahjar litterateurs keeping away from the spirit of fanaticism and rigidity, the blind support originates from the interpretations and explanations of the religious books, the falsehood and the heedless sectarianism and the religious fights. As one of the Mahjar poets utters.<sup>25</sup>

أعطني النايّ و غنّ  
فالغنا خير صلاة  
وأنين النايّ يبقى  
بعد أن تفتى الحياة

(Remoteness provides me a source of spiritual melody, and the spiritual melody is superior to the prayer; while the pangs of separation remain with me, after being the life in a rest forever).

### **Conclusion:**

It has been learnt that the growth and development of Mahjar literature was not based on sudden and unpremeditated occurrences; rather, it was the result of experimentation and observation of many decades in its development. The Mahjar poets migrated to the land of America due to the financial, political, social, cultural and religious injustice imposed on them by the Turkish Sultans arid consequently; they produced a large number of poetry in Mahjar Arabic literature. Mahjar poetry is free from ancient rigidity. Longing for the motherland - i.e. the Mahjar poets became nostalgic towards their motherlands. The Mahjar poets were motivated by the spiritual meditation. Inclination towards humanity was the basic fundamentals of Mahjar poets. The Mahjar poets were the sincere sons and lovers of nature.

Religious freedom is a dominated theory to be realized in Mahjar literature. Lastly, the de- facto character makes the Mahjar poetry more dynamic and appealing to the human life.

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