

Mikhail Noaima's Poetic Legacy in Modern Arabic Literature; A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Mikhail Noaima, 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 of thought, referring to the literary movement which evolved in the United States among emigrant Syro-Lebanese poets and writers, who operated through a literary gathering in New York by the name "الرابطة القلمية" (The Pen Association), during the second and third decades of the 20th century, and until his death in 1931 of Jibran Khalil Jibran, its guiding spirit. The present article is consisted on abstract, two sub-chapters i.e Life of Mikhail Noaima and Critical study of impact of Mikail Noaima workson Modern Poetry, result and the Bibliography. May Allah shower His blessings on us through knowledge. Ameen.

1-Life of Mikhail Noaima

Mikhail Noaima, born in Biskinta¹ 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 became a schoolmate of Nasib Arida and showed such promise that in 1906 the college elected him on scholarship to attend the 'Diocesan Seminary' in Poltava,

Ukraine, where he could able to meet with-his friend Mikhail Iskandra. His involvement in a Students' strike was punished by his removal from the Seminary and the postponement of his final examination for a year until 1911. 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 joined in the 'freedom movement of Syria' (سوريا الحرة) an organization which operated for the freedom of Syria from the yoke of Uthmanids in Turkey².

Noaima 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's degrees in the Arts and Law. Noaima 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 1918.³

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.

On returning to the United States, Noaima wrote the charter for (Al- Rabita Al- Qalamiyyah), founded on 28th April 1920 with Noaima as its secretary. He plunged into the activities of the Association and propagated its message in his famous book on literary criticism "الغربال" (The Sieve), which is almost a manifesto of Mahjar literature. He worked as a travelling salesman until 1932, when he returned to Lebanon and devoted himself to writing.⁴ Noaima was remained a bachelor and passed his life in Biskinta, his native village.⁵

Though, as a litterateur, Mikhail Noaima 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 Noble Prize in literature.⁶ Noaima wrote around fifty titles of works belonging to almost all literary genres such as- poetry, narrative prose, drama, biography, autobiography, literary criticism, novels, short stories, and essays such as "الآباء والبنون" (The fathers and the sons), "الغربال" (The sieve), "المراحل" (The stages), "كان ما كان" (It has happened), "همس الجفون" (Click eyelids). Mikhail Noaima, the simple man and a great literary figure in Mahjar as well as the Arab World, died on 28th February, 1988 A.D.

2-Critical Study of impact of Mikhail Noaima's works on Modern Arabic Poetry

Mikhail Noaima is the third literary figure to leave an impact on Mahjar poetry in North America and a dominating personality in the Arab world. As a critic, his greatest service to modern Arabic poetry has been mostly through his essays on criticism, most of which are collected in "الغربال" (The sieve), published in 1923. It was in 1913, Noaima discovered his critical abilities. In his first critical article he attacked the literature of imitation and decoration as "الأدب الموميا" (mummified literature). In this article he expressed the firm and clear ideas on the necessity for a drastic change, even a revolution in literature, must have come from comparisons with European literature, and Russian literature in particular.⁷

Noaima's writings in "الفنون" (Al-Funun) were all on criticism being appreciated by his readers in the Arab world and other literary figures in North as well as South America. After the suspension of (Al-Funun) permanently in 1916, Noaima continued to publish his critical articles in other North- Mahjar papers. In this respect "السائح" (Al-Sa'ih), edited by Abdul-Masih Haddad, became the platform for North Mahjar literature and for

Noaima's critical writings. These writings, which were mostly bent on establishing a real change in the form, language, attitudes and methods of approach of Arabic poetry, greatly helped to sow the seeds of change which a critic can detect in the poetry of some of the poets of (Al-Rabita). In this respect, Noaima's influence was great, but it could not match Jibran Khalil Jibran's direct example of original literature of a high caliber.⁸

Noaima's critical articles published in (Al- Funun) and (Al- Sa'ih) were collected and published in a book form entitled "الغربال" (al- Ghirbal) by Muhyi ud- Din AL-Rida in 1923 in Egypt. It was only in 1922, apparently, that the two avant- garde movements in Egypt and America came into contact with each other. Before that they had been advancing along parallel lines, both answering the desperate need of Arabic literature to forge new links and to free itself from crystallized traditional attitudes. Both groups, moreover, had been exposed to western cultural values.

In 1922, Noaima received a copy of "الديوان" (Al-Diwan) and managed to include in his collected essays an article on the two volumes of (Al-Diwan) in which he hailed the appearance of this works of criticism in the following curious words:

"God bless Egypt, for not all that she Writes is empty chatter, and not all the Verse she produces is mere affectation. I used to think that she... adored the decorative word and sanctified the mere stringing together of rhymes, for how often she has glorified a clown and cheered a fake..."⁹ It is his sincere joy in discovering an avant- garde team of critics in Egypt and expressed clearly his former lack of admiration for the literature produced in that country. Such an attitude of Noaima was completely overlooked by some Egyptian writers who criticized the two movements and carelessly made Mahjar authors dependent on the Egyptians for their ideas on innovation. Noaima's attitude, it seems, was shared by other members of "الرابطة" 'Al-

Rabita'.¹⁰ Unfortunately, neither Noaima in "سبعون" (Sabu'n), nor Mandur in "النقد والنقاد المعاصرون" (Al-Naqd waI- Nuqqad Al-Muasirun), speak in any detail about the reception of (Al-Ghirbal) in Egypt and the Arab world on its publication in 1923, although Rida prophesied a storm of protest. Noaima himself, although more cultured than the other members of Al-Rabita, he was not interested in classical Arabic literature. He studied, besides Arabic, the foreign literatures like- English, French and Russian and his comparatively insufficient knowledge of the Arabic classical heritage led him to believe in its worthlessness, comparing it with modern European literature.¹¹ That is why; he criticized none of the poets of the classical period.

To Noaima, the main purpose of (Al-Rabita) was 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 Arabic nations.¹² ثريا ملحس (Thuriyyah Malhas) is probably right in saying that Noaima was the first critic in Arabic who preferred content to form in literature.¹³ According to him literature must be focused on content, not form, for the proper province of literature is life itself. But the history of criticism in Arabic shows the equal value which most classical critics gave to the two.¹⁴

Noaima had rejected his former ideas in mystical fashion some years before at an Arab literary conference in Damascus in 1956 In this conference, he declared that no critic was capable of distinguishing absolute beauty, truth and goodness in a work of literature, for "each critic has his own personal criteria", and he advised critics to try to write their own works instead of writing about other people's works. Noaima, as a Romantic poet, could able to open a new chapter in modern Arabic poetry. The dominant impression left by his small corpus of verse contained only 44 (forty-four) poems

entitled "همس الجفون" (Eyelids Whispering), is of a quiet, introspective personality preoccupied with inner problems of the spirit and the emotions. These are expressed in a language which is deceptively simple and without linguistic pretension. True to his own theories, he makes the conflicts within his troubled self the basic theme and justification for his poetry. His work is by no means of even and sustained quality, but some of the examples referred to above rank with the best efforts of Romantic lyrical poetry in Arabic. The fact that he was able to express precise ideas on how such poetry should be written and was also able to demonstrate some of these in some of his own work, lent him great significance amongst his colleagues both in the Mahjar and inside the Arab world.¹⁵

The language of "همس الجفون" (Eyelids Whispering), as Badawi states, is of artful simplicity and directness, and has a quiet contemplative tone which is able to achieve great intensity of feeling without loud rhetorical effects. Qualities such as these were greatly admired by the Egyptian critic Muhammad Mandur, and this new, restrained, intimate language of poetry led him to coin the term "الأدب المهموس" (Al- Adab Al- Mahmus), "The quiet voice in literature", recognizing that this Mahjar verse was a definite new departure in Arabic poetry generally and in Romantic poetry in particular.¹⁶ One of Noaima's poems which Mandur rightly singled out for particular attention is "أخي" (My Brother), a rare example of an Arabic poem which is both a war poem and a patriotic piece, and which is quite devoid of any loud tone of declamation or strained rhetorical effect. Written in 1917, this fine poem was at least a generation ahead of its time, and eventually, the Arab world recognized its value with a great ardor.

The authenticity of Noaima's meditative basis is more significant when set alongside similar poetry of the North Mahjar. Noaima's influence on his fellow writers was considerable, although his own spiritual attitude was in

turn enriched by Jibran's pervasive influence. His spiritual themes, which steadily increased in their meditative attitude until they gave mystical expression to his beliefs, were accepted by the Arab world without much effort, despite their novelty.

Noaima was writing his poetry during one of the most exciting period in modern Arab literary history, when it was possible to impose on the reading public a great variety of themes, as long as they did not touch the basic dogma of religion, the sanctity of the heritage or the jealously guarded code of honor. The first four decades of the century are marked by what can be termed an "individual sensibility".¹⁷

Noaima early enjoyed a great popularity as a poet and short- story writer in the Arab world when "مجموعة الرابطة القلمية" (Majmuat ul-Rabita ul-Qalamiyyah) was published in 1921; it contained five of Noaima's poems. These and other poems in the collection were memorized by the growing generation in the Middle East and their influence was great on the following generation of Arab poets.¹⁸

Abbas and Najm are probably right in their suggestion that Noaima's poetry may have been influenced by the Lebanese folk-song, and nearly all the mountain people in the Lebanon memorized these songs which covered many happy and sad aspects of life. The Lebanese folk- song is characterized by the detail and repetitive phrases that give different aspects of the same theme.¹⁹ Noaima's poetry, like his prose, shows an exhaustive insistence on detail, which is an anti- poetic characteristic.²⁰

His desire to express everything in his mind, or at least to give many sides to the same object or idea treated in the poem may be the cause behind the simplicity of his language in verse, a simplicity more characteristic of prose than of poetry. One cannot, however, fully agree with Abbas and Najm in their suggestion that the parallelisms of his style were caused by his prosaic

tendency for the short sentences or phrases he crowds into his poems are not always prosaic. Good classical poetry, moreover, abounds with parallelisms and anti- thesis. Noaima, however, exceeds anything known before or after him in this, showing this tendency also in his prose, although there is a longer history of such a style in classical Arabic prose. We find this trend is not but a persistent flow throughout his poetry.

RESULT

It can be inferred from the above mentioned discussion that Noaima's writings: 1-Either in criticism or in poetry, played a crucial role in the development of modern Arabic poetry.

2- The language of his poem lacks in complexity, free from obscure vocabularies which is easily comprehensible by the reader.

3-He composed his poems in romantic veins, introducing a new, subdued and muted tone which was a real victory for poetry.

4-His free- flowing (prose- poem) style was highly appealing to the common people in the Arab world. Moreover, he successfully introduced the western cultural values into the Arabic literature.

5- The style he introduced infused a new essence particularly in Arabic romantic poetry.

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