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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Issues of Self and the Aesthetics of Language in the Literature of Kahlil Gibran

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Abstract
It is well known that a significant portion of Khalil Gibran's writings revolves around a central theme: the self. Great attention has been devoted,it is considered one of the fundamental axes of human existence. Hence, Gibran wrote extensively about its essence, characteristics, and its influence on the course of human civilization. He also examined its various states, tracing its weaknesses and limitations, as well as the ways to elevate and perfect it in pursuit of what he calls the "ideal self."However, Gibran's approach to the subject of the self, in all its aspects, was not through direct analytical discourse or a rigid philosophical style. This raises the question: what was the nature of the language he employed to explore this theme and produce literary works whose impact remains profound to this day? Aiming to address the questions of the study, the researcher used simple examples from Gibran's texts in which he employed the language in a unique and distinctive manner, achieving both linguistic beauty and harmony between the content of his work and the form of its expression.

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Introduction

Khalil Gibran's interest in the self was not limited to personal concerns alone; he extended it to analyze what he calls the individual self and the collective self. His ultimate aim was to elevate humanity as a whole to a degree of perfection he considered the purpose of existence. Yet, his expression of these ideas, as was his custom, was highly figurative, crafted to maximize the impact of his linguistic message on the reader.

1. Critique of the Limited Self

Before delving into this discussion, it is essential to consider Gibran's view of the self in terms of appearance and concealment. He believed that the self exists in a deep, distant unity, whose essence cannot be fully grasped nor its paths known. Human unity does not imply isolation from others or retreating to remote, empty places; rather, it signifies the unification of one's inner self and its search for its lost essence. The outward manifestations we perceive as reflective of our true self are, in his view, merely forms shaped to meet life's necessities:

"*My friend! I am not what appears to you. My outward forms are but a finely woven cloak of gentleness and decorum, wrapped around me to shield you from my neglect. Yet my hidden, greater self—the 'I'—is a profound secret, concealed in the depths of my inner stillness, known only to me, and there it shall remain, obscure and veiled*"(Gibran, n.d., p. 10).).

For Gibran, these outward manifestations are mere shells that obscure the truth of the self:

"*I and you, people, are captivated by what is visible of our condition, blind to what is hidden in our essence. We are enthralled by the shells of the 'I' and the surfaces of the 'you,' and thus fail to perceive what the spirit has entrusted to the 'I' or concealed within the 'you*"(Gibran, 1990, pp. 5–6).

No matter how immersed in life a person may be, or how much they interact with others, their authentic self remains hidden, veiled, protective of its secrets, sparing of its virtues:

"It is an island whose rocks are desires, its trees are dreams, its flowers solitude, its springs thirst, and it lies in the midst of a sea of unity and seclusion."(Ibid., p. 93).

Yet, this unity is cherished by those who perceive its beauty:

"*O my solitude and seclusion! You are dearer to me than a thousand victories, sweeter to my heart than all the glories of nations."*(Gibran, n.d., p. 56).

Even those whom life guides along narrow paths, strewn with thorns and flowers, and surrounded by predatory wolves and singing nightingales(Gibran, 1991, p. 64)., resemble prophets among men, for they alone seek the light of the self, follow its path, and drink from its source:

"*If you see a dreamer alone,*

Shunned and despised by his people,

He is the prophet, while tomorrow's veil conceals him

From a nation clothed in yesterday's attire.

He is the stranger to the world and its inhabitants,

Bold among men, whether they excuse him or not.

He is firm even in softness,

Distant, though men approach or abandon him."(Gibran, 1993, pp. 63–64).

This explains Gibran's persistent quest to explore the depths of his own self, purifying it of flaws and deficiencies to attain the desired perfection. It is therefore unsurprising that he criticized all forms of weakness and deficiency within the human self, as well as behaviors marked by submission and resignation when facing life's challenges. Being naturally rebellious, he believed that one must first revolt against one's own weakness and limitations and seek the source of errors within oneself rather than in the external world**,** (Hawi, 1982, p. 110).

Gibran openly began by scrutinizing the weaknesses of his own self. While this might seem simple and accessible to anyone, it is not, for most people cannot confront their own errors or recognize their shortcomings. When glimpses of these truths appear, they often turn away, avoiding confrontation out of fear. Such individuals prefer comfort and live in accordance with their limited concerns, never truly realizing the essence of their existence.

He then proceeded to critique certain individual models, numerous in reality, who exhibit reprehensible traits that distort the human self, traits that the self itself rejects and resists with all available means. Finally, Gibran extended his critique to the collective self, which, in essence and nature, mirrors the individual self and derives its being from the members of society.(Gibran, 1991, p. 96). Here, he examined the weaknesses prevalent in societies—particularly his own Eastern society—including lack of will and thought, inertia of determination, and the tendency to submit to all forms of domination and subjugation: religious, political, social, and otherwise.

Self-Criticism

During his journey of self-discovery, Gibran Khalil Gibran became acutely aware of numerous flaws, shortcomings, and weaknesses within himself. He did not deny or ignore them, as many might, but instead confronted them directly, striving to correct and transform them. He spared no effort, not even for himself—the being closest to him—adopting a revolutionary and forceful approach that sought to destroy anything that could impede the emergence of *"the ideal being within him, veiled by ignorance, servitude, monotony, submissiveness, and lack of courage."*(Khalid, 1983, p. 208).

For Gibran, "*self-knowledge is the mother of all knowledge.*"(Khalid, 1983, p. 208).This conviction aligns him with many thinkers who believed that "he who knows himself knows the world" and "he who knows himself knows God." Awareness of one's flaws and deficiencies is the foundation for such knowledge. To build a firm, lofty structure immune to the storms of life, one must purify oneself of imperfections and correct every weakness, so that the essence shines clearly and rises toward higher realms.

Gibran was a rebel even toward himself, refusing to accept weakness and striving to reclaim his lost essence. This required confronting his own faults openly, without evasion, for honest self-confrontation was the first step toward psychological and spiritual integration:

"When he faced his own naked self, he approached it with the waters of truth, anointing it with the fragrance of beauty, laying down at its feet the burdens of his life. He felt as if what had once been distant had drawn near; what had been foreign had become familiar; what had been an adversary had turned into a friend, embracing him as he embraced it, forging the reconciliation he had sought his entire life."(Na'ima, 1981, p. 254).

Gibran did not indulge in politeness or self-restraint when addressing personal flaws or the shortcomings of others, believing that *"modesty in revealing personal truths is a form of white hypocrisy, known among Orientals as civility."*(Gibran, 1991, p. 64).To show only part of the truth is to conceal the rest behind fear of others' judgments. (Ibid., p. 65).

He summarized some of his own shortcomings in his essay *The Seven Stages*:

"I chastised myself seven times: the first, for seeking elevation through abasement; the second, for yielding before the weak; the third, for choosing ease over difficulty; the fourth, for excusing my errors with the faults of others; the fifth, for enduring weakness while attributing endurance to strength; the sixth, for dragging my tails through the mire of life; the seventh, for standing in ritual before God, counting the recital as virtue."(Gibran, 1990, p. 33).

Critique of Individual Selves:

Just as Gibran turned his critical eye inward, he examined the minds and behaviors of certain individuals, exposing their flaws. He did not claim that all negative traits existed within himself, so he analyzed specific examples in order to extend his critique to broader societal patterns. In critiquing others, as with himself, he demonstrated honesty, courage, and rigor, grounding his analysis in logic and compelling reasoning.

In *The New Covenant*, he reflects on a man of the East:

"Come, tell me who you are. Is your heart secretly thinking: I wish to benefit my people, or, am I a passionate guardian longing to serve them? If the former, you are a parasitic plant; if the latter, an oasis in the desert."(Ibid., p. 87).

In *The Great Sea*, he criticizes those limited by pessimism or weakness:

"Yesterday—how distant and yet how near—my soul and I went to the Great Sea to wash away the dust and mire of the earth. As we reached the shore, seeking a secluded place, we saw a man on a barren rock, scattering salt into the sea. My soul said: 'Behold the pessimist, who sees only shadows of life; he is not fit to see our naked forms. Let us leave, for here there is no bathing."(Ibid., p. 58).

Critique of the Collective Self:

By "collective self," Gibran refers to the essence of a nation, which mirrors the nature of the individual self and derives its existence from its people, much as a tree draws life from water, soil, sunlight, and warmth(Gibran, 1991, p. 96). For example, the Egyptian collective self, shaped over centuries before the first state emerged along the Nile, formed the foundation for Egypt's artistic, religious, and social identity—a pattern repeated in Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the Arab world. The storms (p. 96).

Although Gibran's humanistic outlook embraced all humanity, he remained deeply concerned with the conditions of his Eastern nation. Having spent much of his life in exile, his heart remained preoccupied with his people, oppressed by ignorance, backwardness, and various forms of domination.18 Such a society inevitably aroused the critique of a passionate, conscientious writer, devoted to its progress and outraged by its decline(Ibid., p. 69).

In his essay *Drugs and Slaughterhouses*, Gibran's critique is merciless:

"This preface may seem harsh, but is bluntness worse than treachery? Bluntness reveals itself, while betrayal hides behind polished words(Haneen, 1983, p. 97).

Similarly, in *O My Mother's Sons*, his outrage erupts into furious, uncompromising language, as he confesses:

"What do you want from me, my children? Do you wish for ornate palaces of empty promises, or that I demolish what liars and cowards have built? Shall I coo like a dove for your lands, or roar like a lion for my own?"(Gibran, 1991, p. 59).

The Pursuit of the Supreme Self:

Gibran's critiques of weakness and imperfection—whether in himself or others—were always directed toward transcendence. He sought a new self, characterized by balance, harmony, and inner peace. This aspiration appeared in him from childhood, revealed in his fierce independence: his love of absolute freedom flowed through his veins, recognized by his mother, who rarely restrained him(Ibid., p. 39).

True self-realization, for Gibran, meant the coherent expression of all vital forces, directed toward a noble ideal: the integrated, balanced self where emotions and desires align toward a higher purpose (Baraks, 1981, p. 76). His life unfolded in three major stages: the period of love, of power, and finally, of universal spiritual love. The first two phases were marked by psychological unrest, driving his relentless quest for the supreme self, the source of authentic happiness and tranquility.

Gibran realized early that happiness begins in the sanctum of the soul, not from external possessions, power, or wealth, but from beauty, love, and wisdom. His lifelong struggle involved continuous meditation, rigorous work, and the expression of inner truths through writing and art. Yet he often felt that these efforts fell short of articulating the greatness within him:

"My greatest torment is not physical. Something immense lies dormant in me, a supreme self observing my smaller self, weary from all things. My works seem false because they cannot express what I truly desire."(Ibid., p. 322).

The pursuit of the supreme self, therefore, was both an agonizing and necessary journey. Pain, Gibran believed, was the price of liberation:

"Pain splits the shell that encloses our perception. Pain sparks understanding. Understanding leads to the labor of renewal and creation. Creation dissolves the flawed reality and manifests the ideal life."(Ibid., p. 322).

This ideal self is guided by a beacon—the ultimate exemplar. For Gibran, this was Christ, whose life, endurance, and moral example shaped his thought, art, and ethics. Achieving the supreme self required returning to the pure, innate human nature, untainted by corrupted civilization, greed, or worldly conflict. True growth comes from awakening innate perfection, not external acquisition, echoing Plotinus' philosophy of inner knowledge.(Khalid, 1983, p. 191).

Gibran's critique of modern civilization was consistent with this view, exposing its corrupting influence, yet acknowledging that even flawed civilization contributes to human progress:

"Present civilization may be transient, but the eternal law made its trials a ladder leading to the ultimate essence."(Jabr, 1983, p. 167).

He embraced the doctrine of reincarnation, believing that unfinished souls return to complete their work and perfect their selves across multiple lives.

Ultimately, Gibran's life exemplifies relentless striving toward the supreme self—a pursuit of balance, truth, and spiritual perfection. While he overcame much early psychological unrest, he achieved increasing inner harmony in his later works, as noted by Dr. Ghazi Fouad Brax:

"Gibran's ultimate ideal guided him toward balance. Through favorable circumstances, he established an inner kingdom of peace, reflected in his literature and art in three major symbols: the forest in The Processions, Cities of the Prophet, and Orpheus. The last stage of his life was marked by unity of personality and psychological tranquility, where each aspect of the self occupied its proper place without injustice."(Khalid, 1983, p. 79).

Gibran emphasizes that self-liberation has no bounds; each attained freedom becomes a stepping stone toward higher freedom. The eternal thirst for self-knowledge drives the soul to explore ever deeper layers, for to fully comprehend oneself is to cease striving:

"When a person sits upon the throne of mastery, he becomes a servant. When he perceives the depths of his soul, the book of his life is closed. When he reaches the peak of perfection, his fate is sealed. Like a fruit, when ripe, he falls and perishes."(Jabr, 1981, p. 229).

He lived, then, in a state of intense inner struggle—a continuous rebirth—seeking each day to craft a new history for his own self, one different from that inherited from his forefathers or imposed by his surroundings. It is beyond doubt that such a lofty aim demands a long struggle and the endurance of great suffering.

Yet for Gibran, suffering is nothing less than *"the breaking of the shell that encloses our understanding."*(Baraks, 1981, p. 81). Pain, he believed, ignites awareness: it leads a person toward deeper comprehension; comprehension gives rise to a state of inner labor that pushes one toward renewal and creativity; creativity, in turn, dissolves incomplete realities and ushers in a more ideal form of life. This ideal life, however, cannot be attained unless it becomes a constant inner impulse—an unceasing urge that shakes the soul with questions about existence: "I have been wearied only by those who asked me: Who are you?" It is the painful longing for knowledge—"My soul is laden with its fruits; is there no hungry one to gather, eat, and be satisfied?"—and the drive toward philosophical contemplation, away from despair and naïve optimism. Ultimately, it is the impulse to seek a truth capable of liberating us from all burdens, so that our struggle with ourselves may come to rest in a long-awaited joy.(Gibran, 1988, p. 62).

Thus, suffering becomes the high price of liberation and a unique path in a person's conflict with himself and with the world. For only suffering, when oriented toward knowledge, contemplation, and the urge to transcend the confines of time and place, can free us from the selves that have strayed from their path and return us to the point of origin—where we may begin the reconstruction of our greater self(Khalid, 1983, p. 201).

Although pain is, in Gibran's view, exceedingly bitter, we are called to drink it with acceptance and serenity, for it is the remedy prescribed by the Creator who knows what heals our inward being. As joy is one of the seasons of the soul, so too is pain—bound to it as the seasons of nature are tied to one another:

1. "*You accepted the seasons of your hearts just as you once accepted the seasons that passed over your fields... And much of your pain is but the bitter draught by which the wise physician within you heals your sick soul. Therefore trust your physician and take his remedy in peace; for though his hand seems heavy and hard, it is guided by the tender hand of the Unseen. And the cup he brings to your lips, though it burns them, is fashioned of the clay moistened by the tears of the Eternal Potter.*"(Ibid., p. 202).

   For the higher in the self to prevail over the lower, it needs a guiding light—a model to lead it through the fearful path: the ideal. *"The self cannot unify its vital forces into a harmonious whole, nor find the stimulus that propels it toward fulfillment, except through the ideal."*(Gibran, 1988, pp. 62–63).

Christ was Gibran's supreme ideal. From childhood he heard from his parents stories of Christ's greatness, his life, and his endurance of suffering. Christ became the axis of Gibran's thought, the wellspring of his creativity, and the moral reference for many of his views and attitudes throughout his works. Indeed, his writings seem bound by a single thread dominated by the face of "Jesus of Nazareth," whom he adopted as his model, shaping his artistic and personal journey.(Baraks, 1981, p. 355).

Few writers have granted their ideal the place Gibran granted to Christ. He so profoundly identified with him that he seemed unable to proceed or withdraw except under the influence of Christ's inspiration.

The path to the "great self," for Gibran, lies in returning to humanity's pure and original nature—its innate essence untainted by corrupt civilization and unspoiled by selfish desires or the contradictions of life. Humanity's primordial nature contains the seeds of its expected perfection; all one needs is to awaken these seeds inwardly, rather than seek completion from the external world: "*Knowledge cultivates your seeds; it does not sow them." This recalls Plotinus, for whom true knowledge was inner illumination—awakening the essential truths dormant within our original nature*"(Ibid., p. 349).

Just as Plotinus withdrew his trust from the external world and placed it instead in the awakened wisdom of the soul—rebelling against the excesses of civilization and calling upon humanity to strive toward the perfection planted within—Gibran urged the human being to recover the glory of original innocence. Yet this innocence is not blind submission to instinct; it is creative innocence capable of dismantling a false civilization and giving rise to a nobler human presence.(Khalid, 1983, p. 194)

Gibran writes, in *"Self-Knowledge"* from *The Prophet: "Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights, but your ears thirst to hear the sound of this knowledge. You long to know in words what you have already known in thought."*Ibid., p. 195.

And in *"Iram of the Pillars,"* he writes through the voice of Amina the Ascetic*: "If you close your eyes and gaze into your depths, you will behold the world in its totality; you will know its laws and understand its ends."*Gibran, K. (1988). *The prophet*. p. 64.

Again she says*: "God placed in every soul a messenger to lead it toward light; yet some seek life outside themselves, though life is within them."*(Gibran, 1990, p. 109).This *"messenger"* is none other than the original, essential nature granted to humanity at existence's dawn.

But following one's nature must also be conscious, lest it merge with corrupt impulses ungoverned by reason. Gibran's insistence on recovering the natural state does not mean a wild pursuit of undefined desires; rather, it requires a balanced movement in which awareness illuminates the path of passion, and passion provides energy for awareness.Ibid., p. 113.

This balance is what Gibran expresses as the *"rudder and sail"* of the soul—both of which must exist for life's vessel to navigate safely: *"For if reason alone governs the soul, it becomes a fetter; and passion, if unchecked, consumes itself like fire."*(Khalid, 1983, p. 195).

Gibran believed that modern civilization is among the greatest forces deforming nature and the human soul. Thus we often find him denouncing it, exposing its flaws, and yearning for an ideal life free of hypocrisy and corruption—the life of the forest he glorifies in The Processions.

In The Storm from The Storms, he writes: *"I left the city because I found it an old, decayed tree, mighty and monstrous—its roots sunk in the darkness of the earth, its branches towering beyond the clouds; its blossoms were greed, its fruits misery, sorrow, and care."*(Gibran, 1988, p. 60).

Elsewhere in the same essay*: "Vain is civilization and vain everything within it. Its inventions and discoveries are but toys with which the weary mind distracts itself. Shortening distances, leveling mountains, conquering seas and skies—these are deceptive fruits filled with smoke."*(Gibran, 1991, p. 110).

Yet despite his harsh critique, Gibran did not deny that civilization is one stage in humanity's long ascent toward perfection: *"Present civilization may be a passing accident, yet the eternal law has made such accidents rungs on the ladder that leads to the absolute."*Ibid., pp. 115, 118.

So deeply was Gibran attached to spiritual perfection and the realization of the ideal self—and so convinced was he that no single human life suffices for such attainment—that he embraced the belief in reincarnation: the notion that those who have not completed the full cycle of existence must return to continue their unfinished journey(Na'ima, 1981, p. 216). His conviction appears in several of his stories, such as The Ashes of Centuries and the Eternal Flame and The Poet of Baalbek.

Whatever personal circumstances drove Gibran to rebel against himself and pursue what he called *"the great and absolute freedom—the linguistic equivalent of the great self,"*(Khalid, 1983, p. 199). what concerns us is the intensity of his effort and the fierceness of his struggle, fueled by burning yearning and steadfast faith in the future, to meet his true self.

At the conclusion of this exploration, we may ask: Did Gibran truly achieve his ideal self? He undoubtedly overcame much of the psychological turmoil that marked his early years and reached a degree of inner balance evident in his later works. Dr. Ghazi Fouad Baraks summarizes this transformation after conducting an analytical psychological study of Gibran's writings, drawings, and personality*:*

"Psychological imbalance in Gibran's early stages produced symptoms of anxiety and tension evident in his life and work. Yet his supreme ideal continued to guide him toward equilibrium until he ultimately triumphed. As various favorable circumstances strengthened him, the kingdom of peace rose within his soul. This peace appeared in his works as three great symbols: the forest in 'The Processions,' the bridge leading him from one era to another; 'Iram of the Pillars'; and 'Orphalese,' the city of Al-Mustafa in 'The Prophet.' In each of these symbols, contradictions dissolve and harmony prevails." (Baraks, 1981, p. 349).

But the horizon of self-liberation has no limit: each level of freedom reached becomes itself a new barrier to surpass. As Gibran writes: *"When it fades and leaves no trace, the radiant light becomes a shadow of another light beyond it. So it is with your freedom: when its shackles fall away, it becomes itself a fetter for a greater freedom."*(Gibran, 1988, p. 58).

However many chains the self breaks, *"the freedom of the self is never fixed; it expands and deepens with the soul's ascent."*(Baraks, 1981, p. 339)

The secret of the soul's passion for itself lies in its unending thirst to uncover its hidden depths—stage after stage. For once a person fully grasps the essence of the self, he has reached his end. Gibran puts it succinctly:

"When man sits upon the throne of kingship, he becomes a slave.
When he fully knows the depths of his soul, he has closed the book of his life.
When he reaches the summit of perfection, he dies.
He is like a fruit which, once ripe, falls and disappears."(Gibran, n.d., p. 57).

Conclusion

Through these examples, we observe Gibran's tendency to address questions of the self with the language of poetry, rich in imagery, rhythm, and symbolism. He employed metaphors, allegories, and myth, immersing his thought in nature and Romantic sensibilities, infused with deep emotional resonance. His literary style mirrors the complexity, beauty, and intensity of his philosophical inquiry into human existence and the quest for the ideal self.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on literary analysis and textual interpretation of published works by Kahlil Gibran. Therefore, it does not involve human participants, personal data, experiments, or materials requiring ethical approval. All sources used have been properly cited, and intellectual property rights and academic integrity principles were fully respected.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is qualitative, analytical, and hermeneutic. The study employs close reading of selected works by Kahlil Gibran, focusing on textual analysis of key expressions related to the concept of the self. Through comparative thematic interpretation, the researcher identifies linguistic strategies, aesthetic elements, and symbolic patterns used by Gibran to articulate notions of individuality, ideal self, and collective identity. The method further integrates conceptual analysis with stylistic examination, ensuring coherence between semantic meaning and literary form.

Novelty and Scientific Contribution

This research offers a fresh perspective by linking the aesthetics of language to the philosophical and psychological dimensions of selfhood in Gibran's literature. While previous studies have addressed either the philosophical aspects of the self or Gibran's poetic style, this work uniquely synthesizes both elements, demonstrating how artistic linguistic choice operates as a vehicle for existential inquiry. The conceptualization of the "ideal self" and "collective self"—as expressed through literary aesthetics—presents a new analytical framework for interpreting Gibran's contribution to modern spiritual-humanist literature.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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