

## **Jawdat Haydar and the Modern Spirit of the Mahjar Poets**

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From the time when “I started reading poetry I began to feel that the poet might be the medium between nature and the world, having the power to verify through his creative faculties its characteristics into images bearing the features of beauty, love, passion, pain, despair and worry.” (qtd. in McDonnell 15-19)

Thus, Jawdat Haydar united nature, creativity and emotions in the poet. Haydar, himself, was successful in conveying these characteristics and making use of them in his poetry, which no sooner had it appeared than readers and critics began to compare it with another literary school: the Mahjar school of poetry.

In his foreword to Voices, Haydar’s first collection of poems, John Munro likened Haydar’s writing experience to that of the Mahjar poets: “Tiny cosmopolitan Lebanon has produced at least three poets of international standing who have written in English: Ameen Rihani, Mikhail Naimy and Khalil Gibran [...]. Following in this Libano-American tradition is Jawdat Haydar...” (vii). Likewise, Kassim Shaaban wrote, in his foreword to Shadows, Haydar’s third published work of poetry: “Like Gibran, Naimy, Rihani and others before him who knew the East and experienced the West, Jawdat R. Haydar reflected the East-West blend in his poetry and came across as another strong voice for freedom and nationality” (iii). Both cited critics draw attention to the fact that Haydar’s poetry exemplified a fusion between East and West, a fact which brings Haydar closer to the Mahjar poets, whose writings were clearly influenced by their dual experience of the East and the West. For instance, Mikhail Naimy wrote: “[The Eastern] prophet shall bear his heart upon his palm as food for whoever is hungry. Therefore, shall they eat of it in the West and get poisoned, and shall (they) take it in the East and live?” (N. Naimy 85). Gibran Khalil Gibran asserted his adherence to the East without denying his admiration for the West:

No matter how many days I stay away  
I shall remain an Easterner – Easterner in my manners,  
Syrian in my desires, Lebanese in feelings –  
No matter how much I admire Western progress. (Oueijan 125)

Ameen Rihani took a more liberal attitude by adopting the idea of the “Citizen of the World”: “We are not of the East or West;/ Nor boundaries exist in our breast:/ We are free” (Rihani A Chant of Mystics 106).

Similarly, Haydar championed human unity. In an interview, he declared: “I am one of the pacifiers in the world, why should we fight? Why should I go to heaven from East and the other from West?” (Wettig and El-Ghoul 6).

Despite the significant similarities that are found between Haydar and the Mahjar poets, the former did not imitate the latter. In fact, Haydar's poems exemplify modern characteristics, which clearly set him apart from his predecessors. Before further elaborating, it would be useful to consider the development of some of the major schools in Arabic literature to understand where Haydar stands with respect to them.

According to Mohammad Badawi, who traces the development of Arabic poetry in Modern Arabic Poetry, Arabic neoclassicism revived in the late nineteenth century Arabic poetic traditions with an emphasis on Arabic classical language and was inspired by ancient poetry and aesthetics. Arabic romanticism came as a reaction against the limitations of neoclassicism (15). Arab romantics refused to follow the exigencies of rhyme and meter and liked to express their high sensitivity for and immense love of nature. The Mahjar poets were romantics, who developed poetry in their own particular way. Robin Waterfield explains how they were able to produce a change in the Arab literary world:

Based as they were in the USA, they gained a greater freedom from the approved canons of literary taste in Beirut, Damascus and Cairo. They allowed themselves to experiment, to alter verse-forms, to use more than one metre within a single poem, and to borrow widely from Western literature. They used more everyday language, and allowed themselves to draw their characters from real life rather than from tradition or high-flown imagination. (234)

In fact, the Mahjar poets were writing in exile and were clearly under the influence of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. In addition to writing in Arabic, they composed in English. Due to their circumstances as exiles, they wrote about their feeling of homesickness, their awareness of being outsiders, their dual cultural experience, and their idealization of nature and simple rural life (Badawi 184). In the 1940s, the Tammuz school rejected Arab romantic themes and style (Badawi 225) paving the way for New Poetry, which would later be characterized by its modernism. It adopted the myth of Adonis as a theme and took the Modernist T.S. Eliot as an initial model. Arab modernism developed directly from the Tammuz school. Arab modernist poets were consciously committed to their country and society, which was reflected in their art. More than fifty years after the Mahjar poets and thirty years after the emergence of modernism, Haydar's first collection of poetry appeared.

The question which may now be raised is: Can it be said that Haydar reincarnates the spirit of the Mahjar poets? Other sub-questions to be considered are the following:

- 1- Does his work represent a continuity to their works?
- 2- Does he develop the themes previously emphasized by the Mahjar poets?

These questions will be answered by exploring the following areas: the cultural identity between East and West, the poetic themes, and Haydar's commitment.

### **Cultural Identity between East and West**

It would be useful to highlight some of the most important events in Haydar's life to understand his cultural identity. He was born in Baalbeck in 1905. In 1914, he experienced the bitterness of exile as he and his family were sent to Anatolia. Upon his return, he received his education at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon and the North Texas University, USA. He showed great interest in the English language and began to write poetry in English in the early 1930s while he was studying in the USA. He devoted his life to poetry writing from 1960. In his autobiography Michwar al 'Omor, published in 2002, he described his poems as the true expression of his love for Lebanon and admiration for American values. Therefore, it can be said that the Lebanese and American cultures were strongly present in his life and works. Commenting on Haydar's work, Ica Wahbeh wrote: "Haydar... grants us the privilege of sharing with him the intellectual heritage of those Lebanese who feel as much at home in the American cultural tradition as in their own" (5). In his poem entitled "Lebanon", Haydar praises the beauty of his homeland:

The deep is rising, the ships heading east  
The green mountains capped with snow behind  
Perhaps the eye of an artist possessed  
May contain such a paradise in mind (Voices 5-8)

And in his poem entitled "Sweet Home", Haydar remembers Texas dearly:

Oh! No more never more those homely sunsets,  
No more never more those song sparrows to hear;  
Ah! For the Queen moon to take me where she sets  
On the horizon in old Texas, the dear. (Echoes 13-16)

Before Haydar, the Mahjar poets had struggled to determine their cultural identity which oscillated between East and West. Rihani wrote: "The divine light (...) shall not be an American in the Democratic sense. He shall be nor of the Old World nor of the New; he shall be, my Brothers, of both (The Book of Khalid 113). Similarly, Gibran said: "The West is not higher than the East, nor is the West lower than the East ("Secrets of the Heart" 19). As for Haydar's stance in relation to East and West, he said: "Despite its international course, the poetry I write in English is steeped in my roots as an Eastern and Arab man who feels the hardships of his nation and suffers deeply with it<sup>1</sup>." (qtd. in Khairallah 51). Haydar did not live in exile, but his writings reveal his belonging to two cultures: the Arab-Lebanese and the American.

### **The Themes in the Poetry of Haydar and the Mahjar Poets**

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<sup>1</sup> My own translation

Haydar's major poetic themes are: idealized nature, nostalgia for Lebanon, and alienation. They are reflected in his four collections of poetry: Voices (New York 1980), Echoes (Lebanon 1986), Shadows (Lebanon 1999), and 101 Selected Poems (New York 2001).

*Idealized Nature*

Haydar held nature in high esteem. He believed that it should be saved from the destructive hand of man. In the poem entitled "My Good Neighbors", he wrote:

Once a forest behind our fence  
Where the wood choppers hacked the wood  
And the dead trunks lay down on the ground  
As if they were soldiers killed  
During the civil wars  
.....  
That picture of the forest  
Is still hovering in my mind;  
Of the birds banished,  
Of their kingdom destroyed,  
By that cruel hand of man. (Echoes 10-20)

In other poems, such as "Never Scratch Nature to Bleed and React" (101 Selected Poems), he also condemned the scenes of destruction in Lebanon and warned against imminent environmental catastrophes:

Folks awake and be aware of the reek  
The death like hills of the chemical lees  
Quick shut the flood gates of poison and seek  
To stop being charioted to hades (101 Selected Poems 5-8)

In their time, the Mahjar poets condemned the harmful effects of industrialization and the preoccupation with materialism, but they also idealized and worshipped nature. Rihani wrote:

I come to thee, I prostrate my face before thee, I surrender myself wholly to thee.  
O touch me with thy wand divine again; stir me once more in thy mysterious  
alembics, remake me to suit the majestic silence of thy hills, the supernal purity of  
the sky, the majestic austerity of thy groves. (The Book of Khalid 97)

Nature is almost divine; it is a mediator between man and God:

“Among the hills, when you sit in the cool shade of the white poplars, sharing the peace and serenity of distant fields and meadows – then let your heart say in silence, ‘God rests in reason’”(Gibran The Prophet 46). Haydar and the Mahjar poets both revere nature in their writings. However, it can be said that Haydar’s poems verge on environmentalism since the poet condemns the destruction of nature and invites all people to respect it.

### *Nostalgia for Lebanon*

Haydar knew what it meant to live in exile. In fact, he and his family were shortly exiled during World War I (Michwar al ‘Omor 42). However, despite the fact that Haydar wrote most of his poems in his homeland, he successfully conveyed a sense of nostalgia for the glorious Lebanon. In “The Black Corner”, Haydar lamented the destroyed Lebanon and dreamt that one day it might restore its glorious past:

Still lonely and silently contemplating  
When I heard the voice of Gibran:  
“Pity the nation divided into fragments  
Each fragment deeming itself a nation.”  
The voice dwindled away and I went to sleep,  
Sleeping I dreamt that the Lebanese will rise again  
Like a phoenix from the ash by the wings  
Of their love and brotherhood to the tower of their glory  
With their flags of liberty wavering on the highest mountain. (Echoes 29-37)

The Mahjar poets expressed their nostalgia by remembering the years they spent in Lebanon. For instance, Rihani wrote in The Book of Khalid:

I sit me on a bench and weep.  
And in my heart I sing  
O, let me be a burro-boy again;  
O, let me sleep among the cyclamens  
Of my own land. (6)

Gibran similarly sighed in “Dead Are My People”:

My beloved are gone, and I am here  
Living as I did when my people and my  
Beloved were enjoying life and the  
Bounty of life, and when the hills of  
My country were blessed and engulfed  
By the light of the sun. (qtd. in Orfalea and Elmusa 31)

Unlike the Mahjar poets, Haydar did not live in exile at the time he wrote his poems. Nonetheless, his work expresses the same anguish and pain as Mahjar writing had for its homeland. His nostalgia springs from the rejection of the Civil War, and his wish to reunite with the glorious Lebanon of the past.

### *Alienation*

Living as exiles, the Mahjar poets felt alienated from their new environment. However, their alienation was strictly individual; that is, they did not seek to include a collective consciousness in their personal experiences. Their relief was only found in isolation: “The poet has turned his back on social and political issues, seeking escape in nature and withdrawing himself into an inner world of ‘romantic’ dreams” (Badawi 196). In “The Gravedigger”, which exemplifies Gibran’s search for solitude, the speaker converses with a shadow named Solitude:

I said,  
“Solitude I came seeking.  
Let me be  
And wend your way.”  
Smiling, he said,  
“My way is but your way,  
For where you go I go,  
And stay where you stay.” (qtd. in Orfalea and Elmusa 36)

Haydar was not in actual exile at the time he wrote his poems; yet, Michael Seidel asserts that “alienation, as part of artistic consciousness, can register without one ever leaving home... It is the imagination that relocates or repairs the experience of being exiled, as it were, while still in place” (xi-xii). Unlike the Mahjar poets who alienated themselves from their society and adopted the role of the prophet (‘Abdul Hai 52), Haydar’s alienation is paradoxically fused with social and environmental commitments which seek to stir the Lebanese collective consciousness. His poems reflect his unwillingness to live in the recently destroyed Lebanon and his preference to communicate his distress to soothing nature:

Once lonely and lonesome having been  
Shocked by a horrific scene  
Went hiking on a mountain side  
Where a fan of streams opened wide  
Gargling throat down the slopes intertwined;  
In a lake grown tulips behind

A forest of cedars that stand  
Since time was known years in our land (Echoes “Bereaved Birds Sorrow  
Like Men” 1-8)

Haydar’s poetry is engaged in the political, social and environmental situation of Lebanon and the world. In other words, his alienation is steered towards commitment.

### **Haydar’s Commitment**

The early Arab modern tradition emphasized the concept of “Iltizam” or engagement whereby the poet committed himself to the socio-political situation of his nation (Kozah 118). Haydar’s modernism is displayed through his engagement with his country, its politics, and its social and environmental issues, or “Iltizam” as is referred to in modern Arabic literature. Khatoun Haidar commented on the commitment of Haydar’s poetry: “This 100-year-old poet is no escapist, he is committed and concerned... He lived an intense life to the brim, yet he was not merely content to experience, suffer and enjoy. He sought to understand, analyze, and find solutions” (par. 5). In the “Coming Quietus”, Haydar addressed the world with a powerful message concerning the abuse of nature:

O world, just once listen and be aware  
Of the damaging noise and the thick smoke  
The strong reek of powder in your big nose  
Can’t you smell, can’t you foresee the death stroke? (Shadows 8-11)

In “Brothers”, he called for Lebanese unity:

Brothers why be like a moon on the wane  
Ever beating the bolted door in vain  
Hence why not unite again to stand ‘gain  
Prideful of your Lebanese cultured vein. (Shadows 1-4)

As for the Mahjar poets, they were concerned for their country and nature in general. They tackled these issues, however, from a romantic point of view. Rihani described pollution as such: “How beautiful is the rain falling on the bridge and the river beneath it! How disturbing is the clash of the automobiles and trains, which carry people like cattle! How precious is their time and cheap their lives! (“From Brooklyn Bridge” 10). Gibran commented on the situation of his people by positioning himself as a helpless lonely, exiled soul:

What can an exiled son do for his  
Starving people, and of what value

Unto them is the lamentation of an  
Absent poet? (“Dead Are My People” qtd. in Orfalea and Elmusa 31)

It can be said that Haydar and the Mahjar poets both addressed the same issues. However, Haydar discussed these issues with a modern spirit, whereas the Mahjar Poets did so with a romantic spirit.

To the question of whether Haydar reincarnates the spirit of the Mahjar poets and whether his work and themes represent a continuity to their works, we can conclude the following. Like the Mahjar poets, Haydar reflects his adherence to two cultures: the Arab-Lebanese and the American. In his poetry, he expresses his desire to bridge the chasm between East and West. The themes of his poetry; namely, idealized nature, nostalgia for Lebanon, and alienation, are similar to those reflected in Mahjar poetry. However, in his writings, Haydar expresses greater realism when describing the pain and the suffering of his beloved Lebanon, whereas the Mahjar poets seemed to dream of Lebanon as a romantic utopia. He appropriates and develops the major themes of Mahjar poetry so that they reflect the contemporary issues of his own times. Through the theme of alienation, Haydar echoes a modern poet’s commitment to his country. Thus, his poetry represents a thematic continuity from the work of the Mahjar school, but with a modern spirit.

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