

Harmonious Dynamics of Unity: Unveiling Profound Wisdom in Gibran's 'The Prophet'

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Abstract:

Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet' is universally acclaimed as a best-selling work of mysticism that transcends linguistic barriers to resonate with a global audience. It bridges Eastern and Western philosophies and explores the complexities of the human experience tempered with the vision of underlying harmonious unity, sympathetic understanding, and essential freedom. Gibran's adept use of poetic language serves as a powerful vehicle for transmitting spiritual and philosophical wisdom as it facilitates readers' engagement with it in an accessible and captivating manner. Through evocative and suggestive artistry, he transports readers to sublime realms of understanding and facilitates the expansion of their comprehensive awareness by establishing an intimate connection with them.

An attempt has been made here to present a comprehensive analysis of the enduring impact of the masterpiece and demonstrate its continued influence on readers desirous of timeless wisdom that remains relevant and resonant across diverse generations. In addition to such themes as love, giving, work, freedom, death, etc., the paper attempts to bring out, as espoused in 'The Prophet', the harmonious interplay of unity within seemingly contradictory life forces and dichotomous states of being, including joy and sorrow, good and evil, and passion and reason.

Keywords: Kahlil Gibran; The Prophet; mysticism, passion and reason; love; freedom; death

Khalil Gibran's life and literary works are a testament to his enduring legacy as a visionary writer who sought to bridge Eastern and Western philosophies and explore the complexities of the human experience tempered with the vision of underlying harmonious unity, sympathetic understanding, and essential freedom.

Khalil Gibran was a renowned Lebanese-American writer, known for his works of fiction, poetry, and philosophical essays. He was born on January 6, 1883, in Bsharr, Lebanon, and passed away on April 10, 1931, in New York City. Despite migrating to Boston with his parents in 1895 after completing his elementary education in Beirut, Gibran maintained his connection with Lebanon throughout his life. In 1898, he returned to Lebanon to finish his studies and excelled particularly in the Arabic language at Beirut. Gibran published his first literary writings in Boston in 1903. In 1912, Gibran vent to New York City, where he focused on painting and writing literary essays and short tales in both Arabic and English. Gibran's writing was deeply influenced by his readings of the Bible, Nietzsche, and William Blake, which shaped his intrinsically romantic literary style. He explored philosophical themes such as love, compassion, death, and mystical vision, often using poetic language that reflected his Eastern spiritual vision. In addition to his most celebrated work, 'The Prophet', published in 1923, Gibran authored several

other notable works such as ‘*The Madman*’, ‘*The Forerunner*’, ‘*Sand and Foam*’, and ‘*Jesus, the Son of Man*’.

Among all the Gibran’s works, ‘*The Prophet*’ seems to have emerged from a fountain of holistic inspiration that helped him in discovering harmonious dynamics of unity lying beneath apparently contradictory forces of life. Pain and pleasure, law and liberty, passion and reason, peace and violence, nurturing and devouring, etc, are shown to be the different aspects of the same principle. The realisation of this fact led him to fashion harmony between the means and the end, expression and inspiration, form and substance. He succeeds in connecting with the hearts of the readers through evocative and suggestive art which casts a spell on their conscious mind and transports them to the sublime. The readers are facilitated to enjoy expansion of comprehensive awareness of totality of life that effortlessly encompasses seemingly contradictory elements by helping them leave behind the narrow confines of their lopsided worldview. His poetic exuberance replete with pearls of perspicacious wisdom achieves sublimity.

‘*The Prophet*’ became a best seller book of mysticism in America which was translated into many languages the world over. It was Gibran’s finest achievement. As Mary Haskell says, “Barely 20,000 words long, philosophical in nature and mystical in tone, *The Prophet* was hardly a book one would expect to capture the attention of the reading public. Yet eventually it did” (Bushrui 224). It comprises twenty-seven chapters of poetic essays of answers given to the dwellers of Orphalese by a wise sage-like figure named Almustafa who lived in Orphales for 12 years waiting for the ship that would take him back to his native place. His talks cover a wide range of topics including beauty, love, marriage, reason and passion, death, and so on.

Almitra, a seeress living in a sanctuary, entreats him to dole out his wisdom and truth to the people of Orphalese before he bids farewell to them. The first question is about love. The kind of love Almustafa talks about goes against the romantic sentiment elevated and sanctified in romantic literature in the name of love as affording ease and respite from the harsh realities of life. Rather, he presents love as the very essence and alchemy of life that purifies the coarse into the fine, that transforms the base into the noble, and that converts the mundane to the spiritual. It is life-enhancing and nurtures all the good qualities of life.

However, to walk on the ways of love is not easy, as Almustafa makes it clear that on its ways one may be wounded, pruned and stirred to the very roots of one’s being or even crucified. He advises the listeners to heed the call of love, even when its path is difficult and arduous. He emphasizes the need to surrender to love’s embrace, all the while being fully vigilant to the fact that there may be hidden perils or hardships within its tender embrace. Despite the potential for pain, he encourages unconditional faith in love’s message, even if it means shattering one’s dreams, comparable to the destructive force of the north wind on a garden (Gibran 10-11).

Love in the Almustafa’s sense is comprehensive enough to include both the hard and soft aspects of life and still remains untouched from the stain of binary dualism. Love encompasses both growth and refinement. Love acts as a gardener, nurturing individuals by caressing their most delicate parts and guiding them towards greater heights. However, love also performs the role of a pruner, descending to the

roots and shaking them from their attachment to the earth. This metaphorical process is likened to the gathering of sheaves, the threshing and sifting of grain, grinding it to purity, and kneading it until it becomes malleable. Love assigns individuals to the sacred fire, symbolizing a transformative process that renders them as sacred bread for a divine feast. Almustafa cautions against seeking only the pleasurable and peaceful aspects of love so as to highlight the importance of embracing love's challenges and pains for a more profound connection with oneself and the essence of life. He clarifies the self-sufficiency of love and its capacity to guide and shape individuals, and invites them to pursue a deeper understanding of themselves and the world through love's transformative power (Gibran 11). Love is portrayed as self-sufficient and self-fulfilling, neither possessing nor being possessed. The speaker suggests that love cannot be directed or controlled by human will, as it assumes its own course and guides individuals accordingly. The intrinsic desire of love is simply to fulfil itself (12).

Closely allied to love is Almustafa's theme of giving as explained in chapter IV of *The Prophet* insofar as it is objective correlative of love in the real world. Like love, the giving and receiving also transcend the confines of reciprocative underpinning, challenging the notion of selective giving based on worthiness, using the analogy of "trees in your orchard" and "flocks in your pasture" that give freely for their own survival (28). He suggests that the giver and the receiver should be aware of the fact that "in truth it is life that gives unto life" (29), with the giver and receiver serving merely as instruments of the act of giving. Both the giver and the receiver should not give rise to the feeling of debt. Gibran encapsulates his philosophy on work by asserting that "Work is love made visible" (35), further elucidating the transformative power of love in work. Only by infusing work with love can the innermost secrets of life be experienced, and connection and unity with the earth and others be fostered. Almustafa explains the fundamental attitude that should accompany every act of work undertaken: "It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth" (34). This perspective underscores the significance of love as a guiding principle all sorts of work.

Gibran's vision of harmonious unity between the apparent opposites again becomes accentuated in Almustafa's answer about joy and sorrow. He suggests that only those with a deeper understanding of life can truly comprehend the relationship between these opposite emotions and maintain equanimity in all vicissitudes of life without being swept off the ground. He contends that joy is essentially "sorrow unmasked", and when a person undergoes either joy or sorrow, it is important to realize they both have their origin in the same source.

"When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. / When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." (Gibran 36)

The idea that one is "suspended like scales between sorrow and joy" (37) emphasizes the delicate balance between these emotions. The statement "Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced" (37) suggests that being open and receptive, devoid of preconceived notions or attachments, allows for a harmonious equilibrium between joy and sorrow. This state of emptiness enables one to find balance amidst life's fluctuations.

Going beyond all prevalent superficial ideas, Almustafa provides a profound reinterpretation of the concept of freedom, while alerting his listeners against the possibility of freedom itself transforming into

"a yoke and a handcuff" (57). He critiques the common perception of freedom as a merely external condition, and emphasizes that genuine liberation entails a process of self-discovery, inner growth, and integration of all human dualities within the psyche. The prophet draws attention to the significance of dismantling internal tyrannies before attempting to challenge external unjust despots or laws. Rather than denouncing undesirable aspects of one's being or seeking escape from life's challenges, true freedom involves one's capacity to confront and integrate all aspects of one's being. It is an ongoing journey marked by awareness and acceptance of duality inherent in human experience. The coexistence of desires and fears, attractions and aversions, and pursuits and evasions is recognized as an inherent duality that constitutes the human experience. The state of freedom involves navigating a constant tension between desires and limitations, necessitating an acknowledgment of life's complexities and a balanced approach towards both adversity and prosperity. It necessitates an internal revolution, where the individual confronts and reconciles conflicting aspects of their existence.

As individuals break the chains of one level of freedom, they may encounter new limitations, leading to an evolving understanding of freedom. This introspective perspective on freedom urges individuals to transcend the narrow confines of conventional notions and embark on a transformative journey towards self-mastery and genuine liberation. Freedom in the Almustafa's sense is attainable when the desire for liberation evolves into a process of self-examination, which requires individuals to integrate, rather than discard, seemingly opposite aspects of their being. True freedom is depicted as an elevated state of consciousness where individuals confront life's burdens without being subdued by them, which issues in resilience and self-awareness in the face of challenges. "And thus your freedom when it loses its fetters becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom" (59). It follows that true freedom is an ongoing process of self-discovery and growth, where each level of liberation achieved becomes a foundation for the pursuit of ever-expanding freedoms, which culminates in an enlightened state of being unbound by external circumstances.

In the answer to a priestess seeking the prophet's insight on the inner conflict that often arises within the soul, where reason and judgment contend with passion and appetite, reason and passion are likened to the guiding forces that steer the soul, similar to "the rudder and the sails of your seafaring" vessel (60). However, an imbalance can occur if one aspect becomes dominant or neglected. If reason alone prevails, it can restrict and confine the soul, while unchecked passion may lead to self-destructive tendencies. To attain harmony, Almustafa advises elevating reason to the level of passion, allowing it to be inspired and expressive, and tempering passion with reason to maintain vitality and renewal, comparable to the mythical "phoenix ris[ing] [from] its own ashes" (61). He urges his listeners to regard their judgment and appetite as equally esteemed guests in their inner being, further enjoining them to favour one over the other, as doing so may result in the loss of the love and faith of both aspects. While contemplating the serenity of nature, individuals should recognize the presence of the divine in reason, finding solace and tranquillity; and when faced with the grandeur and tumultuous forces of nature, individuals should acknowledge the divine within passion, experiencing awe and reverence. This perspective underscores the significance of harmoniously integrating reason and passion within the human experience. Both aspects have their rightful place, and individuals should seek a balanced coexistence to attain inner equilibrium and spiritual growth (61).

As regards good and evil, the prophet talks about the concept of good within individuals but refrains from discussing evil directly and posits that goodness can manifest in diverse ways, and that not being actively good does not necessarily mean being evil. For him, evil is essentially a corruption of good that arises from “its own hunger and thirst” (77). Instead of showing righteous indignation at the so-called evil, he underlines all-embracing attitude that may potentially transform evil into goodness, much in the same way as Jesus: "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"(Matthew 5:39 KJV).

One of the most beautiful chapters of *'The Prophet'*, that lucidly brings out Gibran's vision of all-pervasive unity and harmony in human existence is the last one, where Almitra enquires about death, and Almustafa attempts to willingly embrace the apparent fear of death as something positive, not to be suppressed, but to be celebrated, while shedding light on the intrinsic intertwined nature of life and death. He compares the fear of death to “the trembling of [a] shepherd” in the presence of a king who is about to bestow an honour upon him. The shepherd finds joy even amidst his trembling, thereby rendering the fear of mortality subordinate to a higher significance and meaning (Gibran 96). According to him, the true understanding of death lies deeply embedded within the human psyche, concealed in the core of hopes and desires. These inner aspirations contain tacit knowledge of a realm beyond the material existence, akin to dormant seeds lying beneath the surface of snow, awaiting the arrival of spring (95). Almustafa presents a perspective on death that embraces its inevitability as an integral aspect of life's journey and encourages a profound acceptance of the interconnectedness of existence by advocating for trust in innate knowledge and the pursuit of spiritual development.

Gibran took several years to complete the book as he strove to outpour his spiritually imbibed insights in the aesthetically eloquent yet spiritually insightful poetic language through the mouthpiece of Almustafa who, it would not be out of order to say, was the best spiritual alter ego of Gibran himself that he desired to project to the western world. Gibran's outlook on life is profoundly expressed in the book. Almustafa was the result of an attempt to combine the best of Christ, Muhammad and the Sufi wisdom as opined by Bushrui and Jenkins (Bushrui 231). As is obvious to any attentive reader *The Prophet* was closely modelled on Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in structure and manner inasmuch as both Gibran's Almustafa and Nietzsche's Zarathustra offer prophetic advice on several topics with the difference that the one is optimistic while the other is not.

The enduring appeal of *'The Prophet'* can be attributed to its ability to remain pertinent even a century after its original publication in 1923. The timeless wisdom embedded within its verses effectively addresses perennial questions and contemporary challenges confronted by individuals in modern society. The poetic language employed by Gibran in *'The Prophet'* also serves a more profound purpose than mere aesthetic appeal. It effectively acts as a medium through which spiritual and philosophical wisdom is communicated, and allows readers to delve into profound life themes in a readily comprehensible and captivating manner. His skill in crafting evocative and poetic language significantly enhances the lasting fascination and literary importance of this exceptional literary piece.

It is generally known that Gibran's work had a prophetic tone against the evils that prevailed in his cherished nation and drove humanity to decadence. Through his opposition to the prevalent societal norms

including its laws, religions and customs, he sought to remove oppression, intolerance, and tyranny in its various manifestations. Through its exploration of fundamental human experiences, *The Prophet* establishes a deep resonance with readers from various backgrounds and generations by fostering a sense of shared understanding and connection. The cosmopolitan environment in which Gibran lived and was raised allowed him to write about the essence of humanness with felicity without bothering about the seemingly insurmountable divide between the East and the West as both converged in his thought and manner. He firmly believed that the power to transform the world lay in love, freedom, and goodness of the heart. Throughout all the chapters, Gibran desired to impress upon human beings that they should live and let others live in the spirit of freedom, love and understanding that they are only the instrument of life itself living through them.

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