Émigré Creativity in a Historical Context
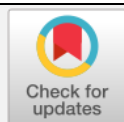
Homam Altabaa [1,*] ⓘ, and Adham Hamawiya [1] ⓘ

[1] Department of Fundamental and Inter-Disciplinary Studies,
Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences,
International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
* Corresponding Author: drhomam@iium.edu.my; htabaa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Émigré writers such as Kahlil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy proved that it is possible to transcend their historical limitations to become leading literary figures. An examination of the historical context of these writers is important for a rich understanding of their works. The themes addressed in such literary works are better appreciated within their cultural environment, and not as objects detached from their times, author and readers[1]. It can be rightfully argued that such works cannot be fully appreciated without delving into the intricacies of the political ideologies and economic crises of previous centuries. This article does not aim to perform such an undertaking, regardless of its literary merit; however, it presents an overview of the historical context surrounding the Émigré literary movement as a product of two cultures bridged by immigration at the turn of the 20th century. This is based on the belief that a profound critical engagement with Émigré works is better achieved with an examination of their historical and literary background. Thus, this article serves as a foundation for profound literary analyses of Émigré works.

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[1] Payne, 2005: 3-4, on the importance of a historical context.

1. Introduction

Émigré writers such as Kahlil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy were part a great literary movement that flourished in the Americas. The relationship between their works and historical context is undoubtedly a subject worthy of historical-literary analysis. Émigré creativity was characterized by aspects of the two cultures that hosted it. It is important to present a historical overview of the climate of political turmoil, economic misfortune, and social upheaval that engulfed Lebanon before the birth and during the life of Émigré literature. This is contrasted to the boom witnessed in the United States after Reconstruction (1865–1877), inviting great waves of migration from Ottoman Syria that included various writers. Émigré writers represent the intertwining of two cultures and perhaps the most significant event in their lives was immigrating from Lebanon to the United States of America. The immigration of these writers to the New World was part of a great migratory movement around the world in general and a relatively considerable one from Ottoman Syria in particular. This paper addresses the most important historical aspects in the period before and during the life of prominent émigré writers.

2. The Historical Context in the Levant

The historical roots of this immigration date back to the middle of the 19th century in a climate of political instability, economic uncertainty, and social tension.[2] Prior to that defining period, what is known today as Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire, which was on a steady rise since the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed the Conqueror in 1453. Lebanon and the Levant in general fell to the Ottomans under the rule of Selim I upon his sweeping victory in the battle of Marj Dābiq in 1516 against the Mamluk Sultanate. The Ottomans ruled by dividing the lands in vast *vilayets*[3] such as the *vilayets* of Aleppo and Baghdad.

Due to the sectarian demographical structure of Lebanon with its Maronites, Druzes, Shites, Sunnis, etc., the Ottomans acknowledged its existing local feudal lords who maintained their partial de facto autonomy, such as the great Fakhr ʾAl-Dīn II, who ruled vast lands in Lebanon and Syria. In general, the Ottomans did not try to impose their culture or language on the people of the region, and the society maintained its existing structure and relations. Thus, religion rather than race remained as the key factor in social unity. Non-Muslims maintained their civic freedom and usually followed their religious leaders in such affairs.[4] Due to the complexity of the political order of the day, corruption was rampant at all levels of government, starting from the feudal lords, up to the *vali*[5] and the upper echelons of central government in certain periods. The region witnessed relatively weak economy and culture, with high taxes and widespread poverty and illiteracy.

Contact with post-Renaissance Europe mainly took place through merchants, banks, and companies that had extensive presence in the region largely due to the export of sericulture. Additionally, Catholic and Protestant missionary schools and colleges were on the rise, and a special Maronite seminary was established in Rome to train monks who would go back to prominent positions within the Maronite church. Beirut flourished as an international trade port for the whole region, and later as the point of departure for thousands of immigrants. Telegraph

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[2] Issawi, 1992: 13-31.

[3] Vilayets and sanjaks were administrative divisions, provinces and districts, of the Ottoman Empire.

[4] Hitti, 1951: 668

[5] Governor of a vilayet; an administrative division or province.

lines reached Beirut in 1863, which enabled the blossoming newspaper industry to cover global events on a daily basis, enabling constant contact with the West.[6]

Earlier in the 19th century, the region witnessed marked prosperity, especially when compared to other regions in Syria, under the leadership of the local prince Bashīr Shihāb II. The Maronite prince also allowed the church to increase its influence, especially with its direct contact with Rome and Paris, at the helm of the social and economic structures.[7]

The successors of this prince were not as effective, which negatively affected the people of the region. Various other factors including sectarian instability, heavy taxes, and foreign intervention also had a negative effect on Lebanon. Ibrahim Pasha's conquest of Damascus in 1832 led to instability across the region, before he was forced to retreat in 1841. Additionally, the Tanzimat policy[8] of Sultan Mahmud, adversely affected the people of Lebanon. The Druze minority was dissatisfied with the division of Mount Lebanon into two districts under two *kaymakams*[9] and their lack of political and economic privileges. All of these factors led in 1860 to a civil war that resulted in the massacre of 11000 Maronites and the displacement of 100,000.[10] The conflict extended to Damascus where hundreds of Christians were murdered.[11] To quell the clashes, Napoleon III sent 6000 French troops, saving the Maronite majority. The Maronites were not as organized as the Druze minority, who were backed by the English and Ottomans, and thus suffered more losses.

In the *Reglement Organique* of 1861, Mount Lebanon's autonomy was recognized by the Sublime Porte, with the protection of France, Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The *kaymakams* system of 1841 became a Mutasarrifate governed by a *Mutasarrif* who was by law a catholic non-Arab Ottoman appointed by the Sultan,[12] and assisted by an Administrative Council of 12 elected members, eventually seven of whom were Christians.

With foreign protection and autonomy, the Mutasarrifate witnessed great prosperity with development in silk production and modern artisan work, in addition to trade, financial services, and road building.[13] In short, the Maronite military defeat turned into political gain, and later economic gain, with the new government system.[14] This agreement officially ended the old system, and power was divided between the *Mutasarrif* and the Church that controlled more than one third of the lands. However, this economic upturn did not affect all Maronite villagers and peasants. The "persistence of large landed holdings and the church waqfs" coupled with rapid population growth became important push factors for immigration to the West.[15]

In general, the economic, social, and political climate witnessed some improvements, with calls for decentralization, officialization of Arabic, and reform of military service becoming more pronounced in Beirut. However, the First World War (1914-1918) and the Arab Revolt (1916-1918) ushered in some of the darkest years in the history of the region, especially with the

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[6] Hourani, 1992: 4.

[7] Hitti, 1959: 213-227.

[8] Started in 1839 and ended 1876. It aimed to modernize the administration of the empire and secure it against nationalist movements.

[9] A Kaza, or district, was ruled by a kaymakam.

[10] Issawi, 1992: 21.

[11] Mishaqa, 1988: 30.

[12] Abu Khalil, 1998: 177.

[13] Naff, 1993: 29.

[14] Traboulsi, 2007: 42-43.

[15] Traboulsi, 2007: 45-47.

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appointment of Ahmed Djemal Pasha as governor in 1915. Conscription, war bonds, expropriation of agricultural produce, drop in trade, epidemics, and famine made Beirut and Mount Lebanon suffer in despair. Around 100,000 of their inhabitants perished in these years.[16] The defeat of the Ottomans resulted in the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon (1920-1940s), a period of military occupation, and political and economic instability that gave birth to the modern Lebanese Republic.

3.   The Historical Context in the United States of America

A defining event in 19th century America was the Civil War in the 1860s, the culmination of a tumultuous period that witnessed the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the abolition of slavery through the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution. Gibran reached the American shores at the end of the century to a country defined by immigration and war, but transformed by industrial progress. Politically, the Progressive movement was gaining control of the scene with its activism for eradicating political corruption and corporate monopoly, while advocating pure democracy that stresses citizen initiatives and referenda, as compared to constitutional or representative democracy.

Immigration in the 19th century was marked by the rise of Nativism, which is antagonism towards new immigrants by native-born citizens. However, the arrival of immigrants continued to increase with the arrival of millions seeking refuge from want and persecution in Europe. Historical data reveal that almost 50 million Third Wave immigrants entered the United States in the decades preceding and succeeding Gibran's arrival.[17] The enormity of the number of immigrants is clarified by the actual number of residents in the US around that time. According to the Twelfth United States Census, conducted by the Census Office in 1900, the population was approximately 76 million, compared to 62 million in the 1890 Census.[18]

Economically, the United States witnessed great progress over the second half of the century, with periodic shocks and depressions such as the Panic of 1893. The railroad industry, with funding from booming Wall Street, provided numerous employment opportunities and spurred growth in the metal industry and later in inter-state commerce. With extensive rail coverage, thousands of locomotives facilitated access to arable lands and made transporting their produce to the national market possible, which, coupled with mechanization, played a major role in the progress of agriculture.

In the last two decades of the century, American gross national product nearly doubled, with growth in all areas of the economy. Manufacturing led the expansion with an increase of almost 200%, compared to around 25% growth in agriculture.[19] These forward strides would not have been feasible had it not been for the leaps achieved in technology and innovation. The end of the century witnessed the wide use of electric generators and lights, in addition to innovations and improvements in telecommunication and engineering, with names such as Edison, Westinghouse, Ford, and others leading the technical-industrial race. With rising skyscrapers, new corporations changed the image of a nation and employed millions of its workers. All of these developments, with the advent of the petroleum industry, culminated in the crowning of the relatively young republic as the world's greatest industrial power at the

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[16] Traboulsi, 2007: 70-72.
[17] Mauk & Oakland, 2005: 57.
[18] U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014.
[19] Murrin et al., 2011: 499.

beginning of the 20th century.[20] The might of the United States was confirmed by victory in the First World War which intensified its role on the international economic and political arenas.

4. Immigration at the Turn of the Century

Immigration has been an integral part of the human experience. Whether voluntary emigration or involuntary migration, the phenomenon has affected millions of people in the past two centuries, boosted by opportunities in the New World and advancements in travel facilities. There are numerous operative push and pull factors at play behind worldwide immigration in the 19th century, such as famine, drought, slavery, war, oppression, and work. The world witnessed more than 150 million cases of documented immigration in the 19th century and early 20th century, mostly in steerages of ships.[21]

As for the United States, it is a country defined by immigration, described by John F. Kennedy as a nation of immigrants.[22] The formative years of immigration to the Americas began in the 16th century with the very first European settlements. Immigration in the 19th century was dominated by Europeans as well, as the rising number of Asian arrivals was stemmed with the Exclusion Act of 1882.[23] The great wave of immigration, from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, helped increase the population of the country from less than 20 million to more than 100 million.[24] The flow of immigrants was interrupted by the Civil War, but poverty and population growth in the old world pushed the numbers to greater heights after the war subsided. To accommodate the influx, Ellis Island was set up in 1892 as the gateway for millions to anticipated prosperity and, in many cases, a new national belonging. The arriving masses were motley of races and religions ranging from Catholic Irish to Druze Arabs. The term New Immigrants was used to denote those arriving after 1880, as they were less homogenous than the predominantly Protestant Western Europeans of the previous decades. New Immigrants formed the majority of inhabitants in several Northeastern towns.

Immigration from Ottoman Levant is an important historical phenomenon as it had affected thousands of families, especially in Mount Lebanon. The act itself was a complex process, but that did not deter entire families from fulfilling their aspirations. Immigration picked up momentum after the conclusion of the 1860 Druze–Maronite conflict and the establishment of Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate. Thus, between 1860 and 1900, around 120,000 people left the Levant, mostly Christians from the Mount. This is a staggering number given that the population of Lebanon stood at a quarter of a million in 1895.[25] The Sublime Porte took half-hearted measures to limit the number of departing Lebanese, mostly to safeguard the international reputation of the state as modern, with a strong economy and robust minority rights policy.[26] These measures failed as there were various factors that facilitated this mass migration, such as the growth of Beirut as the main port in the region, educational reform largely due to missionary schools, contact with Europeans and Americans, and the use of steamships,[27] in addition to syndicates profiting from people smuggling. Regardless of

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[20] Murrin et al., 2011: 524.

[21] McKeown, 2004: 156.

[22] Kennedy, 2008.

[23] Daniels, 2001: 9.

[24] Ward, 2001: 285.

[25] Issawi, 1992: 23 - 31.

[26] Akarli, 1992: 100.

[27] Rowe, 2008: 93.

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outcomes, immigrants from the Levant to the Americas were overwhelmingly sojourners, who had travelled of their own accord to achieve certain ambitions of high income and return[28] with savings and success stories. Fortunately, their immigrant experience in the United States was generally positive, with most starting out as peddlers[29] based in larger cities of the East Coast such as New York and Boston.

To conclude, the difficult political, economic and social circumstances in the Levant formed a push factor that led many families and individuals to immigrate in search of a better life. On the other hand, the climate of freedom and prosperity in the United States became a pull factor that attracted these immigrants to the ports of the American East Coast.

5.   Arabic Literary Context

The Levant has been a cradle of human civilization; home to the early alphabet, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the rise of Islamic culture. However, this unique place in the intellectual history of the world was hard to uphold with the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the 18th century was largely representative of intellectual infertility in the region. The succeeding intellectual and literary production of the 19th century was either an extension of old traditions or a reaction to the contact with the West. The cross-fertilization between the traditional, perceived as unscientific and static, and the modern, perceived as scientific and dynamic, characterized most of scholarly and literary discourse of the period.

In literature, Arabic literature has been mostly an autonomous continuum with minor foreign influences characterized by great reverence for its poetry. This began to change in the 19th century, with the arrival of new forms such as journalism and drama, and new concepts such as Romanticism. Although cultural espousal is a gradual and multifaceted process, its catalyst can be traced back to the French Campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801), which was Napoleon Bonaparte's ill-fated attempt to extend French influence and undermine British India. The campaign was distinguished by the swift and comprehensive defeat it inflicted on the Ottomans, and by the inclusion of various scientists and scholars among its members.

The shock generated by Western omnipotence after the conclusion of the Napoleonic expedition led rulers to send educational missions to study in Europe, establish modern schools, found translation centers, and support the spread of newspapers and magazines. In Syria, Christian missionaries, Protestant and Jesuits, established numerous Western-style schools, whose graduates played a principal role on the intellectual and literary scene of the period both in Syria and Egypt.

In prose, the spread of journalism facilitated the blooming of simple Arabic prose, removed from the embellished rhythmic writing of previous centuries, and capable of objectively conveying scientific truths and social commentary.[30] Limited numbers of Arabic presses were available in Aleppo and Beirut as early as the 1700s, but the proliferation of presses, and with them translation and newspapers, became a hallmark of the 19th century. Thus, with the development of printing and journalism, and the spread of translated novels, the stage was set for a steady evolution of prose. Arabic literary prose flourished with a mixture of tradition and modernity, as in the writings of ʾAḥmad Fāris Shidyāq, ʾAl-Bustānī, and Francis Marrāsh. The mature Arabic novel was only to be realized in the 20th century, with Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888 - 1956) as a key transitional figure.

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[28] Abdelhady, 2014: 19.
[29] Khater, 2001: 75.
[30] Badawi, 1997: 8.

In poetry, the advent of Neoclassicism and Romanticism is more evident than in prose. Neoclassicism, as the name indicates, was a return to the lofty poetic language and standards of the classic past, while expressing the outlook and addressing the concerns of contemporary times. Key figures of Arabic Neoclassicism included Nāṣīf ʾAl-Yāzijī, who co-translated the Bible, Maḥmūd Sāmī ʾAl-Bārūdī, and ʾAḥmad Shawqī.[31] The wide critical and popular acclaim received by neoclassical poets breathed a new life into Arabic poetry and revived trust and interest in literature. This paved the way for Romantic poetry to evolve and blossom naturally in the footsteps of a changing society. The target readership, with the advent of magazines, newspapers, schools and colleges, shifted from elite intelligentsia and rulers to the incipient young urban middleclass. This shift in readership marshaled a shift towards Romanticism. The distinguishing features of Romantic poetry were the high level of personal expression, intensity of emotions voiced, and the relative freedom in the choice of diction and rhythm. These features, in great part, were inspired by European Romantic poets. The best representative of Romanticism in Arabic poetry could be Khalīl Muṭrān (1872 – 1949) who was born in Lebanon and settled in Egypt.

In general, division between tradition and modernity characterized the cultural and literary discourse of the period. Europe was seen as the model to be emulated given its military and scientific ascendency since the Renaissance, but it was at the same time the enemy that occupied Egypt subjugated Arabia and the Maghreb, and threatened the Caliph. Tradition was suspected in the imbalance of development against Europe to be incongruent with progress. Modernization, which was synonymous with Westernization, was imposed on tradition and was not gradually reached out of it, and hence the dichotomy between modernity and tradition existed. In general, the period can be described a period of progress and renewal of Arabic literary themes and forms after decades of stagnation.

6. American Literary Context

At the dawn of American colonies in the new world, culture was characterized by dependence on European heritage and by being localized in each region with little intellectual interaction. A national culture, chiefly marked by Christianity, capitalism, and democracy, began to truly form with the conclusion of the Civil War and the ensuing sense of unity. However, three dominant regional cultures were evident in the West, South, and North. Eventually, the North became culturally dominant with concepts such as individualism, social Darwinism, pragmatism, and progressivism.[32]

The 19th century ushered an intensification of American literature and the rise of many of its towering figures such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe. These writers paved the way for Romanticism to enter and occupy a prominent literary position in American literature and to also earn wide recognition across the Atlantic. This is true of Edgar Allan Poe, whose works were translated by the great French poet, Charles Baudelaire. Poe also pioneered the genre of detective short story and was an important figure in forging American gothic writing and literary criticism.

The most celebrated intellectual movement of the 19th century in the United States was Transcendentalism, whose high priest was Ralph Waldo Emerson. The movement was instrumental in the formation of uniquely American letters.[33] It was an idealist movement that

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[31] Somekh, 1997: 43.
[32] Crunden, 1994: 128.
[33] Goetzmann, 2009: 208.

developed in New England in the 1830s, influenced by European Romanticism and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. It emphasized the manifestation of God in nature, individualism, and intuition. It detested the control of religion over society, stressing instead individual freedom and the divine nature of a human being. Emerson, as a citizen of the world, sought to redefine man, God, and nature in order to change society and its conception of reality.[34] His most influential ideas came in the form of essays such as *Nature*, *Self-Reliance*, *The Over-Soul*, *The Poet*, and *Experience*. Notably, Emerson, the Sage of Concord, called for America to cease its cultural and literary reliance on Europe, calling for its intellectual independence.[35] The influence of this movement, and especially of its leader, on the history of American thought was summarized by eminent critic, Harold Bloom, who wrote that "after Emerson, every strong American writer and thinker has been an Emersonian or an anti-Emersonian but not indifferent to him. This is because he became the Mind of America."[36]

Another influential Transcendentalist writer is Henry David Thoreau, whose lasting legacy is *Walden: Or Life in the Woods*, a guidebook of modest life in nature. It narrates a personal experiment of seclusion for self-reliance and spiritual awareness. Another famous work by Thoreau is *Resistance to Civil Government (Civil Disobedience)*, which calls for civil disobedience when an authoritarian state forces the individual to act against his morality. The influence of the movement extended to Walt Whitman whose seminal book, *Leaves of Grass,* is one of the most famous poetry collection in American literary history with poems such as *Song of Myself*, revolving about freedom, celebrating the human body and American root democracy.[37]

If transcendentalism was the avant-garde of romanticism in the United States, the same is true of naturalism in the context of realism. The latter began to gain momentum with the conclusion of the Civil War due to the dominance of a stable rational and scientific culture. Emphasizing characterization, daily lives, and social observations, the movement gained popularity with the works of Mark Twain and Henry James. Owing much of its features to European roots, the naturalist trend came to dominance in the wake of realism, stressing social determinism through a scientifically accurate depiction of life with a special focus on its oppressed and gruesome sides. Among the significant naturalist authors were Stephen Crane and Frank Norris.[38]

Following the fast-paced industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the century, modernism was to dominate the literary scene augmented by the ideas of some great Continental thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The First World War strengthened the hold of modernism with a sense of desperation mixed with alienation and anxiety,[39] heralding the names of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as the leading figures on the literary stage of the times.

7. Arabic Émigré Literature

The émigré movement is a result of the contact between Arab writers and the American literary environment. A defining literary phenomenon in the history of Arabic literature, it was largely established by Christian Levantine writers in the Americas during the early decades of

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[34] Goetzmann, 2009: 185.

[35] Crunden, 1994: 89.

[36] Harold Bloom, 2008: 11.

[37] Gray, 2011: 212.

[38] Quinn, 2006: 355.

[39] Lauter, 2010: 377-378.

the 20th century. Émigré literature was influenced by the American culture of freedom and individualism, European Romanticism and nationalism, the deteriorating conditions of Arab peoples, and the ʼAl-Naḥḍah movement.[40] Thus, Arabic émigré works explore and address subjective and emotional themes with a depth that was previously uncommon in Arabic literature. The spiritual aspects, with a stress on nature as the primary source of good, are also defining and unique features of émigré works. Such works are also concerned with the social problems of immigrants at the turn of the century and the political and economic ills of the Syrian homeland. The originality of these works, with their simple and innovative styles, has been a milestone in the history of Arabic literature.

The first modern Arabic literary group, the Pen League, was a product of the émigré literary movement. The Pen League was established in New York in April, 1920, with a strong drive from Abdul Masih Haddad, the founder of *ʼAl-Sāʼiḥ* newspaper. Kahlil Gibran was elected president and Mikhail Naimy secretary, with an elite membership that included Nasib Arida, Abdul Masih Haddad, Elia Abu Madi, and Ameen Rihani. This League gave a far reaching resonance to the voice of the group and enhanced its ability to achieve its literary goals. In the words of Naimy in the preamble to its by-law, the League was "aiming to transport our literature from stagnation to life, from imitation to creation… The tendency to keep our language and literature within the narrow bounds of aping the ancients in form and in substance is a most pernicious tendency… our life, our deeds, our circumstances are far different from theirs. We must be true to ourselves."[41]

The émigré movement benefited from the Arabic press in the United States. Thus, Arab-American newspapers popularized the creative works and critical views of émigré writers, and enabled them to reach Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus. The first Arabic newspaper in the US was *Kawkab America* in 1892, followed by *ʼAl-Hudā* and *Mirʼāt ʼAl-Gharb* in 1898 and 1899. Other papers included *ʼAl-Bayān*, *ʼAl-Majallah ʼAl-ʻarabiyah*, *ʼAl-Funūn*, and scores more, mostly in New York.

One of the leading émigré writers greatly influenced by Gibran was Mikhail Naimy who was born in 1889. Naimy's first source of influence was Russian literature as he studied at Russian schools before travelling to the Ukraine from 1906 to 1911 as a student. He then moved to the United States and successfully launched his literary career. As a critic, his 1923 collection *ʼAl-Ghirbāl*, had a lasting impact on the literary scene of the period, calling for a greater stylistic and syntactic freedom to express subjective emotions, instead of the complex and rigid systems of traditional Arabic. He also stressed that the role of art is to convey a message from the heart, without artificial embellishments. His poem *ʼAkhī* (*My Brother*) is a lucid testimony to the doctrine he preached with its subjective voice and whispered tone. Without rhetorical pretensions, the poem approached a traditional subject matter, war, in a novel way.[42]

The most gifted poet of the émigré movement in the United States was Elia Abu Madi who was born in Lebanon in 1889. He left for Egypt at a young age, and there published his first collection of poetry, before emigrating to the USA in 1911. His true success as a poet came after moving to New York and joining the Pen League with the publication of his second and third collections. Abu Madi excelled in the expression of personal bitterness in a modern world and the solace he found in individualism and nature. He ushered into Arabic literature an

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[40]ʼAl-Naḥḍah (renaissance) refers to the historical intellectual reform and modernization of Arab culture, centering in Egypt.ʼAl-Khafājī, *Qiṣat ʼAl-ʼAdab ʼAl-Mahjarī*, 1986: 125-147.
[41] Naimy, 1974: 155-156.
[42] Ostle, 1997: 99-100.

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atmosphere of vagueness and perplexity that was avant-garde. His most famous works include, *al-Ṭalāsim*, expressing agnosticism and anguish in a style that departs from traditional Arabic qaṣīdah.[43]

8. Conclusions

The émigré movement presented Arabic literature with its finest Romantic output, an achievement that echoed across the Arab world despite the geographical distance of its origin. Ostle admired the vitality and position of this movement as it changed the course of Arabic literary expression with focus on themes such as "the duality of body and soul, the poet-prophet of grandiose isolation or simply bewildered subjective malaise... With their preference for short simple metres and stanzaic forms, and their willingness to experiment with lines of irregular length, they paved the way for the formal revolutions that were to occur."[44]

As discussed above, the historical context in the Levant and the Arab world in general, before and during the life of Gibran and other émigré writers, was largely characterized by hardship. The Ottoman Empire was sick at that period, which reflected negatively on Greater Syria. In contrast, the United States was fast developing towards unprecedented prosperity. This led to a wave of immigration, which included a number of writers and their families, from the Levant to the American east coast. For example, the young Gibran, under the protective wing of his mother, left the quite life of the Mount village to the hustle and bustle of Boston and New York.

The Arab cultural scene during the same period was chiefly characterized by a clash between tradition and modernity, fueled to a great extent by direct interaction with the West. In literature, émigré writers were on the side of modernizers, calling for a new spirit of subjective literature with less focus on classic forms. These writers came to a cosmopolitan culture and a booming literary environment, which helped to nurture and polish their talents. It can be argued that this environment fundamentally shaped their outlook on modernizing culture and literary innovation.

The two major recommendations that can be gleaned from the above discussions revolve around the role of interaction between a writer and their culture. First, to fully appreciate literary creativity, critics and readers need to be aware of the culture of the writer and how both culture and writer affect each other. Second, to develop and cultivate a writer's creative literary abilities, it can be advantageous to gain new experiences and insights outside one's familiar environment into diverse cultures with dissimilar worldviews.

9. Acknowledgement

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[43] R.C. Ostle, 1997: 101-105.
[44] R.C. Ostle, 1997: 109.

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About The Authors

1. **Homam Altabaa** (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor at Department of Fundamental and Inter-Disciplinary Studies, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. His doctoral thesis investigated the mystical elements in the works of Kahli Gibran, and he has published several articles on the works of Kahlil Gibran.
   E-Mail: drhomam@iium.edu.my; htabaa@gmail.com.

2. **Adham Hamawiya** (Ph.D.) Assistant Professor of Arabic Linguistic Studies at Department of Fundamental and Inter-Disciplinary Studies, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. His research area covers various aspects of Arabic language and literature.
   E-Mail: adhamawiya@iium.edu.my.