

The Legacy of Lebanese Literature

By

Ms. Preeti S. Manaktala

preetimanaktala14@gmail.com

Abstract

In the words of Khalil Gibran- *“If Lebanon was not my country, I would have chosen it to be. My Lebanon is a serene mountain sitting between the sea and the plains, like a poet between one eternity and another.”*

These lines by Khalil Gibran sums it all up for this beautiful country called Lebanon. What is striking about this country is the multiculturalism, harmonious diaspora and the richness of its profound literature. Lebanon is located between Syria to the north and Israel to the south, while Cyprus lies to its west across the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite the country's small size, Lebanese culture and literature is renowned both in the Middle East and globally. Lebanon is amongst the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world with an extensive mixture of liberal and conservative values. And who isn't familiar with the famous Lebanese cuisine that has ancient roots and is a part of the culinary tradition of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords

Lebanon, Lebanese Literature, Arabic Literary Awakening, Civil War, Beirut.

Introduction

Arabic and western cultures both influenced Lebanese literature which mostly dealt with history and philosophy. The story of Lebanese literature begins in its mountains ascending from the urban shores of Beirut through the celebrated cedar groves. Set in the north eastern Levant, the stories of Lebanese literature begin before the modern republic was yet realized from Ottoman Syria. The county's culinary and literary heritages are thoroughly intertwined in early 20th century American immigrant history. The capital of Lebanon - Beirut tell us the tragic tales of civil war, political infighting, religious conflict, diaspora exile, and refugee obscurity. This civil war generation writers mostly wrote stories from the civil war. The stories of true tales of the difficulties and sometimes fatal decisions that victims of civil war took in order to survive are heart wrenching.

The most distinguished intellectual pioneers, lauded even today as foundational Arab-American writers are Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani. The early Lebanese feminists writers like Afifa Karam and Anbara Salam Khalidi wrote to advocate for the global liberation of women. The modern nation speaks from Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani to Afifa Karam, Elias Khoury, Amin Maalouf to Mikhail Naimy and many more esteemed writers who have made a mark as the bestselling international authors. In more recent times writers like Georges Shehade, Michel Chiha, and Hanan Al-Shaykh have been widely translated and have reached an international audience.

Some Famous Lebanese Writers

Khalil Gibran

A Lebanese-American writer, who is remembered as one of the greatest visionaries of his time, a pivotal figure on the Arabic literature scene of the early 1900s. He is famous for his romantic style and prose poetry. He is best known as the author of *The Prophet*, which was first published in the United States in 1923 and has since become one of the best-selling books of all time, It has been translated into more than 100 languages. While he mostly wrote in Arabic, much of his work published after 1918 was in English. *The Madman* (1918), In 1920, Gibran re-created the Arabic-language *New York Pen League*. *The Tempests* was

published in Arabic and *The Forerunner* in New York in the same year. Khalil Gibran is known as the third best-selling poet of all time and occupies a curious place in literary history. As one of the writers who broke with the old and rigid conventions of Arabic poetry and literary prose, he is among the great figures in the twentieth-century revival of Arabic literature. His Arabic works are read, admired, and taught, and they are published and sold among the classics of Arabic literature.



Image 1: Khalil Gibran

Ameen Rihani

A Lebanese American writer and political activist who is remembered as a major figure in the Mahjar Literary Movement developed by Arab emigrants in North America. Ameen Rihani is considered the founding father of Arab American Literature. He began his extensive literary career, bridging two worlds. He introduced Prose Poetry into Arab literature. His new style of poetry was published as early as 1905.

Among the books that he published during that period were: *The Lily of A-Ghor*, a novel in English- describing the oppression of the woman during the Ottoman Empire. *Jihan*, a novel in English about the role of Levantine women during World War I. *A Chant of Mystics*, poetry in English. *The Descent of Bolchevism* - a political analysis in English on the Arab

origins of the socialist movements. He became the first Arab to write English essays, poetry, novels, short stories, art critiques, and travel chronicles.



Image 2: Ameen Rihani

Elias Khoury

A Lebanese Novelist and prominent public intellectual. He is famous for his book *The Little Mountain*. Set during the Lebanese civil war, this book tells the story of Beirut, civil war, and fractured identity. Elias Khoury is playwright, critic and novelist who, as many other writers, is fixated on issues of politics, identity and conflict. His other works include *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, about a rural immigrant to Beirut who lives through the events of the civil war, and *Gate of the Sun*. Elias has published myriad novels related to literary criticism, which have been translated into several foreign languages. Khoury has been an editor of famous Lebanese newspaper. Between 1993 and 2009, he served as an editor of *Al-Mulhaq*, the weekly cultural supplement of the Lebanese daily newspaper Al-Nahar. He also taught at several universities in Arab and European countries and in the United States. Khoury's style

is visceral and journalistic, he writes about the literal impact of the war as well as the effect it had on the citizens of Beirut and their state of mind.



Image 3: Elias Khoury

Mikhail Naimy

He was a Lebanese poet, novelist, and philosopher, famous for his spiritual writings, notably *The Book of Mirdad*. The mystic Osho had this to say about *The Book of Mirdad*: "There are millions of books in the world but *The Book of Mirdad* stands out far above any book in existence". He is widely recognized as one of the most important figures in modern Arabic Literature and one of the most important spiritual writers of the 20th century. In 1920, Naimy re-formed the New York Pen League along with its original founders Nasib Arida and Masih Hadda and Khalil Gibran. He wrote poetry in Russian, Arabic and English.



Image 4: Mikhail Naimy

Alexandre Najjar

A Lebanese and French writer, lawyer, journalist and literary critic. He holds a Doctorate in Business administration and is specialized in banking and finance law. He is the author of more than 30 books translated into more than 12 languages. In addition to poetry and novels, he has written non-fiction works like the biography of Khalil Gibran, a book 'Berlin 36' about the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Nazi Germany and a book about the Arab Spring 'Anatomie d'un tyran'. Najjar is also a columnist and critic for L'Orient littéraire, the literary supplement of the Lebanese French-language daily L'Orient-Le Jour. In 2009, he received the Prix Méditerranée for his book *Phénicia*. The author of around thirty novels, Najjar often focuses his work on his childhood memories of growing up during the Lebanese War and the effect this had on his character. He deftly paints a picture that interweaves a humorously personal voice with the hard-hitting realities of modern Lebanon. In novels like *The School of War*, Najjar uses narrative elements from Lebanese folklore to comment upon the universality of war and the suffering it produces.



Image 5: Alexandre Najjar

Conclusion

Lebanese linguists have been the vanguard of the Arabic Literary awakening. Lebanese literature can be indeed called a kaleidoscope, with writers emerging from different spectrums of life yet holding their Lebanese roots and past so strongly as to document these stories and telling them to the world to keep the Lebanon history alive. Lebanese Literature has indeed seen an abundance of many emphatic writers writing unabashedly on cultures, politics, wars, exiles, religions et al.

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About the Author

Ms. Preeti S. Manaktala is a published author, poet, blogger and a contributing writer to various online sites. An avid reader, she loves to review books. She has won many accolades and recognition for her poetry contribution to various online contests. She calls herself a writer in progress and believes that writing has helped her discover her own self even better. She believes in staying positive and continues to take small steps towards something very wonderful and beautiful ahead. She is a firm believer in the saying - “My Life is My Own Making!”

You can find her scribbling her thoughts, poetry and book reviews on her WordPress site - <https://preetimanaktala.in>



