

## **Abu Madi: A Voice of Modernity in Contemporary Arabic Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

The migration of Lebanese Arabs to America after 1860 infused a new life of modernity in Arabic literature by turning away from the traditional excessive preoccupation with mere verbal skill. Elia Abu Madi, the most eminent Mahjar poet, converted his poetry into subjective kind. He tried to dispel people's feeling of melancholy by calling to their notice that even in situation of despair there were aspects worth enjoying. He invited to understand life and accept it as it is. He presented nature as a source of moral teaching in a Wordsworthian fashion. His excellent imaginative power helped him in using skillfully the narrative and dramatic elements in his poetry.

During the rule of Ottomans, the population of Lebanon was composed of many different groups, including the Catholic Maronites, the Druzes, who lived mainly on Mount Lebanon itself, and the Sunni Muslims who dominated Beirut and the lowlands. The ruling Shihabi family, led for many years by Emir Bashir II, maintained a tenuous balance among them. This balance had been upset during the Egyptian occupation, when Ibrahim Pasha had used the Maronites against the Muslims, most of whom continued to support the Ottoman sultan. The superior education provided in the Christian schools established a trend toward Maronites domination of Lebanon's life, and this continued after the Egyptians left, leading to resentment by the Muslims and increased conflicts. When Bashir's weak successors converted to Christianity, Muslim fear of a Christian takeover was intensified. The Druzes used this occasion to attack the Maronites. Lebanon was divided into Maronites and Druze Sancaks along a line drawn from Beirut to Damascus (1843) all under Ottomans governor of Lebanon... (1)

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Though the Druzes were able to remain united and had considerable autonomy in their own areas, the Maronites were weakened by internal divisions resulting from reactions against feudal control in the north. But now the Maronite peasants, stirred on by the clergy... revolted and established a peasant republic... Meanwhile, Muslim sentiment was reacting to the provisions for equality for non-Muslims made in Reform Decree (1856) and British also stirred things up by sending arms to the Druzes to counter French influence among the Maronites. Relations among the communities were further strained when the Druzes and the Sunni Muslims, encouraged by the Maronite division tried to use the situation to restore their own domination. The explosion came on May 27, 1860 when a group of Maronites raided a Druze village. Massacres and counter massacres followed not only in Lebanon but also in Syria. In the end, between 7000 and 12,000 people of all religions, had been killed, and over 300 villages, 500 churches, 40 monasteries and 30 schools were destroyed. (2)

In this state of chaos a steady stream of Arabs immigrated to America both North and South. Although they imbibed the culture of their new environment yet they maintained their own culture and language. The result was a new kind of Arabic literature known by the Arabs as 'Emigrant literature' (Adab al-Mahjar). The most significant contribution of the mahjar writers was in poetry which was the mainspring of 'modernism' in Arabic poetry. Elia Abu Madi is one of those few mahjar poets who achieved real eminence in producing current of modernity in Arabic poetry in early twentieth century.

Abu Madi was born in Muhaydatha (Lebanon) in 1889. He immigrated to Alexandria in 1900 where he sold cigarettes for his uncle. He used his spare time to perfect his knowledge of Arabic and the prosodic rules of classical Arabic poetry. His first volume of poetry 'Tadhkar al-Madi' (the memorial of the past) was published in Cairo in 1911. In the same year, he left for USA and settled in Cincinnati, becoming editor of 'al-Majalla al-Arabyya'. In 1929 he founded his own periodical 'al-Sameer' which continued until his death in 1957.

In 1927 Abu Madi published 'al-Jadwil' (the brooks), followed in 1940 by 'al-Khama'il' (the Tickets) and by the volume 'Tibr wa-Turab', all three printed in Brooklyn, New York.

In 1920, Abu Madi became a member of al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya (Pen Association) which was founded by Jibran Khalil Jibran. Abu Madi followed the aim of this association which was "to infuse a new life in modern Arabic literature by turning away from the

traditional excessive preoccupation with mere verbal skill to write a literature that suites the requirements of modern times ..... and the attempt to rise above provincialism by making literature primarily the expression of universal human thought and feeling”. (3)

In Abu Madi’s early writings the traditional element is, as to be expected, strongly pronounced. Poems of public nature, comments on political or contemporary events tends to recur, and although they never quite disappear from his work, it is the subjective kind of poetry that dominates his latter writings. Addressing the readers, he says, “You are not of my party if you regard poetry to be nothing more than words and meter. Our paths will never cross and there is nothing more between us”. (4)

Abu Madi regards life beautiful and nature as containing all elements of beauty and pleasure. Man should focus his eyes on beauties of existence. He should neither bother about what has passed nor concern himself with the future yet to come except the present moment. Like nature he should distribute benefits among all overlooking discriminations. He will find the life beautiful if his soul is beautiful or vice versa.(5)

His poem entitled “al-Ghibta Fikra” (Happiness is an Ideal) reflects his such feelings where he says:

O you who weep  
Tears cannot fill a lack,  
O you who frown,  
No fee is paid for frowning.  
Don’t be bitter  
An don’t make others’ lives litter.  
He who weeps.  
Can also laugh  
Rejoice, then, and be marry  
For a frowning man is but a rock. (6)

In one of his popular poems entitled “al-Masa” (Evening) Abu Madi addressed a woman called Salma whom he caught in a pensive mood one evening as the sun was setting and darkness was creeping. He tried to dispel her feeling of melancholy by calling to her notice that, though certain glorious aspects of daytime were gone, even in the dark there were aspects of night that were worth enjoying...the stars, the breeze, the fragrance of flowers, the rustle of leaves. He ended the poem saying:

Daytime, son of the morning, is dead  
Don’t ask, how did it die?”

For the contemplation of life  
 Increases the pains of living  
 Leave off sorrow and grief,  
 And regain the mirth of a lass  
 Your face in the forenoon  
 Was as radiant as forenoon itself  
 An overflowed with cheerfulness and splendor let it (7)

He repeatedly contrasts the person who keeps complaining of one problem or another in life with the person who understands life and accepts it as it is. The poem entitled "Ibtasim" (smile) which employs a dialogue between the poet and another person bears the same message:

"He said, "the sky is gloomy, and he frowned  
 I said, "Smile. Sufficient is the scowl in the sky"  
 He said, "Youth has gone"  
 I said, "smile, sorrow will not bring back bygone youth"  
 He said" she who was my heaven in love  
 Has become the hell of my soul  
 She broke all promises to me after I left her  
 Possess my heart. How can I bear to smile?"  
 I said, "smile and be marry, for if you married  
 You would have spent the rest of your life in pain" (8)

It is worth noticing that Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads also shows man "in the setting of nature, in strict accordance with daily observation, and without a trace of exaggeration or embellishment. As it (Lyrical Ballads) is deeply alive to nature's influence upon man, there emanates from its brief and sober pictures a teaching of all the inexpressible lesson which the sky and the earth, the seasons and all living creatures convey to a sensibility upright and sound enough to remain receptive." (9)

As in most Mahjar poetry the poet's yearning for nature is a reflection of his homesickness, nostalgia for the Lebanon which in Abu Madi's poetry reaches its highest degree of idealization as, for instance, in his poem "The Poet in Heaven". (10) He says:

God once found me on earth weeping with grief/so He told me: "earth did not suite poetry, so you must return to heaven"/ (Then) He erected my home over smaak (a shining star) / and extended my kingdom up to horizons.

Morning and evening started coming to and fro under my direction.  
 And air used to fetch clouds in such a way /that my flag was raised upon them. And stars obeyed me.

Yet I remained grieved and my spirit was depressed. Allah surprised by my despair even in the world of revelation .... / asked me: "do you want to be a bird?" / I replied: "never I need to be." He further inquired .... "to be a star?" / I replied: "Never as there was no beauty in it." / He expressed: "Are you in need of wealth?" / I answered: "I neither wanted money nor palaces, gardens or legion" ... / He ultimately questioned me: "Then what is your demand?" / I beseeched Him: "I just want to spend a summer or a winter season in Lebanon because / I am stranger in heavens and there is no pleasure to be a stranger". (11)

Among principals of Abu Madi's philosophy is the brotherhood of man, need of his fellows, to live in harmony with them, to forgive their faults and overlook their mistakes and to offer them the best he has. He believes in the equality of human being. All people are subject to the same human condition, its frailties as well as its possible glories. The best poem expressing Abu Madi's views on this subject is his well known poem "al-Tin" (Human clay) in which he addresses an arrogant rich and powerful person and asks him to consider how he is equal to the poor and humble poet, however much they may differ from each other in appearance or in the paraphernalia of power and wealth. (12)

Abu Madi re-created in Modern Arabic poetry a number of elements that had been lost as the Arabic poem suffered much the same decline as cultural life did in general. Jibran says: Abu Madi possessed imaginative power which enables him "to express his attitudes, feelings and ideas in terms of images and concrete situations. This may account for his skillful use of the narrative and dramatic elements in his poetry". (13) One of these was a return to real source of poetry, namely fable. Abu Madi was not content merely to borrow fables from the popular tradition but went on to create his own fables that would be appropriate for each of his themes. This tendency of his shows how acute was his understanding of the psychology of the society for which he was writing poetry. He portrayed aspects of their life for them in the kinds of stories they knew and loved. On many occasion, he deliberately chose to use the world of animals and plants. (14)

### **Conclusion**

Abu Madi is a great interpreter of nature in Arabic poetry. To him nature is often a source of moral teaching in a Wordsworthian fashion. Nature does not deny any one the opportunities to enjoy its beauties, rich or poor, powerful or weak, handsome or ugly. People

therefore ought to live in harmony with nature. Nature was for him (Abu Madi) the embodiment of the Divine Spirit which means that the spiritual communion is possible between the dwelling soul of the universe and the soul of man. His emphasis is everywhere thrown upon those spiritual forces within us which give us power and the ability to lift ourselves through conscious and patient effort, above the reach of circumstances and the flux of external things.

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