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Mīkhāil Nu'aymah in Arabic Romanticism of Mahjar Literature

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Abstract – The emergence of romanticism was a major revolution against classicism, including in Arabic literature. The spread of this school in Arabic literary works was conveyed by the figures of the Diwan school, Apollo, and the *Mahjar* poets who were influenced by Western romanticism. This article aims to provide an overview of romanticism in the *mahjar* Arabic literature, especially through Mīkhāil Nu'aymah's view as one of the important figures of this stream. The method used in this article is descriptive qualitative and literature study. This research also uses observing and note-taking techniques in data collection. The results of this research show that Nu'aymah's view regarding the school of romanticism is the philosophical basis for the renewal of Arabic literature through the collaboration of Western romanticism and Eastern thought to oppose the classical school. Nu'aymah's *mahjar* poems represent the romantic characteristics of the *mahjar* group both in the form and the content of literary works.

Keywords – Arabic Romanticism, Mahjar Literature, Mīkhāil Nu'aymah.

INTRODUCTION

The school of romanticism (*al-Madrasah ar-Rūmansiyah* or *ar-Rūmantikiyyah*) is a philosophical-literary movement that emerged in Europe in the 18th century AD. This movement was considered a major revolution against everything brought about by classicism. Several philosophers and thinkers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and others had a great influence in spreading ideas that left their mark on this new revolutionary doctrine, such as calling for nationality, local color, and individual rights. Rousseau believed that humans were basically good, but society, urban life, and the customs and traditions they established corrupted them, and they were called to break through these boundaries and return to nature to regain its serenity (Quṣāb, n.d.).

The term 'romanticism' was coined by the famous French writer Stendhal in his two treatises called 'Racine and Shakespeare' in which he dealt with the possibility of diagnosing the new literature of his time and distinguishing it from what he called classical literature (Quṣāb, n.d.). Besides,

romanticism was also one of the trends that had a big impact on the Arab literary revolution (Mutmainah & Tasnimah, 2022). Romanticism has spread in the world of Arabic poetry, represented by the figures of the Dīwān school, Apollo, and the *Mahjar* poets. This school first occurred at the beginning of the 20th century in Arabia. This school emerged in the Arab region as a reaction to the rationalism of classical literature introduced by Maḥmūd Sāmī Al-Bārūdī. The neo-classical school characterized by rationalism and realism received a reaction from the new school, romanticism, which tended to place more emphasis on emotion and imagination and prioritized rationality and reality (Kamil, 2009).

The historical sequence of the emergence of romanticism in Arabic literature cannot be separated from the influence of Arabian writers by Western romanticism. The influx of this influence was initiated by the movement of the Syrian-Lebanese people to the West. Between 1880 and 1914, an estimated one-third of the total population of Greater Syria (now Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan) migrated to Egypt and America. During that period,

many writers from the Levant region produced what was known as *mahjar* literature (Njeim, 2021).

The term *Mahjar* is a derivation of the Arabic word *hijrah* which means migration and comes from the root word هـ-ج-ر which means moving from one's homeland and settling in another country. In general, the term *mahjar* means 'country of immigration' and is used in a literary context to refer to *mahjar* writers who moved to America around the turn of the 20th century. The period of intellectual revival of the 19th century, known as *nahḍah* or Arabic literary renaissance, was a period of intellectual modernization that changed the shape of Arabic literature for years to come. *Mahjar* writers are known to have freed themselves from the shackles of traditional Arabic poetry, preferring to seek inspiration from European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (Njeim, 2021).

Some prominent Arab writers such as Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, Mīkhāil Nu'aymah, Amīn Ar-Rīhānī, Nasīb 'Arīdah, and Rasyīd Ayyūb were among the *mahjariyyūn* (immigrants) who migrated to the United States. Several studies have been conducted to discuss the figures and works of the romanticist school in Arabic literature. One of them is an article entitled "Al-Khalilayn in the Romanticism of Arabic Literature" written by Yusuf Haikal. This study (Haikal, 2021) discusses two important figures of the romanticism school in Arabic literature, namely Khalīl Jibrān and Khalīl Mutran, accompanied by an analysis of their works. The results show that these two figures are important in romantic Arabic literature with their respective backgrounds and the romanticism of their works revolves around depictions of nature, the likeness of something far from rationality, emotional and deep feelings expressions. The monumental works such as *al-Arwāḥ al-Mutamarridah* and *al-Ajniḥah al-Mutakassirah* have made Khalīl Jibrān more discussed.

Apart from that, there is Mīkhāil Nu'aymah who is one of the very productive Arabic writers of the *mahjar* group. This is proven by the birth of several of his works which have made a major contribution to the progress of Arabic literary civilization. He has produced at least 31 works which include poetry, novels, short stories, plays, words of wisdom, biographies, literary criticism, and life messages. Among them is the play *al-Ābā wa al-Banūn*, the poetry anthology *Hams al-Jufūn* and his work containing literary criticism, *al-Ghirbāl fī an-Naqd*.

Nevertheless, Nu'aymah's popularity as one of the pioneering figures of the romanticist school among *mahjar* writers cannot beat the phenomenal Khalīl Jibrān. Nu'aymah, as one of the central figures of the *mahjar* group who was influenced by romanticism, indubitably had his perspective on this school. This study tends to focus the research on Mīkhāil Nu'aymah as one of the important figures in the romantic stream of Arabic literature and understanding the style of romanticism in Arabic literature based on his *mahjar* works.

METHOD

This research was use Descriptive and Qualitative Method because it describes various relevant things and in line with the research objective and is carried out not using numbers but by understanding the interactions between concepts that are being studied empirically. The method used in this research is the library research method which uses library sources to obtain research data.

The data in this research is literacy related to Nu'aymah's views on romanticism and his *mahjar* literary works reflecting the romanticism characteristics sourced from various books, articles, and several relevant previous studies using note-taking techniques. The main data source related to Nu'aymah's *mahjar* literary works is the poetry anthology entitled *Hams al-Jufūn*. Once all the data was identified and collected, data analysis was conducted, which included reviewing all the data collected, writing all the relevant data into the corresponding discussion points, and finally correcting all the data written into each point to reveal and rationalize the school of romanticism from Mīkhāil Nu'aymah's perspective which is also represented in his works.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mīkhāil Nu'aymah and the *Mahjar* Group

Mīkhāil Nu'aymah was born into a simple family in a small village on the edge of the Sanin mountain in Lebanon called Baskinta on October 17 1889 AD. He started his education at an elementary school in Baskinta at the age of 5 years. After graduating from elementary school in 1899 AD, he continued at the Russian Orthodox School located in Baskinta. After he completed it at the age of 13 in 1902 AD, he then went to Palestine to study at the Russian Missionary School located in Nazareth. His desire to deepen his

religious knowledge led him to return to pursue further studies at the Theological Seminary University in Poltava, Ukraine. There he read a lot and was inspired by the works of Russian writers, such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Georgiev, and others (Nu'aim, 2018).

After studying in Poltava, he then migrated to the United States and lived in Seattle in 1911 to study law and English literature at the University of Washington. Just like his love of reading literary works from Russian writers, while in Seattle, he also really enjoyed reading literary works from English writers such as Blake, Keats, and American figures, such as Emerson and Thoreau (Nu'aymah, 1999).

After graduating in 1916 he then moved to New York to work. Two years later, in 1918, he was recruited by the army to become part of the US military army and went to war in France. Then he left this assignment in 1919 and returned to New York. This year he also began writing literary works in several languages such as Russian, Arabic, and English. Thus he became acquainted with Jibrān and Syro-American writers (Nawawi, 2015). It was with them that in 1920 he founded ar-Rābiṭah al-Qalamiyyah (The Pen League) which was the first reformer group in Arabic literature with Khalīl Jibrān as president and Nu'aymah as advisor. In 1932, after 21 years of living in the United States, he returned to his hometown, Baskinta Lebanon. Nu'aymah died on February 28, 1988, in Beirut due to pneumonia at the age of 99 (Qabas, 1970).

Mīkhāil Nu'aymah has produced a legacy of special works. As a multilingual, Nu'aymah often writes in Arabic, Russian, and English. The literary works of this prolific writer include novels such as *Mudhakkirāt al-'Arqasy* (1948), which the author himself translated into English under the title *The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul*; or, *The Pitted Face* (1952), as well as *The Book of Mirdad* (1948), written in English and then translated by Nu'aymah into Arabic. The author is also known for writing the biography of Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān (1936), which was later translated into English. Other notable works include his memoir *Sab'ūn: Hikāyat 'Umr* (1959-1960) or *Seventy: Story of a Lifetime*, *Al-Ghirbāl* (1923) or *The Sieve*, a literary critical article, and a collection of poetry entitled *Hams al-Jufūn* (1928) or *Whisper of the Eyelids* (Njeim, 2021). Nu'aymah's writings discuss many topics ranging from war to matters of a metaphysical nature. His work is also heavily influenced by his personal experiences.

In the context of the influence of the *mahjar* group on the development of literature in Egypt, Nu'aymah also had a remarkable role. His work entitled *Al-Ghirbāl* (1923) is an example of the real influence of *mahjar* literary works in Egypt, not only because this collection of essays was published with an introduction from al-'Aqqād, but also because Nu'aymah was directly involved in the founding of Egypt literature with his critics on Syauqi in this book. Besides, his poetry also received appreciation from the Egyptian people even though his poetry anthology *Hams al-Jufūn* which was published very late is perhaps less surprising compared to *mahjar*'s previous publications.

Romanticism in Mīkhāil Nu'aymah 's View

To highlight romanticism in Mīkhāil Nu'aymah's view, this section discusses about the relationship between the concept of romanticism in the West and Nu'aymah's literary attitudes and thoughts. This is necessary because his thoughts in literature are influenced by Western romanticism. Apart from that, Nu'aymah's romanticist attitudes and perspectives are also closely related to the position of the Pen League as a vehicle for channeling his thoughts and literary idealism.

Ar-Rābiṭah al-Qalamiyyah or the Pen League, which was founded by Mīkhāil Nu'aymah together with Khalīl Jibrān and other writers, is one of several literary associations resulting from the influence of Arab writers who migrated to America. The name of this group was based on its members who were migrant poets from Syria and Lebanon who were then referred to as the *Mahjar* Poets (The Emigrant Poets). Beside the Pen League developed in North America, there was another group that emerged in South America in 1932 called al-'Uṣbah al-Andalusiyah or the Andalusian League. In contrast to the more conservative Andalusian League, the Pen League promoted prominent reform ideas. This league was ultimately disbanded after the death of Jibrān in 1931 and Nu'aymah's return to Lebanon in 1932.

The vision and mission of the Arab-American literary community are clearly stated in Nu'aymah's statement, which is to lift Arabic literature from the mire of stagnation and imitation and to instill new life into its veins to make it an active force in the development of the Arab nations and to promote the next generation of Arabian writers (Njeim, 2021). Dardiri (2011), in his research on the development of modern Arabic poetry, underlines that the

emergence of thought renewal movements in the religious and social fields is synergistic with reforms in the fields of literature and culture. Both started from dissatisfaction with infrastructure conditions which resulted in stagnation and even a decline in culture and stagnation of creativity.

At a time of conflicting alliances in the Levantine region, the Pen League's position was to encourage hybrid literature – a constructed literary form that took inspiration from the West – intending to introduce Arab audiences to Western literary styles. The Pen League aimed to rethink the form and essence of Arabic literature, using simple language filled with imagery and symbolism to reflect on the mysteries of existence, the elements of nature, and values such as beauty, justice, love, and truth (Njeim, 2021). This is in line with Shukri's thought, an eminent precursor of romanticism, which says that the value of a single verse is in relationship to its meaning and the subject matter of the poem because it is a supplementary part of the whole poem and should neither be irrelevant to the poem's theme nor misplaced within the poem (Rahman, 2024).

Nu'aymah's views on the literary movement of the Arab-American community are closely related to the vision of the romanticist revolutionary movement in the West which brought literature into a new life. Romanticism writers always pay attention to aspects of beauty and tend to bring about renewal and freedom in thinking and the style of language expressed. They argued that in general literary works are not mimesis of life but of human creativity. Literary works are not created by reason but are the result of the exploration of imagination. They argued as well that a person's imagination can give birth to language and language is a means of conveying literary feelings and thoughts (Muzakki, 2011). In addition to this concept, Rahman stated in his recent findings related to romanticism as an important movement in Arabic literature that imagination, feeling and freedom are the chief points of romanticism as well as subjectivity and stress on individualism as the chief quality of romanticism (Rahman, 2024).

Furthermore, if it was previously explained in the introduction that modern Arabic literature is an implication of the contact between Arabic literary thought and culture and Western literature, then Nu'aymah produced a new perspective. Nu'aymah studied Russian literature as explained in the previous section, and learned about the school of romanticism from European and American

literature. His Russian education exerted a deep influence on him. The more he read the Russian poets such as Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Nikitin, and Nikolai Nekrasov, the more his admiration for Russian literature kept growing. He discovered the inferiority of Arabic literature when compared to Russian literature (Swanson & Gould, 2021). This encouraged him to craft new poetry under the influence of the *nahḍah* in the medium of Arabic with the latest developments in European thought. The *nahḍah* authors sought to develop new philosophical, political, social, and ethical orientations by reviving, criticizing, and transforming classical Arabic. They were constantly searching for new literary forms that would help them develop new aesthetics that responded to contemporary realities (Swanson & Gould, 2021).

He then combined two cultures, West and East. The combination of these two cultures allowed him to form a vision of poetic renewal based on a revolution against the classical school, liberation from old restrictions in the realms of form and content, and making humans and life the center of literature. Nu'aymah explored the relationship between Arabic and European literary influences in Al-Ghribāl: "Today we return to Europe that was our pupil yesterday, discovering in it the examples that we consider to be key to our "literary rebirth" (Nu'aymah, 1932). Nu'aymah's romanticist thoughts combined with Eastern thought later became the basis for thinking in *mahjar* literary criticism.

In one of his writings published in Al-Ghribāl, Nu'aymah wrote his thoughts on the principles of the establishment of the Pen League. He stated that the presence of Pen League for readers of Arabic literature was inspired by an awareness and belief that literature is a messenger or apostle of the souls of writers and the souls of other people. According to him, a writer who can claim to be a writer supplies his soul and thoughts to the envoy. The essence of the value of literature for Nu'aymah is in the messages and treatises conveyed, not its physical appearance in the form of linguistic decorations and the rules of '*arūḍ*' (Nu'aymah, 1932). In any case, the poems of the pre-romanticists seldom accomplished the melodic lavishness of conventional verse. Their significance lies in the impact, they applied on fashion and considering the modern age of writers all over the Arab World (Rahman, 2024).

Furthermore, Nu'aymah emphasized his view that a literary work must touch aspects of emotion and soul

in conveying what he called a *risālah* (vision), not just literal words. This is because basically the Arab nation has been blessed with a language that is beautiful and full of miracles, so what is more important in creating a literary work are touches of emotions and feelings in revealing the secrets that always exist within humans as modern creatures (Nu'aymah, 1932). This is probably the reason for his violent attack on the traditionalist over-reliance only on verbal skill and on the inflexible rules that were held consistently by the neoclassicists of his time.

Opposition to the classical school in terms of form is manifested in the views of Nu'aymah and the *mahjar* writers in general who want a new, free form (*as-Syi'r al-Ḥurr*) but sometimes still use rhyme. This is a criticism of the rules of classical Arabic literature, which does not express itself through emotions and feelings. In general, the works of the *mahjar* group can be characterized as romantic, humanistic, and mystical literature. In its expression, Arabic literature emphasizes the content of the work's message rather than words and does not adhere to existing rules established by philologists, grammarians, lexicographers, and prosodists. More specifically, the characteristics of *mahjar* literature, especially poetry, include a dynamic combination of Eastern spirituality and Western romanticism, full of nostalgia and longing for home. This is specifically reflected in the poetry of ar-Rābiṭah al-Qalamiyyah about humanity, which does not recognize obstacles and differences between creatures, but loves nature because of its simple and straightforward expression (Perdana & Tasnimah, 2022).

Mikhāil Nu'aymah's Romantic *Mahjar* Poems

Mikhāil Nu'aymah has a distinctive literary style under the character of the literary works of poets of the *mahjar* group, both in terms of form and content. Nu'aymah's *mahjar* poems below also represent his conception of romanticism.

أنا السر الذي استترا ** بروحك منذ ما خطرا
 ببال الكائن الأعلى ** خيال العالم الأدنى
 فصزر من ثرى بشرا
 (Nu'aymah, n.d.)

The verse above is a quote from one of Nu'aymah's poems entitled إلى M.D.B. The stanzas of this poem still use a certain rhythm (*wazan*) which aims to act as a frame that depicts a complete meaning. In the three stanzas of the poem, Nu'aymah composed the first two lines with the same length and rhythm.

Meanwhile, the third row only has one section. Furthermore, the rhymes (*qāfiyah*) contained in the pieces of poetry are not the same. In the first stanza, the rhyme is in the form of the letter *ra'*, while in the second stanza, the letter *nūn* is used. In the third stanza, the rhyme again uses the letter *ra'*. This shows that Nu'aymah's poetry is no longer fixated on old-style prosody. Beside the poem above, Nu'aymah expressed his sentimentalism in the following poem.

أشجار الغاب تحيينا
 وطيور الغاب تناجينا
 وزهور الغاب تصافحنا
 ونصافحها وتهنينا
 (Nu'aymah, n.d.)

*The forest trees save us.
 Forest birds whisper to us
 Forest flowers greet us
 We reply and they greet us*

Sentimentalism is one of the romantic characteristics that express emotions excessively in the form of lust, gentleness, and natural things (Febrianisa, 2023). In a quote from his poem entitled *Sadā al-Ajrās* lines 37-40, Nu'aymah clearly describes harmony and gentleness in the relationship between humans and nature. In line 37, he wants to convey that trees function as a savior of human life. For example, this function is manifested in the ability of trees to filter air through their leaves, and store water in their strong roots thereby preventing landslides, floods, and so on. In line 38, Nu'aymah then describes birds whispering to humans. Bird whispering is a form of personification of the sound birds make when singing. This line presents a picture of a healthy and beautiful ecosystem which is characterized by many birds still alive and singing. In line 39, Nu'aymah talks about flowers blooming because of a healthy and maintained ecosystem.

Furthermore, this poetry quote gives a complete picture that when the trees in the forest can live as they should, the natural ecosystem will be maintained. The animals that live in it will continue to live well. Likewise, plants are able to reproduce well. This beautiful phenomenon of course can not be realized without human love and affection for nature by continuing to protect and not damage the environment as expressed by Nu'aymah in line 40. If humans are able to protect and love nature then the functional side of nature will always provide various benefits to all creatures on earth, including humans

themselves. Nu'aymah's *mahjar* poems also often express the feeling of melancholy that frequently found in romantic ones like the following.

والعصفورة المرفوفة فوق وكرها،
 مهما تمادت في الطيران،
 لا تستطيع أن تسبق الفراخ في الوكر
 (Nu'aymah, n.d.)

*Sparrows hover over their nests,
 No matter how far it flies,
 He can't outrun the chicks in the nest*

Generally, the *mahjar* poets feel a sense of longing for their motherland. Living abroad makes him homesick, especially when his life is full of difficulties or when his hopes and dreams do not come true. One example of Nu'aymah's poetry that shows his longing for his homeland is the poem *As-Sibāq* quoted above. In this poem, Nu'aymah wants to explain his longing for his homeland.

The poet uses the term 'bird' to represent himself. The similarity with birds is because this is a similar ability to go from one place to another. When a bird can fly with its wings, it moves from one place to another by plane. In this case, the poet explains that no matter how far people travel from their birthplace, one day they will miss their hometown. Everyone will always miss the place of their birth because it greatly influenced their spiritual formation and is a place that is comfortable and full of memories. Besides, Nu'aymah expressed his criticisms on humanitarian criminal in completely strong feeling.

أخي، إن ضجّ بعد الحرب غربي بأعماله
 وقدس ذك من ماتوا وعظم بطش أبطاله
 فلا تهزج لمن سادوا، ولا تشمت بمن دانا
 بل اركع صامتا مثلي بقلب خاشع دام
 لنبكي حظ موتانا
 أخي، إن عاد يحرث أرضه الفلاح أو يزرع
 ويبنّي بعد طول الهجر كوخا هذه الذلّ مأوانا
 ولم يترك لنا الأعداء غرسا في أراضينا
 سوى أجياف موتانا
 (Nu'aymah, n.d.)

*My Brother, if after the war the Westerner made a fuss
 about his actions
 He sanctified the dead and glorified the strength of his
 heroes*

*Do not mock those who win, and do not laugh at those
 who condemn us
 Instead, kneel quietly, like me, with a heart that is always
 reverent.*

*Crying over our deaths
 Brother, if he goes back to plowing the farmer's land or
 planting it
 After a long desertion, he built a hut, this humiliation is
 our shelter
 The enemy does not let us plant on our land
 Except for our corpses*

Humanism aims to spread noble values based on a sense of love and avoid the desire to do evil (Ad-Dāsūqī, 2016). These poems have themes about social problems, both descriptive and social criticism. The expressions conveyed by the poet in his poetry are personal impressions and the suffering that the poet experienced in his life. Nu'aymah said that "*life and literature are two twins that cannot be separated*" (Nu'aymah, 1932). For Nu'aymah, the movement of language and ideas is reciprocal: life and literature reflect each other (Swanson & Gould, 2021).

Nu'aymah's poem entitled *Akhī* quoted above was inspired by his deployment as an American soldier in World War I on the Normandy front against Germany. During that period, Nu'aymah became aware of the cruelty of war, while far from the famine that hit Mount Lebanon under the despotic rule of the Ottoman Empire (Njeim, 2021). In that particular poem, Nu'aymah speaks to his brothers in a defeated tone, inviting them to bury the living, as war, drought, and famine have left no hope in the land. Swanson and Gould in their research stated that in this poem Nu'aymah achieved the utmost emotional effect while avoiding sentimentality (Swanson & Gould, 2021).

Several of Nu'aymah's *mahjar* poems discussed above reflect the strong characteristics of romanticism mainly in terms of form and message. Finally, some brief implications can be drawn: first, about the importance of the literary endeavors for the Arab romanticism that Nu'aymah helped to form in the West, especially in Russia, and secondly, about what examples of the *Mahjar* poetry he wrote speak of the role of migration in cultural formation. The *Mahjar* poems considered in this article suggest that Nu'aymah has integrated several literary styles, both Western and Eastern, especially Romanticism. This indicates his ability to introduce a romantic aesthetic into Arabic literature, formed by his formative engagement with Russian poets. His development of new forms, rhymes, and themes in Arabic poetry in

imitation of Russian poetry, as well as his Eastern background and migrant status, allowed him to further develop Arabic literature and shape his literary contributions.

CONCLUSION

The school of romanticism in Arabic literature was influenced by the West. This is marked by the existence of relations between modern Europe and the Arab world, one of which is the migration of Syrian-Lebanese people to study in America and the formation of mahjar groups which gave birth to mahjar writers who provided new ideas for the development of the world of Arab literature.

Mikhāil Nu'aymah was one of the central figures in the founding of ar-Rābiṭah al-Qalamiyyah. His perspective regarding the school of romanticism is reflected in his view that the romanticism adopted by the Arab-American literary community is a form of movement for the renewal of Arabic literature. Apart from that, the collaboration between Western romanticism, especially Russian, and Eastern thought that he studied brought a new perspective based on a revolution against the classical school, liberation from old restrictions in the realm of form and content, and making humans and life the center of literature.

Nu'aymah's perspective on romanticism is also manifested in his poetry which represents the romantic characteristics of the mahjar group both in form and content or *risālah*. In form, his poems no longer completely comply with the rules of old poetry. In terms of content, the themes raised include descriptions of nature, humanism, and longing for his homeland, as well as ways to express his sentimentalism, feelings with emotion, prioritizing imagination and freedom of expression, and emphasizing subjectivity.

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