Mīkhāīl 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 Mīkhāīl 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, Mīkhāīl Nu’aymah.

INTRODUCTION

The school of romanticism (al-Madrasah ar-Rūmansiyyah or ar-Rūmantikīyyah) 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 was 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 Diwān 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 Mahmūd Sāmī Al-Bārubī. 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 جر - 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 nahdah 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, Mīkhāīl Nu‘aymah, Amīn Ar-Rihānī, 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 Mīkhāīl 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-Āhā wa al-Banīn, the poetry anthology Hams al-Jufūn and his work containing literary criticism, al-Ghirbāl fī an-Naqīd.

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 Mīkhāīl 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 used 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 Mīkhāīl Nu‘aymah's perspective which is also represented in his works.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Mīkhāīl Nu‘aymah and the Mahjar Group**

Mīkhāīl 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).

Mīkhāīl 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-ʿArqasy (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 Sabʿūn: Ḥikāyat ʿUmūr (1959-1960) or Seventy: Story of a Lifetime, Al-Ghīrībāl (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-Ghīrībāl (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-ʿAqqād, 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 Mīkhāīl Nu‘aymah’s View**

To highlight romanticism in Mīkhāīl 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 Mīkhāīl 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-ʿUṣbah al-Andalusiyyah 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 Nikolita, 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 nahdat in the medium of Arabic with the latest developments in European thought. The nahdat 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-Ghirbāl: “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-Ghirbāl, 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 ‘arūd (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
Mīkhāīl Nu’aymah’s Romantic Mahjar Poems

Mīkhāīl 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.

اذا السر الذي استترا ** بروحك منذ ما خطرنا بالعالم الأدنى ** بالعالم الأعلى *** 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 (qāfiyyah) 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
وتصافحها 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 Sādā 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.

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.

Mikhā’il 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 poetry. In terms of content, the themes raised include descriptions of nature, humanism, and longing for poetry.

**REFERENCE**


