



# Iliya Abû Mâdî: Visionary Insights of His Poetic Journey

Dr. Noor Uddin Ahmed\*

\*Associate Professor in Arabic, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India, nooruddin.ahmed@cottonuniversity.ac.in

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the life and poetic evolution of Iliya Abû Mâdî, a renowned poet of the Mahjar (diaspora) literature, celebrated for his deep appreciation of nature, romanticism, and nostalgia for his homeland. Born in 1889 in the village of Al-Muhayditha, Lebanon, Abû Mâdî's early affinity with the natural world significantly shaped his poetic expression. His literary journey commenced in Egypt with the publication of *Tadhkâr al-Mâdî*, before expanding further in New York, where he became involved in journalism and joined the "Pen Association" (Râbiṭa al-Qalamiyya)—a literary group of Syrian and Lebanese writers in exile. Abû Mâdî's poetry is marked by its themes of optimism, humanistic ideals, and a profound admiration for nature, as demonstrated in his collections *Al-Jadâwil* and *Al-Khamâ'il*. This study examines the major influences that shaped his work, including his romantic ideals and his dedication to social and national issues. Furthermore, it underscores his contribution to Arabic literature and his role as a unifying figure within the diaspora, making his voice a significant presence in both cultural and literary landscapes.

**Keywords:** Mahjar literature, Romanticism, Nature, Pen League, and Nostalgia.

## Introduction:

Iliya Abû Mâdî, a notable figure in Mahjar literature, is renowned for his visionary poetic journey that captures the essence of nature, romanticism, and a deep nostalgia for his homeland. Born in 1889 in the scenic village of Al-Muhayditha, Lebanon, Abû Mâdî's early life was steeped in the natural beauty that surrounded him, significantly influencing his poetic voice. His journey as a poet began in Egypt with the publication of his first collection, *Tadhkâr al-Mâdî*, which marked the onset of a career that would later flourish in New York. There, Abû Mâdî immersed himself in journalism and became an active member of the Pen League, an influential literary group formed by prominent Syrian and Lebanese writers, including Gibran Khalil Gibran.

Abû Mâdî's poetry is distinguished by its themes of optimism, humanistic values, and an enduring love for nature. His works, such as *Al-Jadâwil* and *Al-Khamâ'il*, are celebrated for their accessible and emotionally resonant verses that reflect his personal reflections and universal themes. Through his poetry, Abû Mâdî not only expressed his romantic and nationalistic sentiments but also addressed societal issues, bridging cultural and geographic divides. This paper aims to explore the key influences on Abû Mâdî's work, examining how his experiences and worldview shaped his legacy as a poet who left an indelible mark on Arabic literature and resonated with readers across the diaspora.

## Description:

### Biography of Iliya Abû Mâdî:

Iliya Abû Mâdî was a prominent Lebanese poet and a key figure in the Mahjar (diaspora) literary movement in the United States. Known as the Poet of Love, Hope, and Optimism, he was one of the most influential Mahjar poets of the early 20th century, recognized for his philosophical reflections and nationalistic themes. Born in 1891 in the village of Al-Muhayditha, Lebanon, Abû Mâdî received his early education locally before moving to Alexandria, Egypt, at the age of eleven, and later to the United States. In Alexandria, he worked in trade while composing poetry in his spare time, eventually publishing his first collection, *Tadhkâr al-Mâdî*. In the year of 1911, he emigrated to the United States, initially settling in Cincinnati before relocating to New York in 1916. There, he engaged in journalism and established *Al-Samîr* magazine in 1929, which later

became a daily newspaper. His poetry is celebrated for its tenderness, lyrical quality, depictions of nature, and nostalgia for his homeland.

Abû Mâdî connected with leading literary figures in the diaspora, including Mikhâ'il Nu'ayma, and was a founding member of the Pen Association, which played a crucial role in the development of modern Arabic literature. The Pen Association helped to spread their literary ideals and significantly influenced Abû Mâdî's ability to share his poetic philosophy. On April 15, 1919, Abû Mâdî launched *As-Samîr*,<sup>1</sup> a significant Arabic magazine in the diaspora that showcased modern poetry and featured contributions from other Mahjar poets, particularly those from North American Arab communities. The magazine became a daily newspaper in 1936 and maintained a strong pan-Arab ethos. It continued publishing until Abû Mâdî's death from a heart attack on November 13, 1957.<sup>1</sup>

Abû Mâdî left behind a significant body of work that began with his publications in Egyptian newspapers and continued in the United States. Here an attempt has been made to shed light on major collections of Iliya Abû Mâdî as follows:

1. *Tadhkâr al-Mâdî* (Alexandria, 1911)
2. *Iliya Abû Mâdî* (New York, 1918)
3. *Al-Jadâwil* (New York, 1927)
4. *Al-Khamâ'il* (New York, 1940; reprinted in the Arab world)
5. Numerous poems published in various newspapers, especially "Al-'Usba"

Abû Mâdî's poetry is known for its lyrical beauty, emotional depth, and evocative descriptions of nature.

Fadwa Tuqan praised him: "I elevate Abû Mâdî to the highest ranks, preferring him over any other Arab poet, ancient or modern. Arabic poetry has known no equal."

### Major Works:

Abû Mâdî dedicated his life to literature and journalism, publishing several collections that reflected his philosophical and intellectual outlook:

*Tadhkâr al-Mâdî* (Alexandria, 1911): This collection addresses themes such as oppression, criticizing the injustices of rulers, and the Ottoman tyranny of his homeland.<sup>2</sup>

"*Iliya Abû Mâdî*" (New York, 1918): With a foreword by Gibran Khalil Gibran, this collection explores themes of love, reflection, philosophy, social issues, and national concerns, blending romanticism with moments of intense critique and praise for the beauty of nature.

*Al-Jadâwil* (New York, 1927): Introduced by Mikhâ'il Nu'ayma.

"*Al-Khamâ'il*" (New York, 1940): One of Abû Mâdî's most renowned and successful collections, showcasing his literary maturity. It reflects the complexity of his thought, including the dualities of body and spirit, revolution and peace, reality and imagination.

### Key Influences on Abû Mâdî's Poetry:

**Nature:** Growing up in Al-Muhayditha, surrounded by lush landscapes and flowing streams, deeply influenced Abû Mâdî's love for nature, which became a prominent theme in his poetry.

**Poverty:** Experiencing poverty firsthand made him an advocate for social equality, often emphasizing that all humans, rich or poor, are fundamentally equal.

**Migration and Exile:** His experiences of migration and exile fostered a deep loyalty to his homeland, which permeated his work with a sense of longing and a commitment to his native country.

**Influence of Literary Circles:** In the diaspora, Abû Mâdî engaged with leaders of the Arab Renaissance and other literary pioneers, shaping his poetic style and approach.

**Legacy:** Critics have dubbed Abû Mâdî "The Poet of Hope and Optimism" for his uplifting verses, such as: "The sky is gloomy and frowning," I said, "Smile, it suffices for the sky to frown." He said, "Youth has gone," I said, "Smile, regret won't bring youth back."

He was also known as a nature enthusiast, frequently celebrating the beauty of the natural world in his poetry: "Oh, if only I were a thief to steal at dawn, the secret of gentleness in the flowing breeze, and touch the brilliance of beauty with my fingers, in the beautiful, clear sky."

Abû Mâdî often carried the spirit of the East in his diaspora writings, expressing his devotion to his homeland: "Let me cry out to the sleeping people, I do not except for Egypt to be oppressed. Do not blame a youth in defense of the truth, disturbed by the one who trifles with truth."

He was a staunch advocate for the poor, often writing about their struggles and advocating for social justice: "If they do not kill the wretched, then who, I wonder, will they kill? Do not be saddened by their death, for they are born to die, and say, 'This is what God has ordained, and whatever God wills shall be.'"

Abû Mâdî's love for his homeland, particularly Lebanon, was a constant theme in his poetry: "Two things defy time: Lebanon and the hope of its people." He poignantly expressed his longing for family and homeland during World War I: "My neighbour, I once had family and brothers, but war divided us as a knife cut strings. Now everything that fills my heart is pain, and all around them is misery and sorrow. I once had hope when I had a homeland."

In love, Abû Mâdî's experiences were marked by hardship, yet he maintained an enduring sense of hope, which pervaded his writings. He portrayed love as a resilient force, distinguishing sorrow from despair: "Though sadness fills my heart, it is not despair; rather, a steadfast belief in the enduring power of love."

### **Philosophy of Iliya Abû Mâdî:**

Abû Mâdî was also known as a philosophical poet, offering insights on life, death, the universe, politics, society, and love. He believed in the eternal nature of the human spirit and viewed death not as an end, but as a continuation of the journey.<sup>3</sup>

### **Insights of Iliya Abû Mâdî:**

The Pen Association's key feature is its focus on deep contemplation, allowing poets to transcend earthly concerns and explore the human soul through profound and abstract imagery. Iliya Abû Mâdî, a member of this group, exemplifies this approach in his poetry. In his work "Ṭalâsim," he reflects on existential uncertainty and the quest for clarity, as illustrated by his verses translated into English as follows:

"I do not know where I came from

I saw a road ahead of me

I will keep going whether you like it or not

How did you come? How did you see my way?"

Abû Mâdî's expression of uncertainty "I do not know" (Lastu Adri) is characteristic of Mahjar poets, who often sought to strip away illusions and uncover fundamental truths beneath myths and confusion.<sup>4</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî's poetry often intertwines themes of doubt and introspection with justice, compassion, and love, aiming to offer solace and present life in a deeply appealing way. This human sensitivity is evident in his poem 'Smile' (Ibtisam), where he expresses as follows:

"He said: The nights are bitter, I replied: 'Smile', even if you are bitter.

Perhaps others would abandon their sorrows if they saw the pomegranate garden,

They would cast aside their troubles and sing.

Even if you feel weary, smile and sing, for joy can still be found."

In this poem, Abû Mâdî encourages embracing positivity and finding beauty amidst adversity.<sup>5</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî has a great ability in creation and creativity, and he is the creator of his singing sport and charming, to rise in its coffers and through its charms, which measured life and dark reality and miss hope. We find optimism in the poetry of Iliya Abû Mâdî in the second part of his office "Dîwân Iliya Abû Mâdî".

It is clear to us that optimism is a deep-rooted humanitarian tendency of the poet of Iliya Abû Mâdî, although it is overflowing with dust and time.

And the most authentic example of the optimistic tendency that tends to highlight what is in the life of beauty and splendour, is his perpetuated poem "Philosophy of Life". In this connection, the poet Iliya Abû Mâdî's verses translated into English have been cited as follows:

"This is the complainant, and what is your sickness? How do you come early in the morning, if you become a patient?

The evil of life in the earth is a soul that relaxes before emigration as a departure.

And which soul is without beauty; he does not see any beauty in existence.

It is a heavy burden on the life; he thinks life as a heavy burden."<sup>6</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî stands out among émigré poets for his profound expression and clear, deep insights. His poetry, despite criticism from figures like Taha Hussein, remains distinguished for its exploration of life, existence, and human society. Abû Mâdî's work reflects a broad, empathetic view of humanity, emphasizing justice, compassion, and love.

Mahjar writers, including Abû Mâdî, drew inspiration from nature, using it to express nostalgia and evoke emotional depth. They found beauty and meaning in their surroundings, which enriched their poetic imagination. Nature's influence led them to explore themes of hope, pain, and human experience, contributing to their distinctive, vibrant literary style.

Abû Mâdî's poetry is marked by its vivid imagery and emotional resonance, reflecting a deep connection with nature and a commitment to portraying life's complexities and human values.<sup>7</sup>

At a time when the creative poets in the East could not win with the satisfaction of the Oriental reader their admiration was recognized only through the verbal castles and Abbasid poetic patterns and their poems demonstrate the ability to show the language and expression. The great adults of the émigré poets sang from a distance with poetry of minute words. There were no bells or drums in it, and it was like the subjects of song, either emotional or social or contemplative or any other topics. Here we find such kind of trends in the words of Iliya Abû Mâdî, especially in a poem entitled "Famous Poet" (*Al-Nabî al-Shahîr*) as follows the translation of Arabic poetry:

(The month) May, oh the poet of feelings and the smile of love in the ages,

And the creator of the flower in the hills and the creator of perfume in perfumes

And he is a washer of the horizon and the spindles, and the earth is with light and aromas.

I came because there is an anniversary of the world out of pleasure and joy.

*I awakened in my soul aspirations and smiled in the gaps.*

*Wherever I shall be delighted with the human voice and however I shall fulfill the phantom of light.* <sup>8</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî's poetry is notable for maintaining traditional measures and rhymes, enriching his work with a beautiful imagination and simple yet elegant expression. His verses are characterized by eloquence and a natural flow, making his poetry rich and captivating. Abû Mâdî skilfully combines poetic form with vivid imagery, creating a seamless blend of structure and lyrical beauty.

### **Themes in the Poetry of Abû Mâdî:**

It has been observed that the Mahjar poets devised many themes in their compositions, but the credit of Iliya Abû Mâdî is singled out. In this context, the poet has delved into the twin branches of Arabic Literature: poetry and prose, but his greater credit goes to the line of poetry. A good number of poetical themes are endowed with Abû Mâdî's poetry like Eulogy, Elegy, love poem (ghazal), Congratulatory Messages, and Ode.

**Descriptive poetry:** The descriptive poetry works of the Mahjar poets have scored higher and their work better than others of their contemporaries of the modern Arabic literary Era. Our man on his path attained excellence in his power and ability of descriptive poetic writing. He described animate and inanimate, living, and nonliving objects. Romantic descriptions are frequently employed in his description of objects and scenes.

*"Is that a swell or a mustache?*

*And a spit (of saliva) or Drumbeat?*

*And that a face or moonlight?*

*And that a cheek or Gold?*

*Staggering when it is dangerous*

*I saw the branch of a tree in disorderliness."* <sup>9</sup>

### **His Nationalistic Poem:**

We found two major types of nationalistic poetry of Mahjar School. One of them centered mainly on Syria, the home of the majority of the Mahjar poets in which there is homesickness and nostalgia for Syria, their place of birth characterized by their nationalistic poetry through which they were forced out of it by the imposed socio-political and economic hardship of Ottoman's regime of Sultan Abdul-Hamid. In this context, Iliya Abû Mâdî's verses translated into English can be had as follows:

*"(It is) the cradle of inspiration, the starting point of prophets*

*How have you passed in the evening, the cradle of the cedars?*

*In the eyes of those people who are far from you*

*In the eyes, he was not, if he did not harm me."* <sup>10</sup>

### **Emotional contemplations:**

It appears from the contents of Iliya Abû Mâdî's compositions that as an emotional poet, he peeps into the depth of many things. He was prevented by the realities from further inquiries, while imagination attracts him sometimes and his vision is noticed to overwhelm him by various temptations. From the Mahjar School of poets, Iliya Abû Mâdî is the most celebrated poet in the respect of emotional contemplation. However, he eventually went into excess and doubted everything until he considered the equity and justice of Allah, of which example may be given as follows:

*"I came, I know not, yet came this way:*

*I saw a path-along it made my way,*

*I must go on- or say I yea or nay!*

*How have I come? How did I find the way?*

*I do not know!*

*Am I known here, or have I been before?*

*Completely free, or inferior?*

*O' I would that I was blessed with knowledge, for....*

*I do not know!"* <sup>11</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî demonstrated a strong command of the Arabic language and its literary conventions. Initially, he adhered to the traditional *qaṣīda* form but later transitioned to using shorter, mono-rhymed verses and stanzas. Unlike some of his contemporaries like Gibran Khalil Gibran, Abû Mâdî did not fully abandon traditional themes and styles. His romantic poetry tends to focus more on the imaginative aspects of objects rather than purely intellectual interpretations. His vision often centers on human experience, reflecting his feelings of discontent and indecision as a poet.

### **Critical Perspectives on Iliya Abû Mâdî's Poetry:**

Iliya Abû Mâdî's poetry has attracted considerable scholarly interest, with critics examining various aspects of his work. His verses often draw from personal experience while addressing universal themes, such as humanism, nature, and philosophical reflection.

A major point of critical attention is Abû Mâdî's prevailing sense of optimism. Many of his poems emphasize hope, resilience, and a deep appreciation for life, urging readers to meet life's challenges with positivity. One of his most famous poems, "The Journey", serves as a clear example of this theme, where he encourages people to find joy in life's path, despite any obstacles.

Yet, this optimism is not without layers of complexity. Some critics observe that beneath his hopeful exterior, there exists a subtle tension between idealism and the difficult realities of life. This contract is seen as an expression of both his struggles and the broader socio-political issues of his time, particularly the struggles faced by Arab intellectuals in exile.

Abû Mâdî's evocative use of imagery and his lyrical style are also points of praise. He has a remarkable ability to paint vivid pictures of the natural world while weaving in existential reflections, making his work resonate with a broad audience. His use of simple, accessible language combined with deeper philosophical themes has earned him widespread admiration, both from casual readers and literary scholars alike.

However, some critics argue that his persistent optimism may sometimes overshadow the more complex existential elements in his work. This has led to comparisons with other contemporary Arab poets who more directly engaged with themes of alienation and despair.

While Ilya Abû Mâdî is celebrated for his uplifting and humanistic vision, his poetry also offers space for varied interpretations. For some, it is a testament to the beauty of life; for others, it presents a more nuanced conversation between hope and the realities of human existence.<sup>12</sup>

Iliya Abû Mâdî initially followed the poetic style of his predecessors, beginning his literary journey with the traditional *qaṣīda* (ode) format, characterized by distinct couplets and classical themes. His poetic style evolved significantly after emigrating and joining the Pen Association where he embraced a new, pure style that aligned with the romantic spirit, focusing on human emotions and spiritual dimensions. Abû Mâdî maintained an optimistic yet realistic philosophy, often reflecting ideas like those of Gibran Khalil Gibran, who also explored beautiful, idealistic worlds. His poetry is marked by romantic imagination, through which he seeks to depict a socially realistic life, blending calls for joy and reflection.

The poet Ilya Abû Mâdî composed poems exploiting the issues of pure social reality. He dealt with the hearts and emotions of people and could successfully infiltrate his message into the core of people's hearts; so, the hearts of people were naturally touched by his versification, and people's hopes were raised to the level mark as if people were given to sip thorny emotion by his flowery hope and optimism. Here we find the testimony thereof in the verses like the poem entitled *Ibtasim* means "Smile" and it truly expresses the philosophy of the poet's life and his insight regarding existence as follows:

*(Your feeling of love is awakening in slumber if the feeling of people were not like puppets.*

*Your life is not going on other than you are making the picture of it, you are a life, and an eyelid as regards its character.*

*No blind person who remains without eyes, but I see those blind eyes.)*<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Taha Husayn, a prominent literary critic, offered significant critique toward a group of poets, including Iliya Abû Mâdî, particularly concerning their approach to the form and language of Arabic poetry. Husayn mistakenly grouped Abû Mâdî among poets whom he believed, despite their evident poetic talent, vivid imagination, and creative abilities, lacked full mastery of the essential tools of poetry, notably language. He further accused Abû Mâdî of neglecting the musicality traditionally associated with poetry, labeling him as a pessimist. However, this view does not entirely hold up, as Abû Mâdî's work contains considerable musicality and rhythmic variation, contradicting the claim. Though Abû Mâdî did make occasional linguistic errors, his overall command of the language was quite strong, challenging Husayn's assertions.

The critique of Mahjar poetry, which includes Abû Mâdî's contributions, was not limited to Husayn. 'Azîz Abâza condemned Mahjar poetry on structural and linguistic grounds, while Luwîs 'Awad, following in Husayn's footsteps, criticized Abû Mâdî for being overly romantic. These critics viewed Mahjar poets as neglectful of traditional Arabic language and metre, which they considered a significant flaw. However, despite such criticisms, Mahjar poets like Gibran and Abû Mâdî played a pivotal role in the modernization and revitalization of the Arabic poetic language. Their innovative approaches challenged traditional norms and enriched contemporary poetry, leaving a lasting influence on its evolution.<sup>14</sup>

In his article, "Arab American Poets: The Politics of Exclusion and Assimilation," Nabil Alawi from An-Najah University notes that Iliya Abû Mâdî achieved greater recognition in the Arab world than in America, where his poetry remains a staple in school curricula across Arab nations. After being exiled by the Ottoman authorities in 1912, Abû Mâdî sought refuge in the United States, where he even composed poems honoring the American flag and expressing his sense of patriotism.

Abû Mâdî's existential pessimism, shaped by the American experience, was deeply influenced by major historical moments like the Great Depression, the two World Wars, and the Cold War. In his poem, "The Bomb of Annihilation", he captures the widespread anxiety that permeated American society during the post-war era, particularly around the fear of nuclear warfare that became a defining concern of the time.<sup>15</sup>



### Conclusion:

Iliya Abû Mâdî's poetic journey is a remarkable exploration of the human condition, delving into themes of life, nature, and the intricacies of the soul. His work transcends the boundaries of time and culture, weaving together existential musings, freedom, and a search for spiritual growth. Abû Mâdî's poetic vision is deeply rooted in his unique ability to merge personal introspection with universal themes, creating a resonance that speaks to readers across various walks of life. His poetry frequently underscores an optimistic, philosophical perspective on existence, focusing on the significance of hope, love, and the liberation of the mind, all central to his most memorable lines.

Abû Mâdî's poetry not only captures the social and political turbulence of his era but also offers profound reflections on human resilience, inner strength, and the enduring quest for happiness. His verses encourage readers to navigate life's uncertainties with an open heart and to discover beauty and purpose in every moment. As a visionary poet, his work continues to inspire individuals who are seeking a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them, offering timeless insights that guide and enlighten future generations.

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