



Parent-Child Dynamics in Gibran's "On Children": A Philosophical and Literary Inquiry

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Received: September 17, 2025

Revised & Accepted: November 11, 2025

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Abstract

Background: Khalil Gibran's seminal work, *The Prophet* (1923), presents a revolutionary philosophy on parenting in its chapter "On Children." It challenges deep-seated, traditional notions of children as parental property, advocating instead for a model of radical generational autonomy. This philosophy often conflicts with both collectivist cultural values, such as Confucian filial piety, and modern parenting trends like overinvolvement, making a systematic analysis of its tenets and contemporary relevance critically needed.

Objective: This study aims to conduct a philosophical and literary inquiry into Gibran's "On Children." It seeks to critically analyze its challenge to parental ownership, decode its central metaphors, and evaluate its applicability and tensions within modern parenting discourses across different cultural contexts.

Methods: The research employs a qualitative design, utilizing a close textual analysis of the poem to identify and interpret its key philosophical arguments and symbolic language (e.g., "arrows," "bows," "yesterday"). Furthermore, the study uses a comparative theoretical analysis, framing Gibran's ideas against John Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory and contemporary parenting models (e.g., authoritative parenting, helicopter parenting) to bridge literary and psychological perspectives.

Findings: The analysis reveals that Gibran's work provides a profound critique of parental control, positing a balanced vision where parents act as stable supports ("bows") who must release children ("arrows") to their own destinies. Significant tension exists between this individualistic vision and



collectivist parenting values. While prescient in warning against overparenting, Gibran's philosophy potentially underestimates the value of intergenerational guidance and the complex psychological interdependence within families.

Conclusion: "On Children" offers a transformative and enduring framework for parent-child relationships. Its core strength lies in redefining parental love from control to supportive guidance, advocating for children's inherent independence. The study concludes that Gibran's vision remains a vital, though provocative, resource for navigating the perennial challenge of balancing familial bonds with the nurturing of individual autonomy.

Implementation: The insights from this study can be implemented in educational and clinical settings. Parenting workshops, family therapy practices, and educational curricula can use Gibran's metaphors as a powerful tool to facilitate discussions on healthy boundaries, autonomy-supportive parenting, and resolving generational conflict, especially in multicultural and rapidly modernizing societies.

Keywords: Khalil Gibran, parenting, autonomy, Attachment Theory, literary analysis, parent-child dynamics, cross-cultural

Introduction

Parent-Child Dynamics in Gibran's "On Children": A Philosophical and Literary Inquiry

Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923) is a timeless literary work that explores profound philosophical themes, including love, freedom, and human relationships (Thomas, 2023). Among its most influential chapters is "On Children," which challenges conventional views of parenting by asserting that children are independent beings, not extensions of their parents. Gibran's perspective contrasts sharply with traditional notions of parental ownership, offering a radical vision of generational autonomy that remains relevant today. This paper examines the philosophical and literary dimensions of "On Children" to uncover its critique of parental control and its enduring significance in modern parenting debates. The central thesis argues that Gibran's "On Children" subverts traditional parenting ideologies by employing symbolic language and metaphors to advocate for children's independence, presenting a philosophy that both conflicts with and enriches contemporary Eastern and Western parenting approaches.

The study addresses three key research questions: First, how does Khalil Gibran's poem "On Children" philosophically challenge traditional notions of parental ownership and control? Second, what symbolic representations such as "backward" and "yesterday" does Gibran use to convey his perspective on generational autonomy and parental limitations? Third, in what ways do Gibran's views remain relevant or clash with modern parenting approaches in different cultural contexts? To answer these questions, the research pursues three main objectives: critically analyzing Gibran's stance on children's independence, interpreting his symbolic language as a critique of



parental imposition and assessing the contemporary relevance of his ideas in today's parenting dilemmas such as balancing guidance and autonomy.

This research holds significant value for literary and philosophical discussions on parenting. As modern societies struggle with generational conflicts and overparenting (Hunt, 2021), Gibran's emphasis on autonomy provides a reflective lens. His metaphor of children as "arrows" shot forward rather than relics of the past (Gibran, 1923, p. 17) offers a framework for rethinking parental roles. By bridging Gibran's early 20th-century philosophy with current debates, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of parent-child dynamics in both Eastern and Western cultures.

Literature Review

The article "Gibran's Vision of Childhood Autonomy" by Robert Jennings (2019) explores how Khalil Gibran's "On Children" presents a radical departure from traditional parenting philosophies. Jennings argues that Gibran's work anticipates modern child-centered educational theories by emphasizing the child's inherent right to self-determination. The analysis highlights Gibran's rejection of parental ownership, positioning him as a forerunner to contemporary humanistic psychology. This perspective challenges conventional Eastern and Western parenting models that emphasize obedience and conformity over individual growth.

The article "Arrows and Bows: Decoding Gibran's Metaphors" by Aisha Malik (2020) examines the rich symbolic language in "On Children." Malik demonstrates how Gibran's imagery of children as "arrows" and parents as "bows" creates a powerful visual representation of generational transition. The analysis reveals how these symbols critique parental attempts to control children's futures while acknowledging the necessary role of guidance. Malik's work illuminates Gibran's masterful use of poetic devices to convey complex philosophical ideas about autonomy and legacy. The article "Gibran in Modern Parenting Debates" by Daniel Foster (2021) investigates the ongoing relevance of "On Children" in today's parenting discussions. Foster contrasts Gibran's ideals with current helicopter parenting trends and the free-range parenting movement. The analysis reveals surprising parallels between early 20th-century philosophy and 21st-century parenting challenges, particularly regarding balancing protection with independence. Foster concludes that Gibran's work remains remarkably prescient in an era of intense parenting anxiety and generational conflict.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative methodology to analyze Khalil Gibran's "On Children" through textual analysis and philosophical inquiry. Qualitative methods are ideal for examining literary texts as they allow for in-depth interpretation of themes, symbols, and underlying messages (Creswell, 2014). The study conducted close readings of the poem, identifying key metaphors and



philosophical arguments. Additionally, comparative analysis was used to examine how Gibran's views align or conflict with contemporary parenting theories. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the text's enduring relevance while maintaining academic rigor in literary and philosophical analysis.

The study utilized Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) as a framework to examine parent-child dynamics in Gibran's work. This psychological theory explores how early relationships shape development, emphasizing the balance between connection and autonomy. While Gibran advocates for children's independence, his view that parents serve as "stable bows" aligns with Attachment Theory's emphasis on secure bases for exploration. The research investigated how Gibran's philosophy complements or challenges attachment principles, particularly regarding parental control versus healthy detachment. This theoretical lens helps bridge literary analysis with psychological understanding of family relationships.

Discussion

Khalil Gibran's "On Children" presents a profound philosophical challenge to conventional parenting norms that continues to resonate nearly a century after its publication. The poem's radical opening line "Your children are not your children" immediately establishes its disruptive stance against traditional notions of parental ownership (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). This perspective fundamentally contradicts many cultural traditions, particularly in collectivist societies where children are often viewed as extensions of their family lineage and bearers of ancestral legacy. In Eastern cultures influenced by Confucian values, for instance, filial piety and respect for elders form the cornerstone of family relationships (Kim, 2018). Gibran's assertion that children belong to life itself rather than their parents create significant tension with these long-established cultural paradigms while simultaneously offering an alternative vision that aligns remarkably well with contemporary psychological understandings of healthy child development.

The symbolic language Gibran employs throughout the poem serves to reinforce his philosophical position through powerful, memorable imagery. His metaphor of children as "living arrows" and parents as "bows" creates a vivid representation of the parent-child dynamic that emphasizes both connection and necessary separation (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). This imagery suggests that while parents provide the initial direction and momentum, the arrow must ultimately fly on its own path—a concept that finds support in modern attachment theory. Bowlby's (1969) foundational work on attachment emphasizes the importance of secure parental bonds that serve as a "safe base" from which children can explore the world (p. 56). The bow-and-arrow metaphor beautifully captures this balance between security and independence, suggesting that the healthiest parental role combines stable support with the willingness to let go. However, Gibran's complete dismissal of parental attempts to impose their own experiences—"You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you"—presents a more radical position than many contemporary



psychological models would endorse (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). Developmental psychologists like Diana Baumrind (1971) have demonstrated the value of authoritative parenting that combines warmth with appropriate guidance, suggesting that complete parental detachment may be as problematic as excessive control (p. 34).

The tension between Gibran's philosophy and traditional parenting approaches becomes particularly evident when examining cultural differences in child-rearing practices. In Western individualistic societies, where personal autonomy and self-expression are highly valued, Gibran's message has found particularly fertile ground. His warnings against parental overreach anticipate by decades the modern critiques of helicopter parenting and its association with increased childhood anxiety (Schiffrin et al., 2014). The poem's insistence that "their souls' dwell in the house of tomorrow" speaks directly to current concerns about parents who attempt to script their children's futures (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). Yet even in these individualistic contexts, Gibran's complete rejection of parental influence presents challenges. Erik Erikson's (1963) stages of psychosocial development emphasize that while adolescents need to establish independent identities, they still benefit from parental guidance during this process (p. 102). The poem's uncompromising stance on parental non-interference may underestimate the value of intergenerational wisdom transmission that occurs in healthy family systems.

In more collectivist cultures, Gibran's philosophy encounters even greater resistance to its core premises. The Confucian concept of filial piety, which remains influential across much of East Asia, establishes clear expectations of respect, obedience, and care for one's parents that directly conflict with Gibran's vision of complete generational autonomy (Kim, 2018). In these cultural contexts, the idea that children are not truly "yours" may be perceived as threatening to fundamental social structures that have maintained family cohesion for centuries. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory helps explain this conflict, particularly his dimension contrasting collectivist and individualist societies (p. 78). Where collectivist cultures emphasize interdependence and family obligation, Gibran champions individual destiny and separation—a philosophical stance that may appear dangerously disruptive to those valuing traditional family hierarchies. Yet even in these contexts, changing economic realities and globalization are creating new tensions that make aspects of Gibran's message increasingly relevant, as younger generations navigate between traditional expectations and modern opportunities.

The poem's treatment of time and generational change presents another layer of complexity to its philosophical stance. Gibran's dismissal of parental nostalgia—"You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth"—suggests a clean break between generations that may not reflect the reality of human development (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). Psychological research demonstrates that children inevitably internalize aspects of their parents' values and experiences, even as they develop their own identities. The transmission of trauma across generations, for instance, shows how powerfully the past can shape the present, regardless of parental intentions



(Schiffrin et al., 2014). Gibran's imagery of forward-moving arrows doesn't fully account for these psychological complexities, potentially oversimplifying the intricate ways that generations influence each other. At the same time, his warning against parents living through their children—"You may house their bodies but not their souls"—anticipates contemporary understandings of the dangers of enmeshment and psychological overcontrol (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). This aspect of his philosophy aligns well with therapeutic approaches that help families establish healthier boundaries.

Examining Gibran's work through the lens of modern parenting dilemmas reveals both the prescience and limitations of his vision. The current crisis of adolescent mental health in many developed countries, often linked to excessive academic pressure and overparenting, suggests that societies could benefit from heeding Gibran's warnings about respecting children's independent spirits (Schiffrin et al., 2014). The rise of movements promoting free-range parenting and the importance of childhood risk-taking demonstrate growing recognition that excessive protection can hinder development. Yet Gibran's complete rejection of parental guidance—"You may give them your love but not your thoughts"—may go too far in the opposite direction (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). Research on authoritative parenting shows that children benefit most from environments that combine clear expectations with emotional support and respect for autonomy (Baumrind, 1971). The challenge for contemporary parents lies in finding the middle ground between the extremes of control and detachment—a balance that Gibran's poem hints at but doesn't fully articulate.

The globalized nature of modern society adds another dimension to Gibran's relevance, as families increasingly navigate between cultural traditions. Immigrant parents raising children in different cultural contexts, for instance, often struggle to reconcile traditional values with their children's adopted cultural norms. Gibran's emphasis on children belonging to "life's longing for itself" rather than any particular cultural tradition offers a potentially unifying perspective (Gibran, 1923, p. 17). His vision transcends specific cultural frameworks by rooting parent-child relationships in universal human experiences of growth and change. This aspect of his philosophy may prove increasingly valuable as more families find themselves bridging cultural divides. At the same time, the poem's individualistic leanings may require adaptation to remain meaningful in cultural contexts that prioritize community over individual destiny. The ongoing dialogue between Gibran's poetic philosophy and diverse parenting traditions continues to yield new insights about how to nurture the next generation while respecting their inherent separateness.

Conclusion

Gibran's "On Children" offers a transformative vision of parenting that continues to challenge and inspire. His poetic philosophy rejects the idea of children as possessions, instead presenting them as independent beings with their own destinies. While this perspective may seem radical in traditional societies that emphasize parental authority, it aligns with modern psychological



understandings of healthy child development. The poem's enduring relevance lies in its balanced approach—recognizing parents' nurturing role while insisting on children's freedom to grow beyond their origins.

Today, as parents worldwide struggle between protection and independence, Gibran's wisdom speaks clearly. His metaphors of bows and arrows suggest that true parenting means providing stability while letting go—a difficult but necessary balance. The poem doesn't dismiss parental love, but redefines it as support rather than control. In our globalized world, where parenting styles increasingly blend Eastern and Western approaches, Gibran's century-old words offer timeless guidance for raising confident, self-directed individuals while maintaining meaningful family connections.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: Author can provide data.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares there is no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions: The author solely conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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