

HIS STORY RECONSIDERED

On reading Rachid El-Daif's semi-autobiographical novel *'Azizi al-Sayyid Kawabata (Dear Mr. Kawabata, 1995)*, I was struck by an unusual reference to the narrator's grandmother who, owing to extreme poverty, had to leave her husband and children in order to earn a living in America. She spent ten years there before finally returning to Lebanon with enough money that would allow her daughter to have a decent marriage.¹ Initially, I thought the incident was a mere fragment of the author's imagination; however, when I learned that it was based on historical fact, I decided to inquire about this phenomenon. If the majority of the people I consulted with were, like myself, unaware of the existence of such women, a few had heard of this occurrence though they seemed to know very little about it.

This reference in El-Daif's novel set me thinking of these nameless women who had the courage and daring to part with their families and make it all on their own. Feeling ashamed of my ignorance, I began to look for sources that would enlighten me on the topic and provide me with information. It was a very difficult and frustrating task, to say the least. The history books I consulted were full of information on immigration, but there was hardly anything on women immigrants. In my search for sources, I managed, through my friend Nazek Yared, to get hold of Evelyn Shakir's recently published book ***Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*** (1997)², a work that should be treasured by every Lebanese and Arab woman.

According to Shakir, around the 1870's a number of Lebanese women both single, and married began to travel "westward" all by themselves. Many of them were spurred by "husband or father" though others "seem to have been acting at their own initiative and for the same reason as men. Above all the siren call for riches." A few others travelled hoping for a good marriage or, as was the case with Gibran Khalil Gibran's mother, "to escape a bad one." What is extraordinary about those women is their ability to endure not only the heavy responsibility they were saddled with, and their longing for the children and family they had left

behind, but also "the compromising moral position [they] occupied, the sexual temptations they could be subjected to and the gossip at home" about women who were scot-free and no longer protected by husband, father or brother.

In America, the jobs open to immigrants included work in textile mills, garment making, shopkeeping, cotton mills and peddling. The latter, according to Shakir, was very attractive because it did not require any "special training... no capital (they took merchandise on consignment), and little English (their wares spoke for themselves). It was also a business easy to liquidate whenever they decided to return home."³ Among the items they sold were beads, cheap necklaces, toilet water, vials of holy water supposed to have come from the holy land, thread, combs, shoelaces, aprons, fabrics, needlework, linen, silk lingerie and eventually dresses to wealthy women. Women pedlers did a better job than men because it was much easier and more proper for a woman to deal with housewives and enter the privacy of their homes in order to sell their goods than it was for men. Within the span of a few years, and after accumulating enough money, many of these women returned home with the sufficient means to help their families in a number of ways including buying a house or land or providing their children with the required schooling or university education.

Bint Arab is a unique book that traces the history of Lebanese migration and immigration to America with special emphasis on women. Shakir is one woman who has attempted to read past events outside of a patriarchal paradigm, and her book will open new horizons particularly that history books scarcely deal with women at all, and when they do, it is done in a casual manner and in passing. The contribution of women seems to have been generally overlooked by many historians who present a history monopolized by men where woman plays a marginal and insignificant role. In other words, one could say that history is read and interpreted by men through a manipulative selection of details, where only a handful of privileged women are presented. These are women who made it because they had the social and economic prestige.

My interest in women and in working women, in particular, induced me to pursue the subject and look for more sources that deal with working women not only at the turn of the century, but also over the past 50 years. Father Boutros Daw's book entitled *Tarikh Al-Mawārina al-Dini wa al-Siyassi wa al-Ḥadari* (**The Religious, Political, and Cultural History of the Maronites**, 1978), deals with the role played by Maronite women in history. He sees the Maronite woman in the context of war and the

Christian religious experience. For Daw, the ideal Maronite woman is the one who combines valour, courage, skilful use of weaponry as well as the purity and chastity of the Virgin Mary. In short, the perfect maronite woman is the one who

combines the qualities of the Amazonian as well as the Virgin and the nurse. One prominent woman he refers to is Alya Francis (1842-1924) who learned medicine from her father and practised it throughout her life. She also learnt fencing and the use of weapons and fought bravely in the various attacks on her family. As a result, and owing to her courage and daring, she was nicknamed the "heroine of Lebanon." Her Amazonian qualities made her a force to be reckoned with _ her voice was enough to scare many a brave warrior.⁵

Apart from aristocratic women, the work generally assigned to women at the turn of the century was restricted to housework, agriculture, weaving, lacework, embroidery, knitting, needlework as well as midwifery. One very important industry before 1914, was the silk industry in which women were directly involved. A number of silk factories were established and, initially, the workers were exclusively male; however, with the success of this industry over the years, there was urgent need for more labourers, and, therefore, girls

were hired though at lower wages than men.⁶ Fawwaz Traboulsi's illuminating article in the newspaper *Al-Hayat* gives an account of the work undertaken by women in the manufacturing of silk. Traboulsi describes the condition of women who worked for thirteen hours a day in the summer and ten in the winter and who were paid one piaster and up to five if they were skilled laborers. Many women would raise silk worm at home, and since silkworm eggs were very expensive, they could only afford a

few grams that they hung in small gauze bags around their necks. It did not take long for the eggs to hatch in the warmth of the women's bosoms though the ideal temperature was supposed to be 25 rather than 35 or 37, but how could they, poor as they were, possibly afford sending the eggs to the proper kilns? This thriving business was soon



"La Cueillette des olives" Oil on canvas Omar Onsi, 1957

discontinued when with the opening of new trade routes to the Far East, Europeans had gained access to processed silk that was cheaper and finer than the silk produced in Lebanon's factories. Accordingly, the silk factories were closed down, and some of them were turned into brothels, the only refuge left for redundant and needy women.⁷ Other factories were turned into more constructive venues. Emily Trad (1870-1950), for instance, converted her father's silk factory into a school for orphans.⁸

The establishment of the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) in 1866 and the American Junior College (now the Lebanese American University) in 1924 assisted in the spread of education among men as well as women and the eventual opening of many schools and the establishment of many journals and magazines in Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq where women constituted a pivotal force. Among the pioneers are women journalists whose contributions between 1858 and 1929 cannot be underestimated. According to Shirine Khairallah, there were 179

newspapers in Lebanon during this period.⁹ Before 1945, most women's journals dealt with western women, but after Lebanon won its independence, the journals began to shift emphasis and deal with the problems of Lebanese and Arab women. A few talented women established organizations and women's journals that demanded education for girls, the amendment of personal laws, the removal of the veil, the eradication of illiteracy, poverty, and prostitution, and the improvement of prisons.¹⁰

During the Ottoman period, the jobs open to women were restricted to nursing and midwifery, and women who had degrees were only allowed to practice midwifery and eye treatment which "did not involve a woman treating a man's body." However, towards the end of the Ottoman period, some women began to practice medicine such as the gynecologist-obstetrician Hallum Sabra whose "name appeared in the medical section of the Beirut register for 1889" and who practised medicine with two male doctors in downtown Beirut.¹¹ Gradually, the contribution of women began to gain force. According to the magazine *Ṣawt al-Mar'a* for December 1948, nine women doctors, two dentists and one pharmacist graduated from the American University between 1931 and 1944. Others obtained their degrees from abroad notably the Physicist Salwa Nassar who received a Ph.D in Physics from Berkley, Najlaa Izzeddine who was the first Lebanese woman to receive a Ph.D. in "Historical Research" from Chicago University, and Jamal Harfoush who received her Ph.D. in General Medicine from Harvard University.

In 1923, the Working Woman Association was established by Nazek Al-Abed to deal with problems related to working women. Many projects were envisaged to boost the national industry including the establishment of the Center for handicrafts in 1937 and the starting of the Baalbeck Festival in 1955 to encourage folkloric arts such as dancing, singing, acting and music. As a result of the establishment of the Center for Handicrafts, upper and lower class women were brought together in their joint efforts on projects that would boost the national industry, which necessitated the setting up of centres for needle work, embroidery and other crafts.¹²

The sixties and seventies witnessed more interest by women in Medicine, Engineering, Law, Pharmacy, Business and Business Management. Gilberte Abu Jaudeh, for instance, founded the first Government School of Nursing in 1971-1972 and served as director of the same school, while Eugenie Saed and Labiba Sadaqa were founding members of the YWCA. In fact, the performance of women as directors of schools, hospitals, research institutes and other organizations reveals skill and strong

capability.

If women have been active in the labour force, the majority have not been able to reach top positions in their respective fields. For instance, women journalists have continued to flourish in Lebanon though the vast majority continue to occupy such positions as reporters, art critics, reviewers, correspondents, and fashion critics, but rarely do they make it as editors or columnists, especially in the political field. One reason is that men "still stubbornly believe that women should keep away from politics."¹³ A study made for the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World on the image of women in the Lebanese Press (1935-1975) reveals that weekly newspapers have given more attention to women than daily newspapers though the woman is presented exclusively within social and strictly "feminine" spheres.¹⁴

The sixties witnessed a boom in painting and sculpture as well as the writing of poetry and fiction by women. Women fiction writers dominated the scene during this period and overshadowed the works of men. Among the women writers of novels and short stories are Layla Baalbaki, Emily Nasrallah, Hanan al-Sheikh, Balqis al-Humani, Salwa Safi, Etel Adnan, Rafif Fattuh and many others.

Women are gradually gaining access to jobs previously monopolized by men in the scientific, managerial, and business sectors as well as in other vocations, yet this progress would not and could not have been possible without those other women who over a hundred years ago, had the courage to break the chains and push their way into the male arena. Since history has assigned them a marginal role, it is our duty to interrogate this history, to question his story and retell it from another perspective than the purely male point of view.

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ENDNOTES

1 (Beirut: Mukhtarar, 1995), pp. 28-29.

2 (Connecticut, London: Praeger, 1997).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 24-31.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

5 pp. 297, 302.

6 Shakir, p. 49.

7 *Al-Hayat*, Dec. 21, 1997.

8 Shirine Khairallah, *The Sisters of Men* (Beirut: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1996), p. 235.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 203-205.

10 Quoted in Rose Ghurayyib, ed., *Aḍwā' 'ala al-Haraka al-Nisā'iyya al-Mu'aṣira* (Beirut: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1988), pp. 219-224.

11 See Khairallah, p. 250.

12 Ghurayyib, pp. 347-348.

13 *Al-Raida*, II (August, 1979), 8.

14 Quoted in Ghurayyib, pp. 223, 229.