

From the Holy Land to the New World (and Back): Transnational Arab Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century

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In his most famous work, *The Syrians in America* (1924), historian Philip Khuri Hitti, expert in Islamic Studies, and pioneer of the academic study of Semitic languages and Arab culture in the United States, wrote: “Syria has always been an inhospitable place to live in and a splendid place to leave” (49). Through this humorous note, he expressed the dilemma faced by many his fellow citizens, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, reluctantly made the decision to flee their homeland. A Maronite Syrian Christian, Hitti was in fact recounting the story of the Christian communities who lived under the yoke of Ottoman imperialism. Inhospitability, at the time, resulted partly from the inferior status that such Christians had been forced to endure by the Ottoman governors since the sixteenth century. However, in the first decades of the twentieth century, geopolitical frictions were also compelling many people in the Near East to venture abroad. The Syrian provinces of the empire were indeed chronically beleaguered by religious strife, much of which European nations instigated. Whereas the French vied for control of the Catholic congregations and the Maronites in particular, the British supported the Druze community.

Would-be immigrants were therefore initially torn by conflicting feelings: should they remain in the Holy Land, the cradle of their heritage but also the theater of their misfortune; or, should they travel westward across oceans and hope to find a better fate? This choice was even more complicated for women. Because they came into contact with American Protestant missionaries, Syrian women were exposed to new patterns of behavior and observed, with interest, the dynamics of gender relations in missionary organizations. More precisely, the promotion of the American middle-class ideology of domesticity alongside the paradoxical yet inevitable transgression of traditional boundaries by female missionaries

encouraged, among indigenous women, emancipation and a willingness to embark on a project of outmigration.

Once they made the voyage, like all immigrants before them, Syrian newcomers were confronted with the challenge of adapting to a different cultural environment. This process of integration often entailed the definition of a new collective identity which would eventually ease the community's incorporation into the American racial, ethnic, cultural and religious spectrum. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, as notions of gender and national identity were being articulated in Syria, Syrian American women also questioned traditional gender roles within the diaspora, thus becoming active agents in the formation of an early transnational feminist network between the United States and the Arab world.

Although the definition of a diasporic identity by the Arab American community has been treated by some scholars, the historiography has generally focused on politics and in particular on the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Mc Irvin Abu-Laban; Shain). The incorporation of a feminist agenda into Arab American identity has also been the object of some academic attention (Shakir; Hijab). Yet, the elaboration of a common Arab feminist discourse via different cultural and geographic sites — a phenomenon which occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — has remained largely unexplored. Drawing on the seminal studies of Evelyn Shakir and Akram Khater, this article seeks to describe and analyze the emergence of an Arab American feminist movement in the early twentieth century. It also attempts to answer fundamental questions such as: how did Syrian feminists adapt their heritage to the challenging conditions of the New World? How did they face the dual tasks of constructing both their feminism and their Syrian American identity? I will examine the political and cultural context within which connections between the Old and New Worlds were made and review some of the factors that prompted Syrian women to settle in the New World (the United States). I will also focus on the process of economic and social integration of lower-class immigrant women into the host society and discuss the emergence of a feminist consciousness among Syrian American middle-class women and social reformers. Finally, I will analyze how Syrian American feminism reflected the feminist movement in the Middle East at the time of the Arab Renaissance.

The Emigration of Syrian Women: Features and Factors

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Arab migratory flows came mainly from the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, it should be noted that the term “Syrian,” as used in this article, does not refer only to present-day Syria, but also to the part of the Arab world that included, at the time, the current territories of Lebanon, Israel and Palestine. One of the most notable features of this immigration is that women were a significant portion of the total number of arrivals from Syria. Evelyn Shakir’s research has shown, for example, that between 1901 and 1910, women accounted for more than 32% of all registered Syrian immigrants to the United States while at the same time, Italian women only comprised 22% of all Italian immigrants and Greek women hardly 5% of their immigrant group (202). Although legends of cities with “streets paved with gold” circulated widely in the Near East, triggering what some scholars call “the Arabian Gold Rush” (Hanania 9), historians have also argued that economic improvement was not the only incentive. Indeed, the chronic eruption of religious conflict in Ottoman Syria is often cited as a major cause of this migration. In particular, the brutal and deadly civil war of 1860 in Mount Lebanon between the Maronites and the Druze caused thousands of deaths on both sides and led to several population movements. Adele Younis has estimated that nearly three thousand people left the area every year between 1860 and 1899 (133). Entire families — wives, mothers and sisters included — sought to escape this religious turmoil.

Some scholars have revealed that contrary to the usual image of the meek and suppressed Arab woman, there were many instances where Syrian women were actually autonomous participants in the migration process, thus challenging the classic assumption that immigrants were typically young trailblazing bachelors. Afif Tannous’s study published in 1942 conveys, for instance, that half the women who left Bechmezzin, his home village, were either single or widows (30). Camilla Gibran, mother of the Syrian American writer Khalil Gibran, who left her debt-ridden husband and immigrated with her two children to America, is a well-known example of these “unaccompanied women” who traveled without male guardians. Sarah Gualtieri provides further evidence and mentions a study conducted by journalist Louise Houghton who, in 1901, observed: “It is not infrequently the case that the eldest daughter will precede her

parents or a sister her brother to this country, and earn the money needed to bring over the father or the brother” (69). Similarly, Arab American writer Vance Bourjaily in his autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960) relates how his grandmother left her husband and headed to Beirut where she worked to earn passage money to North America.

Immigration was sometimes undertaken in self-conscious opposition to rigid marriage laws or in order to escape domestic constraints. A majority of experts, however, agree that the most influential pull factor was the promotion, by American missionaries, of women’s education (Younis; Shakir; Khater). Through their philanthropic and educational work, the wives of missionaries publicized enhanced opportunities for social mobility in the United States and presented new role models for Arab women. Initially, when the American Congregationalist missionaries landed in Beirut in 1820, their objective was to convert the Muslim, Jewish and Catholic communities of the Holy Land to Protestant Christianity. Because they were very much inspired by the millenarian tradition, the missionaries considered the conversion of heretics and infidels as a prerequisite to the future reign of Christ on earth.¹

However, as time went by, it became obvious that the great majority of Syrian women were more interested in American secular values, education and professional training, than in the Protestant faith, especially since in Ottoman Syria, female education was virtually non-existent. A minority of Syrian girls received instruction in their homes with a private tutor, which meant that only the wealthiest families could educate their daughters. While French Jesuit missionaries had already established an extensive network of schools, education was primarily conducted in the French language. By contrast, American schools served students of every religion and provided instruction in the vernacular. Above all, for the Protestant missionaries, education was not only geared towards religious indoctrination, but it was also, as noted by Michael B. Oren, the best way to “instill secular notions of patriotism and republicanism” (217). Because they had failed to realize their initial goal, the Americans resolved to become “modern missionaries”² and promote American civil religion through republican principles and individual liberties. Increasing women’s

1 For a discussion of the impact of millenarism on the mission impulse, see Stookey.

2 Expression used by Oren 287.

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access to education was deemed, as announced by the Reverend Henry Jessup, the most effective way to teach these values: “The mothers of Syria will exert our influence in the homes of the backward nations” (qtd. in Younis 64). Such an announcement made it clear that the Americans’ primary intention was to exploit the traditional role of women as “cultural carriers” whereby, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis have observed, mothers transmit ideology and cultural capital to future generations (315).

Consequently, the missionaries arranged and financed the building of free public schools, first in Beirut, then in the surrounding villages. In 1835, Sarah Smith, the wife of Reverend Smith, founded the American School for Girls in Beirut, which was the first school for girls in the Ottoman Empire. In subsequent years, more than thirty schools (for girls and coeducational) opened their doors. By 1900, over eight hundred academic institutions had been founded in the Levant (Jacobs 14). One of the main features of the missionary schools for girls was that, besides home economics, the curriculum also included academic courses and vocational training. Another milestone was reached in 1886 with the founding of the first institution of higher education, the Syrian Protestant College, now known as the American University in Beirut (AUB). Because Americans sought to train the future élite of the Levant, the college provided a liberal arts curriculum that incorporated courses in diverse fields of study such as Arabic literature and Syrian history. At this institution, female students were trained for careers as teachers, engineers and nurses.

Initially, the students were predominantly Christian. However, the reputation of the American college soon encouraged the Druze community to send its own contingent of female students. Moreover, as American women became more involved in their missionary and philanthropic activities, the line between the traditional male/female gender spheres became increasingly blurred. In a sense, these women became active agents in the propagation of what Elizabeth E. Prevost has called “missionary feminism” (1). In a study devoted to the Anglican evangelistic practice in Africa, Prevost describes the unforeseen consequences of female involvement and explains that missionary endeavor not only transplanted bourgeois norms of gender and authority, but also challenged and transgressed them. In this case, single and independent Protestant women were sometimes in charge of mission stations and schools in the most remote areas of the Levant. These women became role models for their students, not only because

they had the courage to venture abroad but also because they subverted traditional gender roles.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the fact that American missionary zeal stimulated a passion for the New World. As Evelyn Shakir explains: “With their textbooks and curriculum, American missionaries helped plant the US in the imagination of thousands of people throughout Syria” (23). It appears that American missions not only promoted a new model of society, but also a reconfiguration of gender roles; this promotion of a more egalitarian society catalyzed immigration by independent women acting on their own initiative. “The Promised Land is not now east and west of the Jordan, but east and west of the Mississippi,” commented Henry Jessup as he regretfully observed the departure of his former students (qtd. in Younis 125).

From Economic Independence to Political Participation

The largest contingents of Syrian women who immigrated to the US were composed of women from rural areas or under-privileged social classes; educated middle-class females represented a distinct minority of immigrants. Therefore, it is fair to assume that for the majority of female newcomers, adapting to a new economic and socio-cultural environment presented a great challenge. Although at the end of the nineteenth century many immigrants tended to locate in ethnic enclaves within metropolitan areas, the greatest number of Syrians could be found on country roads or hauling their carts on city streets. Pack-peddling was the trade which an overwhelming number of Syrians practiced once they set foot on American soil. For immigrants who did not speak English and could not rely on assistance from a pre-existing economic network, street vending seemed the easiest way to make a living. Despite the patriarchal structure of Near Eastern society, in the United States, Syrian women were heavily involved in this activity, with almost 80% of them employed as rural or urban peddlers (Naff “Arabs,” 56).

One explanation for this is that American customers were more willingly to open the doors of their homes to women (Nasr 2). The nature of the goods — clothes, jewelry, hardware — could be another explanation. However, one must also bear in mind that the pioneers of Arab immigration lacked the financial means to start their own business and that the peddling

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trade was a very lucrative activity. Alixa Naff estimates that at the turn of the century, peddling could generate an annual income of \$1,000 while the manufacturing sector only produced, on average, \$600 a year (“New York,” 7). Women’s labor was essential to the economic adaptation of most immigrant families, a factor which eventually persuaded the men of the community to allow their wives and daughters to leave the domestic sphere.

Nevertheless, the participation of women in this business and the resulting degree of freedom they obtained gave rise to complaints from both compatriots and native-born Americans. For Syrian middle-class women who had embraced the cult of domesticity as publicized by American missionaries, the itinerant sellers exceeded their “natural” functions and gender roles. In 1899, one could read in the pages of New York Arabic daily *Al-Huda (The Guidance)* articles by Syrian journalists, such as Layyat Barakat, who while encouraging her peers to pursue an occupation, warned against the dangers and unworthy character of pack-peddling: “It is often dangerous for good, simple-hearted girls who [can become] [...] exposed to evil and whoredom” (qtd. in Shakir 11). Instead, Barakat encourages young Syrian women to take jobs as housemaids because in doing so they can perfect the tasks traditionally assigned to their sex: “She will learn virtue and housekeeping, becoming fit to manage her own home and children in the right manner” (qtd. in Shakir 41). Similarly, Eastern Catholic authorities in the United States sometimes condemned the behavior of female immigrants, as illustrated by this remark made by the priest of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Brooklyn: “It is disgraceful the way Syrian women overstep their boundaries on the pretext that they are living under free skies” (qtd. in Gualtieri 7).

In addition to their peers’ disdain, female peddlers were exposed to the racist prejudice of native-born Americans who interpreted women’s peddling as a sign of cultural inferiority and dangerous gender transgression that threatened the “natural” order. Louise Houghton, for example, in her article entitled “Syrians in the United States,” denounced the immorality of itinerant vendors: “They sometimes take their babies with them, but more often leave them behind, to be looked after by their idle husbands. It is not the custom in this country to let the women work and have the men remain idle at home” (qtd. in Shakir 40). While condemning the immigrant women’s “immoral” behavior, the author implicitly impugns the

masculinity of their husbands by describing them as “idle” and therefore effeminate, a discourse which besides asserting western superiority also upholds the traditional role of men as primary economic providers for their families.

Whether formulated by fellow countrymen or native-born Americans, criticism of female peddling suggests that despite the distance from their homeland, for immigrant Syrian women, sexism continued to be coupled with class and race prejudice. Although they were “living under free skies,” Syrian women from modest origins were expected to adopt and perpetuate the middle-class norm of female dependency. However, if during the early period of Syrian immigration, and despite the controversy, peddling enabled many women to transcend the gender divide, the growth of factory work at the beginning of the twentieth century helped stimulate further changes. As industrialization gained momentum, factory owners often turned to women because they were a cheaper source of labor and supposedly more easily disciplined. The demand for female laborers was such that in 1910, in Fall River, Massachusetts, almost all single women were employed in the cotton mills (Younis 65).

An unexpected outcome was that as Syrian women became wage-earners, they found new motivations for further involvement in the public sphere. Under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the most influential and radical union in the country, labor militancy changed its approach to unionism and encouraged immigrant employees to become involved in the confrontation between employers and the industrial working class. In 1912, during the famous strike at the American Woolen Company textile mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Arab women joined their fellow workers to demand wage increases and the abolition of discrimination between native-born Americans and immigrants. For over ten weeks, hundreds of Arab women organized picket lines, raised funds for solidarity and confronted police forces with banners that bore the slogan “We want bread and roses too” – a request for both livable wages and dignity. Considered one of the most important events in the history of industrial unionism, the strike is also known as the first example of successful mobilization by immigrants and women. The efforts in defense of the interests of the laboring classes granted additional legitimacy to the political commitment of Arab women.

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While carrying out evangelistic and educational work, American female missionaries implicitly addressed conventional notions of gender by stepping out of the “woman’s proper sphere.” As a consequence, their female students, Catholic or Muslim, were simultaneously expected to conform to the ideology of domesticity, and encouraged to enter the public and male-dominated sphere. When they immigrated to the United States, many of these former students were rapidly included in the middle-class. Some of them entered the professions or became journalists, like Layyat Barakat. Others, as homemakers, joined the social reform movement that American women had initiated in the wake of the Second Grand Awakening, which eventually grew into Progressivism.³ Inspired by American women involved in the temperance, social purity, and settlement movements, some middle-class Arab women even created their own private charitable organizations. For instance, the *Syrian Women’s Union*, founded in 1896 in Boston, organized events whose profits were donated to the poorest Arab families. In 1917, the *Syrian Ladies’ Aid Society of New York* was also founded to “financially, medically and morally” assist those who arrived in the port city. In the same manner, many Anglo American associations, like the famous Denison House in Boston, provided assistance to newly arrived immigrants. Besides providing relief, the managers of these associations also believed that Americanization could alleviate the hardships experienced by immigrants. For that reason, language and job training were offered, and national holidays like Halloween or Thanksgiving were celebrated in order to teach newcomers American customs. Within these associations, new bonds were built and strengthened between Anglo Americans, Syrian Americans, and other immigrants.

Syrian American women were also politically active in the suffrage movement, suggesting that the reformers’ ambitions went well beyond the public’s immediate needs. The evil effects of industrialization on the lives of the working class and newly arrived immigrants captured the attention of activist women, with female suffrage becoming the most controversial area of reform. Ever since the famous Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, American feminists, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, organized an annual conference to demand the right to vote. In order to maintain the

3 The Second Great Awakening was a religious revival movement which began around 1790 and reached its peak in the 1840s. The revivalists became leaders of many social concerns such as education, prison reform, temperance and women’s rights.

momentum of their movement, suffragist activists also launched grassroots campaigns targeting immigrant communities. Between 1909 and 1913, the founders of Denison House, Emily Greene Balch and Helena Dudley, both of whom were ardent supporters of female enfranchisement, gave their Arabic protégées the opportunity to join the movement. In demonstrations that were often severely repressed, the militant “Syrian ladies,” as reported in the archives of Denison House, marched alongside their Anglo American counterparts in the streets of Boston: “Today, activists from Lebanon, Tripoli, Damascus and Albania marched proudly through the city” (qtd. in Shakir 60). By the early twentieth century, the wives and daughters of the new Arab bourgeois classes were involved in most sectors of public life; assistance to the poor, education and culture were areas in which they assumed new roles and became models of autonomy. As Evelyn Shakir elucidates: “Women were offered opportunities for leading instead of following” (64). On the surface, at least, it appears that Americanization as promoted by American reformers both enhanced the socialization process and promoted emancipation.

Feminist Voices from the *Mahjar*

As previously explained, American missionaries had a significant influence on their students, many of whom subsequently immigrated to the United States in order to pursue an education. The crystallization of feminist aspirations and the definition of a paradigm associating gender and ethnicity was the work of these intellectuals, particularly through the ethnic press and *Mahjar* literature — the literature of the diaspora.

Between 1901 and 1910, the United States accepted a record number of nearly nine million new immigrants. As more people flocked to the cities, the ethnic composition of urban areas became more diverse. Experiencing a sense of dislocation, many immigrants established their own institutions, one of the most customary being the ethnic press. The Syrian American, although comparatively less numerous than the Italians or Irish, were particularly productive in this field. In 1892, the Maronites of New York City founded the first Syrian newspaper, *Kawkab America* (“The Star of America”). Seven years later, it was the Greek Orthodox community’s turn to create their own daily newspaper. By 1907, there were a total of twenty-one Arabic dailies, weeklies and monthlies in the

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United States (Khater 88). The main function of the ethnic press was to keep readers informed of events back home. However, papers also assisted newcomers in the process of adjustment. The spirit of the Syrian press was rather conservative and the tone largely sectarian, yet Syrian Americans were more interested in embracing their new lives than in preserving their cultural heritage. As Arab American novelist Vance Bourjaily explains, first generation immigrants were “busy being Americans” (238).

Xenophobic and nativist agitation was gaining ground in public opinion in the 1920s following the massive influx of new immigrants. Although few in number, Syrians were nonetheless subject to racist attacks and sometimes referred to as “Mediterranean trash” (Younis 78). In the mind of some employers, Syrians were radical agitators, or so reported historian Herman Feldman: “Employers regard Syrians unfavorably because they’re a lot of trouble makers, much too fond of radical labor movements” (qtd. in Younis 89). Hence the time was not right for any exhibition of ethnic pride. This is the conclusion Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban also makes: “In the community, there was an emphasis on low-profile acculturation and adaptation to the dominant patterns” (51). Obviously, the American social situation was not conducive for Syrian American feminism, so inspiration had to be found elsewhere.

The development that triggered the emergence of Syrian American feminism arose in the ancestral homeland. During the first decade of the twentieth century, partly as a result of the secular nationalist culture that came out of missionary encounters, the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire were in the grip of a nationalist upsurge.⁴ Related to the Arab Renaissance (*Nahda*) that had developed in Egypt a few years earlier, the movement advocated the unity of all Arabs, Christians and Muslims, thus articulating and defending an ecumenical and secular conception of group identity. A level of consciousness was reached in 1905 after the publication of *The Awakening of the Arab Nation* in which the author, Nagib Azoury, a Syrian-Lebanese Maronite, denounced the mechanisms of oppression exploited by the Ottoman Empire to weaken Arabic-speaking people. For Near Eastern feminists, it seemed the time was ripe for the reevaluation of gender roles. Accordingly, they seized the opportunity to highlight the

4 The role played by American missionary institutions in triggering the Arab Renaissance has been the subject of ongoing debate. See Oren and Ziadat.

multiplicity of oppressions and claimed that their cause had to be heard. In their view, the status of women and the nationalist platform were intimately connected.

Although feminist issues were, in fact, not a matter of priority for most *Nahda* leaders, many Arab women realized that they could play a momentous role in the revolt against Ottoman rule. In 1910, a young graduate student from the American University in Beirut, Mary Ajami, founded *al-Arus (The Bride)*, the first journal in the Arab East calling for the emancipation of women. Ajami was editor-in-chief and employed a group of female reporters on the journal's editorial board, but, for fear of reprisals, most of them wrote under pseudonyms. The magazine was dedicated "To those who believe that in the spirit of women is the strength to kill the germs of corruption, and that in her hand is the weapon to rend the gloom of oppression and in her mouth the solace to lighten human misery" (qtd. in Khater). The magazine introduced Ajami to the literary circles of Syria, and she began to attend intellectual salons to discuss philosophy and poetry with male authors at a time when most Arab women were confined to their homes.

Throughout the Middle East, other publications for women also appeared such as *al-Kitade* in Beirut in 1912 and *Fatat al-Niyl* in Cairo in 1913. However, as expected, most of these magazines concentrated on literary discussions and on the promotion of education among women. In fact, these periodicals followed an earlier trend that had started in Egypt with the publishing of Qasim Amin's books. In 1899, in *Tahrir al-mar'a (The Liberation of Women)*, Qasim not only pleaded for the education of women, but also for the reform of divorce laws and for the banning of the Islamic veil. More importantly, Qasim developed the idea that the subjection of the Arab people and the cultural paralysis that resulted from it could not be fought without a new definition of gender relations: "When the status of a nation is low, reflecting an uncivilized condition for that nation, the status of women is also low, and when the status of the nation is elevated, reflecting on the progress and civilization of that nation, the status of the women in that country is also elevated" (6). Although Qasim is sometimes referred to as "the original theorist of women's emancipation in the Muslim world" (Zeidan 15), he maintained his belief in patriarchal domination over women and limited women's roles to "the educated mother" and "the ideal housewife." In other words, his conception of female emancipation

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was a reflection of the western cult of true womanhood and the notion of republican motherhood.

Inspired and encouraged by the Middle Eastern elite, Syrian American intellectuals, many of whom sought to prevent the complete assimilation of their diasporic, transnational community, began to define a distinct Syrian secular identity in the US. Bringing together the various religious groups and common cultural heritage of the broader community, the Syrian American élite established the first “Syrian Society” in 1892 to promote unity and the preservation of their heritage (Naff “New York”, 10). As the movement became more popular, the ethnic press opened its columns to nationalists as well as feminist intellectuals. Faced with the seemingly unavoidable assimilation of Syrians in response to nativist pressure, these intellectuals struggled for the emancipation of women as much as they sought to elaborate a new collective identity.

An outstanding figure in the *Mahjar* press was the novelist and journalist Afifa Karam. After marrying at the age of fourteen, she settled with her husband in the United States in 1897 and was offered a position as “Director of Women’s Issues” at New York’s leading Syrian daily, *Al-Huda*, which gave her the opportunity to write, under her real name, a regular column for Syrian American women. Once she had gained some editorial experience, Karam established a magazine of her own, *The Syrian Woman* (renamed *The New World for Women* in 1913) whose ambition was to offer a critical perspective on the status of Arab women in general: “My main intention here is to show the status of most Oriental women and the way they are treated. Oriental women are the most unfortunate creatures. They are the least knowledgeable and the last to be informed of their God-given rights which men have wrongfully usurped” (qtd. in Khater). Besides portraits of famous women, there were also articles on the need to educate girls. As Karam questioned: “Is education vile or virtuous? The answer, no doubt, is virtuous. So what sin have women committed to be deprived of it? And for what reason? And according to what law?” (qtd. in Shakir 56). Similarly, Karam rebelled against the tradition of arranged marriage which she considered not a family affair, but an infringement on women’s freedom.

Eventually, Karam’s reputation reached the Middle East where her views were met with an immediate echo from Arab women readers. In

the Egyptian newspaper for women *al-Mara al Jadida*, in a section called “*Hadith al-Mahjar*” (“Words from the Diaspora”), Karam regularly described the achievements and challenges of Syrian American women. In doing so, Karam’s objective was clearly to establish a transnational feminist dialogue between those who had made the passage to America and those who remained in their ancestral homeland. Taking advantage of the freedom offered by immigration, Karam encouraged her female compatriots in the East to build on the progress made by Syrian American women. Afifa Karam formulated a vigorous transnational feminist critique of Old World practices that catered to both the exiled community and activists in Syria and Egypt.

However, not all Arab female intellectuals were willing to relinquish the domestic ideology with which they had been inculcated. In 1893, the journalist and former teacher at the American School for Girls in Tripoli, Hanna Kasbani Kourani, for example, gave a rather conservative speech while participating in the International Women’s Meeting in Boston, which illustrated some middle-class Arab women’s desire to maintain traditional gender roles: “The domestic plan is natural for women and they must not overstep it” (qtd. in Khater). Nationalist male thinkers in the Arab world had set for women “neat” and “comfortable” boundaries that sheltered women and were not easily transgressed. However, after several years of lecturing and participating in conventions throughout the US, Hanna Kourani eventually cast away the traditional restraints she had internalized and adopted a more radical position. On a trip to Lebanon in 1901, she developed a new discourse which reflected the influence of Syrian American feminists: “Our knowledge of the greatness that women in the West have accomplished and are accomplishing should exhort us to follow suit here in the East” (qtd. in Khater).

The struggle for the liberation of Syrian women in the United States was also shaped by men who deployed the diasporic condition to engage in a more comprehensive critique of Middle Eastern society. In 1908, the Syrian American writer and poet Khalil Gibran published a book entitled *al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida* (*Spirits Rebellious*) in which he addressed some of the injustices suffered by women. Composed of four tragic love stories, the book critiques the status of the Arab woman and her position in Syrian society. In the first story (“Madame Rose Hanie”), Gibran portrays a young girl who, having been married against her will, fled the family home to live

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with the man she loves. Through this portrait, Gibran conveys the voice of Arab women under the yoke of tradition: “Now I am pure and clean because the law of Love has freed me and made me honorable and faithful. I ceased selling my body for shelter and my days for clothes” (16). Gibran’s criticism also targets the patriarchal interpretation of sacred texts, and he even argues that the subordination of women is contrary to God’s will: “I have obeyed the will of God in everything I have done and followed the call of my heart while listening to the angelic voice of heaven” (22). The penalty for such audacity came quickly: in Syria, the book was severely criticized by the Maronite Church which claimed it was an unacceptable attack on the clergy and an incitement to the moral degradation of women. Eventually, the book was considered heretical, and Gibran was excommunicated *in absentia* by the Maronite Patriarch — an event that illustrated the price that some diasporic Syrian American paid for their feminist activism.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Arab feminists in the Levant and the United States joined with nationalists to forge a distinctive Syrian identity. However, the confrontation with different socio-cultural patterns in the United States inevitably caused a questioning of the traditions observed in the homeland. Syrian women, whether street peddlers or industrial workers, gained economic independence from their husbands and became more active in the political realm. By participating in the reform movements of their host society, middle-class Syrian women were able to redefine their place and responsibilities within their community. As they joined the Progressive movement, many committed themselves to feminism and became vocal advocates of women’s suffrage.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, nationalist struggle in Syria offered local women a platform from which to challenge patriarchal gender roles. Supported and inspired by their counterparts in Egypt and Syria, Syrian American activists fed their nationalist aspirations with new ideas concerning the status of women in their host society. As illustrated in this article, the feminist solidarity that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century was clearly enriched by the contributions of Syrian activists who were already working in a transnational space. Far from the clichés that render Arab women either belly dancers or silent statues, the women of this Arab community were, in the period before the First World War, at the forefront of social and community development. Even though their positions were varied and changing, they still exemplify the idea that

diaspora can inspire both a new definition of collective identity and a reconfiguration of gender relations.

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