

A Bridge Too Soon
The Life and Works of 'Afifa Karam:
The First Arab American Woman Novelist

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Near Eastern Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

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Summer 2015

Abstract

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This dissertation provides the first in-depth study of the Lebanese-American immigrant writer, journalist, and translator ‘Afifa Karam (1883-1924), an important contributor to the *nahḍa*, the Arabic cultural renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Karam published three Arabic novels in New York City between 1906 and 1910, predating the publication of Haykal’s *Zaynab* (1914), which is widely credited as the first Arabic novel. This study challenges the dominant narrative of the evolution of the modern Arabic novel, and posits that Karam’s absence from the Arabic canon stems not only from her gender, but also from her deterritorialized status as a member of the *mahjar* (diasporic) community of Arabs living in North and South America.

An early voice calling attention to the situation of Arab women, Karam was a pivotal figure in the nascent women’s movement in the Arab world. At this embryonic stage of the Arabic novel’s development, Karam articulated a unique gendered theory of the genre that reflects her proto-feminist politics. Karam considered the novel as the most effective platform to reach women readers and a tool for women’s empowerment. An extended analysis of Karam’s three formative Arabic novels – *Baḍī‘a wa-Fu’ād* (*Badi‘a and Fu’ad*), *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* (*Fatima the Bedouin*), and *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* (*The Girl from ‘Amshit*) – demonstrates their engagement with contemporary discourses of Westernization and womanhood prevalent within intellectual circles of the *mashriq*, or the Arab East. Ultimately, this study argues that Karam’s deterritorialized status and distance from the cultural center offered her a unique, hybrid perspective and liberating space for artistic creation. Karam’s stylistic innovations include experimentations in narrative time and structure, and the use of literary techniques such as dialogue and narrative polyphony, a major departure from the paternalistic, omniscient narrative voice that dominated the Arabic novel through the mid-20th century.

By reconceptualizing the *nahḍa* as a transnational phenomenon – and highlighting the vital role played by women and *mahjar* writers in ushering in the modern age in Arabic letters – this study contributes to the expanding palette of scholarly interventions that are

refining and reshaping our understanding of a formative period of modern Arabic literary history.

This dissertation
is dedicated with love to my grandmothers
Virginia Bulpitt Beavon Briggs and Frances Logan Saylor,
and to all those who are searching to find their voice.
May this story be a source of inspiration.

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been completed without the support, patience, and guidance of more people than I can possibly name here. I am deeply grateful to have had, throughout the dissertation process, the pleasure of working with a community of scholars of the highest caliber, whose passion for their work and dedication to their students never ceases to inspire me, and who were more than not only academic advisors, but also friends.

I would like to first express special appreciation and thanks to my advisor, Professor Margaret Larkin, whose mastery of the Arabic language and its vast literature never ceases to amaze me. Your wisdom, knowledge, and intellectual rigor has motivated me throughout my graduate work at UC Berkeley. Without your guidance and persistent help this dissertation would not have been possible. Thank you for your unfailing support of my research and for your invaluable advice with respect to my career in academia. I owe you my deepest gratitude.

I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Professor Chana Kronfeld and Professor Nezar AlSayyad, I would especially like to thank Professor Kronfeld for her insightful reading of my dissertation and her provocative comments, which greatly enhanced the quality of my work and the subtlety of my analysis. Thank you also for providing a model of engaged scholarship, for your fervent passion and commitment to marginalized voices. Your encouragement and compassionate presence throughout my writing of this dissertation softened even the toughest of times. For that, and so much more, I am forever grateful to you. My special thanks also go to Professor Nezar AlSayyad, for his support throughout my graduate studies and for guiding me through so many of my first steps in the academic world. I simply cannot thank you enough for pushing me beyond what I thought was possible, time and again.

I want to also express my gratitude to the department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The supportive community we have built in Barrows Hall has been an essential part of both my professional and personal life. Our first-class departmental staff has given so generously of their time and energy to support students and faculty alike. Sharlene Mulder, Erik Nelson, Rania Shah, and Deanna Kiser-Go – thanks to each and every one of you for your countless contributions over the years. I must also extend a special thank you to Shorena Kurtzidize, whose unfailing optimism, resourcefulness, and reassuring presence are the glue that binds our department together.

The Near Eastern Studies faculty has also played a vital role in my academic life at UC Berkeley. Thank you to Chava Boyarin, Rutie Adler, Jaleh Pirnazar, and Wali Ahmadi for educating me in Hebrew and Persian language and culture. Your diverse and creative teaching styles and methods inspired and strengthened my own language teaching skills. Many thanks also to Sonia Shiri, whose early mentorship and expertise in the theory and practice of teaching Arabic as a second language laid the foundation for my future as a

teacher of Arabic language. The incredible, eye-opening experiences we shared in Tūnis al-Khaḍrā' will stay with me always.

Many other people at UC Berkeley also played important roles in my academic journey and deserve my thanks. I am very grateful to Sanjyot Mehendale for serving as a committee member for my Masters exam in Islamic art and architecture, and to Emily Gottreich, Chair of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, for serving as an outside committee member – and so much more – during my qualifying examinations. Thank you also to Daniel Boyarin and Niek Veldhuis, who have been constant sources of support and encouragement through the years, and to Asad Ahmed and Ben Porter, for their incisive input in dissertation writing seminars. I want to also express my gratitude to Elsa El-Mehdi and Haitham Mohamed, whose energy, enthusiasm, and ingenious creativity as teachers of Arabic have enriched my life and teaching and continue to enliven our Arabic program everyday. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Professor John L. Hayes, for serving on my qualifying exam committee, and for sharing his expansive knowledge about the Arabic language and its history. Your boundless curiosity, limitless vitality, sense of humor, open heart, and open door has been a source of immeasurable joy. Sittīn alf shukr, ya John! Anta al-rajul!

I would also like to thank a number of other people who have played important roles in my academic journey. Thank you to Daniel Fisher and Ian Goldstein for reading draft after draft of dissertation material so carefully and conscientiously. Thank you also to my colleagues and cohort: Kevin Schwartz, Samad Alavi, Emily Drumsta, Aria Fani, Kareem Abu-Zeid, Anna Cruz, Rachel Friedman, Ayelet Even-Nur, Pei-Chen Tsung, and Linda Istanbuli. A very special thank you goes out to my dear friend and colleague Sarah Levin my closest companion throughout each and every step of this process. I cannot imagine getting to this point without you!

My dissertation research on 'Afifa Karam has enabled me to cultivate relationships with a number of individuals outside of the department of Near Eastern Studies to whom I owe a great deal of thanks. I would first like to thank Barbara Badawi, the biographer of 'Afifa Karam, who graciously hosted me in 'Amshīt, Lebanon, Karam's birthplace. The time we spent together in 'Amshīt gave me a sense of intimacy and many new insights into the life of this pioneering writer. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for sharing your profound knowledge about 'Afifa and her early years in 'Amshīt. I am forever indebted to you and your family and I cherish your friendship dearly. I would also like to express my thanks to Sarah Gualtieri and Akram Khater for their advice and encouragement of my research on 'Afifa Karam. Your work is an inspiration to me and I look forward to collaborating with you both in the future.

I also want to thank Mohammed Salaama, whose sensitive reading of Karam's work early on in the writing process not only relieved me of the sense of isolation I often felt, but also enabled me to appreciate her novels with greater subtlety. Thank you for your friendship and for your constant encouragement and positive reinforcement; it has made a difference in my life. I also owe tremendous gratitude to Walaa al-Khulaitit, whose perspective was essential to the final product. Your scrupulous and careful reading of my

translations added depth and nuance to my appreciation of Karam's work. Thank you also for the priceless gift of your friendship, which I will cherish always.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my first mentors at Columbia University. Thank you to George El-Hage, my first Arabic teacher, for conveying your love for the beautiful Arabic language and its literature and for inspiring me to pursue my passion for Arabic when such a thing seemed unimaginable. Thank you also to Muhsin al-Musawi, who gave me the precious gift of my first interactions with the rich and challenging world of Arabic literature and whose innate, encyclopedic knowledge of Arabic literature continue to inspire me.

I would also like to express my gratitude to members of the extended Karam family in the United States, especially John Nackley, Patsy Nackley, and Nicoletta Karam. Thank you for opening your hearts and homes and for sharing your knowledge about this exceptional figure. I can only hope to have done 'Afifi's life and legacy justice. A special thank you also goes to Todd Fine and the Washington Street Historical Society for the valiant and unfailing efforts they have made to preserve the history and legacy New York City's "Little Syria," which is of crucial importance to my own work.

This research would not have been possible without the generous financial support of UC Berkeley's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the Sultan Program, al-Falah program, and the Mellon Foundation, which have kept me afloat throughout these years. I am very grateful to the Arab American National Museum and the Diwan Forum for the Arts for hosting me in Dearborn, Michigan, the capital of Arab America, and for supporting my work on 'Afifa Karam. Thank you also to the staff of the African & Middle Eastern Reading Room at the Library of Congress, especially Muhannad Salhi and Nawal Kavar, as well as to the staff of the New York Public Library, who provided essential assistance during my various periods of archival research on 'Afifa Karam.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family and friends, without whom none of this would have been possible. From the bottom of my heart, I thank my parents, Constance Beavon and Bruce Saylor, for encouraging me to pursue my passion as you have pursued yours. Thank you to my sisters Meredith, Evelyn, and Lydia – I love you more than you can possibly know. Thank you to Claire Whittaker for being my rock through it all – I simply cannot imagine getting to this point without you. Virginia and Martin Davis, knowing you has been one of the great joys of my life and I feel so blessed to have spent these years in your embrace. Thank you to Brian Saylor, for being my personal cheerleader during the final throes of the writing process, and to Ben Saylor for his expert editorial assistance at the final hour. Thank you to my extended families, who are too many to name. Alisha, Carolyn, Mary, Diana, Tom, the Gomez family, Anthony, Justine, Brad, Juliana, Suman, Mallika, Marissa, Liya, Jordan, Nisreen, Katie, Katrin and the Brezansky family, Gila, Catesby, Harry, Jessye, all of my cousins, and the list goes on and on. Thank you for your enduring love and support, for all the sacrifices you have made on my behalf, and for the incalculable joy you bring to my life. Your encouragement and prayers are what have sustained me this far!

One final note of recognition goes to Gloria Steinem, who was inspired by ‘Afifa Karam’s story and scribbled the title of this dissertation on a program note some winters ago in New York City.

CHAPTER ONE

Remapping the Arabic Literary Canon

Introduction

This dissertation examines the life and literary work of the novelist, journalist, and translator ‘Afīfa Karam (1883-1924), a key architect of the formative period of modern Arabic literary and cultural history known as the *nahḍa*, or the Arabic cultural renaissance, which took place during the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Despite the significance of her work, which appeared well before the 1914 publication of *Zaynab* (*Zaynab*) by the Egyptian author Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, widely credited as the “first Arabic novel,” Karam has been consistently excluded from discussions surrounding the development of the Arabic novel.¹ Karam’s absence from the Arabic canon invites a critical reconsideration of the dominant narratives of the evolution of the modern Arabic novel, which describe its emergence as a road paved by numerous experiments by male writers in Egypt and Greater Syria, leading up to the publication of Haykal’s *Zaynab*.

Despite the enduring impression this narrative has made on the Arabic literary field today, the history of the novel’s origin and development is still being written. In recent years, new literary, historical, and cultural research has broadened our understanding of the *nahḍa* as we know it by shedding light on previously neglected authors and texts, thus refining and reshaping our understanding of the period.² By employing Karam as a case study, this dissertation joins forces with other scholarly interventions and suggests that – in contrast to the interpretation of the novel’s emergence as a linear, straightforward process culminating in a single inaugural work – the rise of the Arabic novel may be

¹ Among the works that cite *Zaynab* as the first Arabic novel include Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1982); M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 97; ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭaha Badr, *Ṭaṭawwur al-riwāya al-‘Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1963), 318; John Haywood, *Modern Arabic Literature, 1800-1970* (London: Lund Humphries, 1971); Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel, 1912-1971* (London: Ithaca Press, Published for the Middle East Centre, St Antony’s College, Oxford, 1983), 11; Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983), 262; Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 102.

² Mona A. Selim El-Sherif, *Cairo-Paris the Urban Imaginary of the Self* (Berkeley, CA, 2010); Lisa Lital Levy, “Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863-1914” 2007; Hoda El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, 2013; Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman, eds., *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahḍah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

better understood as a transnational or global phenomenon that took over a period of eight decades originating in diverse and scattered geographical locations around the world.

This study regards the process of literary canonization as highly contingent and constantly changing. Admittance to the Arabic canon is posited as a subjective product of many forces – including geographic context, political and religious environment, cultural norms, and discussions of gender – as well as the development and acceptance of types and forms of literature. A study of ‘Afifa Karam’s innovative work offers a new perspective that can enrich our understanding of the emergence of the Arabic novel, arguing for broader, more inclusive views both of Arabic literature and of the *nahḍa*.

Born and raised in Greater Syria, Karam immigrated to the United States in 1897, where she became a journalist in the Syrian immigrant press and later, a prominent literary figure in the Arab diasporic community of North America. In addition to her literary contributions, Karam was also an early advocate for women’s rights in the Arab world and a central figure in the nascent women’s movement. As the only woman writer to produce a significant body of fiction and journalism in the diaspora, or the *mahjar*, Karam’s output offers a rare window onto Arabic literary culture at the turn of the twentieth century. The term *mahjar*, which is derived from the Arabic word *hijra*, meaning migration, is used to describe both the place of migration in the Arab diaspora – that is, exile, expatriation, or, generally, deterritorialization – and a modern literary movement developed by Arab emigrants living in North and South America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

‘Afifa Karam’s three Arabic novels – *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād* (*Badi‘a and Fu’ad*) (1906), *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* (*Fatima the Bedouin*) (1908), and *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* (*The Girl from ‘Amshit*) (1910) – were written in Shreveport, Louisiana, and published in New York City’s first Arab immigrant neighborhood, “Little Syria,” the epicenter of the *mahjar* (émigré) literary movement. An examination of Karam’s little known works offers an alternative perspective on the emergence of the Arabic novel during the *nahḍa* and highlights the vital role played by writers in the Arab diaspora and foregrounds the transnational character of the *nahḍa*, a locus of literary development that is often overlooked in modern studies of the period.

This dissertation posits that Karam has not been acknowledged as an important contributor to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction because she was a deterritorialized, *mahjar* woman writer, who composed Arabic novels well before the genre was widely accepted in the Arabic literary world. Due to her triple marginalization within the Arabic literary field – by gender, geography, and genre – Karam’s life and work has fallen through the proverbial disciplinary cracks. An examination of Karam’s important body of work, which has never been studied in depth, places her as a pivotal figure in shaping modern Arabic literary and cultural history. This study illustrates the dynamics of this important period of Arabic literary history and suggests that ultimately, Karam’s émigré status gave her a unique perspective born of the freedom that distance from the cultural center provided.

Structure

This introductory chapter sets the organization and theoretical framework for this study, which focuses on the geopolitics of canonization in the Arabic literary field. Following this theoretical introduction, a detailed literature review will further illustrate the rationale for focusing on ‘Afifa Karam as a case study to highlight the hegemonic processes of canon formation in the Arabic literary context.

Chapter Two provides the wider historical, socio-cultural, and literary context for a study of the works of ‘Afifa Karam. The chapter begins with a discussion of fiction writing in the Arabic literary tradition, from the classical era through the twentieth century, to illustrate the changing literary dynamics brought in by the *nahḍa*. It continues with a presentation of the evolution of the Arabic novel as it is viewed in the dominant works on the subject produced by Western scholars through the 1990s, and even into the 2000s. A critical reading of the prevailing scholarship emphasizes the gaps in the historiography of the Arabic novel, and offers a counter-narrative focused on lesser-known works by women and *mahjar* writers, two groups that are often overlooked in scholarly works on the period. This chapter presents the view that the Arabic cultural awakening ought to be seen as a transnational phenomenon, involving a much wider spectrum of players than the prevailing histories and historiographies of the period indicate. Women writers and deterritorialized writers from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds all contributed to an evolving discourse of Arabic literary culture as well as to the emergence of the modern Arabic novel during the *nahḍa*.

Chapter Three presents ‘Afifa Karam’s biography and the trajectory of her literary career, beginning with her early work as a journalist in the Syrian immigrant press and leading up to the appearance of her groundbreaking Arabic novels. This chapter also includes an examination of select articles published by Karam in the New York City-based Arabic-language newspaper *al-Hudā* (*Guidance*) that reveal the author’s unique gender-based theory of the novel well before it was established as a canonical genre of Arabic literature.

Chapter Four focuses on Karam’s first novel, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād* (1906). The novel is clearly informed by the evolving contemporary discourses on women’s emancipation and progress (“the woman question,” or “*qaḍīyat al-mar’ā*”) that circulated during the *nahḍa*. This chapter examines the politics of Westernization and evolving definitions of womanhood as articulated by prominent intellectuals and writers in Egyptian and Levantine communities in the *mashriq* (the Arab East). Among the works considered here are those of the Egyptian intellectual and reformer Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), whose

essays on “the woman question” had a major impact on the development of contemporary debates about gender and society, and provide, therefore, context for an evaluation of Karam’s conception of womanhood and her views on Westernization, *al-tafarnuj*, as she referred to it.

The critical review of Karam’s first novel that follows suggests that the idealized “Karamian” woman is neither of the “East” nor the “West,” but, rather, resides in a liminal space between two worlds. Karam employs the genre of the novel to instruct her readers in navigating the complex interchange between “Arab” and “Western” cultures, values, and worldviews during a dynamic socio-historical moment. An examination of the text’s shifting narrative mode, which highlights the complexity of this cultural encounter, sheds light on the author’s proto-feminist views. In the end, Karam – through the voice of her heroine Badi’a – cautions her readers against excessiveness or extremism (*taṭarruf*) in either direction. The ideal woman, as portrayed in Karam’s first novel, is successful in negotiating between “Syrian” and “American” customs, becoming a hybrid amalgamation of the most positive and moral aspects of each culture.

Chapter Five discusses Karam’s second novel, entitled *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, or *Fatima the Bedouin* (1908), in which the author delves further into questions of Westernization and womanhood. The premise of this novel centers on an unlikely friendship between two women from vastly different cultural, socio-economic, religious, racial, and linguistic backgrounds: Fāṭima the Bedouin and an American heiress Alice Harrison. Through the heartfelt exchange of personal stories of life and love – including the young Bedouin woman’s coming of age between rural Lebanon and the United States – they become intimately bonded.

The novel features an unprecedented meta-textual reference to the trope of women’s bonding-through-storytelling in the narrative structure of the work itself. Not only is the narrative space of Karam’s novel dominated exclusively by the feminine voice (which some scholars have argued did not happen until the 1950s)³ but also Karam’s two principal protagonists – who are women – *share* the narrative space. This egalitarian narrative strategy allows Fāṭima and Alice as well as the narrator to share their voices and perspectives, embodying in its narrative polyphony Karam’s proto-feminist vision and a fervent call for women’s solidarity.

Chapter Six discusses Karam’s third and final Arabic novel, which is also her first venture into the genre of historical fiction. In *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, or *The Girl from ‘Amshit* (1910), the author weaves together facts about contemporary figures from her ancestral home, ‘Amshīt, Lebanon, and a fictional story of the doomed romance between a young girl named Farīda and her childhood love Farīd. Farīda is described as one of Lebanon’s pure flowers, who – due to the intersecting systems of gender and class oppression – would be “plucked before her time.” *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* is, therefore, a provocative indictment of the custom of the arranged marriages of young girls. Married off at a young

³ Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 99.

age to a much older man, she is denied an education, abused, and debased by all the male figures in her life.

Ghādat ‘Amshīt is also a poignant nationalist Biblical allegory with a feminist twist. Throughout the stages of her life’s suffering, Farīda remains righteous, virtuous, and pure, suffering like Job, and eventually dies a martyr’s death, falling victim to the two principal patriarchal institutions in Mount Lebanon – the church and the state. *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* thus represents a literal *prise de parole*, whereby a woman writer speaks out against gender oppression within the wider Lebanese nationalist struggle. An analysis of the novel engages Karam’s genre- and gender-bending innovations, such as the experimental use of historical fiction and the strategic use of transvestism in structuring the narrative. It further illuminates the author’s examination of the taboo subjects of domestic abuse, female sexuality, and a young woman’s unlikely resistance to oppressive social norms.

The dissertation concludes by drawing larger inferences based on this research, linking the study of ‘Afifa Karam to wider contemporary debates about Arab and Arab American identity in the post-9/11 world. The prescient message of Karam’s work is particularly poignant in light of the fact that her writings were produced in “Little Syria,” New York City’s first Arab immigrant neighborhood, located just blocks from what has been, since September 11, 2001, known as ‘Ground Zero.’ In Lower Manhattan, close to the docks where the first wave of Arab immigrants disembarked from the long trans-Atlantic journey by way of Ellis Island, “Little Syria” became the cradle of the *mahjar* literary movement, where writers such as Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, Amīn al-Rīḥānī, Mīkhā’īl Nu’aymah, and ‘Afifa Karam published important works of Arabic prose and poetry.

The Arabic Novel and the Literary Canon

The origin and early development of the Arabic novel took place during the *nahḍa*, or the Arabic cultural enlightenment.⁴ The appearance of the novel as a literary genre in Arabic took place over a significant period of time – roughly between 1850 and 1930 – and involved a multitude of players separated by vast distances. The earliest examples of modern Arabic narrative prose fiction first appeared in Beirut and Cairo; however, its reach extended far beyond these cities to places as far-flung as Buenos Aires, Marseilles, São Paulo, and New York City. The *nahḍa* was a transnational movement linking reform movements, intellectual debates, and literary endeavors in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco; Aleppo, Baghdad, Damascus, Haifa, Jerusalem; and New York, Buenos Aires, and São Paulo.

Despite the many complexities surrounding the emergence of this literary genre in Arabic, the dominant narratives of Arabic literary history routinely present the novel’s unfolding in over-simplified terms. The most widely read critical sources on the Arabic

⁴ The term *nahḍa* is derived from the verb ‘*nahaḍa*’ meaning ‘to rise’ or ‘get up.’

novel present its emergence as the product of several long-term projects; namely, the rediscovery of the classical Arabic literary heritage, the rise of Arab journalism, and the translation of European fiction into Arabic.⁵ While informative, this over-simplified conceptualization reduces a set of complex, interconnected, and simultaneous processes to what appears to be a teleological chronology.⁶

Moreover, as mentioned previously, these studies describe the novel's emergence as a road paved by numerous experiments that eventually culminated in the publication of *Zaynab* (*Zaynab*) by the Egyptian author Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal in 1914. As David Perkins and others have suggested, it is simply unreasonable to look upon literary developments as intricate as the emergence of a new genre in such linear terms.⁷ Rather than framing the emergence of the Arabic novel as a straightforward process with pivotal moments of change that eventually progresses towards a single inaugural work, it ought to be regarded as a rather unruly, unsystematic process made up of various related and unrelated creative experiments.

Before delving further into this discussion, it is important to draw a distinction between Arabic literary scholarship that appeared before the early 2000s, which is the object of critique in this study, and more recent scholarship. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the work of the former group of researchers as 'modern,' whereas scholarship produced during the past decade or so is referred to as 'contemporary.' With this research, I join contemporary scholars who have produced innovative inquiries into the Arab *nahḍa* in recent years, and whose work has enabled new views of the period.⁸

With that in mind, I now turn to a discussion of the most prominent modern studies on the novel's origins and development, which share a tendency to amplify certain voices while silencing others completely. The inclusion or exclusion, canonization or marginalization of literary works is often controlled by prevailing – although frequently obscured – forces and ideologies. Literary canons, criticism, historiography, and other forms of literary "rewriting" (to use André Lefevere's term) of an author, a genre, a literary period, or even an entire literature reveal marked trends that privilege specific ideological perspectives and assumptions while submerging others.⁹ As a consequence of the subjective processes of literary canonization, historical and critical texts on the Arabic novel often yield an incomplete picture that excludes the voices of those belonging to the most disempowered groups in society at the moment that history is recorded.

⁵ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*; M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*; Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993).

⁶ Both Roger Allen and M. M. Badawi describe the novel's emergence in oversimplified terms. The "equation" I speak of looks something like this: Arab journalism + neo-classical Arabic revival + European fiction = Arabic novel. Roger Allen, "The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel," in Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 180.

⁷ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁸ See note 2 above.

⁹ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992).

In the context of Arabic literature, for example, works by women writers have been systematically disregarded, making gender an important category of exclusion. In addition, the most widely available sources on the novel's emergence portray it as a process that had a single, defined center: Greater Syria and Egypt. As suggested earlier, further research suggests that the rise of the Arabic novel was, rather, a global phenomenon that occurred intermittently and discontinuously from various dispersed geographical locations. The bulk of modern historical and critical texts on the Arabic novel reveal what Chana Kronfeld calls a "selective modeling" of authors and texts.¹⁰ These studies privilege a select group of works that belong to the dominant categories of gender and geography, during a time when the genre of the novel was still in flux. It may be that the omission of certain literary voices was simply the result of the manner in which ideas and forms circulate, but whatever the reasons, the way the modern Arabic literary canon has been written has limited our understanding of the full range of Arabic cultural production.

The Geopolitical Environment

The Arabic novel emerged during the *nahḍa*, the Arabic literary renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century that transformed the cultural fabric of the Arabic-speaking world. The complex processes that gave rise to the novel in Arabic resulted from the intersection between historical and political circumstances, ideological forces, the movement of peoples, increasing literacy, and rapid social change.

The most significant historical and political shift during this period was the erosion of the Ottoman Empire, which occurred between 1828 and the end of the First World War.¹¹ Ottoman leadership became increasingly oppressive during the latter period of the empire's rule. At the same time, the escalation of European imperialist ambitions and Euro-American missionary activity led to increased Western influence in the region. These changing socio-cultural and political dynamics prompted a remarkable upsurge of intellectual production and debate in the Arabic-speaking world.

An expanded press and readership also fueled an increase in political and intellectual discourse during this period. The dawning and spread of Arab journalism and the appearance of a new, middle-class readership transformed the socio-cultural and intellectual climate inhabited by Arabic speakers and readers. In the pages of the Arab press, nationalist and social reform movements rose to prominence. Among other social

¹⁰ Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 3.

¹¹ Recent studies on the history of the Ottoman Empire include, Bruce Alan Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, NY: Picador, 2003); Alan Palmer, *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: M. Evans, 1993).

issues, such as religious, educational, and political reforms, “the woman question,” or “*qaḍīyat al-mar’ā*,” became a central part of the debate. Furthermore, it was in these journals that a simplified Arabic prose style evolved and the earliest examples of modern Arabic prose fiction in Arabic were published.

Women’s Contributions to Arabic Literature

Since the very early days of Arabic literary culture, men have dominated the Arabic literary world and, in large part, still do today. That said, Arab women have been active participants in the formation of Arabic literary culture since its very inception. The pre-Islamic female poet Tumāḍir bint ‘Umru bin al-Ḥarth (575-664 C.E.), known as al-Khansā’, stands as proof that Arab women were producers of great literature from the very earliest period of Arabic literary history. Al-Khansā’ is celebrated for the moving elegies she wrote in memory of her brothers Sakhr and Mu‘āwiya.

During the classical period, that is, during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 C.E.) and the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 C.E.), other women poets rose to prominence. One of the most famous women writers from the Umayyad period was Layla al-Akhyaḷiyya (646-704 C.E.), a 7th century woman poet who not only dared to recite her love poetry in public, but also joined the ranks of male poets by engaging in invective poetry (*hijā’*) bouts with male poets.¹² During the early 11th century, the Andalusian Princess Wallāda bint al-Mustakfī (d. 1091) also gained quite a reputation for holding a prominent literary salon where she interacted and dueled with the most prominent poets and intellectuals of her day.¹³

Following the classical era, with the exception of the female Sufi master and poet ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya (d. 1517), women’s voices were largely absent from the literary sphere until the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ At that point, during the late nineteenth century, women writers began to reappear on the Arabic literary scene. A scattered group of women authors began creating literary texts in almost every genre including poetry, short stories, novels, dramas, commentaries, and essays. An examination of the work of women authors of Arabic prose fiction forms an important part of the following chapter. The exhaustive reference guide to Arab women writers published in 1999 by Raḍwa ‘Ashūr and Ferial Ghazoul lists entries for over 1,200 women writers, a number which has increased significantly since that time.¹⁵

¹² Other women poets include Sukayna bint al-Ḥusayn (d. 622), the ‘Abbasid Princess and singer-poet ‘Ulayya (d. 825), and the famous mystic poet of Baṣra Rabī’a al-‘Adawīyya (d. 801), and the anonymous singing slave girls, *al-qiṣān*. For more, see Josef W. Meri and Jere L. Bacharach, *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 866.

¹³ Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 803–804.

¹⁴ Meri and Bacharach, *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, 866.

¹⁵ Raḍwa ‘Ashūr et al., *Arab Women writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999* (Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

Despite the important literary works by women writers, even a cursory glance at the Arabic literary canon will reveal that its creators have consistently overlooked their contributions.¹⁶ This omission of works by women is not surprising considering the male-dominated, patriarchal culture of Arabic literary studies, both in academia and in the culture of at large (curricula formation, the press, etc.). The marginalization of Arab women's writing is symptomatic of a larger issue that has plagued the literary field on a global scale, namely, the suppression of women's literary contributions in what has been until recently an androcentric literary and scholarly domain. More often than not, the work of women writers is ghettoized, that is, treated as a distinct category and discussed separately, often at the end of a larger volume.¹⁷ The tendency to suppress literature produced by women impedes the ability to view the full richness and variety of the Arabic literary tradition of *any* literary genre or period.

The Impact of Geography on the Evolution of Modern Arabic Literature

In addition to gender, geographical location has played an equally important role as a criterion for inclusion among the canonical works of Arabic literature, particularly during the *nahḍa*. An examination of the most widely read critical texts and anthologies of Arabic literature of the period reveals a marked privileging of a standard set of texts written by men in Egypt and the Levant, despite the fact that inaugural works of Arabic fiction also originated in other geographical locales. The dominant Arabic literary histories, critical writings, and anthologies by scholars in the West such as Roger Allen,¹⁸ M. M. Badawi,¹⁹ Pierre Cachia,²⁰ Sabry Hafez,²¹ Hilary Kilpatrick,²² Matti Moosa,²³ 'Ali Jad,²⁴ and Stephen Sheehi²⁵ foreground writing produced in Egypt and the Levant, which

¹⁶ See for example, M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature* (1992), *A Short History of Arabic Literature* (1993), and *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (1975); Pierre Cachia, *Arabic Literature - An Overview* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (1983); 'Ali Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel 1912-1971* (1983); Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (1993); Roger Allen, *The Modern Arabic Novel* (1995) and *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2000); Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel* (1974); and Muḥammad Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel: Genre, Identity, and Agency in Egyptian Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007); 'Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭaha Badr, *Ṭaṭawwur al-riwāya al-'Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938*; Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, *Fann al-qīṣṣah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Šādir, 1996); Ḥamdī Sakkūt, *al-Riwāyah al-'arabīyah: Bibliyūgrāfiyā wa-madkhal naqdī* (1865-1995) (al-Qāhirah: Qism al-Nashr bi-'l-Jamī'ah al-Amrīkiyah, 2000)

¹⁷ Take, for example, Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*.

¹⁸ Roger Allen, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Allen, *The Arabic Novel*.

¹⁹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature; A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

²⁰ Cachia, *Arabic Literature: An Overview*.

²¹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*.

²² Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism* (London: Ithaca Press for the Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, 1974).

²³ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*.

²⁴ Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel, 1912-1971*.

is considered as the Arabic literary “center,” whereas literary works produced from the “periphery” are largely excluded.

Russell Ferguson’s concept of the “invisible center” has proven to be a useful tool for understanding the complex processes of inclusion and exclusion that characterize the formation of the Arabic literary canon. In the introduction to his 1992 anthology *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Ferguson prefaces his discussion of the “invisible center” in the following way:

The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it.²⁶

For Ferguson, the “elusive” and “unspoken” structures of power in the Western academy gave rise to the canon of “great works” in the arts and humanities, produced by a privileged group of white, heterosexual men – the signifiers by proxy of the ‘universal,’ unmarked subject.²⁷ By contrast, Ferguson uses the terms ‘margin’ and ‘periphery’ to describe the cultural production of members of ‘marked’ social groups such as women, African-American, Chicano, Asian, homosexual, and queer writers and thinkers. The literary, artistic, and cultural studies of marginalized authors and scholars working from outside of the “center” make up the content of Ferguson’s revisionist anthology, which seeks to provide a corrective to the received canon of his time.

Ferguson’s conceptualization of “center” and “periphery” in literary dynamics provides the background to this study of ‘Afīfa Karam (1883-1924), an author who has been affected by the politics of canon formation that Ferguson addresses. Karam’s omission reflects what Kronfeld has called the “cartographic paradigm” in relation to modernism in Euro-American literature, whereby the work of writers from a particular geographic location are given consideration, while that of writers operating from a decentered or deterritorialized position are largely ignored.²⁸ Much like the work of women writers, the literature produced by *mahjar* writers in North and South America tends to be treated as a separate, distinct phenomenon, rather than as an integral part of the wider Arab literary and cultural renaissance. This exclusionist tendency of Arabic literary scholarship has hindered a view of the *nahḍa* as a transnational or global phenomenon. This dissertation offers a counter-narrative of the *nahḍa* that brings literature written in diaspora by *mahjar* writers back into conversation with the accepted canon of Arabic literature.

Prose Fiction and Arabic Literature

²⁵ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004).

²⁶ Russell Ferguson, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York, N.Y.; Cambridge, Mass.: New Museum of Contemporary Art; MIT Press, 1990), 9.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 4.

In addition to gender and geography, the construction and codification of new literary genres is a third factor that has contributed to the inclusion and exclusion of particular authors and works from canonical narratives of the emergence of the Arabic novel. This “definitional drive” – as Kronfeld has referred to it – is further impacted by the fact that the novel, perhaps more than any other, is a genre that eludes definition.²⁹ In his foundational study of the English novel, literary scholar Terry Eagleton suggests that the novel is an “anarchic genre” that resists definition, calling it “less a genre than an anti-genre.”³⁰

While the first Arabic fictional works appeared as early as the 1850s, the novel was not widely established as an accepted genre of Arabic literature until the early 1930s. Furthermore, it was not until a full generation later that scholars of Arabic literature began to produce studies that attempted to trace the origin and development of the genre. During the early decades of the *nahḍa*, works of prose fiction in Arabic took on diverse forms. These forms ranged from episodic works of rhymed prose modeled on classical narrative genres, to historical and romance novels that commented on current social and political issues. The anxiety inherent in the enterprise of designating pioneering works of Arabic fiction as “novels” – as opposed to something else – has, therefore, complicated efforts to trace the development of the form.

The first, and arguably the most influential, of these early critical texts on the novel is ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭaha Badr’s *Ṭaṭawwūr al-riwāya al-‘Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938*, published in Cairo in 1963. In this work, Badr suggested that Haykal’s *Zaynab* marked the true beginning of the “*riwāya fanniyya*,” or “artistic novel” in Arabic, a view that has been passed down through the ranks of scholars of Arabic literature ever since.³¹ To cite an example of this perspective, in the preface to her 1974 work on the modern Egyptian novel – whose history begins with Haykal’s *Zaynab* in 1914 – Hilary Kilpatrick states unequivocally that most of the Egyptian novels published before 1962 are “valueless...as literature.”³²

Thus, as a result of the heterogeneity of works of early Arabic fiction – as well as the discrepancy in their visibility – certain texts were belatedly acknowledged as texts that marked significant steps on the road to the novel, while many others were either completely forgotten or dismissed and classified as “premodern.”³³ Even among the privileged works by male writers from the Arabic literary “center,” few have been recognized or seriously considered by modern scholars as foundational works that contributed to the emergence of the genre. Often, works from the nineteenth century are

²⁹ Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 26.

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 1.

³¹ Badr, *Ṭaṭawwūr al-riwāya al-‘Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938*, 318.

³² Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, i.

³³ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 3.

considered as immature experiments that served as mere “bridges” between the Arabic literature of the past and that of a more modernist period.

Furthermore, the Arabic canon privileges certain literary forms over others. In a study of the periodical culture of 1870s and 1880s Beirut, Elizabeth Holt argues that critical texts treating the Arabic novel exhibit a tendency to privilege the individual author and the bound volume, which has resulted in the exclusion of a large corpus of important literary works from the canon, particularly early serialized Arabic fiction, which was of crucial importance to the evolution of the form.³⁴

Narratives of literary history, Perkins argues, are often predicated on spurious assumptions; that literary works are borne of their precise historical contexts, that transformation in literature occurs developmentally, and that this process of literary change represents a continuity that occurs in concert with a larger guiding idea or principle. In view of these caveats, Perkins questions whether any literary history can be “intellectually respectable.”³⁵ Instead, he contends that the resultant narratives of literary history are almost universally inadequate and reductive. By calling into question the teleological drive that so often guides the writing of Arabic literary history, we can open up to new possibilities and ask new questions of this critical developmental period.

Counter-Currents in Scholarship on the *Nahḍa* and the Arabic Novel

Recent scholarship produced in the last few years has broadened our understanding of the *nahḍa* and its impact on Arabic literature. Lital Levy’s groundbreaking research on the lesser-known contributions of Jewish writers and intellectuals from Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt who were active participants in the Arab cultural enlightenment, has enriched our understanding of the cultural fabric of the period.³⁶ Mona A. Selim’s 2010 dissertation *Cairo – Paris: The Urban Imaginary of the Self* reinvestigates Egyptian modernity as expressed in three genres – the essay, the novel, and film – and provides a fresh take on *nahḍa* studies by examining selected creative works through the lens of the urban experience.³⁷

Another important study, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt 1892-2008*, published by Hoda Elsadda in 2012, examines the modern Arabic literary tradition through the lens of gender, linking the processes of canonization to the wider project of nation-building in turn-of-the-century Egypt. In her view, the field of literary production during the *nahḍa* was controlled by a group of male intellectuals who “shaped the nation in their own image,” resulting in the marginalization of certain literary voices that did not

³⁴ Elizabeth M. Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40, no. 1 (2009): 37–8.

³⁵ Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, 11–12.

³⁶ Levy, “Jewish Writers in the Arab East.”

³⁷ El-Sherif, *Cairo-Paris the Urban Imaginary of the Self*.

conform to the “ideological blueprint of the dominant cultural elite.”³⁸ In *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (2013), Tarek El-Ariss provides a refreshing approach to *nahḍa* studies by presenting close readings of works through the lens of media and affect studies against the backdrop of the Arab Spring.³⁹

Similarly, in *The Arab Nahḍah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (2013), Abdulrazzak Patel moves away from the paradigm of decline and the deeply engrained Eurocentric approach that foregrounds the influence of the West in energizing the *nahḍa*. Beginning his inquiry in 1700, the author focuses on cultural factors that contributed to the *nahḍa* at a much earlier period than is usually examined and, in doing so, seeks to dispel the commonly-held assumption that the pre-modern period was devoid of Arabic literary achievements. In addition, Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman’s new volume *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance* (2014) looks at *fin de siècle* Egypt through a collection of “microstudies” that open up new avenues of inquiry across disciplines and sub-areas in the socio-cultural, political, institutional, and economic history of the country.⁴⁰ The goal of their enterprise is to escape the focus on British control and Egyptian occupation following the invasion of 1882, focusing instead on “transnational and translingual cultural flows” of the period.⁴¹ This objective is accomplished through the examination of largely untapped state records, archives, and collections in languages including Arabic, Greek, Italian, and French, shedding new light on a dynamic, yet understudied, period of Egypt’s history. Despite the importance of the scholarly works mentioned above, for the most part, they remain focused on Egypt and the Levant, leaving other important loci of cultural production unexplored.

My study owes a great deal to the foundational work of these and a host of other scholars whose research has called into question the prevailing assumptions of the canonical narratives of Arabic literary history. Their groundbreaking critiques have transformed the way literary history is presently transmitted. Building on the work of Western feminist and queer theorists, who began to grapple with the question of canon-formation in the late seventies and eighties,⁴² a number of scholars have published innovative works that lay bare the “invisible center” that has come to shape the Arabic literary landscape as we know it.

³⁸ Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*, xiv.

³⁹ El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, 2013.

⁴⁰ Booth and Gorman, eds., *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, 12.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Foundational works by Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar addressed women’s exclusion from the male-dominated literary canon, in what is usually referred to as “second wave” feminist literary criticism of the 1960s to 1970s. Beginning in the late 1970s, the groundbreaking scholarship of feminist and queer theorists transformed the way literary history is transmitted today, in what is generally referred to as “third wave” feminism and the newly articulated queer theory. These researchers began producing academic works that unpacked and overturned the hegemonic ideologies that had hitherto sustained Western, male, hetero-dominance in the academic curriculum. For example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

In an effort to address the omission of women's voices from the pages of Arabic literary history, feminist scholars of Arabic literature began to destabilize the accepted canon in the 1990s by producing studies that shed light on early literary works by Arab women writers.⁴³ In *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, Marilyn Booth brings to light the important contributions of women writers and intellectuals during the *nahḍa*, foregrounding early constructions of an Arab women's matrilineal literary genealogy. Mervat Hatem, in her important study of 'Ā'isha Taymūr (1840-1902), published in 2011, provides an extensive literary study of this first published woman writer and commentator during the early Arabic literary and cultural enlightenment, highlighting the literary output of a path-breaking Muslim woman writer and thinker.

In *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, Beth Baron paints a comprehensive picture of the early journalistic and literary endeavors of pioneering women intellectuals in late nineteenth century Egypt. In her presentation, Baron discusses the challenges these writers faced, as well as issues related to the representation and reception of works by women in a male-dominated arena. Bouthaina Khaldi's *Egypt Awakening in the Early Twentieth Century* (2012) offers a fresh perspective on Egyptian culture during the *nahḍa* by focusing on the famous literary salon of Mayy Ziyāda (1886-1941). Khaldi argues that Ziyāda's salon can be seen as a microcosm for the *nahḍa* as a whole due to its hybrid engagement with Arab and European cultures, its role in creating a new public sphere, and the importance of women in shaping the discourses of Arabic cultural enlightenment.

Other important studies that have demonstrated both the sheer magnitude of writing produced by Arab women and the great temporal span their works cover include works by Margot Badran,⁴⁴ Miriam Cooke,⁴⁵ Fedwa Malti-Douglas,⁴⁶ Bouthaina Shaaban,⁴⁷ Lisa Suhair Majaj,⁴⁸ Fruma Zachs,⁴⁹ Joseph Zeidan,⁵⁰ and more. By focusing explicitly on

⁴³ Margot Badran and Cooke, Miriam, *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mervat Faye Hatem, *Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: The Life and Works of 'A'isha Taymur* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Bouthaina Khaldi, *Egypt Awakening in the Early Twentieth Century Mayy Ziyadah's Intellectual Circles* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴⁴ Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴⁷ Bouthaina Shaaban, *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists, 1898-2000* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

⁴⁸ Lisa Suhair Majaj, *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

⁴⁹ Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevi, "From Difā' al-Nisā' to Mas'alat al-Nisā' in Greater Syria: Readers and Writers Debate Women and Their Rights, 1858-1900," *International Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 41 (2009), 615-33.

⁵⁰ Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*.

literature written by women, these scholars have begun to reinscribe in the modern Arabic canon the literary achievements of writers whose voices were previously inaudible. By shifting the focus onto women who were active members of the vibrant, growing intellectual and literary culture of the *nahḍa*, these academics have led the way for scholars to continue this line of research and move beyond what has been accomplished thus far.

In addition to the important studies undertaken by feminist scholars of Arabic literature, greater scholarly attention has been paid in recent years to the work of deterritorialized, or *mahjar* writers. Arab writers in diaspora produced some of the earliest novels and works of free verse poetry, preceding the onset of free verse poetry in the *mashriq* by several decades.⁵¹ Despite their importance, these authors and their works are frequently overlooked or minimized in modern scholarly treatments of the Arabic literary and cultural enlightenment. For example, in critical studies of modern Arabic literature, with the possible exception of their contributions to the development of Romantic poetry in Arabic, little attention is paid to the work of *mahjar* writers.⁵² When *mahjar* writings are discussed, they tend to be treated tangentially as an isolated phenomenon distinct from the literary happenings in the Arab East.⁵³

That said, a number of studies produced in the last few years have turned the spotlight on literary works by Arab writers in diaspora. For example, Wail Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives* (2011) offers an in-depth study of Anglophone literary works by *mahjar* writers in the United States and the United Kingdom, including works by Jibrān, al-Rihānī, Edward Said, Leila Ahmed, Ahdaf Soueif, and Leila Aboulela.⁵⁴ The volume *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009), edited by Layla Al Maleh, also provides a comprehensive critical examination of a wide range of Anglophone Arabic literature produced in the *mahjar*.⁵⁵

Other scholars have focused on the writing produced by diasporic communities in the southern *mahjar*, that is, *mahjar* literature produced in South America. In *Between Argentines and Arabs* (2006), Christina Civantos takes a wider look at the cultural contributions of Arabs in the southern *mahjar* by focusing on the literary production of Arab immigrants to Argentina from the mid-1800s through the mid-1990s.⁵⁶ In his 2006 dissertation "Migration, Literature and the Nation: Mahjar Literature in Brazil," Armando Vargas takes a comparative approach, looking at the Arabic and Portuguese literary

⁵¹ For an extensive treatment of formal developments of modern Arabic poetry, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

⁵² Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel*; Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Pierre Cachia, *Arabic Literature: An Overview*.

⁵³ M. M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁵⁴ Wail S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁵ Layla Maleh, *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009).

⁵⁶ Christina Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

culture of Arab immigrants in Brazil at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁷ Vargas examines negotiations of national and cultural identity in their works, paying special attention to the ties between nation and narration, providing an alternative framework for understanding a body of work characterized by hybridity and transnationalism. There are also a decent number of encyclopedic, survey-style texts in the Arabic source material that discuss works by *mahjar* writers in both North and South America.⁵⁸

While the aforementioned studies on *mahjar* literature have opened up new avenues to consider the literary and cultural life of Arabs in diaspora, there is still a great deal of work to be done. For example, a great deal of critical attention has been paid to the literary work of certain *mahjar* writers, such as Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, Amīn al-Rīḥānī, and Mikhā'il Nu'aymah, to the exclusion of many other important writers.⁵⁹

To address this critical gap, the present study joins forces with the above scholars and many others in the re-writing of the narrative of the novel's development that has prevailed up until this point. To some extent, this dissertation is a work of revisionist history, an attempt to retell the story of the Arabic novel by addressing lacunae in the currently circulating works. I draw attention to two glaring critical omissions in the predominant historiography of the novel – the work of women writers and *mahjar* writers – through an examination of the life and literary work of the pioneering *mahjar* woman novelist, journalist, and translator 'Afīfa Karam (1883-1924).

Summary

This study of 'Afīfa Karam (1883-1924), a forgotten pioneer of modern Arabic fiction, highlights the subjective politics of canonization in the Arabic literary field. Gender politics shaped her reception. Geographical displacement impacted her work's visibility

⁵⁷ Armando Vargas, "Migration, Literature, and the Nation: Mahjar Literature in Brazil" (PhD Dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2006).

⁵⁸ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Hawwārī, *Shu'arā' al-Mahjar al-janūbī*, al-Ṭab'ah 1 (Bayrūt: Dār wa-maktabat al-hilāl, 2009); 'Umar Daqqāq, *Shu'arā' al-'aṣabah al-Andalusīyah fī al-mahjar*, al-Ṭab'ah 1 (Bayrūt: Maktabat Dār al-Shurūq, 1973); As'ad Zaydān, *Adab wa-Udabā' al-mahjar al-Brāzīlī*, al-Ṭab'ah 1 (al-Mukhtārah, Lubnān: al-Dār al-Taḥaddumīyah, 2011).

⁵⁹ Numerous studies have been devoted to Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, Amīn al-Rīḥānī, and Mikhā'il Nu'aymah, including, Suheil B. Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran, Man and Poet: A New Biography* (Oxford, England; Boston, MA: Oneworld Publications, 1998); 'Afīf Dimashqiya, *al-Infi'aliyya wa-'l-iblaghiyya fī ba'ḍ aqāṣīṣ Mikhā'il Nu'aymah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fārābī, 1975); Nathan C. Funk, *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West : A Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding* ([Washington, D.C.]; Lanham, Md.: Ameen Rihani Institute : American University Center for Global Peace ; University Press of America, 2004); Nijmeh Hajjar, *The Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani the Humanist Ideology of an Arab-American Intellectual and Activist* (London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010); Nijmeh Salim Hajjar, "Political and Social Thought of Ameen Rihani" 1991; Khalīl Hāwī, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character, and Works* (Bayrūt: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1982); Alexandre Najjar, *Kahlil Gibran: Author of the Prophet* (London; San Francisco: Saqi Books, 2008); Walīd Munīr, *Mikhā'il Nu'aymah* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmmah li'l-Kitāb, 1992).

on the Arabic literary landscape. And, because she composed works in a genre that was still in its infancy, her works remained under the radar. Ultimately, ‘Afifa Karam’s inaugural works of Arabic fiction were left out of the narrative of the development of the Arabic novel, in both the Arabic and the English sources.

This study of Karam seeks to reframe the *nahḍa* as a highly diverse and disorderly literary and cultural phenomenon that evolved simultaneously and inconsistently in various geographically decentralized locations. Karam’s omission from the Arabic literary canon also calls attention to the fact that certain literary features – such as the use of the romance genre, colloquial Arabic, and poetry in fiction – have led to the dismissal of many works of Arabic literature and is, therefore, another factor that has limited our appreciation of the full range of artistic production of the *nahḍa*. It is my hope that this study can both put ‘Afifa Karam back on the map as an important contributor to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction and broaden our perception of Arabic literary culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER TWO

The Evolution of the Arabic Novel Reconsidered

This chapter examines the prevailing narrative of the origin and development of the Arabic novel as it is conveyed in the dominant studies of Arabic literary history and criticism produced in the Western academy. The sheer volume of critical studies dedicated to the evolution of the form, particularly in Arabic itself, forces a scholar to make a choice. My decision, as an educator in the American academy, has been to focus on Western scholarship of course, including works by Arab scholars based in the West. After all, this is the body of critical literature by far the most readily available to our students. By students, I mean both those who possess a passing interest in Arabic literary culture – whose exposure may not exceed a single college course in Arabic literature in translation – and those who are dedicated Arabic language learners. As any serious student of Arabic knows, it takes many years of committed and rigorous study to gain the level of mastery required to read works of Arabic literature or literary criticism in their original language. Even students who have reached the most advanced levels of proficiency in Arabic will overwhelmingly turn to Arabic literary studies written or translated into English (the lingua franca of the academic world today), French, Spanish, German, and other European languages. The manner in which Arabic literary history has been conveyed – or “translated” if you will – has and continues to shape the way generations of students have come to understand and appreciate one of the most significant developments in the modern Arabic tradition: the emergence of the Arabic novel.

Despite its complexity, the evolution of the Arabic novel is often recounted in a manner that omits certain voices, while highlighting others. This chapter addresses gaps in currently circulating scholarly studies on the development of the novel, and proposes a counter-narrative of its emergence that emphasizes the work of women writers and *mahjar* writers – two areas of the accepted history that are often overlooked. The ensuing account will draw attention to the principal geopolitical, socio-cultural, and stylistic issues that foreground a discussion of the Lebanese-American writer ‘Afīfa Karam. First, to historicize the novel’s emergence as a canonical genre of Arabic literature, a brief introduction to the Arabic literary tradition will situate it within the wider Arabic literary landscape. Thereafter, to contextualize Karam’s innovative work, I discuss the *nahḍa*, the Arabic literary and cultural awakening that gave rise to new literary forms including the modern Arabic novel.

Arabic Poetry

Historically speaking, poetry has always been considered the apex of literary art in Arabic. The roots of the Arabic literary tradition can be traced back to pre-Islamic Arabia, called *al-jāhiliyya* (the age of ignorance), where tribal societies developed a highly sophisticated form of poetic expression. In these cultures, the poet (*al-shā‘ir*) occupied a prominent place in society as the spokesperson for the tribe who served the

role of historian, soothsayer, and propagandist. Not only did poets declaim the tribe's prominence and boast its exemplary traits, but they also negotiated inter-tribal relations. Often, conflict between warring tribes was mediated through poetry duels, which famously took place in a prominent market square in the environs of Mecca, *Sūq al-Ukāz*.

Originally an orally-transmitted form, the poetry produced in pre-Islamic Arabia reflected the difficult existence endured by tribal populations dwelling in an inhospitable desert climate that exposed them daily to the harsh realities of life and death. Among other themes, this body of poetry boasts the heroic values necessary for survival in such climatic extremes, including tremendous physical strength, endurance, and generous hospitality. This fatalistic life philosophy is reflected in a poetic trope common to pre-Islamic poetry namely, the vicissitudes of fate – *al-dahr*, *al-zamān*, or *al-layālī* – which was interpreted as an impervious force that determines the course of events.

Whereas some of these poems are shorter verse fragments, known in Arabic as *qīṭa'* (singular: *qīṭ'a*), others are much longer, polythematic poems, or *qaṣīdāt* (singular: *qaṣīda*). These heroic poems, which are composed in a single, complex metre and rhyme throughout, firmly laid the foundations for Arabic poetry going forward. The most famous of these pre-Islamic *qaṣīdāt* are the *Mu'allaqāt*, translated as the *Golden Odes* or the *Hanging Poems*, which continue to be regarded as the great treasures of the Arabic language.

The pre-Islamic era ends in the year 622 C.E. when the Prophet Muḥammad and a group of his followers made the historic pilgrimage, or *hijra*, from Mecca to Medina, marking year one of the Islamic (*hijrī*) calendar. During the medieval Islamic period, especially during the Umayyad (661-750 C.E.) and 'Abbāsīd (750-1258 C.E.) Caliphates, poets continued to draw upon the wellspring of pre-Islamic poetry for inspiration. The principal genres, or *aghrād*, of Arabic poetry did not change significantly from the pre-Islamic period, and consisted of the *madīḥ* (panegyric), *hijā'* (invective), *rithā'* (elegy), *ghazal* (love poetry), *khamriyya* (wine poetry), *wasf* (descriptive poem), *fakhr* (boasting), *ṭardiyya* (hunt poetry), *ḥamāsa* (war poetry), and *zuhdiyya* (ascetic poetry). In fact, there are few formal innovations during the Classical era other than the emergence of a form of strophic poetry known as the *muwashshaḥa*, developed in Muslim Spain.⁶⁰

The Arabic poetry of the Classical Islamic period began to reflect the new and diverse urban and rural settings of the expanding Islamic empire. At the same time, the role of the poet changed significantly from that of the pre-Islamic poet. During the classical Islamic era, the poet no longer served as a representative of his tribe. Instead, poets were hired to endorse their patrons, who occupied prominent leadership positions throughout the geographically dispersed Muslim provinces. Poets were essentially propagandists, praising their patrons' successes and laudable qualities. As a result, classical Islamic

⁶⁰ Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 3.

poetry embodied changing religious and political ideologies, while still preserving the ancient values of pre-Islamic poetry.

Although the setting, themes, and content of Arabic poetry underwent significant transformations during the classical era, radical departures from the traditional forms of Arabic poetry did not occur until the twentieth century. Only then did the innovative poetic experimentation begin, first in the work of *mahjar* writers and later, in the 1940s, with a group of poets in Iraq. To this day, poetry continues to be the literary form that most deeply reflects Arab identity, heritage, and communal history. As the age-old saying goes, “*al-shi‘r diwān al-‘arab*” or “poetry is the register of the Arabs.”⁶¹

In addition to poetry, there is evidence to support the existence of a rich tradition of oral storytelling in pre-Islamic Arabia, such as the epics of the pagan Arab heroes ‘Antara ibn Shaddād⁶² and Saif ibn Dhī Yazan.⁶³ According to medieval Arab scholars, folktales, fables, and stories such as the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* tales, *Sīrat ‘Antar ibn Shaddād* (*The Stories of ‘Antar*), and *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*) were not seen as possessing literary merit because, among other things, they treated “questionable” topics such as sex and romance. In large part, anecdotes, vignettes, and moral tales – and certainly those written in registers of colloquial language – were relegated to a sub-canonical status.⁶⁴ By way of example, one of the most best known works of Arabic literature, *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*) – revered in the Western imagination as a masterpiece of Arabic literature – was dismissed by Arab intellectuals who viewed it as a work of popular culture rather than a treasure of Arabic literary heritage, a view that often still persists today.

Prose and Fiction Writing in the Arabic Literary Context

Despite its preference for poetry, the Arabic literary tradition boasts a long history of prose writing, which first developed during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 C.E.) and reached its height during the ‘Abbāsīd era (750-1258 C.E.). At the onset of early Arabic literary culture, the term *adab* came to signify a body of profane, courtly literature created by and for functionaries of the Islamic court. *Adab*, which is the Arabic word that has come to signify ‘literature’ in a general sense today, is a complex, multivalent term

⁶¹ Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 2.

⁶² Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (University of Utah Press, 1996).

⁶³ For more, see Aboubakr Chraïbi, “Le Roman de Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan: Sources, Structure et Argumentation,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 84 (January 1, 1996): 113–34; Lena Jayyusi, ed., *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan: An Arab Folk Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁶⁴ It should be noted that some types of indigenous prose fiction narratives were considered by Arab scholars to be more serious literary works than others, owing primarily to their use of the formal linguistic register and style. A prime example is the *maqāma*, a work of fictional prose of substantial length, composed primarily in *saj‘*, or rhymed prose, and interspersed with verses of poetry, proverbs, and morals, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly.

whose literal meaning is “culture, refinement, good breeding, or good manners.”⁶⁵ Works of *adab*, or *belles-lettres*, were generally composed in prose or rhymed prose (*sajʿ*) and peppered with lines of poetic verse. These works treated a wide spectrum of subjects, ranging from history, philosophy, anthropology, geography, and the sciences, to ethics and aesthetics.⁶⁶ In the traditional Arabic context, works of *adab* were expected to include a measure of edifying material while simultaneously entertaining the reader. This dual intent is important to keep in mind in a discussion of the evolution of modern Arabic fiction in general, and my discussion of the novels of ‘Afifa Karam in particular.

In sum, the classical corpus of Arabic literature does not include among its privileged narrative forms a lengthy work of prose fiction that corresponds to the novel. The fact that the Arabic language has no specific term to designate the concept of ‘fiction’ is a clear reflection of the lesser status of fiction writing within the classical Arabic literary tradition.⁶⁷ Indeed, the vast majority of Arab literati did not regard fiction writing as an acceptable literary genre until well into the twentieth century. However, over time, Arabic literary dynamics began to shift. This transformation of literary norms and expectations began during the *nahḍa*, propelled by a number of historical, cultural, and social factors. The next section provides a detailed presentation of this pivotal period of Arabic literary and cultural history, which led, among other things, to the rise of the modern Arabic novel.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Overview of the *Nahḍa*

During the final decades of Ottoman rule (1880-1920), the living conditions and outlook of Arabic-speaking populations shifted dramatically in response to political events and socio-economic forces. Increasing signs of agitation and civil unrest had begun to emerge in the Ottoman-controlled Arab territories as early as 1821 with the Greek War of Independence.⁶⁸ Throughout the remainder of the century, nationalist currents were on the rise, as were voices of political, economic, and social dissent. At the same time, Western forces were encroaching upon Arabic-speaking Ottoman territories. During this period, Arabs were increasingly exposed to new ideas and ways of life, either through the arrival of foreigners on Arab soil or through their own travels abroad as students or emigrants. This international and intercultural exchange impacted the way that Arabic-speaking peoples saw themselves in relation to the wider world they inhabited.

Alongside the rise of nationalist consciousness – a reaction to an increasingly oppressive Ottoman sovereignty and the growing presence of Europeans and Americans in the

⁶⁵ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)*, 4th ed. (Ithaca, N.Y: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 11.

⁶⁶ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁸ For a full treatment of the history of the Greek Revolution, see David Brewer, *The Greek War of Independence: The Struggle for Freedom from Ottoman Oppression and the Birth of the Modern Greek Nation* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2001).

region – a new generation of Arab intellectuals began to discuss the politics of modernization, articulating novel views on religious and social reform, including the emancipation of women. Wide-ranging debates on the pros and cons of Western ideas and influence – coupled with questions regarding the place of traditional Arab values and cultural forms in the “modern” world – accompanied capitalist expansion, military and economic colonialism, industrialization, and the advent of new technologies.

Scholarly treatments of the *nahḍa* often present it as a period of rapid social, cultural, and intellectual transformation that catapulted the Arab world into the modern era. More often than not, these studies foreground the impact of Europe as the driving force behind this process of modernization. ‘Afāf Luṭfī Sayyid Marsot and Peter Gran have produced studies that question the over-emphasis on Europe as the prime catalyst for the Arab “awakening.”⁶⁹ While Europe was clearly a major source of modernization in the Arab world, the Ottoman Empire played a similar, and possibly more influential, role during the years leading up to the *nahḍa*.

In an attempt to consolidate Ottoman authority in the face of rising nationalist movements from within the territories, and the infiltration of foreign powers from without, a series of reforms (called the *Tanzimat*) were enacted in 1839.⁷⁰ These new policies, initiated by a group of European-educated Ottoman reformers, were designed to foster a new culture of “Ottomanism” and to create unity throughout the Ottoman provinces by granting greater civil liberties to the diverse non-Muslim populations living under Ottoman rule. With the approval of a document called the Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber in 1839, all Ottoman citizens were treated equally under the law, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity.⁷¹

The *Tanzimat* reforms also marked a turn toward Westernization in the Ottoman Empire as they sought to modernize the Empire’s military and economic institutions to better suit the modern industrial world. For the first time, Western-style uniforms were adopted by the Ottoman army and, between 1848 and 1852, the first modern universities, teacher training colleges, and scientific academies were established.

In addition, the *Tanzimat* reforms had a major impact on socio-economic relations in the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire. Particularly in Greater Syria, which was already home to many non-Muslim citizens, these reforms created economic changes that gradually put an end to the feudal oligarchy and gave rise to a new bourgeoisie and petit-

⁶⁹ For more, see Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*, Cambridge Middle East Library (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760-1840*, Modern Middle East Series ; No. 4 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

⁷⁰ For a detailed treatment of the Tanzimat reforms, see Chapter 6, “The Tanzimat and the Time of Re-Ottomanization,” in Bruce Alan Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷¹ Alexander Mikaberidze, *Conflict and Conquest in the Islamic World: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 876.

bourgeoisie.⁷² The emergence of this new social class in Syro-Lebanon created important social and cultural developments, not least among them increased access to education and literacy and the growth of journalism and publishing.

As a consequence, the first glimmerings of the *nahḍa* appeared in the Levant (*Bilād al-Shām*). During the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman-controlled region known as Greater Syria (*Sūrīyā al-Kubrā*) comprised modern Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, as well as portions of Jordan and Iraq. However, with the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, the region was left open to competition for influence from European and Russian powers.⁷³

In 1916, Britain and France – with the consultation of Russia – signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, which, secretly and without international validation, effectively divided control of the area between the two nations. According to this covert agreement, France appropriated sovereignty over Syria and Lebanon and parts of southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, and dominated the region until the two countries finally gained their independence in 1936 and 1943 respectively. Britain, in turn, took control of southern Iraq as well as portions of Jordan and Palestine, including the ports of Haifa and Acre, allowing access to the Mediterranean. British-Zionist negotiations also began during this period, leading eventually to the ratification of the British Mandate of Palestine in 1922, further enhancing British colonial influence throughout the region.

Thus, between the late 19th century and 1916, the borderlines between present-day Syria and Lebanon – and the sense of national identity of their peoples – were much more fluid than they are today. In the discussion here, I often use the term ‘Syria’ to denote what was technically Greater Syria or Ottoman Syria. I also use the term ‘Lebanon’ and ‘Lebanese’ rather anachronistically at times in my discussions of ‘Afīfa Karam and other authors based in Beirut and its environs. Though Lebanon did not gain its independence until the French colonial mandate ended in 1943, I use the term nevertheless, because the region of Mount Lebanon – so named for the mountain range that extends the entire length of the country along the Mediterranean coast – has always preserved its own autonomous political, geographical, and cultural identity, regardless of the shifting borders around it.

As previously discussed, the Levant experienced wide-ranging cultural and political influences throughout the nineteenth century. In addition to the Druze, Muslim, Orthodox, and Maronite Christian communities native to Mount Lebanon, French Catholic and American Protestant missionary communities also became a presence and were particularly influential in the establishment of institutions of learning.⁷⁴

⁷² Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 5.

⁷³ At this time, Greater Syria was ruled by Abdul-Hamid II (1876-1909).

⁷⁴ Adele L. Younis, *The Coming of the Arabic-Speaking People to the United States* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Center for Migration Studies, 1995), 40.

Western influence also spread through the expansion of commercial trade relations with Europe. Beginning in the 1860s, the French began to look to Mount Lebanon for a cheaper source of labor for the production of silk, which led to the development of a major silk industry in Mount Lebanon. This change transformed the preexisting social hierarchies in the region; some members of the peasant class (those who worked in silk factories) gained increased economic power and upward social mobility, while others suffered due to the collapse of local industries.

Crucial for the evolution of the *nahḍa* was the introduction of print technology to the region. Christian missionaries first imported Arabic linotype in 1706, initially intended to publish Arabic translations of the Bible.⁷⁵ When the Protestant mission moved its printing press from Malta to Beirut in 1834, print culture in the Levant exploded as local people began to employ the new technology for their own purposes.⁷⁶ In the subsequent decades, the number of printing presses in the Levant increased dramatically, rising to over forty by 1874.⁷⁷

Missionary schools spread Western-style education throughout the region, along with a new system of tastes, habits, beliefs and ways of thinking. They were also the first to spearhead the education of women in the Levant, beginning in 1834, when American missionaries established the first school for girls in Beirut.⁷⁸ In 1866, American missionaries founded the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University in Beirut (AUB), which continues to be the premiere institution of higher learning in the country and arguably in the Middle East as a whole.⁷⁹

Likewise, many local literary-scientific institutions were organized and rose to prominence. These organizations include *Majma' al-Tahdhīb*, which loosely translates as Assembly of Culture or Refinement, founded in 1847, *al-Jam'īya al-'Ilmiyya al-Sūriyya* (The Syrian Scientific Society), active between 1868 and 1869, *al-Madrassa al-Waṭaniyya*, the National School founded by Buṭrus al-Bustānī in 1863, and *al-Madrassa al-Sultāniyya*, the Sultanate School, or Imperial Lycée, founded by Ottoman Empire in 1869.⁸⁰

As educational opportunities expanded and the reading public continued to grow, there was an even greater upsurge of journalistic and literary activity in Beirut and Damascus, the prime loci of intellectual activity of the *nahḍa* in the Levant. A variety of Arabic

⁷⁵ The Maronite community had a printing press for the publication of religious texts, adding two more in 1734 and 1753, in Shuwayr and Beirut, respectively. From Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 8.

⁷⁶ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 46.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The first school for girls was established by American Missionaries Eli Smith and his wife in Beirut in 1834, from Ibid., 52.

⁷⁹ For a complete history of Protestant missionary activity in the Levant, see Samir Khalaf, *Protestant Missionaries in the Levant: Ungodly Puritans, 1820-1860* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁸⁰ For more detailed information, see Holt, "Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut."

journals sprouted up in the 1860s and 1870s, including *al-Jinān*, *al-Zahra*, *al-Naḥla*, *al-Bashīr*, *al-Janna*, *al-Najāh*, *al-Nashra al-Uṣbū‘iyya*, and *al-Junayna*.⁸¹

Despite the flourishing of intellectual activity in Greater Syria during the latter part of the nineteenth century, historical circumstances arose that hindered the flowering of the *nahḍa* in the Levant.⁸² Sectarian conflict between Maronite Christian and Druze populations in Mount Lebanon began to escalate, culminating in 1860 with a bloody civil war that shook the region.⁸³ Furthermore, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Greater Syria was undergoing one of the most oppressive periods of the Ottoman occupation. The strict censorship policies employed by Ottoman rulers to suppress views that threatened its existence made it a difficult climate for the publication of literary works, particularly after 1880.⁸⁴

In response to these difficult circumstances, Syrians fled the country in droves, migrating to Egypt, Sudan, Europe, and North and South America. While some emigrated to escape sectarian violence and the repressive policies of the Ottoman regime, others were enticed by the promise of the New World, which offered economic prosperity as well as political and social freedoms. Thousands of Levantine citizens decided to relocate to cities throughout North and South America, where they established thriving merchant communities. As the other vital center of Arabic intellectual and literary activity of the *nahḍa*, Egypt was one of the most popular destinations for Syrian emigrants fleeing the precarious situation in their homeland.

Though contact between Egypt and the Western world had existed for centuries, primarily through trade relations,⁸⁵ the first significant invasion of Egyptian soil by a European military force was the French campaign led by the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 and France’s subsequent occupation of Egypt for a period of three years. In response, an Albanian officer and a member of the Ottoman forces, Muḥammad ‘Alī Pāshā (1769-1849), was sent by the Ottomans to expel the French from Egypt. Following the ousting of Napoleon and his army from Egypt in 1801, Muḥammad ‘Alī proceeded to remain in power until 1848 as its self-declared *Khedive*.⁸⁶

⁸¹ For a detailed treatment of the Arab Press in Beirut, see Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut”; Philippe de Tarrāzī, *Tārīkh al-ṣiḥāfa al-‘arabiyya* (Bagdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1971).

⁸² Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 16.

⁸³ For a detailed analysis of the events surrounding the 1860 war between Druze and Maronites in Mount Lebanon, see Ussama Samir Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸⁴ For a full treatment of Ottoman censorship in the Levant, see Donald J. Cioeta, “Ottoman Censorship in Lebanon and Syria, 1876-1908,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 2 (1979): 167–86.

⁸⁵ Marsot and Gran have demonstrated that Arab-European relations actually date back to a much earlier period, due to the fact that Arab lands were strategically located along the historic trade routes between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Commerce between Europe and Arab territories greatly intensified during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century as the Middle East and Africa provided the raw materials and markets needed to support the expanding industrial capitalist system in Europe. For more, see Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*; Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760-1840*.

⁸⁶ *Khedive* is an Ottoman Turkish title that translates roughly to the English ‘viceroy.’

Muḥammad ‘Alī was so impressed by the might and excellence of the French military that he set out to create an army like Bonaparte’s in Egypt. To this end, the Egyptian ruler reorganized the military, founded industries, improved the irrigation and administrative systems, introduced new Western technologies, and instated a series of technological, educational, and bureaucratic reforms. As part of his modernizing strategies, Muḥammad ‘Alī also initiated educational reforms in the country. Of critical importance to the *nahḍa* were the educational missions of Muḥammad ‘Alī, who sent delegations of Egyptian scholars, scientists, and researchers to study in Europe, particularly in Italy and France.⁸⁷ The success of Muḥammad ‘Alī’s reformist policies – particularly his promotion of European-style education in the fields of medicine and the sciences – contributed to the progressive and dynamic atmosphere in the country.⁸⁸

At the same time, print technology, first introduced during Bonaparte’s expedition in 1798, spread rapidly across Egypt and revolutionized the country’s reading culture. In tandem with Muḥammad ‘Alī’s expansion of the public education system in Egypt, the rise of Arab journalism engendered a dramatic increase in readership, especially in the major cities of Cairo and Alexandria. By the end of the 19th century, 169 periodicals were circulating in Egypt alone.⁸⁹ The combination of improved access to education and the flourishing culture of Arab journalism led to a gradual increase in the number of Arabic readers, representing a much wider spectrum of society.

Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873), a young Egyptian student who was sent to Europe on an Egyptian government mission, would become one of the most influential figures of the *nahḍa*. While living in Paris for five years as an *imām*, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī wrote his famous work *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (*Extracting Gold in Summarizing Paris*).⁹⁰ This foundational text, published in 1834, described French customs such as food, dress, laws, government, and society. As one of the earliest Arabic texts to examine the relationship between East and West, *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz* had a profound impact on Egyptian intellectual and literary discourse of the day. Deemed a “milestone toward modernity” by later critics, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s work revealed a newfound awareness of Arab identity in relation to a European other.⁹¹ Two years later, in 1836, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī would become a leading figure of the period when he was placed in charge of the new School of Languages in Cairo. This institution played a crucial role in the Arab cultural enlightenment as the primary headquarters of a growing movement to translate literature written in European languages into Arabic.⁹²

⁸⁷ For details on the educational missions of Muḥammad ‘Alī, see Booth and Gorman, *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, 92–93. See also Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 124.

⁸⁸ Marsot and Gran argue that the *nahḍa* was an equally autochthonous phenomenon that began well before the ascendancy of Muḥammad ‘Alī Pāshā to the seat of power. This claim runs counter to the dominant historiographic narratives that present him as the great modernizer of Egypt.

⁸⁹ Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 130.

⁹⁰ Rifā‘ah Rāfi‘ Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1993, 1834).

⁹¹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 45.

⁹² Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 9.

Because the political and social climate in Egypt was more liberal than that of the Levant, it provided Syrian intellectuals with a place to express themselves more freely. For this reason, Levantine immigrants arrived in Egypt by the thousands, particularly during the 1870s and 1880s, increasing the literary and cultural activity in what was already a vibrant cultural center. The large-scale emigration of Syrians to Egypt played a decisive role in the flowering of Arab journalism. The arrival of scores of Syrian Christian writers and intellectuals in the 1870s and 1880s led to a rapid increase in the quantity and diversity of Arabic language newspapers being published in Egypt. In fact, immigrants from Greater Syria founded some of the most well known newspapers in Egypt. Several of these, including *al-Ahrām* (*The Pyramids*) and *al-Hilāl* (*The Crescent Moon*), are still in publication today.

Syrian women who immigrated to Egypt with their families became important pioneers of the Arab women's press. In 1892, a Lebanese Christian woman named Hind Nawfal (1860-1920) established the first Arabic women's journal, *al-Fatāh* (*The Young Woman*). This Cairo-based journal is the first of many women's periodicals that sprang up during the *nahḍa*. For example, a Jewish woman named Esther Moyal (1873-1948) founded a periodical she called *al-‘Ā’ila* (*The Family*) in 1899.⁹³ In 1906, the Lebanese Christian Labība Hāshim (1882-1952) established the journal *Fatāt al-Sharq* (*Young Woman of the East*), which remained in circulation for over thirty years. A few years later, in 1911, ‘Afīfa Karam would go on to establish the first Arab women's periodical outside of the Arab world, called *al-Imrā’a al-Sūriyya* (*The Syrian Woman*). Two years later, Karam would establish a second women's journal, which she called *al-‘Ālam al-Jadīd al-Nisā’ī* (*The New Women's World*).⁹⁴

A significant number of Levantine Christians who participated in the dynamic intellectual culture of the *nahḍa* emigrated to North and South America, where they had even greater freedom of expression than those living along the Nile. The world of journalism played a crucial role in the fostering of community among these Arabs in exile. In the wider Arab diaspora, just as in Egypt and the Levant, the educational reforms and ideological shifts of the *nahḍa* – along with the ever-expanding reading public – created and nourished the burgeoning Arabic press.

Numerous Arabic-language journals and periodicals were established in the United States during the late nineteenth century to serve the reading needs of the growing population of Syrian immigrants.⁹⁵ The first Arabic-language newspaper in America, *Kawkab Amrīkā*

⁹³ For more on Esther Moyal, see Levy, “Jewish Writers in the Arab East.”

⁹⁴ In 1912, Karam bought the license of a paper owned by Sallūm Mukarzil called *al-‘Ālam al-Jadīd* (*The New World*) and renamed it *al-‘Ālam al-Jadīd al-Nisā’ī* (*The New Women's World: A Ladies' Monthly Arabic Magazine*). *The New Women's World* was a monthly magazine intended as a supplement to her weekly magazine *al-Imrā’a al-Sūriyya* (*The Syrian Woman*). For more, see Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Barbara Yūsuf Badawī *‘Afīfa Karam: Ḥayātuhā wa-a‘māluhā* (Bayrūt: Barbara Badawī, 2001), 45.

⁹⁵ By 1928, there were six Arabic daily newspapers published out of New York City alone. This is in addition to five other papers in Detroit, New York City, and Lawrence, Massachusetts that were published

(*Star of America*), appeared in 1892, followed shortly thereafter by *al-Hudā* (*Guidance*) in 1898 and *Mir'āt al-Gharb* (*Mirror of the West*) in 1899.⁹⁶ All of these newspapers were published in the neighborhood of “Little Syria” in Manhattan. By 1907, over twenty Arabic daily, weekly, and monthly papers were published in the United States, most of them out of New York City.⁹⁷ Subsequent chapters of this study will provide more detailed discussions of the cultural production of Arabs in diaspora.

The introduction of print technology ushered in the rise of Arab journalism, which spread rapidly throughout the region, and led to the evolution of a new, simpler Arabic prose style. The new Arab press, by virtue of its international circulation, both encouraged a wider Arabic readership locally and linked Arab readers to societies overseas. A vibrant culture of intellectual journalism embraced the discussion of controversial social issues, and provided the increased availability of foreign literary works through translation, transforming the lived reality of Arabic-speaking populations throughout the world.

To reach a wider audience, writers and journalists were compelled to use a new Arabic idiom that was simple, direct, and unadorned, particularly when compared with the baroque, ornamental prose that characterized Arabic literary texts of the previous centuries. At first, “the plain speech of journalists was seen as a necessity, rather than a desirable stylistic feature.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, it caught on and eventually evolved into the literary and journalistic language that is used throughout the Arabic-speaking world today. Thus, the birth of Arab journalism played an essential role in the modernization of the Arabic language.⁹⁹ Furthermore, as the site of a remarkable burst of literary experimentation, Arab journalism and its ever-expanding audience also played a pivotal role in the birth of the novel.

Changing Literary Dynamics During the *Nahḍa*

It is against this historical background of tremendous social, political, and cultural change that traditional views of Arabic literature began to undergo dramatic transformations. Prior to the cultural awakening of the *nahḍa*, the Arabic literary language – as opposed to spoken colloquial dialects of Arabic – had become the domain of an elite minority. Poets and writers clung to the styles and sensibilities of the classical literary era. Prose writing was overwhelmingly composed in *sajʿ*, rhymed prose, and featured archaic vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. This language, which evolved over time to what M.

weekly, semi-weekly, or monthly. For a complete list, see Raouf J. Halaby, “Dr. Michael Shadid and the Debate over Identity in *The Syrian World*,” in Eric J. Hooglund, ed., *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 56.

⁹⁶ Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 180.

⁹⁷ The remaining Arabic periodicals were published in Philadelphia, Lawrence, Massachusetts, and St. Louis. For more details see Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, M.E.R.I. Special Studies (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 319.

⁹⁸ Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 130.

⁹⁹ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 22.

M. Badawi has called “mere artifice and verbal acrobatics,” was only accessible to those who enjoyed the privilege of an education and training in the classical Arabic tradition.¹⁰⁰

During the Arabic cultural renaissance, authors, critics, and intellectuals grappled with time-honored literary conventions that had hitherto delineated what could be considered ‘literature’ as they began to revitalize the formal Arabic language and its literature. Some found the obsolete Arabic literary tradition ill-equipped for the task of portraying the emerging new social order and its eager newly-literate readers, while others became involved in the republication of new editions of the classics of the Arabic poetic tradition. For many writers and intellectuals, the long-established Arabic literary language, conventions, and styles – and the subjects of their texts themselves – had become antiquated and obsolete and were no longer viewed as an appropriate medium to reflect and address the major changes occurring throughout the Arab world.

The growing audience for the earliest prose fiction works in Arabic in the modern era was a new bourgeois readership.¹⁰¹ Beirut, Cairo, and other more distant cosmopolitan cities including New York became vibrant centers of intellectual activity, education, publishing, and commercial activity. These new readers and writers of Arabic were living in a very different world than the one inhabited by their parents. Furthermore, the literature produced by this exclusive group became increasingly divorced from reality as experienced by the overwhelming majority of the Arab world.¹⁰²

The convergence of diverse, and often conflicting, critical views about Arabic literary forms and styles – across great distances – forms the background of the origin and development of the Arabic novel. Considering the impact of new technologies, the increased movement and interaction of diverse populations, and the exchange of new ideas and modes of living that ensued, the origin and development of the Arabic novel can be thought of as “associated with the generation of a new world-view and a fresh way of expressing and consequently understanding it.”¹⁰³ Hafez, borrowing Hans Robert Jauss’ definition of literary genres as “mechanisms for comprehending, shaping, and responding to reality,” considers the rise of the Arabic novel as one manifestation of a major societal shift, as the product of a marked rupture in the artistic and cultural sensibilities of a population.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Although the processes that led to the emergence of the novel in the Arab world and the West are separated by two centuries, it is possible to draw parallels between the development of the novel in these discrete contexts. In his foundational study on the history of the English novel, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt put forth his “triple rise” thesis. According to this theory, the emergence of the genre was linked to various socio-economic factors, especially the rise of a new bourgeois class. In his conception, the rise of the bourgeoisie brought about an increase in literacy, which led, in turn, to the practice of leisure reading, and finally, to the invention of the novel. The history of the novel’s emergence in the Arabic context exhibits similar traits. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

¹⁰² Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 6.

¹⁰³ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 105.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Antecedents of the Arabic Novel: The *Maqāma*

During the *nahḍa*, writers began to reexamine classical Arabic literary models, in both prose and poetry, often adapting them to a modern setting. In the Levant, members of several major Syrian and Lebanese Christian families, most notably the Bustānī, Shidyāq, Naqqāsh, Yāzījī, and Marrāsh families, began to explore new literary ground.¹⁰⁵ Nāṣif al-Yāzījī (1800-1871), for example, was a pioneer in the reengagement with great works of Arabic literature from the past, such as the famous *maqāmāt* of Muḥammad al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122).¹⁰⁶ The revitalization of the *maqāma* was an integral component of the wider neoclassical movement in Arabic literature and is presented as a critical element in the development of the Arabic novel in most critical texts.

The *maqāma* form was first employed by Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (968-1008) in his famous collection of fifty-two episodic stories featuring a trickster character named 'Abu al-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī whose adventures and exploits are recounted by a narrator, 'Īsā ibn Hishām. This genre is composed of numerous episodes that appear as short, discreet entries with little unifying narrative structure, which has led some scholars to the opinion that the *maqāma* is in fact the ancestor of the Spanish picaresque novel.¹⁰⁷ While meant for enjoyment (*tasliya*), the *maqāmāt* are also didactic, moralistic tales, in keeping with the conventions of classical Arabic letters that required literary forms to be instructive as well as entertaining. During the second half of the nineteenth century, early experiments in prose writing transported the *maqāma* into a contemporary setting, marking an important shift in the Arabic literary culture of the day.

Several adaptations of the *maqāma* have been cited as early precursors to the modern Arabic novel in the dominant critical works on this period. The earliest of these texts is *al-Sāq 'alā al-Sāq fī mā huwa al-Fāryāq* (*The Life and Adventures of al-Faryaḳ*) (1855) by Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1809-87), a Syrian Christian who lived intermittently in Beirut, Cairo, and Malta. Al-Shiqyāq founded the Ottoman Empire's most influential Arabic journal, *al-Jawā'ib*, published in Istanbul.¹⁰⁸ However, due to increasingly stringent censorship enforced by the Ottoman government in the 1880s, al-Shidyāq relocated to Cairo where he became a frequent contributor to one of the oldest Egyptian publications, *al-Waḳā'i' al-Miṣriyya* (*The Egyptian Gazette*). In *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq*, al-Shidyāq transformed the *maqāma* into an essay addressing contemporary issues such as marriage, domestic life, and the treatment of women, using a humorous and sarcastic tone.¹⁰⁹ Scholars such as Pierre Cachia¹¹⁰ and Buṭrus al-Ḥallāq have identified this text as one of the first real attempts at fiction in modern Arabic literature.¹¹¹ In a recent volume,

¹⁰⁵ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 123.

¹⁰⁸ Cioeta, "Ottoman Censorship in Lebanon and Syria, 1876-1908," 171.

¹⁰⁹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 130.

¹¹⁰ Cachia, Pierre, "The Prose Stylists" from M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 407.

¹¹¹ Boutrous Hallaq, "Love and the Birth of Modern Arabic Literature," in Roger M. A. Allen, *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1995), 16-23.

Raḍwā ‘Ashūr goes even further, arguing that al-Shidyāq’s work should be considered as the first Arabic novel.¹¹² While this particular claim is debatable, there is no doubt that al-Shidyāq’s work was one of the earliest examples of a neoclassical movement in Arabic prose, and one that contributed to the evolution of Arabic narrative discourse on the whole.

In subsequent decades, the *maqāma* form became so popular that eventually “every major figure of the Levantine renaissance wrote his own *maqāmāt*.”¹¹³ This resulted in more *maqāmāt* being written during the nineteenth century than throughout the previous 800 years. The *maqāma* revival initiated by Syro-Lebanese Christians, many of whom immigrated to Egypt – such as al-Shidyāq and Marrāsh – soon caught on and was taken up by Egyptian writers. One such writer was ‘Alī Mubārak (1823-93), the founder and director of the Khedival library, *Dār al-Kutub*, now the Egyptian National Library.¹¹⁴ Mubārak composed a didactic work entitled *‘Ālam al-Dīn* (1882) that consists of 125 *musāmarāt*, or evening chats. Mubārak’s work follows the narrator, ‘Ālam al-Dīn, his son Burhān al-Dīn, and an English tourist studying Arabic, on a journey through Cairo.¹¹⁵ This particular iteration of the picaresque structure enabled the author to discuss a wide range of issues pertaining to the contemporary socio-cultural and political life of Cairo, which is the primary feature that has led scholars to consider this text an important antecedent to the modern Arabic novel.

Later still, the prominent Egyptian writer and intellectual Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī (1858-1908) published his own adaptation of the *maqāma*. Al-Muwayliḥī’s famous work, *Ḥadīth ‘Īsā Ibn Hishām*, which first appeared under the title *Fatra min al-Zaman* (*A Period of Time*), features a direct allusion to the famous *maqāmat* of al-Hamadḥānī in its title. Al-Muwayliḥī’s collection was first published serially between 1898 and 1902 in the periodical owned by his father, *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharq* (*Lamp of the East*). The work was subsequently published in book form in 1907. Like *‘Ālam al-Dīn* by ‘Alī Mubārak, *Ḥadīth ‘Īsā Ibn Hishām* is a neoclassical work written in *saj’* that addresses changes in contemporary Egyptian society with a sharp, critical tone, and is interspersed with lines of poetry, especially that of Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (973-1057). The premise of the work is the fantastical and humorous meeting between ‘Īsā, its narrator, and Aḥmad Bāsha al-Manīkalī, a resurrected Pasha from the early 1800s who is bewildered by the changes that have taken place in Egyptian society since his death. Each episode recounts the humorous adventures of the pair as ‘Īsā guides the Pasha through his new surroundings. Due to its success and far-reaching influence, the work is invariably cited as one of the early precursors to the modern Arabic novel.

¹¹² ‘Ashūr, Raḍwa, *al-Ḥadātha al-Mumkina: al-Shidyāq wa-al-Sāq ‘ala al-Sāq, al-Riwāya al-Ūla fī al-Adab al-‘Arabī al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2009).

¹¹³ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 110.

¹¹⁴ For more on Mubārak’s work *‘Ālam al-Dīn*, see El-Sherif, *Cairo-Paris the Urban Imaginary of the Self*. See also Nezar AlSayyad, “‘Ali Mubarak’s Cairo: Between the Testimony of ‘Ālamuddin and the Imaginary of the Khitat” in Nezar AlSayyad, *Making Cairo Medieval* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2005).

¹¹⁵ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 130–131.

The aforementioned texts are certainly formative works of Arabic fiction that encouraged further experimentation in Arabic narrative discourse. However, mainstream critical studies on the topic tend to make problematic assumptions about the degree of influence of the neoclassical revival of the *maqāma* on the birth of the Arabic novel. The *maqāma* has been over-emphasized in critical studies that identify it as the singular indigenous model that contributed to the modernization of Arabic fiction. This notion is misleading. By focusing exclusively on the *maqāma* form, to the exclusion of other important indigenous models, the dominant narratives of Arabic literary history present a rather narrow view of the evolution of modern Arabic literature.

The *maqāma* is not the only indigenous Arabic fictional model that informed Arab writers' understanding of narrative fiction. Other important examples of Arabic fictional prose narratives that contributed to the novel's emergence include the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* tales, *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād* (*The Stories of 'Antar*), al-Tanūkhī's *al-Faraj ba'ad al-Shiddah* (*Escape from Hardship*), *Sīrat Bani Hilāl* (*The Epic of Bani Hilal*) and *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Arabian Nights*). As I indicated earlier, these fictional works were denigrated by scholars of Arabic literature who regarded them as mere folktales rather than as works of literature. The tendency to downplay the impact of these important works points to a general reluctance among scholars to acknowledge the significance of popular Arabic fiction.

To justify their dismissal of works of native fiction, scholars often point to the fact that events in indigenous fictional models – including both the *maqāma* and works of popular literature – are “generally characterized by the fabulous” rather than by causality; that characters are “types” rather than individuals with fleshed out personalities; and that the settings are faraway and romantic, rather than realistic.¹¹⁶ While these traits can be observed in many of these works, scholars' evaluative and dismissive stance toward indigenous Arabic fictional models effectively negates the important role they played in the evolution of the Arabic novel. The ambivalent view of fiction in the classical tradition – whether it is composed in the formal or colloquial register – has contributed to the opinion that the novel in Arabic is a borrowed literary form, rather than one that emanated from pre-existing Arabic literary forms.¹¹⁷

In her article on the literary culture of 1870s and 1880s Beirut, Elizabeth Holt demonstrates that printed copies of the *Arabian Nights* circulated widely “among storytellers and the reading class alike,” suggesting an “interest in the collection among literate members of the growing reading public.”¹¹⁸ Concurrent with the first publication of prose fiction narratives in modern Arabic, popular Arabic fiction was in fact quite influential among Beirut intellectual circles. One clear example of the influence of popular Arabic fiction on early Arabic prose narratives can be seen in the use of suspense. In a gesture that is highly reminiscent of both the *Arabian Nights* and the stories of 'Antar (comparable to the contemporary Victorian English serialized fiction),

¹¹⁶ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 91–92.

¹¹⁷ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 6.

¹¹⁸ Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” 62.

individual installments of serialized Arabic fiction often come to a close at a dramatic moment, with a character in the midst of a sentence, for example. A climactic moment in the story would often be drawn out over the course of several issues, and usually, each episode would come to a stop with the phrase “the remainder to come.”¹¹⁹ This literary device is a central component of both popular Arabic fictional models and early European novels produced during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Similar uses of narrative suspense are employed in works of serialized Arabic fiction by *mahjar* writers, including those of ‘Afifa Karam, which appeared almost an entire generation later.

That said, even the *maqāmāt* are brushed aside by some scholars who are disinclined to accept *any* indigenous models as literary forms that contributed to the evolution of the modern Arabic novel. For example, Badawi makes a sweeping statement that discounts all indigenous Arabic prose forms saying, “[it] cannot be claimed that any of these works contain even in a most rudimentary form the seed of a novel.”¹²⁰ Many critics argue that the *maqāma* remains quite far removed from a modern novel, both in terms of narrative style and structure because it is a work written in *saj‘* consisting of short, independent chapters with no overarching attempt to link them in a larger structural unity. The dismissal of early works of Arabic fiction on purely formal grounds precludes the appreciation of their content and other innovative qualities many of these works possess.

Scholars who do acknowledge the significance of the early *maqāma* renditions as crucial components of the evolution of Arabic fiction, often discuss its influence in a rather problematic manner. Roger Allen describes the *maqāma* revival as a transitional stage in the development of Arabic narrative, one that moved textual production in Arabic from the phase of “translation, imitation, and adaptation” to one of “creation and experimentation.”¹²¹ This particular framing of the modern *maqāma* as a “bridge” between the classical Arabic literary heritage and emerging literary trends of the *nahḍa*, is pervasive in critical texts on the early Arabic novel.

As scholars of Arabic literature looked into the past, they attempted to reconstruct the advent of the Arabic novel by forcing it into a neat system of periodization, sculpting individual occurrences into broader series and continuities. For example, scholarship on the *nahḍa* still presents a narrative account of Arabic literature’s abandonment of indigenous forms (such as the *maqāma*) in favor of the modern novel.¹²² Thus, the perception of the Arabic novel’s development has been limited by the prevailing historiographical tendency to operate on the basis of what is now a rather outdated and reductive binary opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity.’

This progressive, linear articulation of the function of the *maqāma* in the evolution of the novel leads to a misleading, over-simplified view of the novel’s emergence as a logical, organized process, rather than one that is staggered, spontaneous, elaborate, and

¹¹⁹ Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” 54–55.

¹²⁰ M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (London: Ithaca, 1985), 129.

¹²¹ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 31–2.

¹²² Hatem, *Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, 61.

entangled. As Foucault delineates in his seminal work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in large part, the practice of history writing consists in the sifting through of materials which, “through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, effaced in order to reveal the continuity of events.”¹²³ This practice has, following Foucault, “rearranged, reduced, [and] effaced” much of the heterogeneity, discontinuity, and simultaneity, and interruptions that necessarily accompanied its emergence.¹²⁴

Through an examination of the Arabic novels of ‘Afīfa Karam, this study seeks to complicate such reductive narratives of the novel’s emergence, by demonstrating that many early works of fiction displayed a heterogeneous, hybridized composite of both Arab and Western literary conventions, forms, and styles.

The Translation and Adaptation of European Fiction

While scholars of Arabic literature continue to debate the influence of popular works such as the *Thousand and One Nights* on the development of the Arabic novel, no one questions the impact of European serialized fiction on its Arabic counterpart. While some writers were engaged with reviving the *maqāma* and republishing the masterpieces of classical Arabic poetry, others were busy translating European works into Arabic.¹²⁵ The European novel, and particularly the historical romance, is frequently cited as a prime contributor to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction. Members of the literate classes in Beirut read a number of French and English periodicals (French was one of the official languages of the Ottoman Empire). These publications frequently included works of serialized fiction. It is without doubt that the translation of European fiction influenced Arab readers and writers in the years leading up to the turn of the twentieth century. Translations and adaptations of works of European fiction published by the aforementioned School of Languages in Cairo and Levantine scholars helped to lay the groundwork for the development of new Arabic narrative forms.¹²⁶

The School of Languages, which taught Italian, French, and English, produced numerous acclaimed writers and translators who undertook the Arabic translation of over two thousand works from European languages, approximately one third were translations or adaptations (Arabizations) of nineteenth-century European literature.¹²⁷ In 1867, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī himself translated François Fénelon’s didactic prose epic *Les aventures de Télémaque* (*Mawāqī‘ al-alfāk fī waqā’i‘ Tilīmāk*) (1867). Several years later, his protégé Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl (1829-98) translated Bernadin de Saint-Pierre’s chaste romance *Paul et Virginie* (1870), the instructive *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine (1870), as well as an Arabic adaptation of Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1873).¹²⁸ These texts, and others such

¹²³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 9.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ The first Arabic verse translation of *The Iliad* was undertaken by Sulayman al-Bustani in 1904.

¹²⁶ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 98–99.

¹²⁷ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 21.

¹²⁸ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 58, 88.

as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and the adventure novels of Alexandre Dumas, père, and Jules Verne, were translated and circulated widely in the press during the 1870s and 1880s, gradually familiarizing Arabic readers with the European novel.¹²⁹ It was not long until a group of Syrian Christian intellectuals, such as Fransīs Marrāsh (1836-73), Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1809-87), Mārūn al-Naqqāsh (1817-55), and Salīm al-Bustānī (1846-84) began to write and publish the earliest novelistic prose works in Arabic.¹³⁰

Novel Writing: A Revolutionary Act

Until well into the twentieth century, the novel as a literary genre remained controversial among many Arab literati, who viewed it as unconventional, improper, even vulgar. The romance novel, in particular, was criticized for its taboo portrayal of love and relationships. Cultural notions such as this contributed to the vexed emergence of the novel as a genre of Arabic literature. Novel writing was seen as a revolutionary act and a risky undertaking, particularly for intellectuals who occupied prominent positions in the literary and cultural establishment. In a discussion of the respected writer Mustafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūtī (1876-1924)¹³¹ – who is frequently cited as a pioneer of Arabic narrative prose – Pierre Cachia notes that the “sentiment lingered that mere story-telling was not a proper occupation for a man of learning.”¹³² Note that in the above quotation, women are not even considered as players on the intellectual field, which is a firm reminder of the marginalization of women, both in Arabic literary culture of the turn of the century and in later critical assessments of Arabic literary history.

In order to justify their enterprise, early fiction writers during the *nahḍa* – both male and female – employed a number of tactics. One strategy that helped authors to circumvent criticism for composing works of fiction was to use a classical form (such as the *maqāma*) as an entryway. Another strategy employed by authors was to validate their prose by highlighting its inherent instructive or moral value. Some authors elected to publish their works anonymously or under pseudonyms to avoid censure from critics. The use of pseudonyms allowed early writers of Arabic fiction to obscure their identities and protect their public reputations. One writer who notably employed this tactic is none other than Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, author of the purported “first Arabic novel.” When Haykal first published *Zaynab* in 1914, the novel was still such a controversial genre in Arabic that the author decided not to sign the work with his real name. Instead, Haykal opted for the penname “*Miṣrī fallāḥ*” (“an Egyptian peasant”), “as the author did not wish his novelistic activities to stand in the way of his projected legal career.”¹³³ As

¹²⁹ Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 130–136.

¹³⁰ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 10.

¹³¹ Trained at al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's School of Languages, al-Manfalūtī was an author of adaptations and arabizations of European fiction. In addition, he wrote a series of essays and vignettes on a variety of topics that were published serially in the journal *Al-Mu'ayyad* (The Supporter), called *al-Naẓārāt* (1910-12) and *al-'Abārāt* (1915).

¹³² Cachia, *Arabic Literature*, 136.

¹³³ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 102.

this strategic decision indicates, more often than not, early prose writers like Haykal felt uneasy about composing fiction in Arabic.¹³⁴

The Development of Modern Arabic Fiction: An Alternate View

Despite widespread resistance to the genre, early pioneers began publishing Arabic works of novelistic prose as early as 1870. The first author to produce Arabic fictional texts that resembled a novel in form is Salīm al-Bustānī (1848-1884), the son of a “foundational thinker of Arab culture and society,” Buṭrus al-Bustānī.¹³⁵ Salīm al-Bustānī was trained in Arabic language and literature by Nāṣif al-Yāzījī, who was one of the leading figures of the *nahḍa* and a major player in the rediscovery of classical Arabic literary heritage. After succeeding his father Buṭrus as translator for the American Consulate in Beirut, Salīm al-Bustānī began his career by translating and adapting several works of French and English gothic and pulp novels into Arabic.¹³⁶ He taught English and French at *al-Madrasa al-Waṭaniyya* (The National School) and participated in the activities of *al-Jam‘īya al-‘ilmiyya al-Sūriyya* (The Syrian Scientific Society), serving also as its vice president.¹³⁷ For his myriad literary and intellectual endeavors, al-Bustānī has been described as “the consummate Arab Renaissance man” who represented “the quintessence of *al-nahḍa al-‘arabiyya*.”¹³⁸

Over time, al-Bustānī took note of the need for an indigenous Arabic narrative “free from the manacles of the *maqāma*,” which prompted the author to compose his own Arabic fictional works.¹³⁹ In 1870, Salīm al-Bustānī began to compose some of the first Arabic fictional prose texts, which he published in his influential, Beirut-based literary journal *al-Jinān* (*The Gardens*).¹⁴⁰ The newspaper *al-Jinān* is considered to be “the prototype” for other prominent Arabic journals that cropped up at the turn of the twentieth century – including *al-Muqataṭaf* (founded by Fransīs Nimr and Ya‘qūb Sarrūf), *al-Hilāl* (founded by Jurjī Zaydān), and *al-Manār* (founded by Muḥammad ‘Abdu and Rashīd Riḍā) – because it featured articles on a wide range of scientific, historical, political, literary, and technical topics.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Another tactic authors used to justify their literary pursuits was to link their fictional works to wider political movements. In Haykal’s case, the author chose to appeal to the nationalist project by romanticizing the proletariat and criticizing the monarchical elite, despite the fact that he was a member of the elite social class himself.

¹³⁵ Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-83) was a prominent figure in the intellectual circles of Beirut during the early years of the *nahḍa* who worked with missionaries to translate the Bible into Arabic. In addition, he also undertook the compilation of the first modern Arabic encyclopedia, *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (*The Ocean of Oceans*) compiled in 1867. For a complete treatment of his life and contributions to the *nahḍa*, see Sheehi, “Unpacking the Native Subject,” in *The Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 15–45. See also, Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 20.

¹³⁶ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 77.

¹³⁷ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 158.

¹³⁸ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 76–77.

¹³⁹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 112.

¹⁴⁰ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 158.

¹⁴¹ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 77.

Al-Bustānī's writing reflects a spirit of liberalism and humanism as every single issue of *al-Jinān* began with an editorial entitled *al-Iṣlāḥ* (*Reform*). These short pieces focused on a wide range of topics relating to social, cultural, political, and economic reform, as well as current affairs throughout the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴² Al-Bustānī, like many of his contemporaries, felt that social and cultural stagnation (*jumūd*) in the Arab world demanded social, cultural and political renewal. In the view of many intellectuals of the period, this renewal could be accomplished by building schools, libraries, and printing presses, to foster a passion for knowledge and ultimately cultivate "love of the nation" (*ḥubb al-waṭan*) and a new era of national "progress and civilization" (*taqaddum wa-tamaddun*).¹⁴³ Al-Bustānī's forward-looking tolerance is further evidenced by his solicitation and inclusion of writing by women authors in his periodical *al-Jinān*, such as Maryānā Marrāsh (1848-1919), who is famous for holding a popular literary salon in her home.¹⁴⁴

In his journal *al-Jinān* (*The Gardens*), Al-Bustānī composed a total of eight historical and romance novels, all published serially between 1870 and 1884.¹⁴⁵ These novels varied in length and dealt with many themes. His work marked a major departure from classical Arabic literary sensibilities in both form and content, making him a pioneer of Arabic narrative prose.¹⁴⁶ Not only did al-Bustānī in his works defy traditional Arabic literary views that spurned fiction writing as sub-canonical; he also violated a longstanding taboo by portraying romantic relationships. One of the most prominent themes in his writing is the difficulty for married couples to attain compatibility and happiness without modifying or radically changing social customs and conditions, a topic that reflects the changing gender dynamics in the Levant at the time he was writing.¹⁴⁷

Like subsequent early works of Arabic fiction, al-Bustānī's writings reflect the classical convention that required literary works to be both instructive and entertaining. In his novel *al-Huyām fī jinān al-Shām* (*Love in Syrian Gardens*, 1870), for example, the author combines an episode from Islamic history (in this case, the Arab conquest of Syria) with a love story, blending historical fact with entertainment. His works also reflected the perception of narrative at that time as a tool for social reform.¹⁴⁸ Al-Bustānī himself stated that his goal in writing fictional prose was to "show our faults and the faults of

¹⁴² Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 77–78.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 77.

¹⁴⁴ Holt, "Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut," 58.

¹⁴⁵ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 158.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 159.

¹⁴⁷ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 112.

¹⁴⁸ This sentiment has parallels in early European fiction, which often shrouded fictional texts as didactic works written to provide society with useful moral guidance. For more, see Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 21–22; Martin Turnell, *The Rise of the French Novel: Marivaux, Crébillon Fils, Rousseau, Stendhal, Flaubert, Alain-Fournier, Raymond Radiguet* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 10–11. See also Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). McKeon claims that the novel developed alongside a dialogue between formal questions of "truth" and social questions of "virtue," individual morality, and social order.

others...by means of writing novels [*riwāyāt*],¹⁴⁹ and [to] show what is ugly and what is good by means of the description of the individuals whose stories we tell.”¹⁵⁰ This dual intent to instruct and entertain is characteristic of early Arabic novelistic texts, many of which deal with social questions of morality and ethics against a backdrop of historical or social import. According to Sabry Hafez, the presence of moral and didactic elements in early Arabic fiction served two purposes: first, it justified “the reading of narrative on moral grounds in face of certain attacks by the traditional establishment” and second, it allowed the author to “inject the text with both traditional morality and classical stylistic features.”¹⁵¹ As later chapters will demonstrate, the didactic impulse is relevant to a discussion of ‘Afifa Karam, who also believed that fiction writing – and the novel in particular – could be a potent tool for civic education and social reform.

Al-Bustānī’s novel *al-Huyām fī jinān al-Shām* (1870) is a foundational text that “laid down many of the stock leitmotifs, character topoi, and narrative structure common to subsequent Arabic romance and historical novels.”¹⁵² The importance of Salīm al-Bustānī’s groundbreaking work cannot be overestimated, for it initiated a new kind of writing in Arabic and had a major impact on subsequent writers, including Jurjī Zaydān, who went on to popularize the historical novel as a literary form in Arabic.¹⁵³ For his contributions, Salīm al-Bustānī has been called “the true father of the Arab short story and novel, including historical fiction.”¹⁵⁴

Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914) is another important early writer of modern Arabic fiction. A Levantine Christian, Zaydān emigrated from Lebanon to Egypt at the age of twenty-four. An autodidact, he founded *al-Hilāl* (*The Crescent Moon*) in Cairo in 1892, an influential literary journal that is still in existence today. Like al-Bustānī, the editor used his journal as an avenue for the publication of a series of twenty-two historical novels, which appeared between 1891 and 1914.¹⁵⁵ Zaydān’s novels, which focused on various incidents from Arab and Islamic history – usually with an accompanying romance – enjoyed considerable popularity during his lifetime. The self-proclaimed impetus for Zaydān’s literary project was his desire to “acquaint his generation with the history and literature of the Arabs.”¹⁵⁶ Like the works of al-Bustānī, Zaydān’s novels clearly exemplify the prevailing tensions and debates of this formative period in the novel’s development. By

¹⁴⁹ It is quite significant that al-Bustānī used the term *riwāya* here to describe his work, which is a much earlier use of the term than has been attested to. The term *riwāya* did not become the standard term for a novel until roughly fifty years later.

¹⁵⁰ *Al-Jinān* 1:22 (1870), 702, cited in Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” 46; Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, *Fann al-qīṣṣah*, 1966.

¹⁵¹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 113.

¹⁵² Sheehi points out that al-Bustānī’s contemporary Nu‘mān al-Qasāṭlī (1854-1920) “lifted characters and plot structure right out of al-Bustānī’s novels and short stories.” Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 78.

¹⁵³ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 112.

¹⁵⁴ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 158.

¹⁵⁵ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 99.

¹⁵⁶ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 187.

merging history and fiction, Zaydān successfully met the demands of classical *adab* to be both instructive and entertaining.

Also frequently cited in the modern scholarship on the novel as pioneers of Arabic prose, are the Lebanese writers Farah Antūn (1874-1922) and Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf (1852-1927). Ṣarrūf co-founded the influential journal *al-Muqataṭaf* and published three novels of social concern, *Fatāt Miṣr* (*The Young Woman of Egypt*) (1905), *Fatāt al-Fayyūm* (*The Young Woman from Fayoum*) (1908), and *Amīr Lubnān* (*The Prince of Lebanon*) (1907). Egyptian writers who are included among the list of pioneers are ‘Abdallāh al-Nadīm (1843/44-96), Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1871-1932), Muḥammad Luṭfī Jum‘ah (1884-1953), Mustafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūtī (1876-1924), and Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Haqqī (1884-1964), the author of *‘Adhrā’ Dinshaway* (*The Virgin of Dinshaway*) (1906).

Women Writing Fiction Before the “First Arabic Novel”

While the Arabic literary scene during the *nahḍa* was certainly dominated by men, during the late 1800s, a group of women writers began to produce literary works. The pioneering women writers were especially enterprising as writers of some of the earliest novels and works of novelistic prose. The first woman to create a substantial body of modern Arabic prose literature was ‘Ā’isha Taymūr (1840-1902), an aristocratic Muslim woman of Ottoman Turkish extraction who became a prolific writer of poetry (in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian), social commentary, and fiction. Taymūr’s *maqāma*-like narrative, *Natā’ij al-aḥwāl fī al-aqwāl wa-al-af‘āl* (*The Consequences of Change in Words and Deeds*), published in Cairo in 1887, deals with the complex relationships between various members of a ruling family, and offers its readers lessons in ethical political leadership.¹⁵⁷ As the first fictional narrative of socio-political import by an Arab woman author – as well as the first by an Egyptian woman – this text is quite significant, and led the way for other women writers to follow.

The earliest known woman writer in the Levant is Alīs Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1870-1926), daughter of the prominent intellectual Buṭrus al-Bustānī. Alīs al-Bustānī published *Riwāyat Ṣā’iba* (*The Story of Sa’iba*) in Beirut in 1891. The text treats the issue of arranged marriages, which was a hot topic within literary circles of late 1800s Beirut. The novel’s heroine, Ṣā’iba, marries a young man named Luṭfī instead of her cantankerous cousin Farīd, to whom she was arranged to be married. At the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist dies, which suggests that, ultimately, women who challenge societal conventions (such as the traditional custom of marriage between cousins) are doomed. This early work of Arabic fiction is groundbreaking as it is one of the very first to examine current social, cultural, and gender issues from the perspective of a woman.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ ‘Ā’ishā al-Taymūriyya, *Natā’ij al-aḥwāl fī al-aqwāl wa-al-af‘āl* (Cairo: Maṭba‘a al-Bahiyya, 1887).

¹⁵⁸ In terms of its style, it is described as “...well written if you compare it to the other novels of this period.” Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, *al-Qiṣṣa fī-l-‘adab al-‘Arabī al-ḥadīth: 1870-1914* (1961), 85.

Despite its importance, *Riwāyat Ṣā'iba* has received little scholarly attention and very little is known about the author.¹⁵⁹

Around the same time, Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914) emerged as one of the most important women writers of the era. Fawwāz was born into a poor, illiterate Shiite family in a small village in Southern Lebanon called Tabnīn. Fawwāz's modest background sets her apart from the other early women writers, the vast majority of whom were of aristocratic extraction. While working as a maid in the palace of a Lebanese prince, 'Alī Bey al-As'ad al-Saghīr, Fawwāz was befriended by the prince's wife, a poet, who took note of Zaynab's keen intellect and took her on as a pupil.¹⁶⁰ Fawwāz later moved to Egypt where she met Ḥasan Ḥusnī al-Tuwayrānī, who encouraged her to publish her writings in the journal *al-Nīl* (*The Nile*). It was not long before Fawwāz became an active member of prominent Arabic literary circles, publishing her poetry, fiction, plays, articles, and essays in journals throughout Egypt and the Arab world.

Zaynab Fawwāz's first work of fictional prose, *Ḥusn al-'Awāqib* (*Good Consequences*) appeared in 1899, fifteen years before the publication of *Zaynab*. In the introduction to the work, Fawwāz demonstrates an understanding of the emerging genre of the novel that is in keeping with classical Arabic conventions of *adab* – to both benefit and entertain.¹⁶¹ In *Ḥusn al-'Awāqib*, written primarily in *saj'*, Fawwāz explores contemporary political and social issues and aims to educate and enlighten her readers by providing lessons on proper moral behavior. In the text, a complex set of family relationships and events reflects a larger political system that is afflicted by corruption and greed. Women characters play important roles in the novel, defend their opinions, and speak openly with conviction.¹⁶² Fawwāz also wrote the first Arabic theatrical work written by a woman, a play entitled *al-Hawā wa al-Wafā'* (*Love and Loyalty*), published along with *Ḥusn al-'Awāqib*, in 1893. Fawwāz went on to write a second novel, *al-Malik Qurūsh* (*King Qurush*) in 1906.

As a writer, Fawwāz was dedicated to social reform and was a champion of women's advancement. She believed that women should not be restricted to the household, suggesting that women and men possessed equal intellectual capabilities and should therefore be allowed to take part in all the same activities.¹⁶³ Fawwāz spoke boldly of women's emancipation, producing most of her writings on the topic between 1890 and 1892, well before the publication of *Tahrīr al-Mar'a* (*Women's Emancipation*, 1898) by

¹⁵⁹ Moosa, Najm, and Zeidan refer to it briefly, but without any analysis. For more, see Fruma Zachs, "Subversive Voices of Daughters of the Nahda: Alice Al-Bustani and Riwayat Saiba (1891)," *Hawwa* 9, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 332–57.

¹⁶⁰ Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 64.

¹⁶¹ Fawwāz's writes: "As literary novels are the most important writings that benefit one's thought and entertain and benefit (others), and as they reproduce an image of reality and fantasy in its raw form, I decided to write this novel hoping that it will benefit (others) and entertain." Zaynab Fawwāz, *Ḥusn al-'awāqib (riwāya); al-Hawā wa-al-wafā': (masrahiyya)* (Beirut: al-Majlis al-thaqāfī li-Lubnān al-janūbī, 1984), 37.

¹⁶² Shaaban, *Voices Revealed*, 24.

¹⁶³ Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 65.

Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), widely credited as father of the women's movement in the Arab world.¹⁶⁴ As a prolific writer and intellectual, Fawwāz is a pivotal figure who played an important role in the development of Arabic literature, Arab women's literature, and the Arab feminist movement.

Labība Hāshim (1880-1947) is another important early Arab woman writer who followed in the footsteps of her predecessors, al-Būstānī, Fawwāz, Nawfal, and Taymūr. A Lebanese Christian born in Beirut, Hāshim received her primary education in French and English at American missionary schools. In 1890, she moved with her family to Egypt, where she began studying Arabic with the renowned writer Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī (1947-1906).¹⁶⁵ Hāshim's connection to al-Yāzījī¹⁶⁶ is important as he played a very important role in creating the new modern Arabic idiom of the *nahḍa*, which he called "the language of the newspaper," or "*luḡhat al-jarīda*."¹⁶⁷ Labība Hāshim, who was also exposed to Western fiction through her French and English education, wrote two short stories, *Ḥasanat al-Ḥubb* (*The Good Deeds of Love*, 1899) and *Jazā' al-Khiyāna* (*The Penalty of Treason*, 1902). Her first full-length novel, *Qalb al-Rajul* (*The Heart of Man*), was published in 1904.¹⁶⁸ Hāshim's second work, a novella entitled *Shirīn: Ibnat al-Sharq* (*Shirin: Daughter of the East*, 1907) is derived from the *Shahname*, the ancient Persian national epic, versified by the Persian poet Firdowsi in 1010 C.E.¹⁶⁹

Labība Hāshim's significance lies not only in her fiction writing, but also in her work as a journalist. Hāshim founded an influential women's periodical *Fatāt al-Sharq* (*Young Woman of the East*) in 1906, which ran uninterrupted for three decades.¹⁷⁰ In 1923, Hāshim relocated to Santiago, Chile, where she founded the journal *al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb* (*East and West*).¹⁷¹ This illustrates the international circulation of the Arab women's press. While the centers of Arab journalism were in Cairo and Beirut – and to a lesser extent Alexandria, Damascus, and Aleppo – women writers were publishing their works in Arabic-language journals throughout the Arab diaspora, in places as far flung as Chile and the United States.

Hāshim's literary work represents a major step forward in Arabic fiction. Her novels and short stories are composed in a simple and lively prose style that reflected the new journalistic idiom that became more and more common during the *nahḍa*. Not only does the author employ a simplified prose style in her narration of romantic fiction, but she also explores the inner world of her characters, relating their actions to larger

¹⁶⁴ Shaaban, *Voices Revealed*, 36.

¹⁶⁵ Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 67.

¹⁶⁶ Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī, also a Levantine Christian, is the son of Nāsif al-Yāzījī (1800-1871) who collaborated with Buṭrus al-Bustānī in producing the first Arabic translation of the Bible. Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī was also the founder of several journals including *al-Diyā'* and *al-Bayān*.

¹⁶⁷ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 109.

¹⁶⁸ Labība Hāshim, *Qalb al-rajul* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā li-'l-thaqāfa wa-al-nashr, 2002).

¹⁶⁹ Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 68.

¹⁷⁰ Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*, 26.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 27; Ṭarrāzī, *Tārīkh al-Siḥāfa al-'Arabiyya*, 296–97.

psychological motivation.¹⁷² For this reason, the term ‘novel’ is used here to describe her work. *Qalb al-Rajul*, for example, portrays several love affairs set against the Christian-Druze factional strife that took place in Lebanon in the 1860s. The novel features a number of bold women characters and treats controversial topics such as inter-religious marriages. For example, one of the protagonists of *Qalb al-Rajul* is a Druze woman named Fātina, who disobeys her father and flees from her family in order to protect – and eventually marry – her beloved, a Christian man.

Other early novelists include Labība Sawāya and Farīda ‘Atiyya, who are also Lebanese Christians. Labība Mikhā’il Şawāyā (1876-1916) published *Ḥasnā’ Salūnīk* (*The Fair Lady of Salonika*) in 1909. The work is an historical romance based on the political upheaval in Turkey at the onset of the twentieth century. As in Alīs al-Būstānī’s *Riwāyat Şā’iba*, the heroine of *Ḥasnā’ Salūnīk*, commits suicide at the end of the story following the death of her beloved, who dies in battle against the despotic Turkish ruler of Greater Syria, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd. Farīda Yūsuf ‘Atiyya (1867-1917) published her novel, *Bayna ‘Arshayn* (*Between Two Thrones*) in 1912. The novel deals with the circumstances leading up to the 1908 Young Turk rebellion featuring two parallel romances: one between a man and his lover from Tripoli and a second detailing a love story between two Armenians during the Armenian genocide.¹⁷³

Finally, Mayy Ziyāda (1886-1941), who was born in Nazareth, Palestine to a Palestinian Greek Orthodox mother and a Lebanese Maronite father, was a prolific writer who published works of poetry, prose, and drama as well as lectures and biographies.¹⁷⁴ After her family moved to Cairo in 1908, Ziyāda began to write original poetry, originally in French, and later in Arabic. Ziyāda later decided to study literature and Islamic Philosophy at the Egyptian University, at which point she became increasingly active as a writer of poetry, prose, and translations from Italian, German, French, and English novels.¹⁷⁵ Through her assiduous involvement in the world of journalism and the Egyptian literary scene, Ziyāda became an important contributor to both literary culture and the Arab women’s movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Ziyāda organized and hosted the most active literary salon of the day, which was the meeting place for Egypt’s most prominent literary figures and intellectuals – including Ṭaha Ḥussayn, Khalīl Muṭrān, and Ya‘qāb Sarrūf – for over three decades, from 1913 to 1936.¹⁷⁶

In addition to her poetry, Mayy Ziyāda also played a very important role in the creation of Arab women’s literary tradition. Her most significant contribution to the development of an Arab women’s literary genealogy is the publication of three full-length literary biographies of her female contemporaries ‘Ā’isha Taymūr,¹⁷⁷ Warda al-Yāzījī,¹⁷⁸ and

¹⁷² Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 68.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁷⁴ For more information on Mayy Ziyāda’s published and unpublished works, see Zaydan, *Arab Women Novelists*; Khaldi, *Egypt Awakening in the Early Twentieth Century*.

¹⁷⁵ Khaldi, *Egypt Awakening in the Early Twentieth Century*, 4–5.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Mayy Ziyāda, *‘Ā’isha al-Taymūr: Shā’irat al-Ṭalī’a* (Cairo: Dār al-Muqataṭaf, 1926).

¹⁷⁸ Mayy Ziyāda, *Warda al-Yāzījī* (Cairo: Maṭba’at al-Balāgh, 1924).

Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, which is the pseudonym of woman writer Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif.¹⁷⁹ Although she is best known for her poetry and biographical works on contemporary women writers, Ziyāda also composed several works of prose fiction in Arabic later in her life.¹⁸⁰

Arab Novelists in the Diaspora

From across the Atlantic Ocean, *mahjar* writers produced inaugural works of Arabic fiction that contributed to the literary culture of the *nahḍa*. The *mahjar* writers, or *udabā' al-mahjar*, were a group of primarily Christian emigrants from Syria and Lebanon who settled in North and South America during the *nahḍa*. To foster a greater connection with the Arabic literary tradition of their faraway homeland, writers and intellectuals in the diaspora began to organize some of the first genuine Arabic literary societies. In addition to fostering community, these literary circles provided new avenues for the articulation of their varied experiences and views.

The very first of these *mahjar* literary circles is *Riwāq al-Ma'arrī* (The Gallery of al-Ma'arrī) founded in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1900. In 1932, another *mahjar* literary society was founded in the same city, called *al-'Uṣba al-Andalusiyyah* (The Andalusian Group).¹⁸¹ Arab immigrants to Brazil formed an active literary culture and founded a number of journals, including *al-Andalus al-Jadīd* (The New Andalus), and the bilingual Arabic-Portuguese *al-Sharq Oriente* (The East), in which they published important works of prose and poetry.¹⁸² The Arabic literature of the “southern *mahjar*” has received much less scholarly attention than “northern *mahjar*” literature. Basic archival research on the topic has only recently begun to be undertaken by scholars such as Civantos and Vargas, and remains a fruitful topic for future study.¹⁸³

The most well-known *mahjar* literary society is *al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamiyya*, which is alternately translated as the Pen League or the Pen Association. This literary society began informally in 1916 and was officially established in 1920 when a group of Syrian and Lebanese writers began meeting in the New York City studio of Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān (1883-1931), who is by far the most well known writer of the *mahjar*. Members of this literary society included Mīkha'īl Nu'aymah (1889-1989), Amīn al-Rīḥānī (1876-1940), Ilyā Abu Mādī (1889-1957), Nasīb 'Arīḍa (1887-1946), 'Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād (1890-1963), William Catzeflis (1879-1951), Rashīd Ayyūb (1881-1941), and Nadra Ḥaddād

¹⁷⁹ Mayy Ziyāda, *Bāḥithat al-Bādiya* (Cairo: Dār al-Muqtaṭaf, 1920).

¹⁸⁰ Mayy Ziyāda published three short stories: “*al-Sham'a Taḥratīq*” (“The Candle is Burning”) (1934), “*al-Ḥubb fī al-Madrasa*” (“Love in School”) (1934) and “*al-Sirr al-Muwazza'*” (“The Uncovered Secret”) (1935).

¹⁸¹ Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 124.

¹⁸² Vargas, “Migration, Literature, and the Nation: Mahjar Literature in Brazil,” 6.

¹⁸³ Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*; Vargas, “Migration, Literature, and the Nation: Mahjar Literature in Brazil.”

(1881-1950). The Pen League remained active as a literary circle until the early 1930s with the death of Jibrān in 1931 and the return of Nu'aymah to Lebanon in 1932.¹⁸⁴

The first Arabic novel published in the *mahjar* is *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida* (*United Hearts in the United States*) (1904) by the Lebanese Maronite author Salīm Sarkīs,¹⁸⁵ who was also the editor of two influential Beirut-based newspapers *Lisān al-Ḥāl* (*The Language of the Times*) and *al-Mu'ayyid* (*The Supporter*). *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*¹⁸⁶ is an historical romance based on the factual events of the courtship and marriage of a Syrian immigrant man and an American woman, to highlight the victory of true love over the social taboo against “mixed marriage,” or “*al-zawāj al-mukhtalaṭ*.”¹⁸⁷

Shortly thereafter, Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān published three collections of short stories in Arabic: ‘*Arā’is al-Murūj* (*Nymphs of the Valley*) (1906),¹⁸⁸ *al-Arwāḥ al-Mutamarrida* (*Rebellious Spirits*) (1908),¹⁸⁹ and *al-Ajniḥa al-Mutakassira* (*Broken Wings*) (1912).¹⁹⁰ The stories contained in these collections tackled important social issues such as the plight of the poor, the lack of religious and personal freedoms, the oppression of women by men through traditions such as arranged marriages, and the hypocrisy of the Christian institution and its clergy. Individual stories from these collections will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Mikhā’il Nu’aymah was another prolific writer and literary critic in the *mahjar* who composed works of poetry, prose, drama, and essays. In 1917, Nu’aymah published a play, entitled *al-Ābā’ wa-‘l-banūn* (*Fathers and Sons*). Nu’aymah also wrote three collections of short stories, *al-Marāḥil* (*Stages*) (1933), *Kāna mā kān* (*Once Upon a Time*) (1937), and *al-Bayādir* (*The Threshing Floors*) (1945). Nu’aymah’s stories, which portray characters who have lived in both Syria and America, often express protest against the oppression of women in patriarchal Arab culture and the hypocrisy and corruption of the clergy.

At the New York City Arabic-language periodical *al-Hudā* (*Guidance*), ‘Afīfa Karam (1883-1924) published her three novels, which deal with similar themes such as women’s oppression in a patriarchal society, religious corruption, and the fight for social justice. Karam’s novels, *Badi’a wa-Fu’ād* (*Badi’a and Fu’ad*) (1906), *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*

¹⁸⁴ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 61.

¹⁸⁵ Salīm Sarkīs, *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida* (New York: Maṭba‘at Mir’āt al-Gharb, 1904).

¹⁸⁶ The subtitle of the novel reads: “On the persecution and difficulties faced by the Lebanese Spiridon Juḥā and the American Elizabeth Phillips before their wedding, from 1889-1914.” The events of the novel take place in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

¹⁸⁷ Salīm Sarkīs, *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*, 8.

¹⁸⁸ Khalīl Jibrān, ‘*Arā’is al-murūj* (Beirut: s.n., 1906).

¹⁸⁹ Khalīl Jibrān, *al-Arwāḥ al-mutamarrida* (Beirut, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr lil-Ṭibā‘a wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 1908).

¹⁹⁰ Khalīl Jibrān, *al-Ajniḥa al-mutakassira* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Hilāl, 1912).

(*Fatima the Bedouin*) (1908), and *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* (*The Girl from ‘Amshit*) (1910), will be discussed in detail in the following Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Zaynab: The First Arabic Novel?

The literature review presented above is not intended to be an exhaustive index of works of early Arabic fiction. There are numerous works of early Arabic fiction that were not mentioned, and many others still that have yet to be examined by scholars. That said, even from among the canonically privileged works included in the narrative above, none has been crowned with the exalted title of a “real” Arabic novel, that is, not until the publication of *Zaynab*.

As explained in the previous chapter, the novel *Zaynab* by the Egyptian author Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888-1965) is universally cited as a major turning point in the development of Arabic fiction, if not the first Arabic novel overall.¹⁹¹ Written while the author was living in Paris between 1910 and 1911 and later published in Cairo in 1914, *Zaynab* reflects Haykal’s nostalgia for his ancestral home. The novel, which is subtitled “*Manāẓir wa-akhlāq rīfiyya*” (“Country scenes and manners”), is set in the Egyptian countryside. It features lengthy, realistic descriptions of the natural surroundings of the rural Egyptian landscape and treats contemporary social issues, including marriage and romantic relationships.¹⁹² Haykal’s novel tells the story of Zaynab, a beautiful Egyptian peasant girl, and Ḥamīd, a student in Cairo who returns to his family’s home during vacations.

The protagonist Ḥamīd, whose elite education exposed him to the works of western philosophers, is moved to question inherited Egyptian customs, particularly the custom of arranging marriages based on financial circumstances and social class rather than romantic love. As an illustration of the socio-cultural debate about marriage practices, the character Zaynab is forced to marry a man she does not love because her true beloved, a poor villager named Ibrahīm, cannot afford to pay the bride price. When Ibrahīm is drafted into the military and sent to fight in Sudan, Zaynab becomes afflicted with severe lovesickness that manifests in a deadly case of tuberculosis. In the end, Zaynab dies, grief-stricken at this loss. Zaynab’s tragic fate illustrates one of the most controversial issues of the period namely, the conflict between “tradition” and “modernity.”

H.A.R. Gibb was the first to designate *Zaynab* as the first “authentic” Egyptian novel in 1929.¹⁹³ Later, in the early 1960s, the Egyptian critic ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭahā Badr followed

¹⁹¹ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 102; Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, 97; Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel, 1912-1971*, 11; Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 262.

¹⁹² Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 33.

¹⁹³ H. A. R. Gibb, ‘The Egyptian Novel’, *University of London. Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, London Institution*. 8:1 (1933) 1–22. Reprinted in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962).

suit, calling Haykal's *Zaynab* "the first and authentic beginning to the artistic novel" ("riwāya fanniyya"¹⁹⁴) for its contemporary setting and use of Egyptian colloquial in its dialogue.¹⁹⁵ Since that time, *Zaynab* has retained its canonical status as the first Arabic novel, or as Badawī has called it, "the first fully fledged novel of literary merit in Arabic."¹⁹⁶

Despite the way it is presented in the dominant narrative of Arabic literary history and criticism, *Zaynab* was not created in a vacuum, nor was it the only work of its kind to appear in that year. In recent years, the canonical status of Haykal's *Zaynab* has been called into question by a number of contemporary scholars.¹⁹⁷ Elliott Colla and Hoda Elsadda have produced scholarly work that historicizes the canonization of *Zaynab*, showing that its classification as the "first Arabic novel" was not based on its literary merit or its inaugural status, but rather, that it was the product of subsequent literary studies by Arab and Western scholars.¹⁹⁸ In his article "How *Zaynab* Became the First Arabic Novel," Colla argues that *Zaynab* was simply not a unique book on the market in 1914 when it was first published, nor was it the first book that called itself a 'novel' (*riwāya*).¹⁹⁹ He also reminds the reader that *Zaynab* was not "recognized as significant even by the small market segment and cultural field in which it initially appeared," maintaining that *Zaynab* was canonized due to extra-literary events such as a successful film adaptation of the novel in 1925 and the nationalization of university curricula during the Nasserist period.²⁰⁰ In his view, the canonization of *Zaynab* was not an oversight of literary historiography but rather a deliberate process that highlighted this work over others because it reflected a particular image of Egypt during various periods of its political and cultural history.²⁰¹ The canonization of *Zaynab* is discussed here not to perpetuate its canonical status, but to demonstrate the type of literary dynamics with which this dissertation is concerned.

Summary

The preceding pages have presented an overview of the emergence and development of the Arabic novel based on a review of existing critical commentaries to date. While some scholars may argue that the canonical status of *Zaynab* as the first Arabic novel has already been debunked, the reality is – despite the various critical interventions that have

¹⁹⁴ Badr, *Ṭaṭawwur al-riwāya al-'Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938*, 318.

¹⁹⁵ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 135; Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 266.

¹⁹⁶ Badawī, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, 97.

¹⁹⁷ Roger Allen states: "It is perhaps more accurate and useful not to burden *Zaynab* with the designation as the first example of any particular category or quality of a novel, but rather as an extremely important step in a continuing process." Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 33.

¹⁹⁸ For more, see Jābir 'Uṣfūr, *Zaman al-riwāya* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā lil-thaqāfah wa-'l-nashr, 1999); Elliott Colla, "How *Zaynab* Became the First Arabic Novel," *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 214–25; Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel*.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 218.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 220.

shown otherwise – *Zaynab* remains the text that is most often cited as the first Arabic novel. Any student of Arabic literature who consults the dominant critical and historiographical works of Arabic literary history will be left with the same impression: that male writers from Egypt and the Levant were the first to experiment with the writing of indigenous Arabic fiction and, furthermore, that they produced various unsuccessful attempts at the genre until the publication of Haykal's *Zaynab* in 1914.

With few exceptions, the key writers and works credited with inaugurating the genre are male writers from the cultural center. Scholars agree that the early works mentioned above by al-Bustānī, Zaydān, al-Shidyāq, Mubārak, al-Muwaylihī, al-Manfalūtī, and others, are important texts that helped to lay the foundations for the development of the Arabic novel, locating their achievement in the movement from historical and fictional portrayals of the past to depictions of the present, using a simplified Arabic prose style. Some of these writers also broke with traditional literary conventions in their open treatment of love and romance, which continued to be a moral point of contention among Arab critics well into the twentieth century.²⁰² While illuminating, the oft-repeated narrative, which dominates both Western- and Arabic-language scholarship on the Arabic novel, is limited and incomplete, and has created an impression that has persisted in the literary imaginary for a very long time. It is precisely this general picture that the present study seeks to destabilize by presenting a counter-narrative that zeroes in on the marginalized voices in studies of the Arabic novel.

As the previous discussion of the novel *Zaynab* demonstrates, the canonization of a particular text can be rather arbitrary. Some works achieve canonical status while others – which may have been equally important in their innovative qualities, influence, and content – are left out of the historical narrative. This inclusion and exclusion may occur consciously, as a result of power dynamics and marginalization of social groups. It may also occur unconsciously, because scholars who read the same body of critical and historical literature tend to reproduce it, thus sedimenting a particular historical narrative.

The purpose of the next section is to highlight the cardinal discursive issues – geopolitical, literary, and socio-cultural – that have impacted the inclusion and exclusion of authors and texts in the Arabic novel's development as recounted by the most prominent modern works of Arabic literary history. This analysis highlights the important contributions of women writers and deterritorialized *mahjar* writers, which are routinely omitted, in order to demonstrate the irregular and inconsistent nature of the processes of literary canonization.

The Marginalization of Women Writers

The systematic underrepresentation of women's voices in comprehensive texts of Arabic literary history and criticism is an area that warrants further examination. Despite the

²⁰² Allen, "The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel," 189.

fact that Arab women writers published at least a dozen novels before the publication of *Zaynab*, literary studies often disregard novels written by women, making the dominant literary histories of the Arabic novel deficient and incomplete.²⁰³ When prominent literary critic Muhammad Dakrub was asked why this is so, he gave a surprisingly frank response: “The only reason I can think of is that male writers (myself included) must unconsciously believe that the literature written by women is insignificant.”²⁰⁴

There is a tendency among critics to neglect women’s literary and social achievements, attributing them to male writers and intellectuals instead. This phenomenon has been discussed at length in the context of historical narratives of the Arab feminism. The male writer Qāsim Amīn has been widely credited as the originator of the women’s movement, despite the fact that a plethora of writings on the topic by women authors appeared at a much earlier date. For example, in *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, Hafez discusses works produced in the 1920s by the Egyptian brothers ‘Īsā (189?-1922) and Shihāta ‘Ubayd (189?-1961) and claims that “...before them, women were presented in narrative texts through the eyes of their men and were not allowed to speak for themselves and express their own views and feelings including their own views of men’s behavior and attitudes.”²⁰⁵ The author goes even further, calling these two authors “the heralds of women’s emancipation in Arabic literature.”²⁰⁶ When Hafez does mention the work of women writers, he does so in a rather disparaging manner, saying, “Although a number of women had started writing in the 1860s ...it was the men who first spoke out for women’s emancipation.”²⁰⁷ These statements betray a remarkable lack of awareness about the literary production of women authors, such as Fawwāz, Hāshim, Karam, and others, who portrayed numerous outspoken women characters in works published more than a decade before those of the ‘Ubayd brothers.

On the occasion that scholars do choose to expand the scope of their overviews of Arabic literary history to allow space for a discussion of the literary production of women writers, their works are often treated in a belittling manner. For example, Hafez selects a catalogue of authors whom he deems “worthy of discussion,” including al-Bustānī, Zaydān, al-Nadīm, al-Shidyāq, al-Muwayliḥī, and Muḥammad Luṭfī Jum‘a.²⁰⁸ There are only two women writers among the numerous authors that Hafez mentions, Labība Hāshim (1880-1947) and ‘Ā’ishā Taymūr (1840-1902), who are, in fact, the only two women writers discussed in the entire volume. Following a discussion of Hāshim’s important literary innovations and accomplishments, the author makes the following statement: “...although Hāshim lacked talent, her journalistic skills, simple language, and ability to tell a story and sustain a relatively simple plot made her the pioneer of a

²⁰³ In a discussion of the works of Zaynab Fawwāz, ‘Afīfa Karam, and Farīda ‘Atīyya, Shaaban says: “Any talk about the origin of the Arabic novel that does not take into account these three important women novelists is deficient and incomplete.” Shaaban, *Voices Revealed*, 35.

²⁰⁴ Shaaban, *Voices Revealed*, 34.

²⁰⁵ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 183.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 137.

trend of simplistic narrative.”²⁰⁹ While there is certainly a substantive critique implicit in this statement relating to the evolution of the genre – namely, the impact of journalistic language on these early prose texts – one cannot ignore the general dismissiveness of the author’s tone and his negation of the preceding paragraphs commending Hāshim for her literary contributions.

When Arab women writers *are* discussed, they are generally allotted limited space and few, or none, are actually cited by name. More often than not, the inclusion of women authors in the standard texts on Arabic literature reflects a sort of tokenism, whereby one or several of these authors are included in the discussion of a literary period or a genre that would otherwise be represented entirely by male writers from the *mashriq* (the Arab East). For example, Roger Allen’s book chapter “The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel” does not cite any women authors as contributors to early Arabic fiction.²¹⁰ In “The Egyptian Novel from *Zaynab* to 1980” by Hilary Kilpatrick, only a single woman writer is mentioned, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt, author of the novel *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ* (*The Open Door*, 1960), omitting Zaynab Fawwāz, Labība Hāshim, ‘Afīfa Karam, and countless other significant Egyptian women writers who published earlier in the twentieth century.²¹¹

The Marginalization of *Mahjar* Literature

As I have indicated, *mahjar* literature has begun to receive greater scholarly attention in recent years thanks to the foundational research undertaken by scholars, such as Civantos and Vargas.²¹² However, on the whole, *mahjar* literature has tended to exist on the periphery of the wider Arabic literary field. The literary production of Arabs in diaspora is often treated with a similarly dismissive or ambivalent stance to that with which women writers are treated. While the influence of the *mahjar* poets on the evolution of modern Arabic poetry is generally agreed upon, much of what these intellectuals produced in the way of prose has been ignored.²¹³ Second, some studies of modern Arabic literature often minimize this body of literature by treating it tangentially, as an isolated happening, distinct from the broader phenomenon of the Arabic cultural awakening.²¹⁴ For example, in Roger Allen’s “The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel,” only one *mahjar* writer is mentioned, Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān.²¹⁵ In order to glean any substantial information about *mahjar* writers, one is obliged to consult texts dealing specifically with the literary

²⁰⁹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 138.

²¹⁰ Roger Allen, “The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel.”

²¹¹ Hilary Kilpatrick, “The Egyptian Novel from *Zaynab* to 1980,” in *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge [England]; New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 250–51.

²¹² Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs*; Vargas, “Migration, Literature, and the Nation: *Mahjar* Literature in Brazil.”

²¹³ For example, in his work *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, M. M. Badawi includes a treatment of *mahjar* poetry in a separate chapter at the end of the volume, effectively segregating it from the poetic schools of neoclassicism, pre-romanticism, and romanticism. See also Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 61.

²¹⁴ For example, see Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*.

²¹⁵ Allen, “The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel.”

production of this marginalized group. The process of extracting the work of *mahjar* writers from the wider fabric of Arabic literary culture prevents us from seeing the connections that undoubtedly existed between writers, works, and the development of literary forms in both the *mashriq* and the *mahjar* during the *nahḍa*.

The fact that important works by *mahjar* writers are so frequently omitted from narratives of the novel's emergence points to a larger issue, namely the narrow, rather insular view of the *nahḍa* that persists in much of the scholarly writing on the period. The Arab cultural renaissance ought to be viewed for what it was: a transnational phenomenon that took place between Baghdad, Beirut, Buenos Aires, Cairo, São Paulo, New York, and other cities around the world. Salīm Sarkīs – who lived intermittently in Alexandria, Beirut, Boston, Cairo, London, and New York – al-Shidyāq, Jibrān, and ‘Afīfa Karam all embody the patently global character of the Arab cultural enlightenment.

The flowering of Arab journalistic culture created new avenues for the exchange of information, ideas, and literary works, which occurred rapidly and over tremendous distances.²¹⁶ Writers and thinkers in both the *mashriq* and the *mahjar* were writing, reading, and debating the merits of fiction simultaneously in the pages of their journals and periodicals. In some cases, Arab writers in the *mashriq* lagged behind their counterparts in the *mahjar*, who were on the cutting-edge of literary, social, and cultural debates. This is certainly true in the realm of poetry, as the *mahjar* writers were some of the first Arab poets to deviate from the standard metric systems of Arabic prosody.²¹⁷ It is also the case that *mahjar* writers pushed the boundaries of acceptability in their choice of subject matter, which may be due, in part, to the freedom of self-expression that living outside of the Arab world permitted. Jibrān, Nu‘aymah, and Karam, for example, composed fictional works that tackled taboo social issues head on, fighting boldly against social injustice, gender oppression, and religious corruption in Syrian communities in both the *mashriq* and the *mahjar*.²¹⁸

The Stigma of Genre, Style, and Subject Matter

In addition to exclusion by virtue of gender and geographical origin, numerous pioneering works of Arabic novelistic prose have been dismissed for reasons relating to their use of an as yet uncanonized literary genre with new and untraditional stylistic characteristics. The desire to classify and categorize works has proved to be limiting, particularly when dealing with a literary genre as amorphous as the novel.

²¹⁶ For a comprehensive history of early Arab journalism, see Ṭarrāzī, *Tārīkh al-ṣiḥāfa al-‘arabiyya*.

²¹⁷ For a full treatment of the significant achievements of *mahjar* poets in liberating Arabic poetry from the traditional Arabic poetic forms and styles, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Arabic Poetry in the Americas,” in *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 67–138.

²¹⁸ Jibrān, ‘*Arā’is al-murūj*’; Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*; Jibrān, *al-Arwāḥ al-mutamarrida*; Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*; Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*; Jibrān, *al-Ajniha al-mutakassira*; Mīkhā’il Nu‘aymah, *Kāna Mā Kān: Majmū‘at Qiṣaṣ* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Dār al-Makshūf, 1937).

Due to the tremendous variety that exists in its form and style, the novel has often been described as a nebulous genre with characteristics that are difficult to pin down.²¹⁹ Before the novel was cemented as a literary genre in Arabic, there were no specific “rules” for what actually constituted a novel. During the early stages of the Arabic novel’s development – much like the development of the French and English novel – readers, writers, and critics took part in lively debates about their expectations for the genre and engaged in a great deal of negotiation around what a novel is, what it does, and what role it plays. Furthermore, there was also a major controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the form of the novel itself. It was not until many decades later that Arab writers and intellectuals began to regard the novel as a respectable literary form. Thus, many early works of Arabic prose fiction – by both men and women – have been dismissed as immature experiments leading up to the “first” Arabic novel, rather than formative Arabic novels in their own right.

Scholars have taken a dismissive stance toward some of the foundational works of Arabic prose fiction, despite their clearly novelistic characteristics. For example, a number of scholars have minimized the contributions of Salīm al-Bustānī, despite the fact that they are the very first works of fictional prose romances in Arabic. Arabic literary critics have considered the moralizing and pedantic quality of his works, along with the lack of dialogue, to be the major flaws in his literary production.²²⁰ Hafez further criticizes al-Bustānī’s works because the moral lessons that appear are rarely communicated through the actions and speech of his characters, but rather through authorial intrusion in the form of didactic statements.²²¹ Scholars have described this tendency to *tell* rather than to *show* as a clear reflection of the fledgling and inexperienced quality of fiction writing at this early point in the evolution of Arabic narrative.

Evidence of this type of evaluative criticism can also be seen in critical discussions of Jurjī Zaydān. Despite the overwhelming evidence of his influence on the development of the Arabic novel – his works were enormously popular, circulated widely, and were instrumental in expanding the reading public – many scholars have labeled Zaydān’s historical novels as ‘pre-novels.’ ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭāha Badr, for example, deemed them immature attempts at a novel precisely because they were part “entertainment” (*‘tasliyya*)” and part “educational” (*‘ta’līmiyya*).²²² Paul Starkey described Zaydān’s works as those of an educator rather than those of a great writer, claiming that they “strike the modern critic, both stylistically and thematically, as at times almost unbearably pedestrian.”²²³ In other words, Zaydān’s novels – much like those of al-

²¹⁹ The British novelist E.M. Forster, in his classic study of the genre, stated the following: “The novel is a formidable mass, and it is so amorphous...most distinctly one of the moister areas of literature—irrigated by a thousand tills and occasionally degenerating into a swamp.” Terry Eagleton suggests that the novel is an “anarchic genre” that resists definition, calling it “less a genre than an anti-genre.” E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927), 13; Eagleton, *The English Novel*, 1.

²²⁰ Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 112–13.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Badr, *Ṭaṭawwūr al-riwāya al-‘Arabiyya al-ḥadītha fī Miṣr, 1870-1938*, 93–4.

²²³ Starkey, Paul, “Egyptian History in the Modern Egyptian novel,” in Hugh Kennedy, *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, c. 950-1800* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 251–262.

Bustānī – have been disregarded on thematic and formal grounds, despite their significance as early examples of Arabic fiction.

The evaluative nature of this criticism is both unfair and unproductive as it undermines the foundational nature of works of early Arabic fiction, including the novels of ‘Afīfa Karam. Considering that even established male authors at the “center” were excluded from the canon on generic grounds, the exclusion of early women and *mahjar* writers, including Karam, can hardly be surprising. As Foucault explains, literary works are not simply important for their inherent literary value, but also because they “produced...the possibility and the rules of the formation of other texts.”²²⁴ Indeed, these pioneering works of Arabic fiction are vital works to consider, for they paved the way for other experiments in novelistic prose.

However, as the section that follows will demonstrate, the assessment of Arabic novelistic prose on the basis of formal characteristics and stylistic qualities is contradictory and irregular. A cross-examination of critical works on the Arabic novel reveals a selective recognition of novelists; while some literary works are brushed aside for exhibiting a certain stylistic feature, other works that contain that very same feature are retroactively placed in the spotlight.

One salient example of the unruly way in which Arabic literary history has recorded the emergence of the genre of the novel relates to its attitude toward *saj’*, or rhymed prose. As I indicated previously, Arabic literary histories often discuss the relinquishing of “traditional” Arabic forms (such as works composed in *saj’*) in favor of “modern” forms as a major part of the evolutionary process of the novel’s emergence. This basic understanding reduces a vacillating, disorderly process into one that is deceptively linear and coherent. In later historiographic treatments of the *nahḍa*, the use of what was increasingly recognized as an antiquated literary language, led to the dismissal of such works as *not modern enough*.

This belated critical dismissal of works composed in *saj’* impacted the visibility of many works on the Arabic literary landscape, especially works by women writers, since the use of *saj’* was one of the various stylistic and political tactics used by earliest generation of women writers to ease their way into the literary world. At this early date, women writers felt compelled to compose works in the high literary language, which often meant the use of *saj’*, in order to prove their mastery of Arabic and gain respect from members of intellectual circles. Both Zaynab Fawwāz and ‘Ā’isha Taymūr, the first two women to write novels in Arabic, chose to write in the “high” Arabic literary tradition in a deliberate effort to distinguish themselves from the ranks of lowly storytellers, the authors and preservers of oral culture.²²⁵ However, modern critical works on the novel have, for whatever reason, recognized Zaynab Fawwāz more than ‘Ā’isha Taymūr.

²²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 131.

²²⁵ Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*, 42

For example, Taymūr's *Natā'ij al-aḥwāl fī al-aqwāl wa-al-af'āl* (*The Consequences of Change in Words and Deeds*) (1887) – the first work of fictional prose in Arabic published by a woman author – has, until very recently, been left out of studies on the evolution of modern Arabic fiction. Taymūr's work was criticized and dismissed for its use of the classical rhymed prose form, *saj'*. In her 1926 biography of Taymūr,²²⁶ even Mayy Ziyāda, a fellow woman writer, characterized Taymūr's works as "traditional" in form and content, and therefore "deserving to be dismissed."²²⁷ However, the work of other writers, such as Zaynab Fawwāz and al-Manfalūtī, who composed works in *saj'* have been regarded as important contributors to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction. In Fawwāz's case, the use of rhymed prose proved to be a successful tactic. Not only was she admired by male literary critics of her day, who praised her as a rare literary talent,²²⁸ but she has also been inserted by modern scholars into the narrative of the development of modern Arabic fiction.

Mervat Hatem has attempted to redefine the widespread conception of the classical Arabic *saj'*, which she casts as an unjustly discredited style.²²⁹ In her work on Taymūr, Hatem demonstrates that, in fact, "older literary forms proved to be very capable of adapting to the new historical demands and conditions."²³⁰ In this way, Hatem's rereading of Taymūr's work presents an alternative view of a whole body of literary works that has been disregarded for its formal characteristics. Furthermore, it suggests the possibility of an alternative route for the evolution of the novel.

Literary works produced by *mahjar* writers have also been dismissed on stylistic and linguistic grounds. Many scholars criticize *mahjar* poetry and prose for their authors' use of incorrect grammar.²³¹ For instance, among many critics, Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān is not highly regarded as an Arabic writer or poet. R. C. Ostle describes Jibrān's talent as a poet "unremarkable,"²³² while Badawi calls him "not very highly ranked" due to his "rather weak Arabic style."²³³ While this allegation may be true to some extent – as many of these writers were self-taught or acquired their Arabic instruction in predominantly English- or Spanish-speaking environments – it does not negate the importance of their innovations. The dismissal of these works on the basis of their lack of conformity to the conventional literary standards and expectations of Arab writers in the *mashriq* limits our understanding of the full spectrum of Arabic literary production of the *nahḍa*.

²²⁶ Ziyāda, *Ā'isha al-Taymūr: Shā'irat al-Ṭalī'a*.

²²⁷ Hatem, *Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, xi.

²²⁸ The critic Ḥasan Ḥusnī Bāshā, Chairman of the journal *al-Nīl*, said of her novel: "I've read the novel *Husn al-'Awāqib* by the renowned writer whose fame is unparalleled for her enlightened mind and creative pen, and found it very well-structured with far-reaching themes and beautiful literary features. We hope that our writer will continue to endow our modern times with such precious literary writings." Quoted in Shaaban, *Arab Women Novelists*, 23–6.

²²⁹ Hatem, *Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, 63.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

²³¹ Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 203.

²³² R. C. Ostle, "The Romantic Poets," in *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 96.

²³³ Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 183.

An added theoretical dimension that is relevant to a discussion of the works of *mahjar* writers is the issue of language choice, which can explain the celebrity of certain authors and the invisibility of others. Some Arab writers in the diaspora, such as Jibrān and al-Riḥānī, produced literary texts in both English and Arabic.²³⁴ As bilingual, transnational authors, their works reached a much wider audience and have received considerable critical attention in both Arab and Western scholarship. Jibrān, for example, who is known more popularly by the Anglicized version of his name, Kahlil Gibran, achieved worldwide fame – or “cult status,” as Starkey describes it²³⁵ – for *The Prophet* (1923), a work he composed in English. *The Prophet* has since been translated into dozens of languages and is continually being published all over the world.²³⁶ Similarly, Amīn al-Riḥānī is often cited as the first Arab American novelist, for a work he wrote in English, *The Book of Khalid* (1911).²³⁷ This is despite the fact that Arabic novels had been published in the U.S. several years earlier, including works by Salīm Sarkīs (1904) and ‘Afīfa Karam (1906-1910). Unlike Riḥānī and Jibrān, Karam remained an Arabic writer with an exclusively Arabic-speaking audience throughout her career. In consequence, she enjoyed a far more limited reception than that of her contemporaries and, as a result, her works have been virtually cast out of historical memory.

Conclusion: A New Conceptualization of the *Nahḍa*

In light of the patently global character of this period of literary and cultural change, this dissertation argues for a new conceptualization of literary development during the *nahḍa*. The complex, evolutionary processes that led to the emergence of the Arabic novel ought to be approached by scholars with the same degree of complexity that accompanied its materialization. A process of literary change as momentous as the emergence of a new genre ought to be recognized for its essentially amorphous, disorderly, and chaotic nature, rather than as a simple evolution that took a straightforward, linear course. Rather than viewing it as a movement that originated in Egypt and Lebanon and subsequently spread to other regions of the Arabic-speaking world, it may be useful to understand the *nahḍa* as an expansive literary and cultural transition that evolved in fits and starts in various geographically decentralized locations. Only later – when new literary forms and styles were finally endorsed by members of the Arab academy in the *mashriq* – did it crystallize at the putative center of the Arabic literary world.

²³⁴ The choice of *mahjar* authors to compose literary works in English brings up many theoretical questions. Hassan discusses the Anglophone Arabic literature of Jibrān and Riḥānī as ‘minor literature’ as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari. See Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 62-3.

²³⁵ Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 105.

²³⁶ That said, Jibrān has also been disregarded by some Arab writers at the “center,” who viewed him as an outsider or a sell-out, catering to an orientalist, Western audience. For more, see Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 61–70.

²³⁷ Wail Hassan positions Riḥānī as a major pioneer and cites him as author of the first Arab American poetry collection, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1905), the first Arab American play (*Wajdah*-1909), and the first Arab American novel, *The Book of Khalid* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1911) in Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*.

The critical omission of Arabic works by women writers and *mahjar* writers who were active participants in the *nahḍa* seriously limits our understanding of the literary culture of the period during which the Arabic novel developed. Many of the prose narratives that have been either overlooked or deemed as immature antecedents to the “first Arabic novel” merit further study. Each of them should be reconsidered as a unique piece of literature in its own right and as a contributing ingredient to a dynamic, vacillating process of literary development. As works of art that are the individual expressions of a writer’s worldview at a particular moment in time, each of these texts makes a particular contribution, featuring a range of stylistic characteristics, whether they are “traditional” or “modern”; historical or romantic; or something in between.

The enterprise of reexamining the canon is central to the practice of literary scholarship. According to Michael Bérubé, “canons are at once the location, the index, and the record of the struggle for cultural representation; like any other hegemonic formation, they must be continually reproduced anew and are continually contested.”²³⁸ Unless the canon is regularly called into question, the contributions of disenfranchised groups will not cease to be marginalized and ignored. By recognizing previously unacknowledged literary contributions, we can open up to the voices of those who have been neglected and broaden our understanding of a particular literary-historical moment.

This research model seeks to destabilize the existing structure that privileges works written by men in Egypt and Greater Syria by focusing on the cultural production of a woman writer who was actively publishing Arabic literary works *outside* of the Arabic-speaking world. As the only woman novelist in the *mahjar*, Karam’s works offer a unique window into the experience of *al-nahḍa al-‘arabiyya fī Amrīkā*, or the Arab renaissance in America, from the perspective of a woman. Literary studies – both of the *nahḍa* and the *mahjar* – are silent on the literary production of *any* women writers in the *mahjar* at this period. How is it, then, that the author of some of the most innovative works of Arabic literature of her day, has literally vanished from the reported literary histories of the period? On the other hand, could it be that ‘Afīfa Karam, both female and *mahjar*, was in fact liberated from the shackles and conventions of traditional Arabic letters by the very fact of her marginalization? With that question in mind, I will now turn to a discussion of the life and literary evolution of the little-known *mahjar* woman author, ‘Afīfa Yūsuf Ṣāliḥ Karam.

²³⁸ Michael Bérubé, *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Afifa Karam’s Life and Literary Evolution

For the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, very little has been preserved about ‘Afifa Karam’s life. This chapter offers a presentation of her life and evolution as a formidable figure of the Arab literary and cultural enlightenment. The information presented here is the product of extensive archival research into the newspaper *al-Hudā*, coupled with knowledge garnered from face-to-face encounters with surviving relatives and acquaintances of the author, and time spent in her birthplace, ‘Amshīt, Lebanon and her adopted home in the United States, Shreveport, Louisiana.

‘Afifa Yūsuf Šālih Karam was born on July 26, 1883, in ‘Amshīt, Lebanon, a small town about 40 kilometers north of Beirut overlooking the Mediterranean coast.²³⁹ The rich, cultural environment in which she was raised had an impact on Karam as a young person, laying the foundations of her evolution as a thinker and a writer.²⁴⁰ ‘Amshīt and the surrounding area is known for its rich soil and sprawling orchards where figs, grapes, citrus fruit, olives, and tobacco grow in abundance. Bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the West and Mount Lebanon to the East, crops thrive in its moderate, seaside climate. Because of the plentitude of palm trees and delicious figs that grow in ‘Amshīt, the town is often referred to as the “Başra of Lebanon.”

‘Amshīt was historically, and continues to be, populated by Maronite Christians. The Maronites, an Eastern-rite community affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, emerged as a religious group in the 8th century C.E. and established their community in the vicinity of Mount Lebanon.²⁴¹ In the 11th century, the Druze, a Muslim sect that emerged from the Ismā‘īlī school of Shī‘ī Islam, joined Lebanon’s Maronite Christians in this mountainous region. The two populations lived in relative peace until the 19th

²³⁹ Located at the heart of the region known as Mount Lebanon, ‘Amshīt and the neighboring town of Jbeil, perhaps better known by its ancient Greek name of Byblos, have long been inhabited as cultural centers. Archeological excavations have revealed remains on the site that date from the Neolithic period, going back as far back as the 8th Millennium B.C.E. Now a UNESCO world heritage site, Byblos is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, beginning as early as 5000 BCE. Its important port and close proximity to the cedars of Lebanon made it an important site for many ancient cultures, perhaps most notably the Phoenicians, who used the cedar wood to build their ships. Evidence suggests that the city Jbeil was first settled between 8800 and 7000 BCE. Scholars believe the Canaanite ruler Cronus founded the city Jbeil, which still has an important port, to be the first city in Phoenicia. For more, see, R. C. Ostle, “The Romantic Poets,” in *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 96. Michael R. T. Dumper and Bruce E. Stanley, *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 104.

²⁴⁰ As documentation of Karam’s early life in ‘Amshīt is scarce, this study relies heavily on information taken from the biography of Karam written by a fellow ‘Amshītiyya, Barbara Yūsuf Badawī *‘Afifa Karam: Hayātuhā wa-a‘māluhā* (Bayrūt: Barbara Badawi, 2001).

²⁴¹ The Maronites have long enjoyed strong ties to European powers, France in particular, which has offered protection to the minority group since the age of the Crusaders. For more see Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, 279-80.

century, when sectarian tensions mounted, culminating in the civil war of 1860. Both sides suffered heavy losses and over ten thousand Christians were killed in a brutal massacre.²⁴² Following this crisis, Mount Lebanon was established as an autonomous district under Ottoman rule and Christians in Lebanon were given greater political power than ever before.²⁴³ The decades that followed the civil war saw the greatest period of economic growth and personal wealth in Lebanon's history, and the Maronites benefited more than other demographic groups.²⁴⁴

The second half of the nineteenth century was one of the most prosperous periods in the history of 'Amshīt and was known as its Golden Age.²⁴⁵ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the main industry in 'Amshīt was the exportation of goods, especially agricultural products and silk. To complement an already thriving local economy, the wealth of 'Amshīt was further augmented by riches that filtered back into the town from one-time inhabitants who lived overseas. As was the case for many cities in Greater Syria during the later decades of the nineteenth century, a large proportion of 'Amshīt's population traveled and lived abroad, in Egypt as well as in North and South America. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, 'Amshīt's domestic population was 1,500, while over two thousand former residents were expatriates scattered throughout the world, primarily in the United States, Brazil, France, Rome, and Buenos Aires. The 'Amshītīs who lived overseas brought back considerable financial resources to their homeland. They also carried with them tales of new ideas, lifestyles, customs, cultural conventions and political systems and institutions from the far off places where they lived. This influx of new ideas contributed to the cosmopolitan, open-minded, and comparatively liberal atmosphere of the town.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Some figures report that between 20,000 and 25,000 Christians were massacred. In response to this crisis, a new administration was established that aimed to provide a compromise for all of the parties involved. According to this new arrangement, Mount Lebanon was established as an autonomous district under Ottoman rule, and governance was granted to a non-Lebanese Christian appointed by the Sultan called a *mutaṣarrıfıyya*. The first appointed *mutaṣarrıfıyya* was Da'ūd Pasha. This change in leadership gave Christians in Lebanon greater political power than ever before. For a complete study on the history of the Maronites in Lebanon, see Moosa, 2005.

²⁴³ Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, 287.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ During that time, a number of 'Amshīt's inhabitants became so affluent that they began to donate the wealth they had earned to the community. Rich townspeople donated their villas and estates to be converted to free public schools and hospitals for all of 'Amshīt's residents. Eventually, all basic medical and educational services and institutions were available free of charge. In fact, the educational and medical institutions established during that period are still in operation in 'Amshīt today. One of the most notable of these benefactors was Mikhā'il Bey Ṭūbīyā, who was the primary employer of 'Afīfa Karam's father for many years. Ṭūbīyā would later appear as a character in Karam's third novel *Ghādat 'Amshīt*, published in New York City in 1910, by the same name. The acts of charity that Karam observed as a young person undoubtedly had an impact on her development as a socially minded individual. As an adult, Karam become deeply engaged in philanthropic work herself and charity is a recurring topic in her writings, where it is positioned as an essential component of civic duty and ethical membership in society. For more, see Badawi, *'Afīfa Karam*.

²⁴⁶ Today, 'Amshīt is home to many prominent Lebanese figures, including the current President of Lebanon Michel Suleiman, and a number of writers and artists, most notably Marcel Khalife. The town also

Karam's Early Life in Lebanon

'Afifa Karam was born into a well-educated family in a close-knit community inhabited by intellectually-minded and enlightened individuals. She is the eldest daughter of Yūsuf Ṣāliḥ Karam (1822-1895),²⁴⁷ a native of 'Amshīt and a doctor employed by the Ottoman army. Yūsuf Karam was dedicated to research and study in his field, as is evidenced by the numerous Arabic medical documents he left behind.²⁴⁸ Karam's mother, Frūsīnā Ḥabīb Sharbel, was born in the neighboring town of Batrūn. Frūsīnā was well trained in reading and writing, which was an uncommon achievement for a Syrian woman at the beginning of the nineteenth century.²⁴⁹ In fact, Frūsīnā is reputed to have been her husband's right hand in all of his affairs and was described as a 'Society Lady' (*ānisat al-majlis*) because she attended social gatherings with her husband.²⁵⁰ Karam's nuclear family modeled a progressive paradigm of gender relations, as both husband and wife participated in the management of domestic, social, and business-related affairs.

When Karam's parents were married in 1872, the *nahḍa* was well underway in Ottoman Syria. By the time 'Afifa Karam was born in 1883, "the press, schools, theatres, and libraries had become essential institutions in the life of the new educated class."²⁵¹ The historical romances of Salīm al-Bustānī were widely read and circulated throughout the households of educated Syrians. In addition to reading these innovative works of Arabic fiction, 'Afifa Karam's parents and their associates also read works of European fiction, especially French novels, which were taught in missionary schools throughout the region. Karam is reputed to have spent her childhood running freely through the orchards of 'Amshīt with her younger sister Amīna and accompanying her mother and father to social events.²⁵² Whenever she spoke of her childhood years in 'Amshīt, she would say they were "the best days of [her] life."²⁵³

Karam's Early Education

During the mid-nineteenth century, the educational system in the Levant was still in an early stage of development.²⁵⁴ However, in comparison to other Arabic-speaking

provided a second home for foreign intellectuals, such as the French philosopher, writer, and Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who is buried there with his sister Henriette.

²⁴⁷ The full name of 'Afifa Karam's father is Yūsuf Ibn Mikhā'il Ṣāliḥ Mūsā Karam.

²⁴⁸ Badawi, *'Afifa Karam*, 24.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, 60.

²⁵² Badawi, *'Afifa Karam*, 28.

²⁵³ Ibid., 39.

²⁵⁴ Before the establishment of missionary schools, most children, if educated at all, would receive basic instruction at home from their parents or from paid tutors. In 'Amshīt, there were several low-ranking religious clerics with basic levels of education who offered weekly lessons to village children. On Saturdays, young boys and girls would meet underneath an oak tree near *Kanīsat al-Sayyida* (St. Mary's Church), where they were taught basic arithmetic, reading, and calligraphy. These were the basic skills required to engage in the world of commerce, which was 'Amshīt's primary economic enterprise. In

communities, Mount Lebanon was at the forefront of education in the Arab world, particularly with regard to the education of girls. The wife of Presbyterian Reverend and missionary Eli Smith established the first school for girls in Beirut in 1840, which later became the American School for Girls.²⁵⁵ In 'Amshīt, a progressive attitude toward the education of women prevailed, perhaps due as much to its economic prosperity as to the sustained encounter of its inhabitants with Europe and the Americas. Ursulā Mārūn 'Ubayd (d. 1897), known to her townspeople as Sister Ursula, was one of the most prominent figures in the history of women's education in 'Amshīt.²⁵⁶ Sister Ursula was a Maronite nun and a benefactress who traveled back and forth to the United States to raise money for religious institutions in her homeland.²⁵⁷ With the funds she collected, she opened a small community convent at her estate in Jbeil, 'Amshīt's sister city, which also housed a school for girls.²⁵⁸

In 1895, 'Afīfa Karam first began her formal education at the local girls' schools founded by Sister Ursula in 'Amshīt and Jbeil. She was twelve years old at the time, which was the appropriate age for a young woman to begin her elementary education.²⁵⁹ It is likely that Karam attended the school founded in 1881 by Sister Ursula, which was the first school for girls in 'Amshīt. However, Karam's education was cut short later that year following the death of her father. Yūsuf Ṣāliḥ Karam passed away on May 9th, 1895.²⁶⁰

Shortly after her father's death, and perhaps in an effort to safeguard the family's security and social standing, Karam was taken out of school and her marriage was arranged to a cousin who had emigrated to the United States six years prior. Karam Ḥannā Ṣāliḥ Karam (1872-1945), known to his American relatives by the Anglicized version of his name, John Karam or simply K. John, was a native of 'Amshīt who immigrated to America at the age of twenty. For John, as for many Syrians, America represented a land of freedom and opportunity, as it did for the other immigrants who journeyed to the United States from all over the world during the latter part of the 19th century. Driven by an entrepreneurial spirit, John Karam settled in the southern state of Louisiana and he established himself as a businessman and landowner.²⁶¹ After having earned enough money to get married, he returned to his birthplace in search of a bride. It was then that

addition, students also memorized certain religious texts such as *Mazāmīr al-Nabī Da'ūd* (The Book of Psalms). For more details on education in 'Amshīt, see Badawī, 'Afīfa Karam: *Ḥayātuhā wa-a'māluhā*.

²⁵⁵ For more details see Younis, *The Coming of the Arabic-Speaking People to the United States*, 40; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 44, 49.

²⁵⁶ Fourteen years later, on August 15, 1895, Sister Ursula would become an instrumental figure in the history of the Maronite Church when she donated her private estate in Jbeil to Rosalie Naṣr to become the first home base of the Maronite Sisters of the Holy Family, a newly established order under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. For more see Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, i.

²⁵⁷ For more, see Badawī, 'Afīfa Karam, 29-35.

²⁵⁸ The small community schoolhouse started out with a small group of ten pupils and rose rapidly to thirty-five pupils in a few short months.

²⁵⁹ Badawī notes that it is also possible that Karam attended Madrasat Mār Elīshā', run by Father Būlus Yazbek 'Ubayd (1843-1910), in Badawī, 'Afīfa Karam, 29.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 35.

²⁶¹ *Al-Hudā*, Vol. 48 No. 214 Thursday, November 8th, 1945. [This article mentions that while he was primarily a fabric trader, John was also involved in the sale of illegal alcohol.]

John Karam – age twenty-six – was introduced to one of his cousins, ‘Afīfa, who was thirteen years old at the time.²⁶² Following their engagement and wedding, John Karam decided to return to Louisiana and the *mahjar*, where financial success awaited him, rather than to remain in Lebanon, where economic circumstances were unpredictable.²⁶³

Coming to America: A New Beginning in *al-Mahjar*

In 1897, as a young bride of fourteen, ‘Afīfa Karam accompanied her husband on the long, trans-Atlantic journey to the New World, or the *mahjar*. Along with her widowed mother Frūsīnā and her younger sister Amīna, the family made Shreveport, Louisiana their home.²⁶⁴ Although it may seem odd at first glance, Louisiana was not an unusual choice for the first wave of Arab immigrants to the United States. In addition to its warm, semitropical climate, as a French-speaking, Catholic outpost in the otherwise Protestant American South, this southern state was a popular destination for Syrian and Lebanese Christian immigrants.

While Karam was eager to return to her beloved homeland, or *waṭan*, she would never see Lebanon again. This land-locked city in the American South would become ‘Afīfa Karam’s permanent home until her death in 1924, at the age of 41.²⁶⁵ Karam’s grave can still be found in the cemetery of St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church in Shreveport, where she is buried next to her husband and her mother. The nostalgic yearning Karam felt for her birthplace is a constant thread running through all her works, both journalistic and literary.

One can only begin to imagine what ‘Afīfa Karam must have felt upon her arrival to the United States as a newly married, fourteen-year-old girl. What was the experience of a young Syrian immigrant in America at the turn of the twentieth century? Around 1900, the United States witnessed significant technological milestones, such as the first automobiles, airplanes, motion pictures, and long-distance telephone lines. However, the social reality on the ground was far from ideal, particularly for minority groups. All over the United States, and particularly in the American South, racism and racial violence was rampant. This era was marked by the systematic resettlement and extermination of Native American populations, the exclusion of Japanese workers by immigration law, and the discrimination of African-Americans as “separate but equal” under the Plessy v. Ferguson doctrine. The status of women was also far from ideal, as women were

²⁶² Nicoletta Karam, “Kahlil Gibran’s ‘Pen Bond’: Modernism and the Manhattan Renaissance of Arab-American Literature” (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 2005), 237.

²⁶³ Several factors contributed to John Karam’s decision to return to America. For one, there was a pronounced dearth of able workers in ‘Amshīt for him to employ because so many of its inhabitants had left the country. In addition, the construction of new railroad lines connecting Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut to Egypt and the Ḥijāz flooded the market with imported goods, creating a recession in the local market. Furthermore, the standard gold currency was replaced by a new, unsteady paper currency. For more, see Badawi, ‘*Afīfa Karam*, 35-6.

²⁶⁴ *Al-Hudā*, Vol. 48 No. 214 Thursday, November 8th, 1945.

²⁶⁵ The Karam family lived at 1019 Louisiana Avenue and 1101 Common Street, Shreveport, Louisiana.

commonly denied their basic rights, including the right to vote, which they did not gain until the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the United States constitution in 1920.

The existing biographical material on Karam's early years in the United States reports that she began to search out and read anything and everything she could find written in Arabic. In the Arab diaspora, just as in Egypt and the Levant, the educational reforms and ideological shifts that took place during the *nahḍa* created and nourished the burgeoning Arabic press and its ever-expanding reading public. Numerous Arabic-language journals and periodicals were established in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century to serve the reading needs of the growing population of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants.²⁶⁶ Fortunately, the vibrant culture of Arab journalism – which Syrian and Lebanese immigrants carried with them across the Atlantic – satisfied Karam's voracious appetite for literature in Arabic.

Mahjar Journalism

The bulk of first wave Arab immigrants to the United States were Syrian Christians who arrived during the latter part of the nineteenth century, especially between 1888 and 1911. Many of them settled in Lower Manhattan in a neighborhood that would come to be known as "Little Syria."²⁶⁷ Between 1892 and 1907, twenty-one Arabic daily, weekly, and monthly papers were published in the United States alone, and seventeen of them were printed in New York City.²⁶⁸ One of the leading figures of Arab journalism in the United States was Na'ūm Mukarzil, a Lebanese Maronite who founded an Arabic daily paper called *al-Hudā* (*Guidance*) in 1898. Initially published in Pennsylvania, *al-Hudā* soon relocated to 81 West Street in New York City and became the most influential Arabic-language paper in America until its closure in 1971.

The newspaper *al-Hudā* targeted the ever-growing Syro-Lebanese population in America, providing them with news from Lebanon and Syria as well as local and international news. The paper, which ran six days a week excluding Sunday, featured advice columns to help immigrants navigate the difficult transition to life in America, hence its title, *Guidance*. By perusing the pages of *al-Hudā*, one can garner a wealth of information about the pressing issues and concerns of the Syrian immigrant community in the United States. In addition, the daily paper promoted literature among its readers. Every issue of *al-Hudā* included serialized short stories and novels, presenting original Arabic texts by writers from the *mahjar* and the *mashriq* (the Arab East, the center of Arabic literary production) as well as Arabic translations of texts from a whole host of world

²⁶⁶ By 1928, there were six remaining Arabic daily papers published out of New York City, in addition to five other weekly, semi-weekly, or monthly papers published out of Detroit, New York State, and Lawrence, Massachusetts that were published. For a complete list see Halaby, "Dr. Michael Shadid and the Debate over Identity in *The Syrian World*" from Hooglund, Ed., *Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States Before 1940: Crossing the Waters*, 56.

²⁶⁷ Karam, "Kahlil Gibran's Pen Bond," 2.

²⁶⁸ Other Arabic periodicals were published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Lawrence, Massachusetts; and St. Louis, Missouri. For more details see Naff, *Becoming American*, 319.

literatures.²⁶⁹ The archives of *al-Hudā* and other Arabic-language periodicals published in the diaspora have preserved a vast reservoir of information about the *mahjar* literary movement and its place in the wider Arabic cultural landscape. The newspaper, which featured numerous articles on Arabic literature, the role of writers and poets in the *nahḍa*, and the aims of literature at that precise historical moment, shows that Syrians in the *mahjar* saw themselves as participants in the Arabic literary and cultural renaissance, which they called or *al-nahḍa al-‘arabiyya* (the Arab renaissance) or *al-nahḍa al-Sūriyya fī Amrīkā* (the Syrian renaissance in America). *Mahjar* writer Salīm Sarkīs, for example, describes himself as the author of a “Syrian American novel in the era of the Syrian renaissance in America” when he writes: “*Ana aktub ḥawādith hadhihi al-riwāya al-Sūriyya al-Amrīkiyya fī ‘aṣr al-nahḍa al-Sūriyya fī Amrīkā.*”²⁷⁰

As an organization, *al-Hudā* possessed a rather emphatic political agenda. The subtitle of *al-Hudā* is “*Jarīda yawmiyya intiqādiyya tahdhībīyya ikhbāriyya*,” which translates as “a daily, critical, educational, and informational newspaper.” This particular sequencing of descriptive adjectives reflects the newspaper’s critical viewpoint, which corresponds to the political stance of its founder and editor-in-chief, Na‘ūm Mukarzil. Mukarzil was a progressive thinker who was staunchly anti-religion and anti-establishmentarian.²⁷¹ He was also a passionate and outspoken nationalist who openly opposed Ottoman rule. His involvement in the Lebanese nationalist movement led to his nickname *al-Nimr al-Lubnānī*, or “the Lebanese Tiger.”²⁷² In addition, Mukarzil was a major proponent of the women’s movement, as evidenced by the countless articles that were published on the topics of women’s personal and legal rights, women’s education and work, and women’s voting and political participation.²⁷³ The newspaper also announced meetings of Syrian women’s associations in the United States, including listings of attendees and members.²⁷⁴ In fact, it was Na‘ūm Mukarzil who would eventually become ‘Afīfa Karam’s greatest ally and literary mentor, who supported her throughout her career.²⁷⁵

Circumstances of Possibility: The Path of an Immigrant Woman Writer

‘Afīfa Karam’s success as a writer and journalist at this particular historical moment is quite unusual and raises the following question: what were the circumstances of possibility – both historical and personal – that enabled her to embark upon a career as a professional writer? To begin with, as the wife of a successful businessman, ‘Afīfa

²⁶⁹ Among the non-Arab writers whose works were translated into Arabic and published in *al-Hudā* are: Emile Zola, Alexander Pushkin, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, Demetrius Vikelas, Fernan Caballero, Guy de Maupassant, Elizabeth Phyllis, and Sir Walter Scott.

²⁷⁰ Sarkīs, *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*, 9.

²⁷¹ Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 92.

²⁷² Badawi, ‘*Afīfa Karam*, 302.

²⁷³ Naff, *Becoming American*, 320.

²⁷⁴ For example, *al-Hudā*, July 10, 1907.

²⁷⁵ Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 55.

Karam had the good fortune to live in considerable financial prosperity. Unlike the majority of her fellow Syrian and Lebanese immigrants to the United States, Karam and her immediate family did not have to engage in itinerant pack-peddling, or *bī'a al-kishsh*.²⁷⁶ Furthermore, Karam was unable to bear children, a disappointing personal condition that had a profound impact on her life.²⁷⁷ With no children of her own to care for, Karam was able to devote her time and energy to intellectual pursuits, such as reading, writing, and translation, as well as charitable work with Syrian orphanages, Syrian women's associations, and Maronite religious organizations in the United States.²⁷⁸

In addition to her wealth and her childlessness, Karam's literary success would not have been realized without the sponsorship of her husband, John Karam.²⁷⁹ John Karam encouraged his wife's career as a public literary figure at a time when writing was still considered an unacceptable occupation for an Arab woman. Perhaps even more unusual, he stood by his wife despite her infertility, which is significant in a cultural context that viewed motherhood as woman's primary purpose in life. Furthermore, 'Afifa Karam, who harshly condemned the practice of arranged marriages of young girls, was a child bride herself. It is impossible not to wonder about the nature of her husband's reaction to her denouncement of a practice that he himself had subjected her to. Archival materials have provided overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that John Karam was thoroughly supportive of his wife's career and that he was instrumental in its coming to fruition. As it was written in his obituary, "the virtuous [John] Karam spared no effort in supporting [his wife's] literary pursuits with financial sacrifices until the fame of the writer 'Afifa Karam soared."²⁸⁰ Following 'Afifa's premature death in 1924, John Karam remarried another Syrian immigrant woman named Salīma Harāwī, who bore him three children. As a final gesture of his admiration and love for his first wife, upon his death in 1945, John Karam was buried next to 'Afifa, rather than beside the mother of his children.²⁸¹

Apart from her husband, Karam's other main supporter was Na'ūm Mukarzil, the founder and editor of the New York City-based, Arabic-language newspaper, *al-Hudā*

²⁷⁶ Peddling wares was the most common occupation for newly arrived Arab immigrants to the United States. Not only was the task portable, requiring minimal language or other specialized skills, but also peddlers did not have to answer to a boss or fear exploitation or termination. Nevertheless, peddling was a very difficult and potentially dangerous occupation. It was necessary for peddlers – who were both men and women – to walk extremely long distances alone in unfamiliar territories. In addition to the bitter weather conditions they endured, peddlers were frequently subjected to harsh treatment from the people they encountered, including robbery and assault. For more see Naff, *Becoming American*.

²⁷⁷ Naff, *Becoming American*, 39; Karam, "Kahlil Gibran's Pen Bond," 237; *al-Hudā*, 8 November, 1945; and Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 55.

²⁷⁸ Many of the pioneering Arab women writers did not have children of their own. Freed from the time-consuming burdens of household and family management, these women could devote themselves to the creative act of writing. For more, see *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*; Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*.

²⁷⁹ Another factor that prevented Karam from engaging in work outside of the home like many of her immigrant "sisters" was her ailing health. Karam suffered from recurring bouts of illness that required her to be housebound for months at a time. Badawi, 'Afifa Karam, 39.

²⁸⁰ *Al-Hudā*, Vol. 48 No. 214, Thursday, November 8th, 1945.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

(*Guidance*). ‘Afīfa Karam first met Mukarzil in 1898 when he was traveling through the American South prior to the publication of the first issue of his newspaper. In Louisiana, Mukarzil stayed for some time at the home of John Karam, who was a prominent figure in the Syro-Lebanese immigrant community of Louisiana. This is where the editor first met ‘Afīfa Karam, who was fifteen years old at the time. Sallūm Mukarzil, the younger brother of Na‘ūm Mukarzil and the successive editor-in-chief of *al-Hudā*, recounts the story of their meeting in John Karam’s obituary, printed on November 8, 1945 in that same publication.²⁸² According to his account, when Mukarzil met ‘Afīfa Karam, he took note of her “superior brilliance” and “great potential.”²⁸³ Mukarzil was struck by her keen intelligence, literary talent, and ambitions, and encouraged her to pursue her passion for Arabic language and literature.²⁸⁴ From that day forward, Mukarzil became Karam’s most important literary ally, supplying her with Arabic texts, encouraging her to study and write, and critiquing her written work.

Karam’s Journalism and her Early Years at *al-Hudā*

One of the major challenges that scholars of the pioneer generation of Arab women writers often face is the lack of textual evidence to support their research. Furthermore, because reading habits of the age were such that journals, short stories, and novels were read aloud and shared among many people, it is often difficult to measure the influence of a particular writer or to gauge the size and scope of their audience. Fortunately, the archives of the newspaper *al-Hudā* have preserved a great deal of information (including circulation figures) to illustrate the public perception, influence, and role that ‘Afīfa Karam played within the *mahjar* community and beyond. These documents – obtained through extensive archival research during the course of this study – shed light on Karam’s evolution as a literary persona and her unique, proto-feminist, literary vision and provide valuable insight into a pioneering Arab author’s understanding of an emerging literary form.

Karam’s first published article appeared in *al-Hudā* in 1899, when she was only 17 years old.²⁸⁵ By 1903, Karam appeared more frequently as a columnist who wrote primarily about women’s issues. In 1905, Karam emerged as the director (*mudīra*) of a regular column entitled *Mabāḥith Nisā’iyya* (*Women’s Topics*), which appeared between eight and fifteen times a month. At the top of her column was a small photograph of Karam, wearing pearl earrings and a shoulder-length haircut, with a small, white flower tucked behind her right ear. Over the next several years, Karam continued to rise in the ranks of the staff of *al-Hudā* until 1913, when she was appointed as acting editor-in-chief for a period of six months while Na‘ūm Mukarzil was in Paris attending the First Arab

²⁸² *Al-Hudā*, Vol. 48 No. 214, 1945.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Karam’s first published piece is supposed to have appeared in *al-Hudā* in 1899, though additional archival research is required to substantiate this fact.

Congress of 1913 as a representative of the Lebanese League of Progress, or *Jam'iyyat al-nahḍa al-Lubnāniyya*.²⁸⁶

Karam made history again in 1911 when she founded *al-Imrā'a al-Sūriyya* (*The Syrian Woman*), the first Arab women's journal outside of the Arab world. Published monthly, the magazine provided household and medical advice for women, advocated for women's education, and encouraged mothers to teach their children Arabic.²⁸⁷ Two years later, Karam went on to found a second women's journal that enjoyed international circulation, called *al-Ālam al-Jadīd al-Nisā'ī* (*The New Women's World*).²⁸⁸ In both of these publications, Karam defended women's rights and criticized social conventions and traditions that she saw as obstacles to women's advancement.²⁸⁹ As the founder of the first women's journals in the *mahjar*, Karam's work marks an important step forward in the history of the Arab women's movement, the Arab women's press in the *mahjar*, and the history of Arab journalism in general.

While Karam was deeply entrenched within the Syrian expatriate community in America, at the same time, through the international world of journalism, she was also connected to the wider Arabic literary scene in Egypt and the Levant. Karam's women's journals were modeled after the Arab women's press in the *mashriq*. When Karam first founded *al-Imrā'a al-Sūriyya* (*The Syrian Woman*) in 1911, she paid homage to her "sisters" who founded women's magazines in the *mashriq*, calling her own publication their "child."²⁹⁰ Over time, Karam would also be recognized in the *mashriq* as an important literary figure and a key member of the international Arab women's literary movement. In 1908, the prominent novelist and journalist Labība Hāshim, featured a biography of 'Afīfa Karam in a regular column in her journal *Fatāt al-Sharq* (*Young Woman of the East*) entitled *Shahīrāt al-Nisā'* (*Famous Women*).²⁹¹ In this piece, Hāshim praises Karam, calling her a "glorious writer" (*kātibā majīda*), who "presents readers of Arabic with the wide-ranging mastery and knowledge that comes from her pen with the current of the age (*tayyār al-ʿaṣr*) and the need of its sons for reform with fluent (*salisa*) expressions and innovative (*mubtakira*) styles that arouse ideas and affect minds."²⁹²

Karam gained an even greater following in the *mashriq* when she began to contribute a regular column to the Egyptian women's journal *al-Mar'ā al-Jadīda* (*The New Woman*),

²⁸⁶ Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 55; Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 92.

²⁸⁷ Badawi, 'Afīfa Karam, 44.

²⁸⁸ In 1912, Karam bought the license of a paper owned by Sallūm Mukarzil called *al-Ālam al-Jadīd* (*The New World*) and renamed it *al-Ālam al-Jadīd al-Nisā'ī* (*The New Women's World*). *The New Women's World* was a monthly magazine intended as a supplement to her weekly magazine *al-Imrā'a al-Sūriyya* (*The Syrian Woman*). For more see Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*; Badawi, 'Afīfa Karam, 45.

²⁸⁹ Due to financial constraints and Karam's failing health, neither of these journals ran for more than two years. For more, see Badawi, 'Afīfa Karam, 45.

²⁹⁰ Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 55.

²⁹¹ Labība Hāshim printed an obituary of 'Afīfa Karam in her women's journal *Fatāt al-Sharq* following the author's death in 1924.

²⁹² Sarkīs, *al-Qulub al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*, 9.

entitled “*Ḥadīth al-Mahjar*,” or “Talk of the *Mahjar*.”²⁹³ In this column, which became one of the most popular segments of the periodical, Karam described the social, educational, and political life of middle-class women in America for readers of Arabic in the *mashriq*. She also focused on the conflicted existence of Syrian immigrant women in the United States, whose lives oscillated between two very different cultural worlds. This communication between Karam and her “sisters” points to the transnational character of the Arab women’s press, a subject that remains particularly unexplored in the critical literature on early Arab journalism.

From Journalism to Novel Writing

The early years Karam spent writing for *al-Hudā* were instrumental in facilitating her entry into the Arabic literary world. In 1905, Karam transitioned away from journalism and turned her attention to the writing of fiction. The pages of *al-Hudā* are a vital source of information on Karam’s personal process as she underwent this transition, as well as on the evolution of her literary work within the wider historical, social, and political context.

In 1905, Karam took a long, unexplained period of absence from *al-Hudā*. Several months later, she suddenly reappeared with a fiery, impassioned article. In the article, published on August 11, 1905, Karam expressed her outrage about rumors that had been circulating in the Syrian immigrant community. Certain people expressed doubts about Karam’s existence, falsely attributing her writings to the editor of *al-Hudā*, Na‘ūm Mukarzil. In response, Karam fervently asserted her literary independence and autonomy, claiming ownership over her writings and ideas and clarifying the nature of Mukarzil’s mentorship. She explained that he helped her occasionally with a word here and there, but that otherwise, her writing was her own. Subsequently, Karam disappeared again from *al-Hudā* for a period of six months, from August 12, 1905 to March 14, 1906. When she reemerged next, it was just prior to the publication of *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*, the first Arabic novel written by a Syrian woman in America.

The Novel Debate

In 1906, as Karam was writing her first work of fiction, the novel was still a disputed literary form in Arabic. Even Arabs living in the liberal environment of the United States held conservative views of the novel, especially the romance novel (*al-riwāya al-ḥubbīyya*). As discussed in Chapter Two, because novels often featured culturally unacceptable representations of love relationships, its opponents viewed the form a morally degrading force, with the dangerous capability of poisoning the minds of young people, if not the very fabric of society. One unnamed male contributor to *al-Hudā* wrote an article in which he vehemently attacked the “romance novel,” calling it “a woodworm

²⁹³ Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 157.

eating away at the bones of the nation's good morals, and igniting in its heart evil tendencies that should not exist, but that should perish."²⁹⁴ On March 15, 1906, Karam published an article in response to this harsh critique, entitled "*Baḥṭh fī al-riwāyāt*" ("An Examination of Novels").

In this article, which appeared on the front page of *al-Hudā* – an unusual occurrence for the writer, whose works generally appeared on the fourth page of the paper – Karam presents a strongly worded and cogently argued defense of the novel in which she disagrees with the view expressed above and offers her own understanding of the novel and its particular characteristics. In her opinion, the novel – as a literary form – is not categorically harmful. Rather, some novels are harmful and some are beneficial. Therefore, attempting to prohibit young people from reading novels is not an adequate solution. Karam argues that the so-called "evil inclinations" that the above author alludes to in his polemic article cannot be avoided. She reminds the reader that sexual urges and desires are inevitable and will arise naturally when men and women reach a certain age and level of maturity. Rather than being a corrupting force, Karam posits that romance novels can serve as "teachers" or "friends" for young people. In her words, "when they contain useful aims, honorable values, and pure and clean words, romance novels can do to the hearts of young people what the advice, instructions, or punishments of a mother or teacher cannot accomplish."²⁹⁵ Here, Karam demonstrates her understanding of the novel as a genre that possesses great didactic and pedagogic capabilities. Through the troubles, miseries, and joys of its characters, readers can learn important lessons about how to conduct their own lives. Karam believes that young people will be much more receptive to advice communicated through the events in a novel than to guidance imparted by an authority figure, which is most often met with resistance. Furthermore, because novels contain stories that virtually anyone can relate to on a personal level, they are read with much more enjoyment than journal articles or works of non-fiction, such as scientific and historical texts. In her words, "when ideas are collected and arranged in the form of a novel, they...benefit...and impact the reader much more strongly...than short, disruptive essays and columns appearing in the pages of a newspapers."²⁹⁶ That is, because of its length and structure (form), and its subject matter and depth of character development (content), the reader will be more likely to remember the key moral lessons conveyed in the work for years to come, even if precise details of the story are forgotten.

Karam does admit, however, that if an author's opinions are immoral or corrupt, then works they produce can indeed have a negative impact on readers. As such, Karam cautions her audience to be highly circumspect when choosing which novels to read. The article concludes with a heartfelt entreaty to Syrian parents, asking them to carefully examine any novel before allowing their children to read it. By placing equal accountability on both the writer and the reader, Karam removes blame from the *novel* itself as a literary form. Instead, Karam sees it as the moral obligation of the writer to produce novels that have the potential to benefit society as a whole (i.e. *riwāya muḥīda*).

²⁹⁴ Karam, "*Baḥṭh fī al-riwāyāt*," *al-Hudā*, March 16, 1906, 1.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

At the same time, Karam places responsibility on the reader (and on the parents of readers) to be cautious and conscientious when deciding which novels to read.

As this textual exchange demonstrates, at the time Karam was writing, the novel was a new and evolving genre of Arabic literature. However, despite the novelty of the form, Karam's understanding of the genre – as expressed both in the introduction to the work and in the literary text itself – fits squarely within the classical Arabic literary tradition. The medieval anecdotal form of prose, *adab*, or *belles-lettres*, was designed to be both edifying and entertaining. Medieval works of *adab* were written to inform and instruct elite members of the expanding Islamic empire. These works often appeared in the form of manuals of behavior and protocol for conducting the affairs of state through advice embedded in tales and anecdotes. The dual valence of the key literary term *adab*, which denotes both “literature” and “proper conduct and etiquette,” is reflected in Karam's understanding of the genre. Much like the anecdotal prose form that developed in the ninth century, Karam's novels were also intended to be both “beneficial” and “entertaining.” She used fictional stories to offer advice to her readers about behavior and protocol. However, her works were not for members of court, but rather, they were aimed at the Syrian immigrant community living in the *mahjar*, and especially the women among them. Therefore, Karam's works exhibit continuity with the wider tradition of classical Arabic letters rather than a rupture, as many opponents of early Arabic fiction suggested.

Immediately following Karam's fiery vindication of the romance novel, which – remarkably – appeared on the front page of *al-Hudā*, the editors of *al-Hudā* printed an advertisement for her first novel, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, which reads:

On the occasion of the publication of the preceding article by the distinguished writer Miss 'Afifa Karam, we would like to mention that a women's literary romance novel (*riwāya adabīyya nisā'iyya ḥubbiyya*) written by the author is in the printing house of *al-Hudā*. Indeed, it is one of the best Arabic novels, and over five hundred copies will be printed. If there are any merchants who would like [to place] an advertisement in the novel, which will be read and memorized by thousands of Syrians, please contact us immediately and send us an image of the advertisement so that we can determine its price.²⁹⁷

This advertisement provides valuable information about the readership and reception of 'Afifa Karam's novels. Based on reading customs of the day, each of the 500 copies of the first printing of Karam's novel would have been read aloud and shared among various households, allowing her work to reach an audience of many thousands.²⁹⁸ Furthermore,

²⁹⁷ *Al-Hudā*, March 16, 1906, 1.

²⁹⁸ In *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*, Beth Baron provides a detailed discussion of reading habits during the *nahḍa*, noting that the custom of reading aloud and the frequent sharing of printed texts such as a newspapers and journals enabled works to reach a much larger number of readers than its subscription figures suggests. A paper with 20,000 subscribers, she mentions, could reach an audience of 200,000. A writer in the newspaper *al-Hilāl* remarked, “a single copy of a newspaper is touched by many hands, and is

the prominent placement of this endorsement of *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* (and the novel in general) demonstrates that the editors of *al-Hudā* were firm supporters of Karam's literary endeavors and of the emerging form of the novel in general.

While questions about women's role in society were being debated in both the *mashriq* and the *mahjar*, Karam's vantage point differed from writings on gender and women that circulated in the Arab East. First, her writings reflected the particular experience of Syrian immigrant women living in the *mahjar*. As someone who was raised in both Arab and American societies, Karam was acutely aware of their differences. She always examined gender issues through a comparative lens, which is a salient characteristic of her entire corpus. Second, she refused to apologize for the faults and failings of her writing. Unlike contemporary women writers in the *mashriq*, whose works often revealed a self-effacing or conciliatory tone, Karam's self-presentation as an author is straightforward and apologetic, as are her criticisms of traditional Syrian customs and the place of women in society.

'Afīfa Karam: The First Arab American Woman Novelist

Karam's first novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* (*Badi'a and Fu'ad*) was published in New York City the following year, in 1906, after a six-month hiatus from writing in the newspaper *al-Hudā*. In the introduction to the novel, Karam exhibits a keen awareness that Arabic literature was in the midst of a pivotal developmental stage, which she calls elsewhere "*awwal 'ahd nahḍatinā al-adabiyya*" or, "the first era of our literary renaissance."²⁹⁹ Well aware that her forthcoming novels would be met with criticism, Karam deliberately and self-consciously analyzed and articulated her rationale for writing what she calls a "*riwāya nisā'iyya adabiyya gharāmiyya*," a "women's literary romance novel."³⁰⁰ As she expressed in the article "A Study on Novels," for Karam, the novel is a powerful forum for civic education. In the introduction to her first novel, she adds greater specificity to her understanding of the genre. Here, Karam articulates a theory of the novel that links that particular literary form to the female gender, advancing a unique proto-feminist literary theory.

In the introduction to her first novel, Karam cites two reasons for her choice of the novel as opposed to another literary genre. First, Karam identifies her intended audience as the community of Syrian women, both at home and abroad. She dedicates her novel "first and foremost...to the mothers, wives, and daughters who built the past and present and will build the future of humanity."³⁰¹ Second, she explains that she chose to write a novel because "ladies (*sayyidāt*) possess a stronger passion for reading novels...than other

read by tens or scores of people." *Al-Hilāl* (Oct. 1897): 131, quoted by Ami Ayalon in *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East: The Evolution of Modern Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135.

²⁹⁹ Karam, "*Baḥṭh fī al-riwāyāt*," 1.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Karam, "*Baḥṭh fī al-riwāyāt*," iii.

kinds of books.”³⁰² Karam asserts that women “have more patience for reading novels than any other literary genre” and therefore, the novel would be an easier avenue for her “to influence their minds and hearts as well as entertain them.”³⁰³ In other words, because of the special characteristics of its form, the novel will have the strongest impact on female readers and will, therefore, be the most potent platform for what she terms “the dissemination of ideas of critical educational reform,” or “*bathth al-afkār al-iṣlāḥīyya al-tahdhībīyya al-intiqādīyya*.”³⁰⁴

Karam explicitly stated that the “arrangement of events and their narration” (“*tansīq al-ḥawādith wa-sardihā*”) was not her primary concern.³⁰⁵ Instead, Karam saw journalism – and later novel writing – as a powerful platform from which to publicize her views on social and gender issues. To this end, Karam asked her readers to think deeply about the messages her works tried to convey, namely: that women are oppressed in a patriarchal society that denies them equal rights with men; that women should be educated, for themselves, their spouses, their families, and for the greater good of society; that certain traditional customs, such as the arranged marriage of young girls, are oppressive to women and should be abolished; that Syrian women should fight against the “harmful modesty” (*al-ḥishma al-muḍirra*) that has held them back from expressing themselves and their opinions and ideas; and finally, that the hypocrisy and corruption of the Maronite clergy should be addressed and remedied.

Thus, in 1906, at the young age of twenty-four, ‘Afīfa Karam emerged as the first Arab woman novelist outside of the Arabic speaking world. Two years later, she published *Fāṭima al-Badawīyya* (1908), followed by *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* (*The Girl from ‘Amshīt*) in 1910. After the publication of her third novel, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, ‘Afīfa Karam never wrote original fiction again. Instead, she decided to focus her efforts on literary translation.

Karam’s Work as a Translator

Karam’s three known translations include *Nānsī Stāyir* (*Nancy Stair*) (1914), *Riwāyat ibnat nā’ib al-malik* (*Une fille du régent*) (1918), and *Muḥammad ‘Alī Bāsha al-Kabīr* (*Muhammad ‘Ali und sein Haus*) (1919). Karam apparently translated a fourth novel, *Kliūbatrā* (*Cleopatra*) before the 1914 publication of *Nānsī Stāyir*, however no material evidence of this particular work has yet been found.³⁰⁶

Karam’s first translated work of fiction is *Nānsī Stāyir* (*Nancy Stair*).³⁰⁷ Originally published in 1904 by the Southern American woman writer Elinor Macartney Lane

³⁰² Karam, “*Baḥth fī al-riwāyāt*,” i.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., iv.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Karam makes reference to the *Kliūbatrā* in the introduction to *Nānsī Stāyir*. It is possible that the work was published serially in *al-Hudā* and not released in book form, however, I have not been able to locate it.

³⁰⁷ Elinor Macartney Lane, *Nancy Stair* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904).

(1864-1909),³⁰⁸ Karam's Arabic translation of the work was published in New York City by *al-Hudā Press* in 1914. The novel, which casts itself as a factual biography, tells the story of a precocious young woman named Nancy Stair. The Scottish national poet, Robert Burns (1759-1796), features as a character in the novel. His fictional introduction to the work and recurrent poetic exchanges with the novel's heroine led many readers, including Karam, to believe Nancy Stair was historical personage. Nancy, the novel's protagonist, was raised by a single father and his two male friends. Essentially, Nancy was brought up as a man, without any feminine influence. A *New York Times* review of the novel published in 1904 characterizes the novel's heroine as "[ve]rsed in law, in verse writing, in lovemaking, a queen of hearts and beauty, a creature of fire and air, a fairy of the past..." whose "little gift at forging" began at the age of six, when she forged a check in her father's name.³⁰⁹

The unusual characterization of the novel's heroine, in addition to the gender and southern extraction of the author, is undoubtedly what prompted Karam to translate the text. In the introduction to her translation, Karam states that the "feminist subject matter [of the novel] is close to my heart" (*"li-annah qarība bi-mawḍū'ihā al-nisā' min qalbī."*)³¹⁰ She further explains her choice, saying that her decision to Arabize (*ta'arīb*) the text came from a desire to share the story of Nancy's unique upbringing with Syrian readers, for whom such a situation would be highly unusual. Furthermore, she explains that following the publication of the biographical novel *Kliyūbaṭra* by *al-Hudā Press*, she wanted to offer the biography (*"sīra ḥayāt"*) of another woman who, like the Egyptian queen, was raised with the "four pillars of independence: beauty, wealth, power, and freedom." (*"da'ā'im al-istiqlāl al-arba': al-jamāl . wa- 'l-māl . wa- 'l-sulṭa . wa- 'l-ḥurriya"*) (punctuation Karam's).³¹¹ However, at the conclusion of Macartney's novel, despite her untraditional social conditioning, the normative gender roles are reinstated and Nancy's "womanly nature asserted itself in spite of association and training."³¹² Interestingly enough, a biographical text on Lane published in 1909 states, "...the Eastern Scheherazade would have found her a kindred spirit..."³¹³

³⁰⁸ Born in Maryland to Irish parents in 1864, Elinor Macartney Lane lived most of her early life in Washington, D.C., where she attended public schools. Following her graduation in 1882, Lane began a career in the public schools as a teacher of mathematics. However, she was simultaneously developing her skills as a writer, mostly of tales of Southern life. Her first novel, *Mills of God*, was published in 1901. Published in 1904, *Nancy Stair* was a best-selling book, which was later adapted for the stage by Paul M. Potter. The play ran very briefly on Broadway, at the Criterion Theatre, for a month in 1905. Her final novel, *Katrine*, was released after her untimely death in Lynchburg, Virginia, on March 15, 1909. She was only 45 years old. That year, *Katrine* was the second-best selling novel in the United States. For a more detailed biography of Lane, see, Charlotte Newell, "Elinor Macartney Lane," in *Library of Southern Literature: Biography*, ed. Edwin Anderson Alderman, Joel Chandler Harris, and Charles William Kent (Atlanta, GA: The Martin & Hoyt Company, 1909), 3003–6.

³⁰⁹ Author unknown, "The Romance of a Scotch Lassie.," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1904.

³¹⁰ 'Afīfa Karam, *Nansī Stāyir* (New York, NY: al-Hudā Press, 1914), 3.

³¹¹ Karam, *Nansī Stāyir*, 3.

³¹² Newell, "Elinor Macartney Lane," 3004.

³¹³ Karam, *Nansī Stāyir*, 3.

In 1918, Karam translated a rather obscure historical novel by Alexandre Dumas, père (1802-1870), entitled, *Une fille du régent* (1844).³¹⁴ Dumas co-authored the novel with his collaborator Auguste Maquet (1813-1888), and later dramatized the novel as *Une fille du régent* in 1846.³¹⁵ The first known English rendition of the novel appeared as early as 1947.³¹⁶ However, it is more likely that Karam's source for her translation – which she called *Riwāyat ibnat nā'ib al-malik* – was the edition published in Boston by Little, Brown, & Company in 1891. The tale is drawn from an historical event, namely, the aftermath of the Cellamare Conspiracy of 1718 against the Regent of France, Phillippe d'Orléans (1674-1723). The novel focuses on this event from the perspective of the regent's illegitimate daughter, Hélène de Chaverny, whom he raised secretly in a convent. Hélène falls in love with a man involved in an elaborate plot to assassinate her father in order to combat the possible union of France and Spain.

One year later, in 1919, Karam published *Muḥammad 'Alī Bāsha al-Kabīr*, an Arabization of an historical novel written by the German woman novelist Luise Mühlbach, which is the penname of German author Clara Mundt (1814-1873).³¹⁷ The novel, originally titled *Muhammad 'Ali und sein Haus*, was first translated into English by Chapman Coleman in 1910 as *Mohammed Ali and his House: An Historical Romance*. This novel is one of twenty-two historical romances by Mühlbach, which were translated into English and compiled into eighteen volumes in 1902.³¹⁸ It is beyond question that Karam's interest in this work stems from its focus on an Arab historical personage who was a prime figure in the Arab cultural enlightenment by a German woman author.³¹⁹

In 1919, when *Muḥammad 'Alī Bāsha al-Kabīr* was published by *al-Hudā Press*, Karam was thirty-six years old. By that time, she had been actively writing as a journalist, novelist, and translator for almost two decades. Oddly enough, Karam's introduction to this, her final book-length publication, is written entirely in *saj'*, or rhymed prose. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this is the first example of Karam's use of this older, more traditional Arabic prose style across the entirety of her oeuvre. The first paragraph reads as follows:

³¹⁴ *Une fille du régent* was a companion story to another novel by Dumas, entitled *Le Chevalier d'Harmental (The Conspirators)*, published in 1842, although it is often referred to as its sequel.

³¹⁵ Dumas, born Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie (1802-1870), is one of the best-known French writers who began his career as a dramatist, and later earned a reputation as a prolific author of historical adventure novels, many of which were serialized. He was also a productive essayist and travel writer. Among his most famous works are *Les Trois Mousquetaires (The Three Musketeers)* (1844) and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo (The Count of Monte Cristo)* (1845-46).

³¹⁶ Alexandre Dumas, *The Regent's Daughter*, The Parlour Library (London: Simms and Macintyre, 1847).

³¹⁷ For a more recent study of the historical novels of Luise Mühlbach, see, Judith Martin, "Radical Revisions by Ida Hahn-Hahn and Luise Mühlbach: Art, Love, and Emancipation in the Vormärz," in *Germaine de Staël in Germany: Gender and Literary Authority (1800-1850)* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 209-40.

³¹⁸ Louise Mühlbach, *The Works of Louise Mühlbach in Eighteen Volumes* (New York: P.F. Collier, 1902).

³¹⁹ A translation of the same work was published in 1919 by Dār al-Hilāl in Cairo, under the title, *Muḥammad 'Alī al-Kabīr*. In 2008, 'Amr Bayyūmī produced a new translation of Mühlbach's novel *Muḥammad 'Alī al-Kabīr*, entitled *Muḥammad 'Alī: al-Fir'awn al-akhīr*, published in Cairo in 2008 by Nūn press.

La-qad ta'awadtū al-shudhūd al-qawā'id fī ḥayātī al-adabiyya. Fa-šāra al-shudhūd lī qā'ida mar'iyya. Bal šāra fī nafsī tabī'a thāniya ajrī 'alayhā fī taqdīm hadhihi al-riwāya al-tārīkhiyya.

I have grown accustomed to deviating from the rules in my literary life. And thus, deviation has become my guiding rule. However, I am conforming to another character that has settled in my spirit in presenting this historical novel.

What motivated Karam to use this antiquated literary style here, particularly at this late date in her career? It is almost certainly not out of a desire to place herself among the ranks of the intellectual elite, as other women writers during the *nahḍa* did. If this were her intent, she would likely have composed works in *saj'* at a much earlier point in her career. Perhaps Karam chose to compose the introduction in this style in order to lend greater authenticity to the ensuing work, historical novel that takes place in Egypt during the second half of the nineteenth century. The use of *saj'*, which was the literary language most commonly used during the reign of Muḥammad 'Alī by writers and intellectuals alike, would have had the effect of transporting her readers more directly into the atmosphere of the historical moment during which the events of the novel are staged.

Alternatively, Karam's use of *saj'* here can be construed as a deliberate and calculated move on the author's part. In the passage quoted above, Karam comments explicitly on her disavowal of traditional literary norms and standards – and even expresses pride in such an action – using an Arabic prose style that is, for all intensive purposes, the *most* traditional, conventional prose style of the era. Karam's ironic, almost farcical mimicry of this literary idiom, which still held significant cultural capital despite its diminishing popularity, can be seen as a commentary on a tendency that she attributes to “we Syrians” (“*naḥnu al-Sūriyīn*”), namely, the habit of clinging overly to convention. The predisposition toward custom and formality is one that runs counter to Karam's own ideology and practice, as evidenced by her consistent rejection of literary, social, and cultural norms.

As a writer, in all her capacities, Karam was a rebel. As a journalist, Karam tackled controversial socio-cultural issues relating to gender and the role of women in society. In her literary works, Karam addressed many of the same taboo issues she focused on in her journalistic writing, though fiction permitted Karam to express her gender politics more fully, and certainly more imaginatively, than she could do in *al-Hudā*. The novel enabled Karam to make more radical statements than she could in her journalistic writing, partly through its claim to “fiction” and “storytelling,” and also because it allowed her to temper the acerbity of her own critical voice through the voices of her characters. Karam's rich upbringing, first in Mount Lebanon and later in America, laid the foundations for the innovative gender politics and literary style of the Arabic fiction she would go on to produce.

Indeed, the *mahjar* may have been a more hospitable venue for the discussion of issues relating to women's empowerment than Egypt and the Levant, where most of her literary

“sisters” lived and worked. At a distance from the center of Arabic literary and cultural production, Karam was less constrained by the traditional socio-cultural norms of a predominantly Arab society. In the end, it may be that ‘Afifa Karam’s status as an outsider on the periphery of the Arabic literary world – her marginalization – is precisely what afforded her the freedom to address issues and themes few others dared to, not less so in an emerging literary genre.

CHAPTER FOUR

Navigating the Waters Between *al-Waṭan* and *al-Mahjar*:

A New Paradigm of Womanhood in *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*

In 1906, Karam made a bold entry on to the Arabic literary scene with the publication of the novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* (*Badī'a and Fu'ad*). When Karam made her literary debut, Arab writers and intellectuals were grappling with the complex politics of Westernization. In a remarkable flourishing of literary and journalistic activity, writers such as Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭawī, Buṭrus al-Bustānī, Khalīl al-Khūrī, Salīm al-Bustānī, 'Ā'isha Taymūr, Zaynab Fawwāz, Qāsim Amīn, and many others, debated the positive and negative consequences of Western influence on the Arab world. Questions of gender and womanhood as a reflection of shifting societal values and cultural mores emerged as a central preoccupation in works on the topic. Though she was separated from her motherland by a vast ocean, the novels and journalistic writings of 'Afīfa Karam are in conversation with contemporary debates of the *nahḍa*. The encounter between the Arab world and the West was at the very crux of the work and, in her novel, Karam employs the particular lens of gender to examine the socio-cultural encounter between Syria and America (i.e. “East” and “West”).

This chapter considers Karam's construction of womanhood as portrayed in the novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*. During a period of acute cultural confrontation, 'Afīfa Karam used the emerging genre of fiction to highlight gender issues impacting Syrian women's lives in both the *waṭan* and in the *mahjar*, including women's literacy and education, marriage customs, and the role of women in the family and society. This chapter traces Karam's views on the politics of Westernization – or in her words, *al-taḥarūj* – and the “new woman” (*al-mar'ā al-jadīda*), which both reflect her unique perspective as a Syrian immigrant woman writing in America. Over the course of the novel, Karam's fictional heroine, Badī'a, becomes a living embodiment of this new brand of womanhood. In her debut work of Arabic fiction, the author presents her proto-feminist views without reserve, laying the groundwork for an innovative gender politics that she would continue to defend until her death in 1924.

Intellectual Debates about Westernization During the *Nahḍa*

Western cultures began to permeate the wider cultural fabric of the Arab world during the nineteenth century, particularly in Egypt and the Levant. In Egypt, for example, the Ottoman ruler Muḥammad 'Alī (r. 1805-1867) set out to replicate Georges-Eugène Haussmann's style of urban planning, constructing wide boulevards, parks, and squares

that transformed the layouts of Cairo and Alexandria to resemble Paris.³²⁰ Later, Isma‘īl Pāsha (r. 1863-1879) worked to improve the infrastructure of transportation and communication in Egypt, increasing railroad and telegraph networks throughout the country.³²¹ Egyptians, particularly those of the upper classes, increasingly adopted Western styles of dress, food, architecture, education, transportation, and leisure. Over time, as the construction of roads, bridges, ports, railroads, and telegraph lines created the infrastructure needed to support these new patterns of consumption, Western ways of life began to seep into the urban middle classes. During the reign of Tawfīq (r. 1879-1892), the number of Europeans living in Egypt increased tremendously, especially in the cosmopolitan cities of Cairo and Alexandria. This foreign presence further intensified the impact of European culture of Egypt on a domestic level. Along with the spread of hotel, club, and bar culture, this period also witnessed a marked rise in monogamy among the upper classes, which had previously practiced polygamy.³²²

The rapidly growing influence of the West engendered much debate among intellectuals in Egypt, the Levant, and the *mahjar*. While some aspects of Western culture inspired respect and admiration, such as the commitment to education and intellectual rigor, others were met with severe criticism. One of the first writers to critique the relationship between the Arab world and the West was Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-73). Sent on a mission by Muḥammad ‘Alī to Paris in 1826, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī spent five years there as an *imām*, reading and studying copiously. Shortly after his return to Egypt, he composed his famous description of Paris, *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (*An Extraction of Gold in Summarizing Paris*).³²³ Published in 1834, *Takhlīṣ al-Ibrīz* contained a record of his observations of the customs and manners of the French. While al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was critical of some aspects of French culture and society, he praised others, such as their work ethic, dedication to education and intellectual pursuits, and understanding of civic morality and responsibility.

Egyptians from all levels of society, including a large segment of the Arab intelligentsia, held an underlying assumption about the inherent superiority of European civilization over Arab civilization. For example, the leading Syrian Christian intellectual Buṭrus al-Bustānī gave a famous lecture on February 15, 1859 entitled *Khuṭba fī ādāb al-‘Arab* (“A Lecture on the Culture of the Arabs”) in which he condemned Muslim backwardness and weakness in the face of colonial encroachment.³²⁴ Al-Bustānī’s central argument was that the pursuit of knowledge—including Western political, social and economic theory, philosophy, science and technology—was crucial for the development of Arab societies in the twentieth century. Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), another intellectual who displayed similar self-Orientalizing attitudes, frequently discussed the inherent backwardness (*ta’akhhur*) of Muslim countries in comparison to countries of the West, claiming that

³²⁰ Mona L. Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 21.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³²² *Ibid.*, 27.

³²³ For more on Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, see El-Sherif, *Cairo-Paris the Urban Imaginary of the Self*.

³²⁴ Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” 41.

Muslims all over the world shared the traits of ignorance, laziness (*kasal*), and decline (*inhiṭāṭ*).³²⁵

Other scholars were less inclined toward the West, however. One figure who found these rapid transformations to be unsettling was a contemporary of Buṭrus al-Bustānī named Khalīl al-Khūrī (1836-1907). Al-Khūrī vehemently criticized his compatriots for what he saw as the indiscriminate adoption of Western customs in his Arabic novella *Wayy...idhan anā lastu bi-ifrinjī* (*Oh well, I'm not European*).³²⁶ In this text, which was serialized in his own influential newspaper *Hadīqat al-akhbār* (*The Garden of News*) between 1859 and 1861, al-Khūrī discusses the negative consequences of one Aleppo family's discarding of their "Eastern" or "Arab" culture in favor of "Western" culture. For him, the rapid spread of Western customs, dress, languages, and lifestyles among members of the upper and middle classes created a heightened awareness of the need to preserve Arab values and heritage. He argues that heedless imitation of Western culture is not the best way to achieve *tamaddun*, or civilization, in Arab society. In his view, each nation (*umma*) possesses its own unique practices, innate dispositions, and virtues and therefore, the wholesale adoption of the civilization of another nation would result in the irreparable loss of its own culture.³²⁷ Instead, he advocated for the selective adoption of Western customs, which is a viewpoint that 'Afīfa Karam shared.

"The Woman Question" During the *Nahḍa*

Alongside contemporary debates about Westernization, writings on women and gender became the subject of an evolving international debate in the Arab press. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, discussions about gender, family, love, and marriage circulated widely in Greater Syria, Egypt, and the wider diaspora. Arab writers and journalists discussed what they saw as "modern" ideas about practices of childrearing, housekeeping, and marriage. Discourses of "modernity" – as applied to the domestic sphere – were intimately tied to a politics of nationalism that developed in response to a growing Western presence in the region. Articles on women's education, domestic duties, and their responsibilities as wives and mothers soon became ubiquitous and a new model of womanhood began to surface in the Arab world. These emerging constructions of gender and womanhood were placed within a wider discourse of social reform that accompanied nationalist and anti-imperialist struggles, and a belief spread that the transformation of the family was crucial for the progress of the nation as a whole.³²⁸

³²⁵ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-mar'ā* (Cairo: Majlis al-'ālā li'l-thaqāfah, 1999), 119.

³²⁶ Some scholars have identified this work as the "earliest known attempt at modern Arabic fiction." For more, see Zachs et al., "From Difā' Al-Nisā' to Mas'alat Al-Nisā' in Greater Syria: Readers and Writers Debate Women and Their Rights, 1858–1900," 619.

³²⁷ Khalīl al-Khūrī, *Wayy, idhan lastu bi-ifrinjī: al-Riwāyah al-'arabīyya al-ūla wa-'l-rā'ida* (1859), al-Tab'ah 1 (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fārābī, 2009), 47.

³²⁸ For a detailed treatment of gender dynamics and changing conceptualizations of womanhood during the *nahḍa*, see Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt (1805/1923)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*.

The earliest debates about “the woman question” took place in Greater Syria where, as early as the 1840s, women’s issues and rights were discussed in privately published journals and newspapers. Despite resistance, social reformers defended women’s right to an education on the grounds that it would make them better mothers. By raising exemplary children, educated women could better contribute to the prosperity and progress of the nation as a whole. One of the first developed arguments for women’s education and emancipation is found in an article by Buṭrus al-Bustānī entitled *Khiṭāb fī ta’līm al-nisā’* (“A discourse on the education of women”), published in 1849.³²⁹ Discussions on the topic were also featured in Salīm al-Bustānī’s newspaper *al-Jinān* (*The Gardens*) (1870) and Khalīl Sarkīs’ *Lisān al-Ḥāl* (*The Language of the Times*) (1877), whose founder encouraged women to contribute their own writings to the paper.³³⁰ In his *Murshid al-amīn li’l-banāt wa-’l-banīn* (“Honest Guide for the Education of Girls and Boys”) (1873), al-Ṭaḥṭawī defended women’s education on the grounds that education “prepares [them] to raise their children well.” In his opinion, “That children should be given a sound...education is of enormous social consequence.”³³¹

Qāsim Amīn, the author of *Taḥrīr al-Mar’ā* (*The Liberation of Women*) (1899) and *al-Mar’ā al-jadīda* (*The New Woman*) (1900), also advocated for women’s education. Amīn is often credited as the “father of Arab feminism,” although an examination of his work shows that his support of women was more symbolic than genuine.³³² His influential work *Taḥrīr al-Mar’ā* (*The Liberation of Women*) is based on the premise that there is a direct correlation between woman and nation.³³³ Amīn argued that without an education, a woman cannot adequately carry out her role in society or in the family. By educating Egyptian women – albeit through the fifth-grade level – he believed that life in the domestic sphere would improve, which would, in turn, contribute to the progress of the nation as a whole. The status of women was thus regarded as an indicator of a perceived “modernity” that stood in contrast to the “traditional” ways of the past. In his assessment, improving the condition of women in Arab societies was necessary in order to “catch up” with the Western nations of America, Europe, and Russia.

Some scholars have suggested that the origins of this debate can be traced back to the British occupation of Egypt (1882-1956), when Sir Evelyn Baring, the first Earl of Cromer (1841-1917) claimed that the reform of Egyptian society had to begin with transformation of the domestic affairs of its population. The critique and *othering* of domestic practices of non-Western colonial subjects was, in fact, a common tactic used by the British colonizers to justify their own colonial enterprise. Lisa Pollard suggests that the British equated what they saw as depraved or backward family practices such as

³²⁹ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 83.

³³⁰ Fruma Zachs, “Debates on Reforming the Family: A Private History of the Nahda?,” n.d., 290, accessed December 12, 2014.

³³¹ Muḥammad Imarah, *al-‘Amāl al-kāmila li-Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭawī: Dirasāt wa-taḥqīq Muḥammad Imarah*,” vol. 2 (Bayrūt: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya li’l-dirasāt wa-’l-nashr, 1973), 369–378.

³³² Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*, 61–63; Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, xvii.

³³³ Amīn, *Taḥrīr al-Mar’ā*, 9.

polygamy, veiling, and the keeping of harems with the khedives' political ability, or lack thereof. She writes, "The realpolitik of British foreign policy was thus undergirded by the *moralpolitik* of domestic affairs, turning familial practices into family politics – in essence, domestic mores as measures of the ability of the nation-state to govern itself."³³⁴

The spread of nineteenth-century Victorian ideals of marital relations and family life – via colonial educational practice – had an impact on long-established patterns of social interaction. During the *nahḍa*, writers and intellectuals began to consider their societies in relation to those of Western nations, which some perceived as more "advanced" or "civilized" than their own. Arab intellectuals often used the perceived status of Western women as a yardstick for assessing the position of Arab women.³³⁵ Pollard argues that the Egyptian intelligentsia "appropriated" these views and began to engage in debates about marriage and family life. For example, as polygamy and arranged marriages were increasingly looked upon as "backward" social practices, monogamous and love-based marriages became more prevalent.³³⁶ Over time, the nuclear family came to symbolize "modernity and the prosperity and success of the nation-state."³³⁷ The image of the monogamous couple and their children was increasingly regarded as preferred domestic configuration, replacing the traditional arrangement where several households lived in close proximity to one another. The nuclear family was seen as the fundamental building block upon which the modern nation-state would be constructed.

In addition to changing ideas about marriage and family structure, Western models of womanhood circulated widely in Arab journals read primarily by members of the middle and upper middle classes. Early Arab women's magazines were modeled largely after etiquette manuals from the Victorian era, such as *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830-1898), and reflected Victorian ideals about gender roles, femininity, and the cult of domesticity.³³⁸ Barbara Welter was the first to draw scholars' attention to Victorian conceptions of ideal femininity in her foundational 1966 article, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" (1966).³³⁹ She explains that, at the time, women were expected to possess the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The cult of domesticity presupposed that men would be the breadwinners who worked outside of the home, while women would engage exclusively in unpaid domestic labor within the private sphere.

In writings about women by men during the *nahḍa* women, mothers were constructed as the cornerstone of the family. They were called the "queen" of the home, whose small kingdom was viewed as a fundamental building block or microcosm of the nation-state

³³⁴ Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 3.

³³⁵ In *The Liberation of Women*, Amīn provides a list of Western countries in order of the perceived "progress" of their women. America comes in at the top of the list, followed by Great Britain, Germany, France, Austria, Italy and Russia. Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar'a*, 11.

³³⁶ Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*, 27.

³³⁷ Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 5.

³³⁸ Louis Antoine Godey and Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, eds., *Godey's Lady's Book* (Philadelphia: L.A. Godey, 1840).

³³⁹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. No. 2, Part 1 (1996): 151-74.

itself. As the moral pillar of the family – and by metonymic extension the nation – women became the site of negotiation for a connected discourse of nationalism, civilization, and progress. Women have often been the territory upon which nationalist and anti-colonial struggles were mapped out. Images of women became potent political symbols that were central to various revolutionary movements including the American, French, Chinese, and Bolshevik revolutions.³⁴⁰ According to a scholar of Bengali history, “Women’s emancipation was not merely a prerequisite to national regeneration but an index of national achievement in a connected discourse of civilization, progress, modernity and nationalism.”³⁴¹ Much in the same way, male intellectuals spoke out for the “advancement” of women, which they viewed as an important part of wider reform movements in the Arabic-speaking world. However, this power was only symbolic: women (especially mothers) were frequently constructed as metaphors for national progress. However, the only role women were actually expected to play was that of wife and mother. To be sure, the basic tenets of this ideology did not benefit or empower women in any significant or practical ways.

Women Writing on “The Woman Question”

While writings on “the woman question,” or, *qadīyat al-mar’ā*, by male intellectuals such as Qāsim Amīn certainly received the bulk of public attention, women also discussed gender issues in the articles, speeches, novels, and short stories they published. During the 1890s, there was a marked upsurge in literary and journalistic production by Arab women who were instrumental in solidifying a tradition of Arab women’s writing. In fact, women intellectuals such as ‘Ā’isha Taymūr and Zaynab Fawwāz were exchanging views on gender and society as early as the 1880s, which complicates the dominant narrative that credits Amīn with initiating public discussions about women’s emancipation.³⁴² In their journalistic, biographical, and literary works, these pioneering Arab women writers discussed the importance of education for women and girls and the changing roles of women in home and society.

Despite the existence of textual production by women at this early period, writing and publishing were still considered unsuitable – even immoral – occupations for women in the Arab world. In *Tahrīr al-mar’ā*, for example, Qāsim Amīn describes the pervasive sentiment among the male population of Egypt that the education of women would lead to their moral corruption, saying, “it has been deeply rooted in men’s minds that the education of a woman and her chastity are not in agreement.”³⁴³ While reading was regarded as a dangerous pursuit for a woman, the act of writing was even more

³⁴⁰ Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 208.

³⁴¹ Samita Sen, “Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal,” *Gender & History* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 1993): 232.

³⁴² ‘Ā’isha al-Taymuriyya, *Mir’āt al-ta’ammul fī-‘l-umūr* (al-Qāhirah: Multaqā al-marāh wa-al-dhākira, 2002); ‘Ā’isha al-Taymuriyya, *Natā’ij al-aḥwāl fī-‘l-aqwāl wa-‘l-af’āl*; Fawwāz, *Husn al-‘awāqib*; Zaynab Fawwāz, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī ṭabaqāt rabbāt al-khudūr* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1999).

³⁴³ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-mar’ā*, 57.

threatening. Many believed that the ability to read and write would enable women to initiate exchanges with others. This, in turn, would facilitate flirtation and amorous relationships between men and women.

One of the primary concerns of the first generation of women writers, most of whom belonged to the privileged aristocratic class, such as Warda al-Yāzījī and ‘Ā’isha Taymūr, was to overturn the practice of harem seclusion. In the introduction to *Natā’ij al-aḥwāl* (1887-8), Taymūr expressed her fervent desire to break free from the traditional women’s occupations of embroidery and weaving in pursuit of her passion for studying and writing.³⁴⁴ At the end of the introduction, Taymūr characterizes the grief she experienced in seclusion as “the exile of solitude,” which she calls “harder to bear than exile from one’s homeland.”³⁴⁵ This particular phrasing demonstrates Taymūr’s acute awareness of the paradox at the heart of writings by the “champions” of women’s emancipation (such as Amīn and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī) who, despite their call for women’s education, expected women to remain isolated within the private sphere, denying them the agency to contribute to society in any meaningful way.

In 1892, Hind Nawfal entered the male-dominated arena of writing and publishing as the founder of the first Arab women’s journal, *al-Fatāh* (*The Young Woman*). Nawfal’s journal featured news items, articles on housekeeping, health, fashion, and morality, poems, letters, biographies of famous Arab and European women, and debates on women’s rights and responsibilities. One of her main goals in publishing the periodical was to disprove the widespread proscription against women’s literacy and writing.³⁴⁶ In the introduction to the first issue, Nawfal makes it a point to say, “But do not imagine that a woman who writes in a journal is compromised in modesty or violates her purity and good behavior. No! The greatest of European women in science and literature and the highest in nobility are writers in journals.”³⁴⁷ Other women soon followed Nawfal’s lead, publishing their own journals such as Louisa Habblin’s *al-Firdaws* (*Paradise*) (1896), Maryam Mazhar’s *Mir’āt al-Ḥasnā’* (*Mirror of the Beautiful*) (1896), Alexandra Avierino’s *Anis al-Jalis* (*The Intimate Companion*) (1898), and Esther Moyal’s *al-‘Ā’ila* (*The Family*) (1899).³⁴⁸

In the first decade of the twentieth century, when ‘Afifa Karam appeared on the Arabic literary scene, many Arab writers and intellectuals were still averse to the idea of women being public figures as writers and journal editors. Regardless of the gender of the author, novels were controversial, especially those dealing with love and romance. Nevertheless, Karam became an outspoken participant in this evolving discourse on womanhood and family. Underlying Karam’s fiction is a reform agenda that stresses the importance of

³⁴⁴ al-Taymūriyya, *Natā’ij al-aḥwāl fī ‘l-aqwāl wa-‘l-aḥwāl*, i.

³⁴⁵ Quoted in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, 128.

³⁴⁶ This quote comes from the introduction to the first issue of the magazine *al-Fatāh*, published on November 20th, 1892. Quoted in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, 218.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ For a more detailed account of the origins and development of the Arab women’s press, see Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt*.

women's education, not only for the success of their families and society at large, but also for their own self-determination. She articulated a bold, proto-feminist platform that defended women's right to education, self-expression, and freedom in the choice of their partners. By contributing to public debates about women's rights and emancipation, Karam was transgressing major cultural taboos. Not only did she dare to compose romance novels, which were considered by many to be immoral for their unchaste treatment of love and romance, but she also articulated subversive notions of gender in her works.

In her first novel, Karam chose to focus on several core issues, the most urgent of which was the prohibition against women's education and self-expression. In her view, "*al-ḥishma al-muḍirra*," or "harmful modesty" is a deeply rooted "Syrian" social convention that discourages women from expressing themselves openly, whether in speech or in writing. This is a logical and befitting concern for the author as she embarked on her career as a woman writer at this early period. The widespread proscription against women's self-expression in Arab societies was an issue the author repeatedly confronted on a personal level. Like many contemporary women writers in the *mashriq*, when Karam published her first novel – in which she unabashedly laid out her thoughts on gender, culture, literature, and society – Karam felt the need to explain why she was writing. In the introduction to her first novel, Karam anticipated the criticism that she would inevitably receive as she made her literary debut. In her mind's eye, she envisioned the reactions of her critics, the "biting of lips" (*'aḍḍ al-shafāh*) and the "rolling of eyes" (*izwirār al-a'yun*),³⁴⁹ as they read the work of a woman writing about the taboo subjects of "love and marriage."

Karam argues that emphasis on "modesty" is both a major obstacle in the struggle for the advancement of women and a custom that is detrimental to society as a whole, as it prohibits women from voicing potentially beneficial ideas and opinions. It seems that Karam's understanding of "modesty," therefore, refers both to a set of behavioral controls and to the censorship of literary expression. In this way, Karam implicitly draws an analogy between removing societal restrictions on women's self-expression and the development of a literary genre (like the novel) in which women's issues are openly discussed and critiqued.

Badī'a wa-Fu'ād

The novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* (1906) takes place both in Lebanon and in the United States, with the ocean in between acting as a neutral space where her women characters are free to express themselves and share stories and experiences. The novel tells the story of Badī'a, a bright and beautiful girl of modest origins who works as servant in the household of an aristocratic family. Her keen intelligence and firm moral outlook bring her close to her mistress Maryam until Badī'a falls in love with Fu'ād, her mistress's son.

³⁴⁹ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, iv.

Badī'a's lesser social standing makes her an unacceptable bride for Maryam's only male child and, to thwart their union, Maryam and her nephew Nasīb devise a plot to prevent their marriage. Insulted and hurt by these actions, a defiant Badī'a makes the decision to start a new life in America. With her cousin Lūsīyā, Badī'a boards an ocean liner bound for New York City, where she meets another young Lebanese woman named Jamīla. Following a brief stop in Manhattan's first Arab immigrant neighborhood, "Little Syria," the three young women travel to Cincinnati, Ohio, where they are taught to peddle their wares – the most common occupation of Syrian immigrants to America.³⁵⁰ Eventually Fu'ād, still in love with Badī'a, follows her to America and – following a long course of unfortunate events and unlikely coincidences – Badī'a and Fu'ād are eventually reunited in their homeland and married.

In this novel, the author creates spaces where women can exist independently of men, both as autonomous individuals who exercise agency, and as members of a wider collective sisterhood. In my analysis, I examine the author's innovative re-imagining of gender dynamics in her portrayal of a utopian social landscape where women are freed from the traditional patriarchal attitudes and institutions that govern and shape women's lives in the "real world." In the text, the utopia is located in the liminal, fluid space of the ocean between Lebanon and the United States, where the "laws of the land" do not apply. On the steamship, suspended by ocean waters, new expressions of gender identity are imagined, created, and nourished, suggesting that women – when they support one another – can indeed become empowered, self-determined, and independent.

Part One: In The *Wāṭan*

The novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* begins on a moonlit summer evening in rural Lebanon. Using a telescopic lens, an omniscient narrator ushers the reader into a picturesque, natural landscape, zooming in and out of the verdant hills and valleys. The land is inhabited solely by a group of young women who run freely while performing the traditional women's duty of procuring water from the water source. In the opening scene, the narrator conveys a palpable image of women bonding with each other and the land they work, inhabit, and enjoy, which emphasizes the connection between these women and the land that holds and sustains them. The women are youthful, innocent, and possess a joyful, feminine potential and purity of heart. They are connected to nature and they are free. In the author's words:

On a moonlit summer night, a flock of young women from a Lebanese village went out to fill up [their earthenware jars] from the village waterspring. ...The young women were walking leisurely [carrying] their empty jars on their shoulders. Nothing hindered their procession, with agility and grace, over the broad plain in front of the valley overlook. One of them was jumping and laughing while another was chasing her, bursting forth with strength, rich in the

³⁵⁰ For an exhaustive treatment of the history and development of Syrian immigrant pack peddling, see Chapter Four, "Pack Peddling" in Naff, *Becoming American*; Shakir, *Bint Arab*.

tonic of youth. Indeed, what is there that could upset them in this hour and in this time and place! ...The moonlit night lacked nothing. The beautiful, natural scene resembled the pureness and beauty of their innocent hearts. The pleasant breeze increased the moisture and freshness of their faces, added fragrance and sweetness to their breath, and added softness and melodiousness to their voices.³⁵¹

Karam's depiction of these women at the opening of the novel vividly delineates one of the novel's essential themes: that women, who form half of the population, are an indivisible part of the nation/homeland, or the *waṭan*. The narrator describes the young women as traveling in a *sarb*, which can either be translated as 'herd' or 'squadron.' This particular choice of vocabulary suggests an organized formation: these women belong to a close-knit, unified collectivity. Like a flock of birds or alternately, a military unit, they gallop "beneath the skies of happiness, which laughed along with the young women that evening, just like the face of the moon shining over the broad plain."³⁵² Through this use of personification, the young women are depicted as companions of the natural elements, which results in elevating their status to a mythical level. The women's sovereignty over their expansive terrain is further strengthened by the frequent use of grammatically feminine nouns (*iḥdā layālī al-muqmira*, *fatāyāt*), pronouns (such as the feminine plural, *hunna*), and terms that carry a distinctly feminine valence, such as *wādin* 'amīq (a deep valley) and 'ayn al-qariya (the village spring).³⁵³ In this way, the grammatical and lexical feminine territorializes the textual space of the novel.

Throughout this passage, the author plays with the metaphorical trope of 'land as woman' / 'nation as woman,' a long-standing literary and poetic tradition³⁵⁴ that was used extensively by writers and intellectuals during the *nahḍa*.³⁵⁵ The 'land as woman' metaphor becomes explicit when the young women interrupt their roaming to rest at a particularly beautiful spot in the vast landscape. At this point, the narrator launches into an extended metaphor in which the small spot of land upon which the women sit is likened to "dear Lebanon" ("*Lubnān al-'azīz*") and the blossoming lilies that surround them as a protective wall are compared to Lebanon's "beautiful, pure women."

³⁵¹ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 1.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ The metaphorical system land-as-woman / nation-as-woman is a transnational topos that has its roots in Biblical literature beginning with the Song of Songs and continuing through to the modern era in the many cultures informed by the Bible. In the Bible, the nation is figured as a woman or wife, and God, through the male prophet-poet, determines the woman/nation's fate based on her behavior. If she is faithful and obedient, she deserves reward. However, if she behaves promiscuously, then she merits punishment. Chana Kronfeld and Chana Bloch have produced important work that examines the rich inner workings of this powerful topos in modern Hebrew poetry, demonstrating, in particular, the ways that modern Hebrew women poets have produced work that not only destabilizes but radically inverts this biblical metaphor, restoring women's subjectivity and agency. See, for example, Chana Kronfeld, "Hovering at a Low Altitude: Dahlia Ravikovitch," in *Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003); Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, "Dahlia Ravikovitch: An Introduction," *Prooftexts* 28 (2008): 249–81.

³⁵⁵ For a book-length treatment of the metaphorical system 'woman as nation' in the Egyptian context, see Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*.

This particular choice of imagery is evocative, suggesting that the small outcropping on which the women have stopped to rest stands as a synecdoche for the land itself. It is important to note that “Lebanon” is a masculine word, unlike most Arabic country names, which are feminine. The masculine form of the country’s name stands out as a stark contrast to the rest of the scene, which is dominated by the feminine. With this grammatical gender play, ‘Afifa Karam inverts the common trope of the male author describing the feminized land. Instead of the normative situation where the male poet writes with love (often erotic love) about the feminized land, here, we have a female writer referring to a masculine land, a gesture that is unmistakable given the grammatical gender of the word Lebanon. Here, the untended women thirsting for knowledge become the subject of the passage, not the object.

Suddenly, the narrative voice changes dramatically and an exhortative, sermonizing, and didactic tone replaces the romantic, descriptive style of the first three pages. The sentences become short and choppy, and the ideas are communicated through the narrator’s use of a series of rhetorical questions. The narrator addresses the readers directly, saying: “Oh, what a pity! Look at how they wilt from being deprived of even a single drop of edification/refinement (*tahdhīb*).”³⁵⁶ Here, the author lays out her political agenda. Although possessing natural beauty, these lilies, like Lebanon’s women, are undernourished and wilting from a lack of *tahdhīb*, particularly as compared to the brilliant and fragrant lilies of the “West.” Rather than evoking metaphorical women, the narrator uses metaphor to discuss the practical situation on the ground for women, who are likened to lilies who, despite their beauty, are thirsting for water (edification/refinement, or *tahdhīb*).³⁵⁷ Thus, by positioning the women as subjects, rather than metaphorical markers for something else, the author inverts the tenor and vehicle of the normative ‘land as woman’ metaphor.

The narrator adds specificity to her understanding of women’s agency within the larger context of nationalist and reform movements when she turns the spotlight onto women’s role in the domestic sphere, expressing ideas that are in dialogue with contemporary debates about the “new woman.” She writes:

A beautiful, fresh face and a healthy, supple body are good things for a woman, however, they ‘cannot build a house.’ ...for behind a beautiful face and well-built body is a factory of virtue and domestic and social benefit. For what are the mechanisms and gears of that factory other than edification and knowledge...which are denied to girls...contributing to the killing of half of the

³⁵⁶ Karam, *Badr’a wa-Fu’ad*, 12.

³⁵⁷ Edward Lane traces the etymological roots of the word *tahdhīb*, explaining that it comes from “[t]he clearing, or trimming of trees, by cutting off the extremities of the branches, in order that they may increase in growth and beauty; that they were then used to signify the cleansing, or purifying, of anything; and putting it into a right, or proper, state; trimming it; or adjusting it; and clearing it of any dirty or filthy things, or the like, mixed with it.” He continues to say that its original signification comes from “clearing the colocynth of its pulp, and preparing its seeds so that they may lose their bitterness and become sweet.” In Edward William Lane, “H-Dh-B,” *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1863, 2948.

potential benefit...of society [that could be attained] if women were truly educated and cultivated. ...Our women are beautiful. Yes. Pure. Yes. Noble and intelligent. Yes. Like nature, their mother. ...However, what is the use of the tool (*al-āla*) if it is without a hand to operate it? ...Is the raw material alone enough without polishing? No! ...Benefit is not derived from the tool's hard steel, nor from the elegance of its outward appearance, nor from the precision of its construction. Rather, [benefit is derived] from the work that it undertakes when operated. When [the tool] is idle, its beauty is of no use whatsoever.³⁵⁸

The language of this section reveals that Karam is in dialogue with contemporary discourses about women in society, especially *Tahrīr al-Mar'ā* (*The Liberation of Women*) (1899) by Qāsim Amīn, which had a major impact on the evolution of discussions of women during the *nahḍa*. Karam shared a number of Amīn's basic positions on the subject of women's roles and the necessity to change their place in society. For example, Amīn writes "...women are half of the population of the world, and therefore, denying them an education results in the loss of the benefits of half of the population."³⁵⁹ Karam echoes this sentiment in this introductory section of her first novel, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*. Similarly, like Amīn, Karam uses the example of Western women as a measuring stick to assess the status of women in the Arab world. Karam compares the "lilies" of Lebanon to the "lilies" of the West. Lebanon's flowers, denied water, wither and dry out from neglect, unlike the lilies of Europe, which she describes as possessing a "more fragrant aroma."³⁶⁰ In order to "catch up" with the Western developments in America, Europe, and Russia, it was seen as necessary to improve the condition of women in Arab societies.

Amīn also articulated the idea that women should prioritize their mental and spiritual development because physical beauty is impermanent and fades with time, which is a sentiment that Karam also espouses in her work.³⁶¹ Karam's concept of "complete beauty" ("*jamāl tāmm*") is based on the notion that physical beauty is incomplete without moral, spiritual, and intellectual refinement. In the narrator's view, physical, superficial beauty is not enough for the ideal "new woman," who should possess "double beauty" ("*jamāl muzdawij*"); that is, a beauty of both soul and body ("*jamāl al-rūḥ wa al-jasad*").³⁶² When the omniscient narrator zooms in to focus on two of the women from the "flock," Badī'a and Lūsīyā, aged 17 and 20, they are described as educated, cultured, virtuous, and healthy-bodied, in addition to being physically beautiful; to the onlooker they are indistinguishable from "two Parisian ladies."³⁶³ They stand out from among the others not for their physical beauty, but for their attainment of "perfect" or "complete" beauty, that is, a beauty of both soul and body. Badī'a and Lūsīyā thus embody the

³⁵⁸ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 12.

³⁵⁹ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ā*, 22.

³⁶⁰ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 13.

³⁶¹ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ā*, 35.

³⁶² Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 14.

³⁶³ Ibid.

characteristics of ideal womanhood that was becoming more and more commonplace during the *nahḍa*.

Despite these similarities, there are also important distinctions that set Karam's gender politics apart from the dominant discourse as epitomized by the work of Qāsim Amīn. For many of these intellectuals, the "emancipation" of women was seen as a tool for national progress rather than a concrete platform for improving the actual lives of women. Most writings on the subject by Amīn and his contemporaries discussed the liberation of women when, in fact, these women were not expected by most writers and society in general to be active contributors to the political process.³⁶⁴ Already in the first chapter of *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, it is clear that Karam's representation of women and their place in society is very different from that of Qāsim Amīn. For example, Amīn consistently makes reference to women's cunning nature and lack of intelligence.³⁶⁵ Unlike Amīn, whose text is littered with degrading, misogynistic statements about women, Karam endows them with dignity and agency.

In the above passage, for example, Karam outlines a fascinating dialectic between physical beauty – which is superficial and unproductive – and mental or spiritual beauty, which has the creative potential to contribute to society at large. Karam is not content to compare women to wilting flowers, but rather, discards the lily metaphor, comparing women instead with a hard, polished metal tool ("*āla*"). The author's choice to compare women to well-wrought metal tools rather than to passive and beautiful, yet transitory flowers, imbues them with the qualities of power and strength. Her new metaphor places emphasis on women's permanence and utility, pointing to their agency, strength, and endurance. In this way, Karam makes women active agents, rather than an abstract entity to be acted upon in sweeping programs of political and ideological upheaval. By describing women as "factories" ("*ma'mal*") with "mechanisms and gears" ("*dawālīb*"), the author further emphasizes women's agency, drawing the reader's attention to women's untapped potential as powerful forces of change. Raw materials, she explains, need to be worked and improved in order to serve their highest purpose. By the logic of the metaphor, the women are tools to be used by society to improve life for all, but in order to be useful, they need to be given opportunities to develop their potential. Thus, in Karam's discussion, women are both the subject and the object of inquiry. Karam's discussion of women is also distinguished from that of Amīn, for example, by the modernist language and tone that she uses in her articulation of gender politics. Throughout the novel, Karam employs striking metaphors to describe women that echo the industrial period in which she lived. Karam's diction – such as the choice of the phrase "*ma'mal li-l-faḍīla*," the "factory of morals" and its "*dawālīb*," or "gears,"³⁶⁶ reflects the proliferation of new technologies at the first decade of the twentieth century, such as the early steamships, factories, cars, and mechanized machines. These modernist images stand out prominently against the romantic depiction of the beautiful, pure women in the Lebanese national landscape at the beginning of the novel. By juxtaposing

³⁶⁴ Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 5.

³⁶⁵ Amīn, *Taḥrīr al-Mar'ā*, 58.

³⁶⁶ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 14.

women's idyllic innocence and connection to nature with their potential strength in the context of Western utilitarianism, Karam is bringing to life a new definition of the modern woman; one who is virtuous, natural, and pure, and yet hard as nails, possessing agency, instrumentality, and power.

Badī'a and Lūsīyā

With this introduction in place, the novel takes off. The reader discovers through the women's casual conversation that this evening marks the very last night in Lebanon for two women from the group. The very next day, Badī'a and Lūsīyā will bid farewell to their friends and loved ones – as well as to their beloved homeland – and embark on the long, trans-Atlantic voyage to the United States. In an act of great courage and autonomy – and certainly one that is not in line with prevailing views of womanhood – these two young women decide to immigrate to a foreign land across the ocean completely on their own. As the reader later discovers, their decision to emigrate stemmed from the desire to escape the difficult economic and social circumstances of their lives in Lebanon. With this unusual expression of autonomy, the author seems to suggest to her female readers that they need not accept their fate unquestioningly, but rather, that they can be empowered to exercise agency over their lives. The fact that Badī'a and Lūsīyā are both disenfranchised and essentially family-less adds credence to the otherwise unlikely scenario of two young women immigrating to the United States unaccompanied. The autonomy granted to her female characters is not only evident in the plot, but is also reflected on the level of the narrative itself.

Until this point, the story has been conveyed by an omniscient narrative voice. A traditional, paternalistic narrative voice describes the flock of young women from a bird's eye view as they wrestle and play together and eventually settle down to rest. For example, the narrator writes, "The young women got up carrying their earthenware jars along with them. This time, they ascended and thoughts took the place of their tongues: they did not leap or chatter like the first time because their steps were distressed under the heavy burden of their worries."³⁶⁷ In the first few pages of *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, no distinction is made between the individual members of the "flock" ("sarb") of young women, reflecting the straightforward, expository narrative style that is characteristic of traditional Arabic works of *adab*. They sigh in unison and move in unison, and they even experience feelings as one. However, in the subsequent section of the novel, the assembly of women begins to break up and greater specificity is given to individual women characters.

Lūsīyā is the first to speak, in plain quoted dialogue. Then suddenly, the narrator's focus shifts to Badī'a, who is portrayed as brooding and melancholy, occupying a world of her own. The narrator delves into Badī'a's psychology saying, "it was as if she were present among them in body alone, while her thoughts were far away and she could not

³⁶⁷ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 16.

understand a word they were saying, to the point that she could not even sense that they were right beside her.”³⁶⁸ Though physically present, Badī’a is lost in her thoughts and removed completely from the group. The narrator’s focus then shifts to another young woman, who addresses Badī’a yet again, heedless of her scattered thoughts. It is only after being roused with physical touch that Badī’a is, at long last, brought back to reality.

Finally, for the first time in the text, the voice of the novel’s heroine emerges, though rather obliquely, as she utters a sigh of lament. The narrator explains that Badī’a is brokenhearted about leaving her homeland and fearful of the future that life in America will hold. While the narrator – and now the reader – is cognizant of Badī’a’s distress, the other female characters, Lūsīyā included, are oblivious to her troubled emotional state. Thus, a sign of divergence between the two young women is revealed. Lūsīyā is bothered by her friend’s negative attitude toward emigration and takes issue with Badī’a’s suggestion that their emigration was compulsory rather than voluntary. Suddenly, the third person omniscient narrative voice disappears completely, leaving Badī’a and Lūsīyā alone to engage in a discussion. Here, in a technique that is quintessential to the modern novel, polemical positions are relayed via dialogue between fictional characters. Through direct dialogue, the two women express differing attitudes to the West and all that it represents. In a clear narratological innovation, Karam moves away from the paternalistic omniscient narrator that dominated Arabic fiction from its very earliest manifestations through to the 1950s. By allowing the reader to hear the women’s voices, the author enacts her gender politics on the level of the text itself.

While Badī’a is skeptical about emigration, Lūsīyā is convinced that life in America will be glorious, or, in her words, “*al-sa’āda bi-‘aynihā*” (“happiness itself”).³⁶⁹ To back up her claim about the clear advantages of immigration to America, Lūsīyā leads her friends away from the countryside and into the town, pointing to several mansions that were built with money earned by Lebanese immigrants in America. Lūsīyā tells the story of a poor Lebanese widow who, over the course of a decade living in America, earned enough money to build three beautiful homes and, as a result of this promotion in status, her three fatherless sons married some of the wealthiest girls in town. In Lūsīyā’s words, thanks to the opportunity that America afforded, the young men were promoted in status from “*shahhādihīn*” (beggars) to “*khawājāt*,” which is a term used to refer to a person of foreign origin with high social and economic status.³⁷⁰ Such rapid upward social mobility, Lūsīyā states emphatically, could never have happened “*law lā Amrīkā*” (“were it not for America”), which she refers to as “*Umm al-ḥurriyya wa-‘l-akhā’ wa-‘l-musāwā*” or, “the mother of Freedom, Fraternity, and Equality,” making reference to the French revolution.³⁷¹

When Lūsīyā reaches the end of her “rags to riches” story, Badī’a is not impressed. This is the point in the text at which Badī’a’s character begins to distinguish herself and take

³⁶⁸ Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*, 15.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

center stage. Badī'a is unconvinced that life in America will live up to its promise of happiness through wealth and cultural advancement because, in her mind, happiness cannot be derived from material wealth alone. To emphasize her point, Badī'a quotes a verse by the 10th century Arab poet al-Mutanabbī (915-965 C.E.),³⁷² which reads: "*Mā kullu mā yatamannā al-mar'u yudrikuhu / tajrī al-riyāhu bi-mā lā tashtahī al-sufunū*" or, "a man does not get everything he hopes for / the wind sometimes blows against the preference of the ships."³⁷³ Despite its clear significance and obvious implications (i.e. what one plans for does not always manifest in reality, or, you can't always get what you want), Lūsīyā immediately negates its validity. These days, Lūsīyā explains, sailboats have all been replaced by steam-powered ships, which renders al-Mutanabbī's point moot. In a sense, Lūsīyā's retort suggests that both the traditional poetry – and the values that it represents – have been supplanted by the technological advances of the industrial age.

This intertextual reference to the poetry of al-Mutanabbī is significant on a number of levels. First, it functions as a critique of the "rags to riches" narrative. Despite the tales of America's streets paved with gold, for most immigrants, America did not prove to be the land of milk and honey they imagined. Secondly, it recalls the pre-Islamic Arabic trope of *al-qadar*, *al-ayyām*, or *al-layālī* (the vicissitudes of fate), which is reflected in the unruliness of the ship's course, which is determined by uncontrollable forces. Third, the intertextual reference to al-Mutanabbī provides insight into the implied author's attitude toward the characters of Badī'a and Lūsīyā. By quoting a verse of poetry by one of the most renowned Arab poets of all time, Badī'a demonstrates her connection to Arab cultural heritage as it has become incorporated in Arab letters and culture, or *turāth*. Lūsīyā, on the other hand, demonstrates a marked distance from Arab cultural heritage when she dismisses the verse as outdated and irrelevant on the basis of a technical detail.

In this way, a dialectical relationship between traditional (Arab) and modern (Western) culture emerges from the dynamics of this interchange, revealing the implied author's nuanced critique of modernity. Lūsīyā stands as a representative of modernity, yet one that is materialistic, naïve, and shortsighted. The dialogue reflects Lūsīyā's assumptions about the superiority of "modern" Western culture to "traditional" Arabic culture. Her quickness to dismiss of the poetry by al-Mutanabbī – which is still memorized and recited by Arabs today – reveals that her character holds little value for the treasures of Arabic cultural and literary heritage. On the other hand, Badī'a holds onto the "traditional" concept of fatalism as represented in the line of poetry she quotes by al-Mutanabbī. In this way, the author constructs the novel's heroine as demonstrating a nuanced combination of East and West; she is modern by virtue of her agency, and yet she remains a receptacle and transmitter of Arab heritage and tradition.

³⁷² This verse is taken from a poem by al-Mutanabbī that begins "*Bima al-ta'allul lā ahlun wa-lā waṭanu.*" For an exhaustive study of the life and work of al-Mutanabbī, see Margaret Larkin, *Al-Mutanabbī: Voice of the 'Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

³⁷³ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 20.

Finally, this intertextual moment also serves as a foreshadowing of things to come. As the young women settle into their new life, struggling to support themselves as Syrian immigrant women in the United States, Lūsīyā becomes increasingly estranged from both Badī'a and her inherited customs. In the ensuing chapters, Lūsīyā's hastening toward the adoption of harmful "Western" or "American" cultural values eventually leads to her downfall. The complex relationship between Badī'a and Lūsīyā, beyond propelling the plot, becomes an important vehicle of social critique in this novel. The author uses their divergent approaches to life in America to offer guidance (*hudā*) to her readers on how to navigate life in the New World.

The Politics of *Tafarnuj*, or Westernization, in Greater Syria

Before Badī'a and Lūsīyā embark on the trans-Atlantic journey to America, the narrator takes the reader back in time to their early life in Lebanon. Badī'a, a ravishing beauty with blazing, white skin and jet-black hair and eyes, knew nothing of her parentage. When the reader first encounters her, she is seventeen and works as a servant in the home of an aristocratic Beirut family. She is described as constantly borrowing books from her employers and neighbors to read about literature, history, and refinement, or *tahdhīb*. Despite her impoverished upbringing as an orphan, Badī'a received an education at a convent school, allowing her to become what the narrator calls a refined and cultured ("*mutahadhdhiba*") young woman. Badī'a's keen intelligence, grace, and unswerving moral uprightness brings her close to her mistress Maryam, who treats her more like a friend than a servant. However, interpersonal dynamics between the two women shift when Maryam's son Fu'ād returns from boarding school in Beirut to spend his summer vacation at home with his family. To celebrate her son's homecoming, Maryam hosts a grand banquet in his honor.

The homecoming festivities are described in great detail in Chapter Three, entitled "*al-Walīma*" ("The Banquet"). This chapter fulfills an important function in the text. Not only does it provide a striking image of the Syrian aristocracy at the turn of the twentieth century, but it also offers the author an opportunity to discuss her views on the politics of Westernization, or "*al-tafarnuj*," and its impact on the changing socio-cultural landscape of Greater Syria. The chapter begins as an omniscient narrator describes the throngs of guests pouring into Maryam's palatial residence, decorated with beautiful, colored lights. The narrator explains that the guests arrived at seven o'clock "*ifrinjī*," which literally means "European time," to suggest that they arrived promptly at the designated hour. This comment is followed by a statement between parentheses "*wa-kull shay' ifrinjī*" – "and everything is European." The term *ifrinjī* – also used in the title of Khalīl al-Khūrī's novella *Wayy idhn anā lastu ifrinjī* – was originally an appellation given by the Arabs to the French, from "the Franks," which, over time, came to be used in Arabic to refer to Europeans in general.³⁷⁴ The narrator's passing comment "*wa-kull shay' ifrinjī*" indicates that Western ideas and lifestyles (or, *al-tafarnuj*, meaning Europeanization or

³⁷⁴ Edward William Lane, "F-R-N-J," *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1863, 2389.

Westernization) had deeply penetrated the upper and middle classes in Greater Syria. The precise nature of the implied author's views on *al-tafarnuj* are given shape through narrative techniques used over the course of the banquet scene.

Suddenly, an omniscient narrator draws the reader's attention to a young man standing at the threshold of the opulent home of *Dār al-Khawājā Maṣṣūr* (marking the second usage of the term *khawāja* in the novel). Here, the term *khawāja* signals the high economic and social status of the owner of the house. In the narrator's words: "a young man was seen standing at the entrance and observing the [guests] entering from the corner of his eye, as if he were studying their morals from their outward appearance."³⁷⁵ Fu'ād – who is referred to by the narrator as "*al-murāqib*" ("the observer") – stands at a height, surreptitiously inspecting and judging all those who enter into his domain. For the remainder of the chapter, the events are told from the vantage point of this young man, who the reader soon gathers is Maryam's son, in whose honor the celebration is arranged. As the chapter continues, Fu'ād's observations throughout the evening become an illustration of the implied author's views on the complex negotiation between Arab and Western cultural values and mores.

Fu'ād watches from above as the guests arrive in horse-drawn carriages. Women arrive wearing extravagant, European-style gowns with long trains, their arms bare and glittering with expensive jewelry. Fu'ād is repelled by this shameless display of wealth and luxury, which brings to his mind the proverb "women are like peacocks" (*al-mar'ā ka-'l-ṭāwūs*).³⁷⁶ The men accompanying these women are also dressed in European clothing of the latest fashions. One of the first things Fu'ād notices is a distinct correlation between the guests' ages and the degree of their Westernization. The younger men and women wear up-to-date European fashions and speak English, French, and Turkish, while members of the older generation still hold on to their original styles of dress and language (presumably, the version of the colloquial Levantine Arabic spoken in their region). Contrasts between these two groups continue to reveal themselves throughout the evening. After dinner, the young people move to the great hall for dancing, while the older folk remain seated, smoking water pipes, or *narghīla*.³⁷⁷ The older men and women looked upon their Europeanized sons and daughters with admiration, while the younger generation regarded their elders with embarrassment and distaste. The generational and cultural gap described here demonstrates that the phenomenon of Europeanization (*al-tafarnuj*) was still rather recent, as it does not yet seem to have penetrated the older generation. Furthermore, his remarks show that Western fashions and manners were highly esteemed and viewed as a mark of distinction by the members of the cultural elite, even by the older generation who had not yet adopted them.

However, contrary to what one might expect from a young, upper-middle class, educated Beirut male, Fu'ād disapproves of many aspects of the trend toward Westernization,

³⁷⁵ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 28.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

demonstrating that his position within the East/West dialogue is actually quite nuanced. For example, Fu'ād expresses approval when several older men and women arrive clad in traditional, Arab-style garments, which suggests that the generational difference described above is not so straightforward. Without warning, the narration, focalized through the character of Fu'ād, becomes a first-person monologue, revealing a modernist narrative style. In a quoted monologue, Fu'ād asks himself: “Is this what we would call beneficial or harmful civilization/modernization (*tamaddunan muftīdan am muḍirran*)?”³⁷⁸

In response, the narrator embarks upon a lengthy commentary, taking a rather critical stance toward the phenomenon of Europeanization. The underlying problem, the narrator explains, is the astonishing speed at which Syrians were adopting and imitating European customs. Young people were abandoning their inherited Arab customs and replacing them with a whole new set of values, dress and manners simply because it was the new “fashion” (“*mūda*”).³⁷⁹ The “fashion” metaphor continues when Fu'ād's narrator declares that the younger generation of Syrians was treating their inherited culture like “an old, worn-out robe (*thawb*) that is taken off and stored.”³⁸⁰ By comparing their worldview to a robe, the author conveys the idea that each human being is “clothed” by his or her moral beliefs. A similar impression is expressed in the dual meaning of the word “habit” in English, which refers both to a set of behaviors and a robe-like garment. The overall critique is aimed at Syrians who hastily discard their time-honored culture and traditions and substitute them with the “habits” of another people – in this case, *al-ifrinj*. In the narrator's opinion, the blind and indiscriminate imitation of Western customs (especially drinking, dancing, and gambling) is harmful and potentially dangerous to the moral fabric of Syrian society. That said, Fu'ād also criticizes certain Syrian customs that he deems harmful, such as the smoking of *narghila*, or water pipes.

Once the overall problematic is defined (that is, the East/West encounter), the remainder of the chapter is then devoted to a detailed description of the banquet. Throughout the evening, Fu'ād remains a passive observer, scrutinizing the behavior of the guests as they mingle, chitchat, and eventually gather around the table to dine. The narrator explains that Fu'ād was so consumed by “studying” (*darasa, yadrusu*) the conduct and etiquette of the guests that he hardly ate any dinner. The choice of the verb “to study” here emphasizes that such matters are worthy of serious contemplation. Like other authors of early Arabic fiction, Karam employs a didactic style to communicate her ideas. The narrator – through the voice of Fu'ād – provides readers with instructions about proper rules of comportment. For example, Fu'ād takes note of a woman speaking at an excessive volume, which disrupts the calm atmosphere of the dinner. Other displays of poor table manners include guests who eat too quickly, those who audibly criticize certain foods being served, and – worst of all – those who monitor and comment on the selection and quantity of foods their neighbors consume. By the time the night is over, Fu'ād's observations (mediated through the voice of the narrator) become a veritable

³⁷⁸ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 39.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 30.

manual of appropriate social behavior reminiscent of etiquette manuals from the Victorian era.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the didactic impulse – that is, the desire to teach the readers important lessons in an enjoyable manner – certainly does characterize Karam’s fiction. Karam uses fictional stories to offer advice to the Syrian immigrant community living in the *mahjar*. This aim reflects the dual valence of the term *adab* – to “benefit” and “entertain.” However, there is an important difference that distinguishes Karam’s work from the inherited *adab* tradition. Unlike traditional works of *adab*, which impart lessons to the reader in a straightforward manner, Karam’s novel features a cast of characters who take turns conveying the author’s points to the reader. This narrative technique can be seen in the early dialogues between Badī’a and Lūsīyā as well as in Chapter Three, when the narration is mediated through the character of Fu’ād. Though subtle, this change signals an important transitional moment in the wider trajectory of Arabic literary history and the development of modern Arabic fiction overall.

All in all, the underlying message comes across very clearly: one should be strategic in one’s embrace of the West. In many ways, Fu’ād’s posture here echoes the sentiments of many intellectuals of the day, such as Khalīl al-Khūrī, who advocated for the selective borrowing of customs from the West, while also holding on to their own indigenous Arab heritage. Cultural practices should only be adopted if they are useful to society at large (such as education) whereas harmful customs (such as fashion and gambling) should be avoided at all costs. By the same token, harmful indigenous practices should be abandoned, such as smoking *narghila*. In this text, by using modernist narrative techniques and skillful manipulation of point of view, the author crafts a strong argument for a more balanced approach to the complex politics of Westernization.

To offset the criticisms raised throughout the evening, Fu’ād and the narrator also provide readers with a positive model of social and dining etiquette. Fu’ād’s mother Maryam – whom he observed vigilantly throughout the evening – represents, in his words, “the perfect preserver of good manners of behaviors and duties of edification (*“atamm al-muhāfiẓa ‘alā ādāb al-sulūk wa wajibāt al-tahdhīb”*).³⁸¹ Fu’ād takes note of a stark contrast between his mother’s outstanding conduct and the deplorable manners of many of the guests and lamented, “if only all the men and women of our country could excel at imitating the Europeans and preserving our honorable customs like this Lady.”³⁸² Communicated through the perspective of Fu’ād, Maryam is portrayed as the quintessential good hostess. She exemplifies proper social etiquette from the start to the finish of the evening and fulfills the correct duties and graceful manners expected of an educated housewife (*rabbat al-bayt*).

Throughout the evening, Maryam serves as the undeniable mistress of ceremonies. At dinner, she is described as having perfected the art of “table conversation” or “*ḥadīth al-*

³⁸¹ Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*, 35.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 33.

mā'ida.”³⁸³ In contrast to the ill-mannered guests, Maryam is “an expert in the rules of conversation,” or “*khabīra fī qawā'id al-ḥadīth*.”³⁸⁴ Her skill in conversation is expressed with diction that lends her power and control. Mistress Maryam presided over her guests, speaking clearly and loudly enough to command the attention of everyone present. Seated at the head of the table, the narrator explains that she “seized the leadership/the reigns of the conversation” (“*tawallat za'āmat al-ḥadīth*”) ³⁸⁵, employing a verb that is generally used in conjunction with holding political power (*tawallā al-ḥukm*). Her speech was so elegant and entertaining, the narrator remarks, that when she spoke, no one noticed the passing of time. Maryam’s authoritative role is further emphasized by the fact that her husband, *al-Khawāja* Manṣūr, does not appear once throughout the evening’s festivities.

In this chapter, the narrator draws particular attention to women’s power of expression when she describes Maryam’s words as seamlessly interwoven, like a “connected chain of installments,” or “*silsila muttaṣila min al-ḥalaqāt*.”³⁸⁶ In the introduction to *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, Karam uses the exact same phrasing to describe the formal characteristics of the novel as a literary genre, in a meta-poetic reference to its serialized publication. Karam explains that when ideas are collected and arranged in the form of a novel (“*bi-qālib riwāya*”) they become a “*silsila muttaṣila min al-ḥalaqāt*,” or a continuous chain of installments, and therefore, benefit the reader and affect them more strongly than newspaper articles or interrupted chapters.³⁸⁷

The image of the “*silsila*” – meaning “chain” or “necklace” – immediately brings to mind a long-standing metaphor used to describe poetry in the classical Arabic literary tradition. The poem (*al-qasīda*) was commonly referred to as a necklace or a string of pearls (*silsila* or ‘*uqd*) made up of individual verses (*abyāt*). In his authoritative work *al-'Umda fī-maḥāsin al-shi'r wa-ādābihi wa-naqdih* (*The Pillar on the Niceties, Manners, and Criticism of Poetry*), medieval Arab poet and critic Ibn Rashīq (d. 456/1070) compared the aesthetic work of the poet to that of a jeweller.³⁸⁸ Like the craftsman who carefully selects individual gems or pearls and strings them together/arranges them (*naẓama*) to create a beautiful necklace, the poet adorns meaning with rhyme and metrical rhythm to create a poetic composition.³⁸⁹

³⁸³ “Table talk”, or *ḥadīth al-mā'ida*, was a topic that appeared frequently in newspaper columns in the Arab presses and provided readers with etiquette about dining, socializing, and so on. Pollard claims that it “had less to do with eating and drinking than with the politics of creating a new national family.” Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 181–3.

³⁸⁴ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 34.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 36.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., i.

³⁸⁸ Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī al-Ḥasan, *al-'Umdah fī maḥāsin al-shi'r wa-ādābihi wa-naqdih* (Bayrūt: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 2002).

³⁸⁹ Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age: A Selection of Texts Accompanied by a Preliminary Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 44.

For Karam, the beauty and power of the genre of the novel lies in its form. As a sustained narrative made up of “a chain of connected installments,” novels are much more enjoyable to read and make a much more lasting impression than articles or interrupted chapters. In the banquet chapter of *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, the same imagery is employed to describe Mistress Maryam’s skillful command of oral conversation. By employing this textualized metaphor to describe both the novel (a contentious literary form) and spoken conversation (a sub-literary mode of expression), the author inserts and promotes these otherwise denigrated forms of expression into the ranks of the most revered, canonical, and privileged form of verbal expression in the Arabic cultural tradition: poetry. Karam’s metaphor aims to lend greater canonicity to the novel – and later to Maryam’s words – by implicitly and intertextually associating them with poetry and its lofty status in the Arabic tradition.

Perhaps even more tantalizing is the coupling in the text of ordinary speech and the genre of the novel, and the central role that women characters play in both. There are numerous moments in the text that speak to the importance of women’s reading culture of the day. For example, to further emphasize Maryam’s high level of education and learning, the narrator notes that she had arranged a large collection of books, newspapers, and magazines in the salon for her guests, should they tire of conversation.³⁹⁰ These sections of the text reflect the new model of womanhood that was becoming increasingly prevalent in the Arab world during the *nahḍa*. By way of description and comparison, the narrator – through the voice of Fu’ād – vividly illustrates the new social functions and expectations of Syrian women of the educated elite who were emerging as public figures – writers, journal editors, and heads of charitable organizations. In addition to having perfected the rules of social etiquette, Mistress Maryam is a semi-public figure who is an active reader of journalism and literature and who is adept at the arts of verbal communication.

Despite the forward looking content of the portrayal of women in this chapter, women’s roles, as expressed through the focalized perspective of Fu’ād, a privileged, aristocratic male, are limited to that of homemaker, wife, and mother. Despite the fact that Maryam is educated, she is nevertheless described first and foremost as a wife and a mother. Maryam is described as the embodiment of the ideal housewife, or “*rabbat al-bayt*.”³⁹¹ Similarly, when Fu’ād – a highly sought-after bachelor – sees Badī‘a for the first time, he is struck by the thought that she would be an ideal marriage partner. When he first lays eyes on Badī‘a on the night of the banquet, he was captivated by a beautiful and elusive young woman who wore a simple, unornamented black shift.³⁹² Fu’ād muses, “she looks like she knows her duties and would excel in her role as a good housewife.”³⁹³ Indeed, the narrator calls Badī‘a “a queen who knows the duties of the small kingdom of her house” (“*malika ‘arīfa bi-wājibāt mamlakatihā al-ṣaghīra allatī hiya ‘ā’ilatuhā*”).³⁹⁴ The

³⁹⁰ Karam, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, 32.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 35.

³⁹² Ibid., 41.

³⁹³ Ibid., 31.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

idealized image of a woman and her expectations and “duties” presented above reflect the gender norms, patriarchal ideology, and pervasive rhetoric of the *nahḍa*. In this section, which takes place on the ground in Lebanon, the “laws of the land” are in operation and normative gender roles are strictly adhered to. In the introductory sections of Karam’s first novel, it may have seemed judicious to filter her opinions through the perspective of a male. Perhaps the author’s choice of Fu’ād as focalizer was a method – either conscious or unconscious – to temper her own critical voice. However, when the setting of the novel moves away from the land and into the sea, gender dynamics shift dramatically. As the novel progresses, greater narrative authority is granted Badī’a who – as it becomes increasingly clear – is the work’s favored character and the clearest mouthpiece of the implied author’s views.

Love at First Sight

The following day, Maryam introduces Badī’a to her son Fu’ād, who is seated in the drawing room beside his cousin Nasīb. Awestruck by her beauty, grace, modesty, and intelligence, later that day, Fu’ād descends to Badī’a’s room in the servants’ quarters and confesses his love to her. In shock, Badī’a refuses his advances: as a servant of the family, her loyalty to his parents comes first. Fu’ād insists that he can remedy the situation as he is assured of his parents’ love and admiration for her. However, when Maryam gets wind of Fu’ād’s proposal of marriage to Badī’a, she becomes distressed. Such a union would be unacceptable in her stratum of Syrian society and would bring shame (“*‘ār*”) on the family’s name.³⁹⁵ At a loss, and with her husband away in Egypt on business, Maryam seeks counsel in her nephew Nasīb, the novel’s malicious villain, who devises a treacherous plan to prevent their union. Nasīb suggests that Maryam should smooth matters over temporarily by giving the young couple her blessing and then – following Fu’ād’s return to boarding school – she should fire Badī’a and cast her out of the house. He then convinces his aunt that he ought to secretly follow Badī’a to America in case Fu’ād should discover Maryam’s double-dealing and decide to travel to America to find out the truth for himself. Reluctantly, Maryam agrees. Maryam’s moral corruption is described as the result of her slavish obedience to elitist social customs, especially the taboo against inter-class marriages. The overall message is clear: one should avoid blind obedience to *any* of society’s socio-cultural norms or traditions, whether they are “Eastern” or “Western.” Instead, each individual is responsible for making ethical decisions using their own conscious, judicious discernment.

Outraged and brokenhearted, Badī’a asks her mistress for the money to cover the cost of the trans-Atlantic journey from Beirut to New York City. She packs her belongings and travels to the home of her childhood friend and cousin Lūsīyā. This personal crisis marks the dawning of a new chapter in Badī’a’s life, and a new section in the novel. With great sadness, Badī’a leaves this tragic story of betrayal and loss behind and sets her eyes on a new beginning in New York City, the “capital” of the New World.

³⁹⁵ Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*, 71.

Part Two: On The Sea

Aboard a steamship bound for America, Badī'a and Lūsīyā stand amid a large and diverse group of travelers as they bid farewell to their beloved Beirut.³⁹⁶ The section of the novel that takes place on the trans-Atlantic crossing of the steamship *Messengeries maritimes*³⁹⁷ is one of the most evocative and significant in the work as a whole. Not only does it provide a vivid account of the experience of first-wave Syrian immigration to America, but it also serves as the locus of Badī'a's character transformation.³⁹⁸ As the ocean liner makes its way to the New World, Badī'a emerges as an intrepid advocate for her fellow travelers, particularly the women among them, whom she refers to throughout as "*banāt jinsī*," or "the girls of my kind." The various episodes that take place on the ship demonstrate Badī'a's firm conviction that no one should allow themselves to be victimized or disrespected, especially not for material or financial gain. Throughout the voyage, Badī'a spreads this message among the other women passengers, empowering them to uphold and defend their own dignity and self-respect, no matter what the cost.

The author employs various narrative strategies to bring this crucial moment in the story to light. When the story moves off shore, a self-conscious narrative voice steps in as if to physically relocate the theatrical setting of events from land to sea, saying, "Let us take the reader to the stern of one of the ships belonging to the fleet *Messengeries maritimes*..."³⁹⁹ With this intervention, which is not the first example of this narrative strategy in the novel *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, the narrator establishes a direct relationship with the readers, who become a subject of the author's attention rather than an indirect audience to the progress of the story.

Traditionally, the technique of authorial intrusion is viewed as something that distracts from the experience of reading a work of fiction. However, as Jeffrey Williams argues in his 2009 work *Theory and the Novel*, authorial presence can also be seen as a moment in the work that brings the act of narration itself to the fore.⁴⁰⁰ Authorial intrusion has the effect of creating greater aesthetic distance between the reader's conscious reality and the fictional reality presented in the novel. With this intervention, Karam brings the focus to the art of storytelling while simultaneously relating the events themselves.

³⁹⁶ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 120.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ The ship is described by the narrator as the "first of the wonders of America." This phrase, which is between quotation marks, suggests Badī'a's skepticism about America and the utopian vision that so many immigrants imagined America to be.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁰⁰ Williams argues against the widespread critical tendency that considers plot as the "center of narrative and a narrator's discourse as marginal." (12) Instead, Williams calls for a "collapse of the hierarchy of narrative levels," (9) suggesting that "narrative moments" (1) such as authorial intrusions, digressions, frames, and embedded stories are precisely that which makes narratives *literary*, as opposed to another form of communication such as colloquial speech. (3) In such "narrative moments," the act of narration itself is brought to the fore, reflecting a "narrative reflexivity" that has the effect of creating greater aesthetic distance between the reader's conscious reality and the fictional reality presented in the novel. For more, see Jeffrey Williams, *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

As the ship sets sail, the two young women watch the last traces of Beirut disappear over the horizon. When “the night put on its thick *burq’a* of darkness,” the narrator writes, the passengers retire to their quarters. At that point, Lūsīyā notices that her friend was yellow in the face, speaking unconscious, incomprehensible words that neither Lūsīyā nor the reader can hear. The narrator comments that Lūsīyā mistakenly interpreted her friend’s disturbance as seasickness, explaining that she is “ignorant of everything concerning Badī’a.” The narrator continues, saying: “Lūsīyā did not know that Badī’a’s dizziness was not physical, but mental turmoil, caused by leaving that beloved city...”⁴⁰¹ For Badī’a, the pain of leaving Beirut is analogous to the heartsickness of losing a lover. Lūsīyā, however, did not suffer at all. Thus, as the physical distance between the young women and their homeland increases, so does the emotional distance between Badī’a and Lūsīyā. The two young women inhabit diametrically opposed emotional worlds. That night, Lūsīyā dreamt happily about escaping a life of poverty, while a sleepless Badī’a wrestled with mournful thoughts. In the words of the narrator, all her hopes and ambitions for happiness “were buried” when she left “that great Syrian city.”⁴⁰²

The metaphor of the sky as a woman donning a black cloak adds to the already feminine quality of the scene as a whole. For example, the word for ship (*bākhira*) is feminine, as is the city Beirut (*al-madīna al-maḥbūba*). By playing with gender in both diction and metaphor, once again, the author inverts the normative gender dynamics of the metaphorical system ‘land as woman.’ Here, Badī’a – a female character – is afflicted by the pain of separation from her beloved country – which is also gendered feminine. In a sense, this farewell scene aboard the steamship echoes Badī’a’s parting from Fu’ād, who was away at boarding school and unaware of her departure. However, the melodramatic leave-taking scene on the steamship suggests that Badī’a’s loss of romantic love (for Fu’ād) is secondary to the tragic loss of her homeland. The painful disconnection or rupture between the immigrant subject and his or her homeland is a constant preoccupation of *mahjar* writers from this early generation. For example, while he was living in Boston in 1912, Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān wrote the following in a letter to his dear friend Amīn al-Riḥānī on the eve of Riḥānī’s departure for Lebanon:

You are leaving tomorrow for the most beautiful and most sacred country in the world, and I stay in this distant exile: what joy for you and how unhappy I remain. But if you think of me in front of Mount Sannīn, next to Byblos and in the Frayké valley, you will ease the pains of exile and alleviate for me the suffering of immigration and distance.⁴⁰³

The next morning, as she surveys her surroundings, Lūsīyā is disgusted by the unsightly and unhygienic appearance of the passengers, most of whom are her compatriots from Mount Lebanon. Lūsīyā is repulsed by their filthy, tattered clothing, emanating stench

⁴⁰¹ Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*, 120.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁰³ Quoted in Dyala Hamzah, *The Making of the Arab Intellectual: Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 177.

and disease, and refers to the ship as a “hell on earth” (*jahannam ‘arḍiyya*).⁴⁰⁴ For Badī‘a, however, it is not the physical appearance of the impoverished travelers that is troubling, but rather, their docile, self-effacing demeanor. She is outraged by the servile and submissive behavior that she observes in some of her countrymen and women. Even before the ship sets sail, Badī‘a witnesses several instances of Syrian passengers silently acquiescing to disrespectful treatment by American deckhands. In a conversation with Lūsīyā, Badī‘a laments the tendency among Syrian immigrants to accept unfair treatment by the Western deckhands in pursuit of wealth and prosperity. In her view, a person’s dignity is priceless and should not be sacrificed at any cost.

In one instance, Badī‘a overhears a Syrian passenger instruct her daughter not to talk back to an ill-mannered sailor because they were desperately in need of the food and water that he could provide. Badī‘a found this mindset to be despicable. In her view, individuals should show strength in the face of disrespect, regardless of their social status. Badī‘a exhorts her female compatriots to resist maltreatment (as men are socialized to do) rather than allow themselves to be victimized. Rather than blaming the American sailors for the maltreatment of Syrians, Karam faults the Syrians themselves, which underlines her firm belief in the notion of individual responsibility.

Later that day, Karam’s heroine Badī‘a emerges as a fearless defender of her sex after witnessing an American sailor verbally and physically harass a young Lebanese woman. The narrator describes the incident as follows:

...Badī‘a happened to see another sailor walking past one of the young women. He struck her lightly on the cheek with his hand, intending to be flirtatious, and laughed as he passed her. Seeing this, Badī‘a’s sense of honor was stirred and her pure heart was torn to shreds. Driven by outrage and earnest concern for the honor of her sex (*sharaf jinsihā*), she did not stop to think about whether or not it was her duty (*wājib*) to step into the matter. Immediately, she rose and approached the young woman, who still stood rooted in place. Badī‘a found the man to be reprehensible: he had insulted her countrywoman and so, she felt as if the insult was directed at herself as well. An honorable woman, when another woman is insulted, feels as though the insult is directed at all women, not just one.⁴⁰⁵

Infuriated by the young woman’s passivity, Badī‘a reproaches her, insisting that she should have resisted. In her opinion, death is preferable to accepting disrespect from a vulgar, contemptible man. “If I were in your place...” Badī‘a proclaims, “...I would have taken a boot and hit that man with it and cursed at him for everyone to hear, so that he will know that women do have the power to defend their honor and so that, from that point on, he would be deterred from treating any other woman in such a way.”⁴⁰⁶ Teary-eyed and full of remorse, the young girl thanks her, promising to act more courageously the next time around.

⁴⁰⁴ Karam, *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*, 120.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 123–4.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 124.

Prior to this point in the novel, Badī'a's concern for basic human rights and values was broadly extended to all of her fellow travelers. However, this incident prompts her to focus her outrage into an explicit campaign for women's rights and empowerment. Furthermore, in this scene, when a selective omniscient narrator makes Badī'a the focalizer, it reveals a three-way identification: between Badī'a, the narrator, and the young woman who is mistreated. This consensus represents a powerful narratological expression of female solidarity. By contradistinction, it also underscores the mental and emotional gap separating the characters Badī'a and Lūsīyā. On a textual level, the unison of narrative point of view suggests that the implied author's views are in line with the message communicated in this section of the novel.

The proto-feminist position that comes across so clearly in the quoted section above is further reinforced by the diction of the passage. Badī'a describes the defense of her fellow women as her "*wājib*," or "duty." This word choice is significant, particularly at a time when discussions about women's duties (*wājibāt*) were ubiquitous. During the *nahḍa*, however, women's duties were limited to serving their husbands, parents, and children, and only by extension serving the nation or the wider society from within the confines of the domestic sphere. By contrast, in this scene, the author advances an alternative definition of the concept of women's "duty," which reflects the author's progressive gender politics. By highlighting the moral obligation of women to serve and protect *other women*, the author subverts the common understanding of women's role in the world at large. As a seafarer, suspended between her homeland and the unknown shores of *Amrīkā*, Badī'a's character transforms into a firebrand, rousing and awakening her fellow women to protest gender inequalities. She sees it as her "duty" to provoke and inspire her fellow women to find their inner strength and exercise greater agency in their lives, rather than continuing to exist as subjugated, voiceless women. In the next scene, one of the most significant in the novel, Badī'a fully assumes the role of a guardian and protector of her "sisters" when she saves a fellow woman from committing suicide.

Jamīla

On the morning of the second day of their journey, Badī'a awakes before Lūsīyā. Alone with her thoughts, she walks out to the prow of the steamship and gazes out at the ocean, wishing that her own thoughts could be as tranquil and calm as its waters. Suddenly, Badī'a hears footsteps and watches silently as a young woman approaches the bow of the ship. Crying and praying, a despondent young woman pulls a photo from her breast pocket, kisses the image, makes the sign of the cross, and prepares herself to jump overboard. Instantaneously, Badī'a races toward her and pulls the woman back from the edge of the ship.⁴⁰⁷ Disoriented and still in shock, the young woman mutters unconsciously, rationalizing her suicide and begging God and her parents for forgiveness in a reported monologue consisting of a string of questions, unfinished sentences, and

⁴⁰⁷ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 127.

frenetic punctuation.⁴⁰⁸ Impassioned, Badī'a looks at her intently and says: "No, you will not die this way. [Suicide] is the death of the insane, and [I can tell] from the way that you speak that you are not crazy."⁴⁰⁹ In a daze, the woman collapses into Badī'a's arms, the only barrier between her and the great chasm of the ocean below.

The young woman, whose name is Jamīla, gazes up at the woman holding her and notes her beautiful face and kind eyes. An omniscient narrator dramatizes the intensity of their first meeting in terms that almost suggest a homoerotic connection. Lying across Badī'a's lap, the narrator reports that Jamīla felt "a secret love" for the face looking down at her.⁴¹⁰ United in an embrace, "their souls spoke before their tongues exchanged words."⁴¹¹ This comment emphasizes the instantaneous soul connection between the two women, one so strong that it surpasses verbal communication. In short, assured of Badī'a's good intentions, Jamīla breaks her silence, saying: "Listen to my story."⁴¹² In this scene, the bond between Badī'a and Jamīla is thus cemented before the exchange of a single utterance. Despite the fact that Badī'a is a complete stranger, in this intimate moment, Jamīla feels safe enough to share with her the story of the most painful chapter in her life – one so agonizing that it led her to attempt suicide. On the level of the text, Jamīla's story – told to Badī'a – represents an embedded narrative within the larger narrative, which is a narrative strategy Karam explores further in her second novel. The focus on the sharing of stories reflects one of the main themes of Karam's fiction, which is that the deep affiliation between women is solidified through the act of storytelling.

The narrator remarks that Jamīla was not physically 'beautiful' as her Arabic name suggests, rather, she was a rather plain looking, but virtuous and good-hearted girl. As her parents' only child, at the age of twelve, Jamīla was betrothed to one of her cousins in order to keep the inheritance within the family. However, as preparations for the wedding began, her fiancé met someone more beautiful than she and broke off their engagement. Humiliated and brokenhearted, Jamīla decided that the only way to end her suffering was to take her own life. To this end, she purchased a one-way ticket on the *Messageries maritimes* with the intention of throwing herself overboard, so she might disappear into the ocean and never be found again.

Upon hearing Jamīla's story, Badī'a becomes incensed. She is unforgiving in her sermonizing, calling Jamīla "extremely weak" for her decision to commit suicide over mistreatment by a treacherous man. In Badī'a's estimation, death by suicide, which she calls "the weapon of the cowardly,"⁴¹³ is the most dishonorable way to die. With a searing twinge of sarcasm, Badī'a asks rhetorically, "Truly, for the sake of an awful man, you will trample your duties (*wājibāt*) underfoot and fall victim to your own madness while

⁴⁰⁸ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 128.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 129.

⁴¹² Ibid., 131.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 131.

he continues to enjoy his life, mocking you??"⁴¹⁴ In Badī'a's view, suicide represents a failure to honor all of her duties, not only to herself, but also to her parents, and to her religion, which considers suicide an unforgivable sin. To this list of duties, Badī'a adds a fourth, less obvious responsibility: the moral duty to serve as a good example for other women.⁴¹⁵ It is important that suicide in the text is not seen in traditional religious terms as a sin, but rather as a sign of psychic or psychological weakness (such as cowardice or insanity). This psychological emphasis is an expression of modernity in the context of the progressive gender dynamics that Karam expresses in this novel.

In this scene, for the second time, Karam uses the concept of *wājib* in a subversive way. She also redefines a second term, namely, *'ār*, meaning "shame" or "disgrace," creating an alternative meaning for an Arabic word that is heavily freighted with paternalistic references when applied to women in traditional Arab societies. More often than not, the term *'ār* – generally understood as the opposite of "honor" – is used to refer to unlawful or what men deem culturally inappropriate – and usually sexually-related – actions taken by a woman that reflect poorly on the reputation of her husband, father, family, tribe, or religion. By contrast, in Karam's text, the offending act – namely, Jamīla's attempted suicide – is considered a disgraceful action that reflects poorly on *al-jins*, which refers here to the female gender. Thus, this unexpected usage of the term "shame" redefines women's actions according to a new frame of reference where women are at the center of the discussion. The author thus transgresses the normative, patriarchal model that perpetuates the status of women as lesser beings who belong to men, and whose behavior (good and bad) is judged solely by its reflection on their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons.

Badī'a brings her impassioned speech to a close when she says that any woman who would sacrifice her own life for an unfaithful man is a "weak coward and a disgrace to the sex" (*ḍa'īfa jubāna wa-'āran 'alā al-jins*).⁴¹⁶ Conscience-stricken and ashamed, Jamīla states, "...even though your words hurt, I know you are right: your words are a balm to my wounded heart."⁴¹⁷ Thus, for the second time on the sea voyage, Badī'a intervenes into the affairs of an unknown woman and – with her rousing speech, compassion, and solicitude – empowers her to reclaim her own self-worth and to live bravely. This melodramatic scene marks the beginning of a deep friendship between Badī'a and Jamīla. When Badī'a kisses her new friend on the cheek, vowing to be loyal to her forever, a smile brightened Jamīla's face for the first time since she had left home. At that moment, it is decided that Jamīla will join Badī'a and Lūsīyā as a third companion on their journey to America.⁴¹⁸ Unbeknownst to the three young women, Fu'ād's traitorous cousin Nasīb had been secretly observing them throughout the voyage.

⁴¹⁴ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 133.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 132–33.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 135.

It is both significant and evocative that this subversive gender world comes to life aboard a ship as it makes its way across the Atlantic Ocean. The vast, open sea represents an in-between space, a liminal zone that is free from the traditional patriarchal gender structures that govern women's existence on either shore. Hovering above the ocean, women's actions, emotions, and experiences become self-referential. The ocean represents a neutral realm where women are viewed in relation to one another, rather than according to the dominant patriarchal ideology. In this floating utopian world, which is reminiscent of the female-dominated landscape at the opening of the novel, women do not live their lives on men's terms. Rather, in this suspended realm, women – guided by Badī'a – form a self-contained community providing one another with love and support. Here, women can be strong, outspoken, and exercise agency. Like “tools” (*ālāt*) of wrought iron, they can serve a positive role in society by inspiring and empowering other women to do the same. Set side by side with the next section of the novel, which takes place in the United States, it is almost as if the sea functions as the space between the binary distinctions of culturally constructed, normative male and female existence.

It is beyond question that the author was cognizant that she was treading new ground with her portrayal of the novel's heroine, Badī'a, whose name so aptly reflects the radical nature of her character. As an adjective, “*badī'a*” signifies “unprecedented, marvelous, wonderful, amazing, admirable, singular, unique; uncommon, original.”⁴¹⁹ The feminine form of the adjective, *badī'a*, signifies “an astonishing, amazing thing, a marvel, a wonder; original creation.”⁴²⁰ Meanwhile, the noun from which this adjective is derived (*bid'a*) has a special connotation in Islam, where it signifies a ‘heresy,’ a blasphemous deviation from accepted religious doctrine, which is often translated as ‘innovation’ in a negative sense.⁴²¹ The multi-valence of the name Badī'a – which can either be interpreted in a positive sense, as ‘wondrous,’ or in a negative sense, as ‘heretical’ – is fitting for such an unprecedented figure in Arabic literature. Badī'a is a complex individual: she is at once a modest, dutiful woman and a freethinking, iconoclastic, dissenting nonconformist.

Roughly two weeks later, the steamship arrives in *madīnat Nyūyūrḳ al-‘uḏma*, “Great New York City.”⁴²² At Ellis Island, many of the passengers are denied entry to the country on the grounds that they carried disease.⁴²³ However, as healthy, educated, and well-dressed young women, Badī'a and her companions encountered no difficulties at the border. Covertly, Nasīb entered the country right behind them. Their first stop on

⁴¹⁹ Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 57.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ In Arabic literature, the term *badī'*, from the same root *b-d-*, took on a new meaning during the classical period, when it came to designate an emerging branch of Arabic rhetoric that diverged from the traditional poetic conventions laid out in the foundational works of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry in its use of complex rhetorical devices, turns of phrase, and exaggerated figures of speech.

⁴²² Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 138.

⁴²³ Trachoma, a bacterial infection of the eye caused by poor, crowded living conditions, was the number one cause of deportation among immigrants from Greater Syria. For more on this disease, see Hugh R. Taylor, *Trachoma: A Blinding Scourge from the Bronze Age to the Twenty-First Century* (East Melbourne, Vic.: Center for Eye Research Australia, 2008).

American shores was “Little Syria,” New York City’s first Arab immigrant neighborhood. In the ensuing section of the novel, the reader follows this cast of characters as they embark upon a new life in the New World. The author turns to an exploration of identity politics as these newly arrived immigrants from Greater Syria navigate the challenging process of adjusting to life in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Each character exhibits a unique approach to this cross-cultural encounter. Through a comparison of their contrasting attitudes and lifestyles, the author advances her own view of the optimal mode of dealing with this cultural confrontation. In the end, Badī’a (and the author) privileges the worldview and comportment of individuals who have absorbed the best of their inherited Syrian and newfound American values and cultural practices.

Part Three: In Amrīkā

Upon their arrival in the United States, and following a brief stop in New York City’s “Little Syria,” the three young women board a train bound for Cincinnati where they are to be met by a family acquaintance named Adīb. Adīb owns and operates a small shop in the city and – after ten years living in the *mahjar* – he is well connected to the Syrian immigrant community in the area. At thirty-five, Adīb is still unmarried, which is unusual, the narrator remarks, especially considering that he is well educated, gainfully employed, and a good and honest man. When the reader first meets Adīb, he is lost in contemplation about the difficulties he encountered finding a wife, both in the *waṭan* and in the *mahjar*. The experience of life in America compelled him to reexamine his inherited Syrian values and customs. Adīb took particular issue with traditional Syrian marriage practices, which were typically arranged on the basis of an equivalence of wealth and social status between husband and wife. He wanted more than practical complementarity in his future partner: Adīb yearned for love, and he hoped he would find his ideal partner in America. However, to his dismay, the search for a match in the *mahjar* was proving to be equally arduous.

At first, a selective omniscient narrator – focalized on the character of Adīb – explains that he is still a bachelor because he had not yet come across a woman who possesses “*al-kamāl al-nisā’ī al-tāmm*,” or “complete womanly perfection.”⁴²⁴ Adīb ponders his predicament and, without warning, his thoughts transform into a lengthy, first-person interior monologue. Over the course of several pages, Adīb considers the two most eligible Syrian women in his community – Hanna and Muna – who exhibit diametrically opposed approaches to the Syrian-American cultural encounter. Adīb compares and contrasts their opposing approaches to life in the *mahjar* in a lengthy interior monologue that verges on stream of consciousness. The slippage between the voice of the narrator and that of the fictional character Adīb produces the modernist effect of shifting point of view. Through Adīb’s musings, a privileged model of cultural synthesis begins to emerge.

⁴²⁴ Karam, *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād*, 140.

[Adīb's] mind turned to the two young women who were the most suitable for him from among the others in his community.

Ḥanna had a beautiful face, a slender physique, a thin waist, and elegant speech. She spoke, read, and wrote English well. She was intelligent, kind, and excelled at playing the piano. She could easily join, fit in, and be happily accepted by any of the American high societies and associations... However, she demanded a new style of dress and jewelry every month, or else she would become angry or sad. She did not do housework because her hands were soft and were not created for strenuous work. The seamstress did not fashion her soft, clean gown to suit the kitchen; its long train would drag across the floor. She did not want to raise children because "her head could not stand the crying" and furthermore, [childrearing] was not something she could do while wearing a corset, and she would not even consider taking it off at home. She would not sew by hand because it is not worth "tiring her mind for one hour" over it when she could pay five or ten riyals to the seamstress. She could not help her husband with his work because she was not created for work, but for relaxation. When she was out shopping a new piece of jewelry or an expensive gown, she would not consider her husband's financial means or ask for his approval, which would hold him back and would not allow him to move forward in life. She would not refrain from making social visits, even if a member of the family were ill. And he who would have the good fortune to call her his "wife" would become a stranger in his own house. Worse even, he would become "a prisoner in it" when it should have been [a place] where he feels free. The door would be closed to his friends if his lady did not accept them, yet it would always be open to her friends whether he likes them or not, and even if one of them were his enemy. His mother would be mistreated and cast out even if she did not deserve it, while her mother would [always] be welcomed and respected; the poor man would have to wait hand and foot on her mother and all her associates.

When thinking of these matters, [Adīb] said "Uff" to that life, for the sweetness of some of her qualities do not make up for their bitterness. As the saying goes, she is like the carob tree: one dirham of sweetness for a *qantar* (250 kg.) of wood. Let's consider Muna, he said.

[Muna] differs from Ḥanna completely in that she is not at all "Americanized" (*muta'amrika*). Rather, she is still purely Syrian in her nature and her morals. She is naturally beautiful in the face. Her figure is like that of our mother Eve. No corset presses on her or lifts her up, and lace irritates her for all of its detail. She is fanatical in her life to the point that she hates everything foreign, refuses to look at anything foreign, and won't do anything foreign. She considers everything that is not Syrian to be impure, repulsive, and ugly. She is [equally] fanatical in religion: when speaking of someone who is not of her religion, she calls him or her an "unbeliever" (*kāfir*) and forbids people to even mention their name. She believes everything her mother taught her; that every person who is not of her religion belongs in hell, whether or not he or she did noble deeds. She is modest, yes, but to the point that she does not look at anyone, speak to anyone, or attend social gatherings. If she did, she would enter frightened, trembling like a leaf in

the wind. Sometimes she would cry from shyness. She prays a lot, but does not have the slightest idea of what she is saying. She does not style her hair or put effort into dressing up so that the elders would not call her ditsy. She works at home a lot, but she does not cook well because she never learned how, nor does she have a taste for it. She is not proficient in household economics because she never studied it, nor does she spend time with anyone who does, because all her friends are exactly like her. She would sacrifice her happiness for the happiness of her children, serving them night and day, with an exaggerated devotion, the likes of which even spoiled children do not experience. But, a mother's love alone is not sufficient to support the moral and material life of a child, so that his life may serve and benefit himself or the nation. She would love her husband. She would obey him. She would trust him. She would recognize both openly and privately that he is her leader, just as Jesus is the leader of the church. She would sacrifice her comfort and happiness for his comfort and happiness, and would stand waiting for his orders "like a wax dog." Whatever he does is fine by her because he is the "man" and, in her tradition, it is not permissible for her to do anything for herself because she is "the woman." She is not his friend or his comrade, in the way that she is his wife or the mother of his children. She cannot engage in his ideas like a close friend, nor can he ask her opinion about his work, whether it is in commerce or in production. He does not find [the same] pleasure in sleeping with her/living with her as he would if she were intelligent and skilled. She is beloved, but she is a slave. She is a wife, but she is a prisoner, working day and night in her home. With this kind of wife, his house would not be as happy as the houses of others.

Adīb continues to ponder, ...

These [women represent] two extremes. They both have virtues and vices, but their vices outweigh and outnumber their virtues. What would happen, say, if the "Americanized" woman were to exercise moderation, and if the conservative one took steps toward becoming more knowledgeable, cultivated, and intelligent? What harm would come if [Ḥanna] were less haughty and ignorant so that she could use her learning to fulfill her duties as a wife, mother, and member of her family with greater knowledge and understanding, the way she excels at [arranging] her wardrobe or her makeup? What would please me most is if Muna were to hold on to her innate virtues, enhancing them with knowledge and edification (*tahdhīb*), and discard some of the vile, ignorant customs and repugnant, corrupt practices that envelop her from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet, obscuring her natural beauty and her good and honorable virtues.⁴²⁵

In the above passage, through comparison, juxtaposition, and hyperbole, Adīb's colorful, humorous description of Ḥanna and Muna illustrates two opposing approaches to life in America. According to Adīb, each of these women exhibits "extremism" (*taṭarruf*) in their lifestyle, leading to an imbalanced ratio of positive and negative "Syrian" and

⁴²⁵ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 142–45.

“American” traits. Despite her beauty, education, and cultivation, Hanna possesses numerous vices and shortcomings in excess: namely, materialism, haughtiness, and domestic incompetence. Conversely, while fully embodying the traditional woman’s role of mother and homemaker, Muna displays an excess of negative traits such as ignorance, religious fanaticism, submissiveness, and a categorical acceptance of patriarchal domination over women. It is interesting to note that the two women stand at opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to their position of power vis-à-vis their husband. The gendered power differential Adīb so vividly brings to life in his monologue illustrates an earlier discussion between Badī‘a and Jamīla during which Badī‘a argues that equality between man and wife is an essential component of a happy marriage.⁴²⁶ In the final paragraph of Adīb’s lament, he suggests that, unlike Hanna and Muna, his ideal partner would possess a balanced integration of the two cultural worldviews. His dream wife is modest, yet educated and outspoken; dutiful and moralistic, but not subservient; domestic, yet autonomous; naturally beautiful, but not overly materialistic. In short, the ‘ideal Karamian woman’ – now expressed through multiple narrative perspectives – including those of Fu’ād, Badī‘a, and Adīb – exhibits the paradigm of womanhood that Adīb was searching for namely, “*al-kamāl al-nisā’ī al-tām*” or “complete womanly perfection.”⁴²⁷

‘Afīfa Karam advances a similar position on womanhood in her article entitled “The Freedom of American Ladies and the Modesty of Syrian Ladies,” which appeared in the newspaper *al-Hudā* roughly eight months prior to the publication of *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*.⁴²⁸ In the article, Karam considers opposing perspectives toward modesty as reflected in the outlook of American and Syrian women, weighing the pros and cons of each. American women, she explains, are often raised from a young age to express themselves freely in thought, word, and deed. While this “freedom” is a positive attribute overall, at times, she explains, it results in women overstepping the boundaries of decency and politeness. Syrian women, by contrast, are often shackled (*muqayyada*) by the socially imposed values of feminine modesty and decorum. Karam explains that “harmful modesty” (*hishma muḍirra*) is the result of “tyranny and the suppression of women’s thoughts” (*al-istibdād wa-l’daḡḡt ‘alā afkār al-mar’ā*). By contrast, “beneficial modesty” (*al-hishma al-nāf’ia*), is that which emerges from “personal independence, knowledge, sacred freedom, and nobility of the soul.”⁴²⁹ Karam believes that her fellow Syrian women should not be discouraged from expressing their opinions and beliefs candidly if they are based in sound and ethical reasoning. Karam’s overall message is that “*tataḡḡuf*,” or extremism, ought to be avoided on either front. Women should neither be “too” modest (read: Syrian), nor “too” unrestrained (read: American). Rather, they ought to exercise moderation (*itidāl*) in all of their actions and choices. As this article suggests, the ideal woman Adīb is searching for occupies this middle ground, representing an optimal blending of “East” and “West.”

⁴²⁶ Karam, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, 134–35.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁴²⁸ ‘Afīfa Karam, “Hurriyyat al-fatāt al-Amrīkiyya wa hishmat al-fatāt al-Sūriyya,” *al-Hudā*, March 14, 1906, Vol. 9 No. 17, 1.

⁴²⁹ Karam, “Hurriyyat al-fatāt al-Amrīkiyya wa hishmat al-fatāt al-Sūriyya.”

It is at this precise juncture in the text that Adīb receives a letter from a friend in New York asking him to look after three young Syrian women who had just arrived in the United States. In keeping with his promise, Adīb agrees to receive the young women at the station and help them settle in by providing them with housing, work, and community.⁴³⁰ While waiting for them at the train station, Adīb wonders whether their arrival is a sign that his luck in love will change after all.

To welcome them into Cincinnati's Syrian immigrant community, Adīb organizes a party in their honor. In many ways, this scene is analogous to the banquet scene in Chapter Three, where the narrator's humorous and critical observations of the dinner guests – through the focalized position of Fu'ād – provide lessons on proper social etiquette. Here, however, the narrator's two focalizers are Badī'a and Adīb, who observe the behavior of the invited guests throughout the evening as they drink beer and spirits. That evening, Adīb found Lūsīyā to be extremely beautiful, but overly materialistic. Jamīla, he noted, was so shy that she might as well not have been there at all. However, Badī'a made a very strong impression on him. In addition to her radiant physical beauty, she revealed a true inner beauty. Much like her former mistress Maryam, Badī'a excelled at "table talk" (*ḥadīth al-mā'ida*), engaging in interesting discussions with the invited guests throughout the evening.

At the end of the night, Badī'a offers her honest feedback on the behavior of her friends. She criticizes Lūsīyā for incessantly fidgeting in her chair and fiddling with her jewelry. It came across, Badī'a remarks, as if she were more interested in the fashions and styles of the women in the room than in engaging with the guests in conversation. Badī'a censures Jamīla, on the other hand, for her sad and forlorn demeanor. She was so shy and withdrawn that she did not make much of an impression on Adīb or the other guests at all. In the future, Badī'a says, she should either control her emotions or stay at home. Finally, Badī'a criticizes herself for having rudely interrupted one of the male guests, an indiscretion for which she immediately apologized.

Once in the United States, Badī'a – aligned with the voice of the narrator – becomes a mentor and guide for Lūsīyā and Jamīla. Like Ḥanna and Muna, they have not yet mastered the delicate balance between the "Eastern" and "Western" Weltanschauung. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that the comportment of Badī'a, Jamīla, and Lūsīyā on the first evening of their new life in America reveals three distinct modes of interaction that correspond seamlessly to the three models of "womanhood" that Adīb presented in his monologue. Like Muna, Jamīla is unbearably shy and unaccustomed to social functions, which impedes her ability to interact with the other guests. Like Ḥanna, Lūsīyā is overly concerned with superficial, material things, such as fashion, jewelry, and the like. She is described by the narrator as "*muta'amrika*," or Americanized, to an excessive degree for having abandoned positive "Syrian" virtues for a host of negative "American" traits. Badī'a, on the other hand, displays a sense of confidence and comfort

⁴³⁰ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 145.

throughout the evening, engaging in lively conversation while also commanding a level of respect among those present. Adīb refers to Badī'a as "*malikat al-majlis*"⁴³¹ ("the queen of the gathering") and *za'imat al-aḥādīth* ("the leader of conversation"), which places her in a position of power and authority as the "queen" and the "leader" of the gathering.⁴³²

Over time, the divergence between the two women becomes more and more pronounced. Unlike Badī'a and Jamīla, who work steadily and diligently each day peddling their wares to earn an income and support themselves, Lūsīyā refuses to engage in such demeaning and backbreaking labor. In her words, she did not come to America to carry heavy loads, traveling from house to house like a beggar or a pack animal.⁴³³ Instead, fashion and socializing become Lūsīyā's primary occupations. She spends her days attending social events with unmarried men and, to her delight, she amasses quite a collection of fine clothing and jewelry with the gifts she receives from them. Out of concern for her friend's future, Badī'a warns Lūsīyā that no suitor will ever seriously consider taking her as a wife if she continues to behave in this manner. Nonetheless, Lūsīyā remains resistant to Badī'a's criticisms. As a result of Badī'a's incessant critique of her actions, Lūsīyā begins to see her as a disciplinarian rather than a loving friend. When Lūsīyā objects to her friend's unsolicited interventions, Badī'a defends herself, maintaining the importance of what she calls "fair criticism," or "*al-intiqād al-ādil*."⁴³⁴

Not surprisingly, Badī'a's misgivings about Lūsīyā's poor life choices turn out to be justified. Not only does her behavior lead to her estrangement from Badī'a and Jamīla, but Lūsīyā's excessive naiveté, self-centeredness, and materialism leads to her downfall. With empty flattery and honeyed words, Nasīb convinces Lūsīyā to marry him. They move to New York City, where Nasīb proceeds to squander away his wife's money by frequenting bars, clubs, and gambling establishments. On the other hand, Jamīla – who is receptive to Badī'a's counsel – is ultimately rewarded. By following Badī'a's example, Jamīla earns the love and respect of Adīb, who is able to see beyond the women's otherwise unremarkable physical appearance to her true inner beauty and eventually proposes to her. In essence, through the voice of Badī'a – the noble teacher – the narrator offers advice about the proper behavior and comportment of women.

For Karam, one of her most important goals as a writer is to instruct her readers, especially the women among them. This impetus is precisely what initially impelled Karam to compose novels, which she saw as possessing a particularly powerful effect on "the women of her kind." Not surprisingly, the voice of her female protagonist Badī'a comes across as teacherly, as does the voice of the narrator. Though this narrative voice

⁴³¹ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ad*, 145.

⁴³² Ibid., 152.

⁴³³ When the three friends first arrive in Cincinnati, Adīb invites an elderly woman to his home to teach the young women the art of *bī'a al-kishsh*, or peddling wares such as silk fabrics and small trinkets from the "Holy Land." The woman offers advice and tips on how to stay safe while undertaking this potentially dangerous work. Ibid., 159.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 154.

tends to be pendantic, moralizing, and even preachy at times, the act of teaching is elevated to a lofty status in the text. Throughout the novel, teaching is portrayed as a most noble undertaking and one that is closely linked to the female gender. At one point in the story, through the perspective of Adīb, the narrator offers an unconventional rewriting of the biblical story of Genesis that highlights, above all else, Eve's role as an educator. In a conversational style, as if addressing the reader directly, the narrator writes:

It was god's first will on earth...not to let our grandfather Adam live alone. So he created a woman for him. And indeed, she is the oldest and the greatest school known to man. Truly, the mother's knee is the great college in which he was taught to read, and her eyes are made his schoolbook.⁴³⁵

This reworking of the biblical creation story - a text that presents a patriarchal view of humanity that has been long used to argue for the subordination of women - has significant implications. According to the canonical reading of the Genesis, Eve is created after Adam, from his rib, to be his helper and to cure his loneliness. He gives her her name and she is dependent on him. She is subsequently blamed for tempting Adam to disobey God's orders by eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of life, making her responsible for the sins of the world. For this original sin, woman is then punished with the pain of childbirth. There is no trace of this "original" woman in Karam's text, expressed through the voice of Adīb. Here, Eve is not an inferior being, not is she a temptress or a troublemaker, who is dependent on and dominated by her husband. Instead, she is as an educator, a teacher, and a leader who guides Adam and all of mankind. This proto-feminist rewriting of the creation story lends Eve a position of power over all of humanity.

Part Four: Return To *Al-Waṭan*

Abruptly, the setting moves back across the Atlantic. Fu'ād has finally returned from boarding school and – according to the plan his mother and cousin Nasīb had concocted to sabotage their union – Mistress Maryam tells her son that Badī'a had been unfaithful to him in his absence and that she had since travelled to America. As Nasīb anticipated he would, Fu'ād decides forthwith to travel to Amrīkā to find out the truth for himself. Once in the United States, Nasīb intercepts Fu'ād in New York City and, through a series of lies and deceptions, succeeds in convincing his cousin that the scandalous allegations about Badī'a's betrayal are true. Furious and crestfallen, Fu'ād follows Nasīb down the same dark path, drinking his way into oblivion in Lower Manhattan's "Little Syria."

Meanwhile, at an opulent Damascene mansion, a woman named Jamīla kneels at the deathbed of her dying mother. The narrator explains that as a young woman, Jamīla fell madly in love with a penniless French painter and, in violation of her parents' wishes, the couple eloped and fled to Beirut. Soon after, Jamīla's beloved husband died, leaving

⁴³⁵ Karam, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, 140.

Jamīla on her own to care for their infant child. Unable to support her daughter alone, Jamīla had no other recourse than to turn to her mother for help. However, to her dismay, her mother – still ashamed of her daughter’s marriage to a foreigner of such low class – forced her to abandon the child in an orphanage and conceal the whole affair. Twenty years later, on the occasion of her mother’s passing, Jamīla is finally free to search for her long lost daughter, who – we discover – is none other than Badī’a, the novel’s heroine.

Having discovered that Badī’a was living in America, Jamīla sends the family’s trusted servant Mīkhā’il to find her. Once in Cincinnati, Mīkhā’il explains the situation to Badī’a and she decides to return forthwith to her mother/motherland. Passing through New York City on their way out of town, Badī’a learns that Fu’ād was lying unconscious at a squalid public hospital in Manhattan’s “Little Syria” due to complications from alcoholism. Before departing for Damascus, as a final gesture of her love and devotion, Badī’a pawns a ring that was given to her by Adīb to subsidize his care taking and nourishment. Once safely arrived in Damascus, mother and daughter are happily reunited and – in an interesting meta-journalistic moment that points to the prevalence of the culture of journalism in the socio-cultural milieu of Greater Syria at the time – the story of their reunification is broadcast in all of the newspapers of Syria.

Several months later, Badī’a’s mother Jamīla announces that they will be receiving visitors. To her astonishment, the guests are none other than Mistress Maryam, Khawāja Maṣṣūr, and their son Fu’ād. Upon seeing Badī’a, Fu’ād crumbles to the floor and begs for her forgiveness. Fu’ād explains that, after recovering from his illness, he discovered that Naṣīb had lied about Badī’a’s infidelity and that it was she who had provided the financial support that saved his life. Filled with shame and regret for his unjust repudiation of Badī’a, Fu’ād returned to his parents in Lebanon. After hearing his side of the story, Badī’a accepts Fu’ād’s apology and the couple decides to marry at last. In the manner of nineteenth-century French romantic fiction, the novel’s various conflicts are resolved through a sequence of unlikely coincidences and happy accidents. The news of Badī’a and Fu’ād’s wedding spreads throughout Damascus (again through the press) and before long, a beautiful daughter is born to them.

Conclusion

In many ways, the novel *Badī’a wa-Fu’ād* can be read as a poignant fictional representation of a pivotal moment of change in Greater Syria at the turn of the nineteenth century. Badī’a, an orphaned servant girl from Mount Lebanon, decides to leave her beloved homeland and emigrate to America to escape the difficult circumstances of her life. Despite her outstanding morals, education, and beauty, due to her low social class, Badī’a was deemed unworthy of her mistress’s son’s hand in marriage. With Badī’a’s return to the *waṭan*, her coming-of-age journey comes full circle. After a lifetime of separation – first from her parents, then from her beloved, and finally from her homeland – Badī’a is granted the family she had always longed for. Thus, Badī’a’s reunification with her mother/motherland leads to the restitution of her identity as well as to her promotion to the upper echelons of Syrian society.

The novel speaks at once to the Syrian immigrant experience in the *mahjar* and to the internal transformations of the socio-cultural, economic, and political fabric of the region. While focused primarily on the story of Badī'a, the novel tells the tale of four generations of a Syrian family and provides a poignant critique of certain social customs and conventions. In the story, Syrian traditions – such as the practice of arranged marriages, discriminatory class prejudice, and the prohibition against women's work – lead to sorrow, separation, and loss in the lives of both Badī'a and her mother Jamīla. The death of Jamīla's mother (a representative of the oldest generation), therefore, represents a crucial turning point in the story. It is only after her mother's death that Jamīla can finally mend these ruptures and re-establish her family bonds. The birth of Badī'a's daughter Maryam (a representative of the newest generation) then, represents the end of an older era and the beginning of a new generation. The birth of this baby girl further strengthens the power of this defining moment and stands as a potent symbol of hope for the future. It would seem that the author is looking toward a time when people will no longer be judged by their wealth or status, but rather, by the strength of their morals and character; a time when men and women can choose their partners based on love, rather than social hierarchy and financial practicality.

An examination of Karam's work reveals that her views on gender and society deviate from the dominant discourse of "womanhood" that circulated during the *nahḍa*. First, as a deterritorialized writer living in the *mahjar*, Karam communicates a more nuanced view of Westernization than do many contemporary Arab writers. Karam resists clear-cut binary distinctions between East and West, tradition and modernity, and emphasizes instead the power of personal agency and the moral compass of the individual. Second, Karam presents progressive constructions of femininity by reframing the dominant discourse on women's roles and "duties" in society. Karam's characters deviate entirely from Victorian ideals of gender and the gender rhetoric of the *nahḍa* that positioned women as mothers and homemakers who did not work outside of the home. Instead, Karam's "new woman" – as epitomized by Badī'a – travels, works, reads avidly, speaks her minds fearlessly, and chooses her romantic partners for herself. She is a powerful agent who not only supports herself but also uplifts her fellow women.

The emphasis on women's work reflects changes in Greater Syria around the turn of the twentieth century. The expansion of the silk industry and the upsurge of immigration led to the disintegration of long-established class distinctions between the peasants (*al-ahālī*) and the nobles (*al-shuyūkh*).⁴³⁶ Members of the peasant class who began working in silk factories gained increased economic power and upward social mobility. Likewise, when Syrian immigrants (such as the character Badī'a) returned from America to the *waṭan*, they possessed greater social and economic power than they had when they left, which complicated the preexisting social hierarchies in the region. Despite the long-standing taboo against women's work in Greater Syria, the vast majority of those employed in the silk factories were young Syro-Lebanese women who came to be known as "factory

⁴³⁶ Khater, *Inventing Home*, 20.

girls,” or “*āmilāt*.”⁴³⁷ Furthermore, it is estimated that roughly seventy to eighty percent of Syrian immigrant women of the pioneer years (1880s-1910) worked outside of their homes.⁴³⁸ Thus, working women formed a new stratus of society, which led to the dissolution of the established patriarchal social order in Greater Syria by upsetting traditional gender roles and the gendered dichotomy of public and private space.

This shift in socio-economic and gender order is captured in the plot of the novel *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*. An early proto-feminist text, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād* brings to life a “new woman” who is modest, pious, and dutiful, while simultaneously embodying the modern attribute of being educated, employed, independent, and fully self-expressed. The model of womanhood expressed in Karam’s fiction bears both similarities to and differences from the ideal “new woman” of the *nahḍa*. As Mona Russell aptly states: “...the construct of new womanhood that emerged in Egypt at the turn of the century represented the infiltration of new ideas, fashions, and goods, tempered by a cultural authenticity and burgeoning nationalism, both of which encouraged indigenous concepts of morality and virtue.”⁴³⁹ Russell describes the “new woman” as one who “...embodied traditional values, yet superseded her grandmother in her ability to run her home, educate her children, serve as her husband’s partner in life, and in turn, serve her country by fulfilling these duties.”⁴⁴⁰ Karam’s privileged womanhood adds a critical ingredient to this paradigm, namely the right to independence, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. In her first novel, Karam reveals a subversive model of gender relations that stands outside of the normative model. In *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, the standard male-female family unit, whose duty is to serve the nation, co-exists with the relationships among women, whose primary duty it is to serve and protect one another.

The character Badī‘a perfectly embodies the new gender paradigm that ‘Afīfa Karam envisioned. She occupies the perfect middle ground between “American” (Western) culture and “Syrian” (Eastern) culture, exhibiting the *i’tidāl* (moderation) that Adīb so longed for in a partner. Karam’s first novel, thus, seeks to raise the consciousness of her readers to gender issues by familiarizing them with the image of a new Syrian woman who is both suited to the modern world and firmly “Eastern” in other ways. Through the example of Badī‘a, Karam imparts her view that a woman should neither be too modest

⁴³⁷ There, the vast majority of those who worked in the silk factories were young Lebanese peasant women. Over time, due in large part to the significant income it brought in to the families, it became increasingly common for the daughters of peasant families to work in these factories: by the 1880s – when ‘Afīfa Karam was born – over 12,000 unmarried women and girls were working in factories outside their villages.

Despite the growing prevalence of women workers in Mount Lebanon, the issue of women in the work place remained a matter of great contention. The Maronite church viewed women’s work outside of the home as immoral and an affront to a woman’s honor, not only because it meant assuming public roles in society, but also because it often required women to intermingle with men in their work outside of the home. The term “*āmila*” or “factory girl” became a derogatory term for women of the working class, and decreased their chances of finding a husband as they were considered by many to be “tainted.” In order to persuade the Lebanese to allow their daughters to work, the French began to recruit young women workers from European-run orphanages. For more, see Khater, *Inventing Home*, 32–43.

⁴³⁸ Naff, *Becoming American*, 178.

⁴³⁹ Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*, 3.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

nor too free. The “new woman” should be educated, possessing a “double beauty” of both body and mind. She should use her reason to guide her actions based on her own internal moral compass, rather than to blindly follow others or social conventions. Women should carry out their duties as wives, but, by maintaining a certain level of autonomy and financial independence, they should not be entirely dependent on their husbands. Most importantly, they should not remain silent if they are disrespected or if they have something useful to say.

In 1905, as ‘Afīfa Karam began writing *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*, there was still a great deal of resistance to romantic fiction generally and to Arab woman writers in particular. Many feared the autonomy and freedom that the knowledge to communicate via reading and writing would give women. In *Tahrīr al-Mar‘ā*, for example, Qāsim Amīn references the widespread sentiment among men that the education of women would lead to their moral corruption, increase their cunning nature, and give them a new weapon to add to their already evil nature with which to do evil deeds.⁴⁴¹ It is this very fear that Karam’s first novel seeks to quell as she brings to life her ideal example of the “new woman” in her female protagonist, Badī‘a. It is not surprising that Karam’s first work of fiction underscores the Syrian social custom of “harmful modesty” (*al-ḥishma al-muḍirra*) that has silenced many of her countrywomen to the disadvantage of the greater society. At a moment when novel writing was seen as an outrageous, even blasphemous occupation for a Syrian woman, Karam constructs the character Badī‘a to convince her readers that a woman can both be educated and self-determined, and fiercely moral at the same time, and that education can, in fact, strengthen a woman’s moral character.

There is a striking unity in the themes, message, and explicit and implied goals of *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*, Karam’s inaugural work of Arabic fiction. It is clear that both the protagonist, Badī‘a, and the author see their primary role as that of a teacher or a moral guide. Both the fictional character and the author herself are outspoken women who are both morally upright and intent on improving the world, especially for women and other marginalized groups. By carving out a place for herself in a literary world dominated by male writers in Egypt, the Levant, and the *mahjar*, Karam proved that women could be writers – even writers of romantic fiction – and use their writing as a venue to contribute to society. As the leading woman writer in her immigrant community, Karam exemplified the very type of woman she illustrated in her works. The author herself, like the fictional, idealized ‘Karamian’ woman, straddled two worlds. She is neither of the “East” or the “West;” rather, she is something in between. In a final expression of her dedication to the cause of women’s progress, in the introduction to the novel, she promises a free copy of the novel to any female subscriber of *al-Hudā*, bringing the introduction to a close with an expression of her sincere dedication to “the service of nationalism and literature/morals (*khidmat al-waṭaniyya wa-‘l-ādāb*).⁴⁴²

Published at this early date, the novel *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād* exhibits a firm departure from the all-knowing, paternalistic narrative point of view that haunted Arabic fiction from the 19th

⁴⁴¹ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar‘ā*, 58.

⁴⁴² Karam, *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*, vi.

century through the 1960s, and – some might argue – still does in the present era. By according narrative authority to multiple characters, Karam resists the standard omniscient narrative mode, which was the norm at this historical moment. The result of this anti-authoritarian narrative style is a rich polyphonic narrative tapestry. The author communicates her views on navigating this complex cultural encounter by interweaving diverse voices, while simultaneously highlighting the growing empowerment of the novel's heroine Badī'a.

This profusion of narrative perspectives allows for a clearer understanding of the author's overall message: one ought to absorb the best of both worlds, East and West. Like the liminal, utopian world of the steamship, afloat between the shores of the "old" world and the "new" world, the polyphonic narrative of the text reflects the author's status as a hybrid immigrant subject, straddling two worlds. The fluidity of the ocean setting – like the fluidity of the immigrant subject – is mirrored in the wandering narrative style of this pioneering work of Arabic fiction.

The foregrounding of women's voices in the text is significant, particularly during the *nahḍa* when the "emancipation" of women was an oft-debated topic of intellectual discourse, but remained an abstract ideal. Through Karam's inversion of the metaphorical system 'land as woman' and her reworking of the dominant gender rhetoric of the *nahḍa* – especially the concepts of 'duty' (*wājib*) and 'shame' or 'disgrace' (*ʿār*) – Karam endows women with agency and subjectivity. The women in her novel are not merely soft and subtle flowers, bending under the oppression and influence of men. They are also strong metal "tools" to be developed and given the ability for self-expression and exercising agency. Thus, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* represents the author's first stand against the gender inequality and the "harmful modesty" that had silenced her "sisters" for so long.

Chapter Five

Subversive Sisterhood:

Gender, Hybridity, and Cultural Translation in *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*

...in most cases, identity construction involves complex negotiations among sometimes contradictory personal, social, cultural, religious, political, and ideological propositions that often defy straightforward taxonomies. After all, with mixed feelings toward both the home and the adopted country, immigrants are conflicted creatures.⁴⁴³

‘Afifa Karam’s novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* (*Fatima the Bedouin*) opens in New York City with a dramatic scene. A woman is racing frantically down Broadway, disoriented and disturbed, carrying an infant child in her arms. Suddenly, a suspicious police officer intercepts her and interrogates her brusquely. The woman refuses to identify herself or to say where she is going. The officer threatens to drag her off to a mental hospital or, worse, prison. Terrified and swarmed by a mocking, menacing crowd, the woman loses consciousness and crumbles onto the sidewalk with her child.

Our heroine Fāṭima regains consciousness to find herself in a room decorated with sumptuous tapestries overlooking a beautiful garden with fragrant flowers and sculpted marble fountains. Her savior is Alice Harrison, a rich American heiress who happened to witness the confrontation on Broadway and brought her to safety. Over the course of Karam’s novel, through the heartfelt exchange of personal stories of life and love, an unlikely friendship develops between the two women – Fāṭima the Bedouin and the American Alice Harrison – who are two individuals from vastly different cultural, socio-economic, religious, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. The power of storytelling to bridge differences and form bonds is the central premise of ‘Afifa Karam’s second Arabic novel, written in Shreveport, Louisiana and published by *al-Hudā Press* in New York City in 1908.

Fāṭima al-Badawiyya is a groundbreaking work of Arabic literature. Not only is it ahead of its time as one of the first Arabic literary texts to deal with the topics of honor killings, inter-religious marriages, and veiling practices but it is also forward-looking in its progressive gender politics. With the publication of this, her second novel – written when Karam was just twenty-five years old – the author grew even bolder in her articulation of a proto-feminist literary position, which is reflected in the plot, characterization, narrative style, and narrative structure of *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*. Karam develops and expands upon

⁴⁴³ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 37.

discussions of gender within the context of the East/West cultural encounter, and adds a firm critique of organized religion and its complicity in upholding women's oppression. Chapter Five analyzes several core issues – both thematic and stylistic – that emerge from a reading of the novel, and argues that *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* presents a powerful meta-textual expression of solidarity among women, whose shared life experiences supersede artificially constructed social boundaries such as class, religion, language, culture, and nationality.

Indeed, over the course of her career, 'Afīfa Karam pushed the boundaries of acceptability in her choice of theme, manipulation of literary genres, promotion of proto-feminist politics and poetics, and experimentation with narrative voice. The illuminating paratextual writings that accompany this novel are vital historical documents that offer insight into the author's literary vision. Like other pioneering Arab women writers, Karam used various strategies to present herself and her work as she entered into a male-dominated arena.

First, with the title and cover, she places her work under the banner of nationalism, calling herself “a force for national service,” or, “*quwwa 'alā al-khidma al-waṭaniyya*.”⁴⁴⁴ Unlike her first novel, Karam chose to give *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* the subtitle “*riwāya waṭaniyya*,” or a “nationalist” or “patriotic” novel. On the front cover, there is a large, black and white photo of Karam with a short, curly hairstyle and a defiant look in her upward gazing eyes. Beneath her photo, there is an epigraph that reads: “No infant can become a man of the future or his wife, unless he is [nursed] at the breast of a well-bred (*mutahadhdhiba*) and distinguished (*fāḍila*) mother.”⁴⁴⁵ Taken together with the subtitle of the work, this quotation introduces one of its main themes: that educated women are crucial for the progress of society. The language of the quote corresponds to rhetoric used by Arab intellectuals during the *nahḍa* who championed women's education as a fundamental ingredient for modernization. As discussed in the previous chapter, this early push for women's education was tied to nascent ideologies of nationalism, which commonly invoked images of the “mothers of the nation” whose primary contribution to the nation was to raise good children.

Next, she includes a dedication to her mentor, the editor-in-chief of *al-Hudā*, Na'ūm Mukarzil, preceeding her own introduction to *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*. With it, Karam establishes her affiliation with a male ally in the field. In a heartfelt address to Mukarzil, Karam expresses her gratitude for his having planted what she calls “the love of breaking traditional boundaries” (*ḥubb kasr al-quyūd al-taqlīdiyya*) in the hearts of Syrian immigrant women, alerting the reader that the text is born of a rebellious, anti-traditionalist worldview.⁴⁴⁶ But at the same time, she gives that worldview the imprimatur of a respected male intellectual.

⁴⁴⁴ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, i.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., Front Cover.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., i.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the East/West cultural encounter was a critical preoccupation of Arab writers during the *nahḍa*, both in the *mashriq* and the *mahjar*, whose intellectual circles were linked through the lively, transnational network of the Arab press. In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam explores a wide range of issues related to questions of cultural difference between the monolithic categories of “East” and “West.” The primary vehicle for the transmission of this dynamic exchange in the novel is the relationship between the novel’s protagonists Fāṭima and Alice. Through their dialogic exchange of stories occupying the bulk of the textual space of the novel, the two characters discuss a host of differences between them. Alice (a representative of the occidental perspective) raises poignant questions about gender issues relating to Arab and Muslim culture and society, thereby revealing a set of assumptions and cultural misunderstandings. Fāṭima (a representative of the “Orient”) offers her own sophisticated perspectives on cultural and gender issues, calling into question the faulty and biased reasoning of her American counterpart. This brilliant tactic of polyphonic narration allows the author a means to discuss some of the most heated and controversial subjects of the *nahḍa*, including marriage customs, veiling practices, the education of women, and women’s oppression in patriarchal society, with a balanced and nuanced approach. The result is a penetrating dual critique of both Arab and Euro-American customs and traditions that contradicts the typical polarity between Eastern “tradition” or “backwardness” and Western “modernity” or “liberalism.”⁴⁴⁷

Of all the innovative aspects of this novel, the experimental narrative structure of the work is perhaps the most compelling. At this early period of the novel’s development, the author was more free to experiment with narrative form and structure than she would have been in the *mashriq*. In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, the author employs new and unconventional styles and forms – such as experimental manipulation of narrative time and multiple narrative perspectives – producing a dynamic, shifting, kaleidoscopic literary landscape. In addition, unlike her first novel, which included two male characters among its focalizers, the narrative space of Karam’s second novel is dominated exclusively by the feminine voice. This choice is significant considering that some scholars have argued that first-person narration was not used by an Arab woman author until Layla Ba‘albakkī’s 1958 novel, *Anā Aḥyā (I Live)*.⁴⁴⁸ To borrow Ḥanān ‘Ashrāwī’s words on the participation of Palestinian women in the *intifāḍa*, with Karam, “the first person pronoun [was] no longer the sole domain of the masculine.”⁴⁴⁹ Furthermore, Karam’s two principle protagonists – both women – *share* the narrative space. This egalitarian narrative strategy allows the women characters – and the narrators and implied author – to voice their opinions and perspectives, reflecting Karam’s overall proto-feminist vision and an ardent appeal to women’s solidarity.

In Karam’s literary world, storytelling – which is of paramount importance in the novel and in her own understanding of the form of the novel – is characterized as a gendered

⁴⁴⁷ Edward Said calls “the advanced/backward binarism” of late-nineteenth century Orientalism. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 207.

⁴⁴⁸ Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 99.

⁴⁴⁹ Hanan Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace: A Personal Account* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 47.

act that holds particular importance in women's lives and solidifies the bonds between women. Karam's text features an unprecedented meta-textual reference to the trope of women's bonding-through-storytelling in the narrative structure of the work itself. Narratologically, the relationship between Fāṭima and Alice functions as a frame story for the embedded narration of Fatima's life story. As such, this chapter argues that *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* represents an evocative feminist corrective to the frame tale of the *Thousand and One Nights* in order to highlight the redemptive, healing power of storytelling for women.

Between East and West: Cultural Hybridity in the *Mahjar*

The first wave of Arab immigration to the United States occurred roughly between 1890 and 1914. Living in America, Syrian immigrants were constantly reminded of their difference in class, race, language, customs, and socio-cultural mores. Once acculturated into American life, the community formed by these "Syrian" immigrants reflected a new set of ideals that was particular to their experience. Naturally, as they wrestled with a multiplicity of national, social, religious, and cultural allegiances, Arab emigrant writers such as 'Afīfa Karam and her better-known male contemporaries Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān and Amīn al-Riḥānī focused much of their attention on the construction of identity.⁴⁵⁰ The complex confluence, exchange, and negotiation of cultural differences that emerged from such an encounter brought into being brand new articulations of cultural and national identity. As Akram Khater explains, "as much as "hybridity" differentiated them from middle-class "America" it would also come to distinguish them from peasant "Lebanon."⁴⁵¹ On the subject of early Arab immigrant communities in Anglophone societies, Wail Hassan suggests the following:

...they do not stand outside the "Orient," like the European or American Orientalist, since they are of the "Orient" by virtue of their background; but they are also of the "Occident" by reason of immigration and acculturation. Therefore, their position represents a merger of the two classic stances of the native informant and the foreign expert.⁴⁵²

Early Arab Americans cannot be said to embody strictly "Eastern" or "Western" values, nor did they identify themselves as exclusively "traditional" or "modern." Rather, the Syrian immigrant community in the United States reflected a brand of cultural hybridity, as they inhabited a liminal or interstitial space between two distinct worlds that they needed to reconcile in order to maintain a cohesive sense of identity.

⁴⁵⁰ See, for example, Amīn Fāris al-Riḥānī, *The Path of Vision: Pocket Essays of East and West* (New York: J. T. White & Co., 1921); Amīn Fāris al-Riḥānī, *Juhan: A Novelette* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Nahār, 2011); Aida Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani, and Naimy: East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century Arab Literature* (Oxford: Inner Farne Press, 2009); Funk, *Ameen Rihani*.

⁴⁵¹ Khater, *Inventing Home*, 106–107.

⁴⁵² Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 28–9.

An examination of literary works by *mahjar* writers reveals that Arab intellectuals living in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century often viewed themselves as cultural translators – as well as social reformers – of both East and West. Palestinian American poet and scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj has suggested that the *mahjar* writers were “conscious of serving as bridges between East and West, and actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies and contexts...”⁴⁵³

Homi Bhabha’s theoretical work on cultural hybridity serves as a useful framework to understand the dynamic cultural environment that *mahjar* writers inhabited. In his foundational work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha revolutionized the way scholars conceptualize cultural difference in the post-colonial context. Bhabha introduced a dialectical model that describes the process of creating a new culture through the confrontation of two cultures that undermines simplistic dualistic notions of Self and Other, subject and object, colonizer and colonized. Cultures – like nations – Bhabha suggests, are not pure entities but are rather ambivalent and open to interpretation. “The production of meaning,” Bhabha argues, “requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space.”⁴⁵⁴ This “Third Space,” according to Bhabha, is an in-between space that is not the reflection of a standard set of cultural norms, values, and traditions, but rather, a continuous, complex, and ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Bhabha invokes the “Third Space” as a means of escaping what he calls “the politics of polarity.”⁴⁵⁵

An examination of works of *mahjar* literature reveals that, often, the first Arab immigrant community in America viewed itself within the stark binary oppositions of “East” and “West,” “tradition” and “modernity.” The literary works of this period tend to exhibit the familiar Orientalist gestures that dominated the cultural discourse of the day, one in which a monolithic East – associated with ignorance, backwardness, illiteracy, stagnation, religiosity, mysticism, and superstition – is pitted against an equally monolithic West – marked by civilization, modernity, materialism, rationality, and progressiveness. Take, for example, a quote by Amīn al-Riḥānī from his English-language novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), which exhibits a dualistic view of his own identity, caught between two opposing poles of East and West and reflecting what Hassan has called a “culturalist and masculinist hierarchization.”⁴⁵⁶ The author writes:

The Orient and the Occident, the male and the female of the spirit, the two great streams in which the body and soul of man are refreshed, invigorated, purified—of both I sing, in both I glory, to both I consecrate my life, for both I shall work and suffer and die. My Brothers, the most highly developed being is neither

⁴⁵³ Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Arab American Literature: Origins and Developments,” *American Studies Journal* 52 (Winter 2008): 2.

⁴⁵⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 36.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁵⁶ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 41.

European nor Oriental; but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both the European genius and the Asiatic prophet.⁴⁵⁷

As this passage demonstrates, rather than trying to dismantle the essentializing categories of East and West, Rīḥānī worked from within them by using them as a conceptual framework to make sense of his place within the socio-cultural and political landscapes of his homeland and his new home in the United States.

By comparing the cross-cultural discourse as expressed by Amīn al-Rīḥānī and Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, two of the most prominent *mahjar* writers, the singularity of ‘Afīfa Karam’s literary contribution comes into sharp focus. As a woman writer – and the only woman writer in her community – Karam used the rhetoric of the diametrically opposed categories of East and West as a tool to achieve her goal of promoting the advancement of women. The intercultural dialectic that comes to the fore in the novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* demonstrates a more nuanced cultural view that breaks down simplistic binaries through repeated negotiation and ongoing slippage between Eastern and Western subjectivities as personified by Fāṭima and Alice.

Critical Encounters

When Fāṭima regains consciousness, she finds herself in a sumptuous bed at the lavish Manhattan mansion of Alice Harrison, the woman who rescued her from an aggressive police officer on New York City’s inhospitable streets. Needless to say, Fāṭima is disoriented and begins to panic when she realizes that her infant son Salīm is not by her side. Within moments, however, Alice enters the chamber carrying the child, to Fāṭima’s immense relief. Curious, Alice asks Fāṭima about the circumstances that brought her and her son to New York City. At first, Fāṭima is fearful, unwilling to reveal anything about her life to this stranger. But, gradually, over a cup of mid-afternoon tea, she comes to the conclusion that her host is a kind and trustworthy woman whose intentions are sincere. Alice gently encourages Fāṭima, saying, “my intention in knowing [your story] is merely to help you, for I feel in my heart as if I have known you for ages...and I want to help you, which I can do once I know your story. What are you ashamed of, my dear, when I am a woman just like you?”⁴⁵⁸ Upon hearing these words, Fāṭima’s heart breaks open and she decides to disclose the painful tale that she has held inside for so long. Until that moment, the narrator explains, Fāṭima had never before been able to tell her story “without shame or fear.”⁴⁵⁹

At this juncture in the narration, there is an abrupt temporal shift. The time of narration is transported into the distant past as Fāṭima begins to tell the story of her childhood and upbringing. Fāṭima describes her early years in a Bedouin Muslim family in the Lebanese countryside near the ancient Phoenician town of Baalbek. Though simple, her life was

⁴⁵⁷ Quoted in Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 56-7.

⁴⁵⁸ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 13-4

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

idyllic and full of joy. One day, as Fāṭima was watching over the herd of cattle, she was approached by a handsome, Christian city-dweller on horseback. Finding her attractive, the man – whose name is Salīm – stopped to talk with her on the pretense of needing to give his horse to drink. A naïve, young girl, Fāṭima was swept off her feet by the man's seductive words and his promises of an exciting life outside of the rural backwater. Following several covert meetings, Fāṭima agreed to leave her family behind, to convert to Christianity, and marry him. However, because of their religious difference, the couple was unable to find a Maronite clergyman who would agree to legitimize their union. When Fāṭima's family got wind of the news, the men of her tribe banded together with the intention of killing her to protect the family's honor. To escape persecution – and death in Fāṭima's case – the couple decided to board a ship bound for America.

In this text, the narration of Fāṭima's memory of the past is anchored in the present moment, in the unfolding of the interaction between Fāṭima and Alice, which functions as a frame story for the narration. As she tells her story to Alice – and the reader – using the first-person narrative voice, the storytelling is punctuated at intervals by the frontal plot line, the present moment when they share their feelings about the events of their lives. Periodically, the two women weep together to lament the tragedy of a precise moment in the story. At other times, a particular detail sparks a lively debate about the differences between American and Syrian customs and cultural attitudes. In this way, the reader is taken back through time, on a journey that begins with Fāṭima's birth and leads eventually to the recent past when the two women crossed paths, on a hot, muggy day in Manhattan. These abrupt temporal shifts transform a standard expository narrative into a multi-layered, dynamic, and interactive narrative experience. By foregrounding the frontal plot and slowly revealing the exposition through a dialogue between two characters, the implied author inverts the traditional relationship between exposition and plot as first analyzed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE).⁴⁶⁰ This inversion can be considered a textual manifestation, or, perhaps even a foreshadowing of the subversive gender dynamics that the author advances in the novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*.

As this vacillating narrative pattern progresses, the two women share their views quite frankly on a wide range of women's issues, engendering productive discussions about life, love, relationships, and traditions in their respective cultures. In the early sections of the novel, marks of difference between Fāṭima and Alice take center stage. However, through open and compassionate debate, Fāṭima and Alice reach a mutual understanding about many issues, bringing to light a rich, nuanced, and comprehensive perspective on East/West cross-cultural discourse.

One of the primary vehicles of intercultural dialogue in the novel is the discussion of religion, which is featured prominently in *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*. The novel, which bears the name of one of the most important female figures in Islamic history (the daughter of the prophet Muḥammad), is the first of Karam's novels to deal with Islam. However, the manner in which religion is portrayed is rather problematic. As the story plays out, the

⁴⁶⁰ In the traditional dramatic arc, the information about the characters' backstories should be presented before the main plot, which leads to the rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement.

reader (and Fāṭima's American host) is confronted with a distorted version of Muslim society – one that is backward, ignorant, vengeful, and profoundly misogynistic. The initial picture of Islam that emerges from the text corresponds to the essentialized vision of the religion from the perspective of Alice, a Western woman. In the telling of Fāṭima's tale, male Muslim figures are portrayed as fanatical, misogynistic barbarians, while Muslim women are represented as oppressed, uneducated, and disempowered. Fāṭima's father and brother are depicted as brutish, bloodthirsty monsters, "angrily gnashing their teeth and roaring like lions," dehumanized into beasts capable of committing the honor killing of their only daughter and sister.⁴⁶¹

As she listens to Fāṭima's story, Alice makes problematic comments about what she sees as fundamental differences between American women and Bedouin (Muslim) women, in the areas of education, dress, and roles in society. Alice is particularly appalled by Fāṭima's tale of a girl from her village who was the innocent victim of an honor killing by her father – a fate from which Fāṭima herself only narrowly escaped. Horrified and deeply saddened by her account, Alice launches into a critique of Muslim society and traditions. The resulting stereotypical image of Islam is not inconsistent with contemporary media representations of Muslims in the world today. However, it becomes clear that Karam's caricature of Islam fulfills a purpose in the text that is not Islamophobic or slanderous at all. Rather, it sets up a particular argument that reflects the author's overall proto-feminist literary venture.

Quoted dialogue between the two women reveals that Alice holds shallow and uninformed opinions about Bedouin Muslim culture and society, which she views as inferior to her own. There is an inherent assumption about the superiority of Western civilization that emerges throughout the text. Early on in their conversation, Alice interrupts Fāṭima to express her disbelief that her interlocutor, a Bedouin Muslim woman, could possibly possess such a high level of expression in English. She says:

...what surprises me the most is the delicacy and harmony of your narrative, and the beauty of your pronunciation of our language. When I hear you speak, it is as if I am listening to an American girl who has graduated from one of our colleges, not a Bedouin girl who spent her life living in tents.⁴⁶²

This statement foregrounds the stereotyped assumptions that Alice holds about Muslim women, which run counter to the image of the intelligent and articulate woman standing before her. The only way Alice can make sense of this incongruity is to assume that Fāṭima had received a Western education. Alice says to her, "...surely a skillful European or American hand has polished (*ṣaqala*) the precious material (*mādda al-naftsa*) [that you are]."⁴⁶³ According to the logic of the metaphor – which is expressed using a discursive mode that resembles the style of a legal argument – the Arab subject is likened to a raw,

⁴⁶¹ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 103.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

unpolished gemstone that requires polishing by a “Western hand” in order to be truly brilliant. “If it were not polished,” Alice says, “how would it be of use to anyone? ...Without polishing, the substance would not be visible.”⁴⁶⁴ Left in its natural state, Alice believes that not only would it be useless, but it would also be imperceptible.

The figurative language used throughout this interchange – that of the “raw material” needing to be “polished” – brings to mind the history of imperialist expansion and raises important questions about power relations in the context of Western imperialism. European powers colonized and exploited vast territories to obtain precious raw materials and natural resources to support their own growing industries. These raw materials would then be manufactured (or “polished”) in Europe. Beyond this fact, the metaphor also points to ideas about the “white man’s burden,” the discourse of cultural imperialism used by Europeans and Americans to justify their right to rule over and exploit colonized nations. Colonizers frequently positioned themselves as having the obligation to improve, modernize, civilize, and encourage the cultural development of “underdeveloped” or “backward” societies. As Edward Said states in his foundational work *Orientalism*, “...Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over.”⁴⁶⁵ Alice’s suggestion that, until it is “polished,” the gem is not worthy or even discernible, calls to mind important questions about subjectivity and the colonial gaze. Who has the right to determine what is seen and not seen? Who is seeing and who is being seen? Who is the subject and who is the object? That is, Arabness is not “visible” until it is framed to Western eyes. By giving the “hand of the polisher” (*yadd al-ṣaqqāl*) the power of the “gaze,” Alice lends the Westerner power or authority over the colonized subject.

An examination of the grammatical gender of this section adds a second layer to the interpretation of the metaphor. After its initial usage, the term *mādda* (stuff, matter, substance, or material – a feminine word) is referred to by the feminine pronoun *hiya* (she), whereas the *ṣaqqāl* (polisher – a masculine word) is referred to with the masculine pronoun *huwa* (he). The gender dynamics of the passage suggest that the male Euro-American is the actor whose duty it is to modernize or “civilize” the “Eastern” woman. Can Alice, then, be considered a benevolent colonizer, or as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes it, a white wo/man saving a brown woman from a brown man?⁴⁶⁶ After all, it is Alice’s privileged position as a white, wealthy, American woman that enabled her to rescue Fāṭima from the hands of the authorities in the first place.

These cultural dynamics do not slip by unnoticed. Fāṭima takes issue with Alice’s condescension and her suggestion that she is superior to her own people. This event is one of the first instances in the text when cross-cultural dialogue leads to critiques of modernity and Westernization. The discussion harkens back to the banquet scene in

⁴⁶⁴ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 18.

⁴⁶⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 207.

⁴⁶⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

Badī'a wa-Fu'ād, when the narrator, through the focalized perspective of Fu'ād, criticizes various aspects of Westernization. Here, however, through the dialogue between the two female protagonists, the implied author presents an even more critical view of Westernization and its impact on her culture and people. It can be inferred from the dialogue that Fāṭima – as well as the implied author – sees Western cultural imperialism as a dangerous threat with the power to destroy the unique and beautiful culture and identity of the “Eastern” subject.

Fāṭima disagrees with Alice's suggestion that, like a stone that becomes precious only when it is polished, Eastern women need to be “civilized” to enhance their worth. Instead, she maintains that the stone is equally precious when it is raw. In fact, she argues that the process of “polishing” can cause irreparable damage to the “precious raw material.” Like the colonized nations stripped of their natural resources through the encounter with the West, the Arab subject is fundamentally changed through this encounter. “Alas,” Fāṭima says, “if only it (she) had remained as it (she) was without polishing. By polishing it (her), it (he) broke it (her) so completely that it (she) cannot be restored.”⁴⁶⁷ In the words of Said: “...since one cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient...one does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it.”⁴⁶⁸ Fāṭima resists categorization as an oppressed, uneducated, and disempowered “brown” woman needy and desperate for Western improvement and reform. By explaining that Western intervention does not necessarily improve, but, in fact, leads to the disintegration of Arab subjectivity, Fāṭima forces Alice to reexamine her preconceived notions of what it means to be an Arab woman in the context of notions of Western cultural imperialism. Instead, Fāṭima maintains a strong sense of pride in her cultural heritage and its resplendent legacy. She says to Alice, “you are wrong, my lady, to think I am better than my Arab people, for all intelligence is derived from that unique Arab intelligence.”⁴⁶⁹ The author's choice to discuss “Arab” knowledge, as opposed to her more familiar discussion of “Syrian” culture, highlights an undercurrent of pan-Arab sentiment that drives her critique of Westernization home.

Karam's glorification of Arab culture here speaks to a trend among Arab intellectuals of the *nahḍa*, who looked to their own cultural legacy as a means of uplifting themselves in the face of European cultural supremacy. Arab scholars often evoked the golden age of Islamic civilization and the achievements of medieval Arab scholars in all branches of knowledge, so essential for the dawning of the Western cultural renaissance. For example, in his famous work *Tahrīr al-Mar'ā* (*The Liberation of Women*),⁴⁷⁰ Qāsim Amīn makes reference to the golden age of Islamic civilization, as does Khalīl al-Khūrī, in his Arabic novella *Wayy...idhan anā lastu bi-ifrinjī* (*Oh well, I'm not European*). Al-Khūrī agrees that the adoption of Western customs would result in the irreparable loss of Arab culture. By recognizing Arab culture as the original source of all the world's

⁴⁶⁷ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 19.

⁴⁶⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 95.

⁴⁶⁹ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 18.

⁴⁷⁰ Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ā*, 219–22.

knowledge – including that of Europe – Fāṭima replaces the Eurocentric perspective with a world view that places Arab culture at the center of the discussion.

Another topic of cultural relevance that Fāṭima and Alice discuss is women's dress in Syria and America. Alice explains that she had visited Lebanon and Syria on several occasions, giving her a basis for comparison. Alice critiques the veil, or *hijāb*, calling it the “proof of men's hatred of women's honor and of their lack of trust in women.”⁴⁷¹ During her visit to the Levant, Alice also noticed the traditional custom of facial tattooing, which seemed to be ubiquitous among Bedouin women.⁴⁷² Alice found the practice to be disgusting and denounced it harshly as a “repulsive...fashion that mutilates beauty.”⁴⁷³ The narrator explains that Fāṭima felt contempt for Alice's derision of her culture and says to her, with a mischievous smile on her face, “...but I see that fashion has also enslaved you American women.”⁴⁷⁴ In this way, Fāṭima offers a counterargument to Alice's criticism by comparing the Bedouin women's tradition of facial tattooing to American women's enslavement to fashion. According to this analogy, like facial tattooing, fashion is also seen as a mutilation of the body. Alice agrees with Fāṭima, and concedes that indeed, many American women “have neglected their minds because they were too occupied with their faces.”⁴⁷⁵

Here, Fāṭima compels Alice, the benevolent but uninformed colonizer, to dismantle her preconceived notions about backward, uncivilized, and oppressed Arab women, which frustrates the dominant narrative of Western/American women's “liberation.” This situation reflects what Bhabha calls ‘double vision.’ Borrowing from Said, Bhabha explains that, in postcolonial discourse, the “[c]olonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.”⁴⁷⁶ As Karam's inter-cultural dialogue demonstrates, the colonized subject and his or her culture is not the inferior, stereotyped entity that the colonizer creates in his mind. Nor is the colonizer the straightforward, oppressive force that stands above the colonized. The colonized subject refuses objectification, which frustrates the colonizer's need to see the colonized as a fixed subject.

Through the voice of Fāṭima, the implied author makes the argument that, despite the strides American women have made in achieving equality with men, they are still subject to the prevailing structures of patriarchy. The overall message is that patriarchy is ubiquitous; it is East and West and everywhere in between. Thus, it would seem that Karam's text expresses a more subtle view of cultural dynamics than that epitomized by Spivak's famous quote above. In this novel, it is the oppression of women – regardless of their color or geography – that takes center stage. Differences in race, class, and creed are

⁴⁷¹ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 21.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁷⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in Ferguson, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art; MIT Press, 1990), 76.

subordinated to the indiscriminating umbrella of gender oppression. When Alice frees Fāṭima from the menacing police officer, two women – white *and* brown – stand in solidarity against gender oppression and patriarchy, unmistakably embodied in the figure of the patrolman.

A Critique of Religion

Discussions between the two women continue to interrupt Fāṭima's telling of her life story to Alice. Fāṭima explains that, after she escaped from Lebanon with Salīm and settled down in the United States, she repeatedly insisted that they officially legitimize their union. Reluctantly, Salīm agreed to undergo a civil marriage in an American court and, soon after, Fāṭima became pregnant and gave birth to a son. However, unbeknownst to her – and due to her ignorance of the canonical law of the Maronite church – because Fāṭima was never officially baptized as a Christian, their civil marriage was null and void in the eyes of the church. To appease his parents, who highly disapproved of their son's marriage to a Bedouin Muslim woman, Salīm suddenly returned to Lebanon, abandoning Fāṭima in New York City with their infant child. When she discovered what had happened, Fāṭima screamed at the top of her lungs: "He has betrayed me! He has left me forever! ...He made me believe our marriage was legal and so I treated him as a wife would treat a husband."⁴⁷⁷ Through the voice of Fāṭima, the narrator – and implied author – comments on the injustice of society's double standard. Abandoned by her husband and with a child, a woman like Fāṭima would be condemned and viewed as tainted. Whereas, in the case of Salīm, "the world does not view him as culpable because he is a man."⁴⁷⁸ This is the point at which the reader – and Alice – first encounters Fāṭima on the crowded streets of Manhattan, newly deserted by her husband, frantic, heartsick, and afraid.

Though Islam seems to be denigrated at the outset of the novel, as the work progresses, it becomes clear that Karam, a Christian Maronite, does not set up the notion of a virtuous Christianity in contrast to a benighted Islam. Rather, the text offers a dynamic worldview that is much more complex than it appears at first glance. In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam criticizes both Islam and Christianity. In fact, as this plot development suggests, the Maronite doctrine and clergy receive the bulk of the novelist's scorn. Through the arc of Fāṭima and Salīm's relationship – from seduction and deception to her eventual abandonment – the author paints an unflattering representation of Maronite Christianity. Karam denounces the church for dogmatic conservatism, prejudice, and closed-mindedness. And she accuses members of the clergy of hypocrisy, for taking advantage of their clergy status to attain selfish financial and social benefit.

For example, before Fāṭima and Salīm set sail for America, they paid a visit to the local priest, *al-Kāhin* Girgis, with the fervent hope that he would come to their aid by baptizing Fāṭima and marrying them. However, the priest refuses adamantly. Father Girgis explains that he is afraid of going against the will of Salīm's father, a notable figure in the

⁴⁷⁷ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 181.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

community, and risk termination or losing his income. Furious, Salīm accuses the priest of fraudulence and inauthenticity, saying:

Ah, so you consider the vocation of priesthood to be a money-earning trade...and, therefore, you only serve those whose “service benefits you,” even if it goes against the duty of your post. *Mā shā’* Allah, a priest who deals in religion as if it is a commodity to be bought and sold.⁴⁷⁹

In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, adherents of the Maronite Church – both believers (or the laity) and practitioners (or the clerics) – are portrayed as ignorant and fanatical. “Like most of his peers,” the narrator explains, Father Girgis “was simple-minded and ignorant,”⁴⁸⁰ especially with regard to his bigoted view of religious difference, as reflected in his categorical refusal to give his blessing to an inter-religious marriage.⁴⁸¹ Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that organized religion in general is viewed as an artificial construction that divides people unnecessarily.

Later on in the novel, when Salīm neglects to explain to Fāṭima the laws of the church, thereby placing her unknowingly in an illegitimate relationship, the church is once again presented as a patriarchal institution that denies women their basic rights. The ecclesiastical title of the highest in command of the Maronite Church, *al-Batriyark* (the Patriarch), appears throughout the text, reflecting the inherently patriarchal nature of the Maronite Catholic Church.

A Call for Religious Tolerance

At the sumptuous Manhattan mansion of Alice Harrison, Fāṭima is astounded by her host’s kindness. She expresses her shock that Alice would extend such graciousness to a “miserable, foreign lady” like herself, particularly in light of their “difference in religion.”⁴⁸² At this assertion, Alice makes a strong statement of religious tolerance, saying: “There is no difference between souls, bodies, and minds. Between religions there is only a difference in customs. All human beings on the earth are brothers to one another.”⁴⁸³ The most powerful expression of religious plurality in the text occurs when Alice hears the name of her foreign guest for the first time. Recognizing Fāṭima as a Muslim name, Alice inquires about her religious background. Fāṭima explains to Alice that she was born a Muslim, converted to Christianity for Salīm, only to eventually renounce both religions in favor of what she calls, “the religion of love” (*dīn al-ḥubb*).⁴⁸⁴ This statement – which immediately evokes the work of Sufi mystical poet Ibn ‘Arabī, who famously wrote a poem containing the words “*Adīnu bi-dīn al-ḥubb*” or, “I follow

⁴⁷⁹ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 146.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 11-12.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

the religion of love”⁴⁸⁵ – is one of the most provocative moments in the entire work. In the fictional world of this novel, Karam creates space for a utopian vision of a society guided by the tenets of liberalism and humanism in her fervent call for religious tolerance.

The progressive, liberal, and open-minded views toward religion and gender relations expressed in Karam’s novel are in line with works by her contemporaries in the *mahjar*, who have been called “children of the liberal reform spirit that characterized the *nahḍa*.”⁴⁸⁶ The active culture of Arab journalism in the United States fostered very close connections between Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals in the *mahjar*. As discussed previously in Chapter Three, Karam was a direct contemporary of Jibrān and shared a mentor and teacher with al-Rīḥānī, who was also a frequent contributor to Mukarzil’s newspaper *al-Hudā*. Amīn al-Rīḥānī was such a staunch critic of the Maronite church that he was excommunicated in 1903, which is an event he dramatized in his 1911 novel *The Book of Khalid*.⁴⁸⁷ Jibrān, who was “directly influenced by Rīḥānī,” also wrote stories that discussed the corruption and tyranny of the clergy.⁴⁸⁸

In addition to being critics of the religious corruption and the tyranny of the clergy, *mahjar* writers were also staunch supporters of the cause for women’s rights. Jibrān, Nu’aymah, and al-Rīḥānī discussed the social and political oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society. Among the most common themes in their works were forced or arranged marriages. For example, Mīkhā’il Nu’aymah presented a critique of the custom of arranged marriages within the Lebanese Christian community in his 1916 play entitled *al-Ābā’ wa-‘l-banūn*, (*Fathers and Sons*).⁴⁸⁹ Forced and arranged marriage is also a central theme in Jibrān’s fiction, notably his first and second collections of short stories, *‘Arā’is al-murūj* (*Nymphs of the Valley*) (1906) and *al-Arwāḥ al-mutamarrida* (*Spirits Rebellious*) (1908).⁴⁹⁰

In 1915, Mīkhā’il Nu’aymah wrote a short story entitled *al-‘Āqir* (“The Barren”), which was later published in his collection *Kān mā kān* (*Once Upon a Time*) (1937).⁴⁹¹ *Al-‘Āqir* tells the story of ‘Azīz and Jamīla and the dynamics that ensue when Jamīla does not become pregnant within two years of their marriage. This tragic tale speaks to one aspect of unfair treatment of women in a patriarchal society, namely the unquestioned supposition of female barrenness in a childless marriage. ‘Azīz unfairly blames his wife for being sterile and, as a result, mistreats and abuses her terribly. One day, Jamīla becomes pregnant and suddenly, she is given special treatment once again. As it turns

⁴⁸⁵ Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Sharq Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, ed. M. ‘Abdarrahmān al-Karawī (Cairo, undated); text also in James Monroe, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry: A Student Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974).

⁴⁸⁶ Jacob Rama Berman, *American Arabesque: Arabs, Islam, and the 19th-Century Imaginary* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 187.

⁴⁸⁷ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 40.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Mīkhā’il Nu’aymah, *al-Ābā’ wa-‘l-banūn* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1959).

⁴⁹⁰ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 189.

⁴⁹¹ Nu’aymah, *Kāna Mā Kān*.

out, however, the child in her womb was not her husband's. Desperate to regain her husband's favor, Jamīla had decided to become pregnant by another man. Unable to live with her deception any longer, she commits suicide, leaving a note for 'Azīz explaining her position and revealing that it was he who had been barren all along.

Despite the fact that Karam operated within the same social circles and read the same newspapers, magazines, and literary works as her male contemporaries, there are salient marks of difference in their approaches to this particular narrative and the gender dynamics it involves that are worth exploring. A comparison of Karam's novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* with a short story by Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān from his 1906 collection *'Arā'is al-murūj* (*Nymphs of the Valley*), will highlight the unprecedented literary intervention of this pioneering Arab woman author.

Two years before the appearance of *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Jibrān published a short story called "Martā al-Bāniyya" or "Martha of Ban."⁴⁹² In this story, a beautiful but destitute peasant girl (Martā) is seduced by a Christian urbanite who promised her love and a better life. She follows him to Beirut. However, after using her body to satisfy his sexual desires, the man abandons her. Heartbroken, disgraced, and pregnant with his child, the girl is cast out of society. To support her son, Martā is forced to sell her body. As a result, the Maronite priests do not allow her to be buried in the cemetery and Martā dies a miserable and shameful death. She is buried anonymously in the countryside.

These two stories by Karam and Jibrān share the same basic premise: a naïve young girl is seduced by an older man, and is eventually abandoned with his child. They also exhibit a similar moral code in their critique of patriarchy and gender oppression and the complicity of the church in these matters. Both Fāṭima and Martā are forsaken by their communities due to their transgression of traditional expectations of women's chastity and purity.

While the similarities between Karam and Jibrān's texts are noteworthy, the differences between them are even more compelling. In Jibrān's story, Martā is portrayed as a powerless victim who is objectified, abused, and left to die. Society has not provided her or her son with any viable options to escape their fate. Her son Fu'ād – who eventually becomes a beggar selling flowers – has no choice but to resign himself to a life of poverty and to undergo the trauma of watching helplessly as his mother wastes away in misery. By contrast, in Karam's 400-page novel (Jibrān's story is 14 pages in length) the author presents an entirely different outcome to the same basic scenario. Unlike Martā, Fāṭima's life does not end when Salīm abandons her. Instead, Karam presents a radical solution namely, the possibility of women's agency through cooperation. In contrast to Martā, Fāṭima is not passive and resigned to her fate. She takes action to find a solution for herself and for her child by continuing to search for her husband despite having accepted the generosity of Alice. Throughout the novel, despite the hardships she encounters,

⁴⁹² Jibrān, *'Arā'is al-murūj*.

Fāṭima's character refuses subjugation, exhibiting resilience and a firm recognition of her own self worth. Take, for example, the following passage:

People consider me to be public property, a fruit-bearing tree that anyone is allowed to pick from without a pang of remorse. As for me, I do not see myself this way. Rather, I consider these fruits to be the most precious and most difficult to obtain in the world, because my soul, my freedom, and my honor are sublime in my eyes.⁴⁹³

The two tales also differ entirely on the level of the narrative. In "Martā al-Bāniyya," the narrator is Jibrān himself, under the premise that he overheard the story from an old man in the village. The story clearly reflects the traditional, paternalistic narrative voice that would continue to dominate the modern Arabic novel for another fifty years. In the scant direct dialogue that Jibrān allots to Martā, she is pathetic and self-pitying. She speaks about herself in acutely self-deprecating ways, calling herself a filthy leper, the mere mention of whose name brings shame.⁴⁹⁴ "I am a leper who dwells among graves. Do not approach me. ...If you mention my name, say that Marta of Ban has died; say nothing more."⁴⁹⁵ In Karam's novel, on the other hand, Fāṭima is the narrator of her own story – a story that she tells to another woman. In a clear narratological innovation, therefore, Karam moves away from the paternalistic omniscient narrative voice through her use of the technique of direct dialogue. In this way, by allowing the voices of her women characters to be heard, Karam enacts her gender politics on the level of the text itself.

Inter-Cultural Dialogue Leads to Greater Understanding

The deeper Fāṭima delves into the narration of her life story, the deeper the connection between the two women grows. Gradually, through hours and hours of conversation and discussion, a hybrid cultural identity begins to form between Fāṭima – a poor Bedouin Muslim – and Alice – a wealthy American Christian. No longer are their differences emphasized, but, rather, their similarities are dramatized in the text. In the novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, storytelling literally has the power to connect women across cultural, linguistic, racial, and class boundaries. Ultimately, through the act of sharing their stories, Fāṭima and Alice's common experiences as women override the numerous other differences between them, bringing them together in a life-long friendship characterized by love and support.

The intimate bond between Fāṭima and Alice is conveyed textually in the novel in compelling ways. For example, as they share their stories of life and love, the two women begin to sense one another's presence even when they are in separate physical spaces.

⁴⁹³ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 256–57.

⁴⁹⁴ Throughout the narration of "Martā al-Bāniyya," there are lengthy romantic descriptions of the Lebanese countryside coupled with philosophical discussions about man and nature, humanity, education, and spiritual progress, which is characteristic of Jibrān's sentimental fiction.

⁴⁹⁵ Jibrān, *Arā'is al-murūj*, 31.

This psychic bond between the women is described as a fusing of the spirits. One night the women get lost in storytelling until 3:30 A.M. Though they try to force themselves to sleep, they both lie awake in bed. The narrator states, “when the dawn roosters crowed, the two women fell asleep at the exact same time...feeling the exact same emotions.”⁴⁹⁶ The next morning, when Alice’s and Fāṭima’s eyes meet, the narrator reports that each one of them knew exactly what the other had suffered that night. Alice knew the cause of Fāṭima’s swollen eyes and recognized that they were “in the same boat” (or, “*fṭ ‘l-hawā sawā*”) ⁴⁹⁷ The author’s choice to describe the unity of their emotional states using a colloquial Arabic expression serves as an additional textual expression of their newfound intimacy and interconnectedness. The use of colloquial Arabic (an informal register) here narrows the aesthetic distance, further accentuating the closeness between the two characters.

The affiliation between the two women is also rendered in the text through the repeated use of a powerful, modernist metaphor of “*aslāk kahrabā’iyya*,” or “electric wires.” The narrator describes the potency of storytelling, specifically as it relates to the relationship between Fāṭima and Alice, saying:

As if an electric wire had linked Fāṭima’s thoughts and eyes to those of her hostess and aroused within them the memory of love, like a switch that sparked an electric current.⁴⁹⁸

The imaginative metaphor linking the women’s sleepless eyes and beating hearts in an electric circuit is at once shocking and evocative. It creates a stark contrast between deep, emotional sharing that takes place between the two women and the kinetic, mechanical energy of the cold, metallic wires. The same metaphor is used subsequently to describe the power of stories for women in general. The narrator’s description of a circle of women sharing stories of love results in an arresting, futuristic image:

One of the intrinsic characteristics of women is that when they gather together and listen to a love story, it is as if the speaker possesses electric wires that connect to each of their hearts. Whoever presses the button with their narrative either illuminates or darkens the hearts of [everyone in] the group, depending on the course the story takes.⁴⁹⁹

As Alice tells Fāṭima when they first met, “knowing stories and exploring secrets, particularly those that concern our sex, are among the things our souls yearn for the most - we women.”⁵⁰⁰ Here, the narrator describes a group of women as if they were conjoined by electric cables passing through their hearts. When one of them begins to tell a story, it

⁴⁹⁶ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 165.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 163. (“*Ka’anna silkan kahrabā’iyyan waṣala aḥkār Fāṭima bi-aḥkār muḍīfatihā wa-‘aynayhā bi-‘aynayhā...bi-muthābata zarr li-faṭḥ majārī al-kahrabā’iyya...*”)

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 164–65.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

is as if a button is pressed, generating an electric current between them. If the story being told is a happy one, the voltage conducted through the wires illuminates the women's hearts. If it is a sad story, however, their hearts will grow dark. Linked together in a dynamic, charged circuit, the assemblage of women becomes a connected, mechanical entity; a cyborg, if you will. This striking futuristic image is indicative of the environment in which the work was composed. During the first decade of the twentieth century in America, Karam was witnessing the advent of many new technological advances, such as telephonic and radio communication, photography, electric lighting, and so on.⁵⁰¹

In addition to the figurative language discussed above, the women/storytelling connection in the text is also elaborately represented in the narrative structure of the novel. In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, the relationship between Fāṭima and Alice serves as an overarching frame story to contain the telling of Fāṭima's history, which is told through flashback. In the frame tale of the *Nights*, which has endured over the centuries, the interactions between Shahrazad and King Shahriyar provide a shell or structure that links the fantastical collection of otherwise unconnected stories that Shahrazad tells to him. This frame tale and other stylistic elements shared by both texts – such as short chapters, use of suspense, fantastical coincidences, and characters waking up to find themselves in strange places – suggest that 'Afifa Karam must have had the *Thousand and One Nights* in mind when she composed her second novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*. This chapter argues that Karam breaks new ground in her experimental use of narrative structure and style in a compelling feminist corrective to the frame tale of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

A Proto-Feminist Rereading of the *Thousand and One Nights*

The frame story of the *Thousand and One Nights* tells the tale of King Shahriyar, who was about to set off on a voyage when he caught his wife sleeping with one of his servants in the palace. Incensed, he sentenced her to death. As a punishment to all women for his wife's infidelity, the King vowed to marry a new girl each day, take her virginity at night, and have her killed in the morning. The King carried on this daily practice until there were no eligible maidens left in the Kingdom. To her father's horror, Shahrazad, the

⁵⁰¹ The image of a metaphoric circle (women linked together in a chain) brings to mind the previous image of the *silsila* (necklace or chain) discussed in Chapter Four. During the banquet scene, the narrator of *Badr'a wa-Fu'ad* praises Fu'ad's mother Maryam for her excellent command of language. Her words are described as seamlessly interwoven, like a "connected chain of installments," or "*silsila muttasilā min al-ḥalaqāt*." In the introduction to the same work, Karam uses that very same phrasing to describe the formal characteristics of the novel as a literary genre. Karam explains that when ideas are collected and arranged in the form of a novel ("*bi-qālib riwāya*") they become a "*silsila muttasilā min al-ḥalaqāt*," or a continuous chain of installments, and therefore, benefit the reader and affect them more strongly than newspaper articles or interrupted chapters. As discussed in the previous chapter, the image of the "*silsila*," or "necklace," brings to mind a classical Arabic literary metaphor in which a poem (*qaṣīda*) was compared to as a necklace or a string of pearls (*silsila* or *uqd*) made up of individual verses (*abyāt*). Just as individual pearls or beads are strung together to make a necklace, the hemistiches of a poem create a *qaṣīda*. In Karam's case, however, the individual chapters or events (*ḥawādith*) are strung together to create a novel.

daughter of the King's vizier, offered herself as a bride to King Shahriyar. After the King took Shahrazad's virginity, the narrator-heroine – who was remarkably well-read and possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of history, legends, and annals of the kings, philosophy, and art – began to tell him a riveting story that kept him awake and entertained him all night long. When daybreak interrupted Shahrazad at a moment of suspense, the King was prompted to delay her killing so that he could hear the end of her story the next day. In this canonical tale, which continues to inspire the imagination of writers and artists the world over, Shahrazad succeeds in postponing her death night after night by weaving together her dazzling stories to distract the King from his murderous rampage. In this way, she is not only able to save herself, but she also saves all the women of the kingdom who would have followed her to the tyrannical Sultan Shahriyar's bedchamber.⁵⁰²

Many interesting parallels can be drawn between the frame story of the *Thousand and One Nights* and that of *Fāṭima al-Badawīyya*. First, Shahrazad, the narrator of the *Thousand and One Nights*, still stands as the preeminent symbol of women's narrative skill, not only in Arab culture, but the world over. Like Shahrazad, Fāṭima is a skilled storyteller. Like the powerful ruler Shahriyar, Alice stands as a representative of the powerful West who, like King Shahriyar, is spellbound by Fāṭima's stories. In fact, she says, "I beg of you not to stop your storytelling, for your tale is extremely moving. My heartbeat is hastening after it and I cannot calm my mind until I hear its end."⁵⁰³ This statement is not mere hyperbole, however. From the moment she woke up in Alice's house, Fāṭima had implored her host to permit her to go in search of her beloved husband Salīm. But, enthralled by her tale, Alice literally refuses to grant Fāṭima permission to leave her abode until her story is complete. Like Shahrazad, therefore, Fāṭima is imprisoned in Alice's home, which is referred to throughout the novel as a *qaṣr*, or "palace."

As the heiress of one of New York's wealthiest families, Alice belongs to an elite socio-economic group. She lives alone in a palatial residence decorated with the most expensive carpets, tapestries, and brocades and equipped with vessels made of crystal, silver, and gold. Her "palace" is surrounded by a beautiful garden reminiscent of the sublime gardens described in verses of classical Arabic poetry, complete with sweet aromas and bubbling fountains sculpted in the shape of animal and human figures. When Alice hosts a magnificent celebration, it is described by the narrator as the grandest party ever held in America, which adds luster to her regal persona. The power difference between the two women is also evident in their modes of address. While Fāṭima addresses Alice using honorific titles such as "*mawlātī*" (my mistress) and "*sayyidatī*" (my lady), Alice addresses Fāṭima using informal appellations such as "*fatāt*" (young woman), "*azīzati*" (my dear), as well as by her first name. In fact, on numerous occasions in the novel, Alice is referred to as a "queen." Thus, the power relations

⁵⁰² Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 3.

⁵⁰³ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawīyya*, 18.

between the two women are unbalanced, like the relationship between Sultan Shahriyar and Shahrazad.

While the similarities between the two frame stories are noteworthy, the differences between them are even more compelling. In Karam's frame story, the parallel figure to Sultan Shahriyar is not only of the opposite gender, but also espouses a moral code that is entirely different. Unlike the wicked King Shahriyar, this "queen" is "the queen of good deeds," or "*malikat al-muḥsināt* or *malikat al-ḥasanāt*."⁵⁰⁴ Alice is a young millionaire who donated virtually all of her fortune to support charitable organizations, most notably an art school she founded to provide free instruction to impoverished youth. She hosts a grand ball on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the opening of the institution. Young, single, and self-reliant, Alice possesses as much virtue as she does power and wealth. Of all these qualities, perhaps the most significant is the fact that Alice is an unmarried woman who still functions within society with a high degree of liberty and autonomy.

Furthermore, the circumstances of Fāṭima's confinement are completely antithetical to those of Shahrazad. Alice brings Fāṭima into her home out of a compassionate desire to rescue a fellow woman, which stands in marked contrast to Shahriyar's villainous intention to bring Shahrazad into the palace in order to deflower and murder her. The impetus for storytelling and the character of the stories they tell is also very different. Shahrazad employs her narrative prowess as a tool to manipulate the King and save her own life, thus triumphing over gender oppression. Fāṭima, however, decides to share her stories with Alice on her own volition because she found in Alice an empathic, kind, and sincere listener. Moreover, the stories Shahrazad tells are largely fantastical, highly imaginative, and unrealistic tales drawn from legends and folktales, while the stories narrated in Karam's novel are intended to be "realistic."

That said, in both the *Thousand and One Nights* and *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, storytelling possesses a powerful, therapeutic quality. In the two texts, storytelling is an empowering and transformative enterprise. For Shahrazad, storytelling is a life saving act. Not only does it save her own life, but the lives of all the other women in the kingdom. At the conclusion of the *Thousand and One Nights*, after three years of listening to Shahrazad's stories, the King is finally reformed. Seeing the error of his ways, he declares an end to his vengeful vow and marries Shahrazad. The act of storytelling also saves Fāṭima's life. Before meeting Alice, Fāṭima was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, wandering desperately, grief-stricken, and alone, through the streets of Manhattan. When Alice asks her about her last name, Fāṭima replies, "this is my whole name, my lady. Call me Fāṭima only, or Fāṭima the miserable, or Fāṭima the homeless/displaced/outcast (*Fāṭima al-sharīda*) if you want."⁵⁰⁵ As the novel progresses, it is Fāṭima's narrative power that gives her a place of security in Alice's Manhattan palace. But a temporary refuge is not all that she gains.

⁵⁰⁴ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 4.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

The narrator describes the moment that Fāṭima opened up the floodgates to her soul and began to tell her story. It was "...as if Lady Alice's words were the lost key to Fāṭima's heart that appeared in her hand and instantly unlocked the bolts of her miserable heart."⁵⁰⁶ All of a sudden, Fāṭima burst into tears, stating, "Every word I say is like an arrow departing from my heart. In telling my story, I am finding a sense of calm that I have not felt since my problems began."⁵⁰⁷ For Fāṭima, it is through the process of relating her story to another person – for the first time in her life – that she is finally able to articulate and process her trauma and heal. Fāṭima, who was forsaken by her family, her beloved, and both Islam and Christianity, eventually finds peace and serenity when she meets Alice. Fāṭima describes Alice as a Christ-like figure, calling her the "true Christianity" ("*al-masīhiyya al-ḥaqīqiyya*"), for her sincere generosity and benevolent treatment of a complete stranger.⁵⁰⁸

After days and nights of sitting together while Fāṭima recounts the most intimate details of her life to Alice, Fāṭima at last reaches the moment when the frontal plot began: the dramatic moment when Alice encountered the angry altercation between Fāṭima and the police officer on Broadway. At this point, it appears to the reader that Alice will at last permit Fāṭima to fulfill her aching desire to search for her beloved Salīm. However, in a surprising twist, Alice says, "Have you forgotten that you have not yet heard my [story]?"⁵⁰⁹ Suddenly, it becomes apparent that the storytelling in *Fāṭima al-Badawīyya* is not uni-directional! The reciprocal nature of the storytelling in the novel is one, if not the most striking and compelling, of the characteristics that set the frame tale of this novel apart from that of the *Thousand and One Nights*.⁵¹⁰

In the second half of the novel, Alice bears her heart and soul to Fāṭima, narrating her own tragic tale of pure, unrequited love for the Count Giovanni. Once she finishes her tale, the use of flashback comes to a close and the rest of the novel is told in forward motion, barreling toward the resolution. Once Alice's story is complete, she promises to let Fāṭima go search of her husband, on one condition, however. In an outpouring of emotion, Alice says, "...promise me that [you will] give up hope of ever reuniting with [Salīm]. I love you Fāṭima, and I will provide you with solace and a glorious future for your son."⁵¹¹ Alice makes an eternal promise to Fāṭima, vowing to remain her life partner until death and to adopt her son Salīm, guaranteeing that his life will be bright and prosperous. "I would be very happy to live the rest of my life with you," Alice says. "Your beautiful son will be a son to both of us."⁵¹² At this act of kindness, Fāṭima bursts into tears and falls to her knees before Alice, "as a believer would bow before the statue

⁵⁰⁶ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawīyya*, 13.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 188.

⁵¹⁰ It should be mentioned, however, that the portability of storytelling is one of the key themes of the *Arabian Nights*. Various characters inside the embedded narratives, including a number of rulers, take on the role of the storyteller.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 188.

⁵¹² Ibid., 243.

of a god.”⁵¹³ Fāṭima thanks her profusely and accepts Alice’s proposal. In this shocking plot twist, by promising to support Fāṭima and to provide her son Salīm with a vast fortune, Alice assumes the responsibilities neglected by Fāṭima’s cowardly husband, who abandoned his wife and child. By the time Alice finishes telling her tale of life and love, the once miserable Fāṭima had found in Alice a bosom friend and ally, and arguably, a life partner. Like Shahrazad and Shahriyar at the conclusion of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the two women are “married” at the conclusion of the novel. Through the arc of her relationship with Alice, Fāṭima finds safety, emotional support, and eventually, redemption.

While Fāṭima is away, Alice misses her terribly. An undercurrent of homoerotic bonding permeates the emotional connection between the two women, as described by Karam. The language in this section certainly suggests something more than friendship. The narrator writes, “The heart of that great, virtuous woman [was] waiting for her return every day, yearning for her and craving her beauty” (“*shawqan ilayhā wa-wal‘an bi-jamālihā.*”) ⁵¹⁴ When Fāṭima reappears at the gate of Alice’s mansion ten days later with her son, the two women are reunited in an emotional embrace that has all the elements of a romantic meeting between long-lost lovers. Alice rushes toward her and envelops her in hugs and kisses. Overwhelmed with emotion, Fāṭima makes the following declaration:

I am forever your servant, my lady, for I can find no protection, safeguarding, or peace of mind except in your noble house. ...If I were to remain alone, I would only move from one misfortune to another, for this life compels beautiful women to do either one of two things: to carry her weapons in both her hands and constantly defend her honor, or to go mad in the field of man’s carnal appetite, betrayal, and seduction.⁵¹⁵

The homoerotic nature of the relationship between Fāṭima and Alice is undeniable and points to the radical, innovative nature of Karam’s proto-feminist literary project. This bold move on the author’s part demonstrates that, by providing support networks for one another, women can exist outside of the bounds of traditional male-female family relationships. In the passage quoted above, Fāṭima describes her experience as a woman struggling to find safety in a dangerous, patriarchal world. Among men, she feels threatened and preyed on. But with Alice – another woman – Fāṭima finds protection, comfort, and tranquility.

In a discussion of subversive relationships between women in Sarah Scott’s 1762 novel *Millenium Hall*, George Haggerty suggests that the dramatization of women-loving-women allows the author to circumvent the confinement of what he calls “patriarchal narrative.”⁵¹⁶ Of the embedded stories that comprise the *Thousand and One Nights*, many

⁵¹³ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 188.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256–57.

⁵¹⁶ George Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 89.

feature accounts of sexualized violence, most prominently its renowned frame tale, and clearly exhibit traits that are in line with Haggerty's concept of a "patriarchal narrative." However, even texts that are less straightforward in their espousal of a patriarchal gender order can be seen as exhibiting clear vestiges of a patriarchal worldview. Take Jibrān's story "Martā al-Bāniyya," for example. At its core, the story is a denouncement of women's subjugation in a patriarchal society. However, by focusing solely on Martā's oppression and tragic fate, the author – and the fictional world of the text – offers no hope for women to escape their subjugation. As such, the story seems to stand as another, though a less obvious example, of "patriarchal narrative."

By contrast, in *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, through its focus on the loving relationship between Fāṭima and Alice, the author diverts the reader's attention away from the oppression and brutality inflicted upon women by men. Instead, in this feminist corrective to the *Thousand and One Nights*, prominence is given to the potentiality for women's circumvention of oppression – and their eventual freedom – through mutual support and love.

Following the passionate scene in which Fāṭima and Alice's pledge their fidelity to one another, the novel comes to a speedy close. Shortly after Fāṭima's homecoming, Alice is reunited with her beloved, the Count Giovanni, with whom she conceives two children. This development in the plot serves as a neat way of dispelling the homoerotic overtones of the previous sections. Fāṭima's son Salīm lives alongside Alice and Giovanni's little ones, and the group forms a rather unconventional family.

Eventually, Fāṭima and Salīm are also reunited, although not under ideal circumstances. Five years later, by sheer coincidence, Salīm appears at the gate of Alice's home peddling silks and other wares. When Salīm is brought to see Fāṭima, she is emaciated and hardly recognizable, lying on her deathbed. In a melodramatic scene typical of early novels, a priest is called to the bedside to baptize Fāṭima and officially marry the couple, in accordance with her dying wish. When he kisses the bride, Salīm contracts Fāṭima's illness and, before long, both of them die.

Like *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, in the novel's speedy resolution, the normative model of gender relations is reinstated. Even the power of the patriarchal church is asserted, as it possesses the power to consecrate the marriage of the doomed lovers, granting legitimacy to their son. However, after 300 pages of women's bonding outside of the traditional male-female relationship, this conclusion feels like an afterthought. Indeed, the details of the plot are far less interesting than the author's experimental use of narrative techniques and figurative language to express a progressive gender politics that was many decades before its time. In this fictional universe, Karam offers a redefinition of the concept of family and the position of the male within it, resulting in a utopian vision of the possibility for women's self-determination in a patriarchal culture. Through mutual support and love, both Fāṭima and Alice eventually find fulfillment in a world that is ruled by ruthless patriarchal values.

Fāṭima al-Badawiyya as an Act of Cultural Translation

One of the enduring messages conveyed in this text speaks to the importance of dialogue as a vital tool to promote cross-cultural understanding. It is through discussion that the two protagonists – and, with them, the readers – are able to navigate a wide range of controversial socio-cultural issues. The result is a disintegration of the binary typology of East and West, advanced and backward, rich and poor, Christian and Muslim. The ongoing negotiation between Fāṭima and Alice does not eradicate the existence of either culture, producing some grandiose cultural synthesis, but rather, it forces both parties to acknowledge that culture is alive and constantly changing, creating a hybrid culture, which – though clearly dialectic – is also ambivalent in many ways.

This cultural interchange is the site of the “Third Space”⁵¹⁷ that Bhabha speaks of; an in-between, interstitial space that functions as a means of escaping “the politics of polarity.”⁵¹⁸ The “Third Space” is a liminal zone that undermines simplistic, dualistic notions of Self and Other, subject and object, colonizer and colonized. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, which is central to his discussion of hybridity, is also relevant to a discussion of this novel. As Bhabha explains, when the colonized subject mimics the colonizer, the colonizer is compelled to see him or herself as an object. Therefore, through mimicry, the master becomes both the subject and the object. Fāṭima’s ability to mimic Alice’s speech, for example – which Alice remarks is indistinguishable from that of an American college graduate – is precisely what enables Fāṭima to make such a powerful cultural intervention. “Mimicry,” Bhabha notes, “does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire...[but] raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations.”⁵¹⁹ As Bhabha notes, there remains a significant power difference in hybrid discourse. However, its articulation may be muddled and indistinct as it refuses binary representations. The act of mimicry, therefore, solidifies the ambivalence of the colonizer and the colonized to produce a new, hybrid culture. Through their fictional relationship, Alice is not only forced to reevaluate her own stereotyped notions about Arab culture, but she must also reassess her understanding of her own culture.

The concepts of mimicry and hybridity can be extended meta-textually to a discussion of the narrative form of the work itself. The dialectical, vacillating style of the narrative, which tends to be quite disorienting at times, is reflective of the text’s overall message of fellowship between women across borders. For example, during longer dialogues between Fāṭima and Alice, the reader can easily lose track of who is speaking.⁵²⁰ This narrative opacity can be considered as a reflection of the “Third Space” between the

⁵¹⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 36.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵²⁰ This ambiguity of narrative voice is further augmented by the author’s irregular use of quotation marks; at times, the characters’ speech is marked with a dash, other times with a mere indentation, but mostly, with nothing at all. Inconsistent punctuation is common in Arabic texts, as the language did not originally use the Western punctuation system at all.

categories of East and West as represented by Fāṭima and Alice. Further, Karam's adoption of a European narrative form points to the link between hybridity and cultural translation. *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* is a pioneering Arabic novel modeled on examples of European romantic fiction. While the novel does share a great deal with works of European romantic fiction, it also has much in common with indigenous models of Arabic fiction. The employment of literary techniques, such as embedded narrative (the frame story), narrative suspense, unlikely coincidences, and mysterious happenings, call to mind the fanciful tales of popular Arabic fiction as epitomized by the *Thousand and One Nights*. Likewise, its short chapters and consistent interweaving with lines of Arabic poetry recollect classical Arabic prose works such as the *maqāma* and the *Thousand and One Nights*. As discussed in Chapter Two, the presence of these characteristics points to the underestimated role of indigenous Arabic models in the development of modern Arabic fiction.

Moreover, it is the work's reflection of the dual aims of *adab* – to be both instructive and entertaining – that provides the strongest link between the evolving genre and the classical Arabic literary heritage, or *turāth*. In Karam's opinion, the special utility of the genre of the novel lies in its combination of pleasure (*ladhdha*) and benefit (*fā'ida*). As explained in Chapter Two, this dual intent is a key aspect that characterizes many of the early works of Arabic fiction, including the early Arabic fictional prose works by Salīm al-Bustānī, 'Ā'isha Taymūr, Jurjī Zaydān, Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, and so many others. For example, Salīm Sarkīs, author of the first Arabic novel published in the United States, *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*, explains that the novel is comprised of fun (*fukāha*) and counsel (*maw'iza*), which he describes as two "parts of a novel."⁵²¹ Like many of her predecessors and contemporaries, Karam also saw novels as implements for galvanizing the edification of her readers.

However, what distinguishes Karam's literary philosophy from that of her contemporaries is her precise designation of the novel as an important tool to promote the edification (*tahdhīb*) of women, which is the driving force behind Karam's literary venture. In the introduction to *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam makes a fervent entreaty to her readers, saying: "...it is your duty, oh men and women of letters, to consider whether...man is the oppressor and woman is the oppressed. And who else is the judge in this case, if not the societal structure itself."⁵²² It is this question that the ensuing 400-page novel seeks to illustrate.

In many ways, the didactic impulse informs the stylistic characteristics of the work she produced. One of the central arguments of *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, as in all Karam's novels, is that education, above all else, is the most powerful antidote to women's oppression. Without education, the novel asserts, women will remain disempowered individuals within patriarchal society. As Fāṭima herself states, "a knowledgeable (*'ālīma*) woman is completely free in her thoughts, whereas an ignorant woman is a

⁵²¹ Sarkīs, *al-Qulūb al-muttaḥida fī 'l-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida*, 9.

⁵²² Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, ix.

shackled prisoner; nay, she is a slave.”⁵²³ For this very reason, Karam advocated for the use of a simplified prose style. She states her belief that writers should present their ideas “as is, without clothing them in garments of ornamental speech or gems of metaphor.”⁵²⁴ For Karam, the use of simplified, unadorned language was the most functional way to reach her audience, particularly the women among them, who may not have attained a very high level of Arabic training before immigrating to America.⁵²⁵

Karam’s most significant achievement and contribution to modern Arabic literature lies in her suggestion of an alternative to the exigencies of patriarchal narrative. Karam resists the authority of the standard, paternalistic narrative voice by employing various narrative perspectives. In addition to the multi-layered narrative of the text – traversing time and space through the subjective medium of memory – this narrative polyphony produces a multi-dimensional view commensurate with the complex, hybrid subjectivities that it aims to represent. Thus, the novel *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* can be considered in itself as an act of cultural translation. The dialogue between Fāṭima and Alice serves as the very medium that allows the author to draw out her proto-feminist point. Not only does the fictional relationship between the two women – one from the East and one from the West – serve as an elaborate strategy that structures the narrative itself; it also stands as a powerful, meta-textual illustration of the trope of women’s bonding through storytelling.

Karam shows that patriarchy is ubiquitous. Women are oppressed everywhere, even in America – the “Mother of freedom, justice, and equality”⁵²⁶ – though this oppression takes on different forms in different contexts. Much as she does in her first novel, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, Karam presents in *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* a subversive model of gender relations that diverges from the normative male-female nuclear family unit whose duty is to serve the nation. Here, in *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam dramatizes the relationships between women whose primary duty it is to serve and protect one another, bridging national, cultural, religious, and linguistic boundaries.

⁵²³ Karam, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, 193.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., iii.

⁵²⁵ At the same time, however, she composed works in the high register of Arabic *fuṣḥā*, which points to the fact that she is also presenting herself as a writer within the ranks of male authors.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 61.

CHAPTER SIX

A Bridge Too Soon?

Karam's Final Novel and Legacy

This final chapter examines 'Afifa Karam's third Arabic novel, *Ghādat 'Amshīt* (*The Girl from 'Amshīt*), which can be considered as the culmination of her development as a writer. An historical novel, *Ghādat 'Amshīt* serves as an effective vehicle to assess Karam's contributions to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction. The chapter begins with a detailed analysis of the novel, as both an artistic creation and as a means of disseminating her views on social and gender issues. The chapter then concludes with a summative analysis of Karam's evolution as a writer and discusses her overall contribution to modern Arabic literature.

Karam's final Arabic novel, *Ghādat 'Amshīt* (*The Girl from Amshit*) (1910), is a work of social criticism that offers a powerful critique of the inherently patriarchal character of the so-called "reform" movements in Greater Syria and the wider Syro-Lebanese diasporic communities.⁵²⁷ *Ghādat 'Amshīt* stands apart from the other works of this path-breaking author in many ways. First, it is Karam's first attempt at writing an historical novel (*riwāya tārīkhiyya*). *Ghādat 'Amshīt* also stands alone among Karam's work in that, in a nostalgic return to her roots, the novel takes place exclusively in Mount Lebanon. Most importantly, perhaps, *Ghādat 'Amshīt* represents Karam's most uncompromising critique of women's oppression in a patriarchal society. The novel features explicit discussions of female sexuality and pointed, disquieting portrayals of domestic abuse and violence against women.

In this, her last novel, Karam's critical scope transcends the socio-cultural zone of gender discrimination – which she had become comfortable with in her previous writing – and moves into the realm of the political. In *Ghādat 'Amshīt*, Karam takes on the role of a political analyst, offering her trenchant views of the two dominant institutions governing life in Mount Lebanon namely, "the church and the state" ("*al-ḥukūma wa- 'l-kanīsa*").⁵²⁸ At such an early period, it was quite unusual for an Arab woman to engage in political commentary of this nature. Karam recognized the resistance that her outspoken work would meet when she wrote in the introduction, "some people believe I have no right to these ideas because I am a woman."⁵²⁹ Fully aware of the taboos she was breaking in composing this work – in both form and content – Karam proceeds unapologetically. She states frankly that in this novel she "overstepped all boundaries of restraint" in her "fight

⁵²⁷ On page 34, 'Afifa Karam explains in a footnote that she began writing the novel *Ghādat 'Amshīt* in 1909, although it was not published until the following year.

⁵²⁸ Karam, *Ghādat 'Amshīt*, iv.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

against the injustices against women.”⁵³⁰

Ghādat ‘Amshīt demonstrates Karam’s growing mastery of the novel as a literary genre. The novel, which features a multi-tiered narrative landscape, weaves together facts about contemporary figures from her ancestral home with a fictional drama centered on the failed romance between childhood sweethearts Farīda and Farīd. Karam’s experimental manipulation of the genre of the novel is reflected in its lengthy subtitle, “*riwāya waṭaniyya tārikhiyya adabiyya ijtīmā’iyya*,” or “a nationalistic, historical, literary, and social novel.”⁵³¹ By 1910, ‘Afīfa Karam had been away from *al-waṭan* for thirteen years, or, approximately half her life: she was only thirteen when she emigrated to America. In this important yet unknown work, Karam brings home all that she has learned and accomplished. In the work, Karam’s increasing self-confidence in her role as a social critic and champion of women’s rights equipped her to harness that technical ability to her passion for justice. A brief discussion of the novel will highlight the author’s radical innovation, which represents a significant departure from her first two novels.

Ghādat ‘Amshīt: The Anti-Romance

The central plot line of *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* focuses on the failed love affair between childhood friends Farīda and Farīd. At the age of fourteen, Farīda is married off by her father to a wealthy older man named Ḥabīb, who is ignorant, physically repulsive, and an abusive drunk. Farīda’s miserable fate vividly illustrates the harmful effects of the custom of arranged marriages of young girls (“*zawāj al-ṭufūla*”), which Karam calls “a lottery” (“*yā nasīb*”) ⁵³² that is “the root of family misery in our beloved Lebanon.”⁵³³ Farīda’s interminable suffering and wrongful punishment throughout the novel illustrate to the reader the evils of patriarchy in the homeland, where women are treated as the property of men, like “goods to be bought and sold to the highest bidder.”⁵³⁴ Where it not for her loyal childhood companion Sawsan, who moved into Farīda’s husband’s home after her marriage in order to support her friend and bring her comfort, Farīda would have been utterly alone in the world.

Farīda is not the only character in the novel who is negatively impacted by the calamitous effects of “child marriage.” Once she is a married “woman,” Farīda can no longer communicate with her beloved Farīd, who – bereft at losing his friend and embittered by

⁵³⁰ Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, iv.

⁵³¹ In the introduction, Karam carefully delineates her methodology, which features a schism in the text between the historical and the fictional layers of the novel. She devises a system of notation whereby parentheses are used to distinguish the “historical” (*tārikhī*) factual elements from the “fictional” or “imaginary” ones (*wahmī*). Throughout the novel, Karam uses footnotes to offer additional information about the historical people, places, and events the novel describes. In the end, this emphasis on fact becomes a technique to lend greater legitimacy to her critique of the governmental, legal, and religious systems in *al-waṭan*.

⁵³² Ibid., ii.

⁵³³ Ibid., iv.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 122.

her humiliating circumstances – decides to pursue a law degree in order to fight against the unjust and pernicious customs that have ruined both Farīda’s life and his own. Through the course of the novel, Farīd undergoes his own personal evolution, becoming a political activist and liberal reformer. However, despite his egalitarian intentions and heightened sensitivity, Farīd ultimately reveals himself to be an oppressor who is himself caught in the web of patriarchy. Unlike the female protagonists of Karam’s first two novels, Badī’a and Fāṭima – both of whom are neutralized or “tamed” into marriage at the end – there is no reconstitution of the conventional social and gender order at the conclusion of *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*. Rather, in the final hour, Farīda dies in a convent, childless, abused, and ill, at the young age of 23.

What most emphatically sets *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* apart from Karam’s other novels is its outright rejection of the typical romance. Instead, through the relationship between Farīda and Farīd, the text offers a biting, proto-feminist analysis of liberal reform movements.⁵³⁵ Too often, male reformers speak out for the advancement of women within the wider national struggle, and yet they perpetuate the structures of patriarchal oppression in their own lives and by their own actions. In the end, the deeply engrained paternalism of church and state prevails and women remain disempowered second-class citizens.⁵³⁶

Despite Karam’s stark portrayal of the daunting realities of women’s lives in Lebanon and Syria and Arab communities around the world, she repeatedly demonstrates that women can claim some degree of agency and independence for themselves, even under the most oppressive circumstances. This is a key element of Karam’s unique and powerful contribution to Arabic literature of this period. In *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, Farīda’s character does not succumb entirely to the male power around her, despite the ruthlessly limited possibilities available to her and the severity of her subjugation and abuse. From the first moment we meet her, the novel’s protagonist is repeatedly silenced, dominated, dehumanized, and abused – emotionally and physically – by the men in her life. However, mid-way through the novel, Farīda undergoes a significant transformation.

After enduring six torturous years of marriage to Ḥabīb, during which she is forced against her will to have sex with him, Farīda is falsely accused of meeting with Farīd. In punishment, she is beaten savagely by her husband, her father, and her husband’s sister. At the end of the horrifying scene, Farīda is lying unconscious on the floor of her room, with blood streaming from her nose and mouth. This traumatic, near-fatal beating awakens in Farīda a newfound inner resourcefulness and dignity. A naïve and obedient girl no longer, she redirects her suffering and humiliation into self-determination and strength.

⁵³⁵ The author cogently explains in the introduction to *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* that the story of Farīda and Farīd is intended to be a “*ṣūra muṣagghara*” (“a small scale” or “miniature” portrayal) of the bigger issue at hand, namely, the corrupt prevailing institutions in her homeland: the church and the state. Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, vi.

⁵³⁶ For more, see Suad Joseph, “Women Between Nation and State in Lebanon,” in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

In a chapter entitled “The First Step to Autonomy,” (“*al-Khutwa al-ūlā ilā al-istiqlāl*”), Farīda finally makes a stand. After fifteen days of seclusion, Farīda dresses in black robes and summons her husband to her room. To his astonishment, she gives him an ultimatum: either he will allow her to live in his house “as a sister,” or else she will live out the rest of her days in a convent. “When you bought my body, you bought it without my soul!!!”⁵³⁷ “As for now,” Farīda tells him, “...I am taking my body back from you. It is mine and mine alone.”⁵³⁸ In this section, the implied author is uncompromising in her explicit discussion of the female body and sexuality. By refusing the accepted wifely duty of physical intimacy with her husband, Farīda bravely declares that her body is no longer the site of patriarchal control. This event marks a new beginning for Farīda’s character. The horrifying abuse and subsequent reclaiming of her physical self allow her to reclaim her humanity and her subjectivity as a woman. From that moment on, Farīda lives life on her own terms.

The culmination of Farīda’s transformation occurs later in a scene that is rich with transgression of normative gender boundaries. One day, while Sawsan and Farīda are quietly embroidering, a friend of Sawsan’s pays a visit. Accompanying her is Khadīja, a Muslim woman whom neither has met. Once alone, “Khadīja” removes her *niqāb*, revealing “herself” as none other than her lost love, Farīd, dressed as a woman. Still desperately in love with Farīda, Farīd masqueraded as a Muslim woman to gain access to her private quarters. He tries to persuade her to run away with him to America. Surprisingly, however, Farīda does not jump at his offer.

This time, she did not faint like she did every other time; rather, she remained motionless in place like a deaf stone. Her eyes were fixed in place, staring straight at him as if they were nailed onto his face, just as she was nailed fast to her chair. Not a single limb moved except for her heart...⁵³⁹

Lapsing into his latent paternalistic, male-centered view of gender relations, Farīd accuses Farīda of being “weak” and “oppressed,” while simultaneously professing his desire to “help” her and to “release [her] from the captivity of slavery.”⁵⁴⁰ Ultimately, even Farīd, like all the other men in her life, sees her as his property. Farīd betrays his inherited prejudices by urging her to flee with him to renew her honor (*sharaf*): “you would be mine alone.”⁵⁴¹ The narrator notes, “all he could see was himself.”⁵⁴² Farīda notes his hypocrisy, saying:

You men call women “weak” in spite of the fact that you are the cause of their weakness. If you want us to be on equal footing, then why don’t you give women all of their rights? Tell me the truth, Farīd, if I were to flee with you now, can you

⁵³⁷ Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, 198–99.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 274.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 276–77.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 279.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 281.

guarantee that society would not direct its anger at me alone? Would you be able to convince them to either blame or forgive us both equally? As a man, you can drag a woman into anything, but you are incapable of getting her out of it.⁵⁴³

In this pivotal moment in the novel, Farīda steps into her own personhood and exercises agency over her own life. Her years of suffering and debasement have strengthened and empowered her. As the narrator describes it, “she appeared the most beautiful that [Farīd] had ever seen her because she had become fully mature.”⁵⁴⁴ In an emotionally charged scene, Farīda and Farīd are set in opposition to one another, the latter unmasked at his most essential and unenlightened self, a prisoner of his cultural upbringing. He becomes hysterical, “pacing around the room like a lion,” manifesting his underlying arrogance and misogyny.⁵⁴⁵ In hypocritical contrast to his avowed ideological campaign against patriarchal traditions, Farīd reveals the deeply held beliefs of an entitled, male-centered view. Farīd betrays his ignorance of the female experience in a patriarchal society when he imagines that Farīda can function with the ease and autonomy of a man. The gender dynamics in this encounter – the assumption that the woman will necessarily be submissive and obedient while the man is strong and in control – highlights the implied author’s view that men, from their position of privilege, are blind to the harsh social realities for women.

However, in this surprising scene, which is the final confrontation between Farīd and Farīda, the stereotypical gender roles (where man is rational/logical/stoic and woman is irrational/emotional/temperamental) are reversed. While Farīda is composed, clear-headed and resolute in her decision, Farīd literally becomes hysterical when his demand is not met. The contrast is made all the more dramatic in light of Farīd’s literal gender transgression – his cross-dressing. In her book *Literary Transvestism*, Madeleine Kahn explains that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the male transvestite “engages in a kind of gender megalomania when he annexes every female ‘you’ as part of ‘my own [male] me.’ He imitates a perceived other and makes her a part of himself.”⁵⁴⁶ This arrogance is visible in the stance that Farīd assumes in this section: even while dressed in women’s clothing, he is unable to see matters from a woman’s perspective.

This tragic scene marks the end of their relationship. Soon after, following the death of her husband Ḥabīb, Farīda enters a convent and dies at the young age of twenty-three. Through Farīda’s tragic fate, Karam suggests that women are trapped between the contradictory expectations of the conservative and liberal factions of society. Farīda is violently punished and abused by both her father and her husband for being outspoken and disobedient, for asking questions and stating her opinion. At the same time, she is condemned and ostracized by the love of her life, Farīd, a liberal nationalist, for succumbing to the wishes of her father and husband. Ultimately, Farīda is caught in a

⁵⁴³ Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, 278.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁶ Madeleine Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 16.

veritable catch-22 that speaks to an issue that has long plagued women's participation in nationalist, independence struggles: women – whether real or imaginary – become the battleground for men's political conflicts.

The Limits of Nationalism and Failure of Liberal Reform

The novel *Ghādat 'Amshīt* represents a literal *prise de parole*, whereby a woman writer speaks out against gender oppression within the wider Lebanese nationalist struggle. Like many of the pioneering women writers, in order to justify her literary enterprise, Karam positioned her work as serving the broader interests of national progress. However, ultimately – through her subversive model of gender relations – Karam offers a sophisticated critique of nationalism as prominent reformers articulated it during the *nahḍa*. The end result is a scathing denial of the legitimacy of patriarchy and an unflattering appraisal of so-called “reform” movements, which purported to champion the emancipation of women, but which ultimately failed to dismantle the structures of patriarchal oppression.

At the opening of her book *Egypt as a Woman*, Beth Baron discusses the events surrounding the planning and unveiling of a sculpture built to commemorate the ‘Urābī Rebellion in 1919 against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan. The ‘Urābī Rebellion is a pivotal moment in the history of Egyptian and Arab feminism, as it marked the first time that Egyptian women were visibly active participants in a political movement.

The sculpture – which was to be placed in a public square in front of the central railroad station – portrayed a woman lifting her veil with one hand and triumphantly holding the head of a sphinx in the other. By depicting Egypt as a woman, the sculptor Muḥmūd Mukhtār was linking the triumph of the nation over colonial power with a parallel movement for the emancipation of women (i.e. the removal of the veil). However, in 1928, on the grand occasion of the statue's unveiling, King Fu'ād prohibited women – with very few exceptions – from attending the ceremony.⁵⁴⁷ This is just one of countless examples of the paradox that was (and continues to be) faced by female nationalists, scholars, activists, and writers. Despite the persistent allegorical representation of women as symbols of the nation, very few women are permitted to be active participants in the state's governing system.

The event described above highlights the importance of Karam's literary intervention within the socio-cultural and political context she inhabited. Many contemporary male intellectuals and writers discussed women's emancipation and portrayed women figures in their essays, poetry, and works of fictional prose. However, as men, their view of the situation is necessarily one-sided. In her final novel, Karam argues that the “idealistic” preaching of so-called reformers tends to be self-centered, naïve, and based on a

⁵⁴⁷ Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 1–2.

superficial understanding of the extent to which society defines and proscribes women's lives. Men may present themselves as champions of women's emancipation, however, like the character Farīd in *Ghādat 'Amshīt*, it is rare that they can ever see the situation from the perspective of a woman.

This criticism can be applied to other liberal-leaning men of the *nahḍa* in the *mahjar* – such as Jibrān and Nu'aymah – who composed literary works that treated many of the same subjects as Karam, including arranged marriages. Take Jibrān's story "Martā al-Bāniyya," for example, which was discussed earlier in Chapter Five of this dissertation. Though the work was intended by the author to be call for women's emancipation, by fixating exclusively on Martā's persecution, suffering, and tragic death – and by denying her narrative authority altogether – Jibrān's text offers no hope for women to escape their subjugation. This reveals that, ultimately, the author is himself trapped within a "patriarchal narrative:" men cannot truly empathize with life as a woman because they have not experienced it. Karam exhibits a keen awareness of this fact when she positions herself as a more reliable authority on women's experience than any man. In her novels, authorial interventions serve as an opportunity for the author to legitimize her own authority. After portraying Farīda's suffering in her marriage to Ḥabīb, for example, the narrator states, "...this comes from the pen of the author of this book, who became well accustomed to oppression and therefore, can explain it well."⁵⁴⁸

The Arc of Karam's Work and Feminist Perspective

Karam's final novel *Ghādat 'Amshīt* exhibits significant stylistic and thematic features that set it apart from her earlier works of fiction. In view of these changes, an ideological shift in Karam's viewpoint on the place of women in society becomes apparent. This section of my final chapter offers a global assessment of Karam's oeuvre and draws wider conclusions about the direction of her thinking on issues relating to social welfare and gender relations in both her immediate community in the *mahjar* and the Syrian society she left behind. The concluding reflections on her work will demonstrate Karam's singular contribution as a pioneer of modern Arabic fiction.

With respect to the philosophical trajectory of Karam's three novels, one cannot but note a marked progression in the author's perspective. Her first novel, *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, ends happily, fulfilling expectations and placing it within the typical boundaries of the romance genre. Not only is Badī'a reunited with the mother she never knew – who also happens to be a wealthy aristocrat – but she is also reconciled with her beloved Fu'ād, from whom she was painfully separated for so long. The subsequent birth of their daughter Maryam signals the beginning of a new era and stands as a sign of hope for the future.

⁵⁴⁸ Karam, *Ghādat 'Amshīt*, 92.

At the conclusion of *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, the heroine is also reunited with her beloved Salīm – if only during the last moments of her life. While Fāṭima dies in the end, her son Salīm lives on as a symbol of hope for the next generation. Salīm’s survival – made possible by the gracious love and support of Alice – suggests the possibility of women’s agency in its portrayal of a utopian world guided by the tenets of liberalism, humanism, and solidarity between women. The novel brings to life a fictional world in which women can indeed exist outside of the traditional male-female family structure.

However, by her third novel, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, the author’s view becomes much more pessimistic. The novel’s dark conclusion stands in stark contrast to the propitious endings of many romance novels, suggesting, perhaps, that the prevalent formula of the ‘happy ending’ is misleading and unrealistic. At the tragic ending of the story, Farīda dies without any male attachment. She is a nun who has pledged her loyalty to God alone. Her only companion in the terrestrial sphere is her bosom friend Sawsan, who remains faithfully by her side until the bitter end.

Farīda’s death at the end of the novel can be read as a nationalist allegory cast in Biblical imagery. Throughout the stages of her life’s suffering, Farīda remains righteous, virtuous, and pure, suffering like Job. Farīda is portrayed as a holy being, a Christ-like figure. She is interred as a martyr – dressed angelically in pure white robes, holding a lily in one hand and a palm frond in the other. In Karam’s bitter rebuke, Farīda is the martyr who falls victim to the patriarchal institutions in Mount Lebanon – the church and the state. Her death is positioned as a sacrifice for the redemption of the nation. In her melodramatic last words, Farīda asks Sawsan to wear white for her, not black, and to plant lilies atop her grave, which will blossom and grow as a symbol of her innocence and of hope for resurrection and rebirth.

The image of the pure, white lilies at the end of *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* brings us back full circle to the first scene of Karam’s first novel, *Badī‘a wa-Fu’ād*, which opens on a group of young women ambling freely and happily through the hills and valleys of the Lebanese countryside. These women are compared to the beautiful flowers of Lebanon, which need nourishment in order to blossom and grow. Farīda, the heroine of Karam’s concluding novel, is an example of one of these beautiful flowers who, due to neglect and inhumane treatment, withers away and dies.

Therefore, Karam’s final work of Arabic fiction represents an urgent call to action, an undisguised effort to raise the awareness of her countrymen and countrywomen to the “...oppression, superstition, traditions, greed, ignorance of Lebanon, Syria, and the East...” and the unquestioning acceptance of the customs that marginalize and harm women.⁵⁴⁹ *Ghādat ‘Amshīt* is also a cautionary tale about the underlying patriarchal biases that hobble the work of even sworn progressives. Its heroine finds an ally only in her woman friend and attains liberation only in death. Karam’s third novel represents a

⁵⁴⁹ Karam, *Ghādat ‘Amshīt*, 333.

desperate cry for change and suggests that, from her first to her third novel, the author became less and less hopeful about the prospect of women's emancipation.

Karam's Contribution to Modern Arabic Literature: The Novel, Women, and Power

This dissertation stands as a preliminary study of the life and work of 'Afifa Karam, an uncredited originator of the modern Arabic novel. The previous chapters have undertaken to describe the innovative and significant nature of Karam's literary contributions through an examination of her three Arabic novels – *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād* (*Badi'a and Fu'ad*) (1906), *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya* (*Fatima the Bedouin*) (1908), and *Ghādat 'Amshīt* (*The Girl from 'Amshit*) (1910) – formative works of Arabic fiction that shed new light on Arabic literary developments during the *nahḍa*.

The valuable paratextual writings that accompany her works have preserved the author's unique theory of the genre during a period of literary flux. Karam linked the novel – a developing form – to the female gender, as she believed that, more than other forms, the novel was the most effective medium to reach women readers. Karam composed novels, in large part, as a platform to share her convictions about the need for social reform, including a thorough reexamination of traditional Syrian customs in the context of a changing world. She believed in the critical importance of education as a tool for women's empowerment and liberation from oppression, which is the driving impetus behind her novel writing in the first place. The clear, simplified Arabic prose style she employed – which reflects her formative experience as a journalist in the Syrian immigrant press – reinforced her objective of creating useful (*mufīda*) novels. Karam's aspiration was to instruct her readers – especially the women among them – on how to best navigate the complex interchange between “Arab” and “Western” cultures, values, and worldviews during a pivotal socio-historical moment.

'Afifa Karam's Arabic novels are in conversation with contemporary discourses on Westernization and women's emancipation (*qaḍīyat al-mar'a*) that circulated during the *nahḍa*. In her first novel, Karam brings her views on Westernization and womanhood to life in the characterization of her heroine Badī'a, who is the epitome of what that I refer to in this dissertation as the “ideal Karamian woman.” Like, Badī'a, Karam's female protagonists are well-educated, fiercely independent, and brazenly outspoken women. None of them reflects the Victorian expectations of the cult of domesticity that circulated widely in the Arab women's press in the *mashriq*.⁵⁵⁰ Furthermore, in her works, it is not the heroine's relationship to a *man*, but to another *woman* that sustains and ultimately saves her. This recurrent theme in Karam's novels suggests the possibility of alternatives to the traditional male-female relationship and the nuclear family structure. Finally, in her novels, Karam reframes the prevailing discourse on women's “roles” and “duties” in society. Rather than the normative model, where women's lives revolve around serving

⁵⁵⁰ This is unlike the feminine passivity of female characters of other Arab authors, like, for example, the character Warda from *al-Huyām fī jinān al-Shām* by Salīm al-Bustānī. For more, see Sheehi, *The Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 86.

their husbands and children in order to better serve the nation, Karam crafts a fictional world where women are devoted to supporting and nurturing one another over all else.

As discussed in Chapter Five, Karam draws a compelling correlation between women's solidarity and the act of storytelling itself. In her second novel, *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam creates an elaborate argument for the special power of storytelling for women, highlighting the theme of the redemptive, restorative, life-saving power of storytelling for women in the fictional relationship between Fāṭima and Alice, as well as in the figurative language of the text. The novel also features an unprecedented meta-textual reference to the trope of women's bonding-through-storytelling in the narrative structure of the work itself, which stands as a feminist retelling of the frame tale of the *Thousand and One Nights*. In the novel, storytelling – and by extension, novel writing – is portrayed as having the potential to build bridges across differences due to women's shared experiences in a world that is universally patriarchal.

As a Syrian writer living in the United States, Karam possessed a dual perspective that enabled her to articulate her views on womanhood with greater subtlety than many of her contemporaries. As an immigrant writer, Karam possesses the “double vision” – following Bhabha – of the immigrant subject, who is able to see and interpret the world in a more nuanced way.⁵⁵¹ The bi-continental setting of *Badī'a wa-Fu'ād*, for example, affords the author ample opportunity to discuss her views on Westernization and, in particular, its effect on her conception of womanhood. In *Fāṭima al-Badawiyya*, Karam explores notions of East/West hybridity even further. The intimate bond between Fāṭima and Alice is presented as an outward manifestation of the mutually transformative experience of their cross-cultural encounter. The textual confrontation between the two characters leads to an erosion of the East/West dichotomy and subsequently, to the evolution of a hybrid cultural identity. On a meta-textual level, Karam's novels – both in their stylistic literary qualities and their controversial content – reflect the author's hybrid identity as an immigrant writer. Karam borrows formal, thematic, and stylistic characteristics from her inherited Arabic tradition as well as from Euro-American culture to produce creative and innovative literary work that is distinct from both.

Like the author herself, the fictional, idealized “Karamian” woman, is neither of the “East” nor the “West” but rather, resides between two worlds. In the end, through the mouthpiece of her women characters, Karam cautions her readers against excessiveness (*taṭarruf*) in either direction. Karam's ideal woman is able to successfully negotiate between “Syrian” and “American” customs, becoming an amalgamation of what she deems to be the most positive aspects of each culture. The ocean between *al-waṭan* and *Amrīka* symbolizes a utopia of sorts where the patriarchal structures are more malleable, providing her women characters with a neutral space from which to transgress gender norms and achieve greater solidarity and empowerment. In the end, her work creates possibilities for women's agency and autonomy. Through mutual support, fellowship, and community, the author suggests women can exist with greater independence than

⁵⁵¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 126.

would be possible if they remained entirely dependent on men. Karam's novels, thus, modeled a progressive paradigm of social interaction for women that was way ahead of its time.

'Afifa Karam: "Princess of the Pen"

On July 28, 1924, Na'ūm Mukarzil, the editor of *al-Hudā*, informed readers that 'Afifa Karam was ill. Mukarzil's wife Rose was on her way to Shreveport, Louisiana when the author suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died unexpectedly the very next day, on July 29, 1924.⁵⁵² She was only forty-one years old. Following 'Afifa Karam's death, a flood of letters and literary homages to the author deluged the pages of the newspaper *al-Hudā*. These tributes from across the nation – from San Francisco to Brooklyn – illustrate the impact that Karam had throughout the Syrian and Lebanese communities in the United States. They also provide insight into the role she played and how much she was valued by her community.

In numerous obituaries and memorial texts, Karam was commended for her courage as a writer and a journalist. She was recognized as a central figure in the *nahḍa*, an important social reformer, and a leader of the women's literary awakening, or "*al-nahḍa al-adabiyya al-nisā'iyya*."⁵⁵³ Karam was honored by such titles as the "defender of the Syrian woman," "Princess of the Pen," "the carrier of the torch of women's freedom," and the "genius of Lebanon."

Na'ūm Mukarzil, Karam's editor, teacher, and primary literary supporter, stated that Karam's death marked a loss for *al-niswiyya*, or feminism,⁵⁵⁴ and for the women's awakening (*al-nahḍa al-nisā'iyya*) overall.⁵⁵⁵ Many worried about who would now take up the fight for the rights of "Eastern" women. Mukarzil himself wrote, "Who is it we are waiting for? ...Who has your outstanding bravery, the literary courage that the Eastern woman needs? ...Who will unfetter the handcuffs of oppressed female prisoners after you?"⁵⁵⁶ Another eulogist wrote, "every time we recall the women's literary renaissance we will remember you. ...How could we not when you carried the banner of this early awakening."⁵⁵⁷ Yet another writer lamented her passing, saying, "A fortress from among the fortresses of the women's awakening in the *mahjar* has been demolished from its foundations."⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵² *Al-Hudā*, July 28, 1924, 4.

⁵⁵³ *Al-Hudā*, August 1, 1924, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁴ The term *nisā'ī* to denote feminism was first used by Egyptian writer Malak Hifnī Nāṣif, who published a book of essays on the subject of women's rights entitled *al-Nisā'iyyāt* in 1909 under the pseudonym Bāḥithat al-Bādiya (1886-1918). However, there is no unambiguous word for feminism in Arabic because *nisā'ī* can mean both "by or about women" and "feminist." For more, see the introduction of Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, xxv.

⁵⁵⁵ *Al-Hudā*, July 30, 1924, p. 4.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ *Al-Hudā*, August 1, 1924, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁸ *Al-Hudā*, August 7, 1924, p. 5.

Karam was recognized as a firebrand who fought against outdated, discriminatory customs. One writer called her, with great hyperbolic flourish, “the possessor of the mighty pen, who sat on the throne of female genius, who walked through the mud and did not become soiled, and who crushed useless traditions.”⁵⁵⁹ Mukarzil denounced her critics – who accused her of being an “extremist” (*mutaṭarrifa*) – calling them “conservatives and reactionaries.”⁵⁶⁰ In her defense, Mukarzil wrote, “I know of no reform that was not based on some sort of departure or rebellion.”⁵⁶¹ These various tributes all affirm Karam’s role as a radical voice for social change and affirm the importance of her role in reform movements of the day.

In her obituaries, Karam was regarded as a “genius” for having achieved such a high level of literary mastery outside the traditional bounds of formal education. She was praised for having educated herself after coming to the United States, then for using that education to fight for her people – especially women – at home. One admirer stated:

‘Afīfa studied in the school of *al-Hudā* and life, and her mind was polished under the Western sky. She cried out in the service of the East after her soul had become ripe with the substance of Western knowledge, for its daughters who were drowning in oceans of illusion underneath the Eastern sky, that is, under the pure, blue sky of Lebanon.⁵⁶²

Karam was recognized for her unique ability to straddle both Syrian and American cultures and provide guidance for Syrians in both the “old” and the “new” nation: “Journalism will cry for you, oh princess of the pen, in the two nations: the old and the new.”⁵⁶³

While Karam’s literary and social impact was certainly most profound in the *mahjar*, she was also remembered by Labība Hāshim, one of the most prominent women writers in Cairo. Hāshim, also a novelist, founded and edited the prominent women’s magazine *Fatāt al-Sharq* (*Young Woman of the East*), which ran uninterruptedly for three decades.⁵⁶⁴ In her obituary, Hāshim called Karam the “adornment of women’s literature in the New World and the pride of Eastern ladies.”⁵⁶⁵ In a phrase that recalls Karam’s own use of the meta-textual metaphor of the *silsila* (necklace or chain), Hāshim described her as an author who “adorned the newspapers with the pearls of her words, and with a necklace

⁵⁵⁹ *Al-Hudā*, August 6, 1924, p. 4.

⁵⁶⁰ *Al-Hudā*, July 30, 1924, p. 4.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶² *Al-Hudā*, August 9, 1924, p. 4.

⁵⁶³ *Al-Hudā*, August 1, 1924, p. 3.

⁵⁶⁴ Hāshim’s prominent women’s periodical *Fatāt al-Sharq* featured two major pieces about her Syrian immigrant “sister” ‘Afīfa Karam. ‘Afīfa Karam was first featured in a regular segment of the journal entitled *Shahīrāt al-Nisā’* (*Famous Women*) in 1908, following the publication of *Badī‘a wa-Fu‘ād*.

⁵⁶⁵ *Shahīrāt al-Nisā’*: “al-Sayyida ‘Afīfa Karam,” *Fatāt al-Sharq* 19:2 (Nov. 13, 1924) 50-51. Also cited in Cited in Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, 71.

of expressions in women's defense she girded the throat of women."⁵⁶⁶ At the end of the moving piece, Labība Hāshim called Karam's writing "a sword she brandished against traditions, awakening her countrywomen from the lethargy of inaction and ignorance. She walked before them, bearing the banner of literary freedom: 'woman is the foundation of the nation's ascent.'"⁵⁶⁷

Restoring the Literary Legacy of 'Afifa Karam

The effusive response to her death in 1924 indicates that, during her lifetime, 'Afifa Karam was an esteemed figure within her immediate community. However, as a writer with a rather limited audience – consisting primarily of Arabic readers living in the North American diaspora – Karam's reputation did not extend very far beyond these borders. Even within the *mahjar*, where Karam was most widely recognized for her contributions, the author was removed from the innermost circles of a male-dominated literary society by her gender. As a consequence of these circumstances, following her premature death at the age of forty-one, Karam's literary legacy began to fade from historical memory all together.

Still today, awareness of Karam's contributions remains minimal within the wider scholarly community and the general American population, despite increased interest in the cultural production of Arab Americans following September 11, 2001. 'Afifa Karam is the founder of a tradition of Arab American women's writing whose works emerged well before the hyphenated identity marker "Arab-American" came to exist. However, even within the burgeoning field of Arab American studies, Karam is routinely absent from anthologies and survey-style texts.⁵⁶⁸ What's more, despite the historical and literary significance of her writing, there are no available translations of her work. An examination of her writings – journalistic and literary – addresses issues that are

⁵⁶⁶ *Shahīrāt al-Nisā*: "al-Sayyida 'Afifa Karam," *Fatāt al-Sharq* 19:2 (Nov. 13, 1924) 50-51.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ A number of scholars have published anthologies, readers, and important critical works on Arab American literature, identity, and culture in the post-9/11 period. In her 2009 study *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, Layla Maleh presents critical perspectives on Anglophone Arabic literature from the early 1900s to the 2000s. A sub-sector of these scholars has chosen to focus their attention directly on the writing of Arab women in diaspora, such as Susan Muaddi Darraj and Amal Talaat Abdelrazek. In addition, the year 2013 marked the initiation of a new journal entitled *Mashriq & Mahjar*, which takes an interdisciplinary approach to issues related to Arabs working both within and without the Arabic-speaking world, vastly expanding the scope of what can be considered "Arab" identity. For anthologies of contemporary Arab-American literature, see Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa, *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004); Darraj, *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing*; Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (Youngstown, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2007); Layla Maleh, *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009); Alfred Hornung and Martina Kohl, *Arab American Literature and Culture*, 2012; Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Akram Khater, Andre Arsan, John Karam, et al., *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies* (Raleigh: Moise A. Khayrallah Program for Lebanese-American Studies, 2013)

significant to a range of disciplines and areas of contemporary interest, including studies of the Arabic novel, the history and criticism of *mahjar* literature, diaspora and immigration studies, history of the *nahḍa*, Arab-American history and culture, Arab and transnational feminist history and literature, and cultural studies. Given the diversity and relevance of Karam's writing, it seems clear that recognition of her life and literary work is long overdue.

By focusing on the life and little-known oeuvre of 'Afifa Karam, the present study seeks to reframe our understanding of the emergence of the Arabic novel. Through an interrogation of the politics of literary canonization, which has tended to privilege works by male writers in Egypt and the Levant, this study calls for a reconceptualization of the *nahḍa* as a transnational, global phenomenon that included a much wider spectrum of players than have been recognized in the prevailing histories and historiographies of the period. Previously unacknowledged innovators who contributed to the development of the Arabic novel need fuller assessment if that development is to be fully understood and accurately reflected in the critical literature.

To be sure, much work remains to be done in order to fill in the gaps in the historiography of the Arabic novel, but including writers like Karam, who have been previously excluded from the accepted narrative because of the types of literature they produced (genre), their place of residence or publication (geography), or simply, because of the fact that they were women (gender), is one place to begin. This research stands as a springboard for further research, not only on 'Afifa Karam, but also on the other countless authors – male and female – whose voices have been disregarded by current scholarship as a result of the hegemonic processes of literary canonization.

In the final analysis, I have argued in this study that, ultimately, Karam's marginalization is what enabled her to produce such innovative work. Counter to prevailing thought, Karam's status as a deterritorialized writer was a liberating factor. On the periphery of the Arabic literary world, Karam was far enough removed from the prevailing social and institutional expectations that dictated literary production in the *mashriq*. Furthermore, as a woman writer, Karam was not subjected to the same set of standards and guidelines as her male counterparts, especially those in the *mashriq*. Miriam Cooke explains this situation cogently in her article "Arab Women Writers":

In twentieth-century Arabic literature, men and women have written from different perspectives. The men have in general remained in close touch with political reality, to the point that their work can almost be dated by its contents. Many have represented or belonged to certain political persuasions. They were often expected by their groups to write in a particular way. Their message was paramount. Nothing, however, has been expected of women writers. They have been free to dream radically, and not in opposition to a political given, for

example colonialism, westernization, neo-colonialism. This freedom has allowed for a growing autonomy in literature.⁵⁶⁹

In this sense, marginality can be much more than a site of repression. As American author, feminist, and activist bell hooks has suggested, marginality can also be a site of resistance.⁵⁷⁰ In her essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” hooks offers her own definition of marginality, calling it “much more than a site of deprivation...it is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse.”⁵⁷¹ In addition to the unique, hybrid view of Arab female identity that Karam’s marginality engendered, I posit that it was Karam’s distance from the “center” that freed her to articulate controversial ideas using a contentious, cutting-edge literary form.

In her literary works, produced over a century ago, Karam voiced an impassioned message. She fought against religious extremism, against the intersecting oppressions of gender and class, and against the structures of patriarchy, issues that still powerfully affect the world. Karam blatantly propounded her views of inter-cultural understanding, stressing that East and West have much to learn from one another. She promoted a nuanced view of multi-cultural existence, advocating for individual and collective responsibility to create a more just society. In her Arabic novels, Karam emphasized the commonalities rather than the differences between people, anticipating passionate feminist and cross-cultural currents that rose to prominence much later in the 20th century.

The function of art, bell hooks writes, “...is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.”⁵⁷² The foundational nature of Karam’s literary output lies not only in the revolutionary body of work she produced, but also in its creation of “the possibilities and the rules of the formation of other texts.”⁵⁷³ Just as Karam was inspired by the work of the women writers who came before her, Karam’s writings opened up greater possibilities for women after her to come to voice. As such, it is my hope that this study aids in re-positioning ‘Afifa Karam in her rightful place, as a key contributor to the evolution of modern Arabic fiction and as a founding figure of a matrilineal Arabic literary genealogy.

⁵⁶⁹ Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature*, 460–61.

⁵⁷⁰ In the preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks defines the margins in the following way: “To be in the margin is to be a part of the whole but outside the main body. ... We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. ... This sense of wholeness...provided us with an oppositional world-view – a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.” From “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Resistance” in bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 149.

⁵⁷¹ hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*; bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁷² hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, 281.

⁵⁷³ Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 131.

The prescient message of Karam's life and work – as an early bridge between “Eastern” and “Western” cultures and worldviews – still has much to offer today. Karam's life and literary legacy are perhaps more urgent now than ever before. Through her connection to New York City's “Little Syria” – whose traces can still be found on the physical perimeter of the World Trade Center complex – Karam's story challenges anti-Arab sentiments in the post-9/11 world. The rich history of “Little Syria” demonstrates that “Arabs” form a century-old and important, yet neglected, part of American history. Furthermore, the realities of Karam's biography actively counter and undermine the ubiquitous miss-informed stereotypes of disempowered “Arab” women promulgated by mass media. Her biography provides an alternative model of an empowered Arab woman who helped shape a thriving Arabic literary culture in the United States. An examination of ‘Afifa Karam's life story, now finally being brought into the light, compels us to reconsider broader understandings of the category “Arab” and the poorly understood history of “Arab” peoples in the United States.

May ‘Afifa Karam's fearlessness, dedication to justice and social change, and message of mutual understanding and coexistence continue to serve as a source of inspiration for all those seeking harmony in an increasingly divided world. In the end, it is our shared humanity that prevails.

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