

From Lebanon to Louisiana: 'Afifa Karam and Arab Women's Writing in the Diaspora

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Introduction

In 1993, as a young graduate student embarking on archival research, I called Dr. Alixa Naff at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. to discuss my project on Syrian immigration to the United States. Alixa was the author of a pioneering book on Syrian ⁽¹⁾ immigrants and she had graciously donated her extensive collection of research, which included taped oral histories, newspaper articles, books and artifacts, to the American History Museum at the Smithsonian (Naff 1985). As we spoke about possible directions for my work, she told me that the Lebanese émigré writer, ‘Affa Karam (1883-1924), deserved more scholarly attention. I made note of this and took an interest in articles by Karam when I came across them in my research, but she did not become the focus of my dissertation project.

Twenty years after this initial conversation, I revisited my notes and a short essay on Karam that I had first presented at the conference on Arab American Women organized by Michael Suleiman in 2009. Like Alixa, who had died in the summer of 2012 at the age of ninety-three (two years after Michael), “Mike” was a champion of under-studied topics in Arab American studies. He had famously crisscrossed the continent to compile his massive tome, *The Arab American Experience*, a source book of stunning breadth and detail (Suleiman 2006). In this volume, he compiled short summaries of Karam’s newspaper articles as if to tease the reader into thinking, “Look how much there is... and yet we still know so little.” Indeed, assessing the scholarship on Karam is both an exciting and frustrating endeavor. It is exciting because there is now a small but vibrant body of work, in both English and Arabic, on this émigré writer ⁽²⁾. The

scholarship ranges from an overview of her early life and writings, to an analysis of Karam's contributions to Arab American modernism.

The renewed interest in Karam is easy to understand: she was the author of three novels in Arabic; she was a regular contributor from the years 1897 to 1924 to *al-Hoda* (The Guidance), the popular Arabic-language newspaper published in New York; she was the editor of a the first women's magazine published in Arabic in the Americas, *Majallat al-'alām al-jadīd al-nisā'īyya* (The New World: A Woman's Monthly Magazine), and she was the translator of major literary works in French and English into Arabic (al-Zirklī 1995:35; Shabaan 1993:36; Shabaan 1999) ⁽³⁾.

Explorations of Karam's life and works, however, also yield frustrating silences. Why, when she was clearly at the cutting edge of the development of the Arabic novel as a literary genre, is she not part of the canon of *mahjar* (diaspora) literature? What are the reasons behind her early death, cryptically described in her English language obituary as due to an illness after a "nervous breakdown" in Shreveport, Louisiana? (Shreveport Times 1924). And why, when Karam was part of women's movement focused on family and marriage reform are her contributions not widely recognized today within this discursive terrain? During her life, her literary contributions were recognized by her Arabic-speaking contemporaries in the Middle East and the United States. A 1908 issue of the Egyptian journal *Fatāt al-sharq* (Young Woman of the East), for example, described Karam's life story as "falsomely complimentary and fiercely prescriptive." Using what literary scholar Marilyn Booth calls the "trope of exemplarity," the article extolled Karam's intellectual endeavors:

We are hopeful that in the future she will attain a high level [of achievement] and will be the best possible example for daughters of the East to follow: the most brilliant shining

lamp whose light will guide [them] to the paths of knowledge, so the daughters of the East will be freed from the shackles of empty fantasy and the abyss of decadence. Thus will they come to know that they were created for something better than serving the beauty of the face, and that their time is too precious to spend in front of the mirror (Booth 2001:71).

In short, ‘Afifa Karam was a central, although later overlooked, figure in the “women’s awakening” (*al-nahḍa al-nisā’iyya*) -- a term that was used by Arabic speaking writers in the early 20th century to describe a movement characterized by the rise of a women’s press and voluntary associations, the expansion of education, as well as active debates around the status of women in the family (Baron 1994:2).

This essay – the work of an historian, not a literary scholar – mines the archive from Lebanon to Louisiana in order to trace Karam’s voice in the Arabic language debates of female emancipation. It argues that her writing and advocacy on the issues of marriage and education drew on familiar tropes, yet also offered specific interventions due to her position within various local and transnational contexts.⁴ Her writings provide a window through which to understand the tensions inherent in debates around “child marriage”⁵ in the context of rising emigration from Lebanon, and reveal how the *mahjar* became both a fictive and real space in which to resolve these tensions. And while this essay views Karam as exemplary of a women’s movement that had multiple nodes – Cairo, Beirut, Alexandria, New York, and São Paulo to name a few; it simultaneously critiques the bourgeois normativity inherent in the trope of exemplarity. Finally, it posits that the silences surrounding Karam’s life and writing are connected to nationalist historiographies that could not readily accommodate her trenchant critique of masculinist politics in the post-World War One period.

Early Life and Migration

‘Afifa Karam was born in 1883 in the village of ‘Amshīt, south of the coastal town of Batroun in present day Lebanon. Her father, Yūsuf Mikhā’il Ṣāliḥ Karam, was a doctor in the Ottoman army and her mother, Frūsīna Ḥabīb Sharbil Iṣṫfān, was from a respected Batroun family known for its charitable contributions, including to a school at ‘Ayn Warqa. Karam went to primary school in ‘Amshīt and may have been privately tutored by a nun there (Badaoui 2001:33). At the age of thirteen, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Family School in the nearby town of Jubayl. She did not finish her schooling there because of her engagement and marriage to her cousin, Karam Ḥanna Ṣāliḥ Karam, that same year (Ya‘qūb). According to Barbara Badaoui (2001), the death of her father in 1895 precipitated the arrangement of this marriage and while Karam did not directly criticize her husband, she became a forceful opponent of “child marriage”-- a topic to be addressed below.

‘Afifa Karam entered her teenage years in a region experiencing a massive migration of its inhabitants to the Americas, Australia and, to lesser extent, Africa. By some estimates, 550,000 persons, or roughly one-fifth the total population of Syria, had emigrated by 1913 (Documents of the First Arab Congress 1913). Mount Lebanon had a particularly high rate of migration, losing more than 100,000 people by 1914, or more than one –fourth its population (Saliba 1992:8). Shortly after her marriage, as a young bride of fourteen, Karam became an emigrant. Accompanied by her mother, she and her husband travelled to Louisiana in May 1897. They settled in Shreveport, where Karam’s husband (known as Karam John) had already set up business, and where he acquired, according to an Arabic source, “great commercial interests, property, and wealth” (Ya‘qūb).

It is not entirely clear how a young woman, still in her teens and settled in a part of Louisiana that did not have the cosmopolitan reputation of New Orleans, its neighbor to the south, became connected to an Arabic literary and journalistic circle centered in New York, but it happened quickly. According to the available sources, this connection had much to do with Karam's intrepid nature and the cultivation of a close relationship with Naoum Mokarzel, a fixture in the Syrian émigré community. In 1899, Karam subscribed to the daily Arabic language newspaper, *al-Hoda*, owned and edited by Mokarzel who was from Bayt Shabab, Lebanon (Zirkli 1995: 13; Suleiman 1999:71-88). Mokarzel had begun publishing *al-Hoda* in New York in 1898 and promised, in the first issue of the newspaper, a special section for its female readers on matters of import to them. For example, a woman doctor would respond confidentially to questions concerning childrearing, marital relations, the proper ways to apply henna and makeup, comportment, conversation, writing, and *ādāb al-bayt* (homemaking). Mokarzel would later offer a free subscription to any Syrian woman who could read. He hoped that *al-Hoda*, like other newspapers in the diaspora, could become a vehicle for advice literature on the bourgeois aspirations of the immigrant elite. After corresponding with Karam, who had asked him for help with her composition, he began to correct her articles and realized her potential to appeal to readers. Her first article in *al-Hoda* was published in 1898 and by 1903 she was writing regularly on the subject of women for the newspaper, most of her articles being in essay form (Badaoui 2001: 158).

Karam's *al-Hoda* articles: Searching for her reformist voice

Karam's articles in *al-Hoda* address many of the themes that permeate the novels and journals of the early twentieth century Arab female literary culture. She emphasized the importance of education as a means of lifting women out of a state of ignorance that made them inefficient homemakers; she called for men's commitment to the reform of women's status so that they would be better mothers and companions to men; she emphasized the role that women could play in the service of the nation; and she chastised women who sought solace in trivial things and encouraged them to live up to their full intellectual potential. There is much in Karam's writing that resonates with the work of contributors to the popular women's journals, *Fatāt al-sharq* (Young Woman of the East), *Fatāt al-nīl* (Young Woman of the Nile), and *Anīs al-jalīs* (The Intimate Companion) published in Egypt (Baron 1994). Accordingly, we might view her *al-Hoda* articles as an engagement with discussions relevant to the early Arabic-speaking women's movement, discussions that took place within the borders of the Middle East and the Americas and that flourished in areas with a transnational Syrian bourgeoisie.

Yet, Karam also participated in the debates about women that were more specific to *majhar* locations. One of these was the debate on women's work outside of the home and, in particular, the role of women peddlers in the Americas. In the United States, peddling quickly became a prominent economic activity of Arab emigrants. Alixa Naff estimates that as many as eighty percent of Arab women peddled in the early years of their migration and settlement in the United States. In some circles, the fact that these women left the boundaries of the domestic sphere raised eyebrows and engendered criticism in the pages of the Arabic language press (Khater 2001:96-100; Gualtieri 2004:67-78). Elias Nassif Elias, for example, criticized Syrian men for allowing "their" women to peddle because it exposed them to exploitation by

“American” men. “Oh, you dear Syrians who claim honor,” he wrote, “is it honorable to send your women to meander and encounter such insults?” (Khater 2001: 97) One of Karam’s early articles in *al-Hoda* was a response to those who condemned the practice of female peddling. She argued that many women peddled to support their families, and in a clever jab at the self-pretensions of the literate elite, she noted that criticism of peddlers in the pages of the newspaper would have no effect since most could not read (Karam 1903). In another article entitled “Do Not Send Your Women to War without Armor,” she argued that if men accompanied female peddlers, they would be better protected and would not risk tarnishing their reputations (Karam 1906). She did not idealize peddling and, at least in her writer’s voice, maintained a very traditional view that “woman was created to serve the man in his house, not outside of it.” Yet, this propping up of women’s domestic duties was not without nuance. What she lamented was women toiling outside of the home while their men folk were lazy (Karam 1906). She criticized men for failing to share household responsibilities and she attempted to shame them by evoking the trope of male guardianship and female desires to organize the perfect house.

Moreover, Karam’s articles on peddling were not a sweeping defense of *all* the activities of women peddlers. She claimed that “bad behavior” did exist among them, as it did in other occupations. This was an early example of the bourgeois normativity and cultivation of middle class norms in Karam’s articles. Women had boundaries that they should observe. Thus, in a 1904 article on “Women and Fashion,” she encouraged women to spend within their means and to err on the side of simplicity. “If women knew that all wise men preferred the simplicity of the woman and composure in her dress over extravagant elegance,” she wrote, “they would be relieved, for saving is in a woman’s nature and she prefers it over dressing up which she does only to please the man” (Karam 1904). In another article on “Syrian Woman and her Rights”

Karam advocated independence and education for women, but also encouraged them to be well-behaved: “And if the beautiful bracelet that glitters on a woman’s hand attracts the eye with its beauty and shine, then why can’t the bracelet of good manners and education strike the thinker with its value and its essence, and if the beautiful silk dress decorates the body of a woman, why can’t it be the dress of true independence (*thawb al-istiqlāl al-haqīqī*) that decorates both the body and soul?” (Karam 1904). Karam’s use of the silk dress metaphor was fitting. Many emigrants came from silk producing areas in Lebanon, and Arab immigrants were well represented in the textile trade. The advertising section of *al-Hoda* carried numerous advertisements for stores, many of them on Washington Street, the center of the Arab enclave in New York City, that specialized in clothing such as silk kimonos, shirt waists, skirts, outer and under wear.

Karam argues in her early articles that the work of women’s emancipation must be shared between women and men. She in fact blames men for holding women back and accuses them of hypocrisy. In the article, “If We Cannot Reform Women Gently, We Should Not Curse Them,” Karam discusses the problem of women being accused of engaging in idle gossip. “Gossiping is a result of boredom and unemployment and lack of intellectual activity that could keep the mind from interfering in other’s business.” Therefore, she writes, “blaming the Syrian woman for doing something the positive or negative effects of which she is not aware, is like blaming a blind man for not seeing.” Karam ends with this plea: “do not curse the Syrian woman for she is an uncut jewel, she is not to be blamed for her ignorance. It is your responsibility to educate her. Peace” (Karam 1904).

These excerpts from Karam’s writings indicate that her intended audience and interlocutors were men and women of the literate class who she encouraged to be committed to

the cause of reform. More specifically, as other scholars have argued, turn of the century debates on the status of women in Middle Eastern societies were gauges of men and women's capacity to be modern citizens. Men who considered themselves reformers often advocated changes in women's status, calling for, among other things, primary education, unveiling, and breaks with traditional forms of marriage arrangements. Reformers were not without their inconsistencies, however, and the congruencies between colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy could yield troubling results. Much has been made, for example, of the Egyptian judge Qasim Amin's text, "The Liberation of Women," published in 1899, because he advocated changes in the status of women (primary education and unveiling). Subject to careful analysis, however, Amin's feminism appears constrained, his overall contempt for women obvious, and his desire to please British colonial elites in Egypt highly suspect. Leila Ahmed calls Amin the "son of Cromer (consul general in Egypt) and colonialism" because his work denigrated indigenous Egyptian culture and he seemed oblivious to the work that women were doing on the ground and to the fact that it was they who had initiated an analysis of their oppression, not he (Ahmed 1992; Baron 1994). Naoum Mokarzel, 'Afifa Karam's mentor, was also an advocate of changes in women's education and argued that, "ignorant women are the source of the public's backwardness." He was not, however, a proponent of equality between men and women and he maintained a paternalistic attitude toward them throughout his writings (Suleiman 1999). 'Afifa Karam was thankful for the support that Mokarzel gave her (she dedicated her novel *Fātima al-badawiyya* to him), but she was aware of the limitations of the feminism of men and of their frequent double standard.

Ghādat 'Amshīt and anti-clericalism

Religious reform is another dominant theme in Karam's writings. Her critique took various forms, from bitter denouncement of clerical financial and ethical abuse, to a lament of sectarianism and inter-confessional tension. In one article, she appears to be searching for a kind of universalism in which religious identity gives way to ethical humanism. Highly reflexive, it presents a sympathetic portrait of herself as a woman who seeks neither fame nor fortune but the uplift of her Syrian sisters. Entitled "I love those who love me and forgive those who hate me," she reveals herself in the form of an extended answer to six questions. To the first question, "Who is 'Afifa Karam?," she responds: "I have no royal blood in my veins... I am a simple woman who considers that the glory, wealth, leisure and happiness of a person stem from his [sic] virtues." She engages in writing because "as a woman who enjoys all the rights of a moderate, and having fulfilled my duties at home, I find it necessary not to waste my time and opted to spend it on what honors me and educates me and benefits my country." She informs her readers that she does not write for money and that she is not in need of money. In an obvert recognition of the sectarianism in the community, she responds unorthodoxly. "Readers believe that I am Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, etc... any other religion in the world... I belong to all religions when I live among people of different religions and consider their manners and actions and not their beliefs, and when I am in my church, I worship my God and pray by my religion and consider all religions equal" (Karam 1904).

Karam's ideas on religious and social equality, sectarianism, and the clergy would receive greater attention in her novels, particularly her third novel, *Ghādat 'Amshīt* (The Beautiful Girl of 'Amshīt), published in 1910. The novel revolves around the main characters Farīd and Farīda, two young neighbors who fall in love but are separated by Farīda's early

marriage, orchestrated by her father, at the age of fourteen to a man thirty years her senior. Farīd immigrates to the United States, while Farīda accepts her misfortune and endures a loveless marriage with her husband. Upon his death, she is further insulted by a letter from Farīd accusing her of being unfaithful to him. He returns to Lebanon to find her grief-stricken and near death. It is a tragic story that features multiple instances of Farīda's deception at the hands of patriarchal authority, and it is more broadly a reformist text that verges on anticlericalism. One character, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Khāzin, for example, accuses the Lebanese clerical establishment of abusing its power principally through embezzlement and deceit:

The clergy in Lebanon does not exist to inherit those without heirs, and to subtend their money in their safes so that they alone, their families, and their protégés benefit from it. Because when Christ sent them to evangelize, He did not tell them 'whenever you find wealth add it to yours or accept in the name of God all that is offered to you,' but He said: 'do not take with you neither staves, nor scrip,' and 'no one can serve both masters, God and money' (Karam 1910: 16).

The most pointed critique of the clergy, however, concerns its collusion in what Karam calls the "accepted crime," namely child marriage (*zawāj al-ṭufūlah*). Indeed, she devotes a whole chapter of *Ghādat 'Amshīt* to this topic and her repeated critique of the problem in her writings distinguished her from her Arabic-speaking feminist peers. Entitled *al-jarīma al-jā'iza* (the accepted crime), the chapter accuses the clergy of sanctioning a practice that robs young women of their dignity and renders them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation at the hands of their fathers and husbands. Speaking in the voice of the narrator, she writes:

And that priest who was instructed by his Lord to ‘shepherd his sheep,’ did he know that his hand that is ‘blessing’ their eternal union is cursed by God? Did he realize that by doing so he is no longer the good shepherd but a fierce wolf among ‘sheep’?

If they came to him with a wolf and a sheep, would he unite them? (Karam 1910: 50)

Karam emphasizes not only the collusion of the clergy in child marriage but also the ways in which young women enter marriage ill prepared, without adequate knowledge of sex and marital relations. For example, when Farīda’s father first broaches the subject of marriage, she asks, “What does marriage mean?” Evasive and domineering, her father replies that she will come to understand the “holy sacrament of marriage.” Farīda’s deference to him is total and in one of the few uses of Arabic folklore in her writing, Karam puts an Arabic saying in Farīda’s voice in her conversation with her father: “I am the flesh and you are the knife” (“*Ana al-laḥm wa anta al-sikkīn*”) (Karam 1910: 43; Karam 2005). As a butcher manipulates his meat, Farīda is prepared to submit to her father’s wishes. She adds: “I have no will.” Interestingly, in dedicating the novel to “the young girls of Lebanon,” she uses a political metaphor (“election”) to describe her wish that they be able to choose their own partners (Karam 1910: n.p).

It is also in this chapter on child marriage that Karam returns to the theme of girl’s education by arguing that they are ill-served by an exclusively religious one. In a tone that is careful to recognize the nuns’ charity and goodwill, she nonetheless faults them for fostering blind obedience that does not adequately prepare young women for life’s complex challenges:

And therefore we see that most girls who graduate from the sisters' schools are fit to enter the convent as novices rather than entering the world arena, because they are filled with religious virtues and good manners. While these are important qualities for a woman to

have, one should ask: does a woman live in a convent or in the world? Of course not! Her education should be comprehensive (Karam 1910: 47).

...and if our schools continue to raise our children only on moral issues and the family cannot complete their education [with life skills], how are we supposed to become an independent and civilized people? (Karam 1910: 48-49)

Karam decries blind obedience and passivity, and she displayed a fiercely independent streak that was manifest not only in her writing but in other areas of her life as well. In 1912, she founded the short-lived *Majallat al- 'ālam al-jadīd al-nisā'iyya*, (“The New World: A Ladies Monthly Arabic Magazine”), which was the first women’s journal published in Arabic in the Americas. She took over the editorship of *al-Hoda* for six months while Naoum Mokarzel was in Paris preparing for and attending the First Arab Congress in 1913 (Zeidan 1995:292 n. 72). Dominated by Syrian émigrés associated with the Decentralization Party, this highly publicized meeting of Arab nationalists generated a more activist mood among those who favored greater autonomy for the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Karam was a member of the United States branch of *al-Nahḥa al-lubnāniyya* (“The Lebanon League of Progress”), which was founded in New York in 1911 (*al-Hoda* 1913: n.p.). According to Basil Kherbawi, priest of St. Nicolas Syrian-Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Brooklyn, *al-Nahḥa al-lubnāniyya* had 8,000 members by 1913, 5,000 of whom were members of the fifteen branches in the Americas (Kherbawi 1913: 815; Tauber 1993: 76). The main goal of the society in the pre-war period was to safeguard the administrative independence of Mount Lebanon. Its members were overwhelmingly Maronite, residing both inside and outside of the Mountain (Hourani 1983; *al-Hoda* 1913: n.p.). Mokarzel attended the Congress as the League’s representative where he delivered a speech describing a diaspora mobilized by “national feeling,” willing to devote its

intellectual and material resources to the cause of reform (*al-Lajna al-'ulya* 1913). He would eventually become an active supporter of a French mandate over Lebanon and, at the war's end, he hurried to Paris to lobby on behalf of the Nahda's goal of separating Lebanon from Syria -- a position which Karam may not have shared (*Tārīkh jarīdat al-Hoda* 1968: 39-40). In an article published in 1918 entitled "Why?," she laments the factionalism that exists among Syrians in the *mahjar*, noting that "those in our country are starving to death because they are weak, while those in the *mahjar*, trade, gain and enjoy their fortunes and fight among each other." She fears that the fate of Syria will resemble "the great Germanic state back when it was split into small emirates and governorates," and she ends with a laugh of bitterness and despair as she imagines "Lebanon, the old miserable man, standing at the top of Sanine mountain, shaking of hunger, cold, fear and despair and shouting at the top of his voice: Syria, Syria, come and see, your children and my children are killing our children" (Karam 1918).

While the extent of her involvement in nationalist politics needs further study, Karam's writings frequently argue for the important role that women play in the uplift of the Syrian nation. Sometimes they do so as "mothers of the nation," those who find strength in the fact that "they give birth and raise the generations." In the article, "If We Cannot Reform Women Gently, We Should Not Curse Them," she encourages male writers to devote more of their attention to changes in women's status because "the advancement of women is a factor in the progress of nations...reforming a woman is reforming a nation for she is the 'Nation's Mother' " (Karam 1904).

At other times, Karam argues that Syrian women as *emigrants* have a special role to play in the progress of the nation. She writes in "An article about Syrian Women and their Rights":

Follow then the path of education and good manners, for challenging your people honors your nation and the honor of its people... [and] because you came from it and to it you will go back. Hopefully your wishes would come true and you would be able to help in all matters because every patriotic man and woman share the crown of honor and pride of their nation, which endured the actions of people and time and lost some of its precious minds. It is therefore your duty and the duty of every other member of this nation to bring back the good qualities and fortunes to our nation from the west (*arḍ al-gharb*), whatever was the means of acquisition: buying, stealing, or even begging. For you shall not be called thieves or beggars because you are bringing back what is yours. Peace (Karam 1904).

It would be too simplistic to argue that Karam claimed that being modern was merely a matter of importing things from the West. In that same article, she took aim at those who maintained that the desire to be educated was an American ideal and that Syrian women who pursued it were abandoning their culture. “Why then aim the spires of criticism at the educated [Syrian] woman who like to resemble the educated Americans and strive to acquire their good manners and education? They say she is ‘Americanized’, and I say no doubt it is a blessing if becoming truly Americanized brings her nation and its people all the good and the benefit” (Karam 1904).

Karam did not advocate slavish imitation and she more than once criticized American society, noting, in her article “The Past is Dead and Gone-So Forget it,” that “American women are known for committing evil actions such as killing, poisoning, stealing and divorcing, whereas those evil deeds could never be committed by a Syrian woman as her intentions are noble” (Karam 1904). Like her contemporary, Zainab Fawwaz, she lost patience with those who

claimed that advocating women's rights was a Western phenomenon. The primary distinctions that appear in her writing are not between East and West, but between ignorance and independence, backwardness and modernity. In one article, she characterized this difference as two opposing parties: the party of reform (*ḥizb al-iṣlāh*) and the party of retreat (*ḥizb al-taqahqur*). Men who debated the status of Syrian women were either members of the party of reform, which advocated their education, uplift, and acquisition of culture, while those who were members of the party of retreat "ask that she remain in her state of ignorance" (Karam 1908: 4). Karam called for both men and women to be genuine members of the party of reform. (Gualtieri 2009: 148)

Conclusion

Karam remained committed to her belief in the need to educate and recognize the contributions of women, and she often cast the educated woman as the companion of the "modern man." The title page of her novel, *Fātima al-badawiyya* (Fatima the Bedouin) features this epigraph: "The nursing infant will not become a man or a woman of the future unless he or she is nursed at the breast of a cultured and good mother." Karam's feminism operated within a bourgeois frame, reflective of her own class position and that was consistent with an emphasis on patriotic motherhood within the Arabic-speaking women's movement (Thompson 1999). In other words, she advocated for changes in women's status within the boundaries of the nuclear family and within the marriage unit. Her more specific contributions were her sustained critique of child marriage, and her focus on the diaspora as a space where women's relationships to patriarchy were tested and reconfigured.

Her first two novels, for example, *Badī'a wa Fu'ād* (1906) and *Fātima al-badawiyya* (1908), are love stories that feature strong female protagonists who desire marriages based on companionship and affection -- often against great odds. In *Fātima al-badawiyya*, Fatima is a Muslim Bedouin who falls in love with Salīm, an urban Christian. Unable to procure a marriage document in Lebanon because the local priest objects to them being of different faiths, the two immigrate to "America." Salīm eventually returns to Lebanon, abandoning Fātima and their baby, ostensibly because he does not view their union as legitimate. Stricken by a serious illness, however, Fatima chooses to forgive him and the two are reunited in the *mahjar* and are married by a priest shortly before her death.

In Karam's third novel, *Ghādat 'Amshūt* (1910), discussed above, she again explores difficulties women face at the hands of clergy and overbearing fathers. After her husband's death, Farīda joins a convent, but does not live much longer (Zeidan 1995:72-73; Allen; Shaaban 1999:55). As in *Fātima al-badawiyya*, the characters are able to defy social and religious constraints, but only as they near death. Using a familiar trope in Arabic-language literature of the day, Karam reserves true happiness for the afterlife (Hartman 2014: 58)

Her criticism of marriage practices extended to the pages of *al-'Ālam al-jadīd* when, in 1913, she admonished men for rushing back "to the home country to fetch a bride as if she were a piece of cloth sold by the yard." "What results can be expected of this?" Karam asked. "Endless misery and regret" (Karam qtd. in Shakir 1997:65).

Karam's later writings became more expansive, as if she began to see the problem of women's inequality on a more global scale. She noted the irony involved in British politicians' attempt to recruit women into wartime service while, a few years earlier, when women claimed

their political rights, “she was imprisoned, thrown out and considered by the official authorities a disturbing criminal.” Karam condemned the First World War as a “barbaric,” “colonial,” war, “that served to build kings thrones from the skulls of their faithful subjects.” She believed, however, that “from its ashes...the world will rise in peace, harmony and refinement like never before” (Karam 1918). She extolled women’s contributions to the war effort, noting that “she plants and tills the land to feed the hungry men, and she tailors the clothes to protect them from cold and she strives to make money, even by begging just to be able to dress the wounds inflicted by his brother’s sword” (Karam 1918). Consistent with other feminists of the day, Karam believed that women’s virtue emboldened them to the task of reform. In her article, “The Woman,” she writes: “It is men and women’s shameful actions that brought out the virtuous women from the shadows and into the middle of the fight where she struggles for herself and her fellow women against evil and corruption.” She concludes that:

...both types of women exist, the virtuous and the vile. But the future of women resides in the first because in only a quarter of a century, or half at most, there will be no more vile women; as virtuous women strive to clean the mess left after them and prepare pure and solid ground for the generations to come. This is the woman of peace, education, power, courage and honor. This is the woman (Karam 1918).

‘Afifa Karam’s life was cut short by an illness in 1924. She was forty-one years old and childless. The obituary in the *Shreveport Times* described her death in this way: “Mrs. Afifa Karam John...author and leader among Syrians in Shreveport, a Syrian writer of international reputation, died at the home of her sister, Mrs. F. Thomas...Monday night at 11:30 o’clock, following a nervous breakdown two years ago and a recent acute illness.” Funeral services were

held at Trinity Catholic Church of which Karam “was a member and worker” (*Shreveport Times* 1924).

The obituary described her many accomplishments as a writer and her contributions as a philanthropist. These included donations to an orphanage for Syrian children in New York and “the bringing of four Syrian orphans to America, educating them, seeing to their naturalization and giving them a start in the world” (*Shreveport Times* 1924; US Census Bureau 1930) ⁽⁶⁾.

There were close to twenty tributes to her published in *al-Hoda*, three of them by her mentor, Naoum Mokarzel, who wrote that “the world has lost a great and unparalleled literary, humanitarian and reformist force” (Badaoui 2001:106-114). Victoria Ṭannūs noted that Karam had “died in body but would live on in spirit” (Badaoui 2001: 152-153).

One of the most moving tributes was written by Khalīl ‘Assāf Bishāra from Brooklyn. He praised Karam and lamented that “losing her is like losing a sister.” He also claimed that “every Syrian knows her or has heard of her” (*al-Hoda* 1924: n.p.). Bishāra was right to underscore Karam’s influence because her early twentieth century writings did contribute to debates that would develop in the *mahjar* between first and second generation immigrants. Calls for reform in marriage arrangements expressed in the pages of the *Syrian World*, published by Salloum Mokarzel (brother of Naoum), built on earlier arguments made by Karam in her novels and in her newspaper articles. In 1925, Salloum Mokarzel, writing as “The Sage of Washington Street,” criticized “the pilgrimage to Syria in quest of brides,” and he argued that men who did this were “only a relic of our old order of things” (*Syrian World* 1928: 21). He also condemned “the whole system of marriage by bargaining” and urged Syrians to focus on issues of compatibility not finances (*Syrian World* 1928: 22). On this issue, he found enthusiastic supporters among the readership of *The Syrian World*.

Albert Aboud from Detroit, Michigan, argued that elaborate codes of courtship that young Syrians were expected to follow constrained them. The assumption that courtship of a Syrian woman must necessarily lead to marriage, combined with financial obligations, discouraged second-generation men from pursuing Syrian mates (*Syrian World* 1928: 46-47). Matilda Absi agreed, calling pre-nuptial demands “quite ridiculous” (*Syrian World* 1929: 48). Mary Soloman of Mishawaka, Indiana, boldly argued that, “girls must be given more freedom.” She complained that women had little say in the choice of their marriage partners, and she condemned the age-difference that was often a characteristic of Syrian marriages (*Syrian World* 1929: 47-49). The consternations of Albert, Matilda, and Mary echoed the concerns of ‘Afifa Karam and revealed the creative ways that they sought to be both Syrian and American at the same time. Sadly, because they could not read Arabic, they did not recognize that ‘Afifa Karam had defended the right of women to embrace the possibilities of their multiple journeys: geographical, intellectual, and other.

I thank Eliane Fersan for her painstaking work on the translations of ‘Afifa Karam’s *al-Hoda* articles. Her support with the research and writing of this essay has been invaluable. In some cases, literal translations have been modified for ease of reading and comprehension. I am grateful to Barbara Badaoui for sharing her expertise on the life and work of ‘Afifa. Laurie Brand, Umayyah Cable, Crystel El Chayeb, Michelle Hartman, Gil Hochberg, Suad Joseph, María Elena Martínéz, and the late Michael Suleiman read or commented on different aspects of this essay. I appreciate their helpful advice. The essay was first presented at the conference on Arab American Women at Kansas State University in February, 2009. The collegial conversations there were a source of inspiration then and now.

End Notes:

- 1- “Syrian” refers to persons from the late-Ottoman provinces of *Bilād al-shām*, or geographical Syria. These areas included the present states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (not yet a fully recognized state). While the majority of

emigrants from *Bilād al-shām* to the United States were from what became the Republic of Lebanon, they most often described themselves as Syrian in the sources used for this study.

- 2- Based on a search of JSTOR and Proquest in 2009-2014. The most comprehensive treatment of Karam is to be found in Barbara Badaoui's self-published book in Arabic, Barbara Badaoui, *'Afīfa Karam, Ḥayātuhā wa a'mālūha* (Beirut, ṭab'a ūla, 2001). Brief discussions of Karam's *al-Hoda* articles can be found in the following published texts: 'Omar Riḍā Kaḥḥāliḥ, *A'lām al-nisā' fī 'ālamayy al-'arab wal islām* (al-maṭba'a al-hāshimiyya bidimashq. al-ṭab'a al-thāniya, 1959), Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Michael W. Suleiman "The Mokarzels' contributions to the Arabic-speaking community in the United States," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 21, (no. 2), 1999, 71-88. Suleiman has rendered a great service to non-Arabic speakers by providing short summaries of most of Karam's *al-Hoda* articles. See his *The Arab-American Experience in the United States and Canada: A Classified, Annotated Bibliography* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian Press, 2006), 246-249. Joseph Zeidan devotes four pages to a very welcome analysis of Karam's novels in *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 70-73. Nicoletta Karam includes a brief but sophisticated analysis of Karam's novels in relation to "Arab American modernism." See her "Kahlil Gibran's Pen Bond: Modernism and the Manhattan Renaissance of Arab American Literature," Ph. D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2005. According to personal communication, Elizabeth Saylor, at the University of California, Berkeley, is writing a Ph.D. dissertation that will include a lengthy analysis of Karam's novels. These studies are in part a response to the glaring omissions of Karam's work. For example, she is not mentioned in Hanā' al-Fākhūrī's comprehensive study of Arabic literature, *Tarīkh al-adab al-'arabi* (1951). On the problems of situating women writers in the Arabic literary canon see, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Modernist Arab Women Writers: A Historical Overview," in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 5.
- 3- al-Zirkly, Khayr al-Dīn, *al-A'lām*, v. 5 [Eminent Personalities: A Biographical Dictionary] (Beirut: dar al-'ilm lil-malāyīn, 1995), 35. The titles of Karam's novels are *Badī'a wa Fu'ād*, *Fātima al-badawiyya*, and *Ghādat 'Amshūt*. In 1993, Bouthaina Shaaban claimed that Karam's novel, *Badī'a wa Fu'ād*, published by *al-Hoda* in 1906 was the first novel published in Arabic. See "Arab Women Writers: 'Are there Any?'" *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Feb. 1993, 36. Downloaded from: wrmea.com. Shabaan revised this statement in her work *Mi'at 'ām min al-riwāya al-nisā'iyya al-'arabiyya* (Beirut: dar al-

adab, 1999) in which she writes that the first novel was written by Zaynab Fawwaz (*Husn al-awāqib*, “Best Results”) in 1899.

- 4- On transnational and global frames for the analysis of Arab-American literature see Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature; Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York University Press, 2014), 6-7; Pauline Homsî-Vinson, “Representations of Sexualities; United States,” *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, first published online 2015.
- 5- Karam uses the term *zawāj al-ṭufūla* to refer to the marriage of young and adolescent girls to older men. I have chosen to translate the term as “child marriage” and not “childhood marriage” in order to more closely match contemporary usage.
- 6- By 1930, Karam’s husband had remarried. His new wife was of Lebanese origin and had two children from her previous marriage. She and Karam John had a son also named Karam John and they continued to reside in Shreveport. United States, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930 (Shreveport, Caddo, Louisiana; Roll 786, Enumeration district 26), Washington, D.C. Downloaded from Ancestry.com at Los Angeles Public Library.

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