

Immigrant Arab Women in Chile during the Renaissance (*Nahda*), 1910s-1920s

Sarah Limorté

Introduction

Levantine immigration to Chile started during the last quarter of the 19th century. This immigration, almost exclusively male at the outset, changed at the beginning of the 20th century when women started following their fathers, brothers, and husbands to the New World. Defining the role and status of the Arab woman within her community in Chile has never before been tackled in a detailed study. This article attempts to broach the subject by looking at Arabic newspapers published in Chile between 1912 and the end of the 1920s. A thematic analysis of articles dealing with the question of women or written by women, appearing in publications such as *Al-Murshid*, *Asch-Schabibat*, *Al-Watan*, and *Oriente*, will be discussed.¹

This thematic analysis has shed light on questions relating to the role and status of women at the very heart of the immigrant community and their subsequent reformulation. This reformulation was linked, on the one hand, to reformist currents of thought in the society of origin and, on the other, to the phenomenon of immigration itself and the process of social integration and identity strategies in the host society. The first part of the article will focus on the question of women in the context of the *nahda*, a period of “awakening” or “renaissance” in which Arab-Ottoman societies sought to define their place in the modern world, their eyes turned towards the “West”. The second part of the article will highlight the complexity and heterogeneous character of this process by reflecting on the concept of honor (*sharaf*).

Nahda, Women and Modernity

Educated Women: The Pillar of Modern Nations

When the first Arab immigrants settled in Chile, their societies of origin were witnessing important social, political, economic, and cultural transformations. The second half of the 20th century is marked by the emergence within the Ottoman Empire of a reformist drive which seeks to understand and to fix the Orient’s backwardness in comparison with an industrialized, colonial and triumphant Europe. Arab-speaking elites took part in the movement and called for an awakening, a Renaissance for the Arabs, the *nahda*.

1. Newspapers published in Santiago, Chile between 1912 and 1917, 1917 and 1919, 1920 and 1928, and 1927 and 1928.

Nahda theorists were the first people to think of Arab nationalism and pushed for Arab modernity: Arabs should catch up with the West, the symbol of modernity, by adopting its technological and cultural advancement while preserving and reviving what brought on the glory of Arab-Muslim civilization a few centuries earlier. Women's status and role in the elaboration of modern Arab society was at the heart of this issue.

Nahda philosophers agree that women are a key factor in the modernization of society because they are responsible for the education of new generations. Reformist thinkers regard educated women as pillars of a modern nation. A woman's main role as a mother and wife is maintained, but it is given a patriotic and civilizational dimension. An article entitled "Ne méprisez pas la femme, éduquez-la!" (Don't hate women, educate them!), published in Santiago in 1916 sums up this notion in the following manner:

Not one people on this earth have been able to walk the steps of civilization (*darajât al 'umrân*) before having educated its women. For how can a man succeed when she who has fed him the milk of her breast has not been educated and knows nothing of the sciences, of literature or of the right way to offer an education? This comes to prove that women are active members in the making of society [...].

An educated woman feeds her child the milk of knowledge or refinement. She sows in it a seed that will grow all its life and will become a model of refinement and virtue. By contrast, an ignorant woman is a burden to men and to all of society. (*Al-Murshid*, October 20, 1916)

The Issue of Educating Women

The issue of educating women was one of the hobbyhorses of the Arab press in Chile. In 1917, *Asch-Schabibat* newspaper (August 25, 1917) launched a debate on "The Necessity to Educate Women" in the form of a writing contest; it promised the author of the best piece a yearly subscription to the newspaper. Articles published between August 25, 1917 and December 15, 1917 had a mostly reformist streak just like the editorial line: they supported the cause of educating women. In order to ensure their role as educators of future generations, women must be knowledgeable in science and literature while maintaining their roles as devoted and faithful wives and mothers.

An article written by Maria Ahues, the daughter of an intellectual in the community who would also become founder of the newspaper *Oriente* (1927), fervently advocated this image of the cultured housewife:

The house is a woman's temple of glory; it is undoubtedly the battlefield where she triumphs, the scene where she reveals herself as a true goddess.

But although home life is the one that suits a woman's temperament best, this should not stop women from acquiring culture and familiarizing themselves with science, art and literature.

None of these elements can prevent women from fulfilling their mission on earth. Quite to the contrary, they offer women the possibility to be better prepared for the role of angel of the house. (*Juventud Ilustrada*, September 15, 1918)

The arguments for engaging of women in the making of a modern society assert women's equality with men:

Psychology and ethics prove that women's intellectual competence is equal to that of men; furthermore, anatomically, there exists no difference between a man and a woman's head. (*Juventud Ilustrada*, September 15, 1918)

It is to be noted that of the 11 people who participated in the writing contest, only four were women. The articles for the emancipation of women were generally written by men.² The articles were also addressed to men because the latter are the ones primarily responsible for women's ignorance:

For the majority of oriental men, women do not need science [...] A member of the community came to pay us a visit yesterday in the evening, and upon entering he started a conversation in the following manner: "I am not enrolling [my] girls at school this year, I prefer that they stay home so that they can help their mother with house chores and learn how to keep a house. If my daughters marry middle-class men (*mutawasitī al-hal*), science will be of no use to them. However, I want [my] sons to complete their studies. And in the future, I will send them to big schools insha'Allah.

And why, dear compatriot, won't you send your daughters to school? Do they not have the right to know science just like your sons?

Put an end, Oriental men, to your domination (*istibdad*) over women, [do not abuse] our patience towards this injustice. [...]

We now live in an era of freedom and enlightenment [...]" (*Al-Murshid*, April 21, 1916)

The campaign for the education of young women became fruitful only many years later. It is not until the beginning of the 1920s that the *Al-Watan* (January 8, 1921) newspaper praised "the first Syrian young woman to graduate with a Baccalaureate" in Chile: Margarita was the daughter of Elias Sara, an immigrant from Bethlehem and a renowned merchant in his community. A celebration was consequently organized by the Saras during which Margarita played the piano for the guests. This was a practice proper to rich Chilean social milieus. Margarita was therefore an exception because of her father's socio-economic status.

The first Arab women to enroll in university belonged to Magarita's generation, but they were also exceptions. Newspapers mentioned two women who graduated from college in the second half the 1920s: Emilia Sackel as a midwife (*Oriente*, January 29, 1927) and Constance Abusleme as a nurse (*Oriente*, October 22, 1928).

The 1920s were hence a turning point in women's access to education. However, most of these women were daughters of rich immigrants. The real democratization of education for young women of Arab descent would only really start in the 1950s.

In general, the socioeconomic rise of men plays a defining role in the education of women.

2. In *Al-Murshid* issues published between 1912 and 1917, only one female author is featured: Yusufiyya Al-Baraka, the wife of a rich merchant living in the village of Vallénar. The number of female authors increased starting 1917 with *Asch-Schabibat* and mostly in the 1920s.

Wives of immigrants working in trade or industry have progressively come to embody the figure of the good and educated housewife, in conformity with the ideals preached by *nahda* philosophers and with the ideals of the middle and upper classes of Chilean society.

Wives of small merchants and peddlers, however, do not generally have access to education. They often participate in the economic activity of the family by making handcrafted items that are sold by their husbands or sons in the family shop. But this economic contribution does not question the vision of women's role and status within the family.³

The Example of the Western Woman and (Re)Defining Modern Arab Cultural Identity

The presence of various foreign communities (*colonias*) in Chile that were settled throughout the 20th century and that constituted the bulk of the upper-middle class of the country is an important element that partly determines the integration and imitation strategies used by Arab immigrants. From the time when the latter acquired a good economic status, they sought a place within the upper-middle class. This was driven by the desire to establish an Arab *colonia* capable of measuring up to other foreign communities in terms of institutional organization (by creating representative institutions) and socio-cultural levels.

Using Western women as role models is a factor in two dynamics: one linked with a reformist discourse being elaborated in the society of origin which considers the West a model of modernity and the other linked to the desire to find a place among the other foreign communities present in Chile:

When one looks at foreign women (*ajnabiyya*) such as French women, German women, or American women, one is shocked by the backwardness of Syrian women. [...] In general, Syrian men and women are subpar with Western women in terms of knowledge in science and literature. And for that, men alone are to blame, because unlike women, they enjoy their full freedom. (*Al-Murchid*, February 25, 1916)

3. No peddling activities were accounted for in women's experience in Chile, unlike what was done in the United States (Naff, in Khater 2001, p. 82). Truzzi (1997, cited in Baeza, 2010, p. 73) explains that this difference is due to the patriarchal and less pragmatic character of Latin American societies.

4. The concept of auto-Orientalism was developed by Civantos (2006) based on an analysis of the literature produced by Arab emigrants in Argentina.

We notice in this excerpt a certain orientalist tendency on the author's part.⁴ Oftentimes in the community press, reformist and modernist theories are accompanied by the essentialization of the Orient, very close to evolutionism, racism even, which is how the West perceived the Orient at the time.

In certain articles, the auto-orientalist connotation is explicit:

Our race as well as that of other oriental peoples, who are deaf to the calls of civilization and who shut the door to modernization, have preserved a primitive caveman-like vision of women; thus considering women a thing they can dispose of the way they please. (*Oriente*, February 5, 1927)

In addition to this self-criticism, it is also worth noting the discrimination endured by Arab immigrants during the first decades of living in Chile. Settling was filled with hardships. Arabs arrived in a country undergoing a crisis and socially divided to the core where pro-European racial ideology and xenophobic nationalism were growing in

popularity. Arab immigrants were quickly stigmatized and designated by the generic derogatory term “turcos” (because they immigrated with Ottoman passports), and were singled out as belonging to an uncivilized and barbaric people. Hence, it is also as a reaction to this turcophobia (Rebolledo, 1994) that the Arab community press called upon its readers to start a general reform of attitudes and a progressive recreation of cultural referents of the immigrant community: educating women was part of this grand scheme.

However, some articles cautioned readers against irrational and shallow imitation of Western customs:

I would like to tell the readers of an event I witnessed some time ago in Alexandria: one of our westernized women (*mutafaranjât*) walks into a store to buy a trendy hat. A man walks in at the same time bearing a letter in his hand. Upon noticing that the woman is occidentalized [sic], he walks up to her and asks her if she would read what is written on the envelope for him. The woman blushes with shame, and to conceal her ignorance, she blurts out: “I don’t have my glasses on me, you better ask someone else”. But what could men expect when they consider women ornaments or a source of entertainment instead of a partner? [...] In the name of God, dear men, do not hate women, educate them! (*Al-Murshid*, October 20, 1916)

The stakes of the modernization of morals are very present: a profound redefinition of identity by drawing much from modern western referents while constantly being torn between imitation and a desire to reconcile modernity with Arab cultural traditions (which have yet to be defined).

In the quest for balance between borrowing elements from the West and preserving elements from the Orient, women tend to choose values to preserve. In an article entitled “Should I Marry a Syrian Woman or a Foreigner (*ajnabiya*)?” the author declares:

Foreign women are undoubtedly the symbol of good taste, good education, and modern civilization (*tamaddun*) [...] But Syrian women are the very embodiment of faithfulness, of infallible love towards their husband and children, and they are known for their sense of sacrifice. (*Al-Watan*, December 31, 1921)

Arab women thus come to epitomize the oriental family tradition: stability at home (and in the entire nation) lies in the faithfulness and the sense of sacrifice of the wife and the mother. This vision is even more vivid when immigrants look, often contemptuously, at the more liberal morals of Chilean society.

Women in Public Places and the Issue of Honor (*Sharaf*)

Fear of Liberal Morals in the Host Society

The first immigrants to reach Chile generally had financial and cultural constraints. Just like their counterparts in other American countries, they began to work as peddlers or small merchants. Their first contact with the host society, which occurred within the Chilean lower classes, was often marked by mutual hostility: hostility of Chileans towards the “turcos” and hostility of Arab immigrants towards the “scandalous” morals of Chileans. Sometimes, this led to a phenomenon of ethnic and communal withdrawal, which was most conspicuous in the case of women.

Benedicto Chuaqui, a Syrian immigrant from Homs who went to Chile in 1908 at the age of 13, tells in his journal (1942, pp. 136-137) about a birthday party he is invited to some years after settling in Chile. The party is organized by a female Chilean teacher who lives in the neighborhood where he runs his business. He is horrified by the behavior of this young woman who had previously flirted with him by going to his store, and who on that night had drunk a lot and was seducing all the men around her. Chuaqui remembers his shock and his disgust:

How can it be that in such an organized country such as Chile, teachers are so libertine? [...]

Miss Raquel behaved on that night with more freedom than ever. She took me in her arms, kissed me and lifted me up in the air, fired up by all the drinking. But this was nothing in comparison with what she did with many of the men at the party, who were encouraging her behavior with bursts of laughter.

I am unable to explain how my strict Homs morals were bruised.

Moral liberalism is not only frowned upon; it is seen as a potential threat to the honor of the women of the community. Chuaqui (1945) thus explains his refusal to take his sister out with him:

I felt sad for not being able to take my sister along to relax during moments of leisure. Given that she is a woman and given the impertinence so characteristic of Chilean men when they have been drinking, I could not bring myself to do it. She would go to the home of relatives where she would spend hours reminiscing about our beloved Homs. (p. 183)

The presence of Arab women in Chilean public places is thus seen as a hazard because the rules that regulate the community do not exist in public places. It is better for women to stay in an environment where community social control exists: that is, in the company of relatives or compatriots who share the same sense of protecting honor. It is to be noted that Arab women working for small merchants in the family business were not seen in a negative light despite their constant contact with Chilean clientele. This was due to the fact that the store was generally in the family residence and was thus considered an extension of the home. Hence, the fact that women were contributing to the family's economic situation was, in this case, a pragmatic choice which reduced work costs and enabled immigrants to save money faster (Chuaqui, 1945, p. 190).

These strategies are denounced by the press who sees them as one of the reasons why Arab women of the diaspora are lagging behind:

If [Arab] men would enroll their daughters in reputable schools so that they receive a good education rather than think of money and put them behind a *mostrador* [counter] till the end of their days [...] oriental women of the diaspora would be the most advanced on all levels. (*Asch-Schabibat*, October 20, 1917)

Women's Honor and Social Capital

The issue of honor is central with respect to defining the role and status of women.

Honor is considered a quintessential quality in a woman, one that is closely linked to her behavior:

Modesty [*'affa*] is a woman's beauty and pride. If she loses it, she loses her past, present, future, and most importantly her honor [...] Modesty is the root of all the other qualities one finds in a believer [...] Faith, truthfulness, bashfulness, dignity and honor". (*Asch-Schabibat*, December 15, 1917)

But women's honor is not only about an essentialized view of femininity, it also defines the family's reputation and social capital within the community. Preserving women's honor is a shared responsibility and the men of the family are its protectors. This is the reason why most articles trying to push for the education of women (and their access to schools) address men. The strategy is to convince fathers that education would give their daughters sufficient social capital to accomplish their primary mission – that of being a woman and wife – without endangering the honor of the family. Evidently, not all agree:

One day, I told a rich Syrian man who displays prestige and eminence: "I advise you to enroll your daughters in school because we live in the era of science". He replied: "Why is that? So they can marry scientists? Scientists only marry women for their beauty and their wealth! Science is for men, not women. Because a woman's knowledge of science is a threat to the honor [*sharaf*] of her relatives. A woman's honor is for her to stay at home. (*Al-Murchid*, February 25, 1916)

Women and Social Work

Various press articles pointed out the fact that women do not participate enough in the community's social activities:

In 1917, Emilia Mubarak, the wife of one of the community's thinkers and reforming leaders, Issa Khalil Daccarett, published an article in which she summoned her "sisters" to form a women's organization in Chile, just as Arab immigrant women had done in other American countries: "the purpose is to join our voices and actions with those of our renowned sisters in the United States and elsewhere, for they are doing good deeds and aiding afflicted compatriots" (*Asch-Schabibat*, May 26, 1917).

But the project never materialized. Its failure was linked to the issue of women's presence in public places and the social reprehension that came with it: "the majority [of men in the community] think of the bigger picture: women who are present in society and work in associations, isn't that '*ayb* (shameful)?" (*Asch-Schabibat*, October 20, 1917).

Advocates of women's education were also advocates of women's participation in the community's social life. Here as well, using westerners or foreigners as a referent supported this argument:

Women remain marginalized [from the community's social activities] and any Westerner who looks closely at our situation [...] or takes part in our celebrations, would immediately notice the void created in our social lives because of the absence of women. (*Asch-Sschabibat* January 12, 1918)

It is to be noted that the women from the different foreign *colonias* (immigrant enclaves) which settled in Chile were generally involved in benevolent institutions and participated alongside their husbands in social events organized by their community.

The Pivotal 1920s

The desire to measure up to other foreign *colonias* paved the way for women's social participation. It is only in the second half of the 1920s that many charities run by Arab women were established, following the creation of the Syrian-Palestinian Orthodox Ladies Society (*Oriente*, March 26, 1927) and the Lebanese Ladies Association (*Oriente*, June 25, 1927). Furthermore, women began to attend celebrations organized by the community's social clubs – spaces until then fully reserved for men. For the inauguration of the Syrian-Palestinian Club, the *Oriente* newspaper praised the fact that “a large number of refined women of our community have added a lively and jovial note to the celebration” (*Oriente*, April 9, 1927).

In the wake of World War I, the arrival of new and socially active immigrant women into the intellectual circle brought a new mix to the participation of women in the public sphere. One of the most important figures from among these women was Marie Yanni founder and editor-in-chief of the women's magazine *Minerva* in Beirut. She got married to Ibrahim Attallah, a great Syrian merchant who settled in Chile toward the beginning of the century. Marie Yanni was the first woman to be invited to give a public talk before the community. In her talk she addressed her fellow countrymen regarding the inauguration of the Syrian-Palestinian club and encouraged women's charity work (*Oriente*, April 9, 1927).

But the question of the preservation of women's honor within public space was also part of this debate even though the limits and boundaries have changed: while some demanded that their female compatriots imitate foreign women from other immigrant communities in all social activities, others preferred relinquishing bourgeois etiquette to protect women's decency and their family's reputation. An article published in the late 1920s entitled “Sports and Dance in our Colony” criticized the very limited spread of these activities among young women. It emphasized “the terror that Western dance causes in our Colony, particularly in fathers [...] always concerned with the fatal judging eye of others” (*Oriente*, April 23, 1927).

The article highlighted the importance of these activities in order for immigrants to integrate in the social life of the Chilean upper-middle classes:

Dance, in the times we live in [...], is part of an individual's education and is an almost moral social obligation, for anyone who wishes to become part of society. In any social gathering, however small, dance is of utmost importance, and the person who does not know it will immediately be considered uneducated and will be looked down on by his/her friends [...]

With the advent of the 1930s, the phenomenon of imitating the Chilean bourgeoisie and aristocracy developed in the wealthy classes of Arabs in Chile. Hence, many wives and daughters of wealthy immigrants started creating their own charities and organizing fairs, dancing tea parties, and fundraising campaigns to help those in need.

Conclusion

The few elements elaborated on above tackled the issue of the connection between the phenomenon of immigration and the process of redefining group identity and the social representation of women within the immigrant community. Have immigration and contact with Chilean society, which subverted the family's structure and the definition of social gender roles, paved the way for the emancipation demanded by the advocates of *nahda*? Or did the need to ensure the group's cohesion in foreign territory, along with some resistance to the morals of the lower class of the host society, push for a more conservative role for women in the family and host society?

As we have seen, there is no one answer to these questions. The rethinking of the question of women's place or role in the host society is a balancing act between their relationship to the society of origin and their gradual integration in the host society. This process is also linked to the socioeconomic status of immigrants. The economic rise and the progressive integration of some of them helped emphasize women's education as well as their presence in public places. However, the phenomenon remained limited to the upper socioeconomic classes of the community. The 1920s marked the beginning of a phenomenon of acculturation that manifested itself through upper and middle classes' imitation of Chilean society. This will be a key element in the definition of the collective identity of the Arab *colonia* in Chile.

Sarah Limorté is a Ph.D student in Middle Eastern studies and social anthropology at the Université de Provence (Aix-Marseille, France) and Universidad de Chile (Santiago, Chile).
Email: sarah.limorte@gmail.com
Translated by Farah Sahyouni

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