

Remembering Rose Ghurayyib (1909-2006)

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In the early 1900s, when young women rarely had access to education, Rose Ghurayyib's strong belief in women's right to enlightenment enabled her to pursue higher studies and spread progressive education among young Arab women and girls.

Home, Schools, and Higher Education

Rose Ghurayyib was born in 1909 in Damour, a small town on the coastal road to south Lebanon, and she spent most of her childhood there. In an interview conducted at the Yasou' Al-Malak convent on August 30, 2000,¹ Rose said:

All my life was a struggle. Since childhood I felt alone. Having had only brothers and no sisters made me feel that I was on my own. My brothers, Michel and Antoine, were very good to me. They gave me freedom of choice and never interfered in any decision pertaining to my pursuit of a good education or a career as an educator. My father, Salim Ghurayyib, and mother, Hneini Aoun, always supported girls' education and sent me to good schools. Later on, when I became a young woman, they never objected to the fact that I wanted to venture into higher education, but when I decided to leave my hometown of Damour in 1930 and head to the capital, Beirut, to the American

Junior College for Women (AJCW)² in Beirut [currently the Lebanese American University], my father and mother expressed their worry that higher education could hinder my marriage opportunities. I convinced them that marriage was not as important as education (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000).

Ghurayyib's passion for education and her gratitude to those who opened the way for her to realize her dream are expressed in her handwritten, undated, and unpublished short autobiography:

My life, character, and education were influenced by three sources. The first was my home. I took the love for work and the will to dare to experience new things from my mother. I took the ability to criticize, analyze, and yet to be tolerant from my father, and the love of reading and Lebanese folklore from both. The second source was the schools I attended. I was only four years old when I started learning both languages, French and Arabic, at the elementary level at the Damour convent school. Education then was based only on rote learning. I continued my secondary education at the American School of Sidon where I was exposed to English and to a progressive system of education. The third source was in Beirut where I spent



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most of my lifetime studying and teaching. In the fall of 1931 I registered at the American Junior College for Women (AJCW) as a sophomore student.³ ...In June 1932, I graduated with an Associate in Arts degree.⁴ This degree enabled me to pursue my higher education at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and to graduate in 1934 with a BA in Arabic Literature with distinction. I was initially interested in sciences and biology but my background in these subjects was weak and my professors, Dr. Constantine Zurayk, Dr. Anis Al-Makdisi, Dr. Anis Freiha, and Dr. Jubrail Jabbour, advised me to specialize further in Arabic literature. Much later, in 1945, I completed a Master's in this field. My thesis was entitled "Aesthetic Criticism in Arabic Literature." Throughout these years I was simultaneously studying and teaching the Arabic language (Ghurayyib, n.d.).

Ghurayyib was not only distinguished in academia, but her passion for extra-curricular and social welfare work classify her among the pioneers who believed in the overall development of the person. As a student at AJCW, Ghurayyib was involved in many college activities: She was chosen as the chair of the Arabic Literary Society, she participated in theatrical productions and wrote poems and short plays as well. According to Najla Tannous Akrawi (A.A. degree, 1933), one of Ghurayyib's close friends and a distinguished AJCW alumna:

[Rose] was strongly attracted towards voluntary social work in the various welfare projects of the college. She participated in the first Village Welfare Camp initiated by Miss Winifred Shannon⁵ in 1930. She was among the first volunteers who went to Deir Mama Camp in Syria in the summer of 1932 (Sabri, 1967, p. 70).

Akrawi goes on to sum up Ghurayyib's qualities as a student at AJCW:

[Rose had] an absolute honesty that knew no compromise, great modesty to the extent of self-effacement, a brilliant and universal mind that harvested all the scholarly rewards without any trace of self-consciousness or pride. If you add to this fact that we all loved her, and because of some subtle finesse of her personality, were never jealous of her, you might get a glimpse of the unique person that is Rose Ghurayyib (Sabri, 1967, p. 71).

Rose Ghurayyib's Long Career in Education

Rose Ghurayyib's career as an educator started in 1927 when she established and headed the Damour Elementary School in her home town. In 1931, she moved on to teach at the American School of Sidon. It was then that she decided to continue her higher education at the AJCW. Anissa Najjar, another close friend of Ghurayyib and an AJCW alumna, described her as follows:

She was a serious, dedicated, and studious young lady. She barely had any time to stop and speak to anyone. Her outstanding intelligence attracted us, Najla Akrawi, Salwa Nassar,⁶ and myself. We appreciated her and we all became good friends. Fate reunited the three of us in 1937 as teachers in Mosul at the Iraqi Ministry of Education (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p.17).⁷

According to Marie Sabri⁸:

Rose was invited by the Iraqi Ministry of Education to go and teach in Mosul's Secondary School for Girls. Being interested in the new development and re-awakening of Iraq, especially in the field of women's education, Rose felt the urge to answer the call and be among the pioneers who offered their services for such a worthy cause (Sabri, 1967, p. 72).

When Ghurayyib was asked to recall her many experiences related to her trips to Iraq between 1937 and 1941, she answered with a smile:

We usually went as a group and we traveled via Aleppo to Mosul using the Automatrice railway [a coastal railway that connected Lebanon to many Arab countries]. One time, I had to go by myself. I traveled by bus and I had to

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stay overnight in Damascus, Syria, in a hotel. At that time it was unacceptable for girls to travel unaccompanied, and to spend a night at a hotel was even worse. I did not sleep all night fearing that I would be robbed. I guess we were young, full of enthusiasm, determination, and we dared to travel to different places for a good cause (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000).

For Ghurayyib and her friends Anissa Najjar, Najla Akrawi, and Salwa Nassar, Mosul was the place for special and exciting years. She recounted:

The Iraqi government recruited young female graduates from Lebanon to teach at the public schools in Iraq as there were no private schools then. These young educators rented houses and lived together. I lived in the same house as Anissa Najjar and Linda Karam. They called us "sayidat al-shabqah," meaning "ladies of the hat," as we wore hats and they did not. I taught the Arabic language and other subjects and we had to participate in extracurricular activities. Our female students in Mosul looked up to us with great admiration and we were their ideal model due to our modern, progressive teaching style, and to our reaching out to their community through theater and music. We even published a school magazine, *Banat Al-Dad*. ...We spent our time in creative work and we turned the school into a cultural centre. As a result, our students were high achievers in the official exams (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000).

Anissa Najjar further described this cultural movement in Mosul by saying:

I was the principal of the school in Mosul where Rose was teaching. She was in the Arabic department. We introduced extra-curricular activities for our graduate and Baccalaureate classes. These activities would include book talks, poetry, the work of famous writers, plays, and debates. We always ended our activities by serving our audience Iraqi tea. I could always depend on Rose; she was always my right hand although 17 other teachers were at the school then (Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib, 2006:18).

Her many memories of Iraq meant a lot to Ghurayyib. One could instantly notice the radiant expressions on her face when she talked about her theatrical experiences and the many plays that were performed as part of the extracurricular activities. She spoke about those achievements with great humor:

I was best in the role of men. We were all females at school and someone had to perform the role of males in the script. I best fitted these roles. I was tall, thin, and I pinned my hair up. We performed mainly Said Taki Al-Din

stories (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000).

The fervent bond that these young women had was strong enough to keep them united even in turbulent days. Anissa Najjar commented on these difficult days:

When the Second World War started and Lebanon was under General Duntz we gathered to discuss what would become of us. Salwa Nassar said: No one will be interested in my physics or math. I know how to sew so I will work as a seamstress. I [Anissa] said: I know how to cook so I will open a small restaurant, but Ghurayyib said with despair: I am of no use, no one will benefit from my literature so I will surely die of hunger. We assured her that we would never leave her and would take care of her (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p. 18).

They all stayed in Mosul until 1941. When Ghurayyib was asked why she returned to Lebanon, her answer was: "My health deteriorated and I was very tired so I decided to come back and rest" (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000). However, resting was not on her agenda; as soon as she arrived in Beirut she became head of the Arabic Department at the AJCW. In 1945 she moved to the Collège Protestant Français to teach Arabic until 1955. In 1956, she was back at the Beirut College for Women (BCW) as a professor in the Arabic Department. In 1973, upon the establishment of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), alongside her teaching responsibilities, she became the first editor of the Institute's quarterly journal *Al-Raida*. Ghurayyib remained in this position until 1983, when she moved full circle to her final refuge, the Yasou' Al-Malak Convent. She remained an active contributor to, consulting editor of, and researcher for *Al-Raida* until she passed away on January 11, 2006.

Rose's Ghurayyib's Contributions to Literature and Scholarship

Rose Ghurayyib is known for her indefatigable dedication to literature, education, and women's empowerment. She was a pioneer in critical creative writing and literary research. As early as 1947 she wrote a piece in the monthly journal, *Sawt Al-Mar'a* (The Woman's Voice) criticizing the dependence on others that prevailed among men and women in the Orient, as opposed to the self-reliance that prevailed in the West. This, in her opinion, was due to inherited habits and an upbringing that encouraged blind allegiance to leaders who could be merciless rulers, and/or religious figures or even feudalists. Ghurayyib's analytical criticism was even more apparent in a 1948 *Sawt Al-Mar'a* article, "Hal Li Lubnan Risalah?" (Does Lebanon Have a Message?), in which she questioned the achievements of Lebanese thinkers, writ-

ers, and educators. Specifically, she criticized their tendency to slavishly mimic the West, ignoring their own culture, folklore, and language. So much was Ghurayyib an advocate of critical thinking that she stated at the end of her article: "One line written by a creative mind is better than a thousand copied volumes" (Ghurayyib, 1948). Ghurayyib contributed to every issue of *Sawt Al-Mar'a* until it closed in 1958. When asked whether she was paid for her contributions, Rose answered: "I never got a penny for this work. My aim was to master writing, speak what was on my mind, and call for change." (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000)

Ghurayyib started writing for journals in 1924 while still in her teens. She recalls those early days:

I was only 15 years old and still a student at the American School of Sidon. A migrant from the Ghurayyib family came to Damour and established *Al-Shams* journal. He encouraged me to write about progressive ideas that would lead to change and improvement. I kept writing for *Al-Shams* for many years. Later on, when I was 21 and a teacher at the same school, I wrote an article entitled "Ma Hiya Al-Madrassa al-Lati Yahtajouha Waladak" (What Type of School Does Your Child Need?). *An-Nahar* newspaper contacted me and was interested in publishing what I wrote. That was the starting point of my long trip with *An-Nahar* and my articles were published on a regular basis. Later on the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University published these articles in a book entitled *Adwa' Ala Al-Haraka Al-Nisaiyyah Al-Mu'asira* (Contemporary Feminist Movement in the Arab World, 1998), (R. Ghurayyib, personal communication, August 30, 2000).

Although Rose faced some very difficult situations in her lifetime, her strong will and passion for writing helped her to overcome them and never give up. In 1976, she was displaced from Damour due to the civil war in Lebanon, and lost her house, village, and all her literary work and manuscripts. She faced this cruel situation stoically by saying: "I can rewrite all that was lost and destroyed" (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p. 15). Her mind always overpowered her emotions. According to Emily Nasrallah, a chronicler of the lives of pioneering Arab women in education, what helped her to achieve this was her Sufi beliefs.⁹

Later on when she had to move to her solitary final refuge in Yasou' Al-Malak Convent, she again had to face a situation filled with loneliness and seclusion, but her passion for writing and work helped her to alleviate this solitude. During an interview for *An-Nahar* newspaper on August 12, 2000, Rose was asked whether a woman who is in her nineties would still be interested in writing.

She answered with an assertive confirmation that she was in the process of reorganizing all her work and that she still had some unpublished manuscripts that she needed to submit. Work for Rose meant life, and life in her definition meant: "Growth, a continuous growth in knowledge and experience. Every night I ask myself what I gained today and what I lost. Life is a struggle for achieving enlightenment, experience, and knowledge" (Aad, 2000, p. 17).¹⁰

Describing the work of Rose Ghurayyib, the novelist Emily Nasrallah states: "Rose Ghurayyib dedicated her life to work." In Nasrallah's opinion, Ghurayyib covered mainly three major fields: Creative teaching and education, women's issues, and literary work. Rose loved her mother tongue, the Arabic language, and worked hard to make this language appreciated and loved by her students. To this end she published many reading and grammar books for the elementary level. Moreover, her love of folklore and children's literature marks her as a pioneer in writing for youth and young children. She left behind a rich collection of stories, poetry, music books, and plays - more than 70 books (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, pp. 13-14).

This voluminous production was not offered to Ghurayyib on a silver plate; Ghurayyib had to struggle to overcome the many obstacles that faced her. All who knew Rose know for a fact that she never depended on anyone to handle her accounts or to carry out any legal matter related to her books on her behalf. She rarely left the convent except to visit a publishing house to demand her copyrights or to negotiate the printing of a new book. She was in constant struggle with some dishonest publishers who denied her copyright to her work. Henri Zoghaib, a Lebanese writer and poet, highlighted this struggle by stating that "Rose's distress was mainly due to the fact that she gave the publishers a lot of bread but gathered only crumbs" (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p. 22). Emily Nasrallah, Anissa Najjar, and Nafissa Al-Rifai all witnessed and confirmed her long agony with the different publishing houses. She passed away not knowing who the faithful guardian of this heritage will be.

Rose Ghurayyib never liked the idea of people receiving awards or superficial credit for their work. She turned down every invitation that had such a purpose. According to Nasrallah, her friends and students always had to come up with substantial excuses to get her to attend any event, especially if she suspected that it was in her honor (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006). To this effect, Najjar commented: "Rose ... loved, observed, criticized, appreciated, and advised her friends and those in her entourage; but it was hard for her to handle her society's mistakes" (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p. 17).

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Though she tried hard to escape ceremonies held in her honor, she was awarded the Medal of the Association of University Graduates in Lebanon, 1968; the Cedar Order, 1971; and the Gold Medal for Education, 1980. At the commemoration of Rose Ghurayyib held by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World on March 23, 2006, Dr. Joseph G. Jabbara, President of the Lebanese American University, said:

May the memory of Rose Ghurayyib continue to be an everlasting inspiration for all of us. May her achievements in life continue to be a source of pride for all of us and for LAU, and may her extraordinary life continue to be a cause of celebration for this well-knit extended family that we call LAU (*Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib*, 2006, p. 11).

BOX

Rose Ghurayyib's key works:

Al-Naqd al-Jamali wa Athaurhu fi al-Naqd al-'Arabi (Aesthetic Criticism in Arabic Literature), 1952.

Jibran fi Atharihi al-Kitabiyya (Impact of Gibran's Literature), 1969.

Tamhid fi al-Naqd al-Hadith (Modern Literary Criticism), 1971.

Mai Ziyadeh:al- Tawahuj wa al-'uful (A Biography of May Ziadeh), 1978.

Nasamat wa A'asir fi al-Shi'r al-Nisa'i al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir (Contemporary Arab Women Writers and Poets), 1980.

Adwa' 'Ala al-Haraka al-Nisaiyyah al-Mu'asirah (Contemporary Feminist Movement in the Arab World), 1988.

Fi 'Alam Jibran (In the World of Gebran), 2000.

Fi Mindhar al-Naqd (Critical Perspective), 2001.

Endnotes

1. Interview conducted in Arabic on August 30, 2000 and translated into English by the author.
2. Lebanese American University. Formerly Beirut University College (1974-1994), Beirut College for Women (1950-1974), and American Junior College for Women (1924-1950).
3. In those days a high school honors graduate with five years of teaching experience used to be admitted to the sophomore class after passing a special entrance examination.
4. Recipient of both the Scholarship Cup, the highest academic record of the year, and the Torch, the highest award bestowed on the ideal college student.
5. Winifred Shannon, Acting President of the American Junior College for Women 1935-1937.
6. Salwa Nassar Ph.D., a distinguished AJCW alumna (1933) and former President of the Beirut College for Women (1965-1967).
7. All quotes and information taken from the booklet *Natadhakar Rose Ghurayyib* were translated into English by the author.
8. Marie Aziz Sabri Ph.D., distinguished AJCW alumna (1941) and former Acting President of Beirut College for Women (1967-1969).
9. A Sufi is a seeker of the ultimate truth. Sufism is a mystic tradition of Islam encompassing a diverse range of beliefs and practices dedicated to Allah/God.
- 10 The quote from *An-Nahar* newspaper was translated into English by the author.

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