

Zainab Fawwaz (1850–1914)

When people say that Zainab Fawwaz shone in a period of darkness, they seem to forget that other women authors appeared in her time: Aisha Taimour, the Egyptian poet with whom Zainab corresponded and to whom she presented her book of biography, "Ad-Dourr al-Manthour fi Tabaqat Rabbat el-Khudur." Warda al Yazigi, the Lebanese poet; Warda el-Turk; and others.

There is, however, an important difference between Zainab and her colleagues. They all came from cultured homes and had their way prepared by distinguished relatives of theirs, while Zainab was a poor orphan who grew up in an unprivileged district of South Lebanon, called Jabal-Amel. While still a child, she was obliged to earn her living as a servant at the house of Al-Khalil, a prominent family in the South. The lady of the house, Fatima al-Khalil, was quick to discover the keen intelligence of the young girl. She took a fancy to her and encouraged her to learn reading and writing. In a short time she began to study the Koran and other classics.

Stories differ about the details of her life. Some say that she moved from the home of the al-Khalils to that of the al-Assaads, another prominent family of the South. There she married a man servant much older than herself, who divorced her after a while. The difference in their ages and

temperaments had made agreement impossible between the two.

Then she left for Egypt. Once again the reason for her departure is not clear. One biographer says that she ran away from a relative who tried to force her to marry him. She reached Beirut where she was employed by an Egyptian family. Later she went to Egypt with that same family, and with the help of a journalist who was a friend of her masters, continued her education and started corresponding with papers and magazines.

Another biographer says that she went there to join her brother who had settled in Egypt, where he studied and practiced law. It is possible that the flourishing cultural life in that country attracted Zainab as it had attracted many other ambitious Lebanese and Syrians who succeeded in establishing themselves in Egypt and contributing to its cultural revival.

Zainab became an active contributor to various magazines and papers of the time. In her articles she expressed progressive and daring ideas which usually characterize self-made women. Her self-confidence led her to assert that women had the capacity to work like men, the proof being the great progress achieved by western women. In 1893, when an international women's congress was held in Santiago, Chile, the conference members declared in their final

report that women should concentrate their activity on housework and family duties, thus obeying the laws dictated by nature, Zainab Fawwaz retorted with a long article which she published in papers. She tried to show that man's will and intelligence had been able to conquer nature and defy its laws. Many western women proved to be superior to men in their achievements. Even the veil, she said, should not prevent eastern women from venturing into new fields and performing men's tasks.

ZAINAB'S WORKS

Her ambition led her to attempt all forms of writing which prevailed in her time. Besides essays and articles published in papers and magazines and later collected in a volume, she wrote fiction, drama, and poetry.

One of her two novels, "King Cyrus," is a historical story written in the manner of Jurji Zaidan, the Lebanese historian who tried to popularize Arab history by condensing it into twenty-two historical novels. The other one, "Ghada al-Zahira," was inspired by the tribal customs and heroic deeds of her kinsmen and the women of Jabal Amel, South Lebanon.

Her four-act play, "Love and Loyalty," upholding love and character, is modelled after experimental contemporary plays written by Khalil Yazigi and Najeeb Haddad. It represents the humble beginnings of the Arab theater in the 19th century.

Her best known work is her collection of biographies entitled, "Ad-Durr al-Manthour fi Tabaqat Rabbat el-Khudour" which gives, in 522 large size pages, the biographies of 456 famous women from both East and West. The title page of the book contains two verses in which she dedicated her work to the members of her sex. She also left an anthology of poems dealing with current topics such as wisdom and contemplation.

A PROXY MARRIAGE

The story of Zeinab's marriage to Adeeb Nazmi, a writer from Damascus, recalls some anecdotes related in Arabic books about historical or legendary men whose marriages were based on intellectual motives: Shann, who married Tabaqa because she was able to solve his riddles, and the Andalusian Caliph Al-Mutamid, who married the girl slave I'timad because he admired a verse which she improvised to complete his own.

Addeb Nazmi, who lived in Syria, admired Zainab's writings and was fascinated by the stories he heard or read about her eloquence and charming personality. He corresponded with her, asked her to marry him, and obtained her agreement. A proxy marriage was contracted, by which Zainab agreed to take the trip from Egypt to Hauran where she would meet her husband. From Alexandria she travelled by sea to Beirut, then by train to Damascus, from which she journeyed into a village called Shaykh Miskeen. There she rode an ornamented mule which carried her to where her husband lived in Hauran. In her new home, she had the opportunity to contact poets and other literary men, her husband's friends, and acquaintances. They formed literary meetings in which poems were recited and literary questions were discussed. Zainab sat behind a screen which served her as a veil. Her husband acted as the messenger or link between her and the other members of the group.

In that narrow environment, she could not stay more than a year, after which she moved to Damascus where her three fellow-wives received her cordially, recognizing her superiority over them.

Zainab did not spend more than three years with her husband. She was happy to obtain a divorce which allowed her to return to Egypt where she resumed her literary activity.

Her marriage with Adeeb Nazmi was a failure. However her adventure in the field of letters bore fruit and entered her name on the list of pioneers who carried the torch for the feminists and women leaders who would follow her.