

«Adventure of Memories Between Lebanon and Palestine»

Anbara Salam al-Khalidy

The biography of *Anbara Salam al-Khalidy* is not an ordinary personal account, it rather reflects the experience of a pioneer woman who worked to improve the status of Arab women in the social and cultural spheres. Her father, *Selim Salam*, encouraged her yearning for freedom and education. As soon as she was old enough to understand the conditions of women in the Arab world, she wondered why they should be subjected to bondage. Her memoirs reflect the political, social and cultural climate in the early twentieth century, when most people had a traditional conception of the role of women.

Before the age of ten, she only learned reading and arithmetic. It was thought that a woman needed to learn no more. She also had to wear the veil. The first political event that she witnessed was when the Ottoman Sultanate was overthrown in 1908 by the Young Turks. Her family fled to Egypt after Italy launched war against Turkey and Lebanon. In Egypt, she was exposed to various intellectual streams. She continued her education in Beirut al al-Makassed, whose director was Miss *Julia Tohmeh*. Miss *Tohmeh* encouraged *Anbara* to attend cultural activities at the Sunday club, but the newspapers' headlines read in the following day «Muslim girls in night clubs». Ironically enough, it was at the same club in 1928 that *Anbara* gave a speech, without wearing the veil, on her impressions of her stay in England.

Anbara was strongly influenced by the work of *Malak «Bahethat al Badia», May Ziadeh* and *Zeinab Fawwaz*. It was inevitable that she be influenced by *Qassem Amin's* books: «Tahrir al Maraa» and «Al

Maraa Al Jadida». *Anbara* was subjected to the rise of political arabism at the turn of the century. It was mainly fostered by Syrian emigrants to Egypt such as *al-Kawakibi* (1849-1902) and *Mohammad Rida* (1865-1935). Arabism was directed against the Turks and the Sultanate. The Arab subjects were well aware of their separate linguistic and cultural identity and in 1913, a conference was held in Paris to voice Arab demands for justice. *Anbara* wrote a letter asking for the decentralization of the Ottoman rule, which was signed by *Shafika Ghroyyib, Wadad Mahmassani* and herself.

In 1914, she founded with other pioneer women, an association called «Arab Girls Awakening». It was aimed at helping girls to educate themselves and to go on with their education. This society could indeed be considered the first women's society in the Arab world. First World War broke out, and most Lebanese families were suffering hunger and poverty. *Anbara* addressed a letter to *Jamal Pasha* describing the condition and suffering of her people. Soon committees were formed to carry out different services to needy people. Early in the century, political activities in Syria and Lebanon aimed at defining national aspirations. *Anbara* met *King Faisal* and conveyed the message of her people for an independent Arab state. He discussed and compared with her the status of Arab women vis-à-vis the status of Western women. *Faisal's* regime in Syria almost ushered in a period of realization of such aspirations as have been cherished by authors and poets. The dream of Arab unity was shattered at the Peace Conference of 1920, where Syria and Lebanon were entrusted to France.

In 1924, she was a member of the «Lebanese Women's Union» and worked closely with *Salma Sayegh, Labiba Thabet, Ibtihaj Kaddoura* and many

(*) *Jawlatun Fi al-Thikrayat Bayna Lubnan wa Falastine*. Beirut: An-Nahar 1978, 222 pages.

others. The society aimed at promoting local made products produced by the indigenous people of Syria and Lebanon. *Anbara* left for England in 1925 to study English and to join her father, *Selim Salam*.

Women's conferences began their activities in 1928 when the first conference was held in Beirut. The second was held in 1930. In 1935, *Huda Shaarawi*, the first president of the «Union of Arab Women» called for a conference in Egypt to assess the status of women in the Arab World. *Anbara* was greatly impressed by *Shaarawi* who was the first woman to call for social reforms and to participate in many political activities, e.g. the political uprising of 1919. She also mentions *Adila Al Jarairi*, *Fatima Al-Yashurti*, *Julia Tohmeh*, *Ibtihaj Kaddoura*, *Salma Sayegh* and many others who collaborated with her in all women's activities and conferences.

After her marriage to *Ahmad al-Khalidy*, she continued her cultural activities and translated *Homer's Iliad* and *Virgil's Iniad* to Arabic. *Anbara* was able to hold her own beliefs, in spite of many obstacles in her path and this attributed to her success as well as that of women's movements in the Arab East. Women in the early twentieth century had to go through continuous struggle to gain total acceptance of their rights by society. They advocated ideas of freedom, education and work and were strongly fought by those who regarded the independence of women as a threat to their own. She was a woman of principle, an originator of a



renaissance, and a capable woman who was able to organize and command both the respect and admiration of all who worked with her. She worked all her life believing that there can be no progress without the struggle and freedom of Arab women.

A.A.

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