

Becoming Liberated in Beirut⁽¹⁾

Khaoula Mokhtar, assisted by Marie-Christine Aulas and Monique Gadant.

By the middle of the twentieth century, modernism was gaining ground in Lebanon through the influence of foreign schools including French, American, British and other missionary ones. It meant for Lebanese women a growing interest in education and in work. During the first quarter of the century, the baccalaureat system, borrowed from the French, was established. The same program of study, the same examinations were required of boys and girls. Private and public modern schools increased in number and tried to emulate the firmly established foreign schools, reputed for their good standard.

This article summarizes the story of a young Lebanese girl, Khaoula Mokhtar, who came from the Bekaa, a relatively less developed district of Lebanon, and, in spite of hardships, was able to liberate herself through study and work and join the militant women of her country. Her father owned a house and a piece of land but he had eleven children to take care of. Though she was a Moslem, she was sent to a Nun's school at Mount Lebanon. Her brother went to that of the French Marist Brothers. After obtaining a "brevet", a government diploma ending the intermediate stage of education, she wanted to go on with her studies in order to obtain the baccalaureat degree but her father could not afford it. With her brevet in hand, she and one of her cousins who had received the same diploma, were allowed to teach in a State school, located in the North-east of Lebanon. They were in charge of two hundred pupils who were all at the elementary stage. The two girls worked all day long and, in the evenings, studied for their baccalaureat. They lodged with relatives who were closed and conservative, yet they accepted them because they understood the reasons behind their decision and approved their behavior and sense of responsibility.

Having successfully passed the baccalaureat in 1958-59, Khaoula moved to the Lebanese University where she read law and political economy. Her father agreed to let her take this step because as soon as she started working she sent him almost all her earnings, so that he could continue to send her brothers to school or to university. He was proud of her and was ready to declare to his friends and acquaintances that she deserved his admiration.

At the time, Moslem students were generally sympathizers of the Baath party which had as a slogan the unity of the Arabs, freedom, democracy and socialism.

At the Lebanese University Khaoula met and married her husband, who was like her, a student and a member of the Baath party. For her now began a new form of struggle. Joining in political activity for the liberation of Palestine and the rest of the Arab world was to the girls the way to free themselves and win dignity. Young men and women, who were for the new ideas, challenged everybody and everything from parents to the State.

Some women claimed civil marriage. All university people were reading Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and discussing existentialism. Soon after that, they got acquainted with Nawal Saadawi whose writings influenced most ordinary women.

Those who were brought up in conservative homes, and were trained to practice their religion, now started questioning religion, the role of foreigners and their relationship with Israel. When the civil war started in Lebanon, Khaoula's three children, three boys, were about seven or eight years old. They all lived in Beirut and had to go through the horrors of bombardment and constant fear. They saw the buildings reduced to ashes, people in the street killed by rockets and mortar shells. While the mother worked in a ministry, the children went to school but she carefully looked after them because her husband was working abroad. She also tried to help the Palestinian women who were her neighbors, worked as a member of the Relief Committee of the Executive Council of the Lebanese National Movement. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1987 was the worst thing she had ever lived through. Her eldest son, now fifteen, joined the fighters against Israel in spite of his mother's disagreement. She was terribly worried because, like many other fighters, he was not sufficiently trained in handling modern arms. All the people of Beirut old and young, joined in the battle and fought bravely.

Khaoula Mokhtar's story shows clearly that political ideology and revolutionary propaganda in the Arab world have contributed to the emancipation of Lebanese women. However, one cannot help noticing that women's role in the struggle has been that of followers who scarcely have the chance to question plans arranged by men leaders. This attitude led them to accept the regressive measures imposed on women by the recent fundamentalist wave which swept over all religious communities of the Arab world. Only in rare cases have they been able to organize an opposition movement against it.

(1) Condensed from "Women of the Mediterranean", edited by Monique Gadant, translated from the French by A.M. Berrett, Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey.