

Women, Liberation, Creativity (*)

By Khalida Sa'id

Reviewed by Rose Ghurayyib

Khalida Sa'id is a writer of Syrian origin who settled in Lebanon with her husband, the poet Ali Sa'id, better known as "Adonis", for over twenty years. Like many of their contemporaries, they were forced to seek safer regions when the Lebanese war erupted.

"Women, Liberation, Creativity" (an Arabic publication) is a link of series sponsored by Fatima Mermissi, a Moroccan feminist leader and writer, whose book, "Beyond the Veil" was reviewed in *Al-Raida* No. 12, 1980, p. 14. The introduction of "Women, Liberation, Creativity" is written by Ms. Mermissi, in which she considers the book as part of a series called: "Moroccan Women on the Threshold of the Year 2000." The aim of this series is to enlighten the public about the possibility of creating a democratic Arab Maghreb (Morocco) whose inhabitants enjoy complete equality of rights, including sexual equality. "Democracy" Mermissi says "does not exist in the Moroccan world, where sexual segregation is the rule. The Harem atmosphere still dominates. Why can't men and women join efforts for realizing a cultural project of interaction and mixing between the sexes? As it stands, only a miracle could bring about the change, which will allow women and men to sit together, side by side, and converse."

On another hand, the content of "Women, Liberation, Creativity" includes a presentation of a group of contemporary Arab women who

achieved success in various creative fields such as art, poetry and fiction. The overwhelming feminine presence is, furthermore, counterbalanced by fifty pages devoted to a detailed study of Qasim Amin's contribution to women's rights at the beginning of the century. Qasim Amin, an Egyptian lawyer of Kurdish origin, is hailed by the author, Khalida Sa'id, as "the thoughtful light of the Women's liberation movement in the Arab world and the first writer to adopt a scientific approach in handling this delicate issue." Amin is also presented as the reformer, who, in spite of a short life of forty five years (1863-1908), was able to write five books on general reform, including two major works on women's liberation (1). Hence, the core of Amin's ideology is known in one of his famous quotes: **A woman's character should be based on knowledge, free choice and responsibility, instead of coercion and obedience. Her mind must be cultivated and trained to achieve independent thinking and judgement. An ignorant woman, like a child's mind, must be tutored at every step she takes and is, thus, a burden on her family and on society.**

The distinguishing trait of the articles which follow, instead of indulging in a display of claims and complaints, is the presentation of facts about eminent Arab women of our time, followed by a message or plan of action relevant to liberation. First comes the lecture given by Khalida Sa'id at the Lebanese Club

(Dar-el-Fan wal-Adab) in Beirut in 1970, bearing the title "Woman, a Creature who Cannot Exist by Herself." in which she discusses, from a Socialist point of view, the forms of slavery imposed on Arab woman reducing her into an object of pleasure or a body without a soul. Then, Khalida lists a number of reforms she expects the so-called leftist Arab states to adopt as a necessary basis for the realization of real democracy, including sexual equality. These reforms represent the demands of **the enlightened progressive class**, not only in leftist countries but all over the world. This ideology is based on compulsory, free education for both men and women, a co-educational system, strict application of the scientific method in school curricula and in the teaching methods, **secularization of the Personal Status Code**, extending the plan of social security to include all working people and all old age men and women, encouraging and financing women's studies, politicizing women's problems.

The central idea presented in Sa'id's next article "Women and Defiance of Time," is the necessity for every woman to realize herself through a creative activity, which transcends the biological function and insures her continuous development by introducing her into the realm of the intellectual society.

Is woman capable of attaining this stage? Why not? History showed us

that many women attained this creative realization. Even now, in this period of relative inertia prevailing in the Arab world, there are women who have achieved distinction in scientific and literary fields. As an example, the author presents, in abridged forms, the achievements of seven outstanding women from various Arab countries:

Thus, Sahar Khalifa is a novelist who relates, in a set of realistic episodes the story of the Arab woman's shocking condition as a daughter and a wife. In the novel the Arab woman is manipulated by her parents, her brothers, her husband and by society to the extent of losing her identity and being led into a blind alley.

To a certain degree, and unlike Sahar Khalifa, the other women whose work is reviewed by Khalida Sa'id presented solutions for the problems they posed.

Fedwa Tuqan, the Palestinian poet, while she relates the sufferings imposed on her by her conservative environment, tells how she used poetry as a means of self-expression and self-development. Consequently, it became her board of salvation. In her collection, entitled "Wajadtuha (I Have Found It)," she realizes that getting her freedom is in her own hands if she firmly believed in it. Freedom of thought, freedom of expression and of action were all her own if she only dared to declare them through her poetry. Her self-liberation is directly related to the renovation of her poetic style and mood.

Another heroine is Sammiyya Saleh, the rebel poet whose life was a struggle against obsolete stereotypes. Nadia Tueni defied fate through her poetry impending death for eighteen years. Fatima Mernissi, a veteran dared to write a study in which she revealed the errors of religious scholars or "Ulemas", who disagreed on the interpretation of religious texts concerning women. "The guardians of the holy texts have often manipulated them in favor of the ruling power. It is our task to protest and revolt against the errors of the past which are still imposed on us today." Mernissi states.

Suad el-Hakim, a woman of dauntless energy, dedicated herself to the study of Sufism. Her major work is a 1311 page dictionary of Sufism and Sufi terminology and a result of individual research, which lasted years. Muna Saudi is a Jordanian sculptor, whose work, "Improvisations in Stone," stands at the entrance of the Arab Institute in Paris. Muna Saudi's sculptures illustrate her humanist ideology, which evolved from a procreative process into an upward move transcending the dual condition of male-female and seeking infinite horizons. Finally, Laila Badr, a talented fiction-writer, excels in the use of symbolism and moving contrast between dream and reality.

Khalida Sa'id's book, in spite of the variety of ideas it contains, forms a unified whole. The author tries to convince the reader by using rational thoughts and realistic arguments. Her expression is forceful, concise, free from verbosity. The reader, even if he or she does not agree with her, is compelled to think and reexamine

his or her attitude toward woman.

The book, besides its effective style and daring tone, tries to acquaint the public with a group of militant women who have acted in their environments as leaders of thought. For the rest, it brings together, in brief form, some important theories and arguments regarding women's issues, which were already expounded by feminist reformers as Qasem Amin, Simone De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and other modern reformers *

(*) Sa'id Khalida, *Al-Mara'a, al-Tahrir, al-Ibda'a*, (Women, Liberation, Creativity) An Arabic publication. Casablanca: El-Fanak Press, published by the United Nations University, 1991, 152 pgs.

(1) See "Qasim Amin" in *Al-Raida*, No. 3, 1978.

Bibliography of the book reviewed by Miss Rose Ghurrayib in the previous issue of *Al-Raida*:

Hala Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I*, Jordan: The Economic Press Co., 1990, second edition. (first edition was published in 1987) *