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Afifa Karam:

A Pioneering Lebanese Journalist

1883 - 1924

Rose Ghurayyib

She was born in Aamshit, a village neighboring Jbail (Byblos) and Nahr Ibrahim (Adonis River), a district rich in memories and legends. Her family, known for their advocacy of education for women, sent Afifa to the school of the Holy Family in Jbail, a French school for girls. At the age of 14, she was married to a relative of hers who had emigrated to America. She moved with her husband to the State of Louisiana in the United States of America. There and through the course of their affairs, the couple came in contact with prominent businessmen and journalists from Lebanon, including the well known Na'oum Mukarzel, owner and director of Al-Huda, an Arabic paper published in the U.S.

Afifa, who was fond of reading and interested in journalism felt a vivid desire to join the profession. She began a project of self-education focusing on culture as a subject matter. She read on the subject and made contacts with a number of Lebanese and non-Lebanese journalists. In those days, during the early part of the 20th century, the feminist movement was in full swing in the U.S. Many women had already achieved levels of distinction as journalists and writers, like Ann Royal, who interrupted President John Quincy Adams during his morning swim in the Potomac River for an interview. Afifa was strongly influenced by Ann

Royal and her writings about the feminist movement. Encouraged by Na'oum Mukarzel, Afifa began to write on women's issues in Al-Huda.

During that time, the number women journalists and editors had increased in the Arab World. According to Professor Anis Maqdisi, author of a literary history of the Arab Renaissance, there appeared in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, about 40 women's magazines between 1890 and 1950. The best known among them were: "Al-Hasna" ("The Elegant" in the feminine tense) in Lebanon, "The Oriental Woman" in Egypt, "Al-Aroos" ("The Bride") in Syria. In 1912, Afifa Karam decided to buy the Arabic paper, "al-Aalam-ul-Jadid" (The New World), owned by a Lebanese emigrant, and turn it into a feminine magazine under the name of "The Feminine New World". This magazine was short lived and published for only two years, like many other women's magazines in the Arab World at that time. Their brevity was probably due to the fact that their ideas and claims were too bold and forward for society to accept them at the time.

Looking at Afifa Karam's publication, for example, a few issues of her magazines -- available at the Library of Congress -- strongly criticize the traditional upbringing of children in the Arab family, which differentiates between

the treatment of boys and girls. In one issue, she addresses the wife of the Lebanese governor under Ottoman rule (al-Mutassarif), asking her to support the set of reforms that women journalists and writers demanded for women. She criticized traditional marriage which takes the form of business deals joining two people who scarcely know each other. She adds that many Arab women, who have come in contact with Western democracy, remain single because they are torn between two contradictory life styles.

Victoria Tannous, a prominent Lebanese journalist, describing the personal life of Afifa Karam, said she gave charity on a large scale and spent a significant part of her income on the education of needy children. In addition to journalism, writing to Al-Huda and other Arabic papers, she wrote fiction and published three original Arabic novels and three translated ones.

Afifa Karam was a strong-willed, ambitious woman, whose ideas were a century ahead of her time.

— Ms. Ghurayyib is a feminist pioneer, a writer of children's book, a literary critic and the founding Editor of Al-Raida

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