

Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States

by Evelyn Shakir
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Reviewed by Nazek Saba Yared

Although many Arab American historians have written about Lebanese emigrants to the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries, not much attention has been given to women emigrants of that period. Nor do these history books acknowledge the moral courage it required for these women to emigrate all alone in order to gain a livelihood in America. Nothing had been written on those exceptional women before Evelyn Shakir came up with this fascinating book that reveals her admiration for those "grandmothers" and gives them the respect and attention that has long been their due.

Evelyn Shakir is an American of Lebanese origin, and although she was born and raised in the United States, the sympathy, tenderness and love her book expresses towards those women highlights her strong sense of belonging. An original aspect of her book is that it is based on personal testimonies, not only because those testimonies bring her characters alive before the reader, but also because it is these testimonies that show "what it has meant and what it means today to be an Arab or Arab American woman in the United States" (p10).

Shakir divides her book into three parts: the first part deals with the first wave of emigrants between 1875 and 1925, most of whom were Lebanese; the second part records the testimonies of the second and third generation who had to face "political racism" and prejudice; the third and last part of the book concentrates on the second wave of emigrants since 1945, who came from various Arab countries, but mainly from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. In this part she records in detail her interviews with eight Palestinian girls and women, followed by a "collage" of interviews with women emigrants from all over the Arab world.

In the introduction, Evelyn Shakir notes the contradiction between the Arab Americans she knew, like her uncle "who baked blueberry muffins for his wife's breakfast and washed her underthings by hand" or her other uncle who belonged to the Rotary Club and was a deacon in the Baptist Church (p1), and the stereotype of the Arab as terrorist, oil sheikh or master of the seraglio. Also the Arab women she knew who worked in factories or played whist with their husbands and friends or kept open house on Sundays did not conform at all to the stereotype of the harem girls, domestic slaves or belly dancers "that were fashioned to meet Americans' lurid fantasies about the East" (p2).

The first two chapters of Shakir's book deal with her two grandmothers. Her maternal grandmother Miriam was illiterate and yet, at the age of fifty, managed to convince her husband to emigrate to America in order to insure a better future for their children; whereas her paternal grandmother Katreen, widowed at the age of thirty, emigrated with her children in search of a better future. This first wave of immigrants deprived Lebanon of one quarter of its inhabitants, and, unlike what most people imagine, many of them were women who, whether married or single, emigrated alone either in search of adventure or, more often, of a better life. Those who were married would later send after husbands and children once they had made enough money peddling or undertaking some other kind of work. It was quite common to see Lebanese women "peddling, carrying a big bag with lots of merchandise - laces, thread stockings. They went from door to door carrying the bags on their shoulders and taking the streetcars wherever they went." (p35) Most of the first generation immigrants were peddlers since peddling did not require knowledge of the language or any special training, besides the fact that they could easily give it up whenever they decided to go back to their home country.

Given the amount of work and time they devoted to their work, it is not surprising that some of these women rose to higher ranks, like Aunt Josephine, who eventually made a career of selling designer dresses to wealthy women, always by appointment. Others managed to acquire substantial property in the city, or start a shop for some relative, or send their sons to private schools.

Americans, however, looked down on women peddlers and on all working mothers for that matter. The author herself remembers how her fifth-grade teacher criticized working mothers, even those who were not

peddlers. With time those immigrants, men and women, turned from peddling to other jobs, becoming mill and factory hands or entrepreneurs.

For instance Hannah, the author's mother, started a factory of sports clothes when she was in her fifties and only gave it up when she was seventy one years old. The income of her factory was higher than that of her husbands' printing press.

Although most of the shopkeepers and factory or restaurant owners were men, many immigrant women also owned shops that sold ladies' underwear or household linen, in many cities including Boston and New York. Perhaps the most famous among them being the jeweller designer Mary Azeez El-Khoury whose place of business stood on Park Avenue in New York, and who entertained famous writers and artists such as Amin al-Rihani and Gibran Khalil Gibran.

Other immigrants managed to find work in factories. Shakir's mother, Hannah, became a factory hand when she was only fourteen and, like so many others, worked twelve hours a day to support her family after her brothers had left the house. Despite the gossip that centered around them, these working girls managed to gain the respect of their family members and a certain degree of independence. For example, with the approval of their families, they were allowed to choose their husbands, though most of the marriages took place between couples of the same religion and background, or even of the same village revealing that first generation immigrants still clung to their customs and traditions.

By the twenties and thirties more and more immigrant children began to graduate from high school and move into technical schools and universities. Parents, however, preferred educating their sons, and very often part of the girls' salaries went towards paying their brothers' tuition. Some girls, however, among first generation immigrant women, managed to graduate from high school, learn how to speak several languages, get involved in social issues, give speeches and write in Arabic journals and newspapers. Among them were Layyah Barakat, Philomena Yusuf al-Barid, and especially Afifa Karam who wrote for the **al-Huda** newspaper before starting her own magazine **The New World for Women**. In her articles, she insisted on the importance of education for women, pointing out that women's ignorance was the main cause of exploitation by father and/or husband.

In the second part of her book, Evelyn Shakir deals with Arab American women's struggle against political racism, showing how second and third generation children tried to deal with it by adopting

American food, clothing, manners and even religion. Despite such efforts, they continued to bear the brunt of American policy in the Middle East, as well as the Zionist anti-Arab propaganda in schoolbooks, journals, and television talk shows and plays, an antagonism which reached a climax after the Six Day War.

As a result, Arab Americans united with the new Arab immigrants who had fled the unstable political situation in their countries. It was largely owing to those new immigrants that Arab Americans managed to reconnect to their roots and go back to visit their countries of origin. Many of those Arab American women campaigned to make the American public aware of who the Arabs really were. Arabs are not all oil sheikhs or terrorists, and their women are not all victims of genital mutilation or forced child marriage.

The author devotes the third part of her book to the wave of immigrants from 1945 to this day. Although she points out that they came from all over the Arab world, she interviews Palestinian women only in the fourteenth chapter because of their greater numbers and because she felt that their situation is a flagrant example of the conflict Arab American women face in the United States.

The final part entitled "Collage" includes testimonies of immigrant women and girls from different parts of the Arab world. Although most of them agree that the US has offered them rare chances of education, work and freedom, they nevertheless express homesickness for their countries of origin.

The value of Evelyn Shakir's book is not only in the vast information one gleans of the life and courage of first women immigrants, but also in the political, ethnic and cultural racism Arab immigrants had to face and fight. What is especially endearing in the book are the lively interviews and testimonies and the great love with which it was written and which transpires from every page, a love that is revealed, for example, in her pain when she describes the little Palestinian boy who died "with these big eyes looking at everybody, looking at everybody, then he closed his eyes and he died. This bullet that had entered him, once it entered him it had exploded. I mean, he was dead inside before his eyes even knew it" (p101). Love too transpires from her sarcastic description of how the immigrants were offered a table at ethnic fairs: "On these occasions, their Syrianness (meaning mainly Lebanon which was part of Syria under the Ottoman Empire in those days) - or some tamed version of it - was paraded before the American public, like a well-groomed housecat put on a leash that could be relied on not to scratch or hiss." (p82)