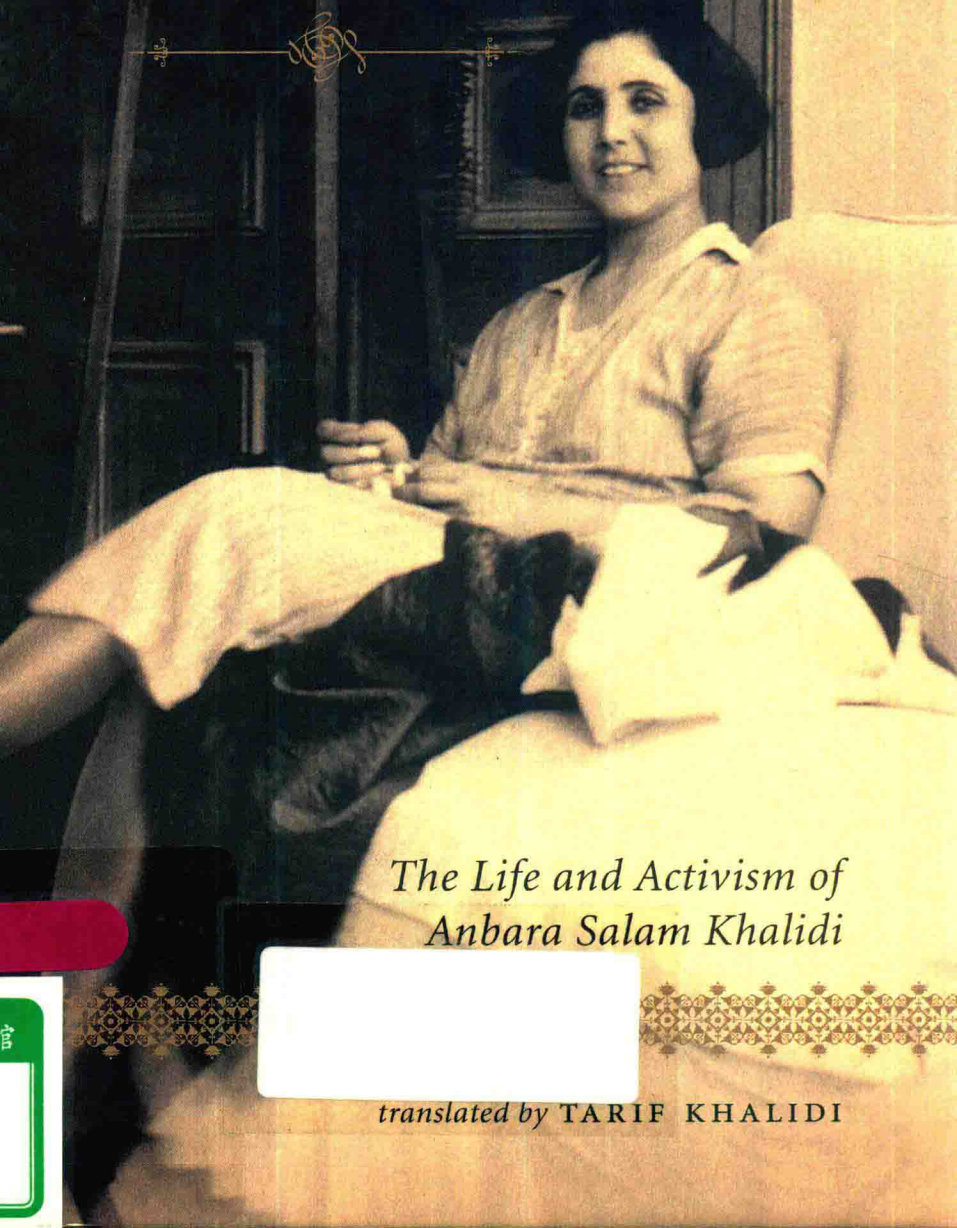


foreword by MARINA WARNER

MEMOIRS of an
EARLY ARAB FEMINIST



*The Life and Activism of
Anbara Salam Khalidi*

translated by TARIF KHALIDI

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Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist

Foreword

Marina Warner

Reading the memoirs of Anbara Salam Khalidi is an inspiring and disturbing experience: here is a truly exceptional woman, who was moved throughout her life by those qualities that remain the highest ethical ideals—generosity and independence of spirit—and modesty. She speaks of her achievements with such restraint that we can only glimpse them, and this aspect of her personality gives us cause for yet greater admiration. But as well as a poignant and forthright picture of an individual woman's life, *A Tour of Memories between Lebanon and Palestine* (the translation of the original Arabic title), was immediately recognised as a major work of historical testimony when it appeared in 1978. Anbara stands witness to a momentous period, from the end of the Ottoman Empire through most of the twentieth century; throughout, she was in the vanguard of reform, present and active at key turning points of the turbulent history of a turbulent region, and suffered at first hand in some of the most profound—and devastating—political developments of the twentieth century.

Two words echo as Anbara tells her story: one of them is “zeal,” which rings through the book, invoked as a powerful virtue, charged with the fervent hopes of a generation that her people and their country will be allowed self-determination and freedom. The other, occurring more frequently, is “pain,” for Anbara's story includes incidents of profound personal loss—including that of her husband, in 1951—unfolding against the wide horizon of politics and history, where pledges were constantly dishonoured, homes lost, projects obstructed and destroyed, leaders abandoned, treaties tossed aside, and worse.

The picture Anbara gives can produce a sense of recognition (of *plus ça change*): an ardent longing to be rid of tyrannical occupying or ruling powers, excitement when demands seem to be succeeding, new plans are drawn up and new times begin—these waves of protest and hope have a familiar look, and revisiting them as they unfolded in the past can intensify a feeling of despair for the present. The disillusion that Anbara experiences, which increases in the memoir

as the decades pass, also strikes chords with current developments. But it would be quite wrong to give the impression that the book is defeatist. In several key ways, the exceptional history we follow *here reveals how much difference someone can make, and how much it matters, for those who come after, that the full story be told.* Mourid Bhargouti might be writing for her when he wrote,

*It's fine to die
with a white pillow, not the pavement, under our cheek,
with our hands resting in those of our loved ones
[...]
leaving this world as it is,
hoping that, someday, someone else
will change it.**

Her autobiography lights a candle in the dark, to use a phrase the writer and activist Rebecca Solnit quotes in the title of one of her books, because it illuminates a neglected history of Arab political and philosophical dynamism. It shows how the current can begin to flow in another direction because an individual makes a decision and takes a step at a certain time. When Anbara removed her veil in public in 1928 to make a speech, it wasn't the first time she had shown her face to strangers—she had lived in England, unveiled, for two years before that. But her action in that forum in Beirut was one of those symbolic events that send long aftershocks through everything; a simple gesture, it spelled a vision of a new world.

In many other ways besides, Anbara made a difference. An individual with a vision, acting on principle with courage and consistency, she took her place at the heart of a revolution about women, a revolution that involved everyone, men and children. That she did so as a Muslim daughter, and later wife and mother, makes her story all the more significant now. Her recollections show how deeply mistaken it is to imagine that female education and emancipation, Arab culture and Islam are contradictions in terms, as happens far too glibly today (under the influence of tragedies such as the shooting of Malala Yousufzai, the young blogger in Pakistan who campaigned to be allowed to continue to go to school). Anbara is a clarion voice of modernity now—as she was then, and she was not alone but part of a vast upsurge of energy.

* Mourid Bhargouti, *Midnight & Other Poems*, trans. Radwa Ashour (Todmorden, Lancs.: Arc Books, 2008), p. 174.

The changes in which she and her family took part represented a break with the immediate present and the reactionary precepts of the Ottoman Empire in its final years. But they had antecedents and exemplars—Salim Salam was an enlightened father who understood the brilliance of his daughter Anbara and encouraged her against prevailing prejudice (her mother—we read between the lines—was anxious about the new direction of Anbara's life). Anbara herself is the first to acknowledge there were many other women among her friends and contemporaries who were also working towards making a new society, and she remembers with beguiling detail the pioneering women's and ladies' associations and clubs and societies they created together in Lebanon and Palestine. These were springing up contemporaneously with their sisters' comparable organizations in England and America and Italy, but far ahead of those in France or Switzerland (to single out only two latecomers to female rights). I was reminded of the gentle, humorous, feminist novel by Edmondo de Amicis, *Love & Gymnastics*, written in 1886, which reveals—rather surprisingly—how advanced Italian women were, in ideas about their freedom to work, to move freely, and to choose their partner.*

The memoirs only mention, with characteristic self-effacement, Anbara's renderings into Arabic of the founding epics of classical culture—the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* (the last intrigues me most of all, as the famous heroine of Virgil's poem, Dido, Queen of Carthage, was from Phoenicia, the name of Lebanon in antiquity). These works she undertook relate her, in my mind, to some of the independent and learned heroines of Arabic literature. When, at the beginning of the book, she tells us she resisted arranged marriages and turned down the many suitors who came forward during her teens and her twenties, she recalls Princess Badr, in one of the best-loved epic romances of the Arabian Nights, who likewise decides never to submit herself to a husband, but dedicate herself instead to learning, wise rule, and furthering understanding. When Badr meets Camar, however, everything changes, as when Anbara does decide to marry a man she has come to know, to admire, and to love, the Palestinian educationalist and reformer Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi. Furthermore, like the marvellous fairy wife of Hasan of Basra, and many other female protagonists of the Nights, Anbara was an eloquent and impassioned writer—a speech she wrote for

* *Love and Gymnastics*, trans. David Chapman, intro. Italo Calvino (London: Hesperus Press, 2012).

Ihsan al-Jabiri in Arabic was so brilliant that he said everyone would realise that he had not written it, and besides, he would never be able to keep up the same standards later, when she was no longer near at hand. This memoir shows her lucid and direct style of storytelling, though we English-language readers are deprived of the pleasure of her Arabic, widely extolled for its beauty. Above all, Anbara's lightly-worn learning recalls this description of Shahrazad, the Vizier's daughter who, we are told was "clever and learned and had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined."^{*} Shahrazad has a library of a thousand books, and knows all the stories she tells from having read them and through them, is speaking out, speaking up, and speaking against tyranny. When Anbara Salam writes about her own wonderful library being ravaged in Jerusalem during the long struggles there as Israel took over, she reminded me of this famous, imaginary precursor, who confronted a despot—the Sultan Shahryar—and managed to persuade him to behave with justice and mercy. This belongs to fantastic literature, of course, and *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist* is history, but both works express lifetimes conducted in a spirit of hope against hope (to use the title of another powerful political memoir, Nadezhda Mandelstam's 1970 book about her husband Osip).

The feminist legacy of heroines like Anbara Salam Khalidi is being contested in today's sexual, ethnic, and religious conflicts, and the meanings of the veil are mutating again, with some young women wearing it as a badge of honour. She does not comment on this development—perhaps it had not yet happened?—but she does note some effects of modernity on young women, which she found distressing. But the steps she took can't be taken back, and those same young women who at university or in places of work today wear the hijab in defiance of prejudice, are standing on foundations their foremothers laid, and are free to make their choice because of the principled, self-sacrificing struggles of women like Anbara Salam Khalidi.

These memoirs have rightly become a classic with the Arabic public, and now, in her son Tarif Khalidi's translation, can at last

* "Prologue: The Story of King Shahrayar and Shahrazad, his Vizier's Daughter," in *The Arabian Nights*, trans. Husain Haddawy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), vol 1, p. 11.

reach Anglophone readers who need them more, since so much of what we learn here is unfamiliar. The book offers us unparalleled insight into a rare human being, whose fascinating and unassuming account of her life will make every reader wish to have known her; her story sharpens the sense that the freedoms that some of us are still fortunate to enjoy were hard-won by forebears like Anbara Salam Khalidi, who should always be remembered—and emulated.

Marina Warner
January 2013

Translator's Acknowledgments

My mother's memoirs were first published in Arabic in 1978, and were received with critical acclaim by both the general public and the scholarly community. Her memoirs brought together three major themes: an intimate evocation of social life in Beirut in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a closely observed account of early Arab nationalism and her own active participation in the early feminist movement. The portraits she drew of the many people she met, both the famous and the not so famous, lend her recollections an unusual vividness. Standard works on the modern Middle East, such as *A History of the Arab Peoples* by Albert Hourani, the *History of Beirut* by Samir Qasir and *Levant* by Philip Mansel, among many others, referred to and quoted extensively from her memoirs. The family was repeatedly urged to commission an English translation, a task that after many years I finally undertook to do myself. My mother, I feel certain, would have been delighted to see these memoirs translated into English, partially at least because the two years she spent in England (1925–27) had a formative influence on her activism, allowing her to observe at first hand the role that English women were beginning to play in public life. To the very end of her days she would be thrilled whenever she heard that women had advanced their status or achieved any notable recognition, anywhere in the world.

Anbara's Arabic presents almost no difficulty to the translator. It is simple, fluent, close to spoken Arabic yet wholly classical in syntax, as befitted a student of Shaykh `Abdallah al-Bustani, the foremost Arabist of his generation. Apart from supplying a few dates and English equivalents to certain Arabic terms, all in square brackets, I made no attempt to alter or to rearrange the text in any shape or manner, and strove to capture in English something of the intimacy of address that her original Arabic imparts to readers.

My list of acknowledgments is affectionately recognized here. To begin with, Claire Leader, Russell Harris and the late Kamal Salibi read through the entire text and polished and clarified its diction; I could not have wished for more perspicacious editors. Next comes the family: Magda, Aliya, Randa, Natasha, Muhammad-Ali, Diane, Ahmad-Samih, Diala, Ilmar, Muna and Ramla. Their help and

input at all stages was crucial. My thanks also to Malik Sharif, former student and present colleague, who repeatedly urged me to undertake the translation myself.

At Pluto, David Shulman shepherded the book from the very beginning with enthusiasm and expert guidance. It was a real pleasure to work alongside him and to accept his suggestions for the final appearance and format of the text. Carrying the book forward from potentiality to actuality was the work of Robert Webb, Thérèse Wassily Saba and Jonathan Maunder, who did so with meticulous attention to detail, patience and exemplary efficiency. I was delighted when Marina Warner consented to write the Foreword to Anbara's memoirs, having been a great admirer of her books and essays for many years. To them all, my warmest thanks.

Tarif Khalidi
American University of Beirut
December 6, 2012

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Prologue

If the narrow windows of the female realm of traditional Arab society were one day to widen a little to let in tiny whiffs of the freedom that existed outside our female world, and it happens that some young woman breathe these in and experienced a lifting up of spirit, an awakening of a yearning to look beyond the walls, or an incitement in her feelings of personal dignity, she would quickly be accused of recklessness and revolt, of daring to attack an august structure and of assailing the holiness of ancient tradition. Campaigns would be mounted against her of total contempt and humiliating mockery, forcing her free spirit to retreat within, but it would not entirely be snuffed out. Her steps would sometimes falter but they would not fail. She would return, shrunken, to her prison, confined within walls—both material and moral—carrying the stigma of glances of malicious joy and the pronouncements of those who had challenged her. Yet in her heart she carries a force, urging her forward and spurring her to be on the lookout. As soon as the whiffs of freedom return once more, her spirit would again grow restless and any former resolution, having since petered out, would be renewed. Anyone in this situation, looking for their lost souls, would find themselves once more charged with zeal to remove all barriers, to throw off all social stagnation and to answer the call to gain their rightful place in this world as human beings; to fulfill their duty as part of their nation; to plunge forward through the darkness; to seek the light of knowledge; to overcome all obstacles; and to open before them all the paths of life. In this endeavor, they would not cut their ties with the past nor stumble into the unknown. Carefully and vigorously they would courageously press on.

I invite my readers to join me as I travel the thorny road traveled also by the women of my generation who sought knowledge, dignity and self-respect. I invite them to observe some tableaux of life from the era during which I lived, and to share the feelings of disappointment that our generation experienced in the shadows of imperialism and foreign occupation.

I now find myself responding to the many and repeated requests made to me, sometimes insistently, to write my memoirs. These

memoirs are the harvest of many years' sewing, diverse in form and circumstances, whether they concerned women's struggle, society, culture or politics.

While reviewing this long life, I find I have much to say. My account may be considered a history of a generation now gone by, of which the new generations know little. While writing about it, I find myself leaping across the years, pulled in different directions. The images before me multiply and I do not know where to start. This is why I was reluctant at first to begin but I finally made up my mind that the point of departure was not all that important.

Before I begin this tour of memories, I would like to explain that I do not intend to write a journal or a history of my family or private life as is common nowadays with autobiography. Rather these memoirs might be described as a history of some landmarks of the age in which I lived and a tableau of incidents or events, social and political, that I myself witnessed. I cannot separate the days I spent in my particular environment throughout the various stages of my life from the family milieu in which I grew up. Social and political events may well intermingle and might be mentioned in accordance with the narrative rather than their chronology. I may also have forgotten important events for I never kept a daily journal, which might have helped me. As for my private papers, I destroyed many on purpose when my father was twice arrested and taken to the military tribunal which the Turkish authorities had set up during the First World War in the town of Aley, Lebanon, to try Arab nationalists. Other papers were lost when the French Army, during the Mandate*, occasionally broke into our house, looking for documents that might help to incriminate my father. They would tear up, scatter or remove whatever they pleased. Some papers were also lost when I moved from Beirut to live in Jerusalem after my marriage in 1929. When we were forced to flee our Jerusalem home in 1948, during the first Arab-Israeli war, all the private papers I had accumulated from twenty years of life in Palestine were lost.

All I intend from writing these memoirs is to put into the hands of a new generation some recollections of my own generation, and some of its major events. This new generation will certainly know a great deal about the political history of the Arab countries, its

* The French Mandate over Lebanon officially began in 1923 and lasted until 1943. The Mandate was granted to France by the League of Nations.

major historical landmarks and its great figures. What I narrate here are mere fragments from here and there, which may contribute to the social history of a country or illuminate the peculiarities of an era. This tour begins with society in the early part of the twentieth century but I will also go back in time to the nineteenth century whenever the narrative calls for this.