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A translation and commentary on The Barren
(al-Aqir), a short story by Mikhail Naima

by

Maha Hilal Hawana

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CHAPTER I. THE EMERGENCE OF SHORT FICTION IN ARABIC

Fiction remains one of the pillars of modern Arabic literature which is trying to catch up with that of the Western world. It is through literature that the Western scholar can understand the Arabs and their culture. On the international literary scene inter-racial influences have never been so strong as at the present time, because never before have there been such freedom and completeness of intercourse between writers of greatly different origins.

Western nations are fast becoming the common constituency, the source of ideas and audiences, of powerful and inspiring writers, without reference to the accident of those writers' nationality. Consequently in the west it will be impossible hereafter to deal with literature in any large, intelligent way without ample equipment of knowledge of the literatures of many nations. Of course, this need for international literary awareness in the west is not totally new. For example, when English critics began to write historically about English literary development, they traced what has been called the classical period in English writing exclusively to French sources; they did not know that while the movement had its immediate impulse at home, it was part of a general movement which embraced England, France, Germany, and Italy. But today the list of nations must be extended to a far greater number,

including the Arab countries. One great gain from increased familiarity with modern Arabic literature will be a widened perception of the accuracy and adequacy with which literature responds to and interprets the successive phases of human experience in a rapidly changing society.

The novel, short story, and essay, unlike poetry, are very recent developments in Arabic literary expression. These new mediums are largely the product of the modernization or Westernization that had begun some sixty or seventy-five years earlier. Their first proponents were, in the main, young emigrants who suddenly found themselves facing the modern ways of Europe and America.

In America, a handful of Lebanese and Syrian men formed a literary circle called "The Pen League." Among them were Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Mikhail Naima. They gathered in one place at the same time to "deliver a message that was due to be delivered and they were equipped to do it."¹ Their message concerned new forms and techniques as well as new ideas and themes in modern Arabic Literature.

Social change and conflicting cultural values were on the list of priorities for those writers who studied and lived in the West. Within them lay the awareness of the problems arising out of the confrontation of the traditional, conventional life-style with the alien, yet more rational, modern ways. Here was the source of the new Arabic fiction in general, and the short story in particular.

John A. Haywood asserts that "The pioneer of the Arabic short story seems to have been Salim Butrus al-Bustani."² Butrus al-Bustani, the father of Salim al-Bustani, had founded the magazine al-Janān in 1870, and Salim was, from the first, a regular contributor of articles and short stories. The first such story, Ramya min Ghair Rami, nearly 1500 words in length, appeared in 1870. Other magazines which published short stories, and also serialized novels at that time were al-Diya and al-Mashriq. These were the outlets for Arabic fiction at the turn of the century. Mikhail Naima and other writers such as Rihani and Gibran started writing their short stories in such journals. Thus the al-Bustanis provided publication opportunities for Naima's creations, the first Lebanese short stories.³

Before there could be a modern Arab short fiction, changes were required for the transition from old-style anecdotal literature to the European style short story. The fundamental change, among others, was in language and style-simplification, and the curtailing of rhetorical devices and rare words to ensure that incident, atmosphere and characterization took precedence. Al-Bustani's Ramya min Ghair Rami⁴ embodies these changes. Its simple style, using nonclassical nineteenth-century Arabic words where necessary, is totally different from the style of the old-fashioned writers like Ibrahim Yaziji and Ahmad Faris Shidyaq.

The plot, too, is straightforward as compared to the more complex classical Arabic tradition. A miserly husband blames his wife for spending too much. Before going on a business trip he gives her money to cover household expenses during his absence. However, putting his hand in the wrong pocket, he gives her a very large sum, instead of the modest one which was in the other pocket. When he is gone, the wife spends it all not merely on routine expenses, but on long-needed repairs, furnishing, decoration, buying new clothes for the children and herself - even buying her husband a new suit. When he returns, the husband is astonished, hardly recognizing the house. He asks his wife where she got the money, and she replies that it is what he gave her before leaving on his trip. Feeling in his pocket he realizes his mistake; but his family's obvious happiness and satisfaction deter him from complaining too much. At the end of the story, while not pretending that such an incident could reform a miser, the author hints that it did start a steady improvement. For in the future, whenever the wife wishes to get around her husband, she uses the expression "you gave me from the wrong pocket."

Apparently, it is a neat little story. The moral purpose is distinct - it is a warning to husbands not to be niggardly to their wives, showing them that generosity will improve the home atmosphere. Evidently al-Bustani's pioneering with such subjects as abused family authority and troubled domestic

relations suggested a direction for Mikhail Naima. As will be seen in the next chapter, Naima's story al-Aqir examines a family problem from the woman's point of view.

Perhaps the most sophisticated short stories in terms of themes were written by Gibran Khalil Gibran. As an individualist and a rebel he wrote with the influence of Nietzsche so apparent in his themes that he shocked the Arabic literary circle with each work. He was the first Arab symbolist and mystic. It is easy to see why most Arabs find him unique and sometimes hard to understand. The best of his short stories were published in two collections: al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida (Rebellious Spirits) and Arais al-Muruj (Nymphs of the Valley).⁵ In his short stories he shows "exactitude and conciseness of expression," and a skillful manipulation of "delicate similes and metaphors and shows psychological insight in delineating character."⁶

Thousands of short stories were published in Egypt and Lebanon between 1870 and 1914, mostly in newspapers and magazines. Other Arab countries lagged behind. Syrian newspapers were not much interested,

. . . but some Syrians, who had often been educated alongside Lebanese story-writers-to-be, wrote short stories which were published in Lebanese magazines such as al-Janan. The first translated fiction by a Syrian author dates from 1871, and its author was an Armenian, Jurji Jabrail Balit. Taken from a French newspaper, it is entitled Rajul dhu eimraatain (A man with two wives), and first appeared in al-Janan.⁷

The literature of the period between the two World

Wars was not favorable to the short stories. The essay emerged at that time as the primary medium of literary expression to signify the struggle of the people against the new colonial powers: The English and the French. Politicians like Saad Zaghlul and social reformers all resorted to periodicals to publish. In the two decades following the Second World War, Egypt produced the most prestigious writers in modern Arabic literature: Taha Hussein, a novelist and critic, and Taufiq al Hakim, a novelist and dramatist. Although both of those writers had published major works in the thirties, their influence and stature were recognized after the 1952 Revolution in Egypt. These two writers dominated the literary scene in the Arabic-speaking world for more than three decades. Their influence is still seen in the styles of the new contemporary writers. It was a great setback for the development of the short story in Arabic that neither of the two writers published much in that genre.

Interest in short story writing in other Arab countries is now increasing with the incoming number of Western-educated scholars. Since 1967 a magazine called Qasas (fiction) has been appearing in Tunis. A new surge of political short stories relating to the Palestinian cause has been dominating the literary scenes in the Arab world, none of which, however, is being recognized as sound in terms of style or technique. The recent war in Lebanon has revealed some talents in story

writing. The stage is set nowadays for the political short story to emerge as the dominant literary expression in Arabic.

CHAPTER II. NAIMA AND AL-AQIR (THE BARREN)

Mikhail Naima was born at Baskinta, a village on Mount Sinnin in Lebanon, on November 22, 1889. He received his primary education in the Arabic-speaking Russian school there and, from 1902 to 1906, in the Russian seminary at Nazareth in Palestine. After secondary education in the Ecclesiastical Seminary at Poltava in the Ukraine (1906-1911), he returned to Lebanon, intending to go to Paris for further study. Instead, he joined an elder brother in the United States and graduated A.B. and LL.B. at Washington State University. He then settled in New York and worked on Nasib Arida's Arabic language paper al-Funun (The Arts) until it ceased publication on the United States entry into World War I. He worked for a time with the Russian commission for the purchase of munitions, but was called up in May 1918 for service with the U.S. Army in Europe. He next studied in France at the University of Rennes, took a diploma in literary studies, and then returned to journalism in New York. There he joined ^{the} al-Rabita al-Qalamiya (The Pen League) and formed a close friendship with Gibran Khalil Gibran, who strongly influenced his literary production. In 1932 he returned, highly celebrated, to Lebanon and settled down in his native village.

John A. Haywood considered Naima the Longfellow of

Arabia. He compared him with the American poet in his touch of mysticism, optimism, and his short metres and free verse. Naima's verse runs smoothly, with light rhythm which reveals no strict classical Arabic canons of prosody. In his best poem "an-Nahr al-Mutajamid" (The Frozen River) Naima writes:

Tomorrow I shall entrust
The remaining dust to dust:
My spirit I shall set free
From the prison of 'maybe'.
Death shall I leave to the dead,
And those who have children bred:
To the world and religion, evil
and goodness I shall leave.⁸

Naima has maintained equal stature as a critic, essayist, and short story writer. All his works bear the stamp of his intense love for his native Lebanon. With simplicity of language, ease of style, and elegance of expression, Naima depicts the lives and problems of Lebanese emigrants and spins enchanting tales of Lebanese village life. Unlike Gibran's, his work reveals great optimism even when he deals with tragic events or philosophizes on the "human comedy." His two outstanding books are a highly subjective biography of Gibran (1934) and his autobiography Sabun ("Seventy"; 3 vol., 1959-1960). Also notable are al-Aba wal-Banun ("Fathers and Sons"; 1917), a play; al-Ghirbal ("The Sieve"; 1923), essays; al-Marahil ("The Stages"; 1933); Kana ma kana ("Once upon a Time"; 1937), short stories; and al-Bayadir ("The Threshing Floors"; 1945), short stories.⁹

Naima has written in English as well as in his native language, Arabic. Four major works are credited to him: The Book of Mirdad, Kalil Gibran-a Biography, Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul, and Till We Meet.

Written in 1915 and published as part of a collection of six short stories (1974) entitled Kana ma kana (Once upon a Time), al-Aqir (The Barren) represents an excellent example of his literary ability as well as his involvement with the "human comedy" of life. The following translation of this story will help the reader appreciate Naima as a storyteller and as a celebrated advocate of social change.

The Barren (Al-Aqir)

"In the name of Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit I declare Aziz and Jamila husband and wife." When father Bulus uttered these words in the evening of the tenth of May, 1900 in the huge elegant hall of Abu Aziz in Kirbag's house, all the guests were silent as if they were listening to a divine message. The children, the young people, and the old were stunned with awe and reverence. Even Father Bulus, who was accustomed to those words, spoke in a divine fashion. He felt for the first time the importance of this ritual, partly because the atmosphere was heightened and dignified, partly because he had never conducted a wedding ceremony for

such a couple as Aziz Kirbag and Jamila al-Bishtawi.

The reverence of the occasion was maximized by the elegance of the couple at the altar. Aziz Kirbag was the only child in his family and was the most handsome young man in his town, perhaps in the whole of Lebanon. If we want to believe what was said about him we would conclude that "God created him and broke the mould." He was a healthy-looking, tall young man with white skin and a rounded face. In his eyes one could see the vitality of life and in his small moustache self-reliance and trust in the future. When he was eighteen he migrated to America. He worked hard and saved five thousand dollars in a short time. He even studied at night and was known among all immigrants in America as a self-made man. Then he returned home responding to his parents' appeal, opened a business, and built the grandest mansion in town. All those achievements and Aziz was not even twenty-five years old. The town considered him its hero and the ideal person to emulate. All the people in the town talked about him in superlatives. He was wise, amiable and very self-confident. He did not swear or curse, did not drink, did not smoke or gamble. He respected the old and the young and treated women in the most respectful manner.

In addition to her beauty, Jamila al-Bishtawi was a collection of the best qualities of women put in one person.

People talked about her beauty, manners, education, and wealth. On every occasion women and men called her an angel and others called her a learned angel. Her neighbors discussed her immense wealth and rumors said that she would inherit more from her uncle in America. No wonder the subject of her marriage was the most important topic in town for a whole week.

The first few months of Jamila's conjugal life passed like a spring day with no clouds at all. She was feeling buoyant in her heart all that time and acted as if she were amid a big festival. She lived with her in-laws and became the pivot of their life. They arranged everything according to her taste, planned for the future according to her aspirations and hopes. If she smiled they smiled; if she frowned they did. In short, she was the source of their happiness and the manifestation of their dreams.

As for Aziz's love for his bride, it was renewed each minute and every day was a new honeymoon. He kissed her on his way to work and hugged her upon his return.

"How is my 'ewe' today?" he usually asked with a caress of her hair.

"How is my 'lamb' today?" Jamila answered coyly.

"Ewe" and "lamb" were used interchangeably between them instead of their names. They hated guests because they could not use their nicknames before them. But Jamila in particular

hated her guests for another reason: When offered anything to drink or eat the guests would wish her good luck and end their wish with the Lebanese traditional auspicious statement: "May God bestow on you the pleasure of having a bridegroom" (analogous to a baby boy). For some reason Jamila resented that tradition.

Aziz and Jamila were enjoying a nice quiet evening alone in their living room when she said: "Listen, my 'lamb'! don't you get bored of hearing those stupid people's wish for a baby boy? They seem to throw it at you whenever they meet you. I'm beginning to feel resentment at meeting those people!"

Jamila thought that Aziz would go along with her feelings on this issue. But she was in for a surprise.

"Shall we swear at them, my 'ewe', if they wish us happiness?" Aziz replied. She realized that if she pursued the topic she might encounter a difference in opinion. She was very careful not to make waves with him as she had resolved not to create any unpleasant incidents in her conjugal life. For a moment a sequence of previous incidents flashed through her mind. She remembered how adamant he was that she put on her most expensive jewelry in public. She hated that habit among rich women, but she succumbed to his pride.

Jamila's female instinct pushed her to pursue the topic

further with Aziz.

"Aren't we happy without a baby?" She said staring in his eyes and gently stroking his moustache." Do we need babies to have complete happiness?"

"Why are you asking, my 'ewe'? . . . don't you think if we have a baby our happiness will be complete and our love doubled?" Aziz replied rather tensely, which made her forget his moustache and look elsewhere.

Jamila felt a little dizzy at this shocking answer. She realized that her ideal love was not complete, that there was more room in Aziz's heart, room for the love of babies; but she wanted his love all to herself. God knows she wanted to be a mother . . . but her wish, whether it materializes or not, had nothing to do with her love for Aziḏ. "But why is it that he talks about complete happiness and double love?" she wondered silently.

All these ideas flashed into her mind in an instant. She could not resist exploring the issue more and more. She looked in his eyes with full surrender.

"Forgive me, my 'lamb', for these stupid questions but . . . but let's assume. . . ."

"Assume what?" Aziz interrupted.

"Let's assume . . . assume that God did not bestow on us . . . that God was stingy enough not to bestow on us a baby . . . would . . . your love and happiness wane?"

"O God! Your questions are difficult tonight! I have told you already that if we have a baby our happiness and love would be completed. But . . . but if not," Aziz hesitated. "What can we do? It would be God's will. Let's stop this Unavailing discussion and go to bed!"

Aziz kissed his wife good night but for the first time since they married he did not feel the warmth of her breath nor the beating of her heart.

* * * * *

Jamila's mother-in-law loved the bride to an extreme. Once she found Jamila carrying a broom to sweep something and she rushed and took the broom from her.

"You are my beloved son's bride and you are not to work at all in this house," the Mother said. "I do not want to see your soft hands touching any of the housework. Go and read instead," the solicitous mother-in-law insisted.

Jamila tried to convince her mother-in-law that she liked to work to kill the monotony but in vain. When Aziz came home that day his mother complained about Jamila's attempts to work and made him pressure his wife to promise not to do such a terrible thing in the future. Aziz persisted and Jamila promised reluctantly.

Aziz kept his wife busy by providing her with books and

magazines. But she was not happy. She felt that the vitality of her youth was being wasted by sitting idly around the house. She did not feel satisfied. And all that because she promised her husband not to work. What bothered her the most was her feeling that her husband was not as warm as he used to be.

Two years had passed since her marriage and Jamila sensed a gap between her and Aziz that was widening by the day. They still called each other "lamb" and "ewe", but the warmth and the feelings were lacking. Aziz's smile was forced, his looks were cold and not passionate. All this change and Jamila did not know why until she heard Aziz and his mother talking.

"My son, what are you waiting for? See what's wrong with your wife!"

"How? Do you think I am God to create children?" Aziz shouted.

"O! my God! Is this the way you conduct your business? Take her to Beirut. Take her to Damascus or leave the matter to me. Do you want us to sit idle while our posterity fades away?"

"For God's sake, leave me alone, mother. Do whatever you like! . . ." Aziz shouted, walking away from his mother.

This short dialogue explained to Jamila what she had

wanted to know long ago. She realized the secret of Aziz's change. But what could she do? She loved Aziz and she was willing to sacrifice anything to regain his love. But it was not her fault if she was barren. Her agony was more intensified since she realized that the solution for her dilemma was not in her hands. Her mother-in-law suggested the doctors of Beirut and Damascus. But she was skeptical.

* * * * *

Aziz's mother insisted this time and won. Aziz did not object, but Jamila tried and failed. The two women went to Beirut to seek medical expertise. Aziz's mother announced in the village that she was accompanying her daughter-in-law to Beirut on a vacation.

One week later the two returned from their tour and Jamila encountered her husband's waning love all over again.

Beirut did not help Jamila's psychological agony. A year had lapsed since she visited that city and her husband was growing colder and colder in his treatment of everybody around the house. He stopped calling her "my ewe" and rarely used her original name. He started smoking suddenly and preferred to sit alone either with a water pipe or a cigarette. When he returned home from work, Aziz developed the habit of going to bed early and alone.

Jamila's mother was no help either. She was sad and thought her daughter's condition was a punishment from God. Every time she would meet her daughter she would lament her luck and cry. She offered her daughter no help whatsoever.

Aziz's mother started to act frantically. She took her daughter-in-law to Damascus but in vain. She sought a solution through witchcraft and the rest of the related methods like natural remedies and sacrificial practices. She visited the churches and the shrine of the Madonna. In all these visits Jamila was disinterested and did not utter a word. She moved like a robot commanded by her mother-in-law.

Ten years had passed since she got married. She realized at last that her husband's love was lost forever. Aziz stopped talking to her or even looking at her. He was spending his nights at the lowest bars in the village and only returned at dawn. Completely drunk. His teeth were yellowish and his face pale. He did not bother with combing his hair anymore or even shaving.

When Aziz would come home drunk the whole house turned as silent as a mortuary lest he start shouting and breaking things. He even beat his wife up for refusing to wear her jewelry to church.

Aziz's parents started resenting Jamila for changing their "good" boy into a monster. Their attitude had changed and the mother kept complaining to her friends.

"My son," Aziz's mother complained, "he is sick with languor. If she dies he could marry another girl who would bear a child!" She never sympathized with Jamila in her calamity.

Indeed, nobody did. Some women would tease her by bringing their infants before her and playing with them. She felt shame surrounding her life wherever she went. But she kept her agony to herself. Never complaining or showing resentment, she went with her in-laws to the old, famous convent of the Madonna which was reputed to have performed miracles.

Whoever said that the age of miracles has passed must visit village A in Lebanon and ask about the incident that occurred in 1910. A woman who had stayed barren for ten solid years and who sought medical advice and even witchcraft was fertile again through her prayers to the Madonna.

Yes, the mother's prayers were answered at last, and Jamila was pregnant that year. Everything changed back to normal again. Aziz resumed calling his wife my "ewe," but Jamila did not call him my "lamb" anymore.

Aziz was the best young man in town again. He abandoned drinking, smoking, and swearing. His face was happy again. Everyone in the village came to congratulate his mother on the expected grandson.

Aziz did not notice the change in his wife's personality. He was too happy to pay attention to such a thing. Her smile

was lost forever and her expressions symbolized a hidden mystery. She became pale and always frowned. But the mother assured her son that these were symptoms of pregnancy.

But Jamila was feeling lonely within herself. She reassessed her life and its meaning every time she felt lonely. She asked herself questions but found no answers. "What does that mean? To be young, married, loved, temporarily happy? Why did she go to Beirut, Damascus and other places? Why did she visit and pray at shrines? Is that the only thing that life can offer? Is she to bear children to make her husband happy? She is pregnant now, why does she not feel content? But how did she get pregnant?" Jamila used to think about the last question and stop. Then she would go all over again asking herself the same questions; offering no answers.

She felt bewitched by a sense of nothingness that would not leave her mind. She tried to free herself from that cycle but in vain. Aziz's kisses were poisonous. His mother's caring for her was sharp arrows in Jamila's heart. She felt like a stranger in her own house, in her mother's house, in her village, and in the world at large. This spiritual alienation was pressing on her consciousness every second until she experienced boredom with life itself.

* * * * *

The tenth of May, 1911 was the most beautiful day of that spring. It was sunset when Aziz came home as usual and asked his mother about Jamila. She told him that she had gone for a walk an hour ago and had not returned yet! . . . then she added that Jamila was probably visiting with some neighbors.

Aziz did not seem to be convinced because he knew that his wife was avoiding people lately. He went into her bedroom to see whether she had worn a formal or a casual dress. But he was shocked when he saw that her room was messy. While he was standing in the middle of the room wondering where she might be, he saw a folded sheet of paper on the vanity. He unfolded it and read: "You will find me under the holm oak - Jamila."

As soon as Aziz read these words he dashed out as fast as light. He knew that holm oak. He knew each branch in it. It was the same tree under which he used to court Jamila. It was the oldest tree in the whole region located on a hill with a narrow stream edging it.

When he reached the tree Aziz stood motionless as if he was stunned.

"My 'ewe'! My 'ewe'!" - he shouted at his wife who was lying on her right side on the ground. She had her white wedding dress on. Her carnelian hair was hanging down over her left

shoulder. Her fingers were pressed to her right cheek.

"Jamila! Jamila!" he cried frantically, but Jamila did not reply. He bent over her with the faint hope that she was asleep. He took her head in his hands and instantly dropped it and retreated with a shriek. Alas! The "ewe" was a corpse.

When he regained his senses, Aziz approached the corpse again as he caught a glimpse of the wedding picture in her left hand. He found a paper tossed on the grass near her as if she had been trying to tear it into pieces but was prevented from doing that by death. He unfolded the sheet with trembling hands.

"To my lovely, priceless 'lamb'!" he read.

"Eleven years ago today the sacred bond of marriage was performed with love. Today we are separated by death. Are we going to meet again?"

"If what they say about the after life is true you will find me waiting at the steps of the other world with open arms to welcome you and with warm lips to kiss you. You will hear my question again: how is my 'lamb'?"

"O! my love, if you were beside me now as I stand waiting for death. I would like to thank you for every kiss you gave with love and warmth. I would like to thank you for every word, gesture, and moment which made me love life more and more. I have experienced moments when I forgot all about the

pain and misery in this world. Those moments were your lovely presents to me, and I thank you for them! I dreamt I was in heaven, not on earth! Those dreams were the gentle breeze of your love! I thank you for that too; Aziz! I tasted the happiness of paradise. That happiness was the fruit of your love, I thank you, Aziz.

"As for me, what did I give you in return? I offered you a virgin, clean body. It was innocent and beautiful. All in all I dedicated my life to you. Is it my fault if my offers did not match yours? You were not satisfied with me alone; you did not accept Jamila personally, but I did accept you. You were all my life. My happiness was completed by your love, but yours was not by mine. You did not reveal your true self at first, but time helped me see what was hidden in your heart. I thought you were happy with my love as I was with yours. How bitter the moment was when I realized my fault! do you still remember our discussion about the baby boy? do you still remember when I asked you whether your love is complete without babies? do you still remember your answer? I tried to fool myself. I tried to convince myself that your desire for children was only because you are a man, and that your love would stay as it was with or without babies. How bitter it was to encounter all the incidents that followed after that!

"When you realized that I was barren you threw me away

like you would throw away an olive pit. That was not enough. You hated me and avoided my sight as if I were the venom of a snake. You started smoking, then drinking, then swearing, and ended with beating me up. Do you still remember when you beat me for refusing to wear jewelry to church? O! how nice it was to be touched by your hands again! Tell me, in heaven's name, did not you feel pity for me when I used to walk through your house like a deaf and mute ghost watching the shrine of my happiness collapsing by the minute before my very eyes? Did you forget that I was still flesh and blood like you, and had not yet lost the sensitive feelings of Eve? Had your heart hardened to the extent that it had no place for warmth any more? Ah! God knows how many times I hoped that you would penetrate my soul with your eyes again to read what was in my mind!

"You do not know the pain when the heart is wounded. The first wound in my heart was when I realized that you loved me not for my own self but as a future mother for your children. You loved me as a female who would increase the population of this earth with your descendants before you die. That was natural as far as you were concerned. But to me it was more bitter than death. When I realized that I had no value to you beyond being a baby machine I favored death.

"You do not understand that. Up to now you do not realize that the woman has her own being independent of her

children. I found in you a completion of my life, but you did not find that in me. That fact hurt my heart. I loved you before I married you, I loved you after I married you, and I still love you. I only hated you for one moment, when you raised your hand to hit me. Yet I recall this incident with satisfaction and wish that you were with me now to repeat it.

"Did you think I was unnatural? Did you think that I did not love children, and I a woman? O! how many times have I dreamt that I was feeding a child! how many times have I heard its crying and calling me 'mama'."

"You do not know what it means to be hated by everybody for a mistake I had not committed. I went along with your parents' wishes and visited the convents, the churches, even the quacks!! you do not know how it felt when I used to hear your parents wishing me death so their son could marry a fertile woman. Now I am doing just that, so you can get married to a better and more fertile woman.

"I have been hanging to a faint thread of hope that I might be able to beget a baby boy for you. I thought that if I could achieve that I would regain your love. My love for you made me commit a sin; even if you forgive me for it, I will never forgive myself. Death will separate us, so why should I be afraid of telling you?"

"I carry within me now a little soul and body. It is

the fetus which restored light to your eyes, and the smile to your face. . . . But it is not of your flesh and blood. . . . I sacrificed my purity and pride to have this fetus in my womb so you would be happy, I realized later it was an unforgivable sin. I do not want to buy your love with treachery and adultery. . . . But when I committed adultery, I did it for you. . . .

"I feel the movements of this miserable creature in my womb. But it will be still soon. Its little heart will stop beating when its mother's heart does. Who is its father? Do you really care?

"It is enough for you to know that it is not your child; it might give your pleasure to know that I die with it.

"Remember, Aziz, you are the sterile one, not I.

"And yet in your eyes and the eyes of the world I am the villain. Is it a murder to commit suicide? Haven't I died before? Wasn't I dead all those years when you left me alone in my agony? Who is my murderer? Is it not you? Now it is too late; Aziz, whom I loved, has gone forever. Why do I care to live or not?

"Why am I talking about these things?

"In a moment my hand will freeze and my heart will stop beating and all these ideas will die with me. How beautiful this holm oak is!

"Do you still remember when we were first in love and how we used to come and sit in this same place?"

"O! if you were beside me I would have hugged you before I said farewell to this world! Our love was born here, and this is where I want to bury it."

"How beautiful life was with you! I thank you. I thank you. I thank you for each drop of your spring of love that I tasted. I ask you to forgive me for any harm I caused you. I die and your name is the last on my lips. . . . Would you bury this picture with me? I would like to have my last slumber with the picture of my love . . . I only ask you to forgive my mistakes . . . I do not have a will to leave you . . . but please take care of my mother. Mother. Mother . . . I love you mother! I wonder what you will do after your Jamila fades for ever!"

"If you shed one tear over my body . . . only one tear . . . I will be grateful to until doomsday. . . . Farewell my lovely 'lamb'! farewell my precious 'lamb'. - your 'ewe': Jamila."

* * * * *

A friend of mine, who is from Aziz's village, says that he saw him in New York recently and asked him if he had gotten married again. Aziz answered with a deep sigh: "No girl is as beautiful as Jamila, my beautiful one!"

CHAPTER III. DISCUSSION

Naima's ingenuity lies in his simple style. In his short stories Naima draws on the reservoir of folk stories popular in the Lebanese rural life. The stories chosen in his collection Kana ma kana are all taken from the oral tradition: Saat al-koko (Cuckoo Clock), Sinitha al-Jadida (Her New Year), al-Zakhira (The Ammunition), Saadat al-Beyk (His Highness the Beyk), and Shorti (Shorty) are all stories about incidents in Lebanese villages. Except for the last story, Shorti, which is about a Lebanese soldier fighting with the French against the Germans, all stories depict the villagers' lives in the Lebanese mountains. Naima adds to those stories the dimension of the immigrant's perspective. In all his plots at least one of the characters is an immigrant who has spent long years in America. In Naima's themes there are always the elements of western culture coming in opposition to the eastern ones.

Naima's al-Aqir suffers from some limitations. By contemporary standards the story may seem to be stereotypical, sentimental, and shallow. The twist of events toward the end of the story which led to Jamila's suicide are not very explicitly explained. The reader feels that Jamila's experience with all the severe psychological changes are rather abrupt and sudden.

The mystery of the other man in Jamila's life poses a serious weakness in the plot. The reader is not aware of any man who might be a partner in the alleged adultery. The weakness lies in the fact that Naima has drawn a picture of Jamila as a well-protected, watched woman living in a small village where everyone knows the rest of the villagers. It is inconceivable for her to be alone, not to mention with a strange man, for a long time. We are not told when such instance has taken place in the plot.

Mikhail Naima does not belong to the old classical Arabic school. In al-Aqir he shied away from complicated sentences and archaic or elaborate vocabulary. Arabic is one of the richest languages in synonyms, but Naima used only a simple common vocabulary in his story. It does not require extensive training in Arabic to read and understand his writing. Naima appears at his best when he describes natural, scenic settings. Consider for example his description of the oak tree and its location. Naima's descriptions add an air of authenticity to his stories and provide detail in what would be an otherwise vague setting.

al-Aqir (1915) deals with serious cultural issues in the Arab world in general, and Lebanon in particular. Naima was one of the pioneer advocates for social change in the Arab world on more than one front. He opposed the social and religious institutions that treated women as inferior members of the

society with no rights at all. Indeed, the Arab world was, at the turn of the century, a male-dominated culture which placed women on pedestals.

Naima was subtle in his attack on the cultural and social vices he witnessed. He did not offend his readers because he only picked up old folk stories and rewrote them. His seemingly innocent technique of presenting his ideas did not stir controversies for social change as he had hoped.

A comparison between Gibran's Marta al-Baniya which relates the story of a whore led to sin by the injustice of society, and Naima's al-Aqir will reveal the extreme to which Gibran has gone in depicting the conditions of women in the old Arab culture. It took writers like Gibran to put the issues in perspective. Gibran spared no strong words or shocking metaphors in his writings. His approach was direct, enthusiastic, and daring.

The emancipation of women in the Arab countries, though it has a long way to go yet, was advocated by Naima early in the beginning of the century. al-Aqir signifies Naima's protest against the social and psychological barriers that continue to restrict the freedom of Arab women. Jamila is a victim of the rigid tradition that is blind and merciless. In a male culture like that in the traditional Arab world, the man enjoys all the privileges of recognition and power. If we examine the situation of Jamila we find that she is labelled

as "the barren" by every member in the village. No one even hints at the possibility that Aziz might be sterile. It goes without question (unfortunately up-to-now) that the man is the stronger partner and he is taken for granted to be fertile.

Naima seeks to demonstrate the tremendous impact of rigid tradition in the Arab culture and the impossibility of breaking its yoke. Aziz is a self-made, educated man. He visited America and studied in American schools. One expects to see him more sympathetic with his wife's situation since he is the "man of the world." But, alas! with all his education and experiences he falls captive to the barriers of his society and puts tradition before his life, sacrificing both his future and his wife's life.

Looked at today, Mikhail Naima's al-Aqir may appear to be too sentimental or simplistic, but when viewed in the context of its times it stands as a notable departure in the direction of recognition of women's rights in Arabic fiction. The situation of the feminist movement in literature currently is promising. Naima and Gibran laid the cornerstone of this revolt in the early 1920's and by the mid 1950's the movement reached full development. Layla Baalbaki, whose Lebanese novel Ana Ahya (I Live) has been translated into French and used by the Women's Liberation Movement in France in the sixties, was influential in this revolt. Colette Suhayl in Syria, Sofie

Abdullah in Egypt, and many other women writers have adopted a Flaubertian approach to social experience: They pitted their heroines' lives and experiences against the life and experience of the community.

Women's rights are being recognized in modern Arab culture very slowly, but at least there is a promising victory after the long-standing misconception that the battle will never be fought. What remains is the tedious effort necessary to widen and deepen the scope of female freedom. Time and technology will, one hopes, take care of this.

FOOTNOTES

¹George N. Sfeir, ed., Fiction in Several Languages (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 60.

²John A. Haywood, Modern Arabic Literature: 1800-1970 (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), p. 126.

³Raoul Makarius wrote in his Anthologie de la Litterature Arabe Contemporaine (Paris: Editions du Sevil, 1964), p. 66, that Mikhail Naima ". . . est considéré comme le createur de la nouvelle libanaise."

⁴The title literally "A Shot from no Shooter" - might be translated as "A Bolt from the Blue," or even "Involuntary Generosity." This story appears in the Arabic section of Abdel-Aziz Abdel-Meguid, The Modern Short Story, its Emergence, Development, and Form (Cairo: Hilal Publishing House, 1950).

⁵Both collections published in Mikhail Naima, ed., Gibran Khalil Gibran: The Complete Collection of His Works (Beirut: Sader Publishing House, 1949).

⁶Haywood, p. 129.

⁷Shakir Mustafa, Al-Qissa fi Suriya hatta al-Harb al-Alamiyya al-Thaniya (Cairo: al-Ahram Publishing House, 1957), p. 54. The title translates as, "The Novel in Syria until WW II.

⁸Haywood, p. 176.

⁹Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 15, 1973, p. 1152.

¹⁰Mikhail Naima, "al-Aqir," in Kana ma kana, 10th ed. (Beirut: Nowfal Inc., 1974), pp. 52-83. The translation while not a close, literal version does convey faithfully the tone, style, and content of the Arabic original.

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