



Refracted Gazes: A Woman Photographer during Mandate Lebanon

by Yasmine Nachabe

While conflicting thoughts on women's activities and their status within their communities were debated in journals that circulated in the Middle East during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century (Baron: 1994, Booth: 2001, Slim and Dupont: 2002, Thompson: 2000), Marie al-Khazen seized every opportunity to use her camera to capture stories of her surroundings. She not only documented her travels around tourist sites in Lebanon but also sought creative experimentation with her device by staging scenes, manipulating shadows and superimposing negatives to produce different effects in her prints. Within the frames of her photographs, Bedouins and European friends, peasants and landlords, men and women, comfortably share the same space. Al-Khazen is a Lebanese photographer who lived between 1899 and 1983. Her photographs were mostly taken around the 1920s and 1930s in the North of Lebanon. Her work includes a collection of intriguing photographs portraying her family and friends living their everyday life in the village of Zgharta in the North of Lebanon.

Most of al-Khazen's photographs suggest a narrative of independent and determined Lebanese women. These photographs are charged with symbols that can be understood, today, as representative of women's emancipation through their presence as individuals, separate from family restrictions of that time. Images in which women are depicted smoking a cigarette, driving a car, riding horses and accompanying men on their hunting trips counter the usual way in which women were portrayed in 1920s Lebanon. The photographs can be read as a space for al-Khazen to articulate her vision of *the New Woman* or the *Modern Girl* as described by Tani Barlow in *The Modern Girl Around the World*. In this anthology, authors like Barlow point to the ways in which the *modern girl* "disregards the roles of dutiful



daughter, wife and mother,” in seeking sexual, economic and political emancipation (245).

Al-Khazen’s photographs lead me to pose a series of questions pertaining to the representation of femininity and masculinity through the poses, reasoning, and activities adopted by women and men in the photographs. The questions which frame this study have to do with the ways in which notions of gender, class and race are inscribed within Marie al-Khazen’s photographs.

For a long time, women have been represented as “objects of vision,” as “sights” designed to “flatter” predominantly male spectators (Berger 1973: 74). However, both photographs in plates no. 12 and 13 counter representations of women as passive objects of vision. It is the woman who is acting in both photographs, whether she is physically were driving a car or expressing an interest in being depicted as an Oriental subject by riding a camel. Men are not necessarily the implied spectator of these images. I argue that, through these photographs, the metaphor of woman undergoes striking transmutations from the woman photographer as observer of the arrival of the machine – seen in Marie al-Khazen’s numerous photographs in which she documents the arrival of the automobile as well as her status as the actual user of the machine such as seen in plate 12.

This paper explores the relationship between modernity and femininity as manifest through the women’s activity, gaze and attire in Marie al-Khazen as well as other photographs taken in the Middle East region between the 1920s and the 1940s. Al-Khazen and the women represented in the photographs of this period were part of a cosmopolitan sensibility that reveals the Middle East region to be far more international than one might have imagined. Caught between projecting a self-image of the cosmopolitan woman and one of the traditional Bedouin, these photographs provide a rich field for tracking the ambiguities of the modern. The change of attire was viewed positively as an entry into a modern era and means of getting rid of the past. I use the question of dress as a lens through which to view the shifting relationships between individual and national identity.

The second part of the paper is a reading of a number of recurring representations that produce modernity in gendered ways as they manifest themselves in the photographs in which technology and progress – predominantly attributed to masculine subjects – appear in photographs depicting women. I explore Marie al-Khazen’s photograph in which she appears driving a car. The photographs can be read as an appropriation of masculine attributes – the domain of rationality, scientific achievements, progress and technology – through the representation of women using machines.

Modernity and the different ways it was manifested through the transformation of appearances in the photograph might indicate social change and even social



freedom, particularly in the case of women. According to Sarah Graham-Brown, “Western-style dress was used by some regimes as an indication of modernity and liberality in regard to women...” (Graham-Brown 1988: 249). Following Graham-Brown, the dress was often used to ascribe modernity and progress to the subjects represented in the photographs. For example, a woman wearing a European dress might signify her belonging to a liberal well-to-do family or, conversely, it could gesture to her defiance of her class, gender, community and family (Ibid.: 248). How did Marie al-Khazen position herself in relation to the logics of the social and aesthetic values associated with the modern?

Muhammad Jamil Beyhum (1952: 109-113), an Arab nationalist who took part in organizing the women's conference in Beirut in 1928, describes Lebanese society as a social sphere in transformation, introducing reforms that included women's entry into the public sphere (Chemali Khalaf 2002: 148). Even though women did not achieve equal political rights, they still managed to acquire additional rights on the basis of their intellectual and educational capacities. In Lebanon, the women's movement reached its apex in 1928 and 1929 (Fares Ibrahim 1970: 50). A significant increase in the enrolment of women in educational institutions and the increasing number of literary clubs and other social clubs, associations and philanthropic organizations emerging during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century prompted the emergence of new customs and habits among Middle Eastern women and helped them to achieve greater independence (Beyhum 1952: 115). The *Lebanese woman* who had been shy and reserved, and whose domain had been restricted to the domestic sphere, now saw herself as a socially responsible citizen. This same woman, according to Beyhum, who had been passive and submissive became a determined modern woman, confident and daring (116).

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the French Mandate created many conflicts and much debate in the Middle East region. In this paper, I will answer the following questions: How were these conflicts in the context of Lebanon represented through Marie al-Khazen's photographs? What does the change in pose and attire signify within an emerging culture caught between the two imperial powers of the Ottoman Empire and the French mandate? And where can 'modernity' be located between the rural subject and the urban subject? Unlike the mainstream representational strategies of Middle Eastern women which were structured around white male European fantasies of the sort that circulated widely at the turn of the Twentieth-Century in images such as Marie Lydie Bonfils's (1837-1919) Bedouin woman (plates no. 2, 3 and 4), in Marie al-Khazen's photographs, women projected a local female subjectivity.¹

¹ Maire Lydie Cabanis Bonfils, together with her husband, Félix Bonfils, established the Bonfils studio in 1867. She is considered the first woman photographer in the Middle East to take studio portraits. Her photographs are part of the Arab Image Foundation's archive as seen on their website: www.fai.org.lb



In a significant number of her photographs, Marie al-Khazen is depicted as a Bedouin. Caught between the cosmopolitan subject and the Bedouin, al-Khazen's photographs raise a number of questions: what was al-Khazen's drive to be depicted as a Bedouin? Is it a nostalgic yearning? Is it a quest for identity? Or does she make manifest the claim to be modern through a self-orientalizing of her own culture? The common practice of posing in different attire referring to two different time frames when produced by a Westerner is understood as a reflection of the subject's playful imagining of herself as participant in an exotic adventure similar to widely circulating orientalist painting representations of the end of the Nineteenth Century. Whereas, when performed by a local indigenous person, the same practice signifies an aspiration to be modern – assuming that being modern is defined as acquiring the refined tastes of orientalizing or exoticizing cultures. When represented in a photograph, the gap between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the peasant and the *bourgeoise*, is instrumental in the formation of al-Khazen's identity.

Notwithstanding the fact that these photos might conform to preconceived Western stereotypes, they can be read as a complex combination of fact and fantasy recordings of Middle Eastern customs as well as al-Khazen's own fictitious accounts of this new, emerging world. The al-Khazen *bourgeoise* shares the orientalist taste in exoticizing peasant life, but she also seems to share the interest taken by orientalists in travelling and the discovery of other cultures. For her, embodying an ethnographic gaze means becoming modern. She places herself in this category by staging scenes, dressing up as a Bedouin and resorting to props which stereotypically signify the exotic East. In interpreting al-Khazen's photos in this way, I question the idea that orientalist representations simply express the politics of Western domination. I argue instead that orientalism is often produced through cross-cultural interactions as a result of increased mobility and the circulation of images through the press.

Although there are stylistic similarities between al-Khazen's stereotypical image of the Bedouin and the traditional Middle Eastern women represented in postcards and photographs circulating in the West, these are not to be understood as imitations; instead, they reveal a visual language of resistance to colonization. What is at stake in this representation is the fact that the Bedouin, who is not only a representative of traditionalism but also of a lower social class, *is* the cosmopolitan woman, Marie al-Khazen the *bourgeoise*, who, in turn, *is* the photographer. Her presence, as a cosmopolitan woman juxtaposed with her presence as a Bedouin, is exemplary in its establishing of a strategy of shifting alliances from a Western gaze, to a more traditional gaze and, finally, to the gaze of the producer of the image. This enables a pragmatic articulation of a local indigenous feminine individualism through orientalist visual culture.



THE FRANJI DRESS, A SITE OF WORKING OUT WOMEN'S IDENTITY UNDER THE FRENCH MANDATE²

By virtue of belonging to the *haute bourgeoisie*, Marie al-Khazen embraced a European attitude in thinking of herself as essentially secular, rational, "civilized," and technologically advanced. By the first decade of the Twentieth Century, stores catering to this social class were spreading across the country's larger cities. One of those, located in Beirut, was the Bon Marché. While it was harder to find similar stores with finished goods in the villages, *bourgeois* families would hire their own *Franji* tailors, who advertised themselves as capable of clothing men and women in the latest European fashions (Khater 2001: 125). In Beirut and many surrounding villages, dressmaking workshops were organized to teach women new techniques in embroidery and the use of the *Singer* sewing machine as it appears in *plate no. 1*. Women were producing their own dresses by mixing and matching local decorative patterns and European designs. A hybrid fashion was to become popular during the first decades of the Twentieth Century. Chic, graceful and convenient European dresses were imported from Paris or manufactured locally, often copied from a French magazine and trimmed with white lace *à la Franji* – as seen in the refined attire of the participants of the Beirut dress making workshop in *plate no. 1*.



Plate no. 1 *Sewing workshop, Lebanon/Beirut, 1920, photographer: Berbari*

² *Franji* is an Arabic term used to designate the locals who are influenced in their dress and behavior by Western culture, French in particular.



Upper-class women identified themselves with modern life as it was portrayed in the magazines in circulation at the time where gender roles were questioned and debated. The women represented in most of the advertisements in these journals were portrayed wearing European dresses. The dress as it was featured on the pages of the magazines, as a commodity that enabled any woman to identify herself as the cosmopolitan young and appealing Parisian woman, signified modernity. The change of attire was viewed positively as an entry into a modern era and as a means of getting rid of the past. Yet, there was resistance from the traditionalists who worried about losing their identity in looking like Europeans. On the other hand, by wearing their *Franji* dresses the rural *bourgeoisie* displayed their wealth, sophistication and social difference. They worked hard to distinguish themselves from their poorer peasant neighbors through their novel styles of sitting, eating and dressing. This was a source of tension that exacerbated the stratification within the social community.

AN ORIENTALIZING PERSPECTIVE IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS

In European travel literature, the portrait of the Orient as the Other, reflecting, complementing or opposing the Occident has changed through the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Century. For example in the Eighteenth Century travel narrative, the Orient is represented as the Other of the Western European self through the rhetoric of travel. In the eyes of the West, the Orient is a “fictional geographical space” upon which Western concerns, establishing empire and a distinguished national identity, are displaced (Lowe: 116). In contrast, during the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the non-European world is figured in the rhetorical framework as sexual and romantic desire in the age of the expansion of industrialization and urbanization. This aspect is particularly revealed in Gustave Flaubert’s texts, in which the Orient is not only eroticized but also feminized. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said claims that what constitutes the Orient and the Occident is not constant, nor is the relationship of the Occident with the Orient (132-133). According to Said, this reveals the Europeans’ anxiety and desire in relation to the Orient (133). The representation of the Orient and the oriental subject thus, reflects, not only, the changing historical circumstances but also the shifts in power between the Western and the non-Western subject. The representation of the Orient as exotic is manifested in Mrs. Bonfils’s photographs in plates no. 2, 3 and 4 as well as Marie al-Khazen’s photographs in plates no. 5 and 6, in which al-Khazen and her friend are disguised as the oriental non-western subject, wearing a Bedouin dress in a desert-like context. How do al-Khazen’s photographs in which she disguises herself as a Bedouin, cause us to reshape the terms of analysis of orientalism?



JUXTAPOSING REPRESENTATIONS OF MODERNITY AND TRADITION

I argue that Marie al-Khazen, in dressing up as an Oriental subject, a Bedouin – the way an oriental subject is depicted in orientalist paintings –, reconceptualizes the perception of the Oriental subject as a sensual subject. We are in this case dealing with the *topoi* of representation of cultural identity. The representation strategies employed by al-Khazen in plates nos. 10 and 11 are either aimed to preserve her traditional identity or to celebrate her *new* identity, thus domesticating a cultural image. It is then my claim that al-Khazen's photos can provide invaluable data for studying her aspiration for a hybrid cultural identity in transition. She turned herself into a Bedouin in plates nos. 5, 6 and 11. Her act can be perceived as an aspiration to be modern, up to date in terms of taste in her appreciation of a stereotypical representation of her own culture. I will analyze plates nos. 10 and 11 in the context of the formation of a hybrid subject situated at the threshold between Ottoman and French culture. Reading Marie al-Khazen's self-portraits in terms of the way in which she sees herself enables us to understand her position as a local indigenous woman in a colonial visual culture.



Plate no. 2



Plate no. 3



Plate no. 4

Plate no. 2 *Woman in Traditional Clothing*, Lebanon, 1880-1890, photographer: Marie Lydie Bonfils; **Plate no. 3** *Woman in Traditional Clothing*, Lebanon, 1880-1890, photographer: Marie Lydie Bonfils; **Plate no. 4** *Woman in Traditional Clothing*, Lebanon, 1880-1890, photographer: Marie Lydie Bonfils

Unlike the mainstream representational strategies of Middle Eastern women which were structured around white male European fantasies of the sort that circulated widely at the turn of the Twentieth Century in images such as Marie Lydie



Bonfils's Bedouin women in plates nos. 2, 3 and 4, al-Khazen and her contemporaries' representations of women project a local female subjectivity.



Plate no. 5 *Disguised Bedouin Women in Front of a Tent, Zgharta, Lebanon, 1920-1930, anonymous photographer*



Plate no. 6 *Disguised Bedouin Women in Front of a Tent, Zgharta, Lebanon, 1920-1930, anonymous photographer*

To further reinforce this argument, it is important to clarify the distinction between the Orientalist photographs of Marie Lydie Bonfils and those of Marie al-Khazen. Bonfils's photographs were produced for commercial purposes in order to satisfy the expectations of a European clientele, whereas al-Khazen's photos present an attempt to produce or imitate a widely acclaimed photographic genre that was highly in vogue at that time. As I suggest, al-Khazen's central motivation in doing so was to imply that she had acquired a European taste: that of exoticizing her own culture.

In her analysis of Henriette Browne's harem paintings of 1861, Reina Lewis argues that the spaces represented within most of the paintings are spaces "of social interaction among women rather than spaces of sexual pleasures for men" (1995: 53). In the same line, al-Khazen's photographs reflect women's everyday activities revolving around the al-Khazen house. They were not produced to satisfy men or European taste. Among the photographs produced by al-Khazen during the 1920s and 1930s Lebanon there were photographs of her female friends and relatives occupying themselves in the *bourgeois* domestic space of the al-Khazen home while playing the piano, socializing and staging photographs. These highly reflect al-Khazen's *bourgeois* lifestyle. As the photographer, al-Khazen was both an eyewitness to and a participant in the liminal social space of Lebanon during the 1920s mandate.



Plate no. 7 *Untitled, Jordan,*
1940-1950, photographer: Bedros Doumanian

If these scenes speak to the Orientalist taste of the Western viewer, they also represent a longing for modernity on the part of the local élite of Mandate Lebanon, an élite striving to demonstrate its recently acquired sophistication, not only in lifestyle and behavior, but also in taste. This modernity appears in a significant number of photographs taken in the Middle Eastern region between the 1920s and the 1940s. The studio photographer, Bedros Doumanian, portrays two women, one wearing a traditional Palestinian *abaya* standing next to another woman wearing a European dress (*plate no. 7*). This photo symbolizes the moment of transition between two eras, the traditional and the modern, as well as between two areas, the local and the foreign; it depicts how both the old and the new, the imported dress and the local dress are assimilated by the host culture. According to Graham Brown, “implicit is the assumption that the *old* is automatically anachronistic, something to be discarded in favour of the *new*, it thus precludes any understanding of how cultural and social ideas can persist in new forms and new images” (1988: 242).



Plate no. 8 *Najla Krikorian*, Palestine, Jerusalem, 1921, photographer: Johannes Krikorian



Plate no. 9 *Najla Krikorian*, Palestine, Jerusalem, 1941, photographer: Johannes Krikorian

Other examples are the photographs of Najla Krikorian, Khalil Raad's sister, in which she has posed in her husband's studio as alternatively the oriental Bedouin holding a jar and the European lady sporting a hat - plates nos. 8 and 9.³



Plate no. 10 *Marie al-Khazen at the Beirut Port*, Lebanon, 1920 – 1930, anonymous photographer



Plate no. 11 *Marie al-Khazen Dressed as a Bedouin*, Zgharta, Lebanon, 1920 – 1930,

³ Khalil Raad is a prominent photographer in Palestine in the 1920s. Najla Krikorian is the Armenian photographer, Johannes Krikorian's wife.



In *plate no. 10*, Marie al-Khazen, wearing a European dress, is sitting on a post at the Beirut port; in the background are two boats and the horizon. In *plate no. 11*, al-Khazen is disguised as a Bedouin standing in front of a tent in the middle of the desert.⁴ The photo of the same woman taken in different places attests to her mobility. The background of the first photograph, the Beirut port, symbolizes traveling, the exchange of cultures and an openness to the West, whereas the background of the second one in the shape of a tribal tent signifies a closed mysterious space or the reproduction of the unknown Oriental space. Both photographs, when viewed simultaneously, produce conflicting narratives about al-Khazen's subjectivity. She stands as a symbol of progress, on the one hand, and as a symbol of continuity with the cultural past on the other. Such symbols have frequently been created in reaction to external representations imposed upon women, thus reflecting a preoccupation with the unequal relationships of power with the West (Graham-Brown 1998: 241). Unlike Marie Lydie Bonfils's representation of Bedouin women motif, Marie al-Khazen's representation of a similar motif appears more dignified: she looks straight into the viewfinder as if asking to be seen in the way she has chosen to portray herself. Al-Khazen, as she appears in plates nos. 10 and 11, seems actively engaged in the production of an aesthetically hybrid self-representation that challenges the values of Western cultures. She looks as proud to be a traditional Bedouin as she is to be a modern cosmopolitan. I argue that al-Khazen's photographs prompt a revision of familiar orientalist stereotypes, particularly those which inscribe Middle Eastern women as passive. Both photos may be read as the visual representation of heated debates occurring at the time and compiled in Mohammad J. Beyhum's *Fatat al-sharq fee hadarat al-gharb (The Eastern Woman in Western Civilization)*. The title of Beyhum's anthology implies the cultural binaries present in the visual semantic resonance of both of al-Khazen's photos when juxtaposed – plates nos. 10 and 11. Al-Khazen's photos in plates nos. 10 and 11 can be understood as a reconfiguration of Marie Lydie Bonfils's topos of the Middle Eastern female. They deny the conventional representation of women as seductress *fellah* (plates nos. 2, 3 and 4).⁵ Through al-Khazen's lens, the passive peasant is replaced by the confident and self-possessed woman. This is another example of the shift in gender and colonial representation that occurs when mainstream notions about the Middle East are intercepted by local photographs.

⁴ More of these images in which Marie al-Khazen and her sister masquerade as Bedouins before a tent appear as part of her photo collection.

⁵ A *fellah* is a peasant in Arabic.



MARIE AL-KHAZEN, THE COSMOPOLITAN WOMAN IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Al-Khazen's tenacity and intelligence, as well as her wealthy family background, allowed her to continue her education, possibly at the *Collège de la Sainte Famille Française*, and gradually broaden her horizons through leisure and other activities such as photography, embroidery, poetry readings, horseback riding, piano playing, fishing, hunting and travelling.⁶ Only the wealthy could afford to wear European dresses. The subjects wearing them were coded as being urban in opposition to rural subjects. After the French mandate, dress and manners became politically charged sites of cultural contestation where, for the first time, the very essence of the Lebanese traditional identity as Arab nationalist was at stake. The younger generation, who had come of age knowing nothing other than colonial rule, adopted the European style of dresses and were mostly attracted by the image of Europe as representing 'progress' and superiority. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, as dress was becoming a focus of fashion that spread across competing and sometimes conflicting temporalities (national/international, traditional/modern), it produced cultural tensions and anxieties that afforded a novel perspective to the subject of the new woman.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that a particular practice of photography can be associated with "urban ways," as a manifestation of the will to distinguish oneself and "to rise above one's rank" (2004: 580). Bourdieu's ethnographical perspective is particularly useful to an examination of Marie al-Khazen's photographs in the Beirut port and the sense of cosmopolitanism deployed within them. In the context of 1920s Lebanon, a European attire led to a clear political statement in alignment with the French mandate whereas wearing traditional dress could be understood in terms of a desire to preserve one's own culture. However, wearing the latest Parisian fashion could produce other connotations: it could reflect an image of the cultivated, proud and confident woman who is committed to education and social reforms. In other words, becoming modern was a much more complicated process than simply imitating foreign dress or rejecting local traditions (Jacob 2011: 198).

The images here discussed appear to challenge the concept of a gendered modernity. I ask whether women might participate in the production of modernity through the masculinization of the female subject by acting like men. What do this acting reveal about the logics of gender roles and patriarchy?

⁶ The *Collège de la Sainte Famille Française* was founded in Junieh, Lebanon in 1898, by the sisters of the *Sainte Famille* de Villefranche de Rouergue, France.



The 1920s and 1930s Lebanon witnessed the growth of technology, the machine industries as well as the development of transportation methods. The railways and roads were being extended to accommodate modern life. This progress in transportation extended mobility and communication among the citizens and expanded the urban sphere.

As in other places around the world, one way in which modernity was expressed in Lebanese photographs of the early Twentieth Century was through a depiction of the subject next to a machine, a vehicle, a radio, an airplane or other imported technological invention of the early Twentieth Century (Zaatari 1999: 7).



Plate no. 12 *Marie al-Khazen Driving*,
Zgharta, Lebanon, 1920–1930,
anonymous photographer



Plate no. 13 *Untitled*, Zgharta,
Lebanon, 1920–1930, photographer:
Marie al-Khazen

Both *plates nos. 12* and *13*, portray women riding either an automobile or a camel while simultaneously looking straight through the view-finder to affirm their position in the front seat, holding the steering wheel or holding the rope to control the camel. The automobile can be considered one of the most important imported products of the 1920s. Over the first few years of the second decade of the Twentieth Century, the automobile became a hit in Lebanon. Owning an automobile was associated with being young, and the pursuit of freedom and excitement. Families could visit friends and family who lived far away. For wealthy people such the al-Khazens who could afford it, the automobile was a new way to occupy their leisure time. As with other technology-related phenomena, the automobile radically changed al-Khazen's life – and that of her family and friends – by accelerating the outward expansion of her outings.



The introduction of the automobile in Lebanon can be seen as a phenomenon that narrowed the gap between rural and urban life. The al-Khazens easily moved around, organizing excursions around different regions in Lebanon. We may speculate that by depicting herself as a driver, al-Khazens sought to celebrate her excitement at the accessibility that owning a car would bring.

In *plate no. 13*, one of al-Khazen's friends is riding a camel sideways. In front of her, a man wearing a European suit is sitting uncomfortably as if he only climbed onto the camel for the sake of the photograph. Both photographs reveal the mobility of the al-Khazens. One symbolizes their being modern – driving around Zgharta with a woman driver – while the other reveals their taste for posing in the photographs as oriental subjects would do in the stereotypical *clichés* which were widely circulated across Europe at the time. The major active figure in both photographs is the woman, who is either driving the car or riding the camel.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN EMPOWERING TOOL FOR WOMEN

Throughout this paper, photography has been seen as an empowering tool for women, whether the woman is standing before or in front of the camera. When standing before the camera, the medium provides her with the means to express herself in exercising her authority and providing her own perspective to the viewer. When a woman stands in front of the camera, she is seen as a legitimate agent in the production of the photograph by acting out the way she wants to *be* in the photograph and expressing her personality as a determined individual in her own right.



EXPLORING FEMININITY BY MASQUERADING IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA



Plate no. 14



Plate no. 15



Plate no. 16



Plate no. 17

Plate no. 14 From the Mardam Bey Family, Dhour Choueir, Lebanon, 1927, anonymous photographer

Plate no. 15 Woman Dressed up as a Man, Tripoli, Lebanon, not dated, photographer: Muhamad Arabi

Plate no. 16 Fatma Ahmad al-Hussein Dressed up as a Man, Egypt, 1926, photographer: Hilmy

Plate no. 17 Marguerite Dressed up as a Man, Jerusalem, Palestine, 1935, anonymous photographer



Plate no. 18
no. 21



Plate no. 19



Plate no. 20



Plate



Plate no. 18 *Adeline Abiad*, Haifa, Palestine, 1920-1930, anonymous photographer

Plate no. 19 *Woman Dressed up as a Man*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1920-1930, anonymous photographer

Plate no. 20 *Untitled*, Tripoli, Lebanon, not dated, photographer: Muhamad Arabi

Plate no. 21 *Woman Dressed up as a Man, Egypt, not dated*, Anonymous photographer

It seems that photographs of women appropriating masculine attributes through cross-dressing was a common practice among most of the local *bourgeois* women around the Middle East region as elsewhere at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. In *La mode à la garçonne, 1900-1925: une histoire sociale des coupes de cheveux*, Steven Zdatny explores women's haircuts of the 1920s as artefacts which according to Zdatny, communicate on the production of culture (174). Short hair was the focus of a social controversy in that it not only marked a radical rupture with the 'peasant' style of the previous era and was evocative of what was commonly termed in France "les années folles," but was also a symbol of women's emancipation (Ibid.). Short hair whether it was understood as a rejection of femininity or a pursuit of a new commodity was definitely a sign for women's comfort and liberation not only in France but also elsewhere as we can see in most of the photographs of the 1920s and 1940s Lebanon. In exploring the photographs in plates nos. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21, this section investigates the terms of gendered representation as a process wherein women appear as flappers and in à la *garçonne* attire and postures.⁷ *Modern girls* in Lebanon, as elsewhere in the 1920s, appropriated masculine attributes in photographs as a means of expanding the public role of women. Through these plates, I examine the ways in which novel ideas about women's roles in society and politics were disseminated through the medium of photography, and how significant, radical changes occurred in female fashion, appearance, and sexual identity. Additionally, this particular use of photography points to the ways in which local women responded creatively to gendered stereotypes and contributed to a reconfiguration of the modes of being a woman in a rapidly modernizing world. The photographs above, most of them taken by amateur photographers, can be seen as opening potential new avenues for gender research in the way they challenge the social institutions – religions, state, and family – that regulated the place of women within patriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa (*plates nos. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21*). Social resistance is evident in the representation of women in these photographs. For most of them, the photographer is unknown, yet I suggest that we may acknowledge the agency of the women who posed for the camera. Through cross-dressing and masquerading à la *garçonne*, these subjects explore their female subjectivity thus giving rise to the expression of a feminine imaginary, liberated from dominant norms of gendered self-presentation. In *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism,*

⁷ Following *La Garçonne*, a French novel by Victor Margueritte that was published in the 1920s.



and Self-representation, Chadwick and Ades see visual production as an opportunity to reconsider the women as part of a larger project which is bound up with self-representation and directs more attention to the practices of individual women (18). In looking at the different ways women were represented in the photographs as primary signifiers, the photographs can be interpreted as expressions of women's desire. This approach establishes new parameters within which women photographers can explore the ambiguous relationship between female individuality and its representation. We read the photographs as an expression of the possibility of a feminine imaginary enacted. The photograph not only projects how femininity is represented as a lived experience but also how female subjectivity is produced through new narratives. Femininity becomes the site of cultural mediations, the sign of political and social challenges. It assigns new meanings to female subjectivity. Femininity as a masquerade is a notion that was first theorized in the late 1920s. According to "Womanliness as a Masquerade," an essay written by the psychoanalyst Joan Rivière in 1929, masquerading enables women to negotiate a subject position within patriarchy (cited in Chadwick and Ades 1998: 23). Masquerading of femininity enables the woman to assume a place within a masculine space and to challenge the rational parameters of the traditionalists. These photographs suggest an urgent political stake in the struggle to place themselves within their social contexts.

Conflicting thoughts on women's activities and their status within their communities were debated in the journals circulating in the Middle East at the time. In *Fatat al-sharq fee hadarat al-gharb*, Abdel Rahman Shahbandar (1880-1940), a prominent Syrian nationalist and a leading opponent of the French Mandate argues:

It is not education, nor knowledge, nor high-rising buildings, nor wider roads, nor faster vehicles, nor the other invented technologies that determine the nation's entry in the era of civilization and progress, it is rather the woman's awakening and her social status that will determine a Nation's entry in modernity (33).

Establishing a relationship between women's liberation and a Nation's entry into modernity was the goal of many women in 1920s Lebanon and Syria, such as Julia Dimashkiyya, Leila Fawwaz, and Salima Abi Rashed, to name just a few. They were eagerly calling for the necessary social change through their writings and their lectures: "... a woman is capable of following a man's suit in the majority of life's tasks," wrote Salima Abi Rashed in the opening of the first issue of her periodical, *Fatat Lubnan* (1914: 5). Dimashkiyya, Fawwaz and Rashed all emphasized the importance of women's education in order to enter modernity while stressing women's education as an essential condition for the Nation's entry into modernity (*Ibid.*). Dimashkiyya, on the other hand, encouraged women to participate in men's work by occupying positions within the political sphere (Fares Ibrahim 1970: 34, 50).



She contributed to education in organizing literary gatherings at the West Hall, the American University of Beirut. In addition to publishing articles in local and regional journals, women in Lebanon and Syria launched a significant number of women's journals. The interest in higher education and the increase in knowledge it brought about became popular among women who would frequently hold books in their poses in photographs of this period in order to demonstrate their new interests. Despite the rising opposition movements who felt threatened by women's ascendance, proponents of the women's liberation movement continued their efforts in organizing lectures and manifestations. Determined and highly involved women such as Nazik al-Abed, Emma Lteif Mukayyed, 'Adila Beyhum, Labiba Philip Thabet and Nour Hamadeh launched their own associations, each with a different goal to better women's circumstances (*Ibid.*: 119). In the same year during which the conference on women's rights was organized in Beirut, Nazira Zeineddin published her first groundbreaking book *Al-soufour wa al hijab (Veiling and Unveiling)* followed by *Al fatat wa al shuyukh (The Girl and the Religious Men)*. Neither of Zeineddin's books circulated without causing turmoil in the region. Another unconventional statement at the time was Rose Ghorayyeb's (1951: 7) rejection of beauty as the only virtue for women. In her article published in *Sawt al-Maraa (The Woman's Voice)* she posits: "Beauty is not the only virtue for women. If beauty is paralleled with ignorance and lameness then I reject beauty as a virtue for women."

These expressions were manifest in the positions, attitudes and attire of the women in the photographs explored in this paper that shed light on the relationship between modernity and femininity. The representation of women as metaphors for change was the focus of this paper in which I attempted to explore Marie al-Khazen and her contemporaries as part of a cosmopolitan sensibility that reveals the region to be far more international than one might have imagined. Caught between projecting a self-image of the cosmopolitan woman and one of the traditional Bedouin, her photographs provide a rich field for tracking the ambiguities of the modern. The change of attire, position and attitude was viewed positively as an entry into a modern era. In this line, I considered the figures of the cosmopolitan and the Bedouin ambivalent. Yet, the female figure can be understood not only as the mediating force between the old and the new but the desire for cultural differences and the desire for cultural integration. The juxtaposition of the two photographs in which al-Khazen is depicted in one as the cosmopolitan subject in the other as the Bedouin subject, can also dissolve the dichotomy between the West and the non-West by examining how women are linked to this relationship. In her self-portraits, Marie al-Khazen projects an image of a woman striving to become an urban subject by supporting evolution and progress, yet she is conscious of the uniqueness of her own culture and the necessity to preserve it. It is the education of women and their mastery of knowledge that was



coded as a means of entering modernity. In this respect, it is not the woman wearing European dress who is modern but the one who has acquired a mastery of knowledge and a refined taste as demonstrated in Marie al-Khazen's *refracted* vision through her photographs.

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