

## Women's literary salons and Societies in the Arab World

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### ABSTRACT

*The tradition of women's literacy circles in the world dates back to pre- Islamic period when the eminent literacy figure Al- Khansa, would stand in the 'Ukaz market in Mecca, reciting her poetry and airing her views on the scholarship of others. At a societal level, the Christian missionaries supported by European led to the creation of a formal system of education for girls, who had until this period received little or no education. Thus the idea that girls should receive an education so as to afford those better marriage prospects and to provide them with educates means in which to educate their children. At this point in time, the range of subjects offered to women was limited.*

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### 1. Introduction

The tradition of women's literacy circles in the world dates back to pre- Islamic period when the eminent literacy figure Al- Khansa, would stand in the 'Ukaz market in Mecca, reciting her poetry and airing her views on the scholarship of others. From this, a culture of literacy criticism emerged among Arab women, under the Umayyad dynasty, Sukaynah Bint Al Ausayn established. The salon evenings, run by women but attended by both men and women, provided a unique opportunity to have discussion about social, political and literary trends of the day.

**Women and the education:** The educational reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period of sweeping of social, economic and political transaction, resulted from various under current occurring at different levels within the realms of the Ottoman Empire from the Syria to the Africa. Theses tends were largely attributed to the Increased European presence in the region and their secular ideas. At a societal level, the Christian missionaries supported by European led to the creation of a formal system of education for girls, who had until this period received little or no education. Thus the idea that girls should receive an education so as to afford those better marriage prospects and to provide them with educates means in which to educate their children. At this point in time, the range of subjects offered to women was limited. By the middle of the century, a sense of awareness and obligation for intellectual and social consciousness, especially the appreciation of women's plight, and the struggle for a voice in society became visible and public. Ideas of educational reform and feminism were also occurring in the Arab world, with the Syrian writer and scholars, Butrus al- Bustani in Lebanon among the first to advocate women's right to education in 1847. By 1924, Art and science faculty at American university began accepting applications from women, the norm that knowledge rather than ignorance prevents women's dignity and morality. In the face of confinement and exclusion from the education system, middle-class women overcame their exclusion and marginalization from the society, holding informal study circles in their family homes.

**Women and the public sphere:** Women of the middle and upper classes were confined to the domestic sphere and the vast majority remained unseen and unheard in public life. Necessity afforded female members of the lower and rural classes slightly more freedom, as they were needed to work the land in order to support their families. Women's issues began to emerge from the back ground slowly. However, the majority of feminist writers were men, and the presence of women activists in the public sphere was virtually nonexistent. The salon and its male participants, many of whom were well known intellectuals, provided them with a means in which to express their ideas and opinions in private, accessing the male- dominated public sphere through their lively discussions and debates.

**Women and the Arab cultural renaissance:** The Arab Renaissance was an endeavor to reach a compromise between contemporary practices similar to those in Europe and shared Arab heritage, in the hope of shaping a new vision for an Arab society in transaction. The relation between women's literary saloons and the Arabs awakening, as it was referred to, is of paramount importance. Women came to realize the strong's bond between the literary movement was key to liberating the collective consciousness from the traditional norms that had stunted their progress. Men also began to acknowledge the responsible of women's emancipation to national liberation and development at this time, and there is no doubt that increased interactions between male and female intellectuals within literary circles made an invaluable contribution. The tradition of women's printing and press, an integral part of middle class circle and the renaissance was also intervened with the literary saloon. It was worth noting that this publication did not focus solely on women's issues, but also those related to the renaissance and nationalism.

**The Salon:** The French word, salon, which was first uttered in seventeenth century, comes from the Italian word Sala, used to define a large reception hall or reception room in a private residence. Later it was used when referring to social gathering in 19<sup>th</sup> century France.

**The First Saloon:** The history of the literary Salon in the Arab world, of which little is known, dates back for longer than

one would expect. Sukayna bint Husayan, began running her salon centuries during the Umayyad dynasty, well before the idea was first introduced in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. She was highly regarded woman of great intelligence, and an expert in fashion and literature. She was the first woman to open her house to male and female guests.

**An Evening spent in the salon:** Unlike Salon sessions in England, which took place during the day or over several days the salons in cities such as Cairo, Jerusalem and Aleppo were usually held in the evening or at night in the family homes of Salonieres one of the less well-known salons is Beirut, for example, was convened on 3 consecutive full –moon nights each month where male and female guests stayed awake until dawn, enjoying the entertainment and lively literary discussions. The tone and topic of discussion were usually at the discretion of the Salonieres or hostesses, who administered the conversation of course, every salon was slightly different, but most evening offered a mix of serious and lighthearted conversation with musical entertainment in some cases. Chess and card games were played, and complicated poetry competition took place, wine and Araq flowed freely; participants sang, danced, and listened to records played in a paragraph.

## 2. Notably literary salons and the societies

**Marrash's Salon:** The first salon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival movement was run from the house. She shared with her husband in Aleppo. The habitual gathering offered a private realm in which male and female guests could mingle, network,

and discuss the fashionable topics of the time. Marrash would often entertain her guests by singing and playing the piano.

**Nazli Fadil Salon:** Nazli Fadil was one of the first women to receive the tradition of the literary salon and contributed immeasurably. To the cause of women's emancipation in the Arab world. She began to invite guests to her Cairo Salon towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although the absence of the female participants in her salon evening should be noted.

**Katy Antonius Salon:** Katy Antonius ran what has been described as the focal point of Jerusalem social life from the home she shared with her husband. The celebrated Arab nationalist, George Antonius- during the mandate period. The Salon provided local journalists, officials, officers, politicians and European diplomats with an opportunity to network and discuss the latest literary, social and political issues, her parties have been describes as elaborate affairs with evening dress, Syrian food and dancing on the marble floor.

**Modern day Salons:** In the 1960's women and their ideas started to become the part of the mainstream culture, and thus the important role of women- run salons declined in the importance. In 2010 a new weekly Salon evening for young male and female writer and literary enthusiastic was launched in the basement of a hotel in Damascus. The popular event held on Monday evenings, named Bayt-al-Qasid, is an opportunity for new voices rather than established poets of writers, and attracts both Syrians and foreigners.

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