

Rural Life and Social Change in the 1929 Collection 'Ghosts of the Village' (*Ashbah al- Qaryah*) by Karam Mulhim Karam (I)

[Vida rural y cambio social en la colección 'Fantasmas de la aldea'
(*Ašbāh al-Qaryah*, 1929) de Karam Mulhim Karam (I)]

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Resumen: Las historias de Karam Mulhim Karam (1902-1959) anteriores a 1930 documentan la evolución de varias clases y grupos culturales en Líbano durante el mandato del último periodo otomano y del francés. Estas historias, entre otros rasgos, muestran los papeles de la cristiandad maronita, como núcleo sin tacha para el libanés corriente, pero también como instrumento diseñado por algunos clérigos pícaros para conseguir dinero de los fieles. Estas historias tocan asuntos macro-históricos de la evolución de Líbano y de su identidad: el país como espacio ininterrumpido, la represión por parte de los turcos otomanos durante la Primera Guerra Mundial y las corruptas conexiones de los maronitas con Francia y otros poderes occidentales a través del comercio y de la cultura.

Abstract: The pre-1930 stories by Karam Mulhim Karam (1902-1959) document the evolution of varied classes and cultural groups in Lebanon in the late Ottoman, and early French mandatory, periods. These stories, among other features, show the roles of Maronite Christianity as a core for intactness for ordinary Lebanese, but also as an instrument crafted by some rogue clergy to extract wealth from the faithful. These stories did touch upon macro-historical issues of the evolution of Lebanon and its identity, such as the country as a continuous place, repression by the Ottoman Turks during World War I, and the self-corrupting linkages of the Maronites to France and other Western world powers through commerce and culture.

Palabras Clave: Líbano, Maronitas. Macro-historia. Cultura. Lengua francesa.

Key Words: Lebanon. Maronites. Macro-history. Culture. French language.



1. “Jabbur in Bayrut”

The Challenged Organic Society

This opening, framing, story of Karam Mulhim Karam’s 1929 collection follows the fate of a late-adolescent alienated from his village’s poverty and traditionalism who descends to Bayrut to make his fortune. There he is initiated into sexuality by an older, experienced Egyptian dancer, degenerates into a thief and a quasi-murderer, is jailed for three years and then returns to his life of hard labor in the Mountain village he had rejected.

The opening scene – light, deft and sublime at one and the same time – is a snap-shot of a typical poverty-stricken Mount Lebanon village of the late Ottoman period that is becoming caught between two world-views: (a) the traditional that finds enough in the old hard-working, simple ways of the village to make life worthwhile, as against (b) new impulses to migrate to cities in the Ottoman Empire, or elsewhere, to make money. In this first superb scene, Karam lovingly depicts a gathering of 15 villagers, among them children, sitting on a moon-bathed village bench that has been abraded by Time: they are intensely listening to a grandfather, al-Hajj Saji’, narrate his memories of field, nature, crop-guards, of tight-knit kin-groups and other village matters of the old days. No other old-timer can match his masterly narrative as he transmits to a new generation of the assembled rural collectivity the hard but harmonious life of their predecessors. But this way that Karam loved is now coming under challenge: the traditional circle is broken by the return from Bayrut of a well-dressed youth who has made quick money there after starting out as only a peddler of olives and olive oil. The folk-narrator Grandfather is somewhat glad for him that young Shamil has been able to break out of the drudgery of his father who must exhaust himself every day plowing, carrying sacks of olives, and repairing stone walls between fields, just for a few piasters. But now the youth’s glamorous tales of city splendors and quick wealth there have turned the villagers away forever from the old, worthwhile narrative of the village of which the Grandfather is the transmitter: “the nightingale had silenced the blackbird.”

Is it then just the sour grapes, the old man’s sense that he is also losing his social authority as his adolescent grandson Jabbur declares his wish to go in his turn to get the money there, that makes him denounce the new narratives from Bayrut as “tales of devils and abnormal spirits”? How adroitly the opening of this novella sets a plurality of perspectives and openness of outcomes, the right inscrutable tone of uncertainty that will keep us reading in suspense to the very end! The returned, relaxed Shamil assures the gaping villagers that Bayrut is better than a thousand Americas for those who know how to work it. Bayrut is “racing along the path of civilization with the speed of an artillery-shell”: the listening villagers ask if “Bayrut is the place most

like Paradise?" – a question that Karam will have answered indeed by the story's end.

It is for the time not easy to know with which party – insular satisfied traditionalism or the new faction of acquisitive modernists – to stand. Overall, the reader at first tends to take the side of the young man and his frustration with the poverty-stricken society of the village. The control exercised not just by parents but by extended kin there reads as suffocating. In order for him to leave to Bayrut, custom demands that grandson Jabbur ask the permission of his grandfather, which he, necessarily, does not do. When his having left is noticed, the Grandfather flies into a long-term rage. He invests emotionally in Jabbur failing to make it: he will not have enough resilience in him to withstand the unremitting shocks that Bayrut is sure to mete out to him, and when he will soon return the Grandfather intends to beat him with a staff that Karam makes clear he can still wield with strength though well into his seventies [AQ 23-24].

After Karam's solid and skilled evocation of the village, we are left waiting for how Bayrut will turn out after Jabbur goes down there. While portraying the Bayrut (of the 1910's? early 1920's?) as a place into which it needs luck and desperate energy for a country lad to implant himself, Karam does not offer too much negative information for a time. The Grandfather believes that Bayrut has none of the humane kindness of the village but Jabbur meets with young migrants there from his own Shuf village who help him get a first menial job and settle in: Karam makes clear that some sort of successor to the lost village community does get recreated in the city by relatives and other ordinary youth living cheek by jowl in the same cluster of streets. And it is not just relatives or the same age-group in cities. The job is swung by the wife of the proprietor of his first hotel who does want to help people because she has not forgotten, and does not let her husband forget, what it was like for them when they first came to Bayrut [AQ 18-23]. On the other hand, the proprietor of the inn at which Jabbur is given the job is portrayed as a serial verbal bastardizer of those under him. Ottoman-era or early 1920s Bayrut, then, has a diverseness of humans. The old friends from the countryside he meets counsel Jabbur to go back: as against the village, "here in these lands of emigration no one helps another: in this city sons eat their fathers, only wolves surround you, ... interest comes before everything", Bayrutis smile only to those they hope can be resources for their own benefit [AQ 20]. But their own aid proves that individuals come in many types that Karam minutely gradates, and that they have and make choices about how they will treat others in the City they share with them. Thus the events of Karam's fiction refute facile social determinism: individuals have some input into what sorts of lives they and other individuals will build.

Sexuality with an Egyptian Dancer

The 18 year-old Jabbur likely had had no sexual encounter in the puritanical environment of his village; his first experience comes in his hotel in Bayrut with an Egyptian singer more than twice his age. Her vivid portrayal anticipates the earlier realist novels of the Egyptian Najib Mahfuz with their poverty-stricken lumpen-bourgeois young men and their conjunctions with vital but nauseating older women outside marriage. The Egyptian singer that Jabbur must service at the hotel is “huge-bodied, with a ready smile, her laughter billowing through the hotel. She has a tender voice, is full of coquetry and loves life.” Well past forty, she likes to call to her young men with muscular arms and brown chests: Jabbur duly becomes her latest. Karam hints that the authenticity of the Mountain Lebanon he loves is at risk of corruption through her perception of the teenager’s vigor and health “and his mountain dialect as harsh as though it had been hewn out from the depths of huge adamantine rocks” [AQ 26]. The naive mountain Lebanese teenager takes long to understand the intention of her caresses and wheedling and succumb.

Not a complete puritan, Karam sees some gain for Jabbur of physical pleasures and some progress from innocence to adulthood, but the new physicality has disgust built into it for the teenager or perhaps for Karam: the cleavage the aging woman displays to ignite the reluctant rural boy is wide enough to be a racecourse, while the two breasts hanging down from it are mountain-huge – the “indecent sight” that makes Jabbur want to bolt. Her initial overtures make plain from the outset that he is unlikely to get any long-term individual humane love out of her: “you are beautiful, strong, and [I] love good-lookers with strong bodies” – he is but the latest in a line [AQ 27]. Yet an irony of this story is that she will come to care deeply for him to the harm of her own vital interests in the doomed relationship. But beyond individuals for Karam there extend their wider groups that nourish not just them but other groups as well: her Egyptian dialect sounds “sonorous”/“lush” (“ghanna’ ”) to the ears of Jabbur and the Lebanese with whom it earns her a livelihood as an artiste.

Jabbur’s wrong first passion cannot carry through his potential for love. In his first transport with her he forgets the grandeur of Bayrut and the wealth he had been hell-bent to wrest from it: for him she is like 3,000 dinars won with effortless ease that trounce the 1,200 that Shamil had brought back [AQ 29]. (This is one of Karam’s hints that servicing as a gigolo had been among the ways that the economical Shamil had built up the initial capital for his incredibly quick success in hard Bayrut: cf. AQ 35, 44). Money early raises its head in this deformed doomed “love” that now sets off the gradual ethical decline and final disintegration of Jabbur in Bayrut. Given that he now has the position of being her lover, she feels obliged to keep him from her good

income from her night club to a certain level of style. Karam offers a sharp snapshot in which the ragged Jabbur wins the respect he wants from the clothing-merchants who overcharge as he buys more and more of the finest imported garments from them [AQ 30-31].

The deterioration of his personality is now rapid in the City. Now holding the amber prayer-beads of a gentleman, and strutting through the streets of Bayrut as though he were its governor, Jabbur disdains to greet any village relatives who cross his path [as against the help they gave to get him his first foothold there]. He writes no letters to his parents and relatives back in the village, who are informed of his unexplained wealth – as sudden as that which Shamil won – by the village's sons settled in the city. He now has chosen to snap finally his link to the community that produced him given that he is now "at the summit." (That "proud soaring oak-tree" his grandfather has also forbidden all villagers, even those with blood-relation, to mention the now-dead Jabbur to him). Karam offers passages of deadly irony to trace the degeneration. The singer now so insanely devoted to him is astonished at the complete change that has come over Jabbur. All the new clothes she has bought him have brought out for the first time his full succulent physical charms. "He was no longer that rough and rather stupid youth. Now he is mature, charming, nimble and graceful in his movements, a person with political intelligence ["dahiyah" – which also means 'sly dog'] well able to play with people's minds and turn the tables on the most able and intelligent. Whoever looked at him would be unable to realize that he had ever been any sort of stranger in Bayrut" [AQ 35]. It was a savage slash by the nativist Karam at the metropolis he charged was a corrupt threat to the authenticity and good sense of the Mountain Lebanon he championed – anybody would have to be a true stupid greenhorn indeed to go on to ape such urban degenerates. Read more narrowly, it is not true that Jabbur is becoming wiser in Bayrut for he is losing the hope of intimacy from those portions of his life in which he is now deceiving and exploiting others for the small payoffs of games that can quickly turn to his own harm.

Karam Mulhim Karam's fiction can make us feel compassion, and indeed angry solidarity, for wretched women even when they bring some of their sufferings upon themselves. We feel with the Egyptian dancer Bahijah as Karam traces Jabbur's mounting exploitation of her. The liason progressively destroys her. Karam is meticulous in sketching minute gradations in the growth of Jabbur's immoral abuse. As he pressures more and more of her earnings out of her, Jabbur is taken over by a group of young parasites who while elegantly garbed often go to sleep on empty stomachs. These wasters introduce him to gambling. As he starts to lose, Jabbur at first is reluctant to risk Bahijah's earnings to continue but his new friends insist. The exchange in

which Bahijah tries to persuade him to stop gambling is skilled, subtle dialogue by Karam. She does not mind so much here that she is now giving until it hurts: what she wants is for him to put the money flowing from her aside for his own future – his long-term interest is her concern because she has come to love him. Here Karam almost considers if even some deformed relations have some potential within them. But she has lost agency over her life and acts – Jabbur now has “authority” over her, she is now his slave not his mistress. When he tells her to sell the jewelry that cover her wrists and breast she does, as she would swallow poison if he ordered. Since she now is staying in Bayrut beyond the contracted four months to remain with Jabbur, Bahijah has lost any capacity to bargain with the night club, and now has to sit for drinks with her most disreputable admirers [AQ 36-39]. Thus, the structure of her interaction with the younger man repeatedly destroys any potential for one-on-one love in it. Soon Jabbur is renting with more of Bahijah’s money the love of a young mistress more appropriate for his age, detonating a melancholy and very public altercation with the singer that leads the police to jail Jabbur for the first time when he draws a revolver. Without her jewelry, and too run-down in appearance now to hold down a job in Bayrut, the ageing Bahijah returns to Egypt where Karam implies she will no longer be able to earn enough to provide for her future [AQ 41-42].

Jabbur’s Final Downfall in Bayrut

Interaction with Jabbur was to prove more nearly fatal for an ageing prostitute at a squalid wine-shop. Upon his release, Jabbur finds work at an inn: it has good decor, the uniforms of its staff are elegant, and the clientele well-heeled, but Jabbur destroys his chances when he is relapses into gambling in its casino. Karam traces with skill the evolution of an abnormal psychology. Having cadged many loans from other bearers at the inn, Jabbur still loses. He now becomes a thief to support his habit. First Jabbur filches an insignificant 15 dinars from hundreds in the sagging pockets of a sleeping gambler who had won big in the casino: yet luck again avoids him at the green table. After scruples about becoming a serious thief, he steals 100 dinars from the purse of a woman from Hayfa who has inherited: the staff beat him and boot him out with contempt although she spares him arrest and prison. With the doors of all hotels now closed to him, Jabbur avoids the shame of begging when he somehow gets work at a wine-shop frequented by violent criminals in which work outcast women who shriek and brawl and sell themselves. Karam takes us inside the thoughts and pain of Jabbur as the scant tips he can cadge out of those customers fail to turn his luck at the gambling-tables. He now needs cheap alcohol to get him through his ongoing search for riches through gambling. He now gets easily confused, he may not hear customers or

misunderstands those he does, so that the proprietor of the inn often gives him a buffet to make him alert. To the end there are fleeting scruples and gradations in his fall. One night when all others have gone home from the inn, he puts a knife to the throat of one of its female workers in the cellar and tells her to take her bracelets off her wrists: he still prefers to define it as a loan or investment by her since he will not just pay them back but give her half his takings if he wins at the table. But the 38-year woman vehemently refuses to surrender the gold bracelets that are her only resource for her old age, he stabs her in the waist, and she falls. He then removes the bracelets.

Karam takes us through the surging depths of the mind of this chronic gambler who is becoming a killer. He had made a good offer to the woman that she might lend him the bracelets but she had forced him to take them by force. He had not meant to kill her with that knife-thrust: if she died the responsibility would fall much more on her than anyone else. Why had she stubbornly refused? Had she no confidence in him? What need had she had of these bracelets to dazzle people's eyes with them by keeping them just an inert wealth on her wrists that had not been benefiting anyone?

In his introduction to *Ghosts of the Village* Karam had promised his readers "unpretentious photographs" of village life [AQ 5], and this collection does deliver richly-toned realistic portraits that catch forever rural and urban societies when they once long ago faced sweeping change. But he also takes us inside disturbed, grotesque sensibilities and interactions of surrealistic horror by them with general society that recall some passages in Dickens and Dostoyevsky. With the body of the woman out of sight in the cellar, Jabbur stays put until the wine-shop reopens and gambles the bracelets: he wins a pile of money, and his co-workers tell him to stop while ahead; but he proceeds to gamble everything away. Given that all gamblers fix their eyes on the gambling-table, no one notices the flecks of blood upon Jabbur's sleeve. Throwing in and losing the last coin he possesses, Jabbur wants to commit suicide. He tries to flee to Damascus on foot but is arrested and brought to court.

At his trial, the prostitute who somehow managed to live testifies against him. Karam does not make her an attractive person. Her make-up, thick as a mask at a masquerade, only points the hard, withered texture of her cheeks and lips [AQ 49]. But, however she earned her money, it was her only insurance from her youth for her last years, and we stand militantly with her as she shouts out "may God never grant him success!" Yet Jabbur had never become completely evil and wishes as he pleads guilty in the dock that he could look at her in a silent plea for forgiveness [AQ 53]. He is sentenced to three years in a harsh Ottoman-era prison.

The last movement of the story is the return to the village of the prematurely aged Jabbur, now one of its burnt-out “ghosts” whom Bayrut felled, where the authority of traditional society as represented in his grandfather is clamped down upon him anew. The collectivism to which he is again submitting has affinities to some celebration of traditional societies by Thomas Hardy: still, all the tears of he, his parents and his grandfather Saji’ in the reconciliation may be too much for our taste as moderns or post-moderns. That Saji’ does not beat him after all, bears the grandfather out that “the village is more kind and just to us” than a city, but one sees how the things that first turned Jabbur off remain. The peasant axe, pick and plow to which Saji’ now sends Jabbur back are a hard life of unremitting toil and poverty; and grandfather yet again stresses that he knew everything and was right. Yet Karam is clear that the prodigal’s healing and recovery of community can only be partial. For the rest of his life the less kindly among his fellow-villagers will question him if Bayrut met his expectations, and the sufferings there that bent his back will make him hold apart from others forever, although the therapeutic labors to which he now races will dim the memories [AQ 55-56].

If Karam was at the opening ambiguous about where he stood between traditionalist kin and disgruntled rural youth, he has now unequivocally come out for the rural insularism of popular village society. Like Hardy, the ultra-literate Maronite novelist in 1929 (at least here) had opted for an authoritarian countryside traditionalism so simple and totalist that it could not accept new elements from the West or even from just a wider modernizing Middle East. His son ‘Isam’s memory of Karam was of an insularist stay-at-home. He had to live in Bayrut some of his time for his publishing purposes, but in every week always took himself up into his beloved Jabal (Mountain) Lebanon. In this family narrative, Karam Mulhim Karam never traveled beyond Lebanon. His two sons begged him, if he would not go to Europe, at least to take them for a holiday to Egypt. But he went to even another Arab country only once, when a strike at the offices of his literary magazine *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* forced him to Damascus to bring out an issue or two from a press there.

2. “Razzuq has Returned from America” [AQ 58-95]

This story traces further aspects of the harm that Karam argued interacting with the West, as well as cities in the Middle East tinted by it, did young Mountain Lebanese. The two main characters are (a) Samha’, the daughter of a loving widow whom her husband bequeathed a fair quantity of land and (b) Razzuq, the poor and socially disgruntled son of a farmer with much less property whom poverty drives off to the Americas to seek his fortune. The main issue is if the drive of both for a one-on-one lifelong marriage can survive a temporary separation. This is also one of Karam’s more anti-clerical

stories in which he assailed a category of Maronite clerics as malevolent exploiters and profiteers.

The Nourishing Village Matrix

As two cousins, the ties of close kinship and tight local community in their small village have, from childhood in public games onwards, nourished in Samha' and Razzuq a craving to marry. No two families are quite alike in Karam's fiction: the story opens with a focussed portrait of the family unit that Samha' has with her mother. Although she lacks a father and has lost three sisters, the unit is nourishing Samha's growth. The mother, cherishing the only one who now remains to her, spares all but light house-duties to Samha', who is duly growing into a good-natured and dreamy adult. From the outset, though, Karam makes clear that her never-ending dream – to marry cousin Razzuq – is an ideological project that will need not just her devoted commitment, but a range of settings and conditions that may not come together. Sacramental Christian ideas of lifelong monogamous love, which the somewhat secularized Karam still had as a Catholic who continued to practise to his death, clearly underlay the assumption of the Samha' character that exchanged statements of love should proceed to a lifelong marriage. The high value of such a drive for relationship can justify heavy sacrifices of self in order to carry it through to fruition and then keep it going. For himself, Karam respects this ideology as a striving but implies from Samha's own dialogue that it can go beyond what is rational and claim too high a price if that final union is delayed too long [AQ 73].

So long as Razzuq has not left Lebanon, Karam sounds to stand with his anger against the feudal social stratification in Jabal villages. From Razzuq's seething mind, Karam put together a portrait of the village's feudal amir ("mir") as a hierarchical bully and sexual molester liable at any moment to become a "violent storm that sweeps down upon, bends, and uproots trees." Despite some formal education and a few words of French, he has remained a functional illiterate. He has inherited his feudal position from his father just as "there passed to him from this father the horse, the donkey, and the decaying black robe that he wears to weddings, funerals and when he receives the men of the [Ottoman?] State so that all can know he is a bey and the son of one" [AQ 64].

While Karam lightly paints in the personal tragedy for Samha' when she fails to dissuade Razzuq from leaving, he also focuses upon the broader problems of barren Mountain Lebanon that have long been pushing its youth to emigrate in what is a collective tragedy for the populations that live in those villages. One woman among many implores Razzuq ("you are the only one on whom I can lean") to tell her long-gone husband when he comes across him

that “his children spend night after night asking about him and if they have any father who cares about them? If this father still lives, will he not come to them? If he cannot, then why does he not write to them? Tell him we often long to see the color of a fils [a small-denomination coin] for we are starting to forget what that looks like.” These are uneducated rural people who do not even know that there are plural states in the Americas, and that Razzuq may be headed for one quite removed from another that claimed this or that lost loved one [AQ 64]. Karam implies that this breaking of sacramental union through emigration may turn out to be the meaning of separation for Samha’ also.

And in fact Razzuq will not be seeking out any Lebanese in the New World, or any human partner, but only money. While Razzuq keeps Samha’ under close observation in conversations with the villagers in his closing days in Lebanon, his love for her is only one consideration in life for him now. In a single sentence very ominous for Samha’, Karam telescopes how Razzuq’s new drive for money replaced his old drive for relationship: “Razzuq forged on across the seas, his tomorrow shining in his eyes as resplendently as a bride decked out in jewelery of the purest gold” [AQ 65]. He only seldom remembers Samha’ in Argentina, but he does, as he grows rich, mail to his parents photographs of himself in elegant suits with over-thick gold chains. He also remits them generous sums of money. A photograph from him bearing a perfunctory inscription “to the beloved Samha’ ” fuels her hopes that she will be the one he will marry when he gets back, although all young women of marriageable age in the village now want him [AQ 66].

Although known to pray, Karam kept up a fire against abuses from the Maronite church that had some affinities to the anti-clericism of the radical secularist ideologues among Lebanon’s lay-Christians. But his non-aligned, ad hoc mind was also alert to corruption and abuse from many groups of humans. While this story of Razzuq directs hammer-blows at corruption by Christian priests, and at tin-pot village feudals, it does not spare the new self-appointed counter-elite that had taken shape by the late Ottoman period.

Karam seems to have meant Razzuq to stand to some extent for a [Maronite] new bourgeoisie that had earned enough money by the arrival of the French to contend with the land-holding Maronite Church and the old rural feudal class. As the sums he remits from Argentina grow, the villagers dub him “one of the amirs (princes) of wealth” and the village’s feudal *amir*, *bey* and *shaykh* are at the fore of those who come to congratulate his parents [AQ 66]. Some sort of loosening or wider distribution of power and money could happen, but Karam pessimistically catches how new wealth – and certainly contact with Westerners to get that money out of them – can cut the upstarts off from masses they might have led otherwise. Enrichment could cut Jabal Lebanese off from both the community that produced them and the self.

Upon his return, the new transformed Razzuq strikes an attitude of aloof disdain towards the villagers. He forbids all from taking him back to the past. For him, the past has died. Only the present and the future remain for the man of enterprise and quality. Razzuq sees himself as now becoming "the lord of the lords". Who are the beys and indeed the ordinary inhabitants of the village? All of them are an obsolescent "people of tricksters and frauds, and Razzuq had learnt in the diaspora how important it is to destroy such [a reference to the radical modernist Christian Lebanese/Syrian press in the diaspora]. What was needed, then, was to organize an uprising to destroy the leaders of yesterday and the idols of the past." A "braying" Razzuq harangues the villagers that he is the new leader who will seize the tiller to steer the village to "the peak of socio-economic development" (qummat al-'imran). ['Imran is a phrase that recurs in the writings of the radically secular pan-Syrian ideologue Antun Sa'adah (1904-1949) who intellectually started out in Arabic journalism in diasporas in the Americas, and among other anti-clerical modernists in Lebanon]. The derisive villagers only stone "the reformer" and "free/liberal man" Razzuq and his advanced principles [AQ 80-81]. Overall, Karam cannot here count as from the Maronite radical modernizers since he regards the new candidate-elite and their principles, and the Latin-America-like turmoil and violence that they might usher in, as no better and perhaps potentially worse than the clergy and the established feudalism-led rural order [which was indeed to prove its adaptable staying-power in coming decades].

Yet, while anti-feudalist, the newly-rich Razzuq still trusts Lebanon's Catholic clergy.

Karam's Anti-Clericism

The Maronite church had acquired large holdings of agricultural land by the time that the French entered Lebanon after WW1. In his 1929 collection of stories, Karam characterized the religion of all but one of the priests he depicted as an instrument that they crafted to get money. His view of the popular Christianity of rural Maronites was more positive but he still saw that pietism as a nexus that could open ordinary people to the exploitation by their enemy caste – the corrupt among the clerics. Karam's two sons were clear in 2004, though, that he stayed a Maronite Christian who was trying to clear flaws from the face of that Church, not destroy it.

Karam cherishingly traced pietism of rural Maronite women which he juxtaposed, though, with superstitions in a way that could become reductionist. An assurance from a thieving gypsy fortune-teller that her love will return from the diaspora to marry only her – "sleight-of-hand" (sha'wadhah) – heartens Samha' then to go to the church to burn candles before the altar of the Heart of Jesus and the statue of the Virgin. "I yearn to see him: I won't just

burn two candles in church but pass around the village barefoot gathering oil for the image of St Taqla.” The kneeling Samha’ beats her breast with zeal until the candles gutter, whereas the priest is ice-cold in promising to say three masses for Razzuq’s return for the money he takes from her into his capacious purse. Karam in this priest stock-character pulls off a portrait of an evil that is at its ease with the world and the humans on which it preys: “Allow me to drink this toast to such women of piety as yourself, the women of devotions who rate Fr Sim’an at his true worth and who understand that the wearing of the smock and cassock would not be enough on their own to fill the cask with wine and produce bread from the kneading-trough” [AQ 71]. Organized churches could be deformed by some into a money-making racket for Karam in this anti-clerical twinge in 1929.

Karam’s narrative makes the paraphernalia and procedures of churches in the small world of early 20th century Maronite Lebanon come alive in a multitude of sharp details. On the other hand, he also makes us aware that his ordinary Jabal Lebanese were Christian in many ways and for diverse motives in that period, as in our own – they tried to bend the clergy and the churches to get out of God what they needed for themselves or wanted for others. In this they were not always selfish. As Samha’ issues off to the Church to persuade God to bring her boyfriend home to her, her reasonably well-off mother calls after her “do not forget the poor. The poor must come before the saints: the saints always find those who will attend to them – as for the poor, who will ward off from them the ferocity and malevolence of time?” Again bending the thing her way, Samha’ agrees that she will give out some bread to the needy of the village on condition that they too will intercede with God to inspire Razzuq to return to his places of origin soon [AQ 71]. Given that Samha’s mother has considerable property, her taking thought for the poor is altruistic and kind, although her own bereavements have sensitized her to the sufferings and deprivations of others. She is not trying to use God for her own material benefit.

The Razzuq story is one of the most anti-clerical of the 100 that Karam penned. It also reads as deeply anti-Western and anti-French. Karam began to publish in 1931 a political weekly *al-‘Asifah* which he stopped after two years in which the French authorities time and again applied their restrictive laws against it. He was an opponent of French mandatory rule

Having become alienated from the villagers he grew up among, Razzuq wants to marry a woman with more sophistication than Samha’, and ill-advisedly decides to try his luck in Bayrut. Making money in Argentina left him little time over to improve his ability to relate to the fair sex there, so he chooses to use the services of a priest – still one common procedure when Maronite males married in the 1920s. “Razzuq has Returned From America”

links malfunctions in the procedures for marriages to both corruption among the clergy and to the cultural Francification that was widening so rapidly in the early years of French colonial rule. Karam overlooked here that in rejecting any impingement of Western influences upon such intimate experiences of the individual as marriage he was in fact very like the Maronite clerical traditionalists. Like him, the nativist Maronite priests too were decrying such deculturization from the West, albeit along with new influence or power that some France-influenced educated women were charged to have been building in the matchmaking.

The priest whom Razzuq chooses as the go-between has hundreds of photographs, but, because they necessarily will have to pay him the most, directs him to a family of handkerchief peddlers whom he presents as a family of major merchants of substance and Virtue to a Razzuq who has never known Bayrut well. The prospective bride at first places the process of negotiation on a footing that amuses the priest when she asks "and who is the customer?" "He is a young man who has just returned from the diaspora: you will drown in all the gold that he will rain down upon you, as you will much admire his pipe, his hat, his large American shoes and the foreign words and drawled accent he has now assumed" [AQ 87]. This could be not the first time that he has been directing males to this young lady, or to others of her type! The scene has triple entendres suggesting that the priest has interfered with the young woman in the past or may have fathered her, or that the mother is a former prostitute who does not need to consult her subsequent husband about off-spring that preceded him.

Without his wanting to know, Karam had veered close to the clerical Maronite nativists where he ironizes the greater weight given to candidates for marriage with French names: they are "sweeter and have greater luster". "Goods imported from Paris are more in demand than those that Lebanon offers" [AQ 85]. As the marriage goes through, Henriette takes exception to the groom's "ignoble, out of date villager name" Razzuq: "so she baptized him with a new name Roget, a pleasant younger-generation Western name." A satisfied Razzuq reflects that he cannot lose by this match given that Henriette not only has a French name but speaks French while Samha' is the "backward, ignorant, peasant daughter of the Mountain" [AQ 89]. Karam does in dissecting the ex-villager Razzuq's "reincarnation" into a West-tinted urban effendi catch here how identification with the secular West was reaching a pitch of fervor among some Lebanese that made it a sort of successor to Christianity. It shows the wide – mass – appeal atoms from French culture were winning under the early mandate that these non-Arabic names here were being seized to lift social status by a despicable "family" that is bourgeois only in its resolve to win the money needed for that by any means.

Freemasonic and radically secular attacks on the Catholic clergies in Ottoman and early mandatory Lebanon quickly degenerated into stereotypes and stock-figures. From Karam as an artist one misses in *Arwah al-Qaryah* at least, a middle category of individual clerics with mixed natures or motives. He could subtly paint scruples, hesitations and gradations into the declines of some of his lay-characters, as we have seen. As a political journalist Karam always kept engaged with the Maronite patriarch and saw at least some of his attacks upon native Catholic clerics as meant to rectify his Church and sect rather than to end them. Still, the portraits of priests in *Arwah* are all of one kind and simple. It was untrue that most Maronite priests spent their lives extracting money and abusing women. The Maronite priests who penned poetry and belles lettres and scholarship made a crucial contribution to Lebanon and the Arab World. These stories give no hint of all that.

Yet these corrupt priests of simple pure evil share it with other characters of quite different backgrounds elsewhere in Karam's fiction, such as the foreign resident who ruins the life of the young Lebanese woman he seduces in the 1936 novel *Surkhat al-Alam (Cry of the Wounded)*. His most depraved characters all have the same nightmare purity of an overpowering evil. Maybe they are a toxicity inborn in a minority of humans or brought out by nearness to any power-centers. Some may feel that divided characters who swing back and forth in indecisions make for more interesting theatre. Yet in some passages the young Karam draws us into situations of pure surreal horror where the fates of his characters do come to matter to us deeply. His account of how an evil man for his own profit entices a young Mountain Lebanese into a grotesque marriage with a prostitute is such a situation.

The Final Destruction of Razzuq

An ex-prostitute cannot long live the calm bourgeois life. Her mother had tried half-heartedly to separate her from her youth next door in the leadup to the wedding, but Henriette is soon receiving him at the large home Razzuq buys for the family he thinks he is now starting. She soon pressures Razzuq into signing over the house to her: thenceforth he is at her mercy. In progressively humiliating, breaking and finally expelling Razzuq from the home he bought, Henriette acts out the poisonous incapacity to relate positively to humans that her travesty of family life and her later profession have implanted. The interest for me in her ill-treatment of Razzuq in this section is that it also connects out to mainstream [Catholic] Lebanese life after WW1, specifically to the tension between (a) the Mountain Catholic Lebanese and (b) those in Bayrut who were opting to construct acculturated lives radically open to France and the West. As she and her boyfriend expel Razzuq, she flings quasi-ethnic abuse at him that almost claims she is acting on behalf

of an urban section of society that is becoming dominant among the Maronites. "Would you forbid me to talk? Why don't you go ahead and hit me, then? You really are an old-fashioned hillbilly. I was very wrong the day I named you Roget. You are Razzuq. Roget is given to those with taste, whereas Razzuq is for everyone who is coarse and rough like you, for every disagreeable villager fashioned from your clay... This house is now mine. Leave it. Oafs have no title to sit with ladies of my standing. You are just Razzuq. It is the name of a herder of cattle, of someone who fetches firewood... I expel you. To my mind, you have to return to the village to plow its soil. Staying there would be better for you than to come to a land/city/place (balad) that now boots you out" [AQ 91. The priest had reassured Henriette during the preliminary discussion that she would find Razzuq very handsome, "although his good looks have some of the harshness of Mount Lebanon": *ibid* p. 88].

After the priest effects a spurious reconciliation that cheats him out of his remaining money, Razzuq takes refuge in a squalid inn where his trauma makes him go blind. One day when he is walking through Bayrut wondering if he should not throw himself under the wheels of a tram, Razzuq is spotted by Samha'. "Samha', I do not deserve you. Let me proceed along my path to my grave. I have to get out of the sight of this criminal world." She replies that the heart that had loved him could not come to hate him.

After she has led him back up to the village, the two live adequately from her inherited property. "Razzuq had now become certain that happiness does not consist of rising to a level for which he was not created, but in having to embrace a heart that is gentle and feels for you."

But can Karam here – as a writer who combined (a) deep caution about change, his traditionalist feel for modest quality in established things, with (b) social critiques – resolve the problematic of personal love and marriage in a changing Maronite society? He does not seem to have believed that Christian society, at least that of the Lebanon of his day, offered any good resolution to two individuals in the position of Razzuq and Samha' in 1929. The traditionalist village after all was not free of rancor towards those who had not fitted properly into its procedures as well as its norms and its criteria of common sense. It is no organic arcadia after all. Samha' now tends the broken blind Razzuq "after she had suffered horrors for his sake." Some villagers had exulted at Razzuq's turning from her and would continue to do so: "she is a mad woman" because she had never cut him off as he had her. "She did not complain, looking after him with dedication. She was waiting for his wife Henriette to die so that he could be hers. She might wait for her whole life without this wish coming true" [AQ 94-95]. Samha''s strict Christian norms of love and marriage here build negation into the relationship of her deep and spiritual affinity with Razzuq. The letter of the story as it closes is that, within

the Maronite religious system, the prolonged interaction between the two cannot now have its fulfillment in the physical union that is the natural outcome both now want. This though it is hard to see a marriage in the formalistic arrangement into which Razzuq was tricked by three swindlers, even if one of them did wear a cross around his neck. Karam here may harbor some critique of inflexible, strict forms in Maronite Catholic ethos but he is highly inscrutable. He may have been incapable of any resolution or synthesis of the elements. A dispirited sense that the elements for potential intimate relationships cannot be brought together properly does recur in Maronite fiction.

3. “Do not Grieve for Me” (La Tintahibi) [AQ 98-134]

This is the story with the most macro-historical span in Karam’s 1929 collection, although Razzuq’s voyage from Lebanon to the New World had vividly evoked a threading of Lebanon/the Arab World into new global interactions. Its components cover many settings and issues and a variety of detailed characters. The story is about the shifting interaction between (a) Salwa al-Jundi, a poor seamstress and embroiderer who has lost her father and at the opening is struggling to keep a shack over her head, (b) Nuha Dagher, a well-off daughter of the new secular, mainly Christian elite that has been evolving around the autonomous *mutasarrifiyah* of Mount Lebanon set up in 1861, and (c) the relationship of these two Jabal women with “Wahib al-Wardi,” a young man of a respected Bayrut family. The triangular situation between them comes not from intention by any of them, but as a result of the havoc of World War I, the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish oppression in the Mountain, and then the birth of a new social order centred around Bayrut [under the French, whom Karam does not mention]. “Do not Grieve for Me” pivots around the permutations of social structure in Lebanon and in particular the division of the Lebanese and perhaps all populations into classes. Karam does, though, see a minority of individuals as able to grow in understanding of their societies and themselves and to form friendships with each other across gulfs that separate classes. However, Karam indicates that such ventures are precarious, as, though, are the health, happiness and life of all people even when born rich.

Salwa al-Jundi: Family and Poverty

Karam portrayed families of a good range. This story quickly creates one whose structuring has been deformed by death (which in any case can dog most individuals in the harsh *Jabal Lubnan* he describes). It shows how the lack of a male provider creates an economic context in which Salwa al-Jundi

and her grandmother, and the two out of five siblings who have survived to her, often could easily be made homeless, in the opening situation.

The two women have a personal plight, but Karam anchors this desperate family within a continuous history of a Lebanon that has been a political unit for a fair time. The opening focuses upon the nearby palace of Bayt al-Din built by the religiously ambiguous Amir Bashir al-Shihabi II (1767-1850), which has a dispirited and wounded look now in the sunshine when viewed through the eyes of a Salwa who is not earning enough to cover the rent of the miserable residence she shares with her grandmother. Yet Karam threads this long-standing poverty into the evolution of a collective community in Lebanon. Her soldier father had not bequeathed enough to cover even his burial, but the high-up villages in particular of Lebanon still had a generous awareness of the fellowship of death: his funeral is paid for by a local community mindful that he had been in the army of the autonomous *mutasarrifiyyah*. Both Karam and the villagers may see the garish uniforms of those troops as comic opera, as though they were always out on parade on one long public holiday, and Karam may in this 1929 retrospect have regarded the powers of that Ottoman-era unit as likewise limited, while cherishing modest benefits in it. As often elsewhere, Karam looks for modest but real quality in the father figure. His mother had brought him from elsewhere to Bayt al-Din where she washed the uniforms of those troops so that he enlisted. In this most ambitious of these stories, Karam does deftly hint that the Bayt al-Din palace is more than a good piece of architecture, and that Salwa and her family stand for a continuous if changing society or quasi-people coming together, not just themselves. It is the story in which he moved closest to Lebanese particularist nationalism in 1929.

"Do not Grieve for Me" does not identify the hierarchy of the Maronite church as the elite likely to lead ordinary Catholics/Lebanese, the quasi-nation, to any political order that would achieve their interests. Now Karam is in anti-clerical mode once more. The heartless exploitativeness and toxic sadism of the deputy of the town's Maronite Bishop as he threatens the orphan tenant Salwa that she will either pay her rent or he will evict her from the shack brings her and her mother close to nervous breakdown. The phrases of this story link what this priest does to humans with the rites of religion: for the Bishop "anyone who dares wrong his rights to prompt rent will be eaten by fires, not those of Hell because they do not restore wronged rights to those have them [ie. the clerics], but the flames of prison that rise up eternally to torture" [AQ 99]. Here religion is deformed to validate social structure, and extraction in anti-community. Typically of his dualities and qualifications, though, Karam hints here that the wide land-holdings of the Bishop may have originally been bestowed on a predecessor by the Shihabi amirs in the period

of their wide-extending political power [argued by particularist nationalists in the 1920s as having set off the progression to the post-1920 Greater Lebanon state]. [So is Salwa al-Jundi, then, just imagining that the symbolic Bayt al-Din site has pain in it wider than her?]

The dialogues in which the deputy of the Bishop tries to bastardize Salwa into paying are a bit uneven. Some excellently catch the Deputy as a skilled social politician who carefully calibrates his ill-treatment so as to avoid alienating important segments of the faithful. She asks him to give her a week's grace until the son of the shaykh pays her for the woolen pull-over she has knitted for him. "This is talk I have never stopped hearing for the past month, and yet still you have not paid. Whenever I talk to your grandmother on the matter she refers me to you. Hand over the sum or quit the house. In this township there are many who are looking for lodgings in it. Our compassion for you was holding us back from pressuring you. But now nobody could blame us!" (He knows exactly when it is politick to expel). Here Karam catches the delicate balance and swing of this church official's considerations that make him present final expulsion of them as kindness to the many people in Bayt al-Din who urgently need homes to live in, whereas that social crisis for him only matters as something to drive up rents. But some of the Deputy's outbursts may be too crude. "I asked you not to address words such as 'mercy' and 'compassion' to me. These are words I do not understand. They have filled up my two ears until I have become like a crocodile towards them." Would that social politician have put that verbally clear a noose around his own neck and that of his institution? On the other hand, the propertied Church turns on like a machine that grinds down the weak. "Pity only makes for losses. The simple word 'compassion' does not make candles illuminate the churches. The poultry at the Episcopate headquarters will not live if we fed them with compassion instead of darnel seed. And where would *we* find *our* morsel if compassion were all we were paid for our labors?" [AQ 100-101]. He expels for the clergy's material benefit, but he also relishes expelling for itself.

The scorching anti-clericism in sections of *Ghosts of the Village* could pass ammunition to the struggle of some modernistic, educated Maronites in this period to wrest social and political leadership from the Maronite Church: it was a construct on that plane. Still, Karam may also have drawn for his portraits of bad priests on an immemorial folk-alienation in the Jabal from the clergy. Salwa al-Jundi is no member of any bourgeoisie save fleetingly later in the story, and Karam does make us feel that in her resistance to the Bishop's Deputy she loathes and fears she does not fight for her and her grandmother only. Salwa is saved from expulsion when the beautiful and sophisticated Nuha Dagher pays her in advance to do some embroidery for her fiancé which is really a tactful charity. But thenceforth more and more wealthy women pay

for such work from the skilled Salwa. When she pays her final rent to the cleric – she is to find better lodgings than a shack – he asks her not to make him threaten her again. “Pay what you owe at once, so that I am pleased with you, and the Bishop is pleased with you and God is pleased with you!” She cuts back: “God’s pleasure is enough for me”. When he comes back in a rage to the Episcopate headquarters, a woman worker there mutters “he is mad. Anger towards all is in his nature. I do not know how the Bishop can tolerate him, unless the Bishop is like him” [AQ 109-110]. Thus, Karam presents Salwa as speaking up for the Maronite common people and in particular women when she repudiates the clergy in a fairly sweeping way.

Social power that corrupts those who administer it was a source of energy in Karam’s fiction. It can simplify the personalities of those who practise it. Thus, the only priests whom Karam has offered us in *Ghosts of the Village* are as severe caricatures as those of barons calmly expelling tenants in “social realist” novels from the early “Peoples’ Republics” that Russian bayonets set up in Central Europe after WW2. We would like to get at least one good priest, or least one with a mixed character, out of Karam.

However, the faults with which he charged the Maronite Church of his day were less important for Karam in “Do Not Grieve for Me” than class divisions in his society generally considered. It is to be noted that Karam did occasionally read French translations of Soviet fiction by such writers as Maxim Gorky and Mikhail Sholokhov (*And Quiet Flows the Don*).

Class and Salwa and Nuha

“Do not Grieve for Me” offers some passages that characterize the elite that exercised delegated power in the autonomous mutusarrifiyyah of Mount Lebanon from 1860-1915 as exploitative and hostile towards the poor. Although it could cherish even aspects of pathos in that mini-polity and Karam saw it as advancing an at least potential political community of his, “Do not Grieve for Me” did not see its burgeoning elite as dedicated to uplifting the generality of Maronites/Lebanese. The new class forming in the Mountain was relaxed more than it was energetic or concerned to make things better for the poor.

The story’s disadvantaged feel that class’ indifference or hostility. Salwa’s grandmother is surprised when Nuha Daghir first calls in and shows concern that her grand-daughter seems unhappy. The grandmother “had known in Bayt al-Din many young women of the type of the one standing before her, beautiful and seductive: but... if they saw her they turned away as though they considered her rubbish..., as though they shared God’s power with Him and she were just an ant crawling under their sandals.” Sharp insight, but when Nuha enters, Salwa’s grandmother bows low to her “with awe/fear (rahbah)

because she has long been accustomed to bow to the lords" [AQ 104-105]. This poor woman has faced ageist as well as classist contempt from new elite women.

Karam's differentiation of classes in the autonomous mutasarrifiyyah of Lebanon under the Ottomans in places wanders in the direction of Marxist ideas. On the other hand, his descriptions of this maturing establishment can be fairly neutral although he seems to regard the process of secularization with some equanimity. "They are the daughters of those with high posts in the miniature state of Lebanon. They wear silk and eat well off poultry, sleep on soft beds and sing love songs and spend their lives in having fun and mocking at poverty and the poor. No book goes on the markets through which passion and infatuations course that does not have them among its eager half-crazed readers. As for books of prayer, they never open them, except sometimes as a pretense when under observation by others. They do not come to places of worship to pray to their Lord when they have no exigency to make them go. In their way of looking at things, prayer is for old women, not for women who have youth and beauty." However, some of them do attend Church to parade their beauties and win male admirers [AQ 104] [as the right-Catholic paper *al-Bashir* had long been denouncing].

The ministers, officials and commercial classes of the new Jabal, then, are no representatives or friends of ordinary Lebanese in this 1929 mood of Karam Mulhim Karam. Yet as he recreates, with vivid sweep, the imposition by the Turks of direct government upon the autonomous Mountain statelet in 1914, Karam's attitude changes. When the elite that had been developing is seen in polarization against Ottoman Turks, much more toxic and violent to the ordinary [Christian?] population, Karam does accept it as a symbol or leadership of the whole indigenous community. But in considering the transformation of Lebanon under the ruthless Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha, and during the early post-war years under the French, Karam does swing to a non-positive, cautious view of social change.

While the stories of Karam's early collection repeatedly focus social control and class differences, some of his better-hearted characters can escape such constrictions and construct friendships across class lines. Striking here is the growth of the friendship that was to become fatal between the "fastidiously groomed" Nuha Dagher and the peasant Salwa al-Jundi. Those who have wealth or who desire or extract it from those who are poorer and weaker come in several types and the personal attitudes can count with individuals who are out of the ordinary, in Karam's flexible world view.

But ability to relate to others as individuals who are discrete rather than in classes is a slow process that has to transform the self. Karam may approve Nuha's wish to do good turns to others not of her class, and her pleasant ease

that in part comes from never having had any worry about where money was to come from. But her bubbling good will as she saves Salwa and her family from eviction for the time still lacks enough insight into the human condition. Social hierarchy is still marked in the first interaction of the two women. Nuha is to transcend her social type, but Salwa in their first encounter "bowed before her as her grandmother did before." Nuha is certainly considerate and deft in giving the urgent money to Salwa within a format of employment that will not "wound" her self-respect but help her build it because it does develop into a livelihood. The relationship between Nuha and Salwa has benefits and good feelings for each as it develops, but it is WWI and the havoc it wreaked upon Mount Lebanon that brings home to Nuha the mortality and the contingency of her family, herself and her class, and indeed of all humans, that now make the two women equals. The troops of Jamal Pasha arrest all with leading positions in the Mount Lebanon statelet and deport them to Jerusalem. As the Young Turks' reign of terror in Lebanon breaks down its established communities and former friends and neighbors avoid the household whose male head has been arrested, Nuha's mother finds that only born-peasant Salwa and her brothers still call and give help in her time of crisis. The former benefactor roles are reversed as the woman whose place of residence and livelihood Nuha saved before now becomes her benefactor and "sister", and the two exchange hugs [AQ 116-117]. The sentimental tears in this set of scenes may not fit the taste of a Western literary critic. But the new relationship comes in the context of a very sharp and real focus once more by Karam upon two family micro-units and the minute ways that individuals mesh together to form a given family – and of equally meticulous small brush-strokes by him that knit the family units into the history of a whole society and country within the macro-history of the diverse, far-flung Ottoman Empire and the history of international relations and a new global explosion.

In a further, much more sweeping deportation, the Ottoman State sends not tens but hundreds marching in long columns not to the Jerusalem that was really no exile but to Anatolia, including Salim Dagher, his wife, and his daughter Nuha. All of them lose hope that they will ever get back given the reports they have heard of the massacres of the Armenians in the Eastern provinces of the Empire.

Karam and Lebanese Patriotism

Karam's sharp recreations of the natural environment of Mount Lebanon and the minutiae of its popular rural life could be serviceable for a homeland-focused Lebanese particularist nationalism. Here there arises the issue of his own attitudes to the problematics in such a polity, under which he was indeed now writing in 1929.

Karam's narrative in *Ghosts* was focusing on aspects of local life-style and also standard Arab language and culture that could bring all Lebanese together. On the other hand, he also portrayed at least their leading classes as highly disunited before the war because they had become affiliated by their sects to Western powers who were to drag the Middle East into an irrational, almost fatal havoc of global warfare. One of the *mutasarrifiyyah* figures who is about to be exiled reflects that, whatever their denials, Lebanon's Christians are indeed guilty of automatically following France or Britain or Russia according to their sects, and thus really are security risks from the point of view of the Turks. In this passage, Karam has the matter-of-fact tone of an observer attuned to reality who merely records a fact or a statement. He does not state any view of his own about the reality that membership in sects determined what stances many of Lebanon's Christians and some of its Druze adopted in international relations. In this work at least, Karam does not offer any radical objections, unlike Amin al-Rayhani, to this psychological nexus between sects and attitudes to outside powers in Lebanon-Syria. A wider scan of Karam's works to explore his attitudes to the international linkages of sectarianism could be made. But in the 1920s, at least in "Do not Grieve for Me", it was the misfortunes and sufferings of the Lebanese [Christians?] during World War 1 that concerned him rather than any ideologies of wider communities, national or global.

In depicting the Turkish military and officials who entered the Mountain during WW1 as purely evil, Karam in 1929 was contributing to a binary, dichotomizing narrative that Lebanese particularists had been evolving during the decade to delimit a coherent Lebanese people. His theme that the Turks – Jamal Pasha – deliberately set up mass famine among the Lebanese during the War to bring the refractory Mountain Lebanese under control accorded with the Lebanese nationalist discourse that took shape in the first years under the French. However, Karam hints that even the secularized *mutasarrifiyyah* elite at the time saw their detention and dangers in primal Christian terms: as the admittedly Orthodox father of Nuha Dagher puts it as the arrests of the elite get under way, "we will either be exiled or crucified" [AQ 112-113]. True, the secular elite also feels language as a community-bond [which could connect their sects to Muslims and Druze in the Mountain and its littoral], but this bond had – and the hatred of the Turks who now persecute them is fueled by this – rather linked the Fertile Crescent's Christians out into wide Arab ethnic protest in the post-Hamidian Ottoman Empire ["There was set up in 'Aliyah a martial-law court to try the Arabs. Spies spread everywhere. A father became afraid to say anything doubtful even to his own son": AQ 112]. These past political associations in tensions with the Turks would foster pan-Arab linguistic nationalism rather than a narrowed Lebanese particularist nationalism.

Karam Mulhim Karam's treatment of Turks in "Do not Grieve for Me" shows him imbibing a resolution in perception of them among Lebanese after 1914 that could stereotype. Karam does not say so in this story, but the Christian elites of Lebanon and the coast had shared deep joint endeavors and some acculturation with their Turkish peers. From the viewpoint of accurate history and artistic interest, one might have preferred that Karam could have offered at least one more nuanced Turk with mixed motives. It is unlikely that all Turkish officials or military approved either of the Committee of Union and Progress regime or of Jamal Pasha and his repression in Syria and the Mountain. Yet this quasi-novella does have historical sweep in conveying a whole society undergoing trauma and sweeping transformation through World War I. And brutal simple power with no scruples recurs as a special artistic power in Karam's fiction that can extend away out into a quasi-surrealism.

It may be impossible to fit Karam's writing into any closed ideological system, social or national. He recurring pessimism about change in society and economics did not encourage him to extrapolate nationality formation out of chaos and disintegration that set neighbors against each other. His pages set in WWI do not project any practical resistance by the Lebanese to the Turks who are bent on their harm, but rather their betrayal of each other to the Ottoman intelligence agencies. Nor does he depict very positively the rise of new strata amid the oppression who were to affiliate to the Lebanese establishment that was to develop under the French after World War II. "The War destroyed all established rank and power. It was as though it ground the earth and turned valleys into mountains, and plains into basins and slopes. The figure of power against whom few had dared to act, now became open to harm from others. Despised outcasts now won standing. An individual of a noted family guttered out and in his place rose some tramp whose origin nobody knew... The First World War was nothing but a revolution in which people leaped upon others to smash them forever." Karam also gave a thumb-nail portrait of a post-WWI Bayrut in which the survivors of the havoc, and shifty bigamous returnees from the Diaspora, plunged into a frenzied round of pleasure-seeking in order to forget the losses and pain. The sums they squandered nourished the newly rich class and inflicted a runaway loss of value upon the local currency. The mass migration of mountain Lebanese down to Bayrut left the Jabal's villages shrunken ghosts of what they had been [AQ 120-121].

Karam did not perceive much new collective community as coming together in that selfish free-for-all of the early 1920s. He did not mention either the French imperialists or the Grand Liban and its institutions and new political elite that were set up under their auspices in 1920. Yet his references to "the collectivity of the Lebanese" ("jama'at al-Lubaniyyin") as the party that had faced the Turks could validate the borders of the separate state that

had now been detached from Syria. In his long life, Karam stayed within the borders of post-1920 Lebanon.

A Triangle and its Resolution

The 1929 collection *Ashbah al-Qaryah* would still repay reading in a new century 78 years later for just its sharp portraits of social types and classes in the Mountain Lebanon and Bayrut. (This story, “Do Not Grieve for Me,” with more sweep and reach also catches the wider transformations and destruction of states and classes in macro-history from 1914). This realistic focus of Karam on the changing Lebanese societies of the earlier twentieth century still holds our interest today. But Karam also was starting to experiment with the psychological portraiture of emotions between individuals that can trigger great pain and disorder, and grotesque deformations of personality, of some independence from general society.

“Do not Grieve for Me” has in it a tragic triangle in which Salwa and Nuha love the same man. This sector depends on multiple coincidences: can the reader accept these in so naturalistic a mini-novella? In their first meeting, the rich, beautiful Nuha Dagher assigns Salwa al-Jundi some embroidering and sewing of shirts as an opening through which Salwa can get out of her poverty and build a livelihood, which she duly does. (Nuha has the skills to do such work herself, if she took the trouble). The handkerchiefs and shirts are for her fiancé who is living in Egypt. Nuha does not return from Anatolia after her father dies there in the War because the journey back would kill her frail mother. Her letters from Turkey to her fiancé in Egypt get no reply: he had heard that Nuha had died in Anatolia and journeys to South Africa to break his grief. After the War, Salwa directs a seamstress and embroidering business that employs many. A young man “Wahib al-Wardi” takes a room in a facing inn and regularly views her from his balcony. His sad, vulnerable expression is one of the things that leads Salwa to accept an offer of marriage that he conveys through the manager of the inn. After they marry, Salwa repeatedly asks her husband what once saddened him, but he asks her to respect his secret so he can forget that past now that they both “have been resurrected after being violently buried for so long” and he can love again [AQ 124]. (The bargain not to mention each others’ pasts must read as unlikely given that “Wahib” and Salwa are building so loving and intimate a marriage). A year later, Nuha Dagher, assumed to have died in Anatolia like the Armenians, knocks on the door of Salwa’s domestic home, almost broken by her bereavements and sufferings. “Wahib al-Wardi” comes home bearing a bouquet, a symbol of his happy quiet marriage with Salwa. On being introduced to Nuha, the bouquet falls from his hand. It is at once revealed that he is really Farid Mahjub,

Nuha's former fiancé: Salwa faints, and after an impossible situation commits suicide at the end of the story.

This section of the novella, its final movement, is unlikely or impossible several times over. One unlikely coincidence yes – but four or five! How unlikely that Salwa would not have mentioned even the name of her benefactor Nuha in passing at least once to a husband she loved and who loved her: they could not have interdicted their pasts to each other that totally! How unlikely that Nuha's former fiance could have assumed the name of Bayrut's prominent al-Wardi family as one device to cut off past trauma in self-exile, without being socially caught out on his return! Had Salwa mentioned the real name of her husband on her reunion with Nuha, that war-broken victim would certainly have left at once. It is worse than Oedipus being made to marry his mother. The issue then becomes if there is enough at stake in the novel, too, to keep us reading on in the face of glaring coincidences that Karam engineered to catch certain human passions in extreme form in a crisis.

I believe that Karam makes the characters matter enough to make most readers willingly suspend disbelief and proceed to the story's end. Karam takes us with fleetness and tact through "Wahib al-Wardi's" courtship of Salwa from the balcony of his inn in which he could otherwise have taken the turn of one more of the womanizers who ogled her and her women workers from those balconies. The prose remains swift-moving and assured in its feel for the calm of the happy marriage that Salwa and "Wahib" proceed to build together. Thus, Karam does make the fulfilled relationship of Salwa and her husband until Nuha returns matter to his readers. Through the coincidences, Karam then locks that stake into the further stake of the non-erotic deep friendship between two women of Salwa with Nuha, across classes, that the story had assembled from its outset. It was a real stroke of Karam here to make all of the three now caught in this fatal triangle overwhelmingly good and positive – it makes them all matter to us. As against normal simple triangles, none of these three characters ever meant the slightest harm or exclusion of any of the others. Because each is so interwoven into the other two, any resolution now must be exceptionally violent and have heavy after-costs, although that would be better than the debilitation from all three remaining in contact.

While bedridden after her faint, Salwa surreptitiously views "Wahib" and Nuha standing together and senses that their past love is reviving. She decides not to be a stumbling block in the way of the woman who first took her hand and led her to a prosperous livelihood, and who is still watching over her with the same loving concern. Yet when Salwa apologizes for what fate, not her, decreed, Nuha says that she accepts the will of fate and is leaving her one-time fiancé to her: "it is better that he should marry you than another [for] you are my sister, a hand that gave in full measure to her sister" – and these two

“sisters” are indeed equally indebted each to the other. She does not notice the feeble Salwa’s talk of “atonement” or the glint of resolve that has now come into her eyes. [But had Nuha fully wanted to step aside, would she not have simply stopped coming to the house? Does she being by the bed make sick Salwa better or worse?] To prove her gratitude for Nuha’s past crucial kindness, Salwa downs a jar of medical purgative by her bed and dies. A lingering sense of having less class standing may have tipped the scale for her suiciding to clear the way again between Nuha and the man of whom she had deprived her: “I was born to misery, and it is not strange that my corpse should be wound in the grave-shrouds of misery” [AQ 128-133].

Only after visiting Salwa’s grave to shed a tear of reverence for her sacrifice, and to ask forgiveness, do Nuha and “Wahib”/Farid marry. After ascending a high peak of the Mountain Lebanon for healing, Farid and Nuha embrace and can live again, although Nuha shudders at the thought of Salwa. There is no complete healing for many of Karam’s wounded protagonists! The very great suffering that life had entailed for all three main characters of this quasi-novella finally brings Nuha at least, to some extent at any rate, to the ordering of pain that Christianity promises the individual. The eerie figure of Salwa’s senile 90 years-old grandmother at their first meeting in Bayrut time and again flashes in Nuha’s mind urging her to be kind to Salwa because she doubts her intention. “Then Nuha would shake as conscience reproached her, and hurry to her room within which she would shut herself away kneeling before the Crucified Jesus and asking His forgiveness as though she were a guilty sinner whose slip no tortures of the fires of Hell could ever clear away.” But then the figure of Salwa would appear with her healing admonition “Never grieve for me!” to make Nuha accept what had had to happen [AQ p. 134]. The believer Karam here does again warm to Christianity as one of the resources that help his characters to stay intact and survive under great pressures.

4. “In The Depths of the ‘Asi River” (1928)

This was a story set in Lebanon’s countryside in WW1 around the breakup of the Ottoman Empire that Karam did not publish in *Ghosts of the Village* and perhaps not in any collection. *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, the literary magazine that Karam edited in this period, in accord with the official ideology of the multi-sectarian Lebanon nation being built under the Mandate, narrated that Jamal Pasha and the Turkish state repressed Shi‘ite Muslim as well as Christian Lebanese. The tightly-knit and fast-moving story described instantaneous bad chemistry of Jamal towards a Shi‘ite leader of Eastern Lebanon who received him, albeit to honor him, with too many martial followers and too much pomp. Fearing such local power could turn to treason, Jamal through a trick exiles the Shi‘ite chieftain to Turkey. The story’s psychologically acute characterization

of the swings of mood of a toxic tyrant, and of the struggle of a Shi'ite youth to marry a young woman whose parents want to marry her to her cousin are in Karam's mode of writing. The leap of the woman's rival from passionate yearning for the youth to toxic aid to the cousin to kill him, and the vividness of rural Lebanon as a place are Karam, although he did not sign his story ["Fi A'maq al-'Asi" (In the Depths of the 'Asi River) *Alf Laylah wa Layla* 23 January 1928 pp. 13-31].

Karam had a special penchant for nightmare people motivated by hate. The swift dialogue between (a) the rebuffed woman and (b) the cousin she now helps frame the man she once loved to the Turks, and the liquid play of language, illustrate Karam's special gift for welding parochial personalities into macro-history or national histories in the Middle East. The story does dissect with acute psychology Salimah's regrets and swings after the letter she forged tricked the Turkish police into arresting the man she had loved ["'Asi", ALWL 19-27]. The story is nuanced and pluralizing about Turks in contrast to "Do not Grieve for Me": "many members of the martial law court were men of sensibility and feeling," and have their doubts about the forged letter, but out of fear of the despot Jamal Pasha may be forced to sentence the young framed Shi'ite to death [28]. However, his spurned former girlfriend stands up and relates to the court how she framed him, so that the young man is released. At the end, the framer Salimah suicides [31], a frequent event in Karam's fiction. The story identified "the Syrians and Lebanese" as the victims of Jamal [24]. In general, this is a story by Karam that had the sweep of the vivid nature of a homeland and matching elemental human passions, but also quieter and more plural analysis of social groups and individual characters.

Larger Patterns and Assessment

How well could the young Karam Mulhim Karam write by international or Western criteria? He had a precise eye for the details of the social life of specific groups and classes in Lebanon but also range: his dialogues between members of diversified families are deft and focus specific inner dynamics of such units well. His Arabic style in *Ghosts of the Village* was a considerable achievement for 1929 because it so flawlessly ran and wove together appropriate selection from the vast ancient vocabulary of the classical Arabs, with the functional precise style that was developing in newspapers and magazines, with representations, usually half-cast into classical grammatical moulds, of recent expressions of Lebanese colloquial Arabic. Although his affinity to the Arab rhetorical classics made some language demands upon his readers, these were within reason and give his locally-focused narrative some little depths of color. *Ghosts of the Village* keeps his readers connected to the language of the classical Arabs, perhaps less so than Taha Husayn's similarly

indignant portraits of rural Egyptian life: however, those bygone Arabs as such very seldom have any alternative presence in this sector of his fiction. Karam was to write separate fiction set under the states of the classical Muslim Arabs.

In the 21st century, Karam's evaluation that migration to cities can corrupt and disintegrate rather than enrich country lads is still savored by Druze and Muslim as well as Christian migrants from that Jabal who made it in Bayrut. Karam is viewed by them as the author who traced the continuity of their Mountain Lebanon identity that unites Maronite, Druze and Shi'ite Jabal Lebanese – who maintain their identity and contact with that homeland down generations of residence below in nearby Bayrut.

Karam's drive to reform the Maronite Church reaped some success. The clerics of principles took his public criticisms on board and purged some bad elements from their ranks. It is made clear in retrospect that he was not truly a revolutionary out to destroy religion but a reformer out to save it. When Karam died in 1959, the Maronite Patriarch Bulus Butrus al-Ma'ushi sent a letter of condolence to his wife, children and kin setting out all "our son" Karam had done to depict Lebanese life, to recover and run into that local focus the most recondite of the old Arabic's words, to redepict incidents of antique Arab history, and also to unite the divided Maronite clergy for patriotic purpose when he edited *al-'Asifah* under French rule. The Patriarch termed Karam a deeply religious Maronite [‘Isam Karam (ed) *Karam Mulhim Karam, al-Mi'awiyat al-Ula 1902-2003* (Bayrut: np., nd) pp. 168-169].

In common with many Muslim Egyptian writers who were shortly to write in the period after 1930, Karam Mulhim Karam sometimes struck a posture of disquiet vis-à-vis urbanization. The opening scene of "Rajjub in Bayrut" also had affinities to the yearning of earlier 19th century English writers for a dying rural organic society amid the industrial revolution and the growth of atomizing large cities there. William Wordsworth harbored realism about feudalism, but his treatment of a peasant girl facing dehumanization in the industrial city in "The Reverie of Poor Susan" was as critical of the socio-economic and aesthetic realities of the London of the industrial revolution as Karam was of the anarchic Bayrut that broke his peasant characters. The poem caught Susan at the precise moment when she repents her migration from the countryside to London. Like Karam, Wordsworth's more radical poetry preferred integrated small rural societies to the anomy and spiritual disintegration of the individual in growing cities.

Karam's outbursts against early 20th century Bayrut read to have come from the depths of his being. A part of Karam liked the close-knit traditional small villages where everybody knew everybody else but authority was exercised against/over young people. He did, though, reject the Maronite clergy as they stood as a component in the traditional system.

Some of the internal discourses of Karam's peasant characters who want to transform their fortunes and make it are like those of Najib Mahfuz in his social-realist earlier novels of the 1930s and early 1940s. Some scenes of ordinary village life in *Ghosts of the Village* are like description of Egyptian villagers and their daily social life and rituals by Muhammad Husayn Haykal and the young Taha Husayn. On the other hand, in his spates of old classical vocabulary in his 1936 *Cry of the Wounded* (*Surkhat al-Alam*), Karam musters more resources of language than did Haykal – or the earlier Mahfuz whose prose was sharp and correct and Qur'an-modeled without drawing upon the 'Abbasid high literature that does supply some unusual vocabulary to *Surkhat*.

Almost all the stories of *Ashbah al-Qaryah* at points depicted groups that had political power and wealth in Lebanon as enemies of the poor or as brutally indifferent to their sufferings. Karam attacked the Maronite Church's high clergy in the collection, but he nowhere held up the feudal nobility or the political elite forming in the autonomous mutarrifiyyah as some alternative of fellow-feeling between the classes of a homeland or a nation. The novels of Dickens and the Soviet novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (all read in French) were deepening his feeling for not just the pain of the poor but their anger. However, literature from Europe that he read at the time that he finalized *Ghosts of the Village* worked against his becoming a revolutionary or a communist. Between August and November 1928, he serialized in his magazine *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* his full translation of the novel *Communist Love* by the popular French writer Marcel Allain (1885-1961). It was about an imaginary Communist revolution in a provincial French village some time after World War I. In the 21st Century, Karam's reincarnation of this novel is still remembered in the layer of Lebanese Maronite society that is heir to his synthesis of Arab and modern Western high cultures, and to his Lebanonist-Arabist concepts. Allain's novel showed the irritation (and also some love) between generations – (a) a solid village blacksmith and (b) a son who worked in a new factory that he felt had made his father's technology outdated [ALWL 12 August 1928 pp. 2-4]. Tensions between rural sons with modernist aspirations and their fathers, uncles and grandfathers recur in Karam's fiction set in Lebanon. Allain had a good feel for the emergence of a new industrial proletariat, but this novel depicts key cadres of the revolution as thieves or Russians manipulating the hopes of ordinary workers. The factory-owner and his family had not really merited to be deposed: anyway, the young proletarian hero becomes the lover of the owner's daughter and saves them.

When reading Karam's social fiction, some might decry one or two far-fetched plots and some lachrymose statements from some characters that are reminiscent of cheap Arabic melodramas of the late 19th century. Yet his 1929 stories show multiple strengths that can extend beyond period photographs of a

bygone society, which, though, always had changed between each of his photographs. He was already trying his hand at portrayal from within of traumatized or abnormal psychologies. He showed how the triangular relationship with the same decent male led Salwa al-Jundi to suicide in favor of her friend Nuha Daghir. Karam's account in another story of how the complicated tensions between Farid and his possessive mother, who would not let him marry the village woman of his choice, led to madness and suicide rings true as psychology.

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