

SALAM AL RASSI

The 'Patriarch' of Folk Literature

By Hanna H. Farha

"When I was born, my father saw a good omen in Zhafer Pasha, the Ottoman Grand vizier at the time, so he named me Zhafer (which means 'victorious' in Arabic). Two months later the Italian fleet launched an attack on Beirut harbor and destroyed the only two battleships left in the Ottoman Navy. The Ottoman Sultanate felt offended and summoned Zhafer Pasha back to Istanbul and he soon disappeared from the political scene. When my father learned about this, he changed his mind and named me Salam (which means 'peace' in Arabic), hoping that peace would prevail on earth. If only my name remained Zhafer perhaps I would have become one of those lucky and victorious ones...."

During a celebration in the honor of Salam Al Rassi, his close friend Habib Sadeq the former MP and Chairman of the Cultural Council for South Lebanon gave a speech in which he said, "When Salam was growing up, his mother prepared him to become a Protestant priest like his father Yuakim, but all her efforts went in vain. She used to wake up in the middle of the night, trembling with fear for the little boy, because she could not see anything but blocked roads and obstacles in his way." Sadeq went on, "What the mother saw in her dreams came true. Salam faced insurmountable barriers in all the paths of life that he wanted to follow. First, he tried to be a school teacher, but quit after a while, following his discovery of the crookedness of the teaching system which he could not straighten up or agree to live under it"

"Then", Sadeq continued, "Salam Al Rassi failed again when he shifted to politics and wanted to become a politician. Then he moved towards socialism to become a socialist. After discovering the rigidity of and the submission of the individual to the will of the 'sole leader'. He was was disappointed and resigned to start his search for his real self." "Such a man" says Sadeq "who made the solemn pledge to free opinion, to the independence of thought and the dignity of man, did not give in to the omnipotence of such institutions, and did not give any attention to any of their temptations.

At last the search was over. Salam found himself surrounded by the enormous world of 'people, folks who were without limits'. He walked along with them, shared them their food and drink, spoke their noble language and played their joyful and collective tune. Salam drank avidly from the spring of Lebanese folk heritage and recorded in his outstanding computer mind the wisdom of the old, the experience in life and the simple and genuine legacy which constitute a collection of norms, values and expressions for moral ties and behavior."

With time, Salam Al Rassi grew into a thinker himself; he took from the people's mouths their wisdom, their values which they were proud of, in addition to their ways of dealing with this world, which according to him should not be left behind or ignored.

In his 'drawing with words' style in writing, Salam drew up the small tiny alleyways of the Lebanese village and the stories told by 'people about people' and even about animals.

Such as the wolf who brings a flock of foxes to witness in his favour that the land of the sheep belonged to his family, from father to son. Or the fact that Shakespeare, according to some villagers, was in fact a Lebanese called Sheikh Isber and that St. George was also a Lebanese who who came from in Mina Al Hosn in Beirut and that the British shouldn't claim him their patron saint.

Or the goatherd of Salam's village Ibel El Saqi who was smarter than Plato, or the man telling his wife 'if you want to sleep next to me, why do you need the pillow between us for?' and many many more, all told in Rassi's pleasant style which leaves his reader laughing while thinking of the rational, the philosophy and the wisdom of his heroes.

Salam Al Rassi was not an unbiased observer; he liked his heroes and had too high an opinion of them as to suspect them of being weak. They were wise and sometimes philosophers 'in the field of life'. His love of his characters was so great that he often came to their rescue in his prose.

In a speech delivered in 1991, Dr. Sami Makarem, American University of Beirut professor of Arabic Literature believed that "when Salam wrote down his first book *Li-alla Tadhi'* (in English Lest They Are Lost), it was not written for the sake of writing alone, or for the sake of documentation. He wanted to acquaint us with the purity of our origin, to remind us of our wealthy culture and to teach us that our civilization can only start off from our genuine heritage." If someone asks Salam Al Rassi today of his true feelings about the past he will reiterate with a sigh, "How beautiful life was when I used to look at it through the eyes of my mother and father, and enjoy thoroughly its beauty through the sense of the citizens of my village... But when I grew up and started to weigh facts with the measures of reason, education and logic, I lost the joy of looking attentively at life in addition to the loss of the strength of my character and innocence." (*Li-Alla Tadhi'*, p.)

Extracts from the book: *Li-alla Tadhi'* "Lest they are Lost"

Bishop Boulos Al Khoury

Boulos Al Khoury, the Greek Orthodox Bishop of South Lebanon, had a pleasant personality and was famous for his witty remarks and jokes. He used to tell the following story: "One day a blind beggar approached me asking for some money. A policeman rushed in and pushed him away, then started to scream at the beggar to keep away. I looked at the policeman and said, "What did this poor fellow do to deserve this treatment?"

"This fellow, your eminence is not blind. He pretends blindness only to beg," replied the policeman. The Bishop said sarcastically, "Anyone who begs from a clergyman must be for sure blind."

Cursing someone else's religion

Iskandar Shahin wrote once an article in the Egyptian magazine Al Latayef praising the characteristics of the Lebanese people. He ended his article by saying, "The two things Lebanon must be proud of are, firstly the discovery of Labneh with olive oil and secondly cursing someone's religion (Masabbat Al-Din)"

Selected proverbs from Al Rassi's books

Sit crooked and speak straight.

A well-prepared lie is better than crooked honesty.

An insane man may talk, but a wise man must listen.

If lack of intelligence (qillat al-aql) caused pain, then most people would spend their lives crying from pain

If you want to live happily always say 'everything is fine.