A Brief History of Arab Immigrant Textile Production in the U.S.

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Alfred Shaheen’s success as a designer and producer of clothing, as well as his family’s history in the textile business in the U.S., stretching back to 1888, is one aspect of the long history of the Arab American production and sale of textiles. The Arab American role in the textile industry is itself a vestige of the wide-scale production of silk in Greater Syria in the 1800s and early 1900s, which employed many of the earliest immigrants.

Alfred Shaheen’s grandfather, Assy Shaheen, arrived in the U.S. from Lebanon in 1887 and opened his dry goods store in 1888. Ten years later, Assy’s sons, among them Assy Jr. and George (Alfred’s father) arrived from Lebanon and helped their father expand the family business to include a manufacturing plant and clothing store in what was known as the “Syrian quarter” in lower Manhattan. By 1920, A. Shaheen and Sons was a booming business with a large manufacturing plant in the heart of the garment district in New York City and a silk mill in Cranford, NJ, built in 1917. Like the majority of Arab immigrant textile companies at the time, the Shaheens produced mainly ladies garments. According to a family history written by Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, George eventually opened his own garment manufacturing business in Teaneck, NJ, where Rose Shaheen (Alfred’s mother) was an integral part of the family’s textile production.

Both the Shaheen family’s history in textiles, as well as that of the Arab American community at large, began in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. This brief essay will provide an overview of the early Arab American textile industry including a focus on the role of women in the production and sale of textiles.

Early Arab Immigrant Textile Industry
Historians have always given much attention to the peddling trade of the early immigrants from Greater Syria. But work in the textile industry (silk, lace, wool and completed garment production) whether in a garment factory, a silk or woolen mill, or making piece meal silk kimonos from home, was more popular than peddling, though maybe less romantic. Textile workers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, like peddlers, were most likely to be Christians from Greater Syria, now present day Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

Syrian immigrants, both men and women, were well suited to work as weavers, because of the silk tradition in their homeland. By the 1880s in Mt. Lebanon, the time when the earliest emigrants began leaving Greater Syria en masse, “silk went from being a supplemental product that helped support a peasant family to being an essential cash crop on which Lebanese peasants depended for their survival” (Khater 2001, 22). The silk industry in the U.S., due to the long history of silk production in the Mt. Lebanon area of Syria in the 1800s and early 1900s, was one of the most popular and prominent aspects of textile production among Arab immigrants.

The experience in silk production in both the homeland and the mahjar (the lands of immigration), and what publications at that time referred to as “the business instinct of the Syrians” (Mokarzel and Otash 1908, 2), led to the wide-spread ownership of silk mills, textile factories, and wholesale garment stores. Though this type of rhetoric, such as referring to the “trading instincts of the ancient Syrians,” plays into the well-worn stereotypes that Semitic peoples are good with money, even to the point of being greedy and “petty” (Miller 1969, 31), the evidence that Syrian immigrants were adept at building, owning, and operating successful textile factories is abundant. One historian attributes the success to good “timing” in addition to skill, writing that “luxury items were becoming necessities among the rising upper-middle class” at the turn of the twentieth century (the time of the first wave of Arab immigrants), which positively affected the silk and lace industries (Younis 1995, 197). The Arab immigrants, according to newspaper editorials of the time as well as later historians like Evelyn Shakir,

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1 Miller (1969) writes that “the Syrian is fond of figures” especially money, and that “the Syrian business man [has] a tendency toward pettiness.” The numerous incantations of an inherent Syrian (or “Phoenician”) aptitude for commerce is stereotypical and even has shades of anti-Semitic views that Jews and Arabs are greedy and underhanded in business dealings. These nativist-American slurs were used to stir up anti-immigrant fervor in the early 1900s.
Akran Khater, and Adele Younis, were determined to move quickly from the immigrant class to the rising American middle class, and business ownership was one fast track to such success.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, New Jersey was considered the silk capital of the U.S. The number of factories in the state as well as its close proximity to the large Syrian communities of Manhattan and Brooklyn combined to lure many Syrian immigrants to the industrial centers of Paterson, NJ (known as “Silk City”) and Hoboken, NJ. By the 1920s there were at least 25 silk factories in Paterson and West Hoboken, NJ, owned by Syrians and 80% of Syrian immigrants in those cities worked as silk weavers (Hitti 1924). And it wasn’t just New Jersey. The textile factories in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and other eastern seaboard states attracted Syrian immigrants who settled in enclaves near the textile mills. In 1910, 91% of the Syrian immigrants in the Blackstone Valley area of Rhode Island worked in the textile mills (Doumato 1986, 15). In Waterville, which housed the largest population of Arab immigrants (almost exclusively from Greater Syria) in Maine, half of the immigrants worked in the town’s two textile mills in the early 1900s. And by 1930 in Waterville, ten percent of the Wyandotte Woolen Mill’s workforce was of Arab or Arab American origin, and most of them were weavers (Hooglund 1987, 100). The entire textile industry, from the milling of raw materials to the sale of the finished product, was vital to the earliest of the Arab immigrants who settled in industrial centers like New York and the Boston area. Although the highest concentration of textile producers was on the east coast in the first decades of the 1900s, immigrants and second generation Arab Americans eventually set up shop out West. For example, the 1937 Pacific Syrian-American Guide features numerous advertisements for “wash dress,” “frock,” and lingerie manufacturers throughout California, mostly in the Los Angeles area, and the Pacific Northwest.

The factories and mills in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Jersey may have been important to the U.S. economy as a whole, but in the early 1900s, New York was the heart of the Arab American economy, especially the textile industry. A 1930 Syrian business directory listed 86 Syrian-owned “lingerie and underwear companies,” 55 negligee or kimono businesses, and 40 embroidered handkerchief firms in New York City alone (Younis 1995, 302). Sociologist Lucius Hopkins Miller also found that in 1904 peddling was the most popular profession, but only by a
slim margin, and was waning in popularity. He surveyed the Syrian community in New York, both in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and found that 30 percent of immigrants worked as peddlers. But factory work was a close second at 26.8 percent, and the small-scale production of silk kimonos by women at home made up 12.5 percent of the total number of “wage earners” (Miller 1969, 11).  

Taken together, considering that most of the factories were involved in textile production, the number of early immigrants in New York involved in the textile industry probably outnumbered peddling. Not to mention that Miller’s numbers show that almost 24 percent of immigrant workers were employed in or owned a store, and many of these stores specialized in ready-to-wear clothing (especially ladies undergarments), fabrics (mostly silk and linens), and threads and lace. Other historians have written that by 1915 peddling had “‘lost its primacy’” and was supplanted by retail jobs and “occupations in the needle trades” (DiNapoli 2002, 18).

A quick survey of the 1908 Syrian Business Directory of New York City and Brooklyn, shows that there were 67 businesses in New York City alone listed as being directly involved in the production and sale of “Oriental goods,” such as “Laces, Embroideries, Needle Work, and White Goods, Etc.,” and another 11 businesses manufactured “Pillow Shams, Petticoats, and Skirts” (Mokarzel and Otash 1908). Without even counting the dozens of dry goods merchants, many of whom sold the textiles and clothing produced by other Syrian immigrants, textile production and sale was by far the most popular profession in New York City in the early 1900s among the Syrian immigrants.

Women and Textile Production

The role of women in the history of Arab American textile production is vital. The work that women did in the mahjar, for the most part, was a continuation of the young women who worked in the silk mills in Greater Syria. Women, mostly unmarried, were sent to work in the

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2 But working in factories was not an entirely desirable job. Compared to peddling, factory had a tendency to be “dark,” “dehumanizing,” and “impersonal,” especially for those workers who had shunned factory work in Lebanon (Khater 2003, 75).

3 It was these Syrian-owned factories and business that served as suppliers for the peddling trade throughout the U.S. (Younis 1995, 197).
factories to provide much needed supplemental income to families struggling through the decline of Lebanon’s agricultural economy. Akram Khater says that “by the early 1880s, twelve thousand unmarried women and girls were working in factories outside their villages, as opposed to a mere one thousand men, who were employed exclusively as overseers” (2001, 32). He asserts, “on average, one out of every five families had a daughter working in these factories” (2001, 33). Khater argues that the French factory owners in Lebanon employed women because they could be paid less and were seen as being able to more naturally fit the hierarchical/patriarchal environment of a French-owned factory.4

The wide scale employment of women in the harsh factory conditions was not without its social ramifications. Even though the labor of young women was needed to support their families, it could be seen as “shameful” for a family to send an unmarried girl away to work. In fact, the Maronite Church in Lebanon declared that factory work was “immoral for women,” regardless of its necessity (Khater 2001, 34). In the U.S., among the Syrian immigrant communities, young women continued to be employed in textile factories. Although there were debates about women working, their labor outside of the house (not to mention the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing within the home, which went hand-in-hand with dominant gender roles within an immigrant community) was a necessity in many households. Still, Arab American newspapers and their writers were quick to speak out against the immorality of women’s work in the public sphere. One writer referred to women’s work as a “disease” and the leading newspaper of the time, Al-Huda, published an essay that chastised Syrian men for “letting ‘their’ women work” (Khater 2001, 97). As historian Akram Khater (2001) points out, it was one thing to want to “protect” women and keep them in the confines of household work, but the Arab immigrant community of the time was also concerned with entering the American middle class, which in most cases necessitated the labor of women both in and out of the house.

4 Khater argues that part of the reason for the success of the European-run silk industry in Lebanon in the late 1800s, was because there was little labor disturbance, which was not the case in France at the time. Khater attributes the lack of labor disruption to the large number of young women who worked in the silk mills in Lebanon. Because they were accustomed to living in a patriarchal society, Khater argues, the female workers “were theoretically much less inclined to challenge male hierarchical authority” in the factories (2001, 28). But in the U.S. in the early 1900s, Arab immigrant women did participate in labor strikes, such as the famous 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence, MA, at which Arab women workers “joined in the strike, singing Arabic songs…dishing out Syrian bread and plates of lamb, rice, burghul, and yogurt” (Shakir 1997, 48).
So women worked, in large numbers no less. In the small industrial town of Waterville, Maine, in the 1920s and 1930s, about “80 percent of all American-born Syrian women had worked for at least one year while they were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four,” and “the preferred work was in the woolen mill” (Hooglund 1987, 99). In Fall River, MA, “the 1910 census shows that nearly every unwed Syrian female...had a paying job, almost always in one of the city’s cotton mills” (Shakir 1997, 49). But factory work was not the only profession in the textile industry that women were involved in. There are stories of women shop and factory owners, and dozens of women in New York City worked from home sewing silk lingerie or kimonos for sale in Syrian-owned businesses.

One of the biggest impacts that Syrian textile manufacturers, including Syrian women, made was in the production and sale of women’s silk undergarments, negligees, and “kimonos.” Writing at the time, Lucius Miller declared, “Many of the kimonos sold in the New York department stores are made in Syrian kimono factories or in the rooms of Syrians by Syrian women” (Miller 1969, 29–30). The garments were produced for sale to American women. The silk kimono industry, which was a staple of early Syrian businesses in New York, was fueled by American women’s desire for the “Oriental” look which was popular in the U.S. in the early 1900s. Kimonos were only one part of the ladies’ undergarment business, which also included lingerie, silk negligees and the less glamorous sounding “dressing sacks.” A great example of this type of product is the silk bed jacket on display at the front of the Living in America exhibit of the Arab American National Museum. The jacket was sewn by Matilda Awad while she was employed by the A. Barsa and Bros. company in New York City in the early 1930s, which was one of more than 40 silk negligee manufacturers in the city (Arida and Andira 1930). According to a letter from noted historian Gregory Orfalea, Matilda handmade dozens of silk bed jackets for the Barsa brothers for sale to wealthy American women, while Awad lived in an impoverished building with her three children and her husband Kamel, who would eventually open his own garment factory in Los Angeles.

Evelyn Shakir is one of the few historians that have focused on the Arab American role in the textile industry, especially the important role that women played. Her book Bint Arab (1997) tells the story of Hannah Shakir within the larger context of Arab American work in factories and
mills. The life of Hannah Shakir, as featured in the Arab American National Museum’s *Living in America* exhibit, is exemplary. Hannah Shakir, who owned a small textile factory in Boston, says: “I worked in the biggest textile mill in Fall River. We made gingham. I learned to operate the looms, six big looms, just like a man. I did it very well” (qtd. In Shakir 1997, 47). According to the exhibit at the Arab American National Museum:

> Around 1920, Hannah and her brother Naseeb opened a small apron factory in the East Boston neighborhood where they lived. Nasseb cut the fabric, Hannah sewed, and brother Elias drummed up customers along his sales route. Though they were initially successful, a move to downtown Boston significantly raised their costs and the business floundered. For the next twenty years, Hannah worked for others. Shortly after WWII, when she was fifty, Hannah started a small sportswear factory. She began with half a dozen sewing machines in a suburban storefront and then expanded, hiring more stitchers, mostly neighborhood women.

The stories of Matilda Awad and Hannah Shakir are two examples of how examining women’s work in the diaspora helps tell the complete story of the Arab immigrant textile industry.
Works Cited


