

## Recalling an Arab American Dream: The Story and Legacy of Ameen Rihani's novel *The Book of Khalid* and The New York Public Library

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### Abstract:

*This paper presents the life and contributions of Ameen Rihani as a case study of public libraries' historical efforts in supporting immigrants in America within IFLA's context of "connections, collaboration and community." Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) was a Lebanese-born Arab Christian who immigrated to the United States at the age of 12. One known fact was that he frequently visited the New York Public Library (NYPL) where he read many classics and studied English. Hailed as the father of Arab American literature, Rihani wrote *The Book of Khalid*, which is considered to be the first Arab American Novel in English. *The Book of Khalid* is a symbol of Rihani's relationship with the United States and the NYPL, and reflects on the themes of political struggles and cultural challenges of immigration, urban life and authoritarianism that still exist today.*

**Keywords:** library history, Arab American studies, genealogy, American literature, and local history

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### Introduction

Throughout urban history, public libraries have played an important role in supporting our communities. Public libraries provide resources, collections, programming, and public services to all kinds of patrons. From scholars to immigrants, public libraries also foster a community of learners. Immigrants of all kinds can come to the library for support: find information and resources to enrich cultural and intellectual lives. Today, public libraries continue to play a significant role in supporting refugees, undocumented immigrants and patrons who often feel marginalized from society. This paper explores one public library's historical effort in supporting and celebrating an Arab American writer: Ameen Rihani.

The New York Public Library (NYPL) in New York, one of the most prominent and well-regarded institution and a public library system carries a bold mission statement: to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge and strengthen our communities.<sup>1</sup> Since 1876, the NYPL has supported millions of people across the city of New York and beyond. From writers to students to immigrants, the NYPL is known for its extensive collections that are open for public usage. Today, the NYPL has over 80 branches across three boroughs: Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx and four research libraries in the borough of Manhattan. This public library has had much success in supporting all patrons, at all levels throughout the history of New York City.

For new immigrant patrons coming from the Middle East like Ameen Rihani, visiting the NYPL in 1911 could have been a daunting experience. However, Ameen Rihani embraced the library and literary scene of New York. He frequently visited the city and returned to Syria from time to time throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Who was Ameen Rihani? Why does his work matter? The paper attempts to address these questions in the context of library history. Rihani's contributions to the intellectual and literary scenes can be regarded as an important and historical outcome of a public library's openness and mission to support immigrant communities in the United States.

This paper investigates Ameen Rihani's life and contributions and positions Rihani as a case study and as a reflection on how public libraries play an important role in creating and building "intellectual connections, collaborations and communities" under the theme of the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) in 2016. Using newspapers, literature and digital media, the paper analyses Rihani's life and influence and how he is remembered and celebrated by the NYPL in 2011.

### **Ameen Rihani: A Biographical Investigation**

Who was Ameen Rihani? Born in Freike (Modern Day-Lebanon) on November 24, 1876, Rihani was one of six children. At the age of 12, his family including himself immigrated to New York in 1888.<sup>2</sup> They lived in a lively neighbourhood on Washington Street known Little Syria in lower Manhattan. His father and uncle were merchants called "A. Rihani & Co." and sold goods from France while he and his brother studied English and was eventually placed to work as a clerk and bookkeeper for the family business. Rihani's Arabic at the time slowly faded away as he became more immersed into the literary and philosophical works of American and European writers.<sup>3</sup>

Little Syria was known as a burgeoning and diverse neighbourhood occupied by Arab Americans in lower Manhattan from 1880 to 1940. The neighbourhood largely composed of Middle Eastern immigrants arriving from former Ottoman land, which is now considered Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine. Linda K. Jacobs, author of *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony* describes the city as the home of "many prominent Arab-American intellectuals, the birthplace of almost three dozen Arabic-language newspapers, the locus of Syrian Christian religious practice in the New World, and the center of Syrian economic life

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<sup>1</sup> See NYPL's Mission Statement: <http://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/mission>

<sup>2</sup> According to Jacobs, Ameen was not listed in the census record because he was "sent off to boarding school shortly after they arrived." Jacobs, Linda K. *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York, 1880-1900*. Kalimah Press: New York, 2015. p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> See Ameen Rihani's biography, <http://www.ameenrihani.org/index.php?page=biography>

in North America.”<sup>4</sup> There were networks of small business owners, merchants, artists, seamstresses, intellectuals, musicians and journalists all confining this neighborhood. In this book, Jacobs traces back to the neighborhood’s developments and describes the challenges, stories and narratives of the immigrant experiences of Arab Americans. There were also second and third generations of Arab Americans living in Little Syria as well. Ameen Rihani and his family settled in Little Syria in 1888.

During his teenage years, Rihani enjoyed theatre and rhetoric and even joined a troupe for a little while. His love for the Arabic language and literature would soon return to him when he became older and returned to his home country. Rihani also attempted to study law at New York Law School, however, he became ill and returned to Lebanon 1897-1888. Once he returned to his Lebanon, he studied Arabic, taught English in a local school. He was became immersed with Arabic poetry as well. In 1889, he returned to New York and worked on several translation and editorial projects; he also wrote for the Arabic daily newspaper, *al-Huda* and began writing more and more essays and poems in English. These works gained attention from several literacy circles such as the Poetry Society of America. Rihani’s work focuses on philosophy, intellectual history, and national politics and society.<sup>5</sup> He published a few works in Arabic in 1902 and 1903: *Treatise of the French Revolution* and *The Trilateral Treaty in the Animal Kingdom*.<sup>6</sup>

Rihani was born a Christian but “developed an encompassing, non-sectarian view of religion in this country today that would probably have branded him as a Unitarian. He disliked fanaticism of any sort and was enlightened and tolerant voice who admitted the religious and political freedoms of his adopted country but never turned his back on the spiritual and traditional heritage of his Arab roots.”<sup>7</sup> Rihani was a prolific writer and thinker. He was greatly influenced by the works of William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Emerson and Bryon and many others.<sup>8</sup> In 1905, he returned to his home country and published several more essays, books, plays and short stories in Arabic. In 1910 he published *Al-Rihaniyat*, a collection of essays and is considered one of his famous works in Arabic. He returned to New York in 1911 and visited the NYPL when it opened its doors to the public in May 1911. Rihani donated a copy of *Al-Rihaniyat* to the Library and spent time browsing and reading the collections that this new Library had to offer to the people.

At the same time, he was working closely on *The Book of Khalid*, which was published in English by Dodd, Mead and Company. “The publisher tried to promote the novel as analysis of American institutions by an immigrant, a work ‘about America.’”<sup>9</sup> The book, widely considered as the first Arab American novel spans over 300 pages draws on many themes that is reflective of Rihani’s own experiences: the immigrant life, political struggles, Arab nationalism and critique of Orientalism. Rihani’s frequent visits from Lebanon to New York gifted him with the cultural mobility to see both Western and Eastern lens critically and analytically. Rihani “articulated an inspiring sense of dual identity. He was an Arab and American, a perceptive critic of both worlds and his writings are a constant dialogue between two identities he refused to collapse with anything so simple as a

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, Linda K. *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York, 1880-1900*. p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Ameen Rihani’s Biography in <http://ameenrihani.org/index.php?page=biography>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kennicott, Philip. Lebanese Writer Hailed as Father of Arab American Literature. *The Arab American News*. 24, May 2002. p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> See Ameen Rihani’s Biography in <http://ameenrihani.org/index.php?page=biography>

<sup>9</sup> Fine, Todd. Afterword. *The Book of Khalid*. p. 321

hyphen.”<sup>10</sup> The *Book of Khalid* gained limited commercial success but the novel’s core message continue to resonant in today’s political and sociocultural landscapes in Arab-American relations and Arab political revolutions. The work would later influence other Arab American writers such as Khalil Gibran who is known for his own work, *The Prophet*.

### ***The Book of Khalid* and The New York Public Library**

Rihani’s story is quite extraordinary: he was a Lebanese immigrant did not have any formal education or academic training but gained his philosophical and political thoughts through his travels from Lebanon to New York and he immersed himself to the rich collections of the Library. Through these experiences, he crafted his first novel in English, now widely the first Arab American novel, *The Book of Khalid*. “Written in 1911, *The Book of Khalid* is about a story of two boys from Lebanon who immigrate to Little Syria’s neighbourhood in lower Manhattan and peddle on the streets. After exposure to the New York cultural, intellectual and artistic environment of the period, the two friends return to Lebanon where inspired by their New York experiences transform into political and social revolutionaries and become in conflict with the ruling Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.”<sup>11</sup> The novel’s literary style is unique: it speaks to the reader, draws on multiple sources and different references of Western and Middle Eastern writers, philosophers and thinkers throughout the plot. The novel is written in poetic forms and utilizes Arabic words. It attempts to link “Western” and “Eastern” literary forms to give the readers a sense of internal struggle in one’s own struggle with identity politics.

One interesting observation of this story is that it is quite reflective of Rihani’s life – and his insights on reconciling the cultural roots of New York and Lebanon. Like most immigrants coming to America, they may struggle to understand how to integrate into their communities; how can they learn to develop important skills, experiences or knowledge so that they can take back to their home countries to support families; how to fight for political rights and citizenship regardless of the location. Director of Project Khalid, Todd Fine writes “[*The Book of Khalid*] does indeed share many of the key characteristics of American ethnic immigration literature... The American themes of advancement or betterment contained in this narrative form hark all the way back to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Yet Khalid, with his lackadaisical attitude towards work, his effortless assimilation into the American scene, and his eventual reverse migration to Lebanon subverts the genre in ways that have yet to be explored by scholars of American immigration fiction ...”<sup>12</sup> Rihani introduced a new kind of field in American ethnic and immigration studies and literature; his work continues to live on beyond Rihani’s life in 1940 when he died from injuries in a bicycle accident.<sup>13</sup>

Rihani’s relationship with NYPL is interesting: it is not clearly evident that he has any other interactions with the Library other than donating a copy of *al-Rihaniyat* and spending time reading the library’s literary collections. What is evident is that his biography and work has inspired many generations of immigrant writers, particularly of Arab descent. It is also known that the Library opened its doors in 1911 around the same time when Rihani published his first English novel. The Library subsequently acquired *The Book of Khalid* in 1911 from

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<sup>10</sup> Kennicott, Philip. p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Pun, Raymond. *The Book of Khalid* Turns 100! NYPL Blog. 6, October, 2011. <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2011/10/06/book-khalid-turns-100>

<sup>12</sup> Rihani, Ameen. *The Book of Khalid*. Melville House: New York, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> See “Ameen Rihani: Report of the Death of an American Citizen,” 13, September, 1940. Accessed from Ancestry.com

the original publisher Dodd, Mead and Company. This edition is currently out of print. The story of Rihani's role in NYPL may have faded into the background of the Library's own history. However, after a hundred years passed, the Library celebrated its centennial anniversary in May 2011. More appropriately, it was also *The Book of Khalid's* centennial anniversary.

On October 11, 2011, the New York Public Library, the City University of New York (CUNY): Graduate Center - Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American Center and Project Khalid sponsored a program in honour of Rihani's work and to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Book of Khalid* since its publication. Lebanon's Ambassador Antoine Chedid introduced the opening remark of the program and presentations by Todd Fine, Director of Project Khalid and Professor Akram Khater of North Carolina State University were made. Journalist Rami Khouri served as the moderator of the program. Over 150 attendees participated in this special program hosted by the NYPL. This centennial celebratory program demonstrates the Library's continued interest in preserving immigrant's literary voices and contributions to society.<sup>14</sup>

The public program garnered success and media attention. This is also an example of Rihani's influence and role in today's society – creating an intellectual community of thinkers gathered in this space. The connection and nexus of Rihani with the Library: drawing on his experiences as an new immigrant who spent time understanding the cultural shifts and dislocations of his new home country, he also seizes opportunities to visit the public library; read, write, and reflect on his philosophical values and cultural insights of his upbringings; being remembered in a symposium in the Library has been one fruitful way to recall his work and legacy and reflect on how his work continues to pose important questions for our society today.

## Conclusion

We know a little bit more about the life of Ameen Rihani. By studying his works and life, we know that Rihani has led a common life similar to most immigrants: the cultural struggles to identify ones' own roots; assimilation and integration; and equal opportunity access to public libraries. The paper examined Rihani's life and his literary scholarship in relations to the NYPL. The story of Ameen Rihani is only one of many that exhibit the public libraries' on going commitment and mission to support people of all backgrounds.

It is well noted that Rihani had already gained literary prominence in the Arab world from his previous works in Arabic. However, publishing *The Book of Khalid* in English has broadened his reputation as a literary scholar in the English-speaking world. Inspiring future authors such as Mikhail Naimy, author of *The Book of Mirdad* and Kahlil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*. Rihani's love for literature is reflective in this novel. *The Book of Khalid* is more than novel, it is a recollection of the past struggles that continue to pervade today.

After 9/11, there have been waves of xenophobia, stereotype and fear of Middle Easterners, Muslims and Arab Americans. We need to study the literary past and be aware of the contributions and experiences of the Arab immigrants and Americans; and not let fear and hate become the force that drives our society. We need to recall, connect and collaborate with

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<sup>14</sup> See NYPL, "100 Years of the Arab American Novel: Ameen Rihani's *The Book of Khalid* and Arab Life in Lower Manhattan." *NYPL Blogs*. 11, October 2011. <http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/100-years-arab-american-novel-ameen-rihani%E2%80%99s-book-khalid-and-arab-life-lower-manhattan>

our immigrant communities to combat this kind of bigotry. Rihani's story as the first Arab American writer can be an inspiring example of what immigrant Americans are capable of accomplishing and overcoming with the help from their public libraries.

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