

MARY AJAMI

[1880-1965]



The 19th Century in the Arab World saw the rise of pioneering figures who strove to revive Classical Arabic literature. They produced important linguistic works which prepared the way for further achievements. They were succeeded, in the late 19th and in the early twentieth century, by a group of committed authors who laid the foundation of modern journalism, essay-writing, drama, fiction and modern poetry. They produced a neo-classical literature and, in spite of variety in the topics they treated, their works were characterized by deep interest in social reform.

The revival included the Arab Countries which had come in contact with the west: Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. It spread into the lands of emigration in the Americas where a group of talented Syro-Lebanese authors upheld the message of renovation and modernism which greatly influenced the Arab World.

Women as well as men participated in the movement. A number of women writers appeared, who not only claimed emancipation for women but joined in the general claim for national independence, social justice and educational reform. Their claims, set forth in papers and magazines, were supported by reformers like Qassem Ameen of Egypt, and by poets and writers who, influenced by the Western Romantic School, devoted a sizable part of their works to the rehabilitation and glorification of womanhood.

Mary Ajami was born in Damascus. She grew up in an atmosphere of burning national zeal, nourished by the prospects of an Arab revolt against Turkish domination and an Arab empire to be founded by King Hussain and his sons. She received her education in a Russian school, then in an Irish school and was able to master English and possibly to learn some French, while she achieved a solid knowledge of Arabic. Her interest in journalism was early awakened when she started publishing in papers and magazines articles dealing with social reform and poems with a romantic flavor.

In the meantime, she practiced teaching and was led to accept an administrative position at the Coptic Schools in Alexandria, Egypt. But her journalistic bent proved to be the stronger and, in 1910, she decided to start a women's magazine: "Al-Arouss" (The Bride), at Alexandria, Egypt, where she presented it to the readers as "a bride dedicated to the service of society which plays for her the role of Bridegroom". The magazine contained three sections: one for literature and history, another for domestic

science, health and child care, a third for fiction, discussions, anecdotes and recreation. The editor stated that she had contacted western women colleagues who published leading women's magazines, and obtained their promise to contribute to her magazine. "This", she said, "should encourage our women contributors to offer the best they can".

After moving her magazine from Alexandria to Beirut then to Damascus, and incurring a temporary suspension during World War I, she finally had to stop it in 1925. In recognition of her contribution to feminine journalism, a reception was held in her honor in Beirut by a group of feminists and leading literary figures in the Arab world.

Her name is mentioned in connection with the nationalists who struggled against Turkish domination and paid for it with their lives in 1916. Her keen interest in political questions led her to support the nationalist movement with her pen and her speeches. She had the courage to visit its leaders in their prison, carrying to them food and encouraging words. She even tried to intercede in their favor before the Turkish ruler but without success. During the French mandatory period, she continued her struggle for national independence and social reform, using for this purpose her prose writings, her poems and the speeches she occasionally delivered at public gatherings.

Mary's poetry shows the influence of Western romantic poets. To them she owes her affinity with nature, her ability to use it as a source of inspiration, her handling of new themes like those of childhood, country-life, orphans and laboring classes.

Her interest in innovation is also shown in her attempt to write prose poems in the Gibranian style which was then in vogue. In this genre she achieved some success but in her regular poems she was more successful.

Her biographers mention, among her many talents, her conversational ability and the ease with which she directed the regular literary meetings that she held every week in her house and which attracted a large number of journalists and men of letters.

It was probably her versatile character which made Fares-el-Khoury, a distinguished politician and literary man, compare her to her famous contemporary, May Ziadeh, when he said in verse form:

My friends, take it from me,
I say that Mary Ajami
can match with May Ziadeh
For skill and ingenuity.