

Mayy Ziadeh (1886-1941)(1)

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Born in Palestine, of a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother, Mayy Ziadeh received her secondary education from the French Sisters of Visitation at a boarding school at Aintoura, in Lebanon. It was here that she began to write under the influence of Western Romantic authors, both French and British, as an entry from her school diary suggests: "I am alone in the woods since two hours. Alone with Byron, poet of violence and sweetness... While I write, his Childe Harold lies at my feet. Did Byron ever dream that a Lebanese girl would spend with him or with some of his works, long, lonely hours in the woods of Lebanon?" After 1908, when she settled in Cairo with her parents, Mayy Ziadeh published a collection of French poems, "Fleurs du rêve" (Flowers of dream), under the pseudonym "Isis Copia." They aroused the interest of Egyptian and Lebanese journalists and writers. Like her father, who was a journalist, she published Arabic and French articles in leading Egyptian magazines. Between 1920 and 1925 she published her articles and essays in four volumes. In addition to the short stories and plays which appeared in her numerous books, she wrote "A Discourse on Equality," which surveyed various political systems and theories, pointed out the virtues and defects of each, and recommended social and humanitarian reforms which would contribute to social welfare under any system. Author, journalist, and public speaker, Mayy Ziadeh also founded in 1912 and animated successfully for about twenty years a salon modeled on those which Western women had created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Taha Hussein, the blind Egyptian scholar who faithfully attended the weekly meetings, has described the ambiance in the salon: "Mayy's salon was democratic; in the sense that it was open to various classes of intellectuals and to literary men and women of different nationalities: Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, Europeans and others. They discussed all sorts of topics, local and international.... Unique in character, this salon had a decided influence on its habitués, who spoke highly of it in their memoirs and their reminiscences."¹

Mayy Ziadeh was a strong advocate of the emancipation of women, which had been a topic of considerable discussion in Egypt from 1900 on. In 1904, for example, Quasim Ameen, an Egyptian writer and lawyer, had published a book called *The Emancipation of Women* in which he tried to prove by careful study of the Koran that Islam did not institute the veil. Another reformer was the woman teacher and writer Malak Hafni Nassif, Mayy's friend and contemporary, who died at the age of thirty-two and was commemorated by Mayy in a famous biography entitled *Bahithat-ul-Badia*. Malak introduced several reforms in girls' education, founded a feminist club, and at a public meeting in 1917 drew a list

of demands that included compulsory education for women at the elementary level and freedom to seek higher education, training a sufficient number of women doctors to fill the needs of Egyptian women, and gradual abolition of the veil. But Mayy's contribution to the women's cause was of a different nature. Because she was a Christian who lived in a conservative Moslem environment, she did not feel free to speak in the name of Moslem feminists who attacked specific traditions like polygamy and the veil. She did attack the tradition which required women to wear black and practice seclusion and mortification as a sign of mourning. In another essay, she voiced the complaint of a young girl whose parents opened letters addressed to her. "It pains me to think that I am subjected to a system of police service, which means a total lack of confidence and understanding between us." And in one of her short stories, she pointed out the evils of frequent divorce and remarriage for which men were responsible.

Like nineteenth-century Romantic writers, Mayy considered love the precondition of marriage and asserted woman's freedom to choose her mate. Although she declared that women should have the same right to education as men, she believed that woman's primary duty was to her home, her husband, and children. And in a letter addressed to Kahlil Gibran, she disagreed with his view, expounded in "Broken Wings," that a woman should be able to leave a husband whom she had been forced to marry and to meet a former lover secretly, even if that love remained platonic. At the same time, Mayy collaborated with Huda Shirawi, the Egyptian feminist leader and president of the women's union, who was the first Egyptian woman to tear off her veil before a large public and throw it into the sea. Mayy Ziadeh's contribution to the feminist cause in the Arab world was more an indirect result of her contribution to Arabic literature than a direct result of her speeches and writings on woman's freedom, the biographies she published of feminist leaders of her time, or her critical studies of three pioneering women writers. She is still considered an unusually gifted stylist, essayist, and public speaker. Many critics believe that modern Arabic literature has not produced a woman writer of her caliber.

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(1) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1979, vol. 5, No.2.

1. M.A. Hassan, *May Adeeabat-ush-Sharg wal Urubat* (Cairo: Dar-Alam-ul-Kutub, 1963), p. 187.