

Arab Feminine Literature Between 1850 and 1950



May
Ziadeh

The period between 1850 and 1950 covers the era of Arab Awakening; it can be broken down into two phases: the earlier one, 1850-1900, and the later one, 1900-1950. The signs of awakening were more evident in the later than in the earlier phase. Those signs were:

1. A pioneering literary activity which includes the study and revival of ancient Arabic literature and the promotion and reinstatement of classical Arabic.
2. A rising influence of Western culture, particularly as represented by French and English literatures and other modern subjects taught in the foreign schools which blossomed in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.
3. The impact of foreign literatures on the Arabic language, leading to the evolution of its prose and the appearance of journalistic writing, modern fiction and drama.
4. The use of literature in its various forms to spread modernism in life and thought, such ideas as freedom of expression, liberal attitudes towards love, marriage, women, government and religion.

The general revival attracted women and aroused interest in their emancipation. The few women poets of the early period participated in the revival of old classical poetry. **Aisha Timur** (1840 - 1902), an Egyptian poet of Kurdish origin declared that in her poetic vocation she was following the steps of distinguished ancient Arab women poets. Her father brought her teachers who taught her at home; he encouraged her to write poetry in three languages: Arabic, Kurdish and Persian, which she did. In spite of her traditionalism, she complained that her veil prevented her from coming in contact with highly learned men, and at one point she blamed men for preventing women from expanding their talents.

Other «revivalists» of the same period were **Warda al-Yazigi** (1838 - 1924) and **Warda el-Turk**, two poets from Lebanon, who prided themselves on their use of traditional forms and themes, like el-ghazal (love poetry), al-ritha' (elegy), el-mahed and tahmi'ah (praise and eulogy).

In the same period, between 1840 and 1900, there

appeared a few women writers who were more or less influenced by the new ideas. **Zainab Fawwaz** emigrated from South Lebanon to Egypt where she made herself known by corresponding with papers and magazines, publishing poems and compiling a biographical work on famous historical women.

Marianna Marrash, from Aleppo, Syria, contributed to magazines, opened a salon for the literary figures of her city and published a collection of traditional poetry.

The women writers of this group, in spite of their relative emancipation, deviated little from traditional lines.

Between 1886 and 1950, a second group of women writers flourished in the three countries of early Arab Awakening: Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. **May Ziadeh**, **Malak Hafni Nassef**, **Marie Ajami** and **Salma Sayegh** fell under the direct influence of Western culture. They expressed themselves mainly in prose, which was earlier to evolve than poetry. They contributed to papers and magazines and practiced public speaking, which was at the time a popular art and an efficient tool for the spread of cultural change. They were the spokeswomen of their emancipated sisters who founded women's schools, magazines and associations through which they preached awakening and renovation in thought and in the way of life.

May Ziadeh (1886 - 1941), was a Lebanese who received, at the French Sisters of Visitation School, Aintoura, Lebanon, a solid and broad cultural background, which enabled her to gain a thorough knowledge of five languages and to master writing in three of them. At the age of 22 she emigrated to Egypt where she started her literary career by publishing prose in French. She attended courses in philosophy and history at the Egyptian University, deepened her knowledge of Arabic and became a distinguished speaker in this language. The influence of romanticism and of modern thought on her writing is clear in her published literary studies and in the essays and articles which she contributed to the leading magazines of her time, essays

dealing with social and linguistic reform, woman's emancipation and other topics of a metaphysical nature.

May Ziadeh's life and thought have been discussed in several books published about her in Egypt and Lebanon. There is little room, in this article, to give her the emphasis that she deserves. In an attempt to make a general evaluation of her literary work, we may note that her 14 books, written in a personal, quasi-romantic, attractive style, make her one of the distinguished stylists of our time and are now considered among the classics of modern Arabic literature.

Malak Hafni Nassef, an Egyptian writer and a close friend of May Ziadeh, who later wrote her biography, devoted her writings to the question of women's emancipation. She belonged to a prominent Moslem family, received her early education at a French school after which she moved to a government training college, where she obtained a «normal diploma». She spent her short life (1886 - 1918) in teaching, writing, speaking in public meetings, drawing plans of reform in family laws and girls' education. Before she died, she published a book on women, called «An-Nissaiyyat,» containing all her ideas on woman's emancipation and social reform. In this book she condemns the prevailing custom of discriminating between boys and girls, and calls for the following: free education for girls, partial removal of the veil, abolition of polygamy and forced marriage, permission for women to attend prayers in mosques. She recommends training of women physicians, capable to treat female patients whose families object to their being treated by male doctors. She also recommends training women in economics and other subjects which would help them administer their properties successfully.

Although **Malak Hafni Nassef** wrote in a purely classical Arabic, her content reveals a broad knowledge obtained from her modern education and her extensive readings.

Marie Ajami, a Syrian who received her education in Russian and Irish schools, started her activity as a teacher in private schools, but found the time to contribute to Arabic papers and magazines. In 1910, she founded her own magazine, «Al-Aroos» (The Bride), which lasted, in spite of temporary suspension during the first World War, until 1925. Besides her journalistic activity, Marie Ajami practiced public speaking and wrote poetry which showed the influence of Western romanticism. She participated in the foundation of women's clubs and schools and joined literary societies. In her writings and speeches, she tried to arouse the spirit of nationalism, called for the revival

of national industry, the emancipation of women and the rehabilitation of the laborers, the farmers and the military, the trio whom she called «the pillars of the nation.»

Salma Sayegh, a Lebanese from Beirut, was, like Malak Hafni Nassef, a contemporary and friend of May Ziadeh's. She had an exceptional literary talent, and developed in her essays, published in magazines and later collected into books, a poetic style. Like the romantic authors who sought refuge in nature and in spiritual yearning, she says in one of her articles:

«To the mountain of the Lord, O ye that are tired and heavy laden!

To the woods which echoed the kisses of Salomon.

To the white summits where Jessus' holiness was revealed.

Away from the city and its turbulence, I fled to the hilltops of Harissa where stands the mother of the Nazarene with open arms, as if repeating the call of her son: come to me, all ye that are tired and I shall give you rest.»

Her writings reflect a highly emotional nature, deeply conscious of human suffering, strongly moved by the sight of misery, ready to denounce all forms of social injustice, such as the abuse of women and children, the ill-treatment of prisoners, handicapped people, refugees and foundlings.

The four writers we have been discussing are good representatives of the women's literary movement during the early 20th century, but, with the exception of Marie Ajami they do not include the founders of women's magazines who flourished in this period, nor the pioneers in fiction writing. Those two topics require special articles.

The period of Awakening in its second phase, 1900-1950, produced not only eminent women writers but also leading men thinkers and authors who left a lasting impact on modern Arab thought. Qassem Amin, author of the famous book on the emancipation of women, (1904); Mohammad Abdo, a rationalist religious reformer; Ali Abdul Razek who, in this book on Islam and the principles of government, favored the separation of religious law from state law; Taha Hussain who adopted Descartes' method in his study of ancient Arab literature; the Lebanese Emigrant writers; Rihani, Gibran, Nu'aimy, Abu Madi and others, who were the champions of evolution and creativity in all fields of culture.

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