

# May Ziadeh: a Biography of Conflict

From a convent atmosphere at the Visitation Sisters' School in Aintoura, Lebanon, May Ziadeh moved, at the age of 22, to the boisterous literary circles of Cairo, Egypt, in 1908. There she came in contact with high-brow Egyptian and Lebanese society. She was able, however, to adjust to the new environment by refining her knowledge of Arabic and starting a successful correspondence with leading Egyptian magazines of the time. She confidently took the initiative of founding a literary salon which was frequented for a long time by Egyptian and Lebanese intelligentsia.

Yet the impact of the convent years continued to mark May's life and thinking. Her social contacts were dominated by reserve and moderation. Of this peculiarity, Taha Hussein (a leading Egyptian literary figure who was May's friend and a regular habitué of her salon) says: "May's literary life had a dual aspect which reflected a dual influence on the Arab literary life of her time. In the first aspect, she was the open-minded, non-conventional literary woman who successfully led literary meetings attended by men and women from various intellectual classes; she participated in their discussions with an able and dignified manner. She directed this salon for over twenty years and made it a source of cultural radiation in Egypt and other Arab countries." "The other aspect of May's life," he goes on to say, "was that of the woman who loved seclusion and indulged in meditation. This trait developed and exerted a determining influence on the last years of her life when she broke all relationship with the outside and refused to meet people except by appointment." A similar opinion was given by her other friend, the essayist Abbas Mahmoud al-Accad, who said that May practised austerity to a point which was harmful to her health and well-being. In his opinion, May had a melancholy nature that was accentuated by her religious training and deep Christian faith.

It is easy to see in her writings the influence of her divided personality. There is shrewdness, mirth and irony in her social criticism while her personal essays are passionate and gloomy. Her Christian devotion contained a large share of tolerance toward other faiths and a strong sense of universal love. Her national loyalty was divided between Egypt and Lebanon, but deep in her heart, she longed to belong to a truly independent and progressive homeland which she failed to see in Egypt, in Lebanon, or in any other Arab country.

"In the wide dancing-hall of life", she says in one of her essays, "I mixed with the dancers, but kept my own

identity and refused to be carried off by the tide. I listened to the contrasting voices, joined in the controversial activities, partook of the varied aspirations and experiences, but I was everywhere confronted by questions that had no answer: Why do we toil and suffer? What is the meaning of life?"

Tormented by the romantic search for happiness and the desire for social justice, she wrote her long essay on "Equality" in which she made a review of the numerous social systems and political regimes. But she finally came to the deceptive conclusion that no system has proved its excellence or superiority over the rest and that the instauration of social justice and welfare is only a dream.

Her attitude toward woman's liberation favored a middle road between two extremes. She pleaded for woman's freedom, claimed equal opportunity with man in education and work, attacked traditions which imposed on her the mourning practices from which men were exempted, but she did not admit a woman's right to violate the sanctity of marriage and break the bond that ties her to a husband whom she does not like.

In her private life, she was discreet and introverted. Though she had many men friends among those who attended her salon, she had no romantic connection with any of them. She probably sought an ideal love which she failed to find. Of this type was her love for Gibran whom she knew only through his writings. She carried on with him an intellectual correspondence and, though in one of her letters she alluded to the love she felt for him, she received no response. It became clear to her that Gibran admired her, confided in her, and appreciated her friendship, but was too much occupied with his art, his health and his writings to give any heed to matrimonial questions. Her love for him remained platonic and ethereal.

May's biographers, trying to analyze the causes of the depression which carried her off at the age of 55, attributed it to the conflicting influences that shaped her and to the pains she suffered when she lost her parents and many of her friends at short intervals between 1930 and 1935. While their conjectures may have some foundation, there is nevertheless, the argument that many other women were afflicted by similar or worse troubles which they were able to overcome. The latest statements of scientists and researchers concerning causes of nervous depressions, affirm that knowledge about them is still so vague and meager that it is impossible to give any definite and scientific explanation of this common disorder.