Ziadeh, May (1886-1941)

SUMMARY



May Ziadeh

(url: <https://arablit.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/may.jpg>)

May Ziadeh was a prominent literary figure and salonnière in the Arab world in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. A journalist, essayist, author and literary critic, she was also known for being a spellbinding orator and an unusually gifted stylist and translator. Ziadeh was best known for instituting a long running weekly salon (1911-1931) in her home that brought together leading men and women in the period when Egyptian anti-colonial nationalism was at its height. Ziadeh was also a strong advocate of the emancipation of women in the Arab society.

Famous for being moderate, Ziadeh did not equate modernity with the denial of Arabic cultural heritage in blind imitation of the West. Many critics believe that modern Arabic literature has not produced a woman writer of Ziadeh’s calibre and that her contribution to the feminist cause cannot be overlooked.

MAIN ENTRY

May Ziadeh [[1]](#footnote-1)was born as Mary Ziadeh in Nazareth, Palestine to a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother. Ziadeh received her secondary education at a boarding school in Lebanon where she began to write under the influence of Western Romantic authors, such as George Gordon, Lord Byron and Victor Hugo. Her parents migrated to Egypt in 1908, in search of opportunities in Egypt’s livelier urban scene and more liberal atmosphere. Shortly after settling in Cairo, Ziadeh published a collection of French poems, "Fleurs du rêve" [Flowers of dream], under the pseudonym "Isis Copia." [[2]](#footnote-2)Like her father, who was a journalist and editor of *al-Mahrusa* newspaper, Ziadeh published numerous Arabic and French articles [[3]](#footnote-3)in *al- Mahrusa* as well as in leading Egyptian magazines such as *al-Hilal* and *al-Muqtataf*.

In 1911, May Ziadeh founded and animated successfully for about twenty years a salon modelled on those that Western women had created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. [[4]](#footnote-4)Her salon was in her house in Cairo and was held every Tuesday. Some of the writers that attended her salon were Taha Hussein, Khalil Matar, Antoun Al-Jamil, Abbas Mahmud Al-Akkad, and Ahmed Shawki.

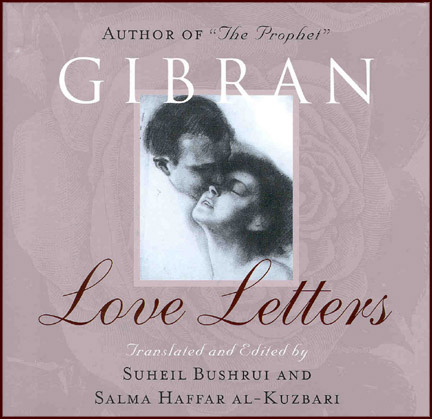
The weekly seminars took place during a time of sweeping social, political and economic changes within the Ottoman Empire and Europe's increasing political and cultural influence in the region. These changes culminated to the Arab Renaissance (*al-Nahda*) that was an endeavour to reach a compromise between contemporary practices similar to those in Europe and a shared Arab heritage, in the hope of shaping a new vision for an Arab society in transition. Ziadeh was a representative of *al- Nahda* as she believed in social integration, and her salon hosted both men and women and was open to various classes of intellectuals and to literary figures of different nationalities and social standings. [[5]](#footnote-5)The salon provided a space where men and women debated their ideas on social change and the pertinence of women’s lives thereto as well as ideas on liberating the 'collective consciousness' from the traditional norms that had stunted society’s progress. The subject of 'equality' was discussed at length as men began to acknowledge the importance of women's emancipation to national liberation and development at this time. Women's desire for emancipation and men's nationalist dreams [[6]](#footnote-6)were seen as complementary and key in the advancement of society.

In 1914, Ziadeh went to the Egyptian University where she studied Arabic literature, philosophy, and Islamic history, graduating in 1917.She met Mrs. Huda Sha’rawi, the Egyptian feminist leader and president of the Egyptian Feminist Union, in college. She then collaborated with her on liberating Arab women from ignorance, tyranny, and slavery.

Ziadeh was acutely interested in biography, as a mode of bringing to notice the feminist intellectual work of earlier women and contemporaries, and she wrote intellectual biographies of three pioneering women: Warda al-Yaziji, A’isha Taymur, and MalakHafni Nassif (also known as Bahithat al-Badiya). [[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1921, she convened a conference under the heading ‘The goal of life’, where Ziadeh called upon Arab women to aspire toward freedom, and to be open to the Occident without forgetting their Oriental identity. On other different occasions, she called on women to work, be financially independent, and consider love as a precondition of marriage. Ziadeh also attacked specific customs like the tradition that required women to wear black and practice seclusion and mortification as a sign of mourning, and women’s lack of privacy. Although she declared that women should have the same right to education as men, Ziadeh believed that a woman's primary duty was to her home, husband, and children. A woman’s education, for Ziadeh, would improve the domestic sphere and childrearing.

In addition to the short stories, prose, poetry, and plays which appeared in her numerous books, Ziadeh wrote ‘A Discourse on Equality,’ (1923). It explores issues through a sociological lens, surveying various political systems, and theories, pointing out the virtues and defects of each, and recommending social and humanitarian reforms which would contribute to social welfare under any system. Ziadeh was in favour of Socialism as a system to aspire for a better society. She also believed that slavery still exists, in different forms, even if its institution had been outlawed.



Love Letters: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran to May Ziadah

(Source: http://gibrankahlil.blogspot.co.uk/)

Ziadeh’s mysterious correspondence with Gibran Khalil Gibran[[8]](#footnote-8), the famous Lebanese artist and writer, overshadowed her literary contribution to Arab culture for many years. The correspondence [[9]](#footnote-9)lasted for about twenty years (1911-1931) though the two never met. Their relationship developed into what is considered a spiritual love.

After the death of her parents and Gibran, Ziadeh retired from her literary life and stopped her Tuesday salon. Struggling with depression, she travelled to France, England, and Italy in 1932. She did not feel better however, and symptoms of hysteria intensified instead. In 1936, she went to Beirut and was admitted to the Al-A’sfoorieh mental health facility. She returned to Cairo after that only to be shocked by a lawsuit that was filed against her by her cousin, seeking to place her property under guardianship. She won the lawsuit but lost her health.She died 1941 in Cairo where only her close friends attended the funeral.

**Some of her publications:[[10]](#footnote-10)**

Flowers of a Dream, azaheer holm, (in French – 1911); published using the pen name Isis Copia.

The Return of the Wave, rojoo’ al-mwjah, (translated from French – 1912)

Smiles and Tears, ibtisamatwadomoo’, (translated from German – 1913)

The Researcher of the Desert, bahithet al-badiah, (1920)

The Purpose of Life, ghayetal-hayat, (1921)

The Tourists of a Girl, sawa’ihfatat, (1922)

Words and Signs, kalimatwaisharat, (1922)

Equality, al-mosawat, (1923)

Newspapers, al-saha’if, (1934)

Between the Ebb and Flood, bayna al-jazrwa al-mad, (1934)

Author’s Letter to the Life of Arabia, risalat al-adeebilahayat al-a’rabia, (1938)

Live in Danger, i'sh fi khatar, (1941)

The Letters, al-rasa’il, (1948)

**Further Reading:**

Jabir, Jamil. Mai fi hayathailmotariba [*Mai in Her Turbulent Life*]. Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 2000. [in Arabic]

Talhami, Ghada. *Historical Dictionary of Women in the Middle East and North Africa.* Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2013.

Bahithat.org. Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women. Bahithat Volume XI: 2005-2006

1. Some translate her name as Mai, or Mayy and her family name as Ziada or Ziyada [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. She also wrote using the pen name Aida while Gibran Khalil Gibran gave her the name Mariam. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Between 1920 and 1925, she published her articles and essays in four volumes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many intellectuals, including Taha Hussein, think that it is the fusion of Arab and European influences that created the salons of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Arab world. Mai was likened to Madame de Staël and Madame Récamier, but also Arab women such as A'ishah Al-Ba'uniyyah, Walladah bint Al-Mustakfi and Wardah Al-Yaziji. The salon, both in Europe and the Arab world, is a long-standing practice. The tradition, however, was revived as a result of the changes, mentioned above, and the need to find a space where discussions about social, political and literary trends of the day can take place. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ziadeh’s salon contrasts with the other famous Egyptian salon of the period. For example, the politically influenced salon of Princess Nazli Abu Fadil was exclusively visited by men. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Women's issues began to emerge from the background - albeit slowly - in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the likes of Qāsim Amin (1863–1908) calling the seclusion of women an 'injustice'and advocating partial empowerment of women for the sake of serving the nation. He also called for the abandonment of the veil. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mai’s friend and contemporary, Bahithat-ul-Badia 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. She also called on training a sufficient number of women doctors to fill the needs of Egyptian women, and for a gradual abolition of the veil. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. He was in New York at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gibran’s letters to Ziadeh have recently been translated to English under the title of *Love Letters: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran to May Ziadah.* Unfortunately, Ziyadeh’s letters are not featured, as her family did not grant permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As far as I know, Ziaydeh’s work is not available in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)