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“WOMEN’S WRITING ON WOMEN’S WRITING”: MAYY ZIYADA’S LITERARY BIOGRAPHIES AS EGYPTIAN FEMINIST HISTORY

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ABSTRACT
This paper looks at three literary biographies written by the Arab feminist writer Mayy Ziyada (1886–1941), published in Cairo at the beginning of the twentieth century: Bahithat al-Badiya (1920), Aisha Taymur (1926) and Warda al-Yaziji (1926). Ziyada is a pioneer Arab woman writer and feminist intellectual who wrote articles which were published in various newspapers issued in Egypt at the time, in addition to her several books of essays. The focus of this paper, however, will be directed to her three literary biographies of Egyptian pioneer feminist writers Malak Hifni Nassif (1886–1918), Aisha Taymur (1840–1902) and Warda al-Yaziji (1838–1924). I begin by exploring the multiple voices embedded in Ziyada’s biographies followed by a discussion of the cultural discourses and feminist politics in the three texts. I then examine the construction of women’s lives involved in life-writing, while in the last part of the paper I look at Ziyada’s literary biographies within the paradigm of “women’s writing on women”. The paper concludes with reflections on the three texts, in terms of literary biography as cultural memory and feminist history.

Introduction

Mayy Ziyada (1886–1941) is a pioneer Arab woman writer born in Nazareth to a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother of Syrian origins. She received her early education in Nazareth, then in Lebanon, in French missionary schools, before moving with her family to Egypt, where she lived most of her life until her death in 1941. Upon coming to Egypt in 1907, Ziyada started a life of work and self-education: teaching French to daughters of the Egyptian aristocracy and intelligentsia; learning English, German and Italian; and beginning to attend lectures at the Egyptian University, the first secular university in Egypt and the Arab region established in 1908. She was soon introduced to the world of Egyptian and Arab intellectuals, and hence began receiving them on Tuesdays in her weekly Salon, held with occasional interruptions, in the period 1912–1931. These were the years
which witnessed the rise of the Egyptian national movement against the British occupation, and the emergence of an organized Egyptian feminist movement, demanding women’s education and liberation. She gained access to women’s writings during a period marked by a proliferation in newspapers and magazines whose owners, editors and contributors were mostly Egyptian and Arab women living in Egypt since the turn of the twentieth century. It is during this period that Ziyada was also introduced to Egyptian feminist thought, particularly through her attendance of women’s lectures at the Egyptian University’s Women’s Section (1909–1912). Her exposure to writings and talks encouraged her to develop her mastery of the Arabic language, and thus begin a career of writing and lecturing in Arabic; hence her contributions to her father’s Al-Mahrousâ newspaper and to several other leading newspapers and magazines of the time, such as Al-Hilal, Al-Ahram, Al-Muqtaṭatif. She was also in charge of the “Women and Society Section” in the weekly Al-Siyasa al-usbu’iyya, as well as giving frequent public lectures in Egypt and Lebanon.

Mayy Ziyada published selections of her writings in several books. These include Sawanih fatah (A Young Woman’s Thoughts, 1922), Zulumat wa ashi’a (Darkness and Rays, 1923), Bayn al-jazr w-al-madd (Between Ebb and Flow, 1924), and Al-Saha’if (The Papers, 1924). Furthermore, a collection of her selected speeches, talks and public lectures from the period 1922–1940 were edited by Ziyada’s biographer Salma al-Kuzburi, and published posthumously in Kalimaat wa isharaat 2 (Words and Pointers 2, 1983). The largest collection of Ziyada’s writings was compiled and edited by Antje Ziegler in Kitabaat mansiya (Forgotten Writings, 2009). This paper, however, discusses Ziyada’s three literary biographies of Arab women: Bahithat al-Badiya (1920), Aisha Taymur (1926) and Warda al-Yaziji (1926).

Ziyada’s book on Malak Hifni Nassif, Bahitaht al-Badiya (1920), originated as a series of articles published in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Muqtaṭatif at the suggestion of its owner and editor Ya’qub Sarrouf, as explained by him in his “Introduction” to the book. Sarrouf then commented on the outcome, describing it as “a new model of criticism in Arabic.” He then highlights the main (“poetics” in Spongberg’s terms) features of Ziyada’s writing: her style, knowledge, commentary and language. The book itself, however, focuses on the “political,” and is divided consequently into nine chapters that cover various aspects of Nassif as a woman, a Muslim, an Egyptian, as a writer, a social critic and as a reformer. Additionally, the book includes in its two last chapters a comparison between Nassif and the pro-feminist reformer Qasim Amin. The book closes with a selection of letters from the correspondence that went on between the two women, as well as Ziyada’s obituary of Nassif.

Unlike Bahithat al-Badiya, which developed out of a series of newspaper articles, Ziyada’s books Aisha Taymur and Warda al-Yaziji originated in
two public lectures she gave. The former was delivered at the Egyptian University upon an invitation from “Gam‘iyat Misr al-Fatah” (Egypt the Young Woman Association) to give a talk on a topic of her own choice addressing the association’s members. The latter, the last and much shorter than the other two texts, was read at the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Cairo in May 1924, in the presence of women’s school teachers and students, and was then serialized in the newspaper Al-Muqtataf. Aisha Taymur is organized around seven chapters, which cover various stages of her life, her times and her writings in prose and verse; while Warda al-Yaziji is divided into five short chapters about her life, her prose and mostly about her poetry in addition to the author’s preface. The book itself maintains the speech form as it opens with her addressees: “Ladies and Young Women.” It is also worth noting that in the case of the two longer texts, the author includes a sub-title; namely, Bahithat al-Badiya: dirasa naqdiyya (Searcher in the Desert: A Critical Study), and Aisha Taymur: sha‘irat al-tali’a (Aisha Taymur: Avantgarde Poet). Thus, although generally defined as Ziyada’s literary biographies of the three women, the three texts share the purpose of reviving and maintaining the memories of pioneer women writers, written in an unconventional style that included extended quotations, narration, conversation, public speech and letters, in addition to personal reflections and critical commentaries. In the following discussion I wish to explore various aspects of Ziyada’s three biographies.

**Reading for multiple voices**

By the use of the subtitle in the biography Bahithat al-Badiya, Ziyada describes her own work as “a critical study” and opens with an account of her encounters with Malak Hifni Nassif, at first through Nassif’s writings and then in person. Although the text presents itself at the beginning as a work of literary biography and criticism, dominated by its author’s voice, it soon acquires an additional conversational tone. Particularly in the chapters that address Nassif’s work, Ziyada gives voice to Nassif by quoting her extensively, and thus using a technique of voice shifts throughout the text. Looking at the text in the context of Ziyada’s oratorical style, her incorporation of quotes creates a dialogue rather than a narrative; a dialogue between the two women, and between them and us as readers. In most cases, Ziyada quotes Nassif, creating conversations based on shared positions and mutual agreement between the two. There are also times where the author quotes Nassif and then disagrees with her, presenting her own argument, as in the following, where she begins by quoting Nassif then responding to the quotation:

“It is most annoying when men claim that they pity us. We do not need their pity, we deserve their respect. Let them exchange one for the other. Pity is the
feeling of the flawless towards the faulty, or the superior towards the inferior. So in which condition of these do they perceive us? By God we reject to be seen as either one or the other.”

Pity can happen between friends and between lovers. The removal of mercy from our hearts simultaneously removes affinity, because pity is an essential element of love …

Why do men pity women? It is because a woman spends her life lost in the high seas of which he knows nothing but the shore.¹¹

The multiple voices we hear here represent two different positions concerning the role of pity in human interaction. It is interesting, however, that while Ziyada seems opposed to Nassif’s point about pity in gender relations, she does not so much disagree with Nassif’s idea of the role of pity in subjugating women, as question the generalization that might be implied in Nassif’s words. She moves the emotion of pity from a gendered context to a more neutral one: “friends and lovers,” and offers her own understanding of gendered pity, attributing it to men’s ignorance of women’s emotions.

Voices reflect positions, but the multiplicity of voices here does not merely reflect Ziyada’s and Nassif’s arguments, but carries echoes of social practice as well. In this case, for instance, we hear the voice of Nassif, the voice of men (their “claims”) and then Ziyada’s response. In addition to this conversational situation, Ziyada introduces the pro-feminist intellectual of the turn of the twentieth century, Qasim Amin, devoting the last two chapters of the book to a comparison between Nassif and Amin, highlighting the similarities in their positions. She concludes the book with emphasis on their roles as reformers working towards the improvement of women’s lives through educational and legal reforms: “As shown above, it becomes clear that Bahithat al-Badiya and Qasim Amin agree on the necessity of reforms for women, opening up educational opportunities and access to learning.”¹²

Unlike Nassif, whom Ziyada knew through her writings as well as personal acquaintance, Ziyada did not arrive in Cairo until 1908, six years after Aisha Taymur’s death in 1902. Although Al-Yaziji was living in Alexandria from 1899 until her death in 1924, Ziyada never mentions having met her in person. She knew them both through their writings, however, and her appreciation of the two women is connected to their roles as pioneer writers:}

When I received the YWCA invitation to give a lecture, leaving me the freedom of choice of topic, Mrs. Warda was on my mind, and her collection of poems was in my hands, as I was turning its pages and squeezing its nectar.

It is worth noting that I have great appreciation for all the women who came before our generation and opened the way for us. I say “opened the way” although all their did is leave a landmark at the threshold of the untrodden way. But it is a valuable and useful landmark, especially when we take into account the time it was laid there. It is now for us to explore the nature of
the Eastern woman, and then to seek to develop and polish her, to reveal her essence as a masterpiece, a spring of water and an asset.\textsuperscript{13}

Ziyada is aware of the great influence of the pioneering women. Just as Al-Yaziji “opened the way,” Taymur similarly “enlightened” the path for women to proceed towards their self-expression and liberation, and Ziyada describes her as a source of light in the dark night.\textsuperscript{14}

A few years before Ziyada thought of Al-Yaziji as a topic for her YMCA lecture, she had already developed interest in Taymur’s work, initiated by an earlier invitation to give a lecture:

I thought that the best topic would be about a prominent woman. We would study her together and discover in the process of research many areas in ethics, literature and society; to examine these issues as much as we can, while drawing an interesting portrait of the woman. Thus, we would document another source of pride in the Women’s Movement in the country, adding to our interest and inspiring us all as a model, helpful and useful.

[...]

I read all that I could find of [Aisha Taymur’s] writings; I gather all the available information about her; and I thought of publishing studies on her.\textsuperscript{15}

Ziyada followed these opening lines with an extended explanation of the reasons that urged her to study Taymur, whom she considered a pioneer of Arab women’s awakening. Ziyada explained that Taymur was mostly known as a poet, but was still not included in the canon of Arabic poetry, and added that very few had access to the works that included her poetry, life and thought. Indeed, Taymur’s poetry had been out of print since the early twentieth century, and it is only through Egyptian feminist efforts that some of Taymur’s works in verse and prose have been recently reprinted in Egypt. Ziyada saw Taymur’s prominence not only in the context of women’s writing and in comparison to other Eastern women writers, but also maintained Taymur’s superiority among her contemporaries in general, both male and female. Her opinions, moreover, reflected the general mind set of a wide public of Eastern men and women, whose ideas and positions prevailed at her time, and remained common among the next generation. In general, Taymur’s work revealed a sense of awakening, when the majority was in deep submission and sleep.\textsuperscript{16} And finally, Ziyada added a personal reason for her interest in Taymur’s work, explaining that that she was introduced to Taymur through a song she remembered from her childhood days back in Palestine, only learning later that the lines were taken from one of Taymur’s poems.

Thus, the voices we hear in this text do not reflect the opinions and positions of Taymur and Ziyada alone, but they represent two generations of women in their different socio-cultural contexts. It is also worth noting
that, in the case of her analysis of the two poets Aisha Taymur and Warda al-Yaziji, Mayy Ziyada allows them to speak within the pages of her writing through her extensive quotations from their works. Ziyada seems to be interested mostly in giving voice to these two poets who were exceptional not only because of their mastery of the poetic genre, but because of the conservative society’s voice embedded in their writings and the challenges they faced in life and addressed in writing.

**Cultural discourses**

The hybridity of the texts, created in part by the multiplicity of voices, reflects effectively the cultural discourses prevalent at the time of Ziyada’s writing, as well as during the time of the three women of whom she writes. The author’s consciousness of the socio-cultural context is particularly evident in her studies of Al-Yaziji and Taymur, who were both born in the early decades of the nineteenth century (unlike Nassif who was born towards the end of that century). For instance, Ziyada begins her first chapter on Al-Yaziji by directly placing her in the context of other pioneers of women’s writing in the region, both in Egypt and the Arab/Ottoman East. Yet, overall, Ziyada does not pay much attention to details of socio-cultural environment in which the women lived in either Bahihat al-Badiya and Warda al-Yaziji; although, in Aisha Taymur does mention the general characteristics of intellectual life and the features of domestic life of Taymur’s time (chapter two), and elaborates this with particular reference the poet’s social and intellectual environment (chapter four). Despite these exclusions, I wish to focus on two of the main issues raised at the turn of the twentieth century, in relation to Ziyada’s three literary biographies, and to reflect on them as representations of the cultural discourses prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century and the years leading up to it. These are the issue of the veil and notions of femininity.

The discourse of the veil is one of the main cultural dialogues that has dominated studies of women in Islamic cultures. In Bahihat al-Badiya Ziyada writes that Nassif was initially against veiling women, but saw unveiling as a long process that should be connected with the rise of educational opportunities for women. In the last two chapters of Bahihat al-Badiya Ziyada draws a comparison between Nassif and the Egyptian pro-feminist Qasim Amin (1863–1908). Amin’s position on the veil was expressed in his book Tahrir al-mar’a (The Liberation of Women) published in 1899, where he argued that it was an obstacle preventing women’s development and, consequently, national progress. Having presented Amin’s position, Ziyada adopts an apologetic tone stating the following:

How mistaken are those who know nothing about Qasim Amin other than his calls to remove the veil—the issue that he is most famous for! And that he wants
unconditional freedom for women. These are the claims of those who have not read his books! He is one of those most caring about women’s femininity and status within the family and the nation.\textsuperscript{20}

In her defence of Amin, Ziyada compares his anti-veil stance to Nassif’s moderate position, highlighting points of similarity, such as the gradual introduction of unveiling and increasing women’s access to education.\textsuperscript{21}

The issue of the veil is not raised in either of the biographies of Al-Yaziji or Taymur, living in an earlier period before it surfaced in the early twentieth century as part of the cultural debates related to the expansion in women’s education; this lead, in turn, to more middle and upper-class women extending their visible presence from the domestic to the public sphere.\textsuperscript{22} An important discussion here is about gender roles and women’s education, and particularly education as a threat to femininity. In \textit{Warda al-Yaziji}, Ziyada stresses the fact that Al-Yaziji was raised in a family of intellectuals. She is said to have attending the American Primary School in Beirut, followed by a national school, in addition to studying French at home, and Arabic grammar and poetry taught to her by her father. Al-Yaziji is described as a woman who wore Eastern clothes, living a life that included Turkish, Persian and Arab cultural elements. Most of her poetry can be classified under the classical categories of panegyric and elegy in Arabic poetry. Similar to her conventional verse, Al-Yaziji expressed her criticism towards Westernized Arab women who attached more importance to adopting aspects of Western appearances in fashion, language and life-style in the name of freedom; calling instead upon Arab women to imitate Western women in their responsible attitudes towards family, society, language and country.\textsuperscript{23} Ziyada defines Al-Yaziji as belonging to the category of “practical” people who represent their societies and do not clash with the dominant practices. In this she was, according to Ziyada, unlike Qasim Amin, who belongs to the category of “visionaries and theoreticians,” whose calls for social reform are rejected by his contemporaries and only gain recognition by the next generations.\textsuperscript{24}

In the case of Aisha Taymur, Ziyada reveals the tension between women’s education and femininity prevalent at the time through experiences described by Taymur in \textit{Mir’at al-ta’ammul fi-l-umur} (\textit{The Mirror of Contemplation}, epistle, 1892). Taymur explained about her own mother’s devastation with her daughter’s resistance to learning embroidery and domestic activities, while devoting all her time to books, pens and papers. It was her father, recognizing her desire for education, who provided Taymur with teachers of Turkish, Persian and Arabic.\textsuperscript{25} Ziyada finds it necessary to comment on the cultural discourse that attributes education to masculinity, for she fears that Taymur’s choice could emphasize “the common false conception that if a young woman is drawn to study and learning, and if she masters an area of
knowledge or art, she then rejects needle-work and becomes masculinised.” Ziyada further elaborates her point by admitting that some educated women are accused of being masculinized when neglecting feminine duties, as their immersion in reading and education may lead them to neglect their appearance, elegance and grace. She concludes by stating that Taymur’s engagement with books and writing “does not take away from her genuine pure femininity,” just as much as men’s engagement with poetry or philosophy does not add to men’s masculinity.26

Feminist politics

Women’s writings are most often read and criticized according to their literary rather than political value. This has very clearly been the case of most of the writings about Mayy Ziyada, let alone the earlier generations of women writers. This, of course, is not strictly a characteristic of the Arab world, but can be seen as a universal feature of reading women’s writings across cultures. For example, in Mary Spongberg’s study of the “politics of life writing” in relation to Englishwomen Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, she highlights the fact that, while autobiographical elements were acknowledged in the fictional writings of both women, still they have not been included in the canon of eighteenth-century women’s autobiographical writing. Spongberg attributes this to “the hybrid nature of such texts” which do not provide an easy generic classification, and the focus on “the poetics of female autobiography, rather than its politics.”27 Instead of restricting her study to Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman or her Memoirs, published posthumously by her husband William Godwin, Spongberg chooses to focus on the intersections between the writings of both women. By doing so, she emphasizes the feminist/political dimension in their writings, and sheds particular light on Wollstonecraft’s preoccupation with women’s oppression and the subordination of female subjectivity, with the purpose of raising feminist consciousness and directing her readers towards social change.

In many ways this applies to the three women Taymur, Al-Yaziji and Nassif, let alone to Ziyada herself. Ziyada’s decision to revive the work of all three is in itself a feminist act, in the sense of establishing a history of Arab women’s writing, as well as reviving the memory of an earlier generation of pioneering women, representing their lives and works as a source of inspiration and empowerment for the next generations. Taymur and Al-Yaziji have both received more attention to their poetry than prose, and to their poetics rather than politics, unlike Nassif whose writings are mostly articles of socio-political prose, rather than poetry or fiction. Although the three women’s “feminist” stances vary, it is worth seeing them in their own historical contexts. Taymur and Al-Yaziji lived at the time when women were denied
educational opportunities equal to their male contemporaries. It was only in the early years of the twentieth century that public women’s schools were opened. The opportunity of gaining a school education was thus available to Nassif but not to her predecessors. If Ziyada’s biographies are themselves feminist acts, then the ability of her three subjects to write and publish their various writings can be seen as acts of women’s agency, even if these works reflect what now seems to be a conservative stance.

In addition to this general feminist achievement, in her biographies Ziyada pays particular attention to the feminist messages embedded in the writings of the three women, in particular Taymur’s and Nassif’s direct engagement with gender roles and women’s rights. Taymur, for instance, it not granted feminist recognition based only on her decision to choose a life of creative writing instead of restricting herself within the feminine domain of domesticity. Instead, Ziyada highlights Taymur’s contribution as a social commentator, whose writings carry a very vocal feminist message. Apart from her poetry, Taymur wrote two significant pieces of prose writing: a fictional prose text entitled Nata’ij al-ahwal fi-l aqwal wa-l af’al (The Consequences of Circumstances in Words and Deeds, 1887), and an epistle of social criticism entitled Mir’at al-ta’ammul fi-l-umur (The Mirror of Contemplation, epistle, 1892). Ziyada describes Taymur’s Nata’ij as the first complete piece of fictional writing published by an Arab woman; and, despite its use of traditional stylistic conventions, the text remains unique in its indirect subversions of gender roles. Similarly, Taymur engages with the issue of gender roles in her epistle published a few years later, in which she merges fiction with non-fiction, by including for example the parable of the lion and lioness wherein the two animals exchange their gender roles. Taymur, thus, destabilizes socially and culturally imposed gender roles and questions their validity and consequences for wives and husbands, men and women, and the society at large.

Unlike Taymur – who lived a life of feminine and domestic seclusion imposed upon women of her aristocratic circles at her time – Nassif was the daughter of the Egyptian upper middle class, enjoyed the opportunities gained by the women of her time. Nassif did not live and write in seclusion, but belonged to the new generation of educated women who were beginning to impose their voice and presence on the public sphere. Nassif wrote extensively about women’s conditions in the society and their rights. She was mostly concerned with issues related to the injustice of polygamy, underage marriages and deprivation of education. As a social critic and reformer, she expressed her views in writing, particularly through publishing articles in the press, which were posthumously collected in her book Al-nisa’iyat (Women’s Issues). Nassif also gave public lectures, one of which included the following list of demands quoted by Ziyada:
What is left for us now is to show the practical way for us to follow, and if I had legislative powers I would have issued the following charter:

(Article One) To teach girls true religion, that is the true teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah [Prophet Mohamed’s sayings and actions].

(Article Two) To teach girls at the primary and secondary levels, and enforce primary education upon members of all classes.

(Article Three) To offer girls domestic education, in theory and practice, and teach them the rules of medical care, child-rearing, and medical first aid.

(Article Four) To direct a number of girls to the study of medicine and education so that they may offer these services to Egyptian women.

(Article Five) To provide access to all other refined areas of knowledge for those young women who would like to acquire them.

(Article Six) To train girls from their early childhood in saying the truth and serious work as well as patience and other virtues.

(Article Seven) To follow the religious doctrine concerning engagement, so that young couples get to know each other in the presence of a first degree relative.

(Article Eight) To follow the rules of veiling and moving in public space as practiced by Turkish women.

(Article Nine) To protect national interests and stop as much as possible resorting to foreign things and people.

(Article Ten) Our brothers, men, should implement this project.32

This list of demands is particularly significant in that it is the first inventory of women’s demands that has been formulated by an Egyptian woman and used as an agenda for action towards women’s rights. It is interesting that the earliest items focused on education as the main path towards improving women’s conditions in the society. It is also noteworthy that these demands were presented at the end of Nassif’s talk addressing hundreds of women at the Umma Party Club.33 Finally, as conservative as most of the demands might seem to us today, they were developed on realistic grounds, offering a “practical” feminist agenda and plan of action. Most of these demands marked the main concerns of Egyptian educated middle class women throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, and were recognized as women’s rights in the first Egyptian constitution issued in 1923.34 In addition, women from the Egyptian upper classes mobilized themselves, along with Egyptian intellectuals, to campaign for their political rights, a struggle that gained momentum throughout the first half of the century, leading to Egyptian women obtaining their political rights in the 1956 Constitution. Women’s demands have developed and have been radicalized along the years, yet Malak Hifni Nassif’s
demands of the early nineteenth century remain a memorable landmark in the history of the Egyptian feminist movement.

Ziyada repeatedly refers to the “practical” actions taken by such pioneer feminists. This notion of “practical” feminist politics reflects certain aspects of Egyptian women’s engagement with their societies and there are important points to bear in mind. Such a “practical” position rests in opposition to a radical revolutionary confrontational stance that would be marked by overt acts of private and public rebellion. It carries within it a feminist awareness of the gendered spaces in which the women existed, and the need for them to negotiate bounded by these spaces. Thus their decisions should be considered within their own socio-cultural and political contexts, rather than judged according to absolute feminist values or the feminist achievements of our days. It is thanks to these “practical” pioneers that their deeds and writings have been preserved; and have been considered as significant role-models to the following generations of Egyptian and Arab women (such as Ziyada herself). Finally, the early “practical” stances taken by individual women mark an important stage that then took more confrontational dimensions with the emergence of the Egyptian feminist movement, as a socio-political movement since around 1919 and onwards, gaining momentum during the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Feminist confrontational politics, however, were not a realistic strategy for change in the case of solitary secluded women of the nineteenth century.35

It thus becomes clear that, in addressing the controversial issues prevalent since the mid-nineteenth century up till the early twentieth century, Ziyada openly discusses these issues from various positions. It is worth noting, however, that Ziyada quotes extensively from her sources to offer as clear an understanding as possible of the controversial issues. In doing so she conveys her well-informed progressive stance, through careful contextualized analysis and classification and commentary of the cultural discourses of her time, as well as those extending further into the past. In doing so, Ziyada seems to fit within the category of practical women, attached closely to her time and place, rather than a visionary. It is this close connection to reality, and the conversation that Ziyada establishes with the three women, that sheds light on feminist politics and lead to the emergence of a clearly defined Egyptian/Arab feminist project.

**Constructing women’s lives**

Ziyada’s literary biographies of the three women offer interesting examples of generic intersections in life-writing, combining authorial narration and commentary with extensive quotations, letters and speeches. Since feminist theorizing about life-writing has been generated by Western feminist critics, in this section I will reflect on Ziyada’s biographies through the contemporary
theorized intersections in life-writing, and attempt to reach an understanding of her biographical construction of Arab womanhood.

In one of the earliest studies of women’s life-writing, Carolyn Heilbrun lists in her (then bestselling) book, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1988) what she defines as the four modes of writing women’s lives:

There are four ways to write a woman’s life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman’s life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process.36

Having offered this paradigm, Heilbrun soon points out the blurred borders between these sub-genres of life-writing. She states, furthermore, with reference to literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, that “biographies are fictions” in the sense that biographies themselves are constructs and representations of other people’s lives, a feature that applies to all forms of life-writing, including autobiography itself.37 Liz Stanley’s work adds several other modes of (biographical) life-writing which include, among others, the following: a person’s biography can be written as a novel; an oral narrative can be transferred into a work of life-history; and a life-story can occur as the outcome of editing someone’s personal writings. Stanley highlights the intersection between biography and autobiography even in her coinage of the term “auto/biography.” Both biography and autobiography, according to her, are authored texts, the products of processes of remembering, selecting and representing. In this sense, “authorised facts are actually authorised fictions.”38 Stanley sees in the act of life-writing a process of representation and, in the act of reading a life-narrative, a process of biographical construction, as every “reader of written lives is a biographer, producing their own authorised version of that life.”39 Life-writing theorists such as Sodonie Smith and Julia Watson have attempted to distinctively differentiate life-writing from biography, history and fiction, pointing out that life-writing should not be seen as “interchangeable” with biography or confused with fiction.40 They tend to conclude, however, that “contemporary practices increasingly blend them into a hybrid,”41 by employing some of the conventions of each of these life-writing modes: fictional elements such as “dialogue, plot and setting,” biographical representations of people, as well as historical documents and accounts. Thus, genre is not fixed by form but rather defined according to its “social action.”42

Such critical positions on the factual dimension attributed to biographies are helpful in understanding the text as a construct rather than as an actual reflection of the subject’s life. Although the elements of narrative objectivity, historical actuality and narrative unity are challenged by
deconstructions of genre, it is still possible – when juxtaposing three texts representing three women – to identify features reflected in common cultural discourse and shared socio-historical experience. These feminist understandings of biographical writing as a process of representation and construction is particular relevant to Ziyada’s handling of the three Arab women. This becomes particularly clear in the light of Hoda Elsadda’s engagement with the potentials entailed – and challenges involved in – constructing women’s biographies. In her study of biographical representations of Prophet Mohammed’s wife, Aisha Bint Abi Bakr, Elsadda explores the “the political use of biographies of women in defining issues related to cultural identity in a postcolonial context.” 43 She exposes the two predominant assumptions and stereotypical representations of Arab womanhood. One is a traditional image produced in the Arab world, where women are portrayed as essentially helpless and marginal; while the other is orientalist, produced internationally, featuring Arab women as oppressed victims. Elsadda finds in Arab women’s biographies and autobiographies alternative representations of Arab womanhood, where women seek empowerment, exercise agency and counter traditional images of femininity and stereotypical roles of women.

Unlike the predominant image of “oriental” womanhood, where women as presented as secluded oppressed and uneducated entities, the three women represented by Ziyada are all literate, multilingual and intellectually involved in the literary scene. They are, perhaps more importantly, conscious of their position as women propagating equal rights as well as a revision of socially constructed gender roles. Ziyada’s biographies also point out that female intellectuals and writers communicated with each other, varying from personal visits to written correspondence. At the turn of the twentieth century, Aisha Taymur (living in Cairo) and Warda al-Yaziji (settled in Alexandria) managed to overcome the distance preventing them from a personal encounter, by exchanging letters commenting on each other’s published writings; while in the early years of twentieth-century Egypt, Ziyada and Malak Hifni Nassif were able to meet in person. Read today, Ziyada’s biographies of the three women, further, emerge as a counter-narrative to the mainstream Western representations of Arab women, a pervasive narrative constructed by colonialist accounts and adopted by modernist discourses. She represents the three women as personalities in the lime-light, whose presence and contributions even over-shadow the socially, intellectually and politically prominent men in their families. By writing literary biographies of the three women, Ziyada is reviving their memories and asserting their contribution not only to the history of Arab writing but as establishing (as early as in the 1920s) a tradition of Arab women’s writing.
Women’s writing on women’s writing

Although, as shown above, the history of women’s writing has received critical attention from Arab and foreign scholars, to the best of my knowledge no critical attention has been directed towards establishing a history of Arab feminist criticism. I have attempted, elsewhere, to present an outline of Arab feminist literary criticism, identifying two main trends in that direction. Firstly, there is work published in English, by both Arab and foreign scholars, which focuses primarily on the historical development of women’s writing using feminist research methodologies. Secondly, there is scholarship published in Arabic which, in turn, is concerned with “poetics” more than “politics,” analyzing the texts using critical tools of Arabic literary tradition without reference to feminist critical theory. In the following, therefore, I wish to situate Ziyada’s biographies within the paradigm of “women’s writing on women’s writing,” bearing in mind the distinction between women’s writing on women’s writings and women’s life-writing.

Mayy Ziyada’s biographies occupy a prominent position as the first extensive representations of Arab women’s writing, including a particular feminist dimension. They have probably inspired the development of a genre of literary biographies and biography studies among following generations of women critics; while at the same time connected to the Arab tradition of biographical dictionaries, and the earlier genre of “Shahiraat al-nisaa” (“Famous Women”). In her study of Arab women’s biographies, Marilyn Booth establishes a tradition of women’s biographies in the Arab world by examining the biographical genre of “Famous Women,” which took the form of short biographical texts about exemplary women (often not restricted to women from Arab and Islamic history). These were mostly published in the proliferating newspapers and magazines at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as compiled and (re)published in “biographical dictionaries” and books (Booth xxxi-xxxv). While Booth focuses on the genre of biographical dictionaries, she acknowledges Ziyada’s contribution as “a culmination” of Arab women’s biographical writing:

Ziyada was the first Arab woman to write full-length biographies in Arabic on other Arab women, a “first” in which she took pride, an act that shaped her life and her understanding of it. Although women and men would continue to write biographical sketches of famous women to entertain and instruct, Ziyada’s biographies of Aisha Taymou (1840–1902), Warda al-Yaziji (1838–1924), and Malak Hifni Nassif (1886–1918) were a culmination of the genre I present in this book. Significantly, she chose contemporary and Arabic-speaking women as subjects, divulging a perception of collective purpose, community, and identity that transcended and respected differences of religion and origin.

Booth highlights the personal relationship between Ziyada and Nassif, reflected in their correspondence, which “embodied shared concerns of elite
women in Egypt,” namely national independence and the liberation of women. By stating that “[b]iography is always autobiography,” she further suggests that Ziyada’s choice of her biographical subjects is closely related to intersections between her personal identity and collective identity.46

The two most prominent of Ziyada’s own biographers are Widad Sakakini, who wrote Mayy Ziyada: fi hayatiha wa athariha (Mayy Ziyada: Her Life and Works) and Salma al-Kuzburi, author of Mayy Ziyada aw ma’saat al-nuboogh (Mayy Ziyada or the Tragedy of Genius).47 Sakakini’s biography details Ziyada’s personal life and its difficulties, as well as her work as a poet, writer, essayist, public speaker and literary critic; her politics, feminism and intellectual milieu; and the critics’ reception of her work. At the end of the book, Sakakini includes selections of Ziyada’s writings. She portrays Ziyada as a pioneer woman writer, critic, thinker and contributor to the Arab and Egyptian intellectual scene at a critical moment in the history of the Arab world, marked by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nation states. It is also worth noting that this portrayal of Ziyada as a public intellectual is highlighted by the subtitle: “Her Life and Work.”

On the other hand, al-Kuzburi’s biography, entitled Mayy Ziyada or the Tragedy of Genius, reduces her subject’s life to “tragedy” attributed to her “genius.” The biography itself was published in two volumes, both appearing in 1987. While the first volume presents Ziyada’s family, education and writings, the second is devoted mostly to her personal life, particularly her “emotional life and love for [Khalil] Gibran,” her sorrow, mental illness and “tragedy” attributed to the deaths of her parents and Gibran.48 Thus the years following these deaths marked a period of anguish that it said to have lasted from 1929 until her death in 1941. A close reading of Ziyada’s life and work, however, suggests that the period of suffering of which she herself speaks is more complex. It certainly coincided with a mental breakdown suffered after some of her own family forcefully institutionalized her at the Lebanon Hospital for Mental and Nervous Disorders from 1936 to 1937. This was followed by Ziyada’s successful legal struggle in 1938 against these relatives’ attempts to prevent her from receiving her inheritance. It is also worth noting that these “tragic” three years of her captivity tend to be over-represented in most accounts about Ziyada, almost overshadowing the earlier decades of her active intellectual life. It was during those earlier years that Ziyada wrote regularly in several newspapers and magazines, held her cultural salon, was involved in the Egyptian women’s movement, and published the literary biographies of Nassif (1920), Taymour (1926), and Al-Yaziji (1926).

Apart from Sakakini’s and al-Kuzburi’s literary biographies, which testify to Ziyada’s prominence among her contemporaries, in Egypt, the Arab World and abroad,49 her writing has received little attention in the context of contemporary feminist literary criticism. It was the Egyptian feminist literary critic Olfat Elrouby who revived Ziyada’s contribution to literary
biography, by situating her within the framework of her scholarship on women’s rhetoric (*balaaghat al-nisaa*). Elrouby used Ziyada’s literary biography of Bahithat al-Badiya to establish a tradition of “women’s writing on women’s writing” in Arabic literature, and to urge contemporary critics to work on developing it, as part of documenting and theorizing Arab women’s writing at the turn of the twentieth century. In her study, Elrouby presented three areas crucial to women writing at the time:

Women writers responded to the open call for them to write about women’s issues at that time by contributing in three main areas. First, the lectures, articles and epistles which dealt directly with issues related to women’s conditions and their liberation. Second, literary writings, particularly in the form of the novel and short fictional writing, which did not aim at offering entertainment as much as essentially supporting women’s liberation discourse. The third area, which is the most supportive of the liberation discourse—in my mind—is what I would call a woman writing on a woman’s writing or “women’s writing on women’s writing”; one of its most prominent pioneers being Mayy Ziyada (1886–1941), herself a contemporary of Malak Hifni Nassif. Elrouby sees Ziyada as an exemplary feminist critic whose work on Nassif, Taymur and Al-Yaziji paved the way for following generations of women critics who worked intensively on Arab women writers; these include Widad Sakakini who worked on women writers, and Aisha Abdul-Rahman who focused on Arab women poets. Elrouby further explains Ziyada’s project as seeking to establish a “critical discourse” which acknowledges the Arab woman’s right to recognition as both “writer” and “critic.”

The years following Elrouby’s death in 2000 have witnessed a marked interest in establishing a genealogy of Arab women’s writing, which has perhaps found its most comprehensive expression in the publication of the four volumes of *Mawsu‘at al-mar’a al-arabiyya* (*Encyclopedia of Arab Women Writers*) published originally in Arabic.

**Conclusion**

I wish to conclude this essay with some reflections on literary biography as a form of cultural memory and a source of women’s history. Hoda Elsadda emphasizes the role of women’s biographies as “manifestations of cultural identity,” and particularly refers to Mayy Ziyada’s contribution towards the establishment of “a tradition of writing that focused on women.” On the other hand, Max Saunders argues that all forms of writing – life-writing, historical writing and fictional writing – contribute to cultural memory. He suggests that one of the main features of life-writing is “generic fusion,” which he explains in the following:

This destabilizing of genres frustrates attempts to see life-writing as possessing a direct connection with subjective experience and individual memory. ... If
other genres or sub-genres or forms can be read as life-writing—such as novels, poems, short stories, travel writing, topographical books, historiography—they can all be used as routes into cultural memory.\(^{55}\)

Ziyada’s biographies of the three women emerge as works of cultural memory. In their hybrid generic forms, multiple voices, embedded cultural discourses and feminist politics they do not only represent literary biographies of three prominent Arab women writes, but also reflect a historical period with its socio-cultural context. The three literary biographies are not restricted to an analysis of the stylistic features of the writers; Ziyada is concerned with the role of these women in establishing women’s literature and contributing to feminist thought. The three texts, furthermore, do not focus simply on giving voice to the three women by quoting from their writing, but also include the writing of their contemporaries and a wider array of other sources. These include, for example, Qasim Amin’s two controversial books, as well as a variety of quotes from newspaper articles and personal correspondence.

Mayy Ziyada truly establishes a tradition of what is described by Olfat Elrouby in terms of Arab “women’s writing on women’s writing,” without falling into the trap of what Spongberg identifies as the threat entailed in the study of hybrid texts where interest “in the poetics” of the text overshadows “its politics.” Ziyada’s biographies of Malak Hifni Nassif, Aisha Taymur and Warda al-Yaziji, unequivocally, establish a tradition of Arab women’s writing, initiate Arab feminist literary criticism, contribute to Egyptian cultural memory, and stand out as significant documents in Egyptian feminist history.

Notes


3. The fact that Ziyada’s literary biography appeared first in the press and was then collected in a book is the exact opposite of the biographical texts which originally appeared in the conventional dictionaries and biographies, out of which exemplary models were selected and published in the newspapers, such as the ones discussed by Marilyn Booth in her study of biography and gender politics in Egypt. See Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of Carolina Press, 2001).
6. Qasim Amin (1863–1908) was an Egyptian lawyer known for his support of women’s rights, expressed particularly in his two books Tahrir al-mar’a (The Liberation of Women, 1899) and Al-mar’a al-gadida (The New Woman, 1900): Qasim Amin, The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peter-son (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000).
7. The Egyptian University was established in 1908 as the first secular university in Egypt and the Arab World.
10. Nassif was known as Bahithat al-Badiya (Searcher in the Desert). This was her pen-name, though it was used more as a description of her state, living in Fayoum, to the south of Cairo, rather than being a pseudonym behind which she covered her identity.
11. Ziyada, Bahithat al-Badiya, p. 31. All quoted translations from Arabic into English are mine.
17. At the turn of the century veiling referred to the Ottoman style of veiling, where the veil referred to the facial cover, not only the head scarf, used by upper class women, and adopted across the Ottoman Empire – including Egypt. For more on the veil, see: Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
18. Ziyada, Bahithat al-Badiya, pp. 75–76.
22. It is worth noting that the three women, Aisha Taymur, Warda al-Yaziji (born in the early 19th century), and Malak Hifni Nassif (born towards the end of the 19th century) appear in the photos on the inside covers of the books without a veil covering their faces, while Ziyada appears in her photos without even a head-cover.
27. Spongberg, p. 167.
33. Nassif, p. 130.
35. The active confrontational roles of Egyptian women demanding their legal rights have been documented by Judith Tucker in her groundbreaking work on the Egyptian court documents related to the cases raised by “lower-class women” in the courts throughout the 19th century. For more: Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
37. Heilbrun, p. 28.
41. Smith and Watson, p. 8.
42. Smith and Watson, p. 18.
45. Booth, p. xvi.
46. Booth, p. xvi.
48. Ziyada established a strong bond with Khalil Gibran (1883–1931), the Lebanese poet and writer, through years of correspondence, without ever having the opportunity to meet, Gibran having emigrated to the US as a young man.
49. Ziyada was a member of the international PEN club; she wrote articles for various Western magazines, and gave talks in different parts of the world.


54. Astrid Erll defines cultural memory in terms of a multidisciplinary area of studies which includes individual and collective memory; it emphasizes the connection between memory and its socio-cultural contexts. Cultural memory can be explored in the light of its dimensions: material, social and cognitive; its levels: individual or collective; and its modes: what is being remembered, how and why? Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction”, A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1–15.


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