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THE LATE REDISCOVERY OF MAYY ZIYÄDA'S WORKS

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More than half a century has passed since the death of Mayy Ziyäda. However, this pioneer female writer of Palestinian origin, who ran the most famous literary salon of the Arab world during the twenties and thirties in Cairo, has not fallen into oblivion, as has occasionally been assumed,\(^1\) in Europe and the West,\(^2\) and the opposite holds true for the Near East. Numerous biographical studies of Mayy Ziyäda have appeared in Arabic since 1941,\(^4\) and the

\(^1\) Title borrowed from an essay written by Mayy Ziyäda 1916 and later published in her collection *Sawâni† fi† fatâh*, Cairo 1922.


steady flow of publications on her in Arabic journals and newspapers suggests that Arab writers have always felt tempted to personally interpret the contrasting aspects of her life—the rise and fall from the heights of celebrity to the depths of supposed madness and complete isolation. Year after year, the discussion of her alleged love affairs with different guests at her salon continues, and her correspondence with Jibrân Khalîl Jibrân in New York, which extended over almost two decades though they never met, remains the subject of speculation about the true nature of her bond to this foremost representative of Arabic mahjar-literature. Most recently, the enigmatic figure of the salonnière has even been discovered as a promising topic for theater, film and television.5

The lively and sometimes noisy controversy about the life and personality of Mayy Ziyâda during the past five decades has not just been the product of sensation-seeking journalists or second-rate authors in need of a best-seller. In fact, a number of academics have joined the debate, among them Arab scholars of considerable reputation, which lends the discussion a semblance of serious scholarly investigation. It is even more amazing that the myth of the fallen muse, once created, has been able to develop relatively unhindered and has predominated to such an extent that it has nearly obliterated the picture of the prolific female writer.

As one might expect, it was women who initially felt offended by the one-sided interest posterity paid to their predecessor. In an attempt to restore due recognition, they once more drew attention to her literary works.6 When the first complete edition of Mayy

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5 Sulaymân Kattânî, for instance, presented a stage adaptation of Mayy Ziyâda’s life. See id., Mayy Ziyâda fi bahar min zama’, Beirut 1984. A film version with Laylâ ’Alawi in the main role produced by Sharîf ’Arafa and a tv-series directed by Yahyâ al-’Alamî were announced in Al-Ayyûm, 12 April 1995. Jean Abu Ghânîm wrote a play about Mayy Ziyâda for Lebanese television. See the commentary in Al-Akhbâr, 4 March 1996. The Lebanese daily Al-Nahîr, 15 February 1997, reported the preparation and forthcoming transmission of another 30-episode serial written by the Syrian author Ysîr Badawî.

6 In addition to the studies of Widâd Sakâkînî and Rose Ghurayyîb already mentioned in fn. 4, see, for example, Hiba al-Wâdî, Mayy Ziyâda bayna adîbât al-