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**“Women’s Writing on Women’s Writing”:
Mayy Ziyada’s Early 20th Century Literary Biographies
of Arab Women Writers**

This paper uses feminist literary theory in looking at three literary biographies written by the Arab feminist writer Mayy Ziyada (1886-1941), published in Cairo at the beginning of the 20th century: *Bahithat al-Badiya* (Searcher in the Desert, pen-name of Malak Hifni Nassif) published in 1920; *Aisha Taymur* published in 1925 and *Warda al-Yaziji* also published in 1925. Mayy Ziyada is a pioneer Arab woman writer and feminist intellectual whose articles were widely published in the Egyptian press, in addition to her books of essays and literary translations. The focus of this paper, however, will be directed to her three literary biographies of pioneer women writers living in Egypt at the turn of the 20th century.

Mayy Ziyada’s *Bahithat al-Badiya* developed out of a series of newspaper articles, published in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Muqtataf*, upon the suggestion of its owner and editor Ya’qub Sarrouf. Her two other books, *Aisha Taymur* and *Warda al-Yaziji*, originated in two public lectures given by Mayy Ziyada. The former was delivered at the Egyptian University upon an invitation from “Gam’iyat Misr al-Fatah” (Egypt the Young Woman Association) to give address to the association’s members on a topic of her own choice. 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*.

Mayy Ziyada’s biographies offer the first example of 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 the 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).

Mayy Ziyada’s writings have received little attention in the context of contemporary feminist literary criticism. It was the Egyptian feminist literary critic Olfat Elrouby who revived Mayy Ziyada’s contribution to literary biography, by situating Ziyada within the framework of her scholarship on women’s rhetoric (*balaaghat al-nisaa*). Elrouby used Mayy 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.

The paper is divided into five parts. In the first part, I attempt to trace the embedded voice of the Egyptian society and the three women’s positions as represented by Mayy Ziyada, in addition to Mayy Ziyada’s own stance. In the second part, I explore the cultural discourses of femininity and modernity as reflected in the three biographies. I focus on two issues raised in the three books, and reflect on them as representations of the cultural discourses prevalent at

the turn of the twentieth century; namely the issue of the veil and the notion of femininity. I then attempt to examine the feminist politics emerging from Mayy Ziyada's biographical writing, with particular reference to women's socio-political demands embedded in the three texts.

This is followed by a discussion of the way in which women's lives are biographically constructed. Mayy Ziyada's literary biographies of the three women offer an interesting example 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, I will reflect in this section on Ziyada's biographies through the contemporary theorized intersections in life-writing, in an attempt to reach an understanding of the Ziyada's biographical construction of Arab womanhood.

In the last part of this paper, I attempt to situate Mayy Ziyada within the critical paradigm of women's writing on women by both Arab and Western critics and scholars. I also reflect on literary biography as cultural memory and feminist history. I find in Mayy Ziyada's decision to revive the work of the three women 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.

Keywords: feminist criticism; life-writing; Arab women writers; literary biography; Mayy Ziyada