

# Literature

## MAY ZIADEH

SUHEIL B. BUSHRUI  
Associate Professor and Chairman,  
Department of English

**M**AY ZIADEH, the foremost woman writer of the first two decades of this century in Arabic literature, was the only child of a Lebanese father, Elias Zakhur Ziadeh, and a Palestinian mother, Nuzha Khalil Mu'mar. Born on February 11, 1886 in Nazareth, Palestine, she was educated first at her birthplace and then for five years at the 'Aintourah Institute for Girls in Lebanon. In 1908 her father, a teacher by profession, seeking better prospects in Egypt transferred his home and family to Cairo, where he eventually became the managing Director of the daily *al-Mahrousa*. For May Ziadeh, then in her early twenties, life in Cairo, the centre of great literary activity at the time, stimulated her interest and encouraged her to publish in 1911 her first major literary work, *Fleurs de rêve*. Written in French and under the pseudonym of Isis Copia, this early work demonstrated the influence not only of her French education but particularly that of Lamartine and pointed to the peculiar, exploratory, creative mind she possessed.

She was a regular contributor to *al-Mahrousa* and to the leading newspapers and periodicals of her age: *al-Ahram*, *al-Hilal*, *al-Muqattam*, *al-Muqtataf*, the French *Progrès Egyptien*, and the English *Egyptian Mail* (for which she used yet another pseudonym — Ra'fat Khalid). Her work as a reviewer of new literary works introduced her to Khalil Gibran, whose influence on her thought and style can be seen everywhere in her works. Although the two had only known each other through correspondence, a fascinating literary and love relationship came to exist between them: they seemed to have achieved a harmony and understanding rare even among people who are more intimately connected.

Her home in Cairo became the literary "salon" of the Egyptian Capital, a meeting place for all those without whom there would have been no modern Arabic literature. Her intelligent and lively mind matched by beauty and great charm attracted



the attention of such leading figures of her time as Lutfi-al-Sayyid, Yaqoub Sarrouf, Taha Hussein, Jurji Zaidan and Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad. She became to many a muse and an inspirer, the influence of her personality and eloquence superseding the influence of anything she has written.

May Ziadeh's interest in creative writing was only equaled by her interest in the movement, then at its height in Egypt, led by the Egyptian suffragette Huda Sha'rawi. The three years (1915-1918) she spent as a student at the Egyptian National University (Cairo) brought her into closer contact with Huda Sha'rawi and confirmed her in the stand she took in support of the Woman Emancipation Movement, which became her most consuming passion to the end of her life and to which the major portion of her work was dedicated.

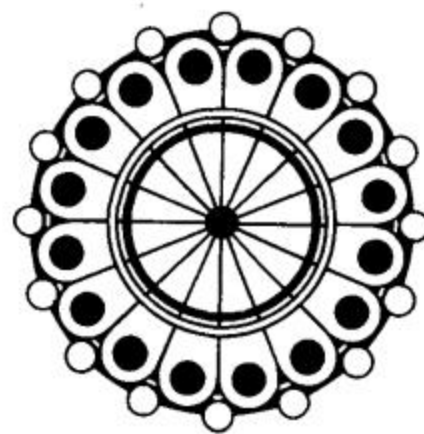
Between 1927 and 1931 May Ziadeh suffered the loss of four of the people nearest to her: her parents; Ya'coub Sarrouf, her staunch friend and ally; and Khalil Gibran, the man she really loved. This series of bereavements affected her deeply as her

letters show: "I have never suffered so much pain, I have not read in any book that it is within the power of a being to suffer what I have gone through..." (Letter to Dr. Joseph Ziadeh). Her condition worsened and she fell a prey to long periods of depression which she tried desperately to overcome through her travels in France, England and Italy, between 1932 and 1934. The last years tell a sad and tragic story of an unsuccessful suicide attempt, of her return to Lebanon to be under the observation of her relations, of her admission into al-'Asfouryyah, Lebanon's mental asylum, and of the horrifying experiences of tight-rope walking over the precipice of insanity. Rehabilitation came through the strength of her friends: Ameen Rihani came to her aid encouraging her to return to her literary activities. On 22 March 1938 May Ziadeh proved through a lecture, "The Message of the Writer to Arab Life," given at the American University of Beirut that she was fully cured.

Much as she loved Lebanon, May Ziadeh's heart was always in Cairo, where she decided to return later in 1938 and where she died after two and a half years, lonely and friendless except for a handful of faithful admirers.

The bulk of her published work consists of essays, articles, reviews, translations, one or two studies, a few poems, a journal and letters. Her place in twentieth century Arabic literature has not yet been fully assessed, but it would be safe to say that her real achievement has been in the art of the essay. She is perhaps the most significant woman essayist in the Arabic literature of the first half of the twentieth century despite a style which now seems to suffer from a somewhat exaggerated emotional quality. At a time when few women expressed themselves in writing, it is remarkable to find a woman able to put before us with such honesty and force the deeper stirrings of her sex and generation. May Ziadeh's art and life are inseparable; the suffering woman and the exploratory, creative mind are the same. Though an "artist" in the loose definition of her age, she was not a professional writer like Wali-u-Deen Yakin or Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad. She relied rather on spontaneity and freshness. Her restless life, her desire for experience, her rebellion against convention were remarkable in the context of her environment and of her age, but in her last years through pain and suffering she was moving towards a spiritual humility and an insight into reality: "Great pain is great purification."

# REJOICE



In the temple of human sorrows the Great Master stood to speak to the people and I heard him say:

If you are rich, rejoice—

The experience of weighty matters has served you well, your good deeds are praised, and your kind ones are to be expected. You have gained in might, have been rendered invulnerable, and prosperity has erected its corridor within your domain, ensuring for you an aspect of independence and freedom

If you are poor, rejoice—

You have been spared that spiritual paralysis which afflicts those who acquire all things, and you have been protected from the envy and hatred which the rich attract; men's hearts are not filled with fire on account of your prosperity, nor do they gaze at your possessions with sick eyes.

If you are charitable, rejoice—

You have filled empty hands, clothed naked bodies, and endowed him who has nothing. Pleased with what you have achieved, you have wished to bring happiness to hundreds so that your one noble pleasure, may be multiplied by the number of those who benefit from it.

If you are unable to extend charity, rejoice—

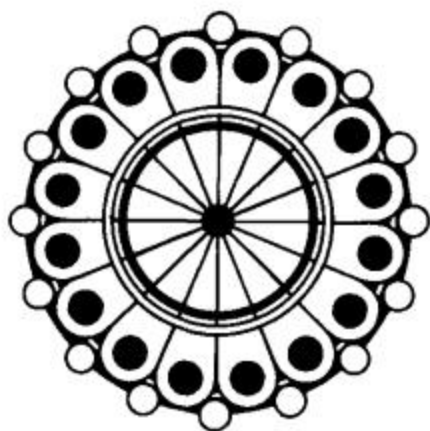
The hour when you will witness ingratitude from the one whom you have benefited and who has taken of your kindness a weapon with which to threaten you, deeming aggression to be courage, and levity a form of cleverness. That hour must surely come, bringing with it tension to your nerves; inciting your rage; hardening your feelings; drying up the source of your generosity; and creating within you a hatred for man and despair of his reform—and all this before you achieve the peak of sublime forgiveness and wise forbearance.

If you are young, rejoice—

The tree of your desires is with succulent branch; and far ahead lies the goal of your aspirations so that you may find it easy to realise your dreams if worthy of them.

If you are old, rejoice—

You have wrestled with time and men; and because of your tact and foresight you have been entrusted with the management of affairs. All your deeds may be useful if you wish; and a minute in your life equals years because it is full of experience, of wisdom and of accurate judgement, as if that minute were an autumn fruit fully mature, succulent, and saturated with the element of perfection, richness and desire.



If you are a man, rejoice—

in the vigour of manhood lies the larger meaning of life.

If you are a woman, rejoice—

Woman is the desire of man, her nobility is his support, her sweetness the source of his consolation, and her smile the reward for his labours.

If you are of noble birth, rejoice—

You have gained the confidence of the many without the recommendation of any.

If you are of low birth, rejoice—

It is better to be the founder of your house... than to be one of its sons who reluctantly bear their names and have nothing to do that houses good fortune.

If you are a man with many friends, rejoice—

You will find yourself present in everyone of them. Amid them success shines brilliantly, while failure is less bitterly felt. To attract mens' hearts requires

qualities and abilities rarely found except in those who are truly great; the most important of these qualities is to break out of the stronghold of selfishness to discover what others possess of nobility, compassion and intelligence.

If you are a man with many enemies, rejoice—

Your enemies are the ladder of your ascendancy and they are the surest proof of your importance. The more they intensify their resistance and attack and the more they vary their slander and calumny, the greater will you feel your greatness. You will then heed what truth there lies in their criticism which is meant to be potent poison, you will take it in small doses so that it becomes for you the greatest of tonics. What remains of that criticism you will ignore gracefully, for it is only the outcome of impotence and deception. Does the eagle soaring in the highest realm take any heed of the conspiracies hatched by the dung beetles of the ground?

If you enjoy good health, rejoice—

In you the universal law has found its equilibrium and balance, and you have been qualified to deal with difficulties and to overcome impediments.

If you suffer from ill-health, rejoice—

In you the two great forces of the universe have found a battlefield; victory is his whom you choose, and your healing is dependent on that which you desire.

If you are a genius, rejoice—

A resplendent ray from the most sublime realm has manifested itself in you. The Merciful has cast his glance upon you, and its image has found reflection in the thought emanating from your forehead, in the mystery in your eyes, and in the enchantment of your voice. Utterances that in others are mere sounds, intonations or syllables have become, by your touch and on your lips, a fire and a light, stinging and illuminating, burning and soothing, humbling and glorifying, humiliating and stimulating, hurting and alleviating, rebuking and bewildering: no sooner do you inspire meaning to be than it exists.

If you are not a genius, rejoice—

Mens' tongues do not sharpen their tips to mention you, and when turned towards you men's eyes are not afire with fault-finding and rivalry. The peak is there for you to capture if you can, or else find

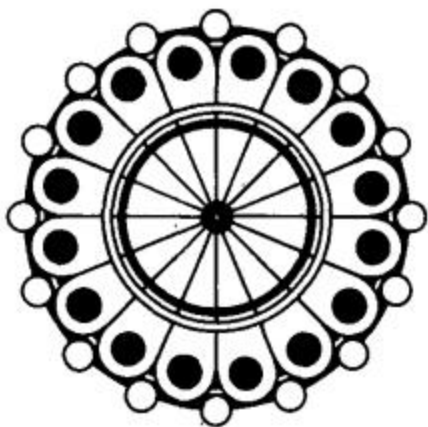
satisfaction in being a part of the universe which competence uses as its fuel. For the luxurious mansion stands not save by means of small bricks. And you will enjoy a comfort none can have except those whose tips taste Life's waters and whose soul bathes in the floods of inspiration.

If your friend is faithful, rejoice—  
The world has bestowed upon you its richest treasures.

If your friend is unfaithful, rejoice—  
He has not been ready to listen to the parable you were going to teach him, for none forsakes the mansion of love but to vacate it for someone more worthy and better than himself.

If you are free, rejoice—  
In liberty strength finds its exercise, faculties are reinforced and possibilities extended.

If you are enslaved, rejoice—  
Slavery is the best school in which to learn the lessons of liberty and acquire that which renders you qualified to earn it.



If you live in an environment that appreciates and understands you, rejoice—  
Therein you will find rejuvenation and new strength, and your spirit will grow in such a way that you will be astonished by its [realms of wide] seas and [limitless] heights.

If you live in a backward and inferior environment, rejoice—  
You are at liberty to take wings in order to rise above it towards a place where you are able to create out of the shadows of your soul a world that can feed the hunger of your thought and quench the thirst of your heart.

If you are in love and are loved, rejoice—  
Life has indeed pampered you and has included you among its chosen sons. Divine Power has disclosed to you its compassion revealed in the exchange of hearts. The two halves wandering in the darkness of the unknown, have at last become united and unto them the wonders of dawn-time have been revealed, the suns have gladdened their hearts with that which they have not yet found in their orbits among the planets. Ether has disclosed to them its very secrets; thus they contemplate when he who is empty of love may be wayward, are silent when he speaks, are in jest when he is serious, and divine the lines of eternity when he sees not even shadows.

If you are in love but are not loved, rejoice—  
He who rejects loves the rejected one in the highest modes of his being in a way that cannot be matched by the infatuation he has for whom he loves. To be rejected in love is a condition full of meaning and mystery; it reduces inflated desires and purifies upset feelings, rendering the heart transparent, glittering and resplendent as the vessel in which the gods drink of immortality. You are bound to win the one you love, and if not in this distant wordly form then in some other form.

Be ready for love no matter how heavy the burden of your feelings, for love has its ups and downs, and you know not the hour of its passage. Be great so that you may be chosen by great love, or else your lot will be a love that feeds on dust and wallows in the mud, leaving you unchanged or allowing you to sink lower with it, instead of allowing you to rise as high as the towers that no eye has seen and whose wonders have never been dreamt of by any being. The edifice of our desires is founded on imaginary drafts invented by our longing.

Rejoice—  
The doors of happiness are many in number, and the gates of good fortune are countless, and the paths of Life are renewed minute by minute.

Rejoice always—  
Rejoice in whatever condition you may find yourself...

(Translated by S.B. Bushrui from May Ziadeh's *Thulumat wa Ashi'a* [Beirut, 1952], pp. 72).