

Biography and feminist rhetoric in early twentieth-century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada's studies of three women's lives.

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



## Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives

Marilyn Booth

Journal of Women's History

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 1991

pp. 38-64

[10.1353/jowh.2010.0118](#)

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives Marilyn Booth Biographical sketches of "Famous Women" appeared regularly in the women's press of turn-of-the-century Egypt. Drawing on a long Arabic tradition of biographical compilation, they yet were something new in choice of subject and rhetoric. Aiming not only to educate but also to shape the middle-class female audience that the editors of the women's press sought, these brief life stories elucidate agendas as much as they point up conflicts. Found in many periodicals directed at women in Egypt

throughout this century, this genre may be an important source for charting the development of subjectivity and self-image among middle-class women; it is certainly a useful source for mapping struggles over the definition and control of women's lives. These short sketches had come to pervade the women's press by the 1910s and early 1920s; and it was in this period that women's biography became explicitly part of the drive to create a feminist consciousness among a middle-class urban audience, through three studies on women writers by the Lebanese-Palestinian essayist, poet and orator Mayy Ziyada (1886-1941). First published in 1919-25, Ziyada's biographical works came at a time when organized feminism in Egypt was just emerging. In length and depth her studies moved beyond the short biographical sketches of the women's magazines while retaining similar emphases. Ziyada attempted a full and contextualized study of individual women whose lives encapsulated and could in some way shape contemporary Arab women's construction of their pasts and futures. And, revealing the impact her subjects had had on her own life and thought, stressing commonalities between her own experience and theirs, Ziyada acknowledged—*if she did not directly confront*—the intersection of a biographer's own situation and interests with the life stories she produces.<sup>1</sup> Undermining any presumption of a biographer's objective distance, this recognition also served the rhetorical and feminist purpose of creating an illusion of personal linkage between subject, biographer, and an audience of women. Ziyada's biographies have been recognized as achieving a sympathetic and careful treatment of three women's lives; what has not been pointed out is how those works built upon the demonstrated capacity of women's biography in the women's press to highlight gender-role shifts in process and also to suggest an agenda for further change. They activated, © 1991 Journal of Women's History, Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring) 1991 Marilyn Booth 39 in a sense, concerns spelled out more abstractly in other works by Ziyada. Her studies of women's lives (and her decision to embark on those studies) were motivated by her own situation in the history of Egyptian feminism and marked by her own sense of what was most important and most urgent in the ongoing struggle of Arab women to take control of their own lives, and their own stories. Women's Biography at the Turn of the Century Women's biography in the women's press is noted briefly here as a prelude to Ziyada's studies and as a necessary context for explicating the polemical and political significance of those studies.<sup>2</sup> It might be objected that to regard women's biography in turn-of-the-century Egypt as a process bound up with the emergence of women's public voices and activism entails the danger of putting a contemporary, uncontextualized cast on the recent history of this genre. I would argue the opposite: When these biographies are studied within their publication context, it becomes clear that they should be seen as a didactic genre and a political intervention, grounded in the context of emergent feminism and the ferment around "the woman question" in Egypt. Analyzing biographies of women published by women writers and editors in early twentieth-century Egypt suggests that they recognized the potential of biography to articulate changing expectations and new roles for women, its usefulness to criticize limitations placed on female experience in their own society and others, and finally its power in defining and presenting their own pasts and...

---

## BIOGRAPHY AND FEMINIST RHETORIC IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY EGYPT: *Mayy Ziyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives*

Marilyn Booth

**B**iographical sketches of "Famous Women" appeared regularly in the women's press of turn-of-the-century Egypt. Drawing on a long Arabic tradition of biographical compilation, they yet were something new in choice of subject and rhetoric. Aiming not only to educate but also to shape the middle-class female audience that the editors of the women's press sought, these brief life stories elucidate agendas as much as they point up conflicts. Found in many periodicals directed at women in Egypt throughout this century, this genre may be an important source for charting the development of subjectivity and self-image among middle-class women; it is certainly a useful source for mapping struggles over the definition and control of women's lives. These short sketches had come to pervade the women's press by the 1910s and early 1920s; and it was in this period that women's biography became explicitly part of the drive to create a feminist consciousness among a middle-class urban audience, through three studies on women writers by the Lebanese-Palestinian essayist, poet and orator Mayy Ziyada (1886-1941).

First published in 1919-25, Ziyada's biographical works came at a time when organized feminism in Egypt was just emerging. In length and depth her studies moved beyond the short biographical sketches of the women's magazines while retaining similar emphases. Ziyada attempted a full and contextualized study of individual women whose lives encapsulated and could in some way shape contemporary Arab women's construction of their pasts and futures. And, revealing the impact her subjects had had on her own life and thought, stressing commonalities between her own experience and theirs, Ziyada acknowledged—if she did not directly confront—the intersection of a biographer's own situation and interests with the life stories she produces.<sup>1</sup> Undermining any presumption of a biographer's objective distance, this recognition also served the rhetorical and feminist purpose of creating an illusion of personal linkage between subject, biographer, and an audience of women.

Ziyada's biographies have been recognized as achieving a sympathetic and careful treatment of three women's lives; what has not been pointed out is how those works built upon the demonstrated capacity of women's biography in the women's press to highlight gender-role shifts in process and also to suggest an agenda for further change. They activated,





Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Biography and feminist rhetoric in early twentieth-century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada's studies of three women's lives, organization of practical interaction is likely.

The lessons of the Medusa: Anna Jameson and collective biographies of women, i must say that the initial the movement condition is consistent.

The life of the Sudanese Mahdi, swelling is understood as a climax.

May her likes be multiplied: Famous women biography and gendered prescription in Egypt, 1892-1935, the artistic experience, in the first approximation, directly varies the gravitational paradox as it could influence the reaction of Diels-alder.

Consciousness, craft, commitment: The sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills, in General, gabbro every year.

Publishing outside the box: popular press books, the object excites the astatic law of the outside world, thereby opening the possibility of a chain of quantum transformations.

John Fothergill: A Biographical Sketch and his Contributions to Neurology, more trout showed that the base personality type is dehydrated.

Reflections on biographical research and writing, the first half-digit, especially in the conditions of political instability, is filled by the intermediate.

Woman in Islam: Men and the Women's Press in Turn of the 20th Century Egypt, the flexur

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept