

The Question of Women in the Works of Selma Rıza and May Ziadeh¹

Selma Rıza ve Meyy Ziyâde'nin Eserlerinde Kadın
Sorunu

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Abstract:

This study aims to show how Selma Rıza and May Ziadeh, a Turkish and an Egyptian woman writer dealt with the question of women in their works. The question of women was the main topic, Selma Rıza dealt with in her novel, titled "Uhuwet". And May Ziadeh, dealt with this question in her essays. Both writers tried to reflect women's status in the society, emphasized the essentiality of education of women and underlined the role of men in women's movement.

Öz:

Bu çalışma, Türk ve Mısırlı kadın yazarlar, Selma Rıza ve Meyy Ziyâde'nin, eserlerinde kadın sorununu nasıl işlediklerini ele almaktadır. Selma Rıza, Uhuwet adlı romanında kadın sorununu ağırlıklı olarak işlemiştir. Meyy Ziyâde ise, denemelerinde bu soruna yer vermiştir.

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Kadının toplum içindeki durumunun nasıl olması gerektiği , kadınların eğitimi, ve kadın hareketinde erkeklerin rolü, her iki yazarın da üzerinde önemle durduğu konulardır.

This study aims to show how a Turkish and an Egyptian woman writer dealt with the question of women in their works. The question of women in eastern literatures was covered relatively later in comparison with the western ones. We witness the emergence of a women's movement in Istanbul and Cairo in the late 19th Century. Similarly the question of women began to be dealt in Turkish and Egyptian literatures from that time on. In Egypt, two women, named Huda Sharawi (1879-1947) and Nabawiyah Musa(1886-1951) played an active role in the shaping of the feminist movement. Huda Sharawi was active in the feminist organizations while Nabawiyah Musa had played a pioneering role as a teacher and first woman principal at a girls' school in her country. Besides this, Nabawiyah Musa edited woman's page of the *al-Balagh al-Usubu'i* weekly and in 1937 founded a journal, named *Majallat al-Fatah* (The Magazine of The Young Woman). She also published books on the education of girls and women's opportunities to work.³ Aisha al-Taymuriyah(1840-1912) and Zaynab Fawwaz(b.1860) who are considered as first generation of woman writers and poets, revealed this question in their works and they were followed by the pioneers of this movement, like Nabawiyah Musa , Malek Hufni Nasif-Bahitha al-Badiyah- (1886-1918) and May Ziadeh (1886-1941).⁴ Men also made their contribution to this matter and even first advocates of women's rights were men. Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq supported women's emancipation, and Rifaa Rafi al-Tahtavi(1801-1871) and Muhammed Abduh (1849-1905) expressed the need for women's education. Qasim Amin(1865-1908) dealt with women's question in his works *Tahrir al-Mar'ah*⁵ (The Emancipation of Women) (1899) and *al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (The New Women) (1901). In *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* he tried to show that women's right are compatible with Islam, and in *al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* his approach was more secular and used the Western arguments.⁶ In Turkish literature, beginning

³ see, Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* , Princeton University Press, Princeton 1995,p.31-60; Charis Waddy, *Women in Muslim History*, Longman 1985, p. 146-149.

⁴ see Margot Badran, *Independent Woman More Than a Century of Feminism in Egypt, Arab Women Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Edt.by Judith E.Tucker) Indiana University Press 1993, p.132-134.

⁵ see Qasim Amin, *Tahrir al-Mar'ah*, Maktabah al-Tarakki, Cairo 1899.

⁶ see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Zed Books Limited, IV. Impression, London 1992, p.43-51; Waddy, Charis, *Women in Muslim History*,

from the Tanzimat period, which symbolizes the first major westernization movement in the Empire, the status of women became one of the main issues, and women's question were dealt with by a number of reformists and writers, among them Sinasi(1826-1871), Namik Kemal(1840-1888), Ahmed Midhat Efendi(1844-1912), Ziya Gökalp(1876-1924), Ahmed Riza(1859-1933), Fatma Aliyeh(1862-1936), Halide Edib(1883-1964) and Selma Riza.

Selma Riza completed her novel titled *Uhuvvet(sisterhood)* in 1897. *Uhuvvet*⁷ was translated into contemporary Turkish in 1999 and was published by the Ministry of Culture in the same year. We do not have detailed information about Selma Riza's life. Nebil Fazil Alsan, a Turkish journalist who brought *Uhuvvet* to light to the acquaintance of the literary circles and converted it to modern Turkish, explained that Selma Riza had left this novel as a draft, along with a 2-page memo. In his foreword Alsan mentions that Selma Riza's elder brother, Ahmed Riza⁸ published a newspaper called "*Meshveret*"⁹ in Paris, but due to pressures by Sultan Abdulhamid II government in Istanbul, the French deported him out of the country. He then moved the newspaper to Switzerland. With her family facing such a difficult period, Selma Riza chose to preserve the copy of *Uhuvvet* as an unpublished manuscript. Alsan adds that we can realize from her work that she had a good command in Arabic, Persian and French, although the work was penned down in Ottoman Turkish. But from other sources we know that she had received education in Sorbonne University and joined her journalist brother in the publishing of *Meshveret*, the mouthpiece of the Party of Union and Progress that opposed the regime of Sultan Abdulhamid II. Therefore she is considered the first Turkish woman journalist. On the other hand, she was the only woman member of the *İttihad ve Terakki* (the Party of Union and Progress).¹⁰ We know also that Selma Riza participated in the woman's associations after she returned to Istanbul upon the declaration of constitutional monarchy (*Meshrutiyet*) in 1908 and published her articles in the newspapers, *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (Newspaper For Women) and *Kadınlar Dünyası* (World of The

Longman 1980,p.143-145.

⁷ see Gürsel Aytaç, *Edebiyat Yazıları 1995-2000*, İstanbul , Multilingual 2001, p.213-218; Nurullah Çetin, Selma Rıza, *Uhuwet(Kardeşlik)* Osmanlıcadan sadeleştiren:Nebil Fazil Alsan, T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, Ankara 1999, *Türk Dili*, 587 , Ankara 2000, p.522-531.

⁸ for Ahmed Riza see Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks-The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics 1908-1914*, Oxford University Press, 1969, p.177.

⁹ see Hasan Duman, *Union Catalogue of the Periodicals in Arabic Script in The Libraries of İstanbul*, Reserch Centre For Islamic History, Art And Culture, İstanbul 1986, p. 256.

¹⁰ see Milliyet (Newspaper) Yasam, 08/03/1997 : / <http://www.bycgm.gov.tr/yayinlari../T24.htm>

Womenj.¹¹ Along with Muhadarat .which was written by Fatma Aliyeh¹², the daughter of the famous historian, Ahmed Jevdet Pasha , *Uhuvvet* has recently begun to be believed as one of the first novels written by women in Turkey.¹³

Particularly Selma Riza's *Uhuvvet*, which was written in the late 19th Century and May Ziadeh's essays demonstrate comparable characteristics as far as women's issues are concerned, although the latter wrote her essays in the first two decades of the 20th Century.

Selma Riza's work, *Uhuvvet* is a 472-page novel set in Istanbul and Beirut in the period of Sultan Abdulmejid. At this period, Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, had been going through social changes under European influence. In this novel of Selma Riza, the question of women has a significant emphasis. The novel also highlights the traditional possession of concubines and odalisques in the abovementioned period and the problems this particular tradition created within families that kept them. In the novel, Murshid and Adil happens to be two brothers that demonstrate completely opposite characters. Particularly in their approach to women, Murshid is a thoughtless, ignorant person, while Adil on the contrary, is a more serious and wise person with moral values. Murshid considers women as objects to amuse himself. Despite he is married, he has concubines and he does not respect his wife. Selma Riza demonstrates several scenes about Murshid's cruelty. In one of these scenes, he dismisses one of his concubines, Mahbube, who has a son from him. He claims that she does not have any right over her child. By his motto, "Children to father, curse to mother," he forces Mahbube to leave her child behind. Adil, is an unmarried man, but he prefers monogamy to protect his wife's honor and children's happiness if he were to marry. He accuses his brother of mistreating his wife as a concubine and ignoring her. Their mother Dilber, a former slave, feels more sympathy towards Murshid than Adil. She deliberately lets Murshid marry Adil's sweetheart, Sabiha, after plotting an intrigue together with the other concubines at home to destroy Adil's love to Sabiha. Adil, manipulated by this scheme, gets disappointed and assumes that Sabiha does not love him. He leaves Istanbul, finding a post at the Foreign Office. As for Sabiha, she has nine children from Murshid, but she lives under difficult

11see Murat Uraz, *Kadın Şair ve Muharrirlerimiz*, İstanbul, p.465.

¹² for Fatma Aliye see Ibid, p.209-213; Tülay Gençtürk, "Memnu Mu Olmak Vech-i Nisyan Nümayan? Fatma Aliye Hanım ve Bir Şiiri", *Tarih ve Toplum*, Ağustos 1994, 10-12 ; Emel Aşa, *Fatma Aliye Hanım*(Unpublished Ph.D.Thesis), İstanbul Üniversitesi 1992.

¹³ see Selma Rıza, *Uhuvvet "Kardeşlik"* (Sadeleştiren Nebil Fazıl Alsan) T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, Ankara 1999,p.V-XII.

circumstances with her husband and mother-in-law who both consider her as a slave. Selma Riza, demonstrates the position of an average Ottoman woman in Sabiha's person, who does not have any personal rights and economic independence. She cannot even decide when to laugh or when to be sad. She has to adapt to her husband's mood. For example, her mother in law once tells her:

"Since you are the wife of a Pasha and you are supported by him, you must smile when he is happy and cry when he is sad."¹⁴

After a while, Murshid divorces Sabiha. Sabiha leaves home and is allowed to take only one her daughters. Then, Sabiha loses her health and requests her former sweetheart Adil to take care of her daughter, Meliha. After Sabiha passes away, Adil moves to Beirut with Meliha and pays considerable attention on Meliha's education. While in Beirut, Meliha obtains very good chances for her education. She enrolls in the American College of Beirut to receive her high school degree there. In the high school, she gets a very good command in English and French. After she graduates, she gets on her way to Paris to receive a university degree. She returns to Beirut after receiving her Ph.D. In Beirut, she concentrates her attention on the education of a girl, named Zehra who serves her as a maid at the home. She tries to enlarge Zehra's horizon by teaching her what she learned at high school along with the western way of life. After the death of her uncle Adil, she decides to move back to Istanbul. In Istanbul, she buys a fancy mansion on the Bosphorus coast and seeks to reunite her family. The writer describes Meliha as an intellectual and well-educated woman, who can organize her life as she wants. Here, we can see that the author creates an ideal character, who represents the awakening of women personified on Meliha's body. Meliha introduces herself in Istanbul as an Arab princess named Zeliha Bintu'l-Ganim and she arouses a big interest among the high-society in Istanbul. The people talk about her beauty, wisdom and extraordinary politeness. They describe her as wise as a philosopher, as creative as an artist, and as rich as Croesus of Lydia. So, the writer here explains how a well-educated, rich woman gets a good position in the high society. The novel also demonstrates how some well-to-do Ottoman women who then lived around the Bosphorus and were impressed by the European way of life, were relatively freer compared to women living in other parts of Istanbul. They ride stylish phaetons or sea caiques without veiling themselves excessively. But the people in other parts of Istanbul hardly react to this contrast of lifestyles.

¹⁴ Ibid,p.91.

May Ziadeh (1886-1941) , who was born in Nazareth to a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, completed her secondary education in Beirut in a French school. She started writing as a career in 1908 in Egypt, where she had earlier immigrated to with her family. After her father became the editor in chief of "*al-Mahrusa*" newspaper, she appeared in this newspaper as a creative poet, translator, essayist and critic. She wrote most of her literary works in the beginning of 1920s and 30s. She studied at the newly-opened Egyptian University in Cairo . She had written her first poetry collection, "*Flowers of Dream*" in French. She had written biographies of Warda al-Yaziji, Aisha Taimur and Bahisa al-Badiya, the three major woman writers of her period.¹⁵ She was an active member in *al-htihad al-Nisai al-Tahzhibi* (Women's Refinement Union) and *Jam'iyat al-Raqy al-Adabiyah li al-Sayyidat* (Ladies Literary Improvement Society) which were founded in 1914, with Huda Sharawi, Nabawiyah Musa and Bahithat al-Badiyah. On the other hand, Ziadah was the founder of a literary salon in her father's house in Cairo in 1914, for the first time allowing both men and women together in literary discussions.¹⁶ The status of women in the society was the main question she had coped with. When she was dealing with that question, one of the topics she had underlined was the evaluation of the women's position throughout the history. She underlines that women, beginning from the old times were in a very miserable condition, but later on, the circumstances had improved.¹⁷

In one of her essays, titled "*al-Mar'ah va't-Tamaddun*"¹⁸ (The Women and the Civilization) she explains that women were valueless and despised creatures in the early ages. She stresses that the primitive societies considered women no more valuable than house pets, the ignorance made them objects, men could do anything with them, leave them, or even kill them whenever they wanted. Later on, they were promoted somehow, but that did not give them any better advantage than being a toy, which their masters played with during their free times, or than a sculpture embellished with expensive dresses and jewels.

According to May Ziadeh, the statuses of women in the history were full of sad events. The saddest thing was, women were not only despised by

¹⁵ see Opening the Gates, *A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Ed.by. Margot Badran and Miriam Coke) , Virago Press Limited, London 1990, p. 239 ; Ma'mun Garib, *Haula.. Va Rihlah al-Zikrayah*, Maktabah Misr, 1996, p. 152-158; Hasan Taşdelen, *Mey Ziyâde, XX. Yüzyıl Arap Edebiyatındaki Yeri ve Tesirleri* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), Uludağ Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Bursa 2000, s.22-59.

¹⁶ see Margot Badran, *Ibid*, p.55,56.

¹⁷ see Hasan Taşdelen, *Ibid*, p. 123-136.

¹⁸ see May Ziadeh, *Kalimat va Isharat 1*, Beirut 1981, p. 29-1

ignorant majorities, also by the people who guided the society. Latin poets were interested in women for their beauty, not for their intelligence. They described women as beautiful devils or the sources of venomous joys. Greek poets Aeschylus, Ovid and the others described them as misfortunes of the world. Plato, the philosopher was announcing that he was sad because a woman gave birth to him and he was despising his mother. Plato had mentioned that the souls of the cowards in this world would reincarnate in the bodies of the women. May underlines that Plato could not predict that neo-Platonic thoughts would be taught by a woman in the early 4th Century Alexandria. That woman, named Hypatia, would pay the cost of teaching philosophy by her life. May Ziadeh, a Christian, mentions that the first man, who showed mercy for women and treated women as equals, was the Jesus Christ himself. She argues that Jesus Christ suggested equal punishments and rewards for men and women. And she states that when Muhammad the prophet came, he improved the status of women, treating them equally with men, except in matters of inheritance and hearing them as court witnesses. He banned burying of infant girls and allowed women scholars of jurisprudence. May Ziadeh mentions Aisha, the prophet's wife, as an example. After this, she speaks of Petrarca and Dante, who described women as creatures with intelligence and high spirit. Then she refers to Shakespeare, who had chosen most of his novel characters among women and reflected their most beautiful and highest feelings. She talks about Corneille who also followed the very same way towards women but adds that not all his contemporaries were encouraging like him. In this context, May demonstrates the public attitudes toward woman throughout the history. She asserts that the people thought that women were able only to do housework or make-up, but then they appeared as reformists and thinkers. May adds that people described women as liar, bad, and dishonest, but instead, women tried to improve and rescue themselves from slavery. May Ziadeh asserts that unlike being described as unstable, stupid, shameful and unproductive, women are able to undertake responsibilities and are deeply devoted to their independence with the awareness for the meanings of life. May says that Voltaire, who accused women of being unstable, at the same time needed Mrs. de Chatelet's assistance to study Newton's works. Therefore, May mentions that in her period, scores of women demonstrated their success in various sciences, hundreds of them were working in various works, arts and crafts. May contradicted some people who said that the science was not a suitable thing for women and those who claimed that women would become indifferent and disrespectful to their families once they get familiar with the sciences, since they would use their knowledge for showoff. May dismisses that opinion by saying that women, contrary to what had been said about them, have their visions, have aims in their life and pay big attention to the majority's interests. And May Ziadeh mentions that also in this period there

were some people making fun of women, but the number of those who supported women were also increasing among the intellectual people. And she asserts that these people showed respect to the struggle of women, recognized their rights and reforms, and in their awakening, saw a contribution for the prosperity for the humanity.

Another topic, May Ziadeh dealt with, was the description of women's movement in general. According to her, this movement aimed to improve the status of women, regardless that they were married or single. This movement included helping poor women and establishing charity, moral and literary societies for protecting homeless young girls. And it also comprised the arguments in favor of employing women in governmental offices and courts as in the United States, Sweden and Norway at that era. The movement also favored employing women in scientific institutions as there were considerable examples in elsewhere in the world, like Mrs .Curie, Mrs. Lafirof, Mrs. Chandon. Similarly, the movement defended political rights for women. According to her, this was what could be described as a women's movement.¹⁹

Another topic May Ziadeh dealt with was the status of women's movement in Egypt and other Arab countries. May, as she is commonly known, criticized women from Egypt and other Arab countries for insufficient level of socialization. According to her, the women in Egypt were only interested in enjoying their own lives, their reception parties, dresses, reading fantastic novels, and watching films. They were not aware of what else happened in the world. In her articles, she complains about the women's inability to speak a foreign language and their limited art knowledge, which was only confined to singing songs by the piano. In terms of socialization of women, she says that women in Egypt were going to cinemas, concerts and theaters, but unlike the European women, they lacked critical discussion of those events. According to her, the question of the education of women were dealt with and discussed by men, not by women, because women were not interested in such matters at all. In addition, May is in the opinion that the women's movement should be considered within the confines of specific periods and societies. Here, she refers to the conservative families in China, who allowed western teachers to raise their daughters. If this were to be considered as a women's movement in China, that practice had already existed in Egypt for many years.. She adds that employing women in universities, courts and parliaments were only a few

¹⁹ see *al-A'mal al-Majhula li May Ziadeh* (ed.by Joseph Zaidan) , Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi 1996, p. 184.

symbols of this movement and the essence of this movement lied in everyday works of women, in the improvement of their status and their daily learning. May Ziadeh describes this movement as a "slowly developing movement" and it was hard to distinguish unless it appeared in a concrete way. She asserts that women's movement in Egypt was suggested, supported and triggered by men. According to May, after receiving education, men became socially aware and appreciated the creativity brought forward by the Western thought. So, men appreciated the social awakening of women in the west. When they compared them with their eastern "sisters" they realized the terrible gap between the two and felt pity about this misfortune, whose effects can be observed in families and society. Here, May Ziadeh refers to Qasim Amin, a man who published works on the freedom of women.²⁰ According to May, women's movement was vital for men as it was for women. According to her, if an uneducated person and a learned one are to meet for a certain reason, they may not notice the differences between themselves for a while. But in the case of living together for a longer period, this co-existence can survive only if the more educated one reduces himself to the level of the less educated. The one who reduces himself to other's level, gets bored after a while and this is also useless for the less educated one. Here, May Ziadeh refers to the essentiality of the social environment for people. According to this, if educated men pay attention on women's education, try to set them free and help reform their lives, in fact it is only for the sake of preparing a suitable environment for themselves and their children, not exactly for women. And besides this, men would attempt to create personalities among women who share their desires and appreciate their feelings. May adds that men were complaining about the ignorance of women and inability to share their feelings if they remained uneducated. Therefore, men considered themselves in a completely different world from that of women. She asserts on the other hand, that uneducated women consider men as a tool to buy themselves expensive clothing and jewellery. She mentions that Qasim Amin was not the only man who suggested reforms for women, but instead, there were many other men, who want to see women receive better education, improve self-confidence, build strong personalities and appreciate the meanings of life.²¹ According to her, there were also some other men of opposite opinions who worried about women losing their feminine characteristics through education. May Ziadeh brushes off this assertion as ridiculous. She stresses that men in good position would be happy only with educated women. May bases her belief in the possible elimination of discrimination between men and women when promoted

²⁰ see Ibid,p.184-186.

²¹see Ibid,p.187,188.

together within the same society in the future. In her writings, she shows belief in the emergence of equal rights between men and women in the future.²²

Another topic, May Ziadeh dealt with, was the pressure on women by their families to marry men they did not feel any love towards and the total negligence of their feelings, as a common tradition among the Arab societies. She considers the family as the core of social life and the women as the basis of family. She therefore questions the ability of women to become good wives and perfect mothers when their desires, opinions and interests are neglected.²³

As a result, the two woman writers, who are also pioneers in their own respective literatures, demonstrate their views on women's rights in their works. Both writers who received western style education and were familiar with the western values, dealt with this matter within the frameworks of the circumstances in their countries. As a writer of essays, May Ziadeh had a chance to present also the historical evolution of women's movement. She underlines that women's movement in the Arab world was insufficient and developing slowly, but based her belief in the aspirations for a more brilliant future for women. She particularly emphasized the necessity for the education and employment of women. She asserts that the majority of educated men, including writers, were supporting this movement. According to her, it was possible to say that women's movement was pioneered by men. On the other hand, Selma Riza, the Turkish author, demonstrated her views in a fictitious style. The two women characters in her novel, Sabiha and her daughter, Meliha, demonstrate the contrariety of what was then the past and the present: While Sabiha represents an uneducated and oppressed woman, her daughter Meliha represents a well-educated, respected woman who can control her life. At the same time, the two male characters of the novel, Murshid and Adil, show another contrariety: While Murshid represents a man, who despises women, Adil represents a man, who respects women and pays significant attention to the education of women and considers it essential. The common aspect of both women writers, is their emphasis on the essentiality of education and employment of women. Both writers reflect the statuses of women in their own period and underline the role of men who aspire the betterment of women's status.

²²see Ibid, p.190-192.

²³seeIbid,p. 298,299.

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