

# La rivista di Arablit

semestrale di letteratura e cultura araba moderna e contemporanea

Anno XII, numero 24, dicembre 2022



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# HAVE THEY NOT FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE OF OUR WOMEN? WARDAH AL-YĀZIĞĪ ON WOMEN POETS, NATION-BUILDING AND EXEMPLARITY

MARIANGELA MASULLO\*

*The cultural Renaissance of the Nahḍah in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries gave rise to new issues and trends. Egyptian and Syrian Lebanese women intellectuals claimed more space in the public arena, while supporting the nationalist movements on the rise in their countries. The reflection on women's role in a modern country was central, leading to an investigation into who could be the most suitable models, in an often lively tension between Eastern heritage and assumed Western modernity. Within this debate, one of the more structured positions was held by the Lebanese poet and intellectual Wardah al-Yāziğī (1838-1924) in her essay al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah (1906). This paper seeks to explore the intersections of the issues of women's advancement and nationalism in al-Yāziğī's vision, with commented excerpts from her al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah. The author's reflections are set within a broader theoretical framework which encompasses the rediscovery of the genealogy of both famous and often little-known Arab women poets, and the author's reflection on autochthonous models. In doing so, literature, women's issues and nationalism interrelate through the unifying instrument of a pedagogical perspective.*

During the *Nahḍah*, the Renaissance of the Arab-Islamic world that took place between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1920s, intellectuals developed new ideas and themes which would be fundamental in reshaping Arab countries and the Arab culture. The resulting forms included both the traditional values and the changes of a quickly evolving world. Culturally, this implied a wide-ranging endeavour involving literati in the fields of language, literature, and journalism, interacting with the debate on political identity and the concept of nationality<sup>1</sup>.

In a society where religious affiliation was a primary and officially-recognized marker of identity, some wanted to think according to nation-based terms that would override religious belonging as the basis of the community. The concepts of homeland (*waṭan*) and nationalism (*waṭaniyyah*), were being formulated by Christian Syrian intellectuals such as Buṭrus al-Bustānī

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<sup>1</sup> I. Camera d'Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea. Dalla nahḍah a oggi*, Carrocci, Roma 2007<sup>2</sup>, pp. 18-27.

(1819-1883) and exponents of the al-Yāziğī family<sup>2</sup>, such as the celebrated philologist and Neoclassical poet Nāṣīf al-Yāziğī (1800-1871)<sup>3</sup> and his son Ibrāhīm al-Yāziğī (1847-1906)<sup>4</sup>. In 1868, the latter called upon the Arabs to re-discover their ancient glory and vitality, shaking off the yoke of their rulers in a poem that met with immediate acclaim<sup>5</sup>. His intellectual vision, contemplating the rebirth of Arab civilisation also through the rediscovery and restructuring of the classical language, was to influence the subsequent development of nationalist political thought, which would spread throughout the Arab world<sup>6</sup>.

Syrian publishers and thinkers, often emigrating to Cairo in pursuit of better financial opportunities, founded many journals and magazines that gave rise to a lively exchange of ideas not only among intellectuals, but also among authors and readers, all being equally involved in the dynamic assessment of the changes needed<sup>7</sup> in governance and social institutions, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Butrus Abu-Manneh, *The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, 11, 3 (1980), pp. 287-304.

<sup>3</sup> A Melkite Christian, he was self-educated, acquiring an excellent knowledge of the Arabic language and literature. He worked as a secretary to important public figures and as a teacher in various schools, including the Syrian Evangelical Faculty (*al-Kulliyah al-Sūriyyah al-Ingīliyyah*), precursor of the American University of Beirut. A leading figure in what was to become known as the Neoclassical movement, he was the author of a number of books on syntax as well as poetic texts and an influential commentary on the Abbasid poet al-Mutanabbī (915-965). He also brought out a fundamental collection returning to the classical genre in metrical prose (*sağʿ*) of the *maqamāt* (*Mağmaʿ al-baḥrayn*, *The Confluence of the Two Seas*, 1856). He thoroughly renovated the Arabic linguistic canon, restoring the classical language with a new role; his work was to considerably influence the intellectuals of the following generations. Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea*, cit., pp. 38-39; A.J. Gully, *al-Yāzidjī*, in *EP*, XI, pp. 317-319.

<sup>4</sup> A leading philosopher, journalist, publisher and poet, he continued and expanded the work of Arabic renewal begun by his father. He focused on the connection between the decline of the language and the rise of the Ottoman Empire. His works include an acclaimed translation of the Old Testament in a dictionary left incomplete, as well as some *dīwān* of Neoclassical inspiration and nationalist spirit. P.C. Sadgrove, *Al-Yāziğī family*, in J. Scott Meisami and P. Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature (EAL)*, Routledge, London-New York 1998, p. 813; P. Soueid, *Ibrahim al-Yazigi: l’homme et son œuvre*. Publications de l’Université Libanaise, Beirut 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea*, cit., pp. 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1997<sup>3</sup>, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> F. Zachs; S. Halevi, *From Difāʿ al-Nisāʿ to Masʿalat al-Nisāʿ in Greater Syria: Readers and Writers Debate Women and Their Rights, 1858-1900*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, 41, 4 (2009), p. 615.



in new practices in social exchanges and new intellectual outlooks<sup>8</sup>. The issue of women's rights was a fundamental aspect in both the literary and political domains, contributing to the redefinition of the relationships between genders as a component of the broader debate on society and nationhood<sup>9</sup>. Women's rights movements emerged as part of nation-state building or in reaction to it. Nationalism, proto-feminism and anti-colonialism invariably became intertwined<sup>10</sup>. The topics of the education, as well as the civil and political rights, of women intersected – in the reflections of both men and women intellectuals – with the choices necessary to direct the Arab world toward modernity without forgetting its roots.

Whilst male intellectuals such as Salīm al-Bustānī (1848-1884) defined patriotism either through the image of women as mothers of the nation or that of women assisting their men in building the homeland<sup>11</sup>, women intellectuals chose a different path, focusing on exemplarity and self-fulfilment in a socially acceptable framework.

Women's magazines and biographical dictionaries appeared first in Egypt, produced by migrants from Ottoman Syria, and then by Egyptians. The publication of over twenty magazines by 1914 suggests a strong interest in capturing a growing female readership<sup>12</sup>. Their pages were largely devoted to biographies of famous women, with a particular focus on those who had lived in the previous centuries. If studying one's past was integral to a modern national and nationalist consciousness, the investigation of a feminine

<sup>8</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001, p. xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the 1870s with pamphlets and articles by a number of intellectuals like 'Ā'īshah Taymūr (1840-1902), considerations on the issue of women culminated with the works of the reformist intellectual Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908) *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah* (Liberation of Women, 1899) and *al-Mar'ah al-Ġadīdah* (The New Woman, 1900). Amīn's school of thought opened up a debate on the condition of women on a broader scale; nevertheless, decolonialist scholars such as Leila Ahmed and Beth Baron argue that Amīn's approach replicated the colonial thought about women in Muslim societies, seeing him definitely not as the «father of feminism», but rather as «the son of Cromer and colonialism». L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1992, pp. 162-163.

<sup>10</sup> B. Baron, *Egypt as a Woman. Nationalism, Gender and Politics*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> F. Zachs, *Narrating an Identity: New Genres, New Identity (1858–1881)*, in Ead., *The Making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 201-202.

<sup>12</sup> The first women's magazine published by a woman was “al-Fatāh” (The Girl), founded by Hind Nawfal (1875-1957), a Syrian intellectual who had moved to Egypt. Camera d'Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea*, cit., p. 186; Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1994, pp. 1-9.

past was significant to raise awareness and change in the present. Biographies of notable women caught on quickly as a regular feature<sup>13</sup>. Women had been the subjects of male-authored collections, but a woman as an author of a biographical dictionary of women was an unprecedented act: biographers had to work within a symbolic field of cultural and political assertion that made up a range of «authentic past»<sup>14</sup>. In 1897, a prototype of Maryam al-Naḥḥās<sup>15</sup> (1856-88)'s first volume on the lives of famous women was published. The second part never appeared, but laid the foundation for the most important work of that issue<sup>16</sup>. In 1894, Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914)<sup>17</sup> published her biographical dictionary *al-Durr al-manṭūr fī ṭabaqāt rabbāt al-ḥudūr* (Scattered Pearls on the Generations of the Mistresses of Seclusion). With the word «ṭabaqāt» in her title, Fawwāz declared a generic link to a centuries-old Arab Islamic tradition of compiling biographical dictionaries<sup>18</sup>. The choice of this term, in its meaning of “class” and “category”, is important, as it represents one of the earliest examples of the classification of women from the perspective of gender.

Meanwhile, Fawwāz's work is an innovation, as the biographical genre is thematised according to the gender aspect: the selection of the figures to be inserted in the individual biographies is functional to the creation of a genre that will become canonical – and in turn exemplary – in the search for models to offer a female audience.

<sup>13</sup> M. Booth, *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: Writing Feminist History Through Biography in Fin-de-Siècle Egypt*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015, pp. 36-48.

<sup>14</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, cit., p. xxxi.

<sup>15</sup> Born in Beirut, she moved to Alexandria where she settled and became a journalist and activist. Her daughter was the journalist Hind Nawfal. H. El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt 1892-2008*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, cit., pp. 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> Born to a simple Shiite family in southern Lebanon, she emigrated to Egypt where she became an established writer of novels, essays, and articles on women. She is considered one of the pioneers of the struggle for women's rights. R. Ashur, F.J. Ghazoul, H. Reda-Mekdashi (eds.), *Arab Women Writers. A critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2008, pp. 391-392.

<sup>18</sup> The earliest surviving example is Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd's (784-845) *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā li-Ibn Sa'd* (The Great Book of Generations), ed. Ihsān Abbās, Dār Ṣādir-Dār Bayrūt, Bayrūt 1958. Other literary genres referred to by Fawwāz's *Ṭabaqāt* are a 'yān (biographical works – biographies of notable people) and *tarāḡim* (individual biographical stories). See Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ġinā, *al-Tarāḡim wa 'l-siyār*, Dār al-Ma'ārif, al-Qāhirah 1969<sup>2</sup>. See also the seminal work by D. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001.

Fawwāz's volume includes reconstructions of early Muslim lives, 19<sup>th</sup>-century subjects, the still-living and the recently deceased, from the Uzbek heartland to the North American Far West. Throughout the volume, she reiterates the outpouring of female Arab literary skills, demonstrating that the Arab cultural and political scene had been shaped by the pens of women as well as by men's pens. She did include notable Western women – such as Joan of Arc, Queen Victoria and Catherine the Great – so as to reinforce her idea of exemplarity as a discursive and inclusive tool for reshaping the image of women. This process encoded the “East-West” contrast as a place of questioning and conflict, but at the same time a space authorizing mutual admiration. The reader is invited to take note of exemplarities that arise from what is presented as their binary opposites<sup>19</sup>.

The enormous success of the volume by Zaynāb Fawwāz extended the focus on exemplary female figures to the broader debate on women's rights which had hitherto been reserved to men of culture, encouraging other women intellectuals to work on this pattern, adapting it to the demands of the public or to their own needs. In the same vein, we find the Lebanese poet Wardah al-Yāziḡī (1838-1924) with her essay *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah* (The Eastern Woman, 1906).

Wardah al-Yāziḡī was the daughter of Nāšif al-Yāziḡī; her brothers were the intellectuals and journalists Ḥabīb (1833-1870)<sup>20</sup>, the aforementioned Ibrāhīm, and Ḥalīl (1856-1889)<sup>21</sup>. She also had a sister, Rāhīl (d. 1876), whom she mourned in her *dīwān*<sup>22</sup>. Her belonging to one of the leading families on the cultural scene of the period ensured for her a high level of education, both at home and at the French School of Beirut<sup>23</sup>. After graduation,

<sup>19</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, cit., pp. 53-55.

<sup>20</sup> A relatively minor figure in his family, he did, however, have a role in the literary scene of the time as a translator from French and a commentator on some of his father's texts. Sadgrove, *al-Yāziḡī family*, cit., p. 812.

<sup>21</sup> The author of a tragedy in verse, as well as of a *dīwān* and a dictionary of the spoken language left unfinished, he, too, took an interest in the state-of-the-art of language, arguing in a number of articles that the political success of the Arab world in the past was also due to the use of a single language, repository of a common vision. Gully, *al-Yāziḡī*, cit., p. 318.

<sup>22</sup> Nothing is known about Rāhīl except for the news of her death in Wardah's *dīwān*. Wardah al-Yāziḡī, *Hadīqat al-ward* (Rose Garden), Dār Mārūn 'Abbūd, Bayrūt 1984, pp. 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> Wardah al-Yāziḡī benefited from the spread of schools run by Christian missionaries; it is estimated that there were 500 French, 100 British and 88 American schools, in addition to the institutions run by Italians, Germans and Russians, in the *Bilād al-Šām* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The important point is that some of these schools were reserved for the education of girls. They were so successful as to prompt a reform of the state educational system in the same direction – not only in Greater Syria, but also in Egypt and, at different times, in other Arab

al-Yāziğī went on to teach in a few schools for girls, and continued to work after getting married and having five children. In 1899, after the death of her husband, she moved to Alexandria in Egypt, where she spent the rest of her days<sup>24</sup>. A poet from the age of thirteen, she was the author of a *dīwān* in the Neoclassical vein, *Ḥadīqat al-ward* (1867)<sup>25</sup>. The first edition of this *dīwān* dates back to 1867 and appears to have been the first work by an Arab woman to have ever been published; it was improved and republished in 1887 in Beirut, and again in 1913 in Cairo. It consists mainly of panegyrics dedicated to notable figures of the author's time, elegies for many members of her family and occasional poems. From time to time, al-Yāziğī also wrote cultural articles for journals and magazines, including *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*.

This essay is devoted to the ideal role of Arab women in contemporary society, traced back through the exemplary lives of women in classical and post-classical poetry<sup>26</sup>. It was first published in "al-Ḍiyā"<sup>27</sup> and subsequently included in Wardah al-Yāziğī's *dīwān*. It redefines the outlines of the condition of women, suggesting a new educational and social model. The influence of her father and her brother Ibrāhīm's nationalist ideas, transposed into an openly asserted feminine point of view, is very evident in her vindication of the glorious Arab heritage, as well as in the need to use the Arab language to reconstruct and educate future generations. The essay opens with a few reflections on the heated debate taking place in those years on the desirability of considering the Western female figure as a reference for the Arab community. al-Yāziğī recognises that the condition of European women is the consequence of European social progress enabled by culture and acknowledged by the dominant male élite:

As we know, the women of the Western countries have made progress over the last few centuries [...]. They have shaken off the pall of ignorance that covered

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countries. J. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, cit., p. 30, fn. 60. See also J. Hauser; C.B. Lindner; E. Möller (eds.), *Entangled Education: Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon (19-20 Century)*, Orient-Institut Beirut, Ergon-Verlag, Beirut 2016.

<sup>24</sup> M. Booth, "al-Yāziğī, Warda", *EAL*, cit., p. 813.

<sup>25</sup> *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah* has not yet been translated into any European language. I hope to offer a wider study on this fundamental essay in the near future.

<sup>26</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, in "al-Ḍiyā" (Illumination), 8, 12 (1906), pp. 357-360; 8, 13 (1906), pp. 392-396; 8, 14 (1906), pp. 422-425; 8, 15 (1906), pp. 453-457. In the present study, the following edition of *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah* has been used: al-Yāziğī, Wardah, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, in Ead., *Ḥadīqat al-ward*, cit., pp. 93-113.

<sup>27</sup> "al-Ḍiyā": mağallah 'ilmiyyah adabiyyah šaḥiyyah šinā'iyah" (Illumination: a Scientific, Literary, Sanitary and Industrial Journal) was founded in Cairo in 1898 by Ibrāhīm al-Yāziğī. Published twice a month, it ran until 1906. The complete digital version is available on the website of the Universität Bonn archives: <https://digitale-sammlungen.ulb.uni-bonn.de/ulbbnioa/periodical/titleinfo/3039125>.

them in the centuries of barbarianism to achieve equality with men and loosen the yoke of slavery. This proved possible thanks only to the results achieved in studies, through which [women] have become aware of their rights and arrived at the firm intention to claim them, demonstrating them with incontestable proof to men, eventually obtaining the reforms they demanded<sup>28</sup>.

Though author recognises Arab women's are in debt to their European counterparts, she strongly contests the spirit of conforming to men. This position is in open contrast with the approach adopted by Zaynab Fawwāz, who praises the exemplarity of the Western model – which she implicitly urges to imitate – for women. By contrast, al-Yāziǧī condemns Western influence and its effects, which she identifies in a progressive loss of national identity and an excessive dissoluteness, with a strong moral condemnation. As a consequence, the influence exercised by Western women is considered detrimental:

However, if we consider the condition of women in our contemporary society, we find scant information about the past; indeed, we learned our current knowledge starting from present-day civilisation, from Western women's ways of dressing and from learning a few European languages [...]. Not only have [the women of the East] matched their Western counterparts, but they may also have fooled themselves into believing they have become like them. Thus, they have denied their own origins and distanced themselves from their compatriots, to the extent that some of them have even refused to speak or write in Arabic. It is sad to see that some of them have abandoned their Eastern ways and have taken up dancing, for example, wearing the costumes of European dancers, shameless to the point of disgusting the Eastern sense of propriety [...]. Moreover, some have taken to gambling, which is among the most shameful things for both men and women<sup>29</sup>.

In doing so, al-Yāziǧī resolutely chose a path less well-trodden, at a time where the first feminist demands were influenced and shaped by Western experiences and models, as the EFU<sup>30</sup> president Hudā al-Ša'rawī (1879-1947) was to successfully demonstrate a few years after the publication of *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*. According to al-Yāziǧī, Westernisation begins with the education of girls. The author points her finger at foreign schools, accused of distorting the self-representation of Arab girls to the point of inducing them to detest their compatriots and to aspire to a false identification with the Westerners. It may seem odd that the author deplors the schools she herself had

<sup>28</sup> Wardah al-Yāziǧī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The Egyptian Feminist Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-nisā'ī al-miṣrī*) was the first explicitly feminist association, founded in the early 1920s by Hudā al-Ša'rāwī; active in the national independence movement, it asked for the restructuring of the Egyptian state and society in order to fulfil women's demands of equal civil and political rights. M. Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1995, *passim*, especially pp. 223-50.

attended, but her topic clearly rises above the personal to the political level. Significantly enough, the keyword in this part of the text is *waṭan*, clearly referring to the nationalist and reformist themes of the period; not applied to any particular area but aiming to include the entire Arab world, in contrast with the Western world<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, al-Yāziğī makes it clear that hers is not a negative judgement of Western women per se, but of the attitude of the Arab women who forget themselves in the glorification of others, evidently misinterpreting their models: «if the women of our country truly excelled in imitating the practices of foreign women, they would, in the first place, preserve the memory of their own nationality and hold high the honour of their own roots»<sup>32</sup>. This observation serves as an introduction to the central topic of the essay, rhetorically emphasising the reason why it is necessary to rediscover one's own roots:

Among European and American women we find scientists, women of letters, acclaimed authors of articles written in political journals and scientific magazines, studying the movement of the heavenly bodies, working in chemistry laboratories and so forth. Have they not followed the example of our women<sup>33</sup>?

This rhetorical premise serves to justify the exclusion of Western women from the models the author is about to propose: that Arab women achieved excellence in the arts and sciences before their Western counterparts. The glorious, idealised past to be revived clearly reflects the positions of Ibrāhīm al-Yāziğī and other nationalists<sup>34</sup>.

al-Yāziğī contrasts Western models with three emblematic figures of Arab women of her times or who lived slightly earlier: ‘Ā’iṣah Taymūr<sup>35</sup>, Zaynab Fawwāz and Labībah Hāsim (1882-1952)<sup>36</sup>. The reason al-Yāziğī gives for bringing together these three women of letters is not for their in-

<sup>31</sup> A. Groiss, *Territorial Identification in the Middle East: Tradition and Change*, in Adel Beshara (ed. by), *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, Routledge, London-New York 2011, pp. 30-32.

<sup>32</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī, *al-Mar’ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>34</sup> See E.S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, pp. 17-46.

<sup>35</sup> Born to an aristocratic Turkish-Egyptian family, she received an unusually sophisticated private education for those times, with two governesses who introduced her to Arabic, Persian and Turkish prosody and literature. She led a secluded life but produced a number of significant works: apart from the *dīwān* in the three languages she had a good command of, she wrote prose texts now considered pioneering in the cause of women's emancipation and advancement – including, notably, *Mir’āt al-ta’ammul fī ‘l-umūr* (The Mirror of Reflection, 1892). For further details, see M.F. Hatem, *Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt. The Life and Works of ‘A’isha Taymur*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011.

terest in matters of women's rights, but for the use of Arabic in their works. According to al-Yāziǧī, it is the linguistic aspect that gives Arab women intellectuals the same dignity as the European women who achieve excellent results in their own language, and only later may explore other languages and cultures. Here, Wardah al-Yāziǧī touches on a crucial point in the nationalist cause, a phase in which the use of language – unlike religious persuasion – played a fundamental role, as noted by scholars:

If we keep in mind that Islam's mark of distinction is its being Arab, while that of the Arabs is not their being necessarily Muslims, it becomes clear that resorting to the past for a fortifying identity in the face of Western colonial thrust can also take a parallel but non-religious course. As an Arab, one can claim descent from a glorious nation whose principle of identity is not primarily Islamic, but Arab and Arabic in expression and, consequently, in heritage and culture. This, perhaps more than any other factor, explains the extraordinary efforts put by non-Muslim renaissance Arabs, all Christians, into reviving the Arabic language and restoring it to its past glory. From Girmanious Farhāt (1670-1732), to Nāssif Al-Yāziǧi (1800-1871), to Ahmad Fāris Al-Shidyāq, to Butros Al-Bustāni up to Ibrahim Al-Yāziǧi (1874-1906) is a series of grammarians, lexicographers and encyclopedists who can safely be considered the Arabists of the century par excellence<sup>37</sup>.

In *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, close connections are traced between exemplary contemporary figures and classical legacy: valiant women intellectuals of today acknowledge the achievements of the women of letters who lived in earlier centuries. Free from Western influence, those women devoted themselves to genuinely Arab arts and sciences, with outstanding accomplishments in their respective fields. In some cases, they surpassed their male counterparts in style, originality, significance and delicacy of expression.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the second part of the essay begins. The author offers readers a selection of verses by 11 women poets she considers significant. They are introduced according to a criterion which is quite the opposite of the one used in *al-Durr al-manṭūr* and other women's biographical dictionaries, where the narrative revolves around the lives of the women mentioned and their features deemed exemplary. In *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah* the verses themselves

<sup>36</sup> A Lebanese journalist, she moved in al-Yāziǧī's circle. Having emigrated to Cairo, she founded the women's magazine "Fatāt al-Šarq" and worked for the Ministry of Education. After moving to Argentina, she founded another magazine and continued writing novels and poetry. 'Umar Riḍā Kaḥḥālah, *Labībah Hāšim*, in Id., *A'lām al-nisā' fī 'ālamay al-'arab wa 'l-Islām*, al-Maṭba'ah al-Hāšimiyah, Dimašq 1958, vol. 5, pp. 279-283.

<sup>37</sup> Nadeem Naymi, *The Concrete and the Universal in Renaissance Arabic Thought*, in Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (ed.), *Studying Transcultural Literary History*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin 2006, p. 296.

<sup>38</sup> Wardah al-Yāziǧī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., pp. 98-99.

take centre stage, while details about the respective authors serve mainly as context and introduction. This pattern follows that of the major Arabic compilations such as the *Kitāb al-aġānī*<sup>39</sup>. The return to the traditional model also serves the – political and contemporary – purpose of reinforcing the guiding principle of bringing Arab women towards their own culture through their own language, as set out in the first part.

The essay follows a diachronic order, retracing what the author appears to consider the most significant phases in the history of Arabic-Islamic civilisation: the Abbasid caliphate and the Andalusian reign, citing the post-classical period in the figure of a single poetess. al-Yāziġī leaves out the pre-Islamic period, explaining that her decision was made not for religious reasons but, rather, for technical ones based on the conscious, codified use of Arabic:

I will confine my attention to the poetry of Muslim women<sup>40</sup> since, although those of the Ġāhiliyya [offer us] compelling evidence of the meaning we now attribute to [pre-Islamic] poetry, they composed their verses intuitively without any education behind them<sup>41</sup>.

Once again, the educational approach, and underlying claim for women's instruction, is stressed. The first of the poets presented is the Abbasid 'Ulayyah bint al-Mahdī (777 ca.-825 ca.)<sup>42</sup>, sister to the caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd (766-809). As her source, al-Yāziġī cites the *Kitāb al-aġānī*, which devotes an entire section to 'Ulayyah, quoting passages that bring out her intelligence and culture, still reinforcing the chosen pattern of emphasizing the educational approach to exemplarity. The verses presented are a selection of various types of poetry written by 'Ulayyah: eulogies for the caliph and poems inspired by homesickness during her travels, verses seen by the critics as love poetry<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, according to tradition, 'Ulayya was – strictly platonically –

<sup>39</sup> See H. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs. Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's Kitāb al-aghānī*, Routledge, London-New York 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Literally "believers".

<sup>41</sup> Wardah al-Yāziġī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> The daughter of the caliph al-Mahdī and the slave woman Maknūnah, she was educated in poetry and music. As a teacher to a number of singers, she also had her musician brother, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (744-785), among her disciples. Moreover, she was the patron of a poet and singer, Abū Ḥafṣ al-Šīranġī, who appears to have been deeply devoted to her. She took part in the caliph's private receptions singing from behind a curtain; with this ploy, the poetess was able to perform in public without formally breaking the rule of female segregation. She appears to have withdrawn into private life after the death of al-Rašīd. al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aġānī*, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, al-Qāhirah 1927-74, vol. 10, pp. 162-186; al-Šūlī, *Aṣ'ār awlād al-ḥulafā'*, in Id., *Kitāb al-awraq*, ed. J. Heyworth-Dunne, Luzac, London 1936, vol. 3, p. 83; H. Kilpatrick, 'Ulayya, *EAL*, p. 791.



enamoured of a slave, Ṭall<sup>44</sup>; this may well have been a literary convention providing her with an opportunity in the area of love poetry – a genre then in vogue at the Abbasid court<sup>45</sup>. The verses dedicated to him are, in actual fact, ambiguous and nostalgic, offering the opportunity for a defence of the Princess, taken up by al-Yāziǧī in a rather significant selection:

They sleep who blame me while I lie awake  
 Those who defamed me are the cause of my sickness  
 And if I had said I was suffering pain  
 The very one I love would have doubted my grief<sup>46</sup>.

‘Ulayyah is followed by Faḍl (d. 871)<sup>47</sup>, a woman poet who was a *ǧāriyah* (“slave”, often meaning a trained poet, musician and singer), at the court of the caliph al-Mutawakkil (822-861). It is worth noting that al-Yāziǧī performs a sort of censorship in her selection, avoiding both any mention of Faḍl’s status<sup>48</sup> and the fact that most of her poetry was concerned with pas-

<sup>43</sup> Shamsi, M.H., ‘*Ulayya, a Lesser Known ‘Abbasid Princess*, in “Islamic Culture”, 21 (1947), p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> al-İṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aǧānī*, cit., vol. 10, pp. 173-174, 179.

<sup>45</sup> M.S. Gordon, *The Place of Competition: the Careers of ‘Arib al-Ma’muniya and ‘Ulayyah bint al-Mahdī, Sisters in Song*, in J.E. Montgomery (ed.), *‘Abbasid Studies: Occasional Papers of the School of ‘Abbasid Studies, Cambridge, 6-10 July 2002*, Peeters, Louvain 2004, p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> Wardah al-Yāziǧī, *al-Mar’ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> She was a leading force in the cultural circle of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, where she played a leading role, also as a judge in competitions between poets. Ibn al-Mu‘tazz mentions her fervent Shiite faith but also questions the strength of her belief, recalling that when the poetess fell in love with the poet Sa‘īd ibn Humayd, she declared herself a follower of Sunni faith to please him. al-İṣfahānī has much to tell us about the troubled relationship, which generated a quantity of love poetry that Kilpatrick considers more sincere than the usual poetry of the *ǧawārī*. al-İṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aǧānī*, cit., vol. 19, pp. 301-13; H. Kilpatrick, *Women as Poets and Chattels. Abū l-Faraǧ al-İṣbahānī’s “Al-imā’ al-šawā’ir”*, in “Quaderni di Studi Arabi”, 9 (1991), pp. 161-176.

<sup>48</sup> As reconstructed thanks to a great many documents dating back to the Abbasid period, the female slave poets (*ǧawārī*) had to be well-versed in conversation, playing musical instruments, and composing and singing verses. They had a particular social status which, in a sense, granted them greater autonomy than the so-called free women: they could take their place seated beside men even without a veil and take part in literary meetings (*maǧālis*), from which the female family members of noblemen and caliphs were usually excluded (apart from some rare exceptions, like ‘Ulayyah bint al-Mahdī herself). Behind the glittering façade, however, things were not so bright. A slave woman was valued less than a free woman; from the artistic point of view, her particular status granted her greater scope for expression and experimentation, at the same time denying her social redress. al-Ġāhiz, usually extremely critical of slave women, showed a certain

sionate and at times dissolute love. Instead, she concentrates on Faḍl's artistic qualities, also including a number of anecdotes drawn from the *Kitāb al-ağānī*, such as the one that sees the poet Sa'id ibn Ḥumayd replying to those who insinuated that he himself wrote the verses attributed to Faḍl: «I swear that if all valid authors took inspiration from her poetry they would gain much», or the one in which, invited to improvise verses in a poetry competition, she received two thousand dinars from al-Mutawakkil, moved by her prowess<sup>49</sup>. al-Yāziğī quotes the verses submitted for the competition; as for the rest of Faḍl's output, al-Yāziğī chooses a brief panegyric of the caliph and a love poem in the nostalgic vein:

Patience dwindles and suffering grows  
Home is near, and you are far away  
My complaint is of you and for you  
The sufferer cannot do otherwise  
And I seek refuge from you in the love I worship  
And the envious submit to love<sup>50</sup>.

The figure of another *ğāriyah*, Maḥbūbah, is then presented. She was the same age as Faḍl and, according to tradition, particularly devoted to the caliph al-Mutawakkil. al-Yāziğī quotes an anecdote from the *Kitāb al-ağānī*, which again brings out Maḥbūbah's skills as an improviser. While attending one of al-Mutawakkil's visits to his wife, Maḥbūbah was asked to put in verses the gesture performed by the woman who wrote the name of the caliph on her cheek with kohl, and the beauty of the verses proved breathtaking<sup>51</sup>. al-Yāziğī solves what might be a moral dilemma in presenting the *ğawārī* with their ambiguous status as models: the perspective remains exclusively that of poetic excellence, emphasised in the repetition of anecdotes linked to their talent, which surpasses that of their male counterparts<sup>52</sup> and rises above personal judgement based on biographical data, no longer central in the essay.

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sensitivity, recognising that they could not be otherwise given a socio-cultural context. Ġāḥiz, *Risālat al-qiyān*, Dār al-Ma'ārif, al-Qāhirah 1964; A.F.L. Beeston, *The Epistle on Singing Girls by Jāḥiz*, Aris and Phillips, Warminster 1980; Ch. Pellat, *Les esclaves-chanteuses de Jāḥiz*, in "Arabica", 10, 2 (1963), pp. 121-147.

<sup>49</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101; al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-ağānī*, cit., vol. 18, p. 175.

<sup>51</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>52</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī had deepened in-depth knowledge of slave women's verses which she drew from various sources, also as a poet herself. An example is her paraphrase of a poem recited by a slave woman, quoted by Ibn Ḥallikān, in an interplay of multiple literary references in the poetic genre of the *mu'araḍah* ("emulation of a poet"). Ibn Ḥallikān, *Tamīm ibn al-Mu'izz ibn Bādīs*, in Id., *Wafayāt al-ā'yān*, ed. I. 'Abbās, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt s.d., vol. I, pp. 304-306; M. Masullo, *Una mu'araḍa di Warda al-Yāziğī*, in "Quaderni di Studi Arabi", 9 (2014), p. 323-332.

The next figure she deals with is easier to handle, being closer to the author's ideal of the woman of letters: 'Ā'īshah al-Bā'ūniyyah (d. 1516)<sup>53</sup>, a scholar and mystic from Damascus who had moved to Cairo. Her importance lies in the fact that she followed the trend of the high-brow Arabic literature of the Mamluk period, distinguishing herself within it as the only known intellectual Arab woman of the period. al-Yāziġī sees her as the finest of the poets presented, introducing her with great enthusiasm:

She was a virtuous and intelligent woman of letters, remembered as one of the finest minds of her time, to the extent that among the Muslim [poets] she is compared with al-Ḥansā' and the women of the Gāhiliyya. [...] She wrote and commented on compositions in verse, and prose, as well as devotional poetry. Moreover, she composed a *dīwān* of marvellous poems praising the Prophet, and many other poems [...]. But recognition of her flair is due mostly to the verses praising Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Aġā<sup>54</sup>.

This passage marks a contradiction with the previous observation regarding the women poets of the *Gāhiliyyah*, whom al-Yāziġī had chosen not to take into account because she did not consider their poetry at the same technical level as that of later women of letters. Here, by contrast, the pre-Islamic model appears once again as a more noble benchmark, above all in relation to a poet well-versed in the use of the complex rhetorical techniques of *badī'*. Moreover, it should be noted that the poetic genre which al-Yāziġī deems more significant is the panegyric (*madīḥ*); she considers love poetry to be somewhat trivial, although a number of the figures she deals with excelled at it.

The next section is dedicated to the poetry of Arab-Andalusian women, taken up in al-Maqqarī's *Nafh al-ṭibb*. The women poets mentioned are

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<sup>53</sup> Born to a wealthy Damascus family at the service of the Mamluk sovereigns, she dedicated herself to poetry, jurisprudence and mysticism. She may have been an initiate of the mystical Qādirīyyah brotherhood, like the rest of her family. Around 1513 she left Syria for Cairo, travelling alone, with the aim of finding work for her son in the Mamluk administration. At the court of the Sultan of Cairo Qānṣūh al-Ġawī, she was introduced to the cultural circle of the Palace, gaining a prominent position with her reputation as a mystic. al-Bā'ūniyyah died leaving a considerable quantity of juridical, theological, mystical and poetic texts; according to Homerin, more of her texts have come down to us than of any other female Arab author who lived before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During her lifetime, she became famous for a long eulogy of the Prophet, where she makes ample use of the rhetorical technique of *badī'*, which she herself explains in an extensive commentary. Th.E. Homerin, *Living Love: the Mystical Writings of 'Ā'īshah al-Bā'ūniyyah (d. 922/1516)*, in "Mamluk Studies Review", 7 (2003), pp. 211-234; Ḥasan Muḥammad Rabābi'ah, *'Ā'īshah al-Bā'ūniyya: šā'irah*, Dār al-Hilāl li 'l-Tarġamah, Irbid 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Wardah al-Yāziġī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., pp. 102-103.

al-Ġassāniyyah al-Baġāniyyah<sup>55</sup>, Umm Sa'd bint 'Iṣām (d. 1242 ca.)<sup>56</sup>, Ḥassānah al-Tamīmiyyah<sup>57</sup>, Umm al-'Alā' bint Yūsuf al-Ḥiġāriyyah<sup>58</sup>, Amat al-'Azīz al-Šarīfah al-Ḥusayniyyah<sup>59</sup> and 'Ā'īshah bint Aḥmad al-Qurtubiyyah<sup>60</sup>. Just a few lines are devoted to each of these authors – of whom in most cases few verses and very little information are in our possession – and a variable number of verses are quoted, together with reference to the sources. Although rather less space is reserved for the individual women, the female poets of al-Andalus form a compact core which, given the uniform qualities of the figures presented, bears out the fact that «in al-Andalus there was a considerable number of women poets on par with the men, including some who were able to improvise verses»<sup>61</sup>, further enhancing the overall message of al-Yāziġī's essay.

The presentation of these exemplary figures is followed by some theoretical reflections expanding upon the themes introduced at the beginning, and going on to the issues raised by the nationalist debate on women in those years: the need for women's education, recognition of domestic work and the education of children. These interrelated themes start with the contrast between a glorious, cultured past and a corrupt present. The author holds that blame for this degeneration can be ascribed to two related factors: the fact that men have abandoned their role of intellectual guidance for women, and the adoption of Western customs. al-Yāziġī returns to the traditional *topos* of the *ġāhiliyyah*'s men, idealising their education and influence:

in the pre-Islamic period, although there were no schools or education and their men relatives were all illiterate except a few, [women] were eloquent and their talk was rhetorical. Many of them were poets and some were able to

<sup>55</sup> Native to the area of Almeria, she appears to have been an author of panegyrics; only six of her verses have come down to us, harking back to a poem by Ibn Darrāġ al-Qaṣṭallī. T. Garulo, *Dīwān de las poetisas de al-Andalus*, Hiperión, Madrid 1986, pp. 66-67.

<sup>56</sup> Belonging to an illustrious family of scholars from Cordoba, she wrote what appears to have been the only religious poem composed by an Andalusian Arab woman. *Ibid.*, p. 135-137.

<sup>57</sup> Apparently the earliest Andalusian woman poet we have evidence of. She lived in the times of al-Ḥakam I (796-822), and wrote a poem requesting protection after the death of her father. E. Terés, *El poeta Abū l-Maġṣī y Ḥassāna la Tamīmiyya*, in "al-Andalus", 26 (1961), pp. 229-244.

<sup>58</sup> Of Berber origin, she lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century; five fragments of her poems have been found, three of which from a more extensive panegyric. T. Garulo, *Dīwān*, cit., pp. 128-130.

<sup>59</sup> Cited only by Ibn Diḥyah, who recalls hearing her reciting some verses. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>60</sup> From a noble Cordoban family, she is described as a woman of incomparable learning and virtue; she wrote mainly panegyrics. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>61</sup> Wardah al-Yāziġī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 104.

make great speeches much better than today's most eloquent writers. Such talent was due to the fact that wherever they were, they could hear only rhetorical speeches and talks, which was the main characteristic of the people who lived in tents. Nowadays men rarely talk about literature or science. They rarely care about anything aside from joy, collecting funds and useless subjects. Nowadays educated men do not do more than what has previously been said about women, which can be summarized in learning foreign languages and spending their time in reading novels, most of which are harmful for morals<sup>62</sup>.

Thus, the intellectual decadence of men had repercussions on women, and these lines imply the need for a renewal of female education, without which Arab women risk becoming caricatures of Western women, copying only their detrimental features while losing Arab identity:

Therefore, our homes, clothes, meetings and talks have become totally foreign. As we lack the sciences, crafts and other advantages of foreigners, we settled for imitating these superficial skins. If we ever tried to follow the morals of the most noble and generous of them, we would not match with their honourable customs, finding them in contrast with our spirit because of those [aforementioned] phenomena or shortcomings by the worst of them, such as dissoluteness, indecent attire or manifesting shameful deeds which are too embarrassing to write about or even describe<sup>63</sup>.

Returning to the political debate of the time, al-Yāziǧī associates the issue of female education with that of the primary function of women in society: motherhood. In this respect, she adheres to the emerging trend of the “New Woman” in Egypt at the turn of the century. The increased educational opportunities for women were disseminated in order to serve the needs of the state, to let women enter medical and teaching professions, as well as to enable them to become better wives and mothers<sup>64</sup>. Once again, the contrast between Western and Arab women serves to define the areas of correct social conduct. The ultimate aim of an Arab woman is to bring her children up well, offering the country an educated and aware future generation. To fulfil this goal, the mother needs an education too<sup>65</sup>. The author draws up a sort of classification of the education desirable for a mother; in the first place, she needs scientific knowledge through which «her raising of her children may

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>64</sup> M. Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2004, p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> In 1910, a few years after *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, the intellectual and poet Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1871-1932) wrote the following statement in an article published in “al-Hilāl”: «The mother is a school; if you prepare her, you prepare a nation well from its roots», showing how this liberal idea of educating women to improve the nation had spread to the political debate. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

be considered as primary school lessons, so that when they starts going to school, will already have a background in many of these facts before they are academically taught»<sup>66</sup>. Thus, for women the purposes of education are not strictly personal but concern the improvement of society; Arab women, the author warns, ought not to take their example from certain Western women who, concentrating on science alone (e.g. chemistry and astronomy), lose sight of the «natural functions of women»<sup>67</sup>. Apart from bringing up their children, these functions also include housework<sup>68</sup> – which can, however, become a limitation if it takes up all the free time of a woman who needs to read and educate herself, «especially if she is rich and has servants to help her in the household chores»<sup>69</sup>. This point summons the publication's ideal reader, warning her to behave as best befits her status of a woman of the upper-middle class, with no need to work outside her house and with a basic education enabling her to read on her own. Here, too, al-Yāziġī draws up a sort of classification of desirable skills:

If she hasn't study science or she isn't talented in poetry, it is better for her to read useful books such as history which widens the horizon of the mind and keeps it away from superstitions and myths, and readers of history gain intellect in many scientific facts because history addresses all the aspects related to human beings, whether scientific, political, social, etc. If she is talented in writing prose or rhetorical speeches, she can have the best impact with what she writes of wisdom or literature which will give her a noble position in society and maybe she will write many things helpful for the reader<sup>70</sup>.

Here the author draws her conclusions and formulates her message, addressing not only women in need of education in the true Arab values, but also women intellectuals so that, writing in Arabic on issues relevant to the cause

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<sup>66</sup> Wardah al-Yāziġī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>67</sup> On this topic see Z. Belhachmi, *Women, Education, and Science Within the Arab-Islamic Socio-Cultural History. Legacies for Social Change*, Brill, Leiden 2008, pp. 11-47.

<sup>68</sup> The issue of housework was to long remain central on the agenda of the female and feminist debate. A few years later, in 1922, the Syrian-Lebanese intellectual Mayy Ziyādah (1886-1941), among other things biographer of Wardah al-Yāziġī (see below), gave a lecture on the issue, entitled “Ġāyat al-ḥayāh” (The Purpose of Life). Targeting a readership of middle and upper-class women much like that of al-Yāziġī, the text extols domestic work, looking after children and running the household as expressions of women's self-fulfilment. It was subsequently included in a book: Mayy Ziyadah, *Ġāyat al-ḥayāh*, Mu'assasat Nawfal, Bayrūt 1980, pp. 24-25 (or. ed. 1921). See also M. Masullo, *Mayy Ziyāda (1883-1941) tra femminismo e nazionalismo*, in D. Poli, (ed.), *In Limine. Frontiere e integrazioni*, Il Calamo, Roma 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Wardah al-Yāziġī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., p. 112.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

of women, they may contribute to the (re-)education of women<sup>71</sup>. As al-Yāziḡī points out, the fundamental problem of her times is the lack of significant women writers comparable with those discussed in her essay. In conclusion, she calls on established or aspiring women writers «not to be ashamed of writing in Arabic; [...] journals and magazines should accept every single article of theirs. If their efforts should fail to have the expected effect or to receive the right consideration, the writers will in any case have done their best. May God lead them on the right path»<sup>72</sup>.

To sum up al-Yāziḡī's essay with some general remarks, we may note that the first clear criterion for selection lies in the fact that all the women chosen for their exemplarity are poets. The exclusion of women of the past famed for their rank or great qualities such as – to give but one example – the wife of the Prophet 'Ā'īshah bint Abī Bakr, much cited in biographical dictionaries, bears out the choice to favour the educational aspect aiming at the use of the Arabic language. Moreover, we may conjecture that this selection of models amounts to a sort of autobiographical projection<sup>73</sup>, as elucidated by Marilyn Booth:

Biography is always autobiography, [...] when the authorial "I" links the act of writing biography to individual and collective identity, as later feminist scholars have insisted. Feminists have been at the forefront of scholarship on auto/biography that privileges this interweaving of lives. Perhaps women who wrote of "Famous Women" were contemplating prospective autobiographies for their futures and those of their friends, pupils, and daughters. To write biography meant to focus on real women's struggles, with the interplay of discursive and extratextual elements that most struggles entertain<sup>74</sup>.

The study by Wardah al-Yāziḡī is much shorter than Zaynāb Fawwāz's, and thus offers rather fewer exemplary cases. Nevertheless, it is an essay of great intellectual interest, with a significant theoretical framework. Like al-Fawwāz, Wardah al-Yāziḡī disregards the tradition of the classical biographical sketches where much space is devoted to details regarding the figures' lineages. She focuses attention solely on women poets, placing them at the centre of the cultural scene and bringing out their exemplary qualities. Unlike al-Fawwāz, however, al-Yāziḡī devotes an equal amount of room to general theoretical reflections. Moreover, unlike *al-Durr al-mantūr*, al-Yāziḡī

<sup>71</sup> On the topic of female education between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries see C. Mayeur-Jaouen, *Feminine or Masculine adab? Education, Etiquette, and Ethics in Egypt in the 1900s–1920s*, in C. Mayeur-Jaouen (ed.), *Adab and Modernity: a «Civilising Process»?*, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 405–434.

<sup>72</sup> Wardah al-Yāziḡī, *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, cit., pp. 112–113.

<sup>73</sup> For an analysis on the use of the first person in the pre-modern biographical genre see J. Bray, *Literary Approaches to Medieval and Early Modern Arabic Biography*, in "Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society", 20, 3 (2010), pp.1–17.

<sup>74</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, cit., pp. xvi–xvii.

denies any exemplarity of Western women. She does not, however, demonise them but, rather, acknowledges their merits as scholars and scientists, tracing their Arab counterparts and claiming chronological and qualitative supremacy. The analytical categories of Western and indigenous values and thought are put into a rather political approach, which dichotomises them<sup>75</sup>. As a woman of her time, al-Yāziğī is still far from understanding the dynamics of colonial cultural hybridization, and chooses to position herself within the range of intellectuals who claim a self-sufficient cultural development of the Nation, in a gendered perspective which makes her a pioneer of feminists' demands.

Ten years after *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, al-Yāziğī returned to the subject of exemplary women with an article devoted to five Arab-Andalusian women poets in the magazine "Fatāt al-Šarq"<sup>76</sup>. Here, she returns to and elaborates upon the argumentation of *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*, focusing on the exemplarity of classical figures. Once again, we find a specific rhetorical emphasis on the glorious Arab past and in particular on the pre-Islamic period: the *ğāhiliyyah* is idealised as a period when men were better because they lived absorbed in a poetic context. In this essay, as Marilyn Booth observes, the author «exemplifies a tension between the narrative demands of the biographical notice or sketch on the one hand and the rhetorical demands of exemplarity on the other»<sup>77</sup>, thus returning to the approach of *al-Mar'ah al-šarqiyyah*.

A point worth stressing is that Wardah al-Yāziğī herself became a reference model for women and, in an interplay of literary mirrors, the protagonist of several biographical profiles. While still alive, she was the subject of an article by Hind Nawfal, who praised not only her poetic qualities but also her exemplary lifestyle devoted to her family. Thus, the ideal dominance of domesticity is evoked to balance the outward-looking literary activity, seen as an arena of competition: «enough glory for her, a woman who has surpassed men and competed equally with Western women in the noblest of arenas»<sup>78</sup>. A few years later, another biography, using a traditional approach, wished Wardah al-Yāziğī a long life because she still had much to offer women with her profound knowledge of literature and life<sup>79</sup>.

‘Ā’iṣah Taymūr included al-Yāziğī among her models of «veiled women who were prominent poets», stressing the affinity with herself thanks to cultured, forward-thinking fathers who allowed their daughters to have a

<sup>75</sup> See Nadje al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East. The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 58-59.

<sup>76</sup> Wardah al-Yāziğī, *Šahīrāt al-nisā’* (Famous Women), in "Fatāt al-Šarq", 10, 6 (1916), pp. 201-206.

<sup>77</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes be Multiplied*, cit., pp. 97-98.

<sup>78</sup> Hind Nawfal, *Wardat al-‘Arab* (The Arabs' Rose), in "al-Fatāh", 1, 7 (1893), pp. 302-305.

<sup>79</sup> *al-Sayyidah Wardah al-Yāziğī* (Mrs. Wardah al-Yāziğī), in "Fatāt al-Šarq", 2, 1 (1907), p. 7.



thorough education. Significantly enough, Taymūr does not take their different religious background into account, since she also believes that most important link lies in the Arabic language<sup>80</sup>.

A few years after the death of Wardah al-Yāziḡī, the Syrian-Lebanese intellectual Mayy Ziyādah<sup>81</sup> devoted a biographical study to her. Originally conceived as a lecture for the Young Women's Christian Association of Cairo in 1924, it was published in instalments in the magazine "al-Muqtaṭaf"<sup>82</sup> in the same year, and immediately became a book in its own right. This text belongs to a trilogy which Mayy Ziyādah devoted to the most significant women of her time, and is preceded by texts on 'Ā'īshah Taymūr<sup>83</sup> and the Egyptian Islamic feminist Bāḥiṭat al-Bādiyah (1886-1918)<sup>84</sup>. The alignment of these three figures represents an important step forward in the genre of the biographies of women, vindicating a political approach with feminist lean-

<sup>80</sup> M.F. Hatem, *The Life and Works of 'A'isha Taymur*, cit., pp. 155-156.

<sup>81</sup> The daughter of a leading Syrian Catholic publisher, she moved at a young age from Nazareth to Cairo, where she completed her studies. A brilliant essayist, prolific writer, translator from various languages and a poetess associated with the innovations introduced by Ġubrān, she also held a literary salon open – for the first time – to both men and women. An outstanding figure of the *Nahḍah*, she suffered the consequences of the end of that historical phase, becoming increasingly isolated although she continued writing to her last days. For further details, see I. Camera d'Afflito, *Mayy Ziyadeh alla ricerca di una patria e della libertà*, in "Oriente Moderno", 64/65 (1985), pp. 203-214; Salmā al-Ḥaffār al-Kuzbārī, *Mayy wa ma'sāt al-nubūḡ*, Mu'assasat Nawfal, Bayrūt 1987.

<sup>82</sup> Directed by Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf (1852-1927), a journalist who made biographies of exemplary women popular beyond the limits of Egypt's female press. P. Starkey, *Ṣarrūf. Ya'qūb*, in *EAL*, p. 693. On the magazine "al-Muqtaṭaf", fundamental for the popularisation of science, see M. Avino, *L'Occidente nella cultura araba. Dal 1876 al 1935*, Jouvence, Roma 2002, pp. 29-32, 143-148.

<sup>83</sup> Ziyādah stresses her prominent role as a complete intellectual and not only as "woman writer", emphasising her pioneering efforts in favour of women's rights several years before Qāsim Amīn. Mayy Ziyādah, *'Ā'īshah Taymur; Ṣā'irah al-ṭalī'ah*, Mu'assasat Nawfal, Bayrūt 1983 (or. ed. 1921), p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Pen name of Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif; daughter of an Islamic intellectual, she was the first Egyptian to graduate from a public primary school, and among the first of the country's teachers. She lived in Cairo and in the oasis of Fayyūm. She was also a school inspector. A troubled arranged marriage stimulated her interest in the contradictions and limits of the female condition, expressed in the two volumes *al-Nisā'īyyāt* (1925). Radwa Ashour, Ferial J. Ghazoul, Hasna Reda-Mekhdashi (eds.), *Arab Women Writers. A Critical reference Guide 1873-1999*, translated by M. McClure, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2008, p. 452. Mayy Ziyādah highlights her skill in reconciling tradition with the need for reforms, translating her experience as a practising Muslim into a broader dimension and analysing the differences in thought between her and Qāsim Amīn. Mayy Ziyādah, *Bāḥiṭat al-Bādiyah. Baḥṭ intiqādī* (Bāḥiṭat al-Bādiyah. A Critical Research), Maṭba'at al-Muqtaṭaf, al-Qāhirah 1920.

ings since, for the first time, models were chosen on the basis of their awareness of rigid gender limitations, which they overcame through writing, activism and work. Despite the structural differences, the three essays pursue common aims, including a focus on the connection between life experience and intellectual elaboration, and thus between biography and literature. They also dwell on the indissoluble link between public and private, the artistic channels along which personal experience reaches out to the world, the importance of the three intellectuals as pioneers and promoters of a new awareness, and the role played by what could be defined as “alienation” arising from the dynamics between personal desires and social tensions<sup>85</sup>.

According to Mayy Ziyādah, the latter aspect was less obvious in the case of Wardah al-Yāziğī, since rigid poetic conventions and the pressures of the family model limited her freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the author notes, al-Yāziğī succeeded in formulating strategies to elude certain constraints, such as in the case of a poem entitled *Risālah* (Letter), apparently addressed to a female friend. According to Ziyādah, it was written for a man, «conforming to society’s ruling that forced women to conceal their feelings, even in poetry»<sup>86</sup>. At the same time, the pursuit of contacts with other women poets and scholars through “letters” in poetic form reveals the aim to cooperate with other intellectual women<sup>87</sup> according to a perspective ascribable to a pre-feminism crucial for the later developments in women’s emancipation.

In conclusion, in her twofold role as author and subject of biographies, Wardah al-Yāziğī shows how the stories of women’s lives would serve an exemplary function that was more narrowly defined and yet, in changing circumstances, increasingly broad in its view of what contemporary Arab women were doing<sup>88</sup>. Significantly, when her death was announced in the magazine “Fatāt al-Šarq”, she was described, like the women poets she had written about, as «the best model for the excellent and learned Eastern woman»<sup>89</sup>.

<sup>85</sup> M. Booth, *Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada’s Studies of Three Women’s Lives*, in “Journal of Women’s History”, 3, 2 (1991), pp 38-64.

<sup>86</sup> Mayy Ziyādah, *Wardah al-Yāziğī*, Mu’assasat Nawfal, Bayrūt 1980 (or. ed. 1924), p. 35. The poem in question is in al-Yāziğī, *Hadīqat al-ward*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> Worthy of mention among these are some poems addressed to ‘Ā’iṣah Taymur and Wardah al-Turk (1797-?). al-Yāziğī, *Hadīqat al-ward*, cit., p. 6, 66-67. The poem for Wardah al-Turk is translated and analysed in M. Badran, M. Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 2004, pp. 21-22.

<sup>88</sup> M. Booth, *May Her Likes be Multiplied*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>89</sup> *Wardah al-Yāziğī*, in “Mağallat al-sayyidāt” (Ladies’ Review), 5, 5 (1924), p. 308.