LATĨFA AL-ZAYYÂT AND THE QUEST FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN EGYPT

Sanidul Islam*

Abstract: Laṭīfa al-Zayyât is an author, critic, social activist, and a well-known feminist in Egypt. She is recognized for her significant contribution to contemporary Arabic writing and the Egyptian feminist movement. Her writing extensively addresses social justice, nationalism, gender inequality, and women's liberation, establishing her as a significant personality in the 20th-century literary and cultural scene. This research paper explores the biography of Al-Zayyât, her literary accomplishments, and the socio-political environments that shaped her compositions. The study examines the novel's lasting importance in modern literature and its significant influence on Arab feminist discourse, focusing on her seminal work "Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ (The Open Door)." The research sheds insight into al-Zayyât's noteworthy contributions to the struggle for women's freedom in Egypt and her enduring impact on the Arab world by analyzing her narrative style and thematic concerns.

Introduction

Laṭīfa al-Zayyât is a distinguished Egyptian novelist and political activist of the second half of the 20th century. She was among the first women writers of novels to use a feminine voice to represent the political and social context in which she found herself. She parallels women's emancipation and the struggle for national independence. By placing her writings in the larger Egyptian socio-political framework of the 20th century, the research emphasizes Al-Zayyât's influence on modern Arab philosophy and the ongoing fight for women's emancipation. This study aims to shed light on the literary legacy of Al-Zayyât by analyzing her narrative strategies and thematic concerns in depth.

I. A Brief Review of Laṭīfa al-Zayyât's Life

The renowned author Al-Zayyât was born in Damietta, Egypt, a seaside city, on August 8, 1923. (Al-Zayyât, 2016, 12) Her birth occurred four years following the 1919 Egyptian Revolution. (Salam, 2012, 154) She was born and grew up in a middle-class family. Her father worked in a municipal council. She was raised at home in Damietta when she was six. At an early age, she traveled around Egypt for her father's job until his passing.

When Laṭīfa al-Zayyât was three years old, she enrolled in Damietta's kindergarten. After that, Mansoura informed her that she had completed her elementary schooling at Mansura. She advanced from the elementary to the secondary school levels in Assiut. She completed her secondary education at Al-Saniya Secondary School in Cairo. After finishing secondary school, she enrolled in the Faculty of Arts in Cairo in 1942. A.D. in 1946 A.D., she earned a B. A. in English Language and Literature. From an early age, she enjoyed studying at the university. In 1957 A.D., she received her Ph.D. in Literature from Cairo University in the Faculty of Arts. (Al-Zayyât. 2016b. 14)

When Al-Zayyât was twelve years old, her father passed away, and the same year, her grandmother also passed away. She had one sister named Safiya and two brothers named Muhammad and Abdel Fattah. Her life completely changed once her father passed away, and she moved to Cairo to live with her relatives. Her brothers Muhammad studied at the

* Dr. SANIDUL ISLAM, Guest Faculty, Mangaldai College, Assam, India. Email: sanidul873@gmail.com

Faculty of Law and Abdel Fattah at the Faculty of Agriculture. Al-Zayyât led a limited life and faced many challenges, but she never wavered from her beliefs or strong positions in her life's many spheres. She also played a significant role in the political and scientific communities as a writer, critic, fighter, and revolutionary.

Al-Zayyât firmly engaged in the national struggle after enrolling at the Egyptian University in 1942. (Al-Sahhâr, 1999, 168) She was selected to be the secretary of the National Student group, which in 1946 spearheaded the Egyptian people's fight against reaction and colonialism in tandem with the group known as "The National Workers." From an early age, Al-Zayyât was a woman of virtue. She was very advantageous and capable of creativity and coordination. She was the first woman to work as a professional in Egypt, making her an icon of both Arab and national culture. She had a record of accomplishment and success in every endeavor she undertook, and while attending the university, she produced many literary works.

As an Egyptian activist, Al-Zayyât rose to fame for her artistic creations. Throughout her engagement and marriage, she spoke her opinions. Marxist Al-Zayyât was a sentimental one. She saw marriage in a different light. She declined to utilise a family friend or matchmaker, which is the customary approach to marriage. Her marriage to "Abdul Hamid Abdul Ghani," better known as "Abdul Hamid Al-Katib," was short-lived. He was by no means a Marxist. He was in the mosque day and night for the most of his life. His efforts were connected to mosques because he was abiding by God's precepts. He was connected to the Sayyida Nafisa Mosque, also known as the "Zaynab Mosque." (Al-Muta'i, 1423-2003, 124)

Al-Zayyât remarried Ahmad Shukri Salem after divorcing her first husband, Abdul Hamid al-Katib, after a disagreement. Ahmed Salim was a doctor by profession.(Ibid., 125) She later divorced Shukri Salem and married Dr. Rashid Rushdi al-Yamini for the third time. Rashad Rushdi was a university professor and cultural adviser to President Anwar Sadat. She eventually divorced him also and spent the rest of her life alone.

Al-Zayyât has been involved in political activities since she was a university student. She was first exposed to the student movement in the 1940s. 1946 she joined the National Committee for Student Workers as general secretary. (Abu Auf, 2014, 372-373) The committee then spearheaded the Egyptian people's resistance movement against the British occupation. Al-Zayyât joined the Marxist National Committee when Saad Zahran, a representative of Marxist organizations, withdrew from the committee. Zayyat sought to uplift female students in the national uprising. Her tenure on the committee was restricted, as it was only operational for a brief period following its merger, with the committee comprising representatives and students. The Supreme National Committee for Students and Workers was formed with representatives from Marxist groups, and Ismail Siddiqui dissolved it six months later. Marxist views greatly inspired Al-Zayyât, and it has been evident that she contributed significantly to Marxism until she founded the Supreme National Committee for Students and Workers.

In addition to being a writer, Al-Zayyât was also an activist and an artist, and he played a significant role in many of the political developments in Egypt at the time. She had a considerable influence on Egyptian women's roles in society as well. She took part in protests against Egypt's British occupation. Her internalization of Marxist principles deepened throughout her time at Cairo University, and in 1946, she was elected general secretary of the National Committee for Students and Workers. Marxism was a part of her political actions, and she was arrested more than twice. [1]

[1] *Sawt al-Balad*, Titled by Laṭīfa al-Zayyât, Cairo book fair, January 27, 2013 www.baladnews.com 15/08/2020. *Al Balad* radio station is playing the latest Arabic and English releases and hits including up to date news, juicy segments related to Al Balad newspaper, Gala and Layalina latest

II. Laṭīfa al-Zayyât as a Feminist

Laṭīfa al-Zayyât was a prolific feminist from Egypt whose writings greatly impacted how women were discussed in the Arab world. Her books address women's rights, gender inequality, and women's challenges in patriarchal societies. Through her books and articles, Al-Zayyât tackled the intersection of gender, class, and national identity, shedding attention on the conditions faced by women in Egypt. Her writings explored topics including women's oppression, cultural expectations, and the pursuit of personal liberation. She attempted to increase awareness of the potential for women's freedom through education and self-awareness. She looked at the political, social, and economic facets of women's marginalization in Egypt and stressed the need for significant changes to achieve gender equality. Al-Zayyat's works strongly emphasize the importance of women's financial stability and education as catalysts for societal change and the advancement of women's rights. (Abu Auf, 2014, 372-373)

In her feminist writings, Al-Zayyât stressed the importance of challenging patriarchal structures and changing cultural perceptions of gender roles. She argued that women should actively shape their destiny instead of being limited to traditional domestic duties. Her publications advocated for women's rights to work, education, and civic participation.

Al-Zayyât's feminist writings had a significant influence outside her works. She had a substantial role in establishing the Egyptian Women's Union, a well-known feminist organization that spearheaded the advancement of women's rights in Egypt. Future generations of feminist activists and intellectuals will find their foundation in the works of Al-Zayyât, whose writings still impact and stimulate contemporary feminist conversation in the Arab world.

Al-Zayyât presented women as multifaceted individuals with ambitions, dreams, and desires that transcend traditional gender norms. Her writings challenged the notion that a woman's worth is chiefly determined by her roles as a wife and mother. In addition to being a writer, Al-Zayyât was a strong advocate for women's rights. She participated in several feminist groups and ran campaigns in Egypt to advance women's rights. Her work "*Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*" (*The Open Door*) mirrored her activism and social reform passion. Al-Zayyât violated social conventions and regularly explored taboo issues in her works. She fearlessly addressed topics such as female sexuality, the right to choose, and the unjust expectations that are put on women in terms of romance and relationships. (Al-Zayyât, 1990, 54)

Al-Zayyât occupied a significant place in both literary and scientific feminist literature. In the realm of culture and literature, she successfully made a name for herself and expressed her point of view. The author disliked the idea that male and female writers are separate from one another since society treats women's literary creations with less respect, just as it treats them in real life. Al-Zayyât discovered during her undergraduate studies how books may mirror people's lives. Her writing gained more significance as a result. She also saw that writers of the period were not as concerned with women's issues as other subjects. "*Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*," her magnum opus novel, was thus released roughly three years following her doctorate.

Al-Zayyât, a prominent female voice and outstanding novelist, describes how she fought for women's liberation in her notable novel "*Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*. This novel is about all the freedoms necessary for women to live socially. The novel's main protagonist, Layla, attempts to free women from the bondage of male-dominated society. Layla has

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issues' contents. AL Balad Radio Station could be reachable on both frequencies: 106.5 & 106.9 MHz.

been imprisoned in the house since she grew up or the day after her first period. After coming off her first menstruation, her father said as follows:

> Layla, now you have to know that you are grown up. From now you cannot go outside without permission. You just have to go to school from home and straight home from school. And turning his sight on her brother Mahmoud and said, "I don't want to see any novels or girlie magazines at home. If you want to read, you have to read at school. And from today onwards, it is forbidden to bring any boyfriends at home. (Ibid.. 31-32)

From Al-Zayyât's father's speech, it is easy to know how women's freedom was brutally violated. Not only that, women were not even given any liberty in dressing. In addition, women were not free to choose their life partners, take higher education, participate in social meetings, join the job sector, go to the market alone, etc. Women were even prevented from participating in the Egyptian Independence movement. When Layla wanted to participate in the freedom movement, she was told by the headmistress of her school that women's jobs were only motherhood. Then Layla expressed her dissatisfaction and said as follows:

> Our respected headmistress says that women belong to the home and men to the struggle. I want to say that in 1919 when the British killed Egyptians they did not distinguish between women and men. They did not distinguish between men and women even when they took away their freedom. And when they plundered the livelihood of so many Egyptians, they did not stop to think whether it belonged to men or women. (Ibid., 57-58)

Al-Zayyât has worked for women's fundamental freedom in her entire life. She highlights women's various issues in a patriarchal society through her writings. She has tried to resolve women's problems through her writings and worked for women's liberation by creating and participating in various women's organizations and collaborating with governmental and non-governmental organizations. Al-Zayyât was appointed to the UNESCO Committee for Translation and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. She used these positions to promote education, culture, and women's rights worldwide. In addition to her literary work, Al-Zayyât was a vocal advocate for women's rights in Egypt and the Arab world. She was an active member of feminist organizations and worked to promote gender equality through her writing and public speeches. (Campbell, 1996, 676-677) She showed a keen interest in women's affairs and the connection of the women's cause to society's cause. She edited a weekly chapter on women's affairs in "*Hawa*" magazine from 1965 AD to 1968 AD. She co-founded the Egyptian Women's Union in 1974. Al-Zayyât Participated in the 1979 Egyptian Women's Conference and advocated for women's rights and reforms. (Al-Zayyât, 1994, 92, 94 &.106) She was a supporter of the 1981 Egyptian Women's Day and promoted women's empowerment and solidarity. (Abu Auf, 2014, 371)

Conclusion

In the novel *Al-Bab al-Maftūḥ* (*The Open Door*) by Laṭīfa al-Zayyât, Layla is viewed as a representation of resistance against the constraints of the conventional social structure. She detested women, gave them equal status, forbade them from acting on their desires, and worked to eliminate them from society. She was a fierce opponent of gender inequity. The book demonstrates how Layla is fighting for her liberation and taking an equal part in the nation's freedom movement alongside men. Al-Zayyat's books emphasized the disparities women faced in various domains, including marriage, politics, the job, and education. She debunked misconceptions regarding women's primary responsibilities as

moms and spouses and their limited educational opportunities. The novels also examine the cultural and societal norms that uphold gender inequity and restrict women's freedom. Gender equality was a topic that Al-Zayyât addressed in her books, demonstrating her commitment to fighting for women's rights and combating gender inequality. With her engrossing narrative and nuanced character development, she pushed readers to consider social norms and structures that uphold injustice and to envision a time where gender balance and justice are the norm.

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