

A CRITICAL STUDY  
OF THE WORKS OF  
NAWAL EL SAADAWI,  
EGYPTIAN WRITER AND  
ACTIVIST

BY DIANA ROYER



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For Carl  
and, as always,  
in memory of Carrie



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## **FOREWORD**

Throughout the fiction and nonfiction of Nawal El Saadawi--indeed, throughout her life--there is a persistent set of ideals and a passion that speak so strongly that I was compelled to write this book. From the first short story I read by her when teaching at the American University in Cairo over ten years ago to hearing her tell a packed room of Arab and American women and men in Chicago, "Fighting for more justice, more freedom, and more love--that is my identity!", I have felt lucky to have encountered this impressive woman. And so, although I work from the English translations of her texts, which are admittedly different from their Arabic originals, I feel her words should reach as many people as possible. Practically, that means they must be translated into and be written about in languages other than Arabic. Many of her books are available to readers of English, and it is to those readers that I hope my study will be of use.



## NAWAL EL SAADAWI IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Thoughtful scholars from many disciplines agree that this millennium is characterized by a monumental transformation of human existence on our planet. Many call this transformation globalization. Globalization has political, economic, and cultural dimensions and significant relevance in the day-to-day lives of individual people, as well as groups, all over the planet.

Some scholars hold a view of “cautious optimism” about the future of people’s lives as a result of globalization. In his book, *Global Trends 2005: An Owner’s Manual for the Next Decade*, Michael J. Mazarr acknowledges our time as “the knowledge era” and holds that “the fundamental thrust of many of the trends of the knowledge era runs in the direction of freedom, prosperity, empowerment, and ecological health” (9). Along with multinational corporations, international loans, worldwide investment, and inclusive summits come increases in education, attention to human rights, broad health-care initiatives, and mobility. Mazarr’s caution is based on an understanding of the contradictory forces of human history: simultaneous to movements in the direction of globalization, we witness in the news every day a powerful surge of “tribal” energy, fierce loyalties to ethnic and local cultures.

Samuel Huntington’s less optimistic view is clear from the title of his book, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*. Huntington’s view is based on his perception that “For peoples seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world’s major civilizations” (20). Where Mazarr focuses attention on the trends that seem to drive change across national boundaries, Huntington calls upon Adda B. Bozeman to stress the importance of the “values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance” (qtd. in Huntington, 41).

Unlike these scholars, Nawal El Saadawi bases her views in moving personal stories that dramatize these same trends and conflicts. Her life, her work, and her voice, like that of novelist Vaclav Havel, can be seen as a medium for more nuanced understanding of the effects of the paradoxical forces of globalization on individual lives and on prospects for the future. In a 1994 speech, Havel searches for “the creation of a new model of coexistence among the various cultures, peoples, races and religious spheres” but recognizes the futility of such efforts “if they do not grow out of . . . generally held values” (614). A firm believer in the benefits of democracy, Havel courageously states that “The idea of human rights and freedoms must be an integral part of any meaningful world order. Yet I think it must be anchored in a different place, and in a different way, than has been the case so far” (614). El Saadawi’s training and practice as a medical doctor, as well as her time in “exile” in the West, anchor her views in a humanism that pierces the veneer of exploitative practices in several cultures. If globalization means the spread of Western culture, values, and ideas solely, El Saadawi speaks against it: “I’m against what they call globalization [that] means domination, the powerful dominate the weak, and they call that globalization” (Personal Interview).

In the broad context of the forces, trends, conflicts, and values of an increasingly global world, Diana Royer examines the work of Nawal El Saadawi through the full prism of Egyptian culture, literary traditions, and aesthetic norms. El Saadawi is a significant figure for study in English-speaking countries for a nexus of experience and circumstances. Her own journey of childhood experiences, medical education, activism, imprisonment, and continuing efforts to bring women’s voices to public attention is an important window into women’s lives in modern day Egypt. Her fiction helps Western readers engage emotionally with themes and issues—especially those relevant to the lives of children and women—that may not be well represented by other media of communication. Reading El Saadawi in the context of the history of Arab women’s feminism, humanism, and activism is an opportunity to dispel some of the stereotypes based on a Eurocentric view of Anglo-

Anglo-American feminism as the model for worldwide feminism. The broader history of U.S. and European involvement in the politics and nationalisms of the Middle East also indicates a need for English-speakers to gain deeper understanding of the culture of the region, particularly as related to the least empowered, children, women, the elderly, ill, and disabled. Fortunately for us, El Saadawi's perspective is informed by her experience as a physician, her past government positions, and her travel outside of Egypt.

The significance of Royer's presentation of El Saadawi to English-speaking readers is three-fold. First, she introduces new readers to the substance of a major figure of contemporary Egyptian literary and social culture. El Saadawi cannot be marginalized by the label of feminism when her work and life is so clearly that of a humanist. Secondly, Royer provides a substantial context of what typical Egyptian readers would know by virtue of living within the culture to allow for non-Egyptian readers to comprehend the stories. And thirdly, Royer offers interpretation of the novels that goes beyond mere cultural understanding to reveal patterns of social construction of gender. This view should encourage readers from any culture to reflect upon their own narratives, societal expectations, and assumptions. Through this book, students and scholars gain from Royer's knowledge of the novels and Egyptian cultural contexts, and also from her probing of El Saadawi's views on the larger context of globalization. El Saadawi and Royer challenge readers to seek out exploitative practices everywhere. My own students found *Woman at Point Zero* unbelievably foreign until they were asked to view *Thelma and Louise* (which seemed so "American") in the same unit. They discovered that the juxtaposition illuminated both experiences and deepened their empathy for characters in both cultures. Diana Royer's study of Nawal El Saadawi is a resource for deepening our understanding of another culture, for recommitment to humanistic values on a global scale, and for self-examination.

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quote from *The Circling Song*, *God Dies by the Nile*, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, “Introduction” to *Women of the Arab World: the Coming Challenge*, “The Political Challenges Facing Arab Women at the End of the 20th Century,” *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, and *Woman at Point Zero*.

## INTRODUCTION

Nawal El Saadawi's life has been an ongoing search for resolutions to problematic issues of personal and societal integrity. Now, more than ever, her voice and wisdom are needed not only in her homeland of Egypt but the rest of the world.

I offer this book because there are few critical works in English on El Saadawi, while at the same time English translations of her novels and nonfiction are increasing. Of the two book-length studies on El Saadawi published before this one, undeniably Fedwa Malti-Douglas's *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (1995) is the seminal text. In addition to correcting the misinformation that has been published about El Saadawi (which ranges from her birth date to medical specialization to the translators of her books), Malti-Douglas introduces the nebulous position the writer has been allotted by Arab critics. Her shorter publications on El Saadawi are useful as well: "Writing Nawal El Saadawi" in *Feminism Beside Itself* (1995), chapters of *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (1991), the multi-book assessment in the *American Book Review* titled "An Egyptian Iconoclast: Nawal el-Saadawi and Feminist Fiction" (1989), and an interview conducted along with Allen Douglas, "Reflections of a Feminist" (recorded 1986, published 1990).

Other short pieces bring a different focus to El Saadawi scholarship. Joseph T. Zeidan devotes two sections of his *Arab Women Novelists* (1995) to the political aspects of El Saadawi's work: "Militant Fiction" and "A Link Between Personal and National Identity." Ramzis Saiti compares El Saadawi's situation to that of Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris in his article "Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El-Saadawi" (1994), deciding that the harsh criticism and banning of her books are greater trials than the other authors have undergone.

The other book-length study falls among the condemnations of El Saadawi's writing. Georges Tarabishi's notorious *Woman Against Her Sex: A Critique of Nawal el-Saadawi* (originally published in Beirut in 1984 and in English in 1988) is a Freudian analysis that associates the author with her heroines and calls all the heroines neurotic for rejecting femininity, to borrow El Saadawi's summation of Tarabishi's approach. Her response to his study, published in the English edition, questions his highly selective choosing of only those texts that support his theories.

Another negative response comes in "Intentions and Realisation in the Narratives of Nawal El-Saadawi" (1989) when Sabry Hafez denigrates El Saadawi's talents as a writer and questions whether her "fame" (Hafez uses the term seriously) in the West is because she upholds stereotypes about Arabs and repeats traditional dogma about women's status (189). He accuses El Saadawi of catering to a Western reading audience (something Hafez himself could be taken to task for with his references to Marshall McLuhan, Bakhtin, and Dostoyevsky) and of letting "a personal vendetta" (which Hafez attributes to her imprisonment under Sadat) mar her writing (194). Primarily, Hafez objects to El Saadawi's use of the novel for political criticism since he deems her a "bad" novelist (194).

Even within circles of Arab feminism El Saadawi is responded to at times with ambivalence or even hostility. Malti-Douglas notes that her work on El Saadawi has led to encounters with "supposed feminists" who detest the idea of Arab feminism and believe El Saadawi "should be silenced" ("Writing" 284, 283). Saiti, commenting on the absence of Arab critical response to El Saadawi's work, speculates that they may be ignored in hopes they will be forgotten. El Saadawi herself has written, "A writer cannot mount to the pinnacles of literature, and stay there, unless the authorities approve" (*Memoirs* 3). Indeed, complex social and political forces around the world have resulted in the persistent exclusion of Nawal El Saadawi from mainstream academic and literary communities even as western nations like the United States perpetuate the belief that cultural boundaries and intolerance are disappearing. Fame, it seems, is reserved for those who adopt western

values and lifestyles, even if they denounce them. El Saadawi has referred to this as the “neo-colonialist star system,” a system that favors authors who live in the west, “[quote] occidental post-modernists from Foucault to Derrida,” and remain aloof from the people and struggles they purport to represent (“Dissidence” 173).

One reason foreign writers such as El Saadawi are not widely known or read in the United States is linked to what amounts to our hypocrisy. Long touting that equality exists among our citizens, in actuality equality remains a myth, and a dangerous one because it precludes the discussion of inequities that would be essential as a first step toward true equality. A hypocritical attitude lies behind our applause of multiculturalism too. We Americans like to see ourselves as genuinely accepting (“embracing,” to use the popular term) that which is not just like us, whether it be a culture, religion, sexual orientation, or whatever. But for a myriad of reasons--time constraints, lack of accurate and sufficient information, even a wavering conviction of the usefulness of engaging with unfamiliar people and activities--we keep our relationship with “others” on a superficial level. From my perspective as a teacher, even those who sincerely wish to engage in multiculturalism have to deal with an often insufficient exposure to and training in the teaching of texts and concepts of non-dominant cultures. Those of us who went through the educational system before multicultural texts were included in the curriculum even on a small level struggle to learn about them on our own, and we encounter incorrect information, make misguided interpretations, even unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes. At times we meet students who resent having multiculturalism “forced” upon them. Their belief in the myth of equality leads them to adopt this stance and, ironically, increases racial tension, even to the point of promoting open hostility.

Outside the classroom, multiculturalism has progressed little beyond its use as a marketing strategy: a line of greeting cards with “interpretations” of sentiments and art from other cultures, mall shops featuring imported decorative items and comestibles, mail order catalogs offering handicrafts from around the world. The message seems to be that commodities are the first step toward cultural knowledge

and true understanding. Even literature and music delivered in the classroom could be seen as the marketing and exploitation of a culture. For example, all major textbook publishers offer multicultural readers for first-year college composition courses; I have even seen an El Saadawi short story in one. But unless these books also offer the cultural context apparatus by which students and teachers alike may engage with the texts on their own terms (and most books do not delve into the social, political, economic, religious, gender, etcetera issues), the experience will be reduced to an unsatisfying and potentially estranging one of readers noting superficial similarities to and differences from their own lives.

After consumption, the next step toward understanding other cultures is left unclear. I see little going on beyond role playing. So we must ask, at what point does consuming evolve into coopting? The United States has already absorbed and transformed American Indian cultures to the point of extinction; could this occur with world cultures? While such a thought seems preposterous, it appears that already the U. S. marketing of items from other countries has led to our devaluation of their cultures. Or, more specifically, to our placing value on them only in terms of what we can gain from them--whether on a small, aesthetic level (the purchase of a handcrafted necklace) or a larger, economic one (the purchase of oil). Perhaps major capitalistic forces will create a global community without borders or differences as aspects of cultures are adopted, adapted, absorbed. Or perhaps resistance to such a trend will increase divisions between countries and cultures.

The misperception that “multiculturalism” is changing society for the better is a dangerous one. In the United States, it permits inequities of all sorts. It has led to what Susan Faludi arguably terms the feminist backlash, it strengthens religious conservatism and intolerance, and it allows violence against minorities, gays, the women who obtain abortions and the doctors who perform them. In some countries, such as El Saadawi’s Egypt, religious fundamentalism has an extremist faction that can be linked to terrorism, with the result that choices not just for women, but for men too, are diminished. Now is the time to reinvigorate not only a flagging

feminism, but a waning *humanism* around the world. Nawal El Saadawi's work can help us do that. Her writing and her life are dedicated to education, equitable relations between people, and human decency and kindness.

The second point under the Arab Women Solidarity Association (an organization El Saadawi founded) article "Who are We?" that appeared in every issue of the Association's journal *Nun (Health)* promotes a thoughtful approach to rethinking society :

We are against the imitation of tradition. We study our heritage with critical minds. We take the positive and leave the negative. We study the contemporary situation domestically and internationally.

We are not afraid of other Eastern and Western cultures. We study them with critical minds and profit from them without either blind imitation or blind rejection. All cultures and civilizations are mutually intertwined.<sup>1</sup>

I wish this book to illustrate how these and other ideas for the renewal of society run through El Saadawi's writing. As a companion for reading her fiction and nonfiction, this volume contextualizes her work by taking into consideration the complexities of Egyptian society today.

Chapter One, "Modern Egypt," begins with a brief sketch of El Saadawi's life and work and then discusses issues of Islam and fundamentalism (particularly the increase in fundamentalism in Egypt over the past ten years), assessing various situations and problems of modern Egyptian women, and discussing El Saadawi's location within these issues. Chapter Two, "Ancient Egypt," focuses on her nonfictional study, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, to explain her thoughts on the changing of women's status over time. I set El Saadawi's views within the recent scholarly debate over the status of women in ancient Egypt and caution us to overcome the biases of our own culture, time period, educational training, and so on when interpreting ancient cultures. Lastly, the myth of Isis is retold as prelude to analyzing El Saadawi's fiction in subsequent chapters.

Background from the opening chapters is applied in Chapter Three, “Isis as Antidote: *Two Women in One*.” The heroine of *Two Women in One*, Bahiah Shaheen, is a model for what other women can become if they allow their natural attributes to surface. A medical student whose creative impulses connect her to goddesses, Bahiah struggles against her parents’ plans for her future as she questions her society’s ideas about women. The arranged marriage she is forced into is the antithesis of the relationship she freely enters with a fellow medical student. Her encounters with love and nationalism are part of an educational process other women have not undergone. Thus Bahiah, who embodies the strength and activity of a woman trying to reach her potential, is set in stark contrast to other modern women who submit to the strictures of patriarchy.

In several of her works El Saadawi draws on the techniques of oral literature. In particular, her experimental novel *The Circling Song* is a hybrid of genres that permits her to raise and explore crucial issues of gender proscription, as the fourth chapter, “Fusing Form and Content: *The Circling Song*,” shows. When a young girl becomes pregnant as a result of being raped by a family member, her mother banishes her from their village and her father sends her brother after her to kill her. Making the subjects of this honor killing twins allows El Saadawi to reveal how the genders are intertwined: the fraternal twins Hamido and Hamida have parallel experiences in Cairo that make the reader question the attributes and roles generally assigned to male and female. El Saadawi uses a children’s cyclical song as the basis for the novel’s structure and as a way to introduce the theme of physical abuse.

Additional techniques of oral literature are used in the novel that is the concern of Chapter Five, “Writing the Savage Truth: *Woman at Point Zero*.” *Woman at Point Zero* emphasizes the strength of a woman’s voice and, accordingly, the potential strength of her spirit despite the main character’s degradation by men as a prostitute. The frame narrator meets Firdaus on the eve of her execution for murdering a pimp, and the largest portion of the book is Firdaus’s life story, a first person account of how a young girl becomes destined for the career of prostitution.

Family intrigues, failed lesbian and heterosexual relationships, a truncated education, and a corporate work structure that keeps women down all contribute to the moment in which Firdaus plunges a knife into the latest man to try robbing her of her income and her freedom. Since Firdaus's circumcision contributes greatly to her formation, the chapter opens with information and discussion about female genital operations.

Chapter Six, “The Peasant as Pawn : *God Dies By the Nile*,” extends the issue of woman as commodity to look at the repercussions on society. A brief survey of the development of the Egyptian novel helps identify El Saadawi’s contributions to the genre via her artful telling of how corrupt local officials, whose only concern is that they remain in the favor of their mayor, scheme for personal gain by ruining the lives of their fellow villagers. Class issues come to the forefront as it soon becomes apparent that the poor farmer is nearly the lowest in the power structure of Egyptian society. Lower, however, are the daughters and wives of these farmers, who become pawns in the game of survival that life has become. Superstition and religious beliefs are but one element of the peasant’s makeup that the government exploits to destroy their bonds of love and trust. A gripping depiction of a shattered Egyptian society, *God Dies By the Nile* is a literary triumph.

The final chapter, “The Goddess and Global Feminism: Some Connections Between Nawal El Saadawi and Virginia Woolf,” extends El Saadawi’s relevance beyond the borders of her homeland Egypt by connecting her to the earlier British feminist writer Virginia Woolf. Despite differing cultures, the two writers share an emphasis on the renewing power of the goddess to change patriarchal societies and thus offer one basis on which to build a global feminism. I argue with those who divide eastern and western feminists or who claim feminism is a western concept that shouldn’t be applied to non-western cultures. I wish the final chapter to reveal how the work of Nawal El Saadawi transcends such attitudes to offer the hope that all feminists can work toward universal goals of equity.



## CHAPTER 1

### MODERN EGYPT

As psychiatrist, writer, and feminist, Nawal El Saadawi has devoted her life to altering a patriarchal society that oppresses both men and women. Born in the Delta village of Kafr Tahla in 1931, El Saadawi attended public schools and then Cairo University, from which she received her Doctor of Medicine. Subsequently she earned a degree from New York's Columbia University and conducted research on women and neuroses at Ains Shams University in Cairo. She has published numerous novels and short story collections, plays, memoirs, and several non-fiction studies on the situation of women in Arab society. As well she has been a Visiting Professor at several institutions, including Duke University, and has received various literary and other awards.

El Saadawi's publications and her professional activities--as founder and president of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), co-founder of the Arab Association for Human Rights, and founder of the Egyptian Women Writer's Association, to name but a few--have made her the object of scrutiny by the Egyptian government and terrorist organizations. Her progressive work caused her to be dismissed from her government position as Director General of Public Health Education in the Ministry of Health in 1972, her home was under 24 hour observation by armed police, and in 1981 she was one of thousands arrested on suspicion of political opposition to Egypt, an experience she describes in her 1986 book, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. The magazine *Nun (Health)*, which she had founded and edited for over three years, was suppressed; in 1991 the government closed down the Egyptian affiliate of AWSA and ordered it to hand over its funds to the group Women in Islam; and her name is on the death list of a terrorist group. In her history of the AWSA, which held its first conference in Cairo in 1986, El

Saadawi laid out the organization's main principles and objectives, which included the promotion of "the creative development of women and the emergence of their distinctive personality to enable them to criticize the ideas and values aimed at undermining their struggle for freedom" ("Introduction" 2). Although the AWSA no longer exists in Egypt--actually *because* it no longer exists--this goal is still a pressing one ten years later.

Scholar Monique Gadant describes how the structure of Arab culture emphasizes motherhood as "the sole means of fulfilment" and a source of some power for a woman, since she receives "social recognition for her function as reproducer (not only of the lineage but also of the patriarchal ideology" (1). This culture makes the task of Arab feminists "doubly difficult," to use the words of Kumari Jayawardena, whose introduction to the essay collection *Third World-Second Sex* 2 remarks that Arab women must not only free themselves from such a traditional patriarchal society, they must also "avoid the trap presented by developmental and modernising processes in which new forms of exploitation are embedded" (vii). Imported products such as makeup and fashion are part of this exploitation, although the social and economic factors are larger and quite threatening. "Egyptians who stand up and challenge the global neo-colonialist powers and their collaborators in local governments are labeled dissident, communist, nationalist or feminist," El Saadawi said recently. "They are punished according to the effectiveness of their dissidence; this ranges from losing their job and censorship of their writings to imprisonment and even death" ("Dissidence" 159). El Saadawi's response to the need for political and social change is to urge creativity: "Creativity means uniqueness: innovation. Discovering new ways for thinking and acting, for creating a system based on more and more justice, freedom, love and compassion" ("Dissidence" 160). But currently, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism thwarts a balancing of Egyptian society.

The Marxist-feminist sociologist Valentine M. Moghadam declares in *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* that Islam in

itself is not the cause of Arab women's situation. "Why Muslim women lag behind Western women in legal rights, mobility, autonomy, and so forth," she explains, "has more to do with developmental issues--the extent of urbanization, industrialization, and proletarianization, as well as the political ploys of state managers" (5-6). Undoubtedly Islam, the official state religion, is not the sole cause of the problems women face in Egypt today; Moghadam is right to point out the other factors that come into play. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is difficult to distinguish developmental issues from religious and cultural ones. Egypt has a secular government under Hosni Mubarak, and that is what fundamentalist groups are trying to change. They employ a number of tactics in their attempts, from advocating veiling to gaining popular support by providing better services than the government to killing tourists. These and other actions are taken in the name of Islam. But they are political acts as well, and politics have colored Islam--as they have all major religions--since its founding.

Looking at the history of Islam Lois Beck explains that Muhammad "established a system of relative equality between the sexes, in which complementary but not necessarily unequal, roles were provided for males and females," although the "stronger" male sex was to protect the female sex (33). After Muhammad died, "religious scholars and administrators elaborated on and exaggerated this position of protection by the male of the female, a process that reflected the patriarchal customs and attitudes of the time," which led to religious law being partial to male interests (33). Islam, like all religions, is in a mutually affective relationship with the society in which it is followed, thus, as Camillia Fawzi El-Solh and Judy Mabro note in their introduction to *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, it makes sense that "Muslim women's lives and the choices they face are influenced as much by patriarchal social arrangements as they are by religious ideology" (1). Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early concur: beyond the influences of "local custom" and Islam, "it is clear that the majority of social restrictions on Middle Eastern women originate in cultural traditions such as

patriarchy and honor, which are not in the tenets of Islam” (79).

El Saadawi too has declared that women’s “triple oppression” (national, class, and sexual) comes not from Islam but from “the patriarchal class system which manifests itself internationally as world capitalism and imperialism, and nationally in the feudal and capitalist classes of the Third World countries” (“Woman and Islam” 206). She explains how there is a neo-colonial game being played in which global powers put pressures on governments in the Third World “in the name of freedom of the market. Non-flexible governments in the Third World are considered bad or ‘dissident’ governments. The global neo-colonial powers are able to punish them in ways corresponding to their level of ‘dissidence’ or ‘inflexibility.’ Punishment includes the threat of economic or military sanctions and of defamation: publicizing their human rights violations in the global media” (“Dissidence” 167-68).

“Individual identity or individual responsibility is inseparable from social identity or social responsibility,” El Saadawi notes; “But these words are all used by neo-colonialists to abstract the freedom or identity of others, to favour the development of so-called modern or post-modern democratic free societies” (“Dissidence” 166). The result, she explains, is that “concepts like radical ethics, religious freedom, liberation theology and cultural autonomy have not led to greater freedom or to fundamental cultural and economic changes that improve our lives. They have led to what is now called religious fundamentalism and fanatical spiritual movements using religion or culture to abolish the other (the devil)” (“Dissidence” 166). Not restricted to Islam by any means, such religious and political movements occur worldwide.

One of the dangers of these movements, El Saadawi continues, is that they “do not oppose or expose neo-colonial economic exploitation” (“Dissidence” 171). In Egypt, “They are religious movements fighting against western values, protecting women or the nation of Islam against western materialism. They put more energy into veiling women and fighting against ‘abortion’ than into fighting against the sale of bad meat or the shipment of nuclear waste into our country” (“Dissidence” 171).

While problems in the Arab nations are reported in the international press as religious ones, “Concealed beneath the surface are international struggles over petrol and Arab wealth, Israel’s occupation of Palestine, the employment of petrol revenue against the interests of the Arab peoples, spurious development projects and greater dependency, more external debt, more unemployment, rising prices, and inflation” (“Political Challenges” 19).

El Saadawi’s beliefs are also held by Valentine Moghadam, who notes, “Family law; affirmative action, provisions for or restrictions on working mothers; policies on education, health, and population; and other components of social policy designed by state managers crucially affect women’s status and gender arrangements” (18). Too, Moghadam states that gender is “not a homogenous category”; “class, ethnicity, religion, and age” are additional “socially constructed distinctions” that must be considered (16). El Saadawi herself deals with current gender proscriptions in Egypt--for men and for women--not only in her nonfiction, but in her fiction too, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Haleh Afshar exposes the fallacious thinking of Islamists who claim Islam has done more to elevate women’s position in society than other religions by giving them an independent status and legal rights in inheritance and negotiating marriage contracts, not labeling them the source of evil, and not claiming their creation from the rib of Adam.<sup>1</sup> Ghada Karmi is another scholar who notes that “pre-Islamic marriage customs were flexible and some of them gave women considerable independence and control over their own lives” (77). She points to strong women figures in early Islamic history as evidence of this “prior tradition of female independence” (78). And today, Afshar observes, there are “gaps even in the Koranic text between the endorsement of economic independence of wives and their duties towards their husbands” and “even greater discrepancies between the Koranic text and the practices of Muslim men,” the latter including patriarchal households, wives under the protection of their husbands, and women as “the standard bearers of the family honour” (11). In practical terms this means that “often Muslim wives cannot

travel, take up formal employment or even, in some cases, leave the house without their husbands' permission" (11).<sup>2</sup>

El Saadawi remarks on this phenomenon in "The Political Challenges Facing Arab Women at the End of the 20th Century," citing the case of a university teacher whose husband prevented her from attending the first AWSA conference by threatening her with divorce. "In Egypt and in most of the other Arab countries," El Saadawi observes, "men no longer reject the notion that a woman has the right to work outside the home. In most cases, however, men do reject women's participation in public political or cultural activities" (8). This situation demonstrates the connection between the public/political and private/family-related challenges of Arab women, El Saadawi points out, and these challenges involve "all women, of all classes and sectors, from poor women in rural areas to upper-class women, including the wives of the nations' rulers and presidents" (9).

El Saadawi's works, as do studies by Afshar, Beth Baron, Safia K. Mohsen, and others, show that while in Egypt women have public rights and duties equal to those of men, privately they are controlled by men. The Islamic *sharia* helps to keep women under control. *Sharia* is "the body of formally established sacred Islamic law based on Allah's commandments as found in the Qur'an. It governs religious matters, and also regulates political, economic, civil, criminal, social, ethical, and sometimes domestic affairs in muslim countries."<sup>3</sup> In Egypt, Article Two of the constitution was amended in 1976 to make *sharia*, "which used to be one of the sources of legislation, the principal source of lawmaking."<sup>4</sup> *Sharia* allows fundamentalists to charge feminists like El Saadawi with infidelity and atheism. El-Soh and Mabro explain fundamentalists' views of Islam as a social order "and as the 'natural religion' laid down by God and therefore unchangeable. . . . [T]he fundamentalist resorts to rational arguments to demonstrate how the divine law of Islam has been tainted by alien customs" (6). Women Against Fundamentalism, a British group started in 1989 "to challenge the rise of fundamentalism in all religions," defines fundamentalism in their article "Refusing Holy Orders" as "modern political movements which use

religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control” (57). Further, WAF believes that “at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women’s minds and bodies. All religious fundamentalists support the patriarchal family as a central agent of such control. They view women as embodying the morals and traditional values of the family and the whole community.”<sup>5</sup>

El Saadawi too focuses on the dangers of fundamentalism, a movement whose influence has increased over the past ten years or so in Egypt: “Since most of the Arab peoples suffer from illiteracy and ignorance [the illiteracy rate for men in Egypt is 37%, for women 66%]<sup>6</sup>, what they know of religion is limited to the information offered by the ruling institutions through educational curricula and the mass media” (“Political Challenges” 18). In her nonfiction work *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, El Saadawi declares, “There is no doubt that the wave of religious fanaticism that has swept many Arab countries in recent years is one of the ways used by the feudal and capitalist ruling classes to hold back the movement towards progress. . . . [Reactionaries] attempt to convince the people that most of the economic and political difficulties and crises that have been faced in recent years are due to the fact that they have strayed from the path of Islam. . . . They say that poverty and increasing want for the millions are a manifestation of Allah’s wrath against those who have moved away from Islam and its teachings” (82).

The fanaticism of which El Saadawi speaks has ties to militant and terrorist groups. Modern militant Islamic groups in Egypt have a history that goes back to the late 1920s when *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (the Muslim Brotherhood) was founded to protest Britain’s colonial rule following World War I. After British troops withdrew, the Brotherhood fought for an Islamic government. President Gamal Abdel Nasser, viewing the group as a challenge to his rule, arrested its members and executed its leaders, and, when an attempt on his life was attributed to the group in 1954, it went underground. Nasser’s death in 1970 created an atmosphere in which *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* (the Islamic Group) and *al-Jihad* (literally “to strive,” but understood to

mean any endeavor made to further the cause of Allah) could come into existence. President Anwar Sadat encouraged Islamists as a way to counter Leftists and socialists who disapproved of his increasing rapport with the West during his de-Nasserization of Egypt. A militant segment of *al-Jihad* is considered responsible for Sadat's assassination in 1981, shortly after his signing a peace treaty with Israel. In 1985 all the Islamist militant groups--around 44--formed an alliance, although they retain their separate identities.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is the more conservative of these groups and disclaims accusations of assisting militant groups, saying that Islamic rule should be attained through democratic, non-violent means. Still outlawed, it is the largest of Egypt's oppositional movements.<sup>8</sup> *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* and *al-Jihad* can be labeled the two strongest Islamic *militant* groups in Egypt, with an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 members and probably twice as many sympathizers. The contrast between the poverty of most Egyptians and the extreme wealth of those who have benefitted from the past few governments fuels the rise of fundamentalism. Other factors are the increased power of Israel and the West, a rapid urbanization that has altered social and economic structures, and public disappointment in a government influenced by Western theories.<sup>9</sup> Since 1991, attacks on tourists, Coptic Christians, and the police have increased and caused around 1300 deaths as Islamic groups attempt to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak's secular government.<sup>10</sup> Despite a declaration calling for a halt to violence that was signed July 29, 1997, by six *al-Gama'a* leaders during their subversion trial, terrorist acts have not ceased. Police ambushes and executions, a tourist bus bombing, and the massacre at Luxor's Temple of Hatshepsut on November 17, 1997, are part of a chain of terrorism, government punishment of terrorists, and retaliation through more terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Details of the attacks lead specialists to believe the younger are breaking from the older leadership--specifically, those imprisoned in Egypt who called for the unconditional cease-fire in July of 1997. The newer generation of terrorists seem quite willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

President Hosni Mubarak's response to the increasing terrorism has been to step-up security at tourist sites and to continue refusing negotiation with radical groups. He accuses Britain and Afghanistan of giving refuge to those financing the rebels.<sup>13</sup> Major General Habib Adli, appointed by Mubarak as Egypt's interior minister as a replacement for Hassan Alfi (who was dismissed after the Hatshepsut massacre for lax security procedures), believes terrorist acts are planned and financed from without the country.<sup>14</sup> Response from the general public of Egypt has been to denigrate the terrorists. In some places banners were raised after the Temple of Hatshepsut massacre that said, in English, "All Egyptians refuse murder action in Egypt" and that "the true people of Egypt" are "sad for what happened in Luxor."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the knifing of Naguib Mahfouz in 1994 was seen as "a travesty and disgrace."<sup>16</sup>

As terrorist killings gain world-wide attention, a quieter attempt to force change in Egypt continues, its target women. Fundamentalist groups are devoting energy to reaching Egyptian women, explains Valentine Moghadam, partly as an economic response. Under Nasser and Sadat an expansion of the economy created jobs that encouraged women's participation in the public sphere. But "severe recessionary conditions" in the mid-1980s "fueled social tensions and led to a growth in Islamism, with its attendant ideological and social pressures on women. Employed women now feel compelled to appear in *hijab* [a head scarf] at work, even though they will claim that the turn to Islamic dress is their own choice" (56). Mervat Hatem adds that "the Islamist demand for a return to the old Islamic definitions of the sexual division of labor legitimized the return of women to the home at a time of large scale unemployment" (31). Observations El Saadawi made in 1986 support this view: "In Egypt, under Nasser, women were encouraged to work. It's not like that now. Now, in the public sector . . . women are being discouraged from working, because of unemployment, because of the veil."<sup>17</sup>

Undeniably there is a strong Islamist influence in the schools, the media, and the arts of Egypt. Poorly paid schoolteachers are prime targets of fundamentalists.

Islamic tracts replace schoolbooks, the flag salute and anthem are ignored, and young girls are forced to wear the *hijab*. Some schools have brought back the *niqab*, which covers the face, hair and neck, even though it has been banned by the government. In the poor neighborhoods that are the living and working grounds of militant Islamists, women and girls are harassed if they appear in public without covering their heads. Whereas the usual age for veiling is 12 or 13, girls as young as age six are taking the veil.<sup>18</sup> Scholar Maha Azzam believes there is a “psychological pressure” to wear the *hijab* and be seen as “being a better Muslim” for doing so (226).

In the eyes of Western observers veiling has become synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism. In any discussion of veiling it is important to remember that the practice is not specifically ordained by Islam, nor is it exclusive to that religion. Veiling occurred in Ancient Athens, the Greco-Roman world, pre-Islamic Iran, and the Byzantine empire. Muslims took up the practice from those they conquered, Nikki Keddie argues, “and both non-Muslims in Muslim societies and Mediterranean women in Christian societies were subject to many of the same forms of control and isolation from men” (3). Minou Reeves declares that during Muhammad’s lifetime “there was no segregation and no veiling in the sense that Moslem societies later developed it” (32). We are reminded by Juan R.I. Cole that veiling in the Muslim Middle East was “in premodern times a highly classed institution, practiced only by the elite” and that it “greatly increased . . . during the colonial period (roughly 1830-1956)” (24). Margot Badran explains that peasant women, needing to work outside for economic reasons, have always gone unveiled, and that domestic seclusion was practiced mainly by middle and upper class urbanites and rural gentry, although some type of segregation of the sexes occurred across classes (4).

Today veiling is a symbol of tradition--even if invented tradition. The *hijab* is less traditional veiling than Islamist uniform.<sup>19</sup> Badran explains that *hijab* in nineteenth and early twentieth century Egypt “signified covering the face and was used as a generic term,” whereas for the past few decades “with the ‘return to the

veil,’ *hijab* does not refer to hiding the face but simply to covering the head while the less common cloth covering the face is called a *niqab*” (22-23). Elizabeth W. Fernea disagrees with the phrase “return to the veil” since she finds “that the contemporary use of conservative dress is a new phenomenon”; the clothes women are fashioning are not “the *milaya*, the head scarf, the long, full black dress” that has long been considered traditional Muslim garb, but “a new style, developed only in the past ten years” (“The Veiled” 120). While these clothes “are variations on an old theme,” they have “new expressions and new implications” (120). More conservative Islamists perceive it differently, stating that today’s *hijab* is the same as the *khimar* mentioned in the Qur’ān, and hence a garment of the earliest Islam.<sup>20</sup>

Once asked by a fully veiled woman whether she thought “a woman’s face [was] a blemish upon her, a shameful private part to be covered,” El Saadawi responded, “The shameful blemishes are oppression, falsehood, and the eradication of the human mind, whether a woman’s or a man’s” (*Memoirs* 29). El Saadawi sees veiling as “forced on Egyptian women by religio-political groups. It is no different culturally from the post-modern veil made of cosmetics and hair dyes that is forced on western women by the media and beauty commercials. . . . This post-modern veil is seen by the global neo-colonial media as beautiful, feminine, a sign of progress, though it is as pernicious to the humanity and authentic identity of the woman who wears it as the so-called religious veil” (“Dissidence” 170). Veiling is *not* a sign of authentic Muslim identity, El Saadawi maintains, and of those who don it to protest Western invasion she says, “They think that they can protest against foreign invasion and Western economic exploitation just by putting a piece of cloth on the face. Some upper and middle-class women import their veils from the West; some of them do not know their indigenous language or culture. They do not participate in any struggle to liberate their country from Western economic and political exploitation” (“Islamic Fundamentalism” 96). Indeed, “Western colonial circles praise such superficial battles against them [as women veiling] so long as economic exploitation goes on” (96).

To those who support the veil as a sign of authentic identity or in the name of multiculturalism, El Saadawi responds, “But the veil is just a piece of clothing. How can an authentic identity be reduced to a piece of clothing? How can multiculturalism depend on confining women or hiding their faces?” (96). In a recent talk with an audience comprised mostly of Arab-American and Arab-born women from various nations, El Saadawi asked them to think about what they meant by their identity. Is it religious identification, wearing the veil, wearing makeup, wearing earrings? Veiling is not a choice, she maintained; Arab women are pressured to take the veil. But, she asked, what is wrong with women’s hair? “Which is more *fitna*, the hair or the eyes?” El Saadawi queried, using her eyes to mimic a coy expression. Hair is power, she said, recalling Samson; it is an organ, a part of us. When women cover their head and lower their eyes they are diminishing their courage. Veiling weakens the personality and prevents women from fighting; practically speaking, she pointed out, women need to look around to protect themselves. To an audience including several veiled women who argued vehemently about the importance of covering themselves, El Saadawi explained that veiling has become an issue, although it is not an issue, and it takes us away from the most important issues in economics and politics (“Arab Women”).

In an attempt to link issues of veiling to economic and political issues, several voices in the veiling debate argue over which class is most affected. Elizabeth Fernea stresses that it is “a middle- and upper-middle-class phenomenon, found mostly among educated working women” and students in universities and professional schools (“The Veiled” 120). Soha Abdel Kader agrees: the women wearing Islamic dress “at least early in the movement, showed no signs of wanting to return to the *hareem* or of wanting to give up employment outside the home”; indeed, medical, engineering, and pharmacy students comprised the largest number of veiled women, and “Islamic groups and the Islamic movement were most active and most assertive” in such schools (135). In contrast to earlier veiling that attempted to distinguish classes, Kader finds that current Islamic dress “is symbolically and sociologically

egalitarian. Presumably identical in style, material, and range of permissible colors, it is intended to erase any social or economic differences among its wearers,” which accords with “the egalitarian spirit of the Islamic movement that initially, and in part, had gained momentum as a reaction to the increasingly evident gaps between the haves and the have-nots” (135). Fernea takes this view also, seeing Islamic dress as more than a religious statement: “it is a dramatic, nonviolent protest against the establishment and its politics, as well as against the West” (“The Veiled” 120)--an indication that the economic situation for most Egyptians is not what earlier governments had promised. While Fernea argues that adoption of this attire results from a complex of religious, political, cultural, and individual motives, fundamentalists do encourage and in some communities seem to enforce veiling as part of their complex identification and ideology. And an interesting side issue, Barbara F. Stowasser notes, is how in addressing women’s issues, fundamentalists and conservatives ignore the largest group of Muslim women, those who live in the countryside and who generally do not veil because of the nature of their daily work. Therefore, “Based as it is on political, economic, social, and educational factors, the city-oriented bias of traditional Islamic culture thus continues to prevail in contemporary Islamic thought” (23).

Veiling and the focus on urban women seem related to another aspect of fundamentalist groups, one that may be gaining them wider support: providing Egyptians greater access to necessary or desired services. Diane Singerman observes, “Both legal and illegal religious organizations and political parties offer health care, education, legal assistance, tutoring, housing, and day care. Although people use these services without necessarily supporting the groups, it is easy to understand why the beneficiaries of such services might become active supporters of their benefactors.”<sup>21</sup> In most cases, the Islamists are outdoing the government in bringing health care, schools, day care, food and employment to Cairo’s poor, and are thus winning their allegiance. Sherifa Zuhur sees this as a savvy move: “The Islamic groups realize they must build an infrastructure capable of supporting the state. Even

now, their economic and social-service efforts are directed toward that end through the operation of schools, clinics, banks and investment houses, supermarkets, and retail ventures,” services that gain them mass support (86). Yet with these services and benefits comes censure. Mary Anne Weaver, a journalist who often writes on Egyptian issues, describes how fundamentalists are opposing the arts by destroying video stores, preventing the staging of plays, and threatening writers. In an unexpected response to Islamic pressure, in 1994 the Minister of Culture agreed to send all books scheduled for publication to *al-Azhar*, the seat of Islamic learning, for review. In reaction to the Minister of Culture’s move, Nobel prize winner Naguib Mahfouz told friends, “The censor in Egypt is no longer just the state. It’s the gun of the fundamentalists.”<sup>22</sup> Even though an administrative court ruled in January of 1995 that the Ministry of Culture was the only censor in Egypt,<sup>23</sup> Weaver describes what she calls an “intellectual siege” going on in Egypt, a siege in which artists, particularly writers, find themselves trapped between the Islamists and the government (“The Novelist” 57). In recent years *al-Azhar* has granted the title of martyr to a member of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* who participated in sporadic killings in Jerusalem, has defended the assassin of the writer Farag Foda, and essentially has endorsed the killing of anyone who opposes *sharia* law (58).

Weaver sees Islamists infiltrating Egypt’s legal, educational, cultural, and artistic institutions, as well as the news media. Islamist lawyers are filing suits against members of these institutions at an increasing rate in the secular courts.<sup>24</sup> And they are winning the cases. One shocking verdict in 1995 was against a professor of Islamic studies at Cairo University, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid. He was accused by a colleague, Dr. Abdel-Sabour Shahin, professor of Arabic linguistics and a Muslim cleric, of apostasy for presenting the argument in his books that interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadiths should be made in their “historical and linguistic context” and should consider how society has changed (“Revolution” 38). Abu Zeid was found guilty, which meant he also lost his right to have a Muslim wife; he was ordered to divorce her. *Al-Jihad* decreed he be killed. Within a week *al-Azhar* representatives

asked the government to put Abu Zeid to death, the punishment Shariah law declares for apostasy (40). Abu Zeid and his wife left Egypt to live in the Netherlands, while the highest court in Egypt, the Court of Cassation, ruled in 1996 to uphold the verdict of guilty.<sup>25</sup> As retired judge and Islamic scholar Said al-Ashmawy told Weaver, “This is the first time that the courts have ruled someone an apostate in modern history. We’re returning to the Inquisition. With this decision, we have gone backward five hundred years” (44). Al-Ashmawy himself has been accused of apostasy and threatened with death because he resists the increasing use of *shariah* law and has challenged, in print, a government based on Islam (43-44).

Clearly Islamic fundamentalism is one force that undermines a balanced Egyptian society, one in which intellectual freedom would be preserved and men and women would be viewed as equals. And it has contributed to Egyptian feminists and Islamist women being “ideological adversaries,” according to Valentine Moghadam. Feminists view religion as a personal matter,” she explains; “They do not advocate an Islamic government and they have a pluralist attitude toward society. For Islamists the goal of an Islamic state and society is basic,” and when it is reached, “women, and all other members of the *umma* [the Islamic community of believers], will enjoy true liberation” (160). Minou Reeves emphasizes that “Islam is not an individualistic religion. The individual is secondary to service to God, and service to God is service to society. To a woman of fundamentalist Moslem persuasion, identity as a Moslem guarantees dignity” (196). Hence typically feminist goals are not shared by fundamentalist women. Both feminists and fundamentalists do share a commitment to women working in society, however, and because of this Moghadam speculates hopefully that an unforeseen result of Islamist movements and the work of those who oppose them “could very well be the subversion of the patriarchal order and its rapid demise. In tandem with mass female education and the entry of women into the formal work force, the expanded activities of women’s organizations will be the strongest challenge to patriarchy and the neopatriarchal state” (170). As well there may be the cultural strengthening some women seek. Soha Abdel Kader describes it

thus: "Clinging to their heritage is women's way of imposing a semblance of order on an otherwise confusing world and their means of restoring self-worth and lessening alienation" (137). They choose only those aspects of modern culture that are "consistent with their heritage and Islamic traditions," such as education and professions. "The Islamic veil thus may be part of a new assertive Islamic movement with a powerful message that synthesizes modernity and authenticity," Kader suggests.<sup>26</sup>

Such a synthesis will not be uncomplicated, one senses. In the Abu Zeid case, his wife Ebtehal, a professor of French and Spanish literatures, was told by Shahin that another husband would be found for her and the mosque would provide her with a dowry.<sup>27</sup> And, as Kader learned from her study of the past hundred years, what might have begun as Islamic loyalty and "an intelligent and selective synthesis of modernity and authenticity is gradually transforming itself into a call for the 'retraditionalization' of women's status and roles and women's return to their 'proper' place within the home and within society as a whole."<sup>28</sup> Arlene Elowe Macleod says that even as women strive for equality, their accommodation on some points works against them, so that "the potential of the new veiling to create an alternative image for women, combining the strengths of women's working and family identities, seems to be wavering. There are signs that the potential for reproduced inequality is becoming stronger" (160).

This is a trend El Saadawi has been suspicious of for years. She is concerned, for example, that so far secular political forces in Egypt "either keep completely quiet or they agree with the religious forces, in considering the Personal Status Law as a religious law which must conform to the rulings of the *sharia*" ("Political Challenges" 15). El Saadawi is referring to Personal Status Law No. 44, the replacement of which in 1985 caused Egyptian women to lose some of their rights.<sup>29</sup> Such concession has repercussions for all Egyptian citizens, not just women, El Saadawi warns: "One misapprehension of the relatively progressive political forces in the Arab countries is that they can win the struggle against the conservative

religious groups by backing down or compromising in some areas, especially on the question of women's rights. They do not realize that when the conservative forces gain grounds in these important mass issues, such gains will strengthen their position and create leverage for them to move on more successfully to the rest of the issues" ("Political Challenges" 15).

In terms of the call for women to veil and retreat from public arenas as a way to show loyalty to Islamic values, El Saadawi comments, "All of the ruling political forces--and those outside the ruling structure--are trying to monopolize Islam, interpreting and choosing the Quranic verses, passages from the sayings of the Prophet, and words of the classical jurisprudence appropriate to their own interests" ("Political Challenges" 19). And it is women who remain casualties in this kind of religious war because, as she explains, "Men remain the medium through which she understands religion. Naturally, men interpret the religion according to their own interests, and place themselves in the position of the powerful majority, imposing submission on women" ("Political Challenges" 19). She wants Egyptians to recognize that "the particular Islamic *sharia* which the conservative movements have circulated is mostly based on distorted interpretations of Islam and other philosophies that emphasize the inevitability of fate" ("Political Challenges" 19). As a corrective, El Saadawi urges women to "interpret [religion] with her own powers of rational intelligence, . . . link religious concepts and texts to their historical and social contexts, and develop a highly critical outlook in which rationality gets the better of tradition and imitation, and the doctrine of utility replaces a blind adherence to the literalness of the text" ("Political Challenges" 19-20). She notes, however, that when one reinterprets religion in Egypt he or she is considered an atheist ("Arab Women")--or an apostate, like Abu Zeid, whose situation certainly proves El Saadawi's concern over the misuse of religion to be well founded. El Saadawi credits her father, a graduate of *al-Azhar*, with teaching her to think about religion. "He taught me God does not come out of the printing machine. God is not a book," she said in a recent talk. "God is freedom, love, willing to fight to liberate your country" ("Arab

Women").

But while El Saadawi (and others) opposes a religious state in Egypt or any nation ("Arab Women"), she is challenging a deeply ingrained ideology. Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early's introduction to *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* explains how Islam "provides a safe, secure touchstone which ensures that today's Muslim is part of a long, illustrious, and well-defined tradition," even if that security was lessened by the West's "intrusion" (4). Whatever date one gives to this intrusion, its significance is still "a challenge to traditional patterns of action and thought, and--most important--a challenge to the supremacy of Islam as the unquestioned arbitrator of intellectual process and community guidance" (5). This challenge is generally met with a nationalism that encourages Islamic fundamentalism. As an added barrier to the kind of examination of religion El Saadawi promotes is a cultural attitude that Leila Ahmed, speaking of feminism in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, finds in non-Western Islamic women. While Western women can be openly critical of their culture's ideologies, the Islamic woman is constantly reminded that she should remain loyal to Islamic society and its values as a way to resist Western culture. For centuries Western and Islamic worlds opposed each other, then colonizing occurred, and now both abstract and material culture have entered the conflict, with the result that Islamic civilization "finds itself reaffirming [old values] the more intransigently and dogmatically and clinging to them perhaps the more obstinately because it is reaffirming them against, and safeguarding them from, an old enemy" (162).

For some, then, it is a matter of cultural loyalty or betrayal, and such an attitude provides the opportunity for fundamentalism to make the inroads it has lately in shaping contemporary Egyptian society. But nationalism is not the only explanation. Valentine Moghadam proposes that increasing female education and employment "has challenged and slowly weakened the system of patriarchal gender relations," causing middle-class men anxiety and leading to "contestation between modern and traditional social groups over the nature and direction of cultural

institutions” (137). El Saadawi does not take an optimistic view of the impact made by women in the public sector. Although their numbers have increased, there is no accompanying political power or cultural influence to alter hostile attitudes toward women. She explains the conflicting messages Arab women receive, especially through advertisements, where a television commercial exploiting a woman’s body might be followed by one covering it or a woman might appear on television--an advancement in the public sector--yet wear a veil. As well, women are divided by class: “As consumers and sex objects [urban professional women] are called upon to become more liberal and more modern” while other urban women and those in rural areas “are told to stay at home rather than go out to paid work, to wear the veil, to be overworked and exhausted by their several roles both inside and outside the home, and to hold more firmly to traditionalist religious practice” (“Women’s Resistance” 144).

Her involvement with the AWSA makes clear that despite fundamentalism’s attack of her, El Saadawi is not against Islam. The tenth point under the third section of the article summarizing AWSA’s philosophy reads, “Religion may be with Truth, Justice and Freedom, or against it, depending upon how it is interpreted.”<sup>30</sup> Expanding on this idea, El Saadawi has written in “A New Battle for the Women’s Movement in Egypt,” “I view the issue of culture and morals as an issue of justice and freedom. There must be one standard for all people, regardless of class, gender, custom or belief” (94). To counteract fundamentalist thinking, and as part of a new step in Egyptian feminism, El Saadawi evokes the ancient past. She reminds us of a time when women were goddesses; powerful and intelligent, these women commanded respect. As such, they can serve as role models for modern Egyptian women. This theme, which appears overtly in her nonfiction and subtextually in her fiction, will be discussed as we now turn to *The Hidden Face of Eve*.



## CHAPTER 2

### ANCIENT EGYPT

“Usually I say I have genes from Isis,” Nawal El Saadawi said not long ago when I asked her if she saw ancient Egyptian civilization shaping her fiction. “You inherit your genes from your grand grandmothers,” she went on, “so of course I am affected physically, mentally, psychologically, socially, historically by Arabic female goddesses, and they were quite powerful--Isis, Ma’at, Sekhmet--and the more that I read about them the more I am affected by them” (Personal Interview).

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*<sup>1</sup> El Saadawi explains that “the most ancient of all gods were female. In Pharaonic Egypt goddesses ruled over many areas and participated with male gods in deciding human destinies” (92). Isis, Ma’at, Sekhmet, Neith, Hathor<sup>2</sup> and other goddesses were worshiped. “The elevation of women to the heights occupied by goddesses was a reflection of their status within society before the systems characterized by the patriarchal family, land ownership and division into social classes came into being” (92), El Saadawi declares, citing studies by Arab scholars who note that in the earlier phases of Egyptian civilization, “a legitimate son carried his mother’s name and inheritance was often matrilineal. . . . It is a well-known fact of human history that the elevated status of woman in society, and in religion, was related to the fact that children carried her name” (92). Referring both to Arab and western studies, El Saadawi offers several examples of women’s equality and respect in the Ancient Kingdom, roughly 3000 to 2700 B.C.<sup>3</sup>: woman “laboured in textile and carpet manufacture, traded in the markets and shared in hunting side by side with her husband”; tomb drawings depicted women as of the same size as men (later they were of diminished size); “A memorial stone erected in honour of a woman called Bisisht . . . indicates that she presided over a group that brought together medical doctors”; “An Egyptian husband was tried by a judge and punished

with a hundred lashes of the whip for having insulted his wife, and was warned that he would be deprived of his share of the money earned jointly by the couple if he reverted to insulting her again" (108-109). Women's status changed during the IIIrd and IVth dynasties, approximately 2700-2500 B.C.,<sup>4</sup> which El Saadawi credits to the development of land ownership, slavery, and patriarchy, this last coming about "in order to ensure that inheritance of property was reserved for their sons" (109).

In recent years the status of women in ancient Egyptian society has been under debate. The conflicting viewpoints will probably never be settled, but the discussion is nonetheless invigorating and insightful. Can such texts as tomb drawings and papyrus, which connect to a small and elite portion of society, be used to make assumptions about the larger population? Based on the dynamic of societal attitudes transcending class division, something current societies evidence, many scholars say yes. The authors of *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* offer a helpful and applicable definition of the "world view" of a society as "a set of concepts, held by all or most of its members, about the natural, human and supernatural worlds of which that society is a part; and about the interrelationships which link these worlds into a meaningful, intelligible whole."<sup>5</sup> Therefore a world view has an integral role in forming a society's politics, social structure, and economy. They maintain that "a specific and identifiable world-view dominated Egyptian thought, attitudes, and actions" during the ancient period and that it "was shared by all strata of society, albeit with inevitable variations in sophistication" (188). The continuation of a world view over time was linked to a desire for the preservation of Ma'at, or right order, so adherence to former practices was preferable and any changes needed to "adapt but not radically alter the supernaturally sanctioned formal structure" (188). In the legal area, Janet H. Johnson observes that Late Period documents are more detailed about those elements of the society and economy that had been noted in previous periods and so can be used, "with care, to suggest possible reconstructions for earlier periods" (180-81). And Barbara S. Lesko maintains that although historical texts do not often deal with "ordinary" women, "minute details on their lives can be

uncovered by perseverance and careful shifting of written records as well as archaeological data” (xvi). These approaches to ancient Egyptian society let us extend to the larger female populace some of what we do know about royal women, their female attendants, and the few things recorded about less-prominent women in legal texts.

Gay Robins, an art historian who has written several books on Egypt, argues that hieroglyphic texts were generally made “according to traditional models. Their contents were made to conform to the Egyptian world-view and ideals, and so cannot be read at face value.”<sup>6</sup> They were intended to show that the deceased had lived an exemplary life. Primarily she reasons that what we see in tomb records about the tomb owners matches little with the real lives of individuals therein buried. And she points out that such texts do not exist for women.<sup>7</sup> However, Robins does allow that subsidiary scenes in tombs, which are a more informal art, “are set in the world of the living” and “mainly show aspects of everyday life on the estate or in the house of the tomb owner, or activities connected with his office,” depicting a variety of people who are less than ideal and sometimes even physically deformed (*Proportion* 23). Elsewhere Robins stresses that “any study of Egyptian society is basically a study of the elite scribal group” and therefore any study of women will be of those in the same class, or of royal women (*Women* 17). Robins warns against making assumptions, noting that the majority of texts concerning women are New Kingdom or later, so “it is dangerous, although tempting, to read it backwards to supplement a dearth from earlier times” (*Women* 15).

To an extent this view is shared by Elizabeth Wayland Barber, who declares in *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years*, that time has buried much of the specifics about the lives of prehistoric women. When records do begin to appear, “very little of the ancient literary record was devoted to women” (23), and texts of the Old Kingdom “were largely reserved for important religious uses, ones that promoted the immortality of the pharaoh and the nobility” (186). Barber does see a change near 2250 B.C. and attributes this to the fall of the VIth Dynasty and the concomitant

dispelling of “the myth that pharaohs were gods incarnate” (186). More earthly activities began to be recorded. Despite protests about the dearth of materials, Robins, Barber, and others reveal a number of things about ancient Egyptian women in their studies. Not all of them relate solely to elite households, although most scholars begin with that material.

Barber notes how Middle Kingdom tomb paintings and other texts let us know women’s occupations: “spinning and weaving, grinding grain and preparing food” (188), “attendants of wealthy mistresses—serving food, assisting the toilette, entertaining as singers, harpists, and dancers” (205), “overseers and ‘sealers’ of storehouses” of linen and food (205). Indeed, Barber elaborates, women’s titles often relate to food: scullery maid, grinder, brewer, table attendant, butler, and keeper of the dining hall; less frequent titles include winnower of grain and gardener. Many women were priestesses (205). There were those called the “lady of the house,” who oversaw the household, and those called townswoman and freewoman (206). Although many activities—servant, musician, dancer, and so on—were performed by men as well as women, Catharine H. Roehrig notes that linen textile manufacture was solely women’s domain (15), citing evidence from predynastic Egypt through the New Kingdom (19–24). Robins observes that women of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms could own and farm land, could sell produce (*Women* 104), but “were excluded from the official bureaucratic structure” (111), the conjecture being that the women who had administrative titles “were probably in the service of royal women or private households rather than in the state bureaucracy. Their status would depend on that of their employer” (117). Robins is one of many scholars who maintains that there were no female scribes in ancient Egypt, deducing from this that women were largely uneducated in reading and writing. William A. Ward, however, cites four female scribes noted on Middle Kingdom artifacts and suggests that more must have existed, and that these women were trained somewhere for their position. These two scholars look at the very same artifacts yet arrive at varying conclusions. Ward takes proximity of scribal tools to indicate their ownership and use and translates

differently than Robins, who argues that the translation of *seshet* is not female scribe but “painter of her mouth” or ‘cosmetician’” and that there may have been artistic reasons for placing a husband’s scribal kit under his wife’s chair in certain New Kingdom scenes.<sup>8</sup>

Most scholars do agree on the legal equality of New Kingdom women. Robins explains that women could “inherit, own, and dispose of property in their own right, . . . enter into business deals, and . . . go to court as plaintiff, defendant, or witness, on an equal footing with men” (136). They did not have to have a male guardian represent them, as in some cultures. And, “In accounts of court cases, women undergo the same harsh methods of interrogation and penalties as men” (*Women* 137). The authors of *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* agree, saying, “In law women were able to function on very much the same terms as men” but adding, “one of the few distinctions being that they do not seem to have had the right to appear as witnesses in legal transactions.”<sup>9</sup> Referring to surviving contracts they note that a woman could “own property, retain it on marriage, and dispose of it exactly as she chose” (312). One document records the bride giving her bridegroom a substantial amount of money “as payment for all the rights and privileges which he will grant in the course of the marriage”; she may “collect any arrears in her dues,” their children will inherit all their father’s assets, and “the husband has no right to break the agreement unilaterally” (312).

However, despite such historical records of legal equality, Robins insists that “Women’s legal rights clearly did not extend effectively throughout society” (*Women* 141). Cited as evidence are their loss of priestly titles in the New Kingdom as men made the priesthood a full-time bureaucratic occupation and mid-XVIIIth Dynasty art that depicts women “in a passive stance” and in “restrictive” clothing (*Women* 181). For a slightly different perception of the priesthood we could turn to Barbara Watterson, who observes that women’s involvement in cults was for social as well as religious purposes since priestly titles were prestigious and indicated respectability and intelligence (39). She feels that so many women participated in

cults in the New Kingdom--this now being open to members of even the lowest social classes, who had previously been excluded from such service--that the status of female priests was lessened. Yet the male priesthood became "largely professional and hereditary, dominated by the men of a priestly class jealous of its rank and the privileges that went with it. This state of affairs contrasts sharply with the position of women during the Old Kingdom in the cult of Hathor" (41-42).

Once again concentrating on the visual records, Robins warns that we should not let "the high visibility of women within Egyptian art to obscure the fact that gender distinction existed as part of the formal structure of Egyptian society," explaining that "in general" women were secondary citizens for the entire ancient period (*Women* 191). She makes a point of noting that while scholars strive to be objective, "they carry with them sets of assumptions embedded in their immediate cultural outlook, of which they may well be unaware" (*Women* 15). To return to her comment on women's clothing and physical attitude, I would caution against imposing modern fashion and interpretations of body language from a different culture onto Egyptian tomb paintings; perhaps the "passive stance" has less to do with subordination than with showing an elite woman of leisure. We must bear in mind what Robins herself stresses, that depictions of tomb owners are idealized. As Watterson puts it, "tomb-paintings portray the upper classes dressed for eternity" (97). Indeed, evidence has shown that women did wear a straight, tight slip dress until the New Kingdom (when contact with the Near East affected garb and skirts became fuller), but not all the time. They were "too tight, too elaborate and, perhaps, in many cases, too expensive" to wear for work, for example, and "It is probable that except for the richest members of society a woman owned only one 'best dress' and that this was a prized possession" (101). For work a short skirt was more practical, and Watterson reports that figurines of servants in the acts of grinding corn and kneading dough have no upper body covering.

As Betsy M. Bryan remarks in her investigation of the woman king Hatshepsut, "we should not presume that the Egyptian culture can be understood

according to modern notions of sexual dominance” (34). Too, I would argue that “gender distinction” does not necessarily mean inequality. For example, Janet Johnson explains that legally, even though a husband had control of joint property, by law he had to supply his wife with objects of similar worth should he sell or give away property and she disapprove. The husband’s use of joint property “reflects the *social* fact that men normally participated in the public sphere, whereas women did not” (177). Documents Johnson cites indicate that women successfully exercised their legal rights and recourse in regard to joint property. And while she mentions the social “fact” of separate spheres for men and women, she seems to contradict this by noting, “A fair amount of Old Kingdom evidence shows women in the economy or the ‘public sphere,’ including women working as merchants in market scenes and women acting as priestesses.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, she explains how a daughter received her share of the family wealth when she married, whereas a son had to wait until the parents died. Sons remained dependent on their parents and, concomitantly, under their control. “This situation could have put men and women on very different footings in relation to their families and (in practice if not in theory) to society at large,” Johnson suggests. “Women may have been more independent and judged capable of making major decisions affecting themselves, their property, and their families,” but men seem not to have been (184-84). Because a woman often was given a house or part of one upon marriage, according to Late Period records, Johnson speculates that “the generic title *nbt pr*, ‘Mistress of the House,’ may imply more than we normally assume” (185).

Barbara Watterson looks at surviving legal texts and maintains, “The advantages that this equality gave to the women of ancient Egypt cannot be overestimated, for their legal status had such a profound effect on their lives” (34). Regarding the roles men and women played she explains that men passed on their civil offices to their sons, not daughters, but in private arenas, titles of Middle Kingdom women include treasurer, major-domo, “superintendent of the dining-hall; overseer of the wig-shop; overseer of singers; overseer of amusements; mistress of

the royal harem<sup>11</sup>; and overseer of the house of weavers” (37). So the different spheres for men and women appear not to have been rigid, since some women functioned in the public sphere, and what might appear to us to have been a less powerful role, lady of the house, may indeed have been more powerful than that of the husband.

Some of what we know about life on estates can help us better understand the activities of women throughout the population. *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* divides Old Kingdom Egypt into three social groups: literate males the pharaoh invested with power, professionals such as soldiers, doorkeepers, and quarrymen, and peasants.<sup>12</sup> Agriculturally the authors see also three types of estates, those owned by the pharaoh, those owned by religious groups (“whose relationship to the crown was a subtle one”), and those owned privately and taxed by the pharaoh (82). Barber conjectures that men did outside work and women inside work on these estates, saying that this explanation of the division of labor “would account for the convention that men were shown with dark skin and women with white” in tomb paintings (206). Watterson says men are shown with reddish-brown skin and women with creamy yellow (4). Yet numerous tomb paintings exist depicting men and women--the elite as well as servants--of the same hue, sometimes light and sometimes dark.<sup>13</sup> For example, two drawings from the tomb of a husband and wife at Deir el Medina show the husband plowing as the wife sows and the husband cutting grain while the wife collects it<sup>14</sup>; their skin is the same tone. Erik Hornung’s study of tomb painting reveals that while an artist’s selection of color sometimes accorded with natural color, sometimes it did not: “The color of many bird signs does not correspond to the bird’s actual appearance; similarly, black is used for waves, blue for clay or clay bricks, and blue or green for the horns of hooved animals” (27). It is risky to assume a woman’s lighter skin tone in a tomb painting depicts either her actual or idealized skin tone; the whim of the painter and materials available may have had more to do with the color used.

What we can be certain of is that women of the landowning, servant and

peasant classes sometimes (in the case of the latter, frequently) worked out of doors. Tomb paintings and models from the Old Kingdom depict women winnowing grain, gleaning the fields, grinding grain, and baking bread.<sup>15</sup> Women harvested flax by pulling it out of the ground, then separated it into tow and rove it, activities that required no little strength.<sup>16</sup> Women made beer and occasionally pottery. In later periods women are portrayed winnowing grain less often, while in the New Kingdom gleaning the fields increases as their gender's activity. Grinding, baking, and brewing are frequent activities of women in all periods. And while the depictions we have are of workers on an estate, such activities must have taken place in the smaller homes of artisans and farmers, who of course had the same need for food.<sup>17</sup> An additional activity is suggested by Robins when she breaks her rule of not applying Egyptian art to the real lives of ancient Egyptians: she cites a Middle Kingdom text in which women act as beaters to make birds rise and New Kingdom love poems that refer to a woman netting birds and states, "Although in tomb scenes this is shown only as a male occupation, and the fowlers listed among the personnel of the estate of Amun were men, the image would hardly be effective if it were a mere poetic fiction and not a fact of life" (*Women* 123-24).

Barbara Watterson believes that tomb paintings "illustrate the social freedom of ancient Egyptian women" (26). Here we see women joining their husbands in business matters such as counting cattle, inspecting property, and observing craftsmen and agricultural workers. A few women conduct business on their own: "a vignette in the tomb of Kenamun at Thebes, for example, shows an Eighteenth Dynasty woman merchant squatting behind her merchandise" (26). In the New Kingdom men were launderers, weavers, and cooks to the upper class while "the worst task of all, the back-breaking daily job of grinding grain by hand on a stone saddle quern, was performed by female servants" (27). Certainly peasant women performed many tasks out of doors, such as cooking, clothes washing, fetching water, field work, and marketing (26-27).

As with the work and activities performed, the possibility of Egypt's having

been matriarchal appears throughout the social classes, although it is the female pharaohs who attract the most attention from scholars. Inheritance on the mother's side appears to have been predynastic and occurring throughout the population, however. Jon Manchip White connects these two phases of Egypt's history, first noting that in "the ancient clan system of pre-dynastic times property and possessions were transferred in Egypt through the female line." Once the dynasties began, "it was nominally the Queen or Crown Princess rather than the Crown Prince who would inherit the throne."<sup>18</sup> The "nominally" is downplayed by Afaf Lutfi-Sayyid Marsot, who explains, "In Pharaonic times women were the 'focus of the house,' the house ruler or leader, rather than the male. . . . Heredity in the royal families went through the female line." But when Persia and Greece conquered Egypt, women lost power and were "relegated to an inferior position like their counterparts in Hellenic society," which meant also that seclusion and veiling began in the third century B.C. (262).

Gay Robins dismisses the idea of a matriarchy, saying that even if Egypt had been matriarchal, "the office of the Kingship was not exercised by the 'heiress' but by the man she married."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Barbara Lesko notes, there are Old Kingdom records listing pharaohs' mothers for several centuries, which "would suggest that matrilineal descent was significant, at least during the formative centuries of Egyptian kingship and imparted both legitimacy and divinity to the king" (3). As well, some wives tried to and did obtain the throne after their husband's death. Betsy Bryan remarks that Hatshepsut is remembered on the Manethonian king lists, as "Amessis," and that occasional women rulers seemed to be accepted rather than rejected (36). In fact, there are several women rulers in Egypt's history about whom we have records, although different scholars sometimes cite different women. Bryan lists Neith-Hotep<sup>20</sup> (Ist Dynasty), Mer-Neith (Ist Dynasty), Nitokret (IIInd Dynasty), Sobeknefru (XIIth Dynasty), Hatshepsut (XVIIIth Dynasty), Nefertiti (XVIIIth Dynasty), and Tauseret (XIX Dynasty) (27-36). Robins also notes Hatshepsut and Nefertiti, but the balance of her list contains Ahhotep II (XVIIIth

Dynasty), Ahmose Nefertari (XVIII Dynasty), and Tiy (XVIIIth Dynasty) (*Women* 42-55). Even when combined these lists are certainly a small percentage of women in relation to male pharaohs, but nonetheless the existence of solo women rulers is significant. While it is beyond the scope of this study to delve into what is known about each of these women rulers as individuals, I will discuss the repercussions of their having existed.

Robins questions how much actual power they had, emphasizing that “kingship itself was not an office open to women on normal terms, and that the role of the royal women was to complement the divine aspect of kingship through divine queenship” (*Women* 55). Barbara Watterson concedes that no women obtained other prominent offices of state and had little political power, aside from that of queens and some priestesses, yet goes on to claim, “In spite of this, ancient Egyptian women in general were able to exert a certain amount of influence outside the domestic sphere” because of matrilineal property descent (23). Ancient Egyptian men generally gave their mother’s, not their father’s, name, such as “Ahmose, son of (the woman) Abana; Baba, son of (the woman) Reonet” (23). So even though, as Watterson puts it, “the real power lay in the hands of the men” because they were office holders, equality in the legal system and property rights gave women economic independence and “a fair amount of social freedom. They went about freely, with faces unveiled, unlike the women of ancient Greece” (24).

The quarrels among scholars of ancient Egypt serve to remind us that in surveying all the materials, primary and secondary, on women’s occupations and legal status, we would do well to try to overcome the biases of our own culture, time period, educational training, etcetera. One longstanding bias has its root in European thinking, as Frederick Engels complains in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State*: “One of the most absurd notions taken over from 18th century enlightenment is that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man” (113). More recent scholars criticize Engels’s work,<sup>21</sup> but whether one relies on Engels or not, we need to keep our minds open to the possibility that earlier

cultures were of a construct we have difficulty fathoming as a result of our experiences with patriarchal societies. For example, regarding primitive societies, which would accord with predynastic Egypt, Engels notes, “The division of labor between the two sexes is determined by quite other causes than by the position of woman in society. Among peoples where the women have to work far harder than we think suitable, there is often much more real respect for women than among our Europeans” (113). Here appears to be another Eurocentric, western outlook we must guard against. Through our interpretations of ancient tomb paintings, legal documents, and other archeological findings, we are reconstructing ancient Egypt and the lives of its peoples. Let us try as best we can to let the materials speak to us rather than impose our modern constructs of religion, intellectual frameworks, and cultural biases on them to the extent that we remake them in our image. One way to explore our biases in reading history is to carefully trace backwards as best we can from the present, always keeping our minds open to the possibility that ancient views of women may have been quite different from ours.

In this respect Jon Manchip White, noting the prominence of Isis and the status accorded to women on her behalf, strikes a rich vein in the ancient Egyptian world view when he attributes the “prestige” of a wife not only to worship of Isis but also to “the special honour accorded to her predecessors in pre-dynastic times, when women were regarded as the mysterious source of life, possessors of psychic powers beyond male experience, and guardians of the myths and traditions of the race” (169). This is a vision of women as powerful, insightful, and divine. It is a positive view of women, one which correlates to and explains women’s elevated status in ancient times. Yet it is not a view held by most cultures today. How and why did this view of women change?

El Saadawi and others theorize that powers once seen as positive in women were turned into negative ones as patriarchy and male-dominated religions arose. An increase in private property caused the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy: men wished to pass on property to heirs they were sure were their own offspring, and,

according to El Saadawi, the handing down of landed property to the male heir necessitated “a system of moral and religious values, as well as a legal system capable of protecting and maintaining these economic interests” (*The Hidden Face* 41). Women were to have one husband while husbands could have several wives, primarily to prevent “confusion between the children of the legitimate husband and [those of] the outside lover,” that is, to prevent illegitimate children from stepping into the line of descendants for property (41). To ensure fidelity, practices such as veiling, seclusion and circumcision were practiced, and still are to varying extent, as I discuss elsewhere in this study. Frederick Engels too credits the change from matriarchy to patriarchy to the increase in property and fathers’ desire for inheritance along the male line. He describes the repercussions of the shift bluntly: “The overthrow of mother right was the *world historical defeat of the female sex*” (120). Men were the major figures in the household and women became their servants, sexually as well as practically, “a mere instrument for the production of children” (120-21). Engels offers Heroic and Classical Greece as obvious examples and remarks that even if cultures have “palliated and glossed over” such degradation, it did and does occur (121).

Goddesses no longer, women became the property of men. Religion became male-dominated, and women--whose powers were now a threat--were depicted as dangerous and evil. An observation Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early make about Muslim women today has its roots in this ancient shift: “Women are simultaneously cherished and seen as dangerous--beings who must be protected, but also possessors of strange powers which stem from their fertility” (78). They cite the parallel to the virgin/vixen concept in Western cultures. Soha Abdel Kader’s study *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society 1899-1987* explains how (mis)interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadiths, coupled with Bedouin culture, effected the view of women as “religiously inferior beings, ritually impure, with limited mental capacities or the capacity for ‘modest’ behavior” (35-36). As well, because they descended from Eve, “women possessed the powers of witchcraft and were the

initiators of all temptation” (36). The concept of family honor, “of which men were the guardians and beneficiaries,” relied on women’s premarital virginity and led to female genital mutilation and virginity tests (36). Margot Badran echoes these ideas, noting that women were “a threat to society because of the chaos or *fitna* they could unleash” since their sexual drive was ostensibly stronger than men’s (5). Hence, seclusion and veiling were imposed among middle and upper classes and “community surveillance of behavior and the imposition of severe penalties on both sexes for violations of the moral code” occurred among the lower class and peasantry.<sup>22</sup> These attitudes from former centuries still predominate in Egyptian society.

El Saadawi cautions us to put all this in the proper historical perspective. We must look at ancient Egypt, and the development of Judaism, Christianity, and then Islam, if we are to understand the position of women in Arab and Islamic society today. As she explains, “The story of Adam and Eve was born in Judaism, and through Judaism arose the idea that woman was sinful and that sin was sex. With this idea the separation between spirit (or soul) and body was consecrated and canonized for all time. Christianity followed in the wake of Judaism, and went even further in smelting and moulding the iron fetters of prejudice and rigidity in the attitudes and values related to women and sex” (*The Hidden Face* 95). I do not intend to reproduce here the full unfolding that El Saadawi gives in *The Hidden Face of Eve* of how patriarchal religions affected women’s status, but will include her comment, “God had created man in his own image, and God was spirit. Woman on the other hand was the body, and the body was sex.”<sup>23</sup> Such a view helps explain why cloistering, segregation, veiling, and circumcision came into practice in male-dominated religions. Women’s sexuality was seen as incredibly powerful. As El Saadawi comments in regard to some Arab countries, “Segregation and the veil were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men. And the Arab woman was not imprisoned in her home to safeguard her body, her honour, and her morals, but rather to keep intact the honour and the morals of men.”<sup>24</sup> This view

overturns the sexist notion that women are the weaker sex and exposes how its root lies in women actually being the *stronger* sex, hence feared by men and subjugated by all means possible.

How strong the desire to regain the world view of a society where women were legally equal, possibly more powerful than men in daily activities, and certain women were even elevated to pharaoh or goddess! In trying to understand and learn from ancient Egyptian culture and society we must remember that, in Gay Robins's words, "the interaction between divine and human spheres was always extremely complex, for while the human originated the divine, the human world in turn modeled itself on its own construct, so that the two worlds came to reflect and interact with each other" (*Women* 17). Indeed, in noting how marriage in ancient Egypt was "a true partnership" because women enjoyed freedom and received respect, Jon Manchip White traces this to Isis. Isis was a strong figure women could pattern themselves on. Additionally, undertaking a "dangerous service for her husband [Osiris] she had made it possible for him to undergo his resurrection, and she was thus the indirect saviour of mankind" (169). Barbara Watterson too sees Isis (and some other goddesses, including Hathor) as much more than "the stereotype of the faithful female" (18). In addition to being depicted as "the faithful companion and protectress of Osiris" and as the nurturing mother of Horus, Isis had other attributes: "She used magic in her struggle against Seth to fulfil her ambitions for her son Horus; and she used it against the great sun god, Re himself, in order to discover his secret name so that she would become his equal as a magician" (19). As a prelude to discussing El Saadawi's fiction in later chapters, we need to look further into the role of the gods and goddesses, particularly Isis, in ancient Egyptian culture.

Of the Heliopolitan Ennead, the family of the nine primary Egyptian gods, four are female. The male god Atum ("the all" or "the complete one") produced a female offspring Tefnut ("moisture") and a male offspring Shu ("air"), who in turn produced the female offspring Nut ("sky") and the male offspring Geb ("earth"), who then produced the sisters Isis and Nephthys and the brothers Osiris and Seth. This

increased number of siblings led to conflict, out of which several myths were born.<sup>25</sup>

The myth of Isis and Osiris does not appear in any one ancient Egyptian source in its entirety; scholars have pieced it together from hieroglyphs and papyrus texts, also using Plutarch's version, which, although considered unreliable in many regards, most likely made use of the same primary sources. It is one of the oldest myths: Osiris is depicted in a text whose origin is believed to be the First Dynasty, and my own reading on the matter leads me to agree with those who believe the myth is predynastic. Osiris was originally a god of vegetation, who dies away and is revived again, in this case, by the inundation of the Nile that represents Isis's tears. Osiris succeeded his father as king of Egypt and had a prosperous reign until his brother Seth murdered him. Some versions of the myth say Osiris's body was dismembered and the parts scattered over the land; others say his body was thrown into the Nile; later renderings indicate a tree grew around the corpse. In all versions Isis makes a lengthy search for the body, ultimately finding it and breathing life into it long enough to become impregnated with their son, Horus. After this episode, Osiris, in a sense dead again, reigns as King of the Dead.

An XVIIIth Dynasty tombstone contains a hymn to Osiris which includes the following references to Isis:

His sister protected him, she that held the foes aloof and warded off the deeds of the miscreant by the beneficent things of her mouth [her magical spells], she with the excellent tongue, whose words come not to nought, and admirable in command.

Beneficent Isis, that protected her brother, that sought for him without wearying, that traversed this land mourning, and took no rest until she found him. She that afforded him shade with her feathers, and with her wings created air. She that cried aloud for joy and brought her brother to land.<sup>26</sup>

According to El Saadawi, "Isis was . . . the greatest of gods because she possessed more understanding and knowledge than all other gods" (*The Hidden Face*

104-105). She finds that “All that was useful and constructive found its source in Isis’s activities and merely took the shape of Osiris. Osiris was no more than the concretized form of Isis’s actions” (105). Egyptologist Henri Frankfort agrees, calling Osiris “a passive and a suffering figure” (104). “The mythological story of Isis,” El Saadawi writes in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, “shows clearly that woman in ancient society was the source of creation and action. Man . . . was the object of action, the result of woman’s initiative and versatile creativity. That is why the name, Isis, means in fact wisdom, knowledge and rapid action. Osiris, on the other hand, only means the pure (virtuous) or sacred” (105).

Pierre Montet shows the centrality of Isis to Egyptian civilization in *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great*. The annual flood itself, he argues, was not a regular enough point to designate the start of the new year, but another phenomena occurring around the same time was: “the dog-star Sirius (known to the Egyptians as Supdit), which had been invisible for a considerable period, made a brief appearance in the eastern sky immediately before sunrise” around the time the waters started to rise (32). The star became associated with Isis and the flood with the tears she shed for Osiris. The ancient Egyptians deemed her “the patron deity of the year, which was regarded as beginning on the day when the star first rose” (32). Montet notes that the association of Sirius and Isis appears in “the books of the House of Life, which was a kind of repository of tradition and knowledge maintained from the Old Kingdom right down to the late period” (32). We must recall too, as Jon Manchip White does, that for the Ancient Egyptians, religion was a practical part of everyday life. Temples were more than sites for religious ritual, “they were schools, universities, libraries, archives, and centres of administration and scientific enterprise; they were workshops and granaries” (130). Human and divine interacted on a daily basis, as it were, and goddesses such as Isis were believed to be an active part of the culture.

In the Late Period, roughly 650-332 B.C.,<sup>27</sup> “Isis features prominently” in Egyptian civilization, and temples were built for her at Memphis, Philae, and Behbet

el-Hagar.<sup>28</sup> The recent discovery of the lost cities of Herakleion, Canopus, and Menouthis off the coast near Alexandria, which are thought to have been built 500-600 B.C., has revealed numerous temples dedicated to Isis. The authors of *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* account for the “efflorescence of her cult as a major feature of state concern” politically: Isis was highly celebrated by the populace, so, as a goddess “associated closely with Kingship,” her promotion by the crown was an attempt to foster public support for pharaoh at a time it was much needed (294). Religion and politics mix throughout history, ancient Egypt certainly no exception. Isis became a “universal goddess” during the period “by assimilation with Astarte, Bastet, Hathor, Nut, Sothis, Thermuthis and others.”<sup>29</sup> These examples of her predominance in the Late Period only reinforce the sustained influence Isis had on the people of Egypt throughout antiquity.

In El Saadawi’s work, Isis, “the source of all action, work and creation” in the myth of Isis and Osiris, becomes both source and symbol for *modern* Egyptians (*The Hidden Face* 105). El Saadawi asks her contemporaries to remember, “There have been stages in human history in which women belonged to no one but themselves, indeed, women were once the goddesses of knowledge, the makers of civilizations, the creative minds in the evolution of scientific knowledge, agriculture, philosophy and medicine. These are established historical facts found in the sources of Egyptian and other ancient civilizations” (“Introduction” 20). She is not asking for a return to ancient ways, but seeking to get Islamic, Coptic, and all Egyptians to examine what they mean by their authentic identity. She assures contemporary women “that there is no conflict between one’s authentic Arab personality and modern culture. Rather, the opposite holds true: a woman’s ability to grasp her history and authenticity increases as she is able more fully to comprehend modern civilization, and the new sciences, from East, West, South and North. Being female and Arab is not unlike the human personality of either sex in any other society: it is the product of that creativity which links the past with the present, the heritage with current civilization, then goes beyond both history and heritage to a future which is freer, more just and more

humane” (21). Heritage must be “a means of change rather than . . . a museum for preservation of the past” (21). And that heritage itself needs careful exploration so as to avoid a society that actually permits economic and political dependence on foreign powers even as its people believe they are fighting such exploitation by “returning to tradition” via fundamentalism.

El Saadawi calls for

a rereading, a reinterpretation, of our history that can illuminate the present and pave the way to a better future. For example, if we delve more deeply into ancient Egyptian and African civilizations we will discover the humanistic elements that were prevalent in many areas of life. Women enjoyed a high status and rights, which they later lost when class patriarchal society became the prevalent social system.

Western orientalist circles have tried to deprive us of our history just as Western capitalist circles have deprived us of our resources. We are required to be without a civilization, without a culture, without a past, and without roots. (“Women’s Voice” 29)

Division--of the present from the past, of people from their true identity, of the elite from the majority, of the body from the mind--is a major theme in El Saadawi’s work. She seeks to overcome unjust divisions through education. Yet education in Egypt and Africa is itself a problem, she explains, because “the influence of modern Western culture has established systems of learning and education which, in the absence of true development, encourage *imitation* and dependent thinking, lead to rigidity, and stifle creative processes” (“Democracy” 192). The legacy of colonialism and the ongoing influence of neo-colonialism thwart the development of authentic literatures, among other things. “What we need is an educational system that is not only adapted to solving the specific problems of our societies,” El Saadawi states, “but is also built on developing the capacity for *critical appraisal* and free examination of options. Taboos on thought still hold sway, especially in the three areas of politics (class and national struggle), religion and sex”

(193).

El Saadawi has long observed problems with educational systems, contending in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that “Arab men . . . cannot stand an experienced and intelligent woman” because they threaten the patriarchal class structure (77). She promotes education to fight the system that has labeled women weak, naive, and passive and calls men strong, bold, and active. Some of the problems in Egypt’s educational system are compounded by cultural attitudes. In “The Egyptian Woman: Between Modernity and Tradition,” Safia K. Mohsen records that parents have been known to discourage their daughter from attaining a college education because it might scare off potential husbands, the perception being “that educated women were harder to manage and that they tended to control their husbands and their families” (52). The fear that education might “masculinize” a woman, that is, make her self-assertive and active, seems at work here. Mohsen charges feminists who focus solely on legal reform with neglecting these “cultural practices and attitudes” that are the source of legislative inequities (58). While Mohsen sees both men and women as conservative, men’s conservative views arise from a desire to keep things as they are (and thus themselves privileged), while women’s conservative views come “partly from the fear of having to compete in areas for which they have not been culturally trained. The home for the woman is the domain of her authority and the source of her security. Some women view equality . . . as a sacrifice of the woman’s only stronghold” (58).

Wedad Zenie-Ziegler’s findings corroborate such views. An unveiled woman student at Cairo University told her that “an educated woman has a particular place in society” and “no longer is dominated by circumstances,” yet when asked if she asserted herself at home, responded “The man is always the master” and that it was difficult to challenge one’s upbringing: “There are acquired habits you can’t shake off easily. But in time, things will change” (79). Zenie-Ziegler adds the important fact that illiteracy in Egypt’s countryside places rural women in an even less hopeful position (65).

Another part of the educational process women undergo is not related to formal learning, but comes from the media and the influence of Western capitalism. El Saadawi has often pointed out the contrasting messages Egyptian women receive to remain pure and veiled, yet to be sexual objects. A “false femininity or beauty culture” infiltrates society through the media and women are encouraged to conform by purchasing makeup, perfume, and fashion items (“Women, Religion” 139). Further, “Images of femininity or female beauty have increasingly become the reflection of a globalized mentality. The American or Western white upper-class image of femininity or beauty represents a conception of femininity for all women throughout the world” (139). It is true that when I lived in a women’s dormitory of the American University in Cairo a decade ago, the most popular television shows among the students were “Dynasty” and “Falcon Crest,” American series depicting the lives of extremely wealthy and fashionable people. Mornings, as I passed through the floors on the way to school, the scent of expensive perfumed shampoos wafted from the shower rooms. El Saadawi’s fictional works offer hope that what she wrote in *The Hidden Face of Eve* can one day be: “True beauty is that of a woman who is herself, who does not forge another personality in order to please her husband lest he divorce her or abandon her for another woman, who does not put on an appearance which is not really hers in order to catch a husband, and who refuses to distort her behavior, her desires and her conception of happiness to satisfy the norms of society in the hope that people will not fight her, or accuse her of being abnormal. Beauty comes, above all, from the mind, from the health of the body and the completeness of the self” (88).

In “Dissidence and Creativity” El Saadawi warned, “We must not separate the political from the sexual, economic, religious or cultural. We must carry on a continuous resistance, a continuous dissidence, which will forge the way to a better future for *all* the peoples of the world” (174). Crucial to recall is that men are not solely oppressors. As Diane Singerman explains in “Where Has All the Power Gone? Women and Politics in Popular Quarters of Cairo,” “Explicit political activity is

dangerous for both men and women. . . . People are routinely arrested or harassed for their views and activities" (178) She evokes Nesha Hanniff, who recommends that "Western feminists and social scientists highlight[ing] the repression and subjugation of women in the Third World . . . should remember that most men in Third World nations also are excluded from conventional spheres of political life" (178).

This predicament is portrayed in El Saadawi's fiction. Several male critics have objected that all her male characters are negative. This simply is not so. As we shall see in the following chapters, she represents the political, legal, social, and psychological punishments Egyptian men undergo and has stated in more than one way that "Emancipation of women does not in any way mean hatred of men. We do not reply to sexism with sexism in return . . . the movement for national, political, and economic liberation, [is] a common struggle and a common future in which men and women must share the efforts and the fruits of liberation" ("Democracy" 197). Almost 35% of the members of AWSA are men, and, El Saadawi observes, "Some men are quite progressive. Even sometimes they are more progressive than women. It depends--how they think, how they behave, how they talk. Some are very much against the system they are part of, which is very progressive" ("Arab Women").

There is an Egyptian phrase *sep tepi* ("the first time") that Erik Hornung interprets as "evok[ing] the magic that radiates from every beginning, every first time. The ancient Egyptian designation shows that creation was perceived not as a single, isolated event, but instead as something that entailed constant repetition. In the Egyptians' view, the world could become repeatedly as new and perfect as at the time of its origin" (39). In another context Mircea Eliade calls this "the myth of the eternal return." It is this promise of renewal that Nawal El Saadawi holds out to Egypt. Having considered the views she and many others take of ancient Egyptian society, let us now see how this heritage influences her fiction.

## CHAPTER 3

### **ISIS AS ANTIDOTE: *TWO WOMEN IN ONE***

Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Two Women in One*<sup>1</sup> is a book-length testament to a point she argues in *The Hidden Face of Eve*: underlying Islamic culture is the premise "that woman is powerful and not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying and not easily destructible, and that if anyone needs protection it is the man rather than the woman." Such "innate resilience and strength" terrifies men, and has since primitive times (100). Bahiah Shaheen, the eighteen-year-old heroine of the novel, embodies the strength and activity of woman and is set in stark contrast to modern women who submit to the strictures of patriarchy. Considering El Saadawi's investment in goddesses as a sign of women's former exalted and powerful position in Egyptian culture, I believe she drew on goddesses, and in particular on Isis, when creating this fictional heroine. Bahiah is a model for what other women can become if they allow their natural attributes to surface. And both men and women will benefit from such change, for the theme of repression that runs through the novel makes readers aware that all members of Egyptian society are suffering under the current structure.

The title *Two Women in One* itself suggests many things. Bahiah Shaheen is seen by her family and most others as one type of woman--obedient, diligent, conventional--yet she has an inner self that is strong, inquiring, and nonconformist. Bahiah is a medical student, but is an artist at heart. She is literally a modern Egyptian woman, while her attributes recall ancient goddesses and her name suggests the Quranic *baqiya*, to remain, to be outstanding, to endure.<sup>2</sup> Bahiah's duality and dilemma began with her birth. She regrets having been separated from her mother, having to become aware of what she calls "the tragedy of her own body" (11). As a child she held on to her mother, knowing "instinctively that her mother's body was

the only thing that understood her" (10). Being separated from her mother meant that she was "separated from the universe" (16), and her longing for reconnection is a driving force in her life. Late in the novel, when she joins a student demonstration, Bahiah's feeling of elation reminds her of how she felt when a child, "her childish laugh when her mother embraced her with all her might and their bodies would almost melt into one" (83). Bahiah's desire to be safe with her mother, to become one with her again, "to curl up like a foetus" (118), continues despite her awareness that "[t]he eternal separation took place in a fleeting moment never to return" (119). That Bahiah must--and indeed *wants* to--be independent of her mother is indicated by several references to rejecting all food her mother gives her, spitting it out when no one is looking. El Saadawi captures effectively a young woman's need to be her own person at the same time her longing to remain united with and protected by her mother persists.

Part of Bahiah's separation from her mother is fueled by a growing dislike of the older woman's conformity to male ideals, desires, and taboos, compounded by the situation of her trying to indoctrinate Bahiah into this patriarchal view of life. Instead Bahiah responds to her natural feelings. When in childhood Bahiah discovers she is a girl and innocently undresses to show her mother, she is punished, at which point Bahiah "realized that people suppress only real desires, because they are strong, while unreal desires are weak and need no laws to keep them in check" (12). Thus as she grows up Bahiah looks at taboos and tries to "unravel people's real desires. It was nothing less than the search for truth" (12)--and it will lead Bahiah to uncover her own inner strength.

One of Bahiah's continual questions for other people is what being female means. In her modern Egyptian society, the answers to her question are not encouraging. Dr. Alawi, her medical school instructor, responds literally, biologically, by holding up the womb of a corpse in the dissecting room. "As for man, here he is," Dr. Alawi says, next holding up a male corpse's penis (17). Medical school is just one establishment that reduces people to their sexual organs. So too do

the police. The policeman on the corner near where Bahiah lives sniffs the air for her menstrual blood, an act that begins with her very first menstrual cycle and haunts Bahiah ever after. El Saadawi gives emphasis to Bahiah's traumatization by relating every man in the novel, save one, to this policeman with the villainous handlebar moustache and making all the vehicles in which Bahiah is transported by men resemble police cars. The horror is increased when we deduct from a painting Bahiah displays in a student art exhibition that as a child she was attacked by the police officer, perhaps raped:

At the bend in the street the big man with the handlebar moustache grabbed the child by the arm. The bag fell to the ground. With puny arms and legs, the child struck at the big legs, but they were strong and gaped like destiny's jaws. The child lay between those legs, face down on the asphalt near the wall. A fine trickle of blood streamed from her nostrils down her face; it would clot before her father saw it. (40)

Bahiah's father sees her bleeding in the genital area and slaps her, sending the message that she is to blame for being female, for having a menstrual cycle, and for "attracting" men who assault her.

In contrast to these experiences that teach Bahiah that a woman is reduced to her sexual organs and somehow guilty for male violence against her, and certainly adding confusion to her view of the world, is how once she becomes a teenager, her father acts as if she was "born without sex organs" (75). Her father doesn't think of her as an individual woman with desires. Yet when he marries her off later in the novel, the wardrobe in her husband's house is filled with cosmetics and racy lingerie; clearly the expectation in this society is, as the narrator comments, "A girl moves from her father's house to a husband's and suddenly changes from a non-sexual being with no sexual organs to a sexual creature who sleeps, wakes, eats and drinks sex. With amazing stupidity, they think that those parts that have been cut away can somehow return, and that murdered, dead, and satiated desire can be revived" (101).

“Those parts that have been cut away” refers to clitoridectomy and female circumcision, a topic that will be discussed at length in chapter five. Genital mutilation is but one of the complex and contradictory messages, albeit a devastating and large one, an Egyptian woman receives from everyone around her that batter the psyche.

As the novel progresses, readers learn along with Bahiah that there is no escape from the ordeals of women and that a society bent on oppressing women will oppress its men too, at least those men of the lower classes. The government itself forces conformity and repression of the true self. Bahiah observes how government employees, all men, are all the same and always seem to be sleeping on the trams that take them back and forth between home and work, a kind of death-in-life existence. The trams themselves are portrayed as rapacious beasts that will kill any passenger who might chance to slip while boarding, and the death metaphor is echoed again by the men’s neckties, which “wound round their necks like hangman’s ropes” (31). Governments “deform people,” make them inhuman (14), and El Saadawi evokes some empathy for Bahiah’s father as a lower-level worker in this system. Seeing what he goes through, Bahiah loves her father “in spite of everything” because “he worked so hard for her and her brothers and sisters” (64), to provide for them and give them a ten-*piastre* note every day. The scene in which Bahiah sees him at work in the Ministry of Health is but one I would offer to those critics who declare all El Saadawi’s male characters are totally negative:

She spotted him walking along the corridor behind his boss. His back was bowed, his neck muscles slack, and his head hung in submission, while his superior walked in front, his back straight, his neck muscles taut, his head tilted back arrogantly. She longed for the earth to swallow her up. Later when he sat near her on the tram and smiled, she did not smile back. She avoided his eyes until the next day, and when he handed her the sweaty, old note she nearly refused it. But finally she took it, feeling humiliated. When she managed to raise her

eyes to his she saw an invisible, translucent tear. (64)

While Bahiah is repelled by the conformity and submission her society demands from her and her father and fights against being absorbed into the crowd, initially she is afraid of being singled out and finds protection in hiding among the other women medical students, “her body disappearing among theirs” (21). El Saadawi makes it easy for us to see why women might support the status quo. Having no models for instigating change and coming up against an entire system that oppresses--and that oppresses men too, who in turn exert even more oppression on women--the temptation to merge with a group in hopes of avoiding negative attention seems but self preservation. Thus we admire Bahiah all the more when she separates from her peers and moves according to her individuality.

It is natural desire that leads Bahiah to this action. People suppress their desires, she observes, “because they are strong enough to be destructive; and since people do not want to be destroyed, they opt for a passive life with no real desires. Bahiah grasped this end of the thread and set out to seize the other, then realized that there was no other end, only the bottomless abyss itself” (34). Compelled to the abyss, having to be herself and seek despite any danger, Bahiah leaves the dissecting room at medical school one day and shortly thereafter meets fellow student Saleem Ibrahim. Saleem too feels that most people are fakes who don’t know their true selves. Real people, he asserts, make others panic and try to kill them. A real person “will always be hunted down, killed, condemned to death, imprisoned or isolated somewhere far from other people” (68). Since we know by this point that Bahiah is striving to become a “real person” and we guess from his words that Saleem already is one, we fear for their future as we read on.

Various people representative of the status quo tell Bahiah how she is different. She doesn’t want a medical degree, a car, a house like other young women. To her this would all be “meaningless,” would make the world “all one colour” (24). And Bahiah wants color, for she is an artist. She leaves the school lecture hall, stamps her strong foot on the ground, decides she wants to do “something concrete

with her life, something definite,” and that “she could do it with a pen-point on a blank sheet of paper” (25). So she goes home and draws, crafting a face like her own which stares at her “woman to woman” (25). Bahiah has to hide such drawings from her father, who destroys them whenever he finds them because he thinks art is a waste of time. He crumples up her image and throws it in the dust bin, leaving Bahiah to stare at “her familiar, crumpled drawing . . . for a long time, just as she gazed at her face in the mirror” (26). But she will not be deterred by his attempts to wipe out this new self she is creating; she takes out a fresh sheet of paper and draws herself again. Her father is practical in wanting Bahiah to devote all of her time to her medical studies, but he also distrusts her creative powers and attempt to fashion herself. Bahiah’s drawing and painting allow her to “[define] things as she really saw them” (27), and since she is unhappy with her traditional role as a woman, her art is one means by which she tries to reorder society. As a man, and as the key man in Bahiah’s life until she should marry, her father wishes to retain his position of power, so any sign on her part that she will step outside her assigned role is highly threatening to him.

And he is right to suspect that art will strengthen Bahiah. Drawing, Bahiah knows herself. While reading medical books out loud her voice is like someone else’s, the obedient daughter and student. When she hides her drawings from her father, she is “concealing her real self in the folds of the hidden sheet of paper” (26). Her father, destroying her art, “stood like a vast, high barrier between her and her real self” (27). It is only her false self that obeys him as she searches for what she wants out of life. Feeling “like a lost soul. Like a particle of air lost among millions of others floating in a void” (60), Bahiah fights for control over her own life, struggles to be an individual. The current options of dutiful daughterhood, a medical career, and marriage do not appeal; she has another mind: “She could feel it in her head, a swelling thing that filled her skull, impishly and secretly telling her that all these things were worthless and that she wanted something else, something different, unknown but definite, specific yet undefined, something she could draw with the tip

of her pen on the blank sheet of paper like an individual black line" (60). Bahiah's individuality increases when she enters a relationship with Saleem Ibrahim. Until now, "no one ever penetrated her true essence" (8). Saleem offers her the key to his apartment and in one sense it is also the key to her identity, yet one must remember that it is her *choosing* to go to him that is the true thing that helps her find herself; he just provides the opportunity. Bahiah is in no way dependent on Saleem; actually their relationship before his arrest is too brief to allow this to happen. Further, Saleem only echoes beliefs that Bahiah held long before. She gains ever more control over her own life from the point at which they meet.

In fact, Saleem is another of those characters by which El Saadawi defies critics who see only negative portrayals of men in her fiction. He is extremely unpatriarchal and rather mystical, this latter attribute as important as the first, perhaps even allowing the first. El Saadawi can thereby develop the idea that these two characters form a special relationship because each is tapped into the primal forces that permit a person truly to be themselves. In a continuation of the goddess motif, Saleem becomes a god of sorts, a complementary power to that of Bahiah. Indeed, his Islamic name means healthy, safe, complete.<sup>3</sup> Immediately upon their meeting--significantly, at a student art exhibition including Bahiah's creative work, upon which Saleem congratulates her--Bahiah knows that Saleem will be able to see her real self. Initially she fears this, yet is not hesitant; in this instance fear becomes a positive force, driving her on to knowledge. Although we learn while reading of Bahiah's awakening that she has within her all the resources she really needs, Saleem is a catalyst in her progress toward selfhood. Bahiah hears her name called in a few scenes before she and Saleem meet, and she responds positively to her name being called because it helps give her identity as an individual in the universe and among others: "What an extraordinary power, which could distinguish her name from all other names! What a miraculous power that picked out her body from among the millions of other floating bodies!" (34-35). Whether Bahiah is having a premonition of her relationship with Saleem or whether his being linked to a mystical force is

being suggested through this disembodied voice is unclear and, ultimately, unimportant, just as it is not important whether Bahiah's sensing that someone is behind her, following in her path as she goes to school, is a psychical awareness that Saleem exists or another manifestation of his mystical power. What is crucial and what these scenes establish is that Bahiah and Saleem join with each other because both are connected to the ancient forces of nature from which their contemporaries have become divorced.

El Saadawi develops this idea artfully in her descriptions of Bahiah. Bahiah has strong, black eyes, a color that is significant because "Black is the origin, the root that reaches back into the depths of the earth" (9). When her eyes meet those of authorities such as Dr. Alawi, she is able to hold her ground. Her eyes are not "defeated" like those of her fellow women students: "When she raised her eyes, her gaze was level, and no power on earth could make her lower them" (77). Bahiah's eyes are inquisitive, searching; "They probed the minute creatures drifting through the world, searching among the thousands of similar beings for the extraordinary face, for the eyes that would see her and make her visible--the black eyes that would pick her face out from among the others, and extricate her body from among the millions of bodies lost in the world" (51). At such times she is quite like Isis, seeking the other being who will make her complete. In Bahiah's case this will be Saleem.

Something else that distinguishes Bahiah from other Egyptian women her age and aligns her further with goddesses is her physical strength. She has "straight bones and strong muscles, and could walk firmly, swinging her legs freely and striding out confidently" (7). Most modern women hobble along because of their long skirts; Bahiah wears trousers. Unlike the other women medical students, whose "suppressed feminine laughter [is] like gasps of eternally unquenchable deprivation" (13), Bahiah "stamped the ground hard with one foot and realized that she wanted to do something concrete with her life, something definite" (25). Images of Bahiah stamping, striding confidently, and standing with one leg upon the rung of the dissecting table (a pose considered suitable only for the male professor and definitely "a posture unbecoming

for a woman” [7]) recur throughout the novel as part of a motif for the strong female.

Yet another resource Bahiah shares with the goddesses is creativity. In particular, Bahiah’s art, her painting, allows her to metaphorically heal. El Saadawi introduces a doubling motif between Bahiah and a young boy that, in alluding to a different aspect of the Isis/Osiris myth, lets her develop another attribute of Bahiah’s character. When she sees a one-legged boy who sold matches, combs, and pins on the trams run over by one, his spreading blood reminds Bahiah of her own blood spot when first menstruating. The blood is significant, a sign of sacrifice to society in both her and the boy’s instances. They each have served as scapegoats. Other passengers rejoice that they were not the one hit by the tram. Bahiah herself, reflecting on the accident later in her room, turns her medical school skull to the wall, a sign of her guilt--despite her own victimization--at being part of this society.

In an attempt to heal society, just as Isis attempted to restore order to the chaos Seth introduced to the world in killing Osiris, Bahiah metaphorically restores the boy to life by putting him back together as she paints him in the middle of the night. She “slaps” the other passengers’ faces with her brush as she paints the boy to life, “dragging the torn body out from under the wheels and filling the slender skull with flesh. The two sunken holes became a pair of black eyes like her own” (32-33)-- further sign of Bahiah’s association with the boy as an outcast from contemporary society and another reference to the Isis/Osiris brother/sister relationship. El Saadawi shows us that it is not modern male-taught medicine but Bahiah’s own talents, the ones connected to the primal female sources of creativity in her ancient culture, that are healing.

This idea that painting organizes the universe, as the gods and goddesses once did through their creative acts, appears several times in the novel. Bahiah’s “wide open eyes could detect the faintest of lines, even a dot. Her fingers could cut the black universe into two with the tip of her brush, making a white line, a hair’s breadth, like the horizon separating the earth from the sky and day from night: a white line tinged with a dark deep red the colour of blood” (50). This passage has

multiple functions. It alludes to Nut and Geb, goddess of the sky and god of earth. Nut and Geb were sister and brother, the second generation of goddesses and gods in the Heliopolitan Ennead. Nut is depicted with hands and feet at opposite horizons and her naked body stretched over the earth, which Geb represented. She gave birth daily to the sun, who passed along her body up to her mouth; Nut then ate the sun and it disappeared until the next day, when she gave birth to it again. El Saadawi refers to this distinction of day from night in Bahiah's painting, a painting that emphasizes the line of separation between Nut and Geb as a horizon "tinged" with blood. According to myth, Nut and Geb were born embracing each other and their father, Shu, came between them to place Nut in her position overarching the earth. The separation of sister and brother becomes a violent one in El Saadawi's rendition of the myth, hence the blood red aspect of the dividing line. In this sense too it echoes the division of Isis from Osiris that resulted from his being murdered.

The passage describing Bahiah's painting recalls also "that hair's breadth as fine as air" that separates Bahiah from Saleem at their first meeting (42). This is another subtle association of the human couple with the divine. Shu, we remember, was air. Nut and Geb were in love with each other, just as their children, Isis and Osiris, were devoted wife and husband as well as sister and brother. El Saadawi makes use of the more dramatic story of separation between Isis and Osiris in her plot. When first reading, however, the close connection between Bahiah and Saleem could be that of any pair of sister-brother goddesses and gods, which is an aspect of the text that serves to strengthen its mythological aspects more than it might confuse readers.

When Bahiah initially sees Saleem, he is standing on the threshold of the student art gallery exactly as Bahiah characteristically stands at the dissecting table, his right foot raised higher than the left. They resemble each other in numerous physical ways: "Only in a mirror had she been aware of being seen by [such] a pair of black eyes--her own" (36); "His palm was the same size as her own, so were his long thin fingers" (39); Bahiah and Saleem are the same height; and "His leg was just

like hers" (39). Their hands are the same temperature, and "The blood coursing through the veins of his hand beat with the pulse in her own wrist, like the earth beneath her and the air around her" (39). This last phrase could again be associating Bahiah with Nut, with Geb beneath her and Shu, her father and god of air, holding her up. When, soon after meeting Saleem, Bahiah walks toward his apartment with him, references to the special forces of the gods and goddesses increase.

El Saadawi's descriptions border on magic realism as she conveys Bahiah's personal growth: "She was overcome by that mysterious feeling that something momentous was about to happen to her: the chunk of brick underfoot would suddenly peel away from the mountain and her body would be drawn by the dreadful force of the earth and would shatter into little pieces, like particles" (44). Her hesitancy to complete the trip at this point leads Saleem to tell Bahiah she'll end up like all the others, living a routine, conforming life, falling "into the trap of the mundane, like countless millions of others" (47). However, just as fear drove her on to knowledge previously, Bahiah goes to Saleem's apartment the next day. Saleem's home is in the Muqattam hills, and El Saadawi's depiction of the landscape suggests Nut once more: "The street lengthened and protruded from the belly of the mountain like an outstretched arm. Above it, caught between the mountains and the buildings, a strip of sky formed a second arm. The two huge arms, like those of the mythical god, stretched out before her like the gaping jaws of fate, extending toward the horizon, lying in wait for her, willing her body to turn to them" (57). The image of the arms and gaping jaws does remind of Nut, who, in one version of the myth, eats all her children, and the phrase "willing her body to turn to them" suggests both Bahiah's earlier yearning to be reconnected with her biological mother and her turning toward her ancient mother, in the form of the goddess Nut. This could, then, associate Bahiah more directly with Isis, Nut's daughter.

And indeed, when Bahiah and Saleem are alone together in his apartment for the first time, their physical melding is like the bonding of Isis and Osiris, which was a spiritual as well as physical connection: "[Bahiah] heard the violent pounding of

[Saleem's] heart. It sounded like her own heartbeat. Everything of him that reached her senses became like the touch of her own body. Only with great difficulty could she distinguish her body from his: temperature, smell, complexion, the flow of blood in the veins--all were as similar as if they were in one body" (67). Being with Saleem leads to Bahiah's living--"She had torn away the membrane separating her from life" (67), an allusion of course to losing her virginity. Yet sex is downplayed in this scene, and later, when Bahiah reflects on how their relationship has changed her sense of self, "She was not even aware of being female. She did not consider Saleem male. She saw her real self in his eyes. Going to him was an assertion of her freedom and choice" (97). With Saleem, Bahiah "would be in the grip of a new, wild, nameless desire: the desire to be her real self" (97). El Saadawi has employed mythology to connect her character Bahiah to the powerful natural forces that allow her to attain full selfhood. Going to Saleem's apartment was a big step for Bahiah, one she consciously made in an effort to leave the old Bahiah Shaheen behind and become the person she wants to be. As El Saadawi puts it, "It would mean that she was Bahiah Shaheen no longer, that she had become that other, stronger being, equally desired and feared" (57). Bahiah muses that having sex with Saleem was "the only real thing in her life. It was not an accident, a dream, an act of fate and destiny or mere chance, but the only act she had ever performed intentionally, the only thing she had actually wanted to do" (72). While the relationship with Saleem may seem an unusual, even heretical message for a feminist writer to present, we must remember that up to this point, "None of [Bahiah's] life was of her doing or her own choice" (72). Instead, "Everyone told her what they wanted. No one asked her what she wanted. In fact, she had never wanted any of the things they wanted for her" (73). Her relationship with Saleem, however brief, is El Saadawi's example of a good relationship entered willingly, quite in contrast to the one Bahiah imagines she would have with the cousin her father had picked as a potential suitor. In terms of all relationships, Bahiah feels that "only human choice gives this bond any meaning" (59). El Saadawi thereby criticizes arranged marriages and reinforces the importance

of a woman's having choice in career, lifestyle, and relationship.

Truly, her relationship with Saleem is an important way that Bahiah distinguishes herself from the other women she knows, whose entire existence seems wasteful to her. She wonders that they don't see the futility of their lives and strive to change, as she does. The resources for doing so lie within, if people would only access them:

She realized that people have other senses, as yet undiscovered, that they lie latent in the inner self. But these other senses are more capable of feeling than the senses that are known to us. They are the real, natural senses, but they have never been developed by our upbringing, or by education, regulations, laws, traditions or indeed by anything at all. They are like a river flowing free without dams, or the rain pouring down from the sky, facing no barrier or obstacle until it is soaked up by the soil. (65)

These natural senses, linked through El Saadawi's imagery to the inundation of the Nile, call forth the mythological. The flood is thought to have been caused by Isis's tears over the loss of Osiris. The power of the goddess, the power of womanhood is the source of Bahiah's new-found strength. The novel builds a tremendous portrait of a woman overcoming the oppression of her society by developing her inner strength, a strength that comes from awareness of one's natural senses, to use El Saadawi's term, and the equally important understanding that these natural senses are *good*, not evil. It is modern society that labels them evil, that thwarts their development and demands their repression. Here El Saadawi neatly exposes the corruption of a positive force due to misapprehension: Bahiah realizes what society--and to some extent she herself--imagines about the power of woman: "It must be dangerous and frightening" (74). Bahiah is determined, however, to overcome external influences and ends up carrying this power "in her body as an inseparable part of her. Sometimes she would forget it and consider it one of the myths that had filled her head as a child. At other times it would become an inevitable naked truth

like a live wire; when she touched it her body would shiver and tremble violently” (74). The allusion to women’s sexual organs is clear. We are told at one point that Bahiah had avoided circumcision because the village midwife had died and her family had moved to Cairo. Retaining all of her sexual organs increases Bahiah’s strength. Escaping that patriarchal control gives Bahiah access to a powerful sexuality, connection to the natural forces that the goddesses represent.

Her subsequent strength allows Bahiah to join a student demonstration at the medical school and at last gives her the feeling of “becoming part of the infinite extended body of humanity” (82). Perhaps another allusion to the primary gods and goddesses of which the physical world was comprised, it is on another level a representation of how personal completeness permits honest connection with others. The protesting students are upright and strong, and Bahiah “found herself with them and part of them, like part of an immense body with one heart and a single set of features” (82). She too calls out, with strong body and voice, “Egypt shall be free!” and finds the feeling like that of her mother holding her and of being with Saleem. It is not unusual to find an association to a mother in a passage making use of nationalism, where Egypt is the mother-country, but her earlier references make it clear that El Saadawi refers too to the mother goddesses. And, importantly, El Saadawi stretches the association to include a lover. Not coincidentally, Isis was revered as both an ideal mother and devoted wife. Bahiah’s love for Saleem--and the self-love it awakens--allows her to love her fellow students and her country, and increases her power to that of the immortal goddesses: “At that moment she felt she could pierce iron with her body, take bullets and poisoned daggers in her chest, and that no power on earth could make her body fall, stop her legs from moving on, or prevent her voice from calling out for freedom. She was determined that there would be no going back; no power on earth could stand between her and her freedom” (83).

But Egypt has not yet come to the stage where all can develop as Bahiah did, or where gender and class don’t matter. Government powers stand between the Egyptian people and their freedom; thus the demonstration is put down, students are

killed, Bahiah and Saleem are arrested. Imprisoned, her hard-won strength does not fail her: “She felt a strange power, not illusory but real, with a tangible material density. . . . She would not break, merely bend under pressure. She knew that her body could not withdraw from life. Her heart would continue to pound in ever faster bursts” (91). Bahiah discovers that “The body acquires this extraordinary ability when it rids itself of its false human consciousness and achieves true awareness” (91). Her connection to the natural senses has brought her to an honest relationship with her physical self, which in turn fuels her individuality and resilience.

Patriarchal society’s control is tenacious and omnipresent, however, like the policeman on the corner. It is Bahiah’s father who obtains her release from jail, and it is her male relatives who decide she must leave school and marry--this will, they hope, subdue her. Bahiah thinks, “Fate was her father, who owned her just as he owned his underwear. He might or might not educate her, for he was the one who paid the fees. He could marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorized him” (96). The degrading association of Bahiah to her father’s underwear emphasizes women’s current status and is a shocking contrast to the previous goddess imagery. Bahiah is married off for a 300 LE dowry, and not surprisingly, the car that transports her to her husband’s home after the ceremony is likened to a police car, her father and the groom within it the policemen.

Yet El Saadawi holds out hope, a hope based on a woman drawing on her own powers. Bahiah defies her husband on the wedding night, kicking him so hard in the stomach with those stamping feet of hers that he lands on the floor. “This strong foot could not possibly belong to a female,” her husband thinks, for “this foot was as firm and strong as a bullet” (101). Bahiah openly tries to get her husband to reject her so the marriage will end before it has begun: “She wanted to be cast out, to have no mother or father, and no family to protect her. For protection itself was the real danger: it was an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and of her very existence” (102). El Saadawi emphasizes the harm that family, in their perpetuation of the status quo, does to the individual. And so she has Bahiah leave her husband

to join an underground group of radical students who distribute pamphlets against the government. Living in her small attic room away from her family's oppression, Bahiah paints freely; "The pressure of her hand as it coiled around the brush gave her a mysterious joy that spread from her fingers to her arms, neck and head as if along a taut electric wire" (117). Her art, her creativity, allows her to shape her own life: "Shortly before dawn she moved her brush over the painting, changing the lines and creating new moments in her life, new moments that she chose to create through her own will. With that deliberate movement across the paper--in any and all directions--she destroyed other wills and designed her own lines and features" (118). Bahiah even sells her paintings; there is a shopkeeper who likes her work and buys from her regularly. What her father saw as a waste of time enables Bahiah to live on her own.

Isis-like, Bahiah devotes herself to finding Saleem, whom she has not seen since the arrest. When still, she is described like an ancient Egyptian sculpture: "her feet were solid like a granite statue" (117). When she moves her strength becomes active: "She came out and walked on with her straight, strong legs. She knew the sound of her footsteps, one after the other, as she stamped the ground in defiance. She would lift one foot high and bring it down hard as if penetrating the earth and defying the whole world around her. She would kick anyone who approached her and gouge out the eyes of anyone who dared to touch her or even to stir the air around her" (113-114). Interestingly, because she wears pants and strides confidently, people of all ages and both genders stare at Bahiah and ridicule her. "Just look at what Western women are like!" the women say (120), as if an Egyptian woman can't be confident. This societal attitude is underscored by the hypocrisy of an old man praying on his mat while slyly looking around for women to leer at.

Bahiah looks for Saleem as Isis had looked for Osiris's body: "Her eyes searched earth, trees and sky for those eyes that were capable of seeing her. . . . She knew he was there, like the sky, the air, the sun, the moon and the stars. He was part of the universe" (112-113). Paralleling Isis's lament over the loss of her lover, Bahiah "breathed [Saleem] every minute, she felt his touch on her body as she walked, sat

or slept" (113). And too, like Isis, Bahiah leaves off mourning to become active: she "pulled herself together. In that determined gesture, she realized that she would go to him, she would devote her life to going to him, and nothing could stand between them. . ." (113). She does not fear harm to herself, having come to know that "[t]rue indifference comes when one realizes the futility of one's intentional life and untimed death, the futility of living indefinitely in chains. True indifference comes when one knows that death may come at any moment" (109). Her freedom of choice drives her to walk toward police who are following her and let herself be arrested. Bahiah determines to continue her search for Saleem as she is taken to prison.

The Isis-Osiris myth ends with their reunion. The final image in *Two Women in One* is that of handcuffs, literally restraining Bahiah as she reaches out for Saleem, imagining his presence. El Saadawi only suggests, for a fleeting moment between the covers of a work of fiction, that a return to the cultural climate of Isis, where powerful women join *with* men, instead of serving them, may heal modern Egypt. She offers Bahiah as a role model, and the brief relationship of Bahiah and Saleem as an example of a respectful relationship between a man and a woman. Yet El Saadawi will not ignore the actuality of present-day Egypt, where handcuffs hold women back and prisons restrain men. All her life Bahiah had met with societal disapproval of feminine confidence, sexuality, and individuality. From an early age she was taught by her mother, father, and men on the street that a woman is supposed to loathe and repress her sexuality while at the same time be available to satisfy the sexual appetites of her husband. Through Bahiah, El Saadawi explores what it is like to seek selfhood in a society that demands uniformity and self-effacement from women. She has shown that a reconnection with one's natural senses--in this instance achieved through a connection with one's mythological heritage--and an overcoming of the distortions that society places on those natural senses is the path to a society that respects the individual.

El Saadawi's allusions to ancient Egypt are one way of suggesting that humans must emphasize their similarities and shared origins. In *The Circling Song*,

to which we now turn, she employs other means in analyzing gender roles, in particular the utilization of oral literary forms along with the techniques of modern fiction.

## CHAPTER 4

### **FUSING FORM AND CONTENT: *THE CIRCLING SONG***

In a recent speech, Nawal El Saadawi urged her listeners to use creativity in throwing off the negative influences of “global and local powers of domination and exploitation” that “help to veil our brains with one myth after another”; we must “acquire . . . knowledge by ourselves, from our own experience in the daily struggle against those powers globally, locally, and in the family. . . . This,” she said, “is creativity” (“Dissidence” 160). El Saadawi’s own creativity involves using fiction to convey truth to her readers, and she is always expanding the genre of the novel—pushing it, reshaping it, finding suitable ways to make it convey her ideas. One of her ongoing innovations is the changing of Arabic language. Since Arabic is “male-oriented” (as English can be with terms like “mankind” and using the personal pronoun “he” in general references when both men and women are the subject), “we are still using a language that is alienating us,” El Saadawi explains. “I am really trying to change the language. Because when you change the content, you have to change the form.”<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago I questioned El Saadawi about using techniques of oral narrative in her novels. Early Arabic literature was, as indeed were most literatures of the world, oral. Fables, prose narratives and legends about demi-mortal figures and heroes and heroines, and poetry were part of this tradition. Folklorists transcribed some of it, and certain of its attributes were absorbed into written literature: frame narrators, a cyclical structure, repetition. I wondered if El Saadawi saw any movement in feminism from the oral culture into published writing, my thinking being that this might be a source of power for women writers. Recalling the oral tradition and stories told by her grandmother and aunts in the village where she grew up, El Saadawi observed that “in a way there is a shift from the oral culture to the

writing, to the educated, because of the increased rate of education among women and among men” of the younger generations. But her subsequent comments about oral tradition surprised me:

And this is not always positive. Sometimes oral traditions are very positive, sometimes, but sometimes oral traditions are quite negative.

We have both. We have many proverbs in Arabic that we inherited that are quite negative, very patriarchal and class oriented. And there are other proverbs that are very, very progressive. Some people worship the oral tradition. No, I look to it very critically, and some are quite positive, some are negative. (Personal Interview)

The beginnings of Arabic literature date to around the 6th century A.D., when “a vigorous oral poetic tradition” can be found.<sup>2</sup> Here we find rhythmic structure and, when artistic prose forms such as the *maquama* developed a few hundred years later, rhyme.<sup>3</sup> But the orality upon which El Saadawi draws can be traced back beyond the early Arab culture to ancient Egyptian civilization. The terms used to refer to the historical divisions of ancient Egypt also serve to tell us the primary language in use at that time, which was, chronologically, Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic.<sup>4</sup> There were written texts in the four scripts of hieroglyphic, hieratic, Demotic, and Coptic, and the scripts were used to record both religious and secular texts at varying times.<sup>5</sup> The Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead are some of the oldest written texts, and they indicate an earlier, oral literature. The earliest recovered Pyramid Text (so termed because they are funerary texts appearing on the interior walls of pyramids) is that of King Unas, around 2350 B.C.E.<sup>6</sup> M. Abdel-Kader Hatem speculates that a written literature existed before the Pyramid Texts and that “a well-developed oral literature” probably preceded this (43–44). William Stevenson Smith notes that the Pyramid Texts “seem frequently to hint at actual historical events” and “portions of it are thought to be very much older” than late Dynasty V when King Unas’s tomb was inscribed (16). Coffin Texts evolved from these Pyramid Texts in the Middle Kingdom and appear not only

on the coffins of kings, but on the coffins of anyone who could afford such artistry. The Book of the Dead came next, a funerary text recorded on papyrus and so named because its spells were intended to guide the dead through the underworld.

The spells, hymns and rituals that appear in these three forms of the earliest Egyptian written texts are a type of poetry. Scholars believe that their being titled as “sayings or “songs” indicates their being part of oral tradition.<sup>7</sup> Some qualities of these ancient texts cannot be determined. For example, since vowels were not recorded until Coptic script was used, we have no way of knowing if poetry made use of rhyme or assonance.<sup>8</sup> But other techniques, such as rhythmic structure, repetition, and alternating speakers, are readily apparent. David Silverman’s collaborative study of ancient Egypt provides a rather full description of the early written literary texts, one that indicates strong connections to the oral. Short lines with “a rhythmic cadence that varies between rhetorical narrative and self-evidently metrical styles” would imply they were composed to be recited (102). Rhythm is created within lines by the use of alliteration and homophony and between lines with an echoing or contrasting of meaning. The ancient Egyptians were also fond of puns and double entendres, which went beyond “superficial verbal cleverness” to “represent a community of meaning,” a crucial aspect of “the verbal performance of ritual, magic and medicine, where they provided the association that gave force to the action” (102).

Considering these qualities of the written texts, it is not hard to accept Abdel-Kader Hatem’s declaration that much of early Egyptian literature was “transmitted orally” (70). He finds also that any form of literature in use at the present time--fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction of all types--has connections to earlier literature (55). This method of looking for the roots of modern literature’s forms accords with David Bynum’s methodology in tracing narrative patterns through time. For example, because data on ancient fables is limited, using available modern materials helps “supply the missing typological links between unsuspected multiforms of the same tale in an ancient literary compilation” (74-75). Bynum’s research in oral narrative

has uncovered patterns that will help us understand the structure of *The Circling Song*.

Taking a children's song as her reference point, El Saadawi creates a novel intricate in its interweaving, mirroring, doubling, and imagery. *The Circling Song* is one of her most innovative fictions, a complex and surreal book that works on so many levels at once that it engulfs the reader. Elements of the novel change, merge, and are divided as if in a kaleidoscope. The depiction of the fabulous has origins in oral fable (in fact, both words derive from the Latin *fabula*, a story), which, Bynum explains, often begins like an ordinary narrative but quickly becomes imbued with fantastical, not realistic, elements (52–53). As well, El Saadawi builds what could be described as alternative views of reality in this novel, and here observations that scholars have made about the ancient Egyptian vision of the world can help us understand the world of *The Circling Song*: it moved "seamlessly between the physical and the biological, the tangible and the metaphorical, the measurable and the mythological."<sup>9</sup> We should remember too the varying depictions of Egyptian gods and goddesses and explanations of nature; not meant to contradict one another, they rather are "alternative explanations of reality, each concentrating on separate aspects of a single force or element of nature."<sup>10</sup> And, as we have seen, everything was cyclical, whether on the small or grand scale. Looking at the children's song El Saadawi provides as a gloss for her novel will let us apply our knowledge of the oral literature and the beliefs of ancient Egypt as one way to unlock the meaning of *The Circling Song*.

The song, presented on the first page, introduces one of the protagonists, the main plot, and the initial setting. It alludes to ancient Egyptian deities, which are an important thematic element in the book. Plus, the song's structure is a microcosm of the overall structure of the novel.

Hamida had a baby,  
She named him Abd el-Samad,  
She left him by the canal bed,

The kite swooped down and snatched off his head!  
 Shoo! Shoo! Away with you!  
 O kite, O monkey snout!<sup>11</sup>

The above verse appears two and a half times in succession, ending in an ellipses that indicates it is repeated over and over again. The narrator tells us that the children singing this song are holding hands and dancing in a ring and that the stanza “repeated itself in a never-ending, unbroken cycle, as they turned round and round, and round” (7). The circling, fluid movement of the children and the song, neither of which has a definite end or beginning, convey exactly the movement of the plot and the protagonists--it will often be hard to tell when Hamida’s movements become those of her twin brother Hamido, and the reverse. This rhythm of plot and character depicts the fluidity between male and female that is El Saadawi’s aim. The end of the book circles back to the opening, a brilliant use of a key element of Egyptian fiction, repetition, but here done in a highly unorthodox way.

El Saadawi writes in the introduction that “the characteristics and structure of [*The Circling Song*] lived on in my imagination, like a dream that one has once had” (3). The book affected others similarly, who wrote to her, ““This little book has released so many of my innermost feelings! Why don’t you always write in this style?”” (4). Her response was that “every idea has its own particular mode of expression, and I made no attempt to impose this style on different thoughts or ideas” (4). When I asked El Saadawi about her novels, which to me seem innovative hybrids of what are labeled Eastern and Western genres of literature, she said that she could not really separate between what I called Eastern and Western literature and that she didn’t follow any school since she didn’t formally study literature or literary criticism. “I write because I love writing,” she told me, and enthusiastically explained herself:

I am a physician, a medical doctor, and I look to life very realistically and I don’t think that I write about genres of literature, or Eastern or Western. I *write*. And each novel is different totally from the others,

each type, you may have noticed--although the translation is not really like the Arabic--but you notice that in the Arabic, the novel, when you read the novel you see that it's totally different the way it's written from the others, because the subject is different, everything is different, the characters are different. So each novel is an organism. Usually I say it's like children, you know, you have a child because the novel is an organism, it's a human being, and it has its character, so the novel is independent of the other novels.

No one style dominates her work, she summed up; her way of writing differs according to what she is writing about (Personal Interview). This stylistic flexibility makes El Saadawi one of the most exciting novelists to read, for it allows her to push the genre in new directions each time she writes.

At the end of *The Circling Song*, the narrator observes that she cannot tell where song or circle begins or ends and likewise “do not know the end point of my tale. I am unable to define it precisely” (84). “In fact,” the narrator notes, “there is no ending, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the end and the beginning are adjoined in a single, looping strand; where that thread ends and where it begins can be discerned only with great difficulty” (84). This and subsequent passages repeat, with some slight changes, opening passages of the novel: “Yet I do not know the starting point of my tale. I am unable to define it precisely, for the beginning is not a point that stands out clearly. In fact, there is no beginning, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the beginning and the end are adjoined in a single, looping strand; where that thread starts and where it ends can be discerned only with great difficulty” (8). El Saadawi’s repetition of the full passage, with words referring to beginnings and endings appropriately changed, makes use of a standard technique yet significantly alters it to relate to the form of the narrative, which in turn relates to the novel’s themes.

Subsequent reflections by the narrator on writing pull us ever closer to these themes:

Here lies the difficulty of all beginnings, especially the beginning of a true story, of a story as truthful as truth itself, and as exact in its finest details as exactitude itself. Such exactitude requires of the author that he or she neither omit nor neglect a single point. For, in the Arabic language, even one point--a single dot--can completely change the essence of a word. Male becomes female because of a single dash or dot. Similarly, in Arabic the difference between 'husband' and 'mule,' or between 'promise' and 'scoundrel,' is no more than a single dot placed over a single form, an addition which transforms one letter into another. (8)

This passage launches us into the gender issues of the novel and prepares us for the circling between the fraternal twins Hamida and Hamido. We are alerted that words can prove to be as slippery as the concepts of gender and gender roles they signify. By the end of the novel they seem quite arbitrary.

In a 1989 review of several novels by El Saadawi, Fedwa Malti-Douglas observed, "El-Saadawi's characters act out stark and central issues in male/female power relations"; "sexual dynamics are the rule rather than the exception" ("An Egyptian" 5, 8). Her fictional studies of gender problems raise essential questions about how feminine and masculine are defined, what their boundaries and relationships are, and how "the paternal and maternal unbalance this explosive mixture" (8). In *The Circling Song*, El Saadawi puts these issues directly before us by having the narrator look at the face of one of the children who breaks away from the singing group. Was the child a boy or a girl? "I wasn't absolutely certain," the narrator says, "for children's faces--like those of old people--are sexless. It is in that phase between childhood and old age that gender must declare itself more openly" (10). Once the story begins we come to realize how much cruelty is enacted by and on people of that in-between stage. An institutionalized degradation and deprivation is based on the addition or subtraction of a dot to a word, signifying gender.

The ambiguity of these initial passages is another technique that forwards

theme throughout the novel. The narrator is aware of her creative process: "I fancied (and my fancy, at that particular moment, amounted to fact) that one of the children who were circling round as they sang in unison suddenly moved outside the circle" (9). Here is a basic premise of western Romantic fiction, that the imaginative construct is a permissible substitute for fact so long as it reveals "the truth of the human heart," to use Nathaniel Hawthorne's phrase. Actually, fiction is preferable, for it can convey more effectively a message of truth than can bald statement. The narrator of *The Circling Song* explains that because a narrator must begin somewhere, at a point, not a circle or dash, "scientific accuracy is unavoidable in this work of art which is my novel. But scientific accuracy can corrupt or distort a work of art. Yet perhaps that corruption or distortion is exactly what I want, and what I aim for in this story. Only then will it be as truthful, sincere and real as 'living life'" (8). This is the Romantic concept stretched, suggesting the kind of alteration that occurs when oral tales pass from one teller to another. Truth telling is difficult since candor, as our narrator tells us, is seldom welcome:

Nevertheless, I have promised myself to tell the truth. Speaking candidly is hard work, I know, and persisting in it requires ever-greater efforts and more and more sacrifices. One must give up trying to be attractive or acceptable at every moment; one must even accept that people may find a certain degree of ugliness in what we are or in what we say and do. Sometimes they may find us so ugly that we become repulsive to them. But this is the struggle demanded of freedom fighters, and also of anyone who wants to produce a good work of art, which is what I am trying to do. (11)

That truth is unwelcome to many people is evident in other works by El Saadawi, such as *Woman at Point Zero*, the subject of the next chapter, and of course energizes her desire to pursue and present it. The narrative that follows this particular statement about truth in *The Circling Song* is indeed an ugly one--or rather, a beautifully told story of an ugly society.

In a wonderful sense, Hamida is born of the song, springs out of the circle of singing children as if she is created at that moment from the song. Her pregnancy, like that of the Hamida in the song, drives the plot initially. A note to the translation tells us that the baby's name, Abd el-Samad, is a male one meaning "Servant of the Everlasting," and that "*sumuud*, from the same root, also suggests 'defiance' and 'resistance'" (87). The canal bed lets us know that the first setting is a village, and Hamida's leaving the Servant of the Everlasting there seems like delivering him to the gods. The swooping kite could allude to Isis, although when she took the form of the bird it was to fly in search of Osiris's body parts for reassembly. On the other hand, Isis is sometimes depicted wearing a vulture headdress, and both she and her sister Nepthys are sometimes portrayed as vultures in tomb drawings, guarding the body of the dead person now joined with Osiris. The kite could also allude to yet another bird, the ibis, one of the forms Thoth takes. The other form Thoth takes is a baboon, which suggests Thoth as one possibility for whom the "monkey snout" of the song addresses. This association is quite important, for Thoth is the divine scribe who records the outcome of the weighing of the deceased's heart against the feather of Ma'at. He is god of wisdom and writing; inventor of hieroglyphics, arithmetic and astronomy; and record keeper for the gods. Pointedly, he is believed to be the "source of rhetoric, names for objects, and the alphabet."<sup>12</sup> Also known as the god of science and medicine, it was Thoth who gave Isis the power to bring Osiris back to life and cure Horus of scorpion stings. As deputy to Ra, Thoth had authority over men and gods and fearlessly defended wronged gods to enact justice; Pyramid Texts refer to him as a peacemaker and a Coffin Text calls him the "Bull of Justice."<sup>13</sup> As well, Thoth was the heart of Ra, Ra's source of wisdom, and thus "had his place in the solar boat, where along with Ma'at, he set the course each day."<sup>14</sup> This role too suggests much in reference to the plot of *The Circling Song*: "As a moon god, Thoth used his knowledge of mathematics to measure the seasons and regulate time. He surveyed the heavens and planned the shape of the earth; it was his will that kept the earth and everything on it in equilibrium."<sup>15</sup>

Hapy was another god to whom “monkey snout” could refer. The ape-headed son of Horus, and thus Isis’s grandson, Hapy and his brothers are depicted in the judgment scene along with Osiris, Ma’at, and Thoth. All of these allusions taken together suggest the mythic aspects of the world in which the novel will occur, providing us a commentary on the actions of the humans in the story as well as offering a way to read the structure of the novel as an ancient narrative pattern that most likely began in oral form: a fabulous journey from the real to another world, which the deity allusions in the song suggest will be the underworld. Certainly it is a dark world, where Hamida and Hamido are wronged, justice and peace are upset, and the universe seems unstable. Metaphorically, they seem to be traveling without the Book of the Dead to guide them safely.

Through her identification with the young girl she sees breaking away from the circle of singing children, the narrator brings the reader close to the sexual violence Hamida will endure. The face of the child reminds the narrator of her own, *is her own we are told*, and she follows Hamida into a house without pausing to knock “as strangers to a household usually do,” stumbling on the step “just as I have every time” (13). Here the narrator stops being a separate character in the novel and blends into what I would describe as a narrative *perspective*, one that witnesses the rape that occurs while Hamida sleeps and then follows her and her brother through subsequent experiences.

The passage into the house could be the movement into another realm. Even though for most of the ancient period Egyptians viewed death as a continuation of earthly life with the dead having achieved divine status, the Book of the Dead and other funerary literature tells us the journey to the land of the dead was a dangerous and complex one. One recent study describes how the soul, trying to reach the Hall of Judgment of Osiris, “risked destruction by hostile serpents and demons and by ferocious doorkeepers who yielded passage only to those who knew their names”; then, “at the Hall of Judgment, the soul was obliged to name not only doorkeepers but doorbolts and floorboards as well.”<sup>16</sup> I do not propose that *The Circling Song*

should be read as an allegory of the ancient Egyptian passage through the after life, but I do suggest that the dangers which Hamida and Hamido encounter on their journeys can be equated with the perils of the death journey: both instances threaten destruction of the body and annihilation of the soul.

As Hamida innocently sleeps, a candy dissolving in her mouth and a coin clutched in her hand, a large form comes panther-like through the dark and rapes her. Bruised, in pain, she fastens on the lingering smell of the man's tobacco, a smell that will be associated later with some male relative, just as now "she could make out the features of the face clearly enough to recognize their resemblance to those of her father or brother, one of her uncles or cousins, or another man--any man" (15). This extension to any man becomes manifest as the novel proceeds and Hamida suffers sexual violence at the hand of most men she meets. Everything connects back to the candy and the coin, for the sweets of childhood come at a price: the image of a shopkeeper demanding payment and beating Hamida with a stick is symbolic of rape throughout the book.

El Saadawi uses repetition of phrasing, imagery, and scene throughout the novel to underscore the connection between sister and brother and hence show how a patriarchal society that allows, even encourages violence toward women harms its male members too. Hamida becomes pregnant from the rape and her mother forces her out of the village, another act executed in darkness, pushing her onto the night train to Cairo. The rape, pregnancy, and expulsion make her an adult, marked externally by the woman's black *tarha*, a long piece of cloth for wrapping over the head and body, that her mother gives her to hide her swollen abdomen. Hamido becomes an adult from suffering Hamida's absence and by the gift of a knife (a symbolic penis) and an order (again, given at night) from his father to kill his sister because "Only blood washes out shame" (27).

Fedwa Malti-Douglas points out that *The Circling Song* "rewrites and reinterprets one of the key gender-defining cultural 'texts' of modern Egyptian society, the popular ballad of 'Shafiq wa-Mitwalli,'" in which a sister's "sexual

improprieties” bring shame on her family and thus her brother kills her, “win[ning] social approval for his act” (*Men, Women* 69). Indeed, much of my reading about Islamic law, the *sharia* which dictates personal comportment in much of Arab society, indicates that the blame for premarital sexual relations--even in the case of rape--is placed on the woman. In her novel, El Saadawi makes evident that *both* brother and sister are affected negatively by such cultural beliefs and punishments. And in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi boldly states that men as well as women are “victims of a society that segregates the sexes, and that considers sex a sin and a shame which can only be practised within the framework of an official marriage contract” (13). Since masturbation, prostitution, homosexuality, and sexual relations among the unmarried are “severely condemned by society,” men may turn to their female relatives (14). The problem is exacerbated because the time between sexual maturity and marriage is increasing in Egypt due to economic reasons (lack of employment, scarce housing, high rent, and a rising cost of living). “Most female children are exposed to incidents of this type,” El Saadawi explains about incestuous molestation, and most are afraid to tell someone about it, “since, if there is any punishment to be meted out, it will always end up by being inflicted on her. It is she alone who loses her honour and her virginity” (14).

As part of the continuous cycle of the novel, at the same moment Hamida disembarks in the city, Hamido steps on the night train back in the village in pursuit. Once in Cairo, Hamida’s hunger leads her to steal a loaf of bread. When a policeman grabs her arm, she attempts to use the *tarha* to shield herself, leaving only one eye exposed, but as with other eyes in this novel, El Saadawi lets the description carry a pointed message: “. . .its look of bafflement still alight with the innocent sparkle of childhood: the gleam of an eye that had always been closed, and was now opening for the first time on to the infinite world” (29). What Hamida sees is rows of yellow brass buttons on the uniform of a representative of the law, buttons that become probing eyes as the man feels her breast while forcing her through the streets to his room. Once there Hamida asks who he is and begs to be let go; he responds, “I’m the

government" and tells her she is already condemned (32). And indeed she is, for he rapes her.

Hamido arrives in Cairo and soon he too has a run-in with those brass buttons. He is abducted into the soldier corps where first he is beaten on the head with a police stick and then his head is shaved, scenes that symbolically parallel Hamida's rape. Hunger distends his stomach in a mock pregnancy, a suggestion that poverty puts men in a situation similar to that of women: they become objects for abuse. Memories of the past blend with present experience, something Hamida undergoes as well. When Hamido is taught to use a gun it reminds him of when a ewe was killed at home: a voice mocks, as had his father, "Crying like a woman, hunh?" (37). A further connection to the lowly position of women comes when Hamido is whipped to the ground, kicked and spit on, which actions are "followed immediately by a familiar curse--an epithet pertaining to female genitalia--and then by a fierce kick with the blunt toe of a heavy boot . . ." (38). Obtrusive eyes seek him out: "Somewhere in the vicinity, there is always an eye which takes notice of whatever is going on. Observing things, staring with uninhibited intrusiveness into the lives--or deaths--of others, it gives the living no space to enjoy life, nor the dead respite in which to enjoy death" (38). When he sees the eye Hamido pulls his legs together to shield his genitals just as Hamida had tried to protect her female body with the *tarha*. A passage on Hamido needing to stay in line with the corps might well be extended to his (and everyone's) position in society: "A misstep would distort the rank. And when one rank gets out of order, naturally the others become misshapen too. And this spells disaster right through" (38). Men of the lower ranks of society like Hamido, equated with women and treated accordingly, had best realize their position and accept it.

As the novel progresses, this message is carried out in full. Life and death become confused as Hamido is killed yet lives on, and gender is confused when an official records his name incorrectly as Hamida. This is where El Saadawi begins heavy employment of the fabulous. The novel breaks away from any pretense of

realism, although its subject matter of abuse is real enough. The story is best taken symbolically, with Hamido beginning another life--or journeying through an afterlife of sorts--as a woman. A passage echoes the narrator's comments near the opening of the novel about gender: ". . . the letters of some names are similar, particularly as certain names given to females can be distinguished from male names only by the single-letter, feminine ending. . . . In other words, with a mere stroke of the pen, man becomes woman" (42). Thus, with a stroke of her pen, El Saadawi transforms Hamido into Hamida.

The original Hamida reenters the plot as a hard working maid, unable to escape sexual abuse wherever she is. Even in her dreams, when she imagines herself back home in the village, the dream always turns to violation: "Everything becomes compounded into a single object, a single heavy stick in the shopkeeper's hand, striking blow after blow. . ." (45). In her waking life in Cairo Hamida is exposed to the seedy underside of wealthy people's lives. As a maid she must, of course, use the back entrance to her master's apartment, and significantly, "The servants' stairs spiral crookedly; at every twisting bend is a dark crevice wide enough to hold a secret crime. . ." (45). Garbage is left here, and Hamida learns "that one's garbage increases as one's position in society rises" (46). The rich attempt to hide their dark deeds, which often involve abusing servants, on the back stairs. Hamida alone retains the senses and strengths the supposedly "civilized" have lost through their corruption (55).

The distinction between true and false honor comes out when Hamida is violated by her master while his wife's dead body lies in another room. This works as a metaphor for how living people can be as putrid in their characters as a corpse is in its physical nature, for the dead wife seems able to see what is going on and, blaming Hamida for seducing her husband, has the girl thrown into the streets. Just as she had been blamed by her own parents for the incestuous rape, once again she is at fault merely because she is a woman: ". . . her body was the crime. They took the body away and left her the crime, like bees sucking at a flower blossom, they take

draughts of the nectar and then reject the sucked-out remains" (60). The image of a once-beautiful blossom ravaged to the point of destruction fits Hamida's situation aptly. Her Islamic name, after all, means blackened, barren, lifeless.<sup>17</sup> It is no wonder that after repeated abuses sadness is what gives Hamida strength; sadness is described as her natural child.

Hamido reenters the story clothed in a *gallabiya*, a long robe-like garment worn by both men and women. The connection to his sister builds as he too becomes a domestic servant and walks leaning to one side as Hamida does because of toting a vegetable basket. El Saadawi increases the surrealistic aspect of the narrative through several references to ewes--significantly, female animals of sacrifice. As brother and sister, in separate yet parallel instances, participate in the slaughtering of a ewe, both of them seem to be slaughtered as well. Again, this can be taken symbolically rather than literally. The ewe's panic at her impending butchering reminds Hamida of her own circumcision, which action is described like a butchering. Cleaning the ewe's heart evokes a memory of Hamida's first menstrual period, which was by no means a joyous event since it was soon followed by her rape. As it had in *Two Women in One*, the onset of menstruation makes a woman a sexual object, and one who is blamed for her own sexuality. Accordingly, Hamido associates the death of the ewe with his order to kill Hamida for her pregnancy, but since he so closely identifies with Hamida--indeed, could be said to have *become* Hamida by this point in the narrative--these thoughts are mixed with those of his own imagined slaughter.

We are invited to read Hamida and Hamido's experiences on a universal level, as standing for many such children who are forced prematurely into adulthood by the horrible circumstances their society permits. The idea that they have been on that voyage to the land of the dead comes forth:

Such is the status of children born in defiance of the government employee who determines birth dates. They live untouched by the government, unaffected by history, unmarked by time and place. They

do not pass through the stages of childhood, youth, and old age, as do ordinary human beings. They live on, beyond old age, notwithstanding the government employee who records dates of death. Like the gods, they are spared the boundaries of time, and they live forever, sharing a single, extended existence unmarked by developmental stages. (65)

This rather loaded passage returns us to themes implied by the use of the children's song at the novel's opening. Hamida's birth out of the song, as might her birth in a country village, leaves her out of the government birth records, although in one sense both she and Hamido *are* touched by the government in the abuse they receive from the police and soldiers corps, respectively, and thus *are* marked by place in both the village's custom of expulsion and honor killing and Cairo's moral corruption. They miss the normal stages of development because they are "born as adults" and "grow old without experiencing childhood or adolescence" (65); they are not permitted the joys of childhood--or if they are, such joys, like the candy Hamida had at the beginning of the story, are quickly replaced by physical violence as the "shopkeeper" extracts payment. In another sense, though, Hamida and Hamido *are* untouched in that their essence survives; they "live forever" like the gods because they have the endurance of the just, the truly honorable. The "single, extended existence unmarked by developmental stages" that they share with the gods is indeed the overall structure of the novel that we find too in the song; at the end of the book Hamido springs up like a child from his sleeping mat. He *is* a child still.

Before this occurs, however, Hamida and Hamido are pulled ever closer together while still in Cairo. They seem to meet in an actual and a metaphorical prison, death continues to intersect life, and the past permeates the present, to the end that Hamida represents all such women and Hamido all such men. We are prepared for this representation by the former passage speaking of the "children born in defiance" as an entire class of people. The idea is pushed to the point that one segment begins with Hamida recalling her first rape and ends with her taking money

from the wallet of a man she has slept with, a man that seems to be Hamido, but only in the sense that Hamido has become like all men. If his part in the attempted honor killing and his subsequent experiences in Cairo have made Hamido a john, a nameless everyman who exploits women, her rape and continual abuse have made Hamida a prostitute. That is how the reader sees her for the last time, driving off in a car. Hamido returns to the village and, using the training he learned in the soldier corps, shoots and kills his father. Taking a penny from the dead man's hand, Hamido goes to a shop to buy tobacco but gets a sweet instead, a sign that he is renouncing his association with abusive men and is returning to childhood. When the shopkeeper asks for payment Hamido cannot find the penny and is chased and beaten by the shopkeeper's bamboo switch; the scene is described in nearly the same words as Hamida's first rape. And, like Hamida had, Hamido jumps up from his sleeping mat the next morning and it is he who emerges from the house, a child, thinking all has been a dream (as Hamida had thought her first rape must be a dream). He joins the circle of singing children to become absorbed by the song in the antithesis of Hamida having sprung from it.

El Saadawi closes the novel by repeating some of the narrator's earlier ruminations on endings, the dash or dot that can change the meaning of a word, and corruption or distortion. Now, as before, a child leaves the ring of singers and the narrator sees herself in its face; in fact, she says, "the face which met my gaze was none other than my own" (86). The mirroring of narrator and child, which is echoed throughout the novel by Hamida and Hamido's parallel appearances, thoughts and experiences, works on both a structural and a metaphorical level. And it extends beyond the book to us as readers: by association with the narrator and by virtue of being part of human society, we are complicit in what happens to Hamida, Hamido, all children. In reading we observe along with the narrator, but in living we contribute to a society that permits the atrocities that occur in the novel. The final paragraph, which repeats exactly one from the opening section of the book, ends by conveying the narrator's panic, confusion, and inability to distinguish: "Contradictory or

incompatible things come to resemble each other so closely that they become almost identical. Black becomes white, and white turns to black. And the meaning of all this? One faces, with open eyes, the fact that one is blind" (86). Male and female might be seen as contradictory things, but as we have observed throughout Hamida and Hamido's story, male can become female just as white can turn to black.

El Saadawi uses *The Circling Song* to show that gender seems at once an external, societal construct and, as the conception of the main characters shows, an arbitrary act of nature: "Hamido and Hamida had been one embryo, growing inside one womb. From the beginning they had been one cell, a single entity. Then everything split in two . . ." (23). Differences "between the sexes is indeed secondary to the similarity between the sexes," Ramzis Saiti observes about this novel; "In other words, much of this 'difference' is *created*, it is not the given. . ." (165). El Saadawi explores the concept that behavior associated with gender is proscribed by society, not innate in the individual, through the parallel experiences and emotional responses of the twins. As with children singing in the novel, real men and women are members of one circle. In showing gender to be an accident of birth and gender roles to be an outer imposition of society, El Saadawi prepares the reader to accept her implicit suggestion that these roles be rethought. We should not remain blind.

*The Circling Song* may be a feminist revision of a popular ballad about honor killing and a call to rethink gender roles, yet it is also something more. It is both an inscription of the patterns of women's lives and a new use of ancient patterns, and with this combination El Saadawi makes a development in feminist writing. In his study of modern Arab women novelists, Joseph Zeidan agrees with Western feminists who see a "direct connection between the nonlinear patterns they observed in women's writing and women's own life structures, experiences, and physical makeup" (148). While he believes it impossible to prove such theories, Zeidan says "it seems reasonable at least to relate women's nonlinear writing patterns to the ways in which social contexts affect *perceptions* of women's lives, work, and bodies as cyclical, repetitive, and interruptive" (149). Under this view, *The Circling Song* is,

structurally, a woman's narrative. So too is *Woman at Point Zero*, with its framing narration and repetition of scenes and phrasing, as will come clear in the next chapter. To Zeidan's comments I would add that repetition and circularity connect to oral narrative patterns and, beyond that, to the cyclical nature of Ancient Egyptian myth. In this sense it is the oldest pattern in human culture, and its use by El Saadawi evokes those myths that helped ancient Egyptians make sense out of and find comfort in a changing world--depleted land in the spring will always be followed by the flooding of the Nile in late summer and crop growth in the fall, for example. El Saadawi echoes such patterns in her novels: as we will see, Firdaus of *Woman at Point Zero* is reborn into different classes of society, and will be reborn into narrative; Hamida and Hamido are reborn into each other, just as they are reborn from as well as into a song. The blend of this most ancient pattern with women's narrative structures and the various techniques of the novel is a true innovation.

And, as suggested earlier, the use of myth functions thematically as well as structurally. Making *The Circling Song* a brother/sister, god/goddess story forwards the theme of gender relations. El Saadawi's dedication of the book contains mythic imagery alluding to Isis and fertility:

Centuries ago, and all alone, I gave birth to an unknown child. That night I relinquished him to the canal embankment's sheltering embrace, and the next morning I found in his place a towering green tree. Sending its roots into the earth and lifting its crown into the sky, that tree was as lofty as the ancient goddess of life and death.

To that child, to all of the world's towering trees, and to all of the children born of gods, I dedicate this story.

Hamida and Hamido's sleeping together replicates the Isis-Osiris relationship, for they were not only sister and brother but wife and husband as well. Hamida and Hamido came from one embryo, a further connection to the ancients and more direct allusion to Isis and Osiris. To be specific, in Egyptian mythology, male and female come from one source--indeed, *are one entity*. In the Heliopolitan Ennead the sun

god Ra, the first principle from whom other gods evolved, “had lived alone in the primeval waters, where he developed in darkness and contained both male and female principles.”<sup>18</sup> From Ra came Shu (god of air) and Tefnut (goddess of mist), and pairs of gods and goddesses continue to descend from there. Many pairs are brothers and sisters, like Isis and Osiris and Shu and Tefnut (who are *twins* as well). Some deities of ancient Egypt are shifting in gender, like Shai/Shait, the deity of destiny who “was born with each human and lived with that person until death,” and who changed to match the human’s gender.<sup>19</sup> As is common to many religions, some deities, such as Hap, the fertility god of the Nile, contained both male and female attributes; a man with long hair, Hap also had a woman’s breasts and a large abdomen.<sup>20</sup> Illustrations in the Book of the Dead show Mut, originally a local goddess of Thebes and wife of Amun, god of wind, with an erect phallus.<sup>21</sup> The construction of this world of deities is based on the idea of complementary forces, with Isis (life) and Osiris (fertility) set beside Nepthys (death) and Seth (evil), or, since the sisters often worked together, the duality of Isis (life) and Nepthys (death) can be considered. Anyway in which one configures the deities, duality and balance become apparent as the underlying structure, with a fluidity between genders often an element as well. That is how, as El Saadawi writes in *The Circling Song*, “contradictory or incompatible things come to resemble each other so closely that they become almost identical.”

By alluding to the times when gods and goddesses played important roles in Egyptians’ lives, El Saadawi offers the perfect setting in which to reassess the appropriateness and even validity of modern Egypt’s gender roles. This allusive backdrop helps her expand the genre of the novel as she alters the technique of repetition, adds orality via the children’s song, and transforms the convention of the frame narrator, whose ruminations on narrative technique explore the very craft of writing and make the text reflexive. El Saadawi links the narrator’s thoughts about literary creation to thoughts about societal constructs--and questions what process might produce the most effective outcome. Just as this novel is one of El Saadawi’s

unique children, so too is *Woman at Point Zero*. As we shall see, in telling the story of Firdaus, El Saadawi takes modern Egyptian fiction in yet another direction.



## CHAPTER 5

### WRITING THE SAVAGE TRUTH: *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

Clitoridectomy. Female circumcision. Excision. Female genital mutilation. Purification. The term and procedure it refers to depends on who is speaking, what culture is in question, and whether the speaker is from within or without the culture. The general perception is that these practices occur only within highly traditional pockets of the population in Arab and African nations, but the reality is that they have been performed in England, the United States, Germany, Russia, France, and India.<sup>1</sup> Female genital operations receive condemnation from human rights organizations and most feminists, and not just those outside the cultures having such practices. Efua Dorkenoo, Asma El Dareer, and Nawal El Saadawi have all published criticisms of their culture's practice of female genital operations. The topic comes up in El Saadawi's fiction too, which we shall see in *Woman at Point Zero*. As one of the atrocities enacted against the heroine Firdaus because she is female, it contributes heavily to her formation. Therefore it is necessary to take the time to look at the issue, and especially at El Saadawi's views on it, before delving into the novel.

There are three main categories of female genital operations. Pharaonic circumcision, also known as infibulation, has the longest history and in one study on the African continent, 80% of procedures were of this type, although Amnesty International's study of all of Africa found 15% of procedures to be infibulations.<sup>2</sup> There are two subcategories of infibulation. Classical infibulation involves removing the clitoris and labias minora and majora, then binding the wound with thorns, catgut, or an adhesive such as egg or sugar. A small piece of wood or a thorn is usually inserted in the vagina to create a passage for urine and menstrual blood. The legs of the infibulated girl are kept tied together at the ankles, knees, and thighs for two to six weeks. To deter infection and promote healing, substances such as

warm oil, tea, or water, acacia tar, or animal excreta may be applied.<sup>3</sup> Antiseptic powders or pastes with herbs, milk, or ash may be used.<sup>4</sup> The other type, modern infibulation, involves the removal of the clitoris, labia minora, and much of the anterior parts of the labia majora. The opening is sewn with silk or catgut, the warm healing fluids mentioned above are applied, and the girl may have her legs bound for a week.<sup>5</sup>

Excision and clitoridectomy are often used as interchangeable terms, although strictly speaking excision refers to removal of the labia minora and clitoridectomy refers to removal of the clitoris (when I use the term circumcision in discussing *Woman at Point Zero*, I use it as El Saadawi does in much of her nonfiction, to refer to the amputation of the clitoris). Known as intermediate circumcision in some places, this is cited by Fran Hosken in *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, put out by Women's International Network News, as the most frequently practiced form when considering all countries; Amnesty International found 85% of the procedures done in Africa to fall into this category.<sup>6</sup> There may be different gradations of cutting depending on the practitioner and culture, and sometimes the vagina is cut to ease childbirth, although this has no medical basis.<sup>7</sup>

Sunna circumcision is the mildest method, involving the removal of the tip or prepuce of the clitoris. Hosken notes that Sunna is Arabic for "tradition" (38), while El Dareer explains it more fully as "following the tradition of the Prophet Mohammed (blessings be upon Him)" (2). It is the least practiced of the procedures.

The implements used to perform these various types of genital operations vary widely. Knives, razors, and scissors are used most frequently, although their condition (rusty, old) and sterilization (used also for household tasks, unwashed, stored in an old rag) are generally poor. Razor blades and sharp stones may be used,<sup>8</sup> and tin lids and broken glass have been employed as well.<sup>9</sup> The use of anaesthesia and antibiotics is increasing as they become more available: El Dareer found anaesthesia was used in 31.15% of all circumcisions, 79.5% of clitoridectomies, and 31.25% of Sunna circumcisions; antibiotics were used in 25.9% of all circumcisions

and 54.7% of clitoridectomies (6).

Her work as a rural physician exposed El Saadawi to cases of hemorrhage, infection, and psychological shock resulting from female genital operations. Studies have shown that death, HIV, intermittent bleeding, and abscesses and tumors of the nerve can occur.<sup>10</sup> Infibulation can have long-term health implications, such as "chronic urinary tract infections, stones in the bladder and urethra, kidney damage, reproductive tract infections resulting from obstructed menstrual flow, pelvic infections, infertility, excessive scar tissue, keloids (raised, irregularly shaped, progressively enlarging scars) and dermoid cysts."<sup>11</sup> El Saadawi notes that her family was educated, yet she was circumcised, as were most girls in the late 1930s, whether they were upper, middle, or lower class, and whether they lived in city or countryside. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* she recounts her circumcision at the age of six, how she experienced fear, confusion, and betrayal at seeing her mother talking to and smiling at the strangers who had awakened her in the middle of the night, held her down on the bathroom floor, and cut her.

How many women have undergone these procedures? Amnesty International offers a world wide figure of 135 million, believing two million girls a year will possibly undergo some type of procedure, translating this to a daily figure of 6,000.<sup>12</sup> Usually the girls are between the ages of four and eight years, but the procedure has been done earlier and later; sometimes sisters of varying ages or all the girls in a village undergo procedures at once for convenience, cost effectiveness, or as an initiation rite. Across the African continent, percentages of the female population who receive genital operations range widely from country to country, from the relatively low rate of 5% of girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to 20% in Cameroon, 50% in Kenya, and 90% in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Mali.<sup>13</sup> To focus just on El Saadawi's country, one report estimates that today 50% of the women in Cairo and 80% of the women in Alexandria, Egypt's two major cities, have been circumcised.<sup>14</sup> A government survey funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development in 1996 discovered 97% of married women, ranging in age from 15 to

49, were circumcised, a figure Amnesty International also arrived at.<sup>15</sup> Wedad Zenie-Ziegler's transcription of her interviews with Egyptian women from a variety of backgrounds indicates that both Muslim and Coptic women in the villages of Upper Egypt are circumcised, and she estimates that about 75% of the women in Egypt have been--qualifying, however, that among many city dwellers this rate is dwindling and the practice becoming restricted to the poor and those retaining their rural heritage (98). But El Saadawi found that 97.5% of uneducated families in a sample of 160 Egyptian girls and women had insisted on circumcision, while among educated families the rate was as high as 66.2% (*The Hidden Face* 34). In 1998 the figure remained high, "close to ninety percent" overall, according to Dr. Laila Shoukri al-Hamamsy, an anthropologist who formerly directed the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo.<sup>16</sup> A study done in Cairo revealed that most of the circumcised women subjects had a high school education and 25% had a college education, whereas merely 2% were illiterate.<sup>17</sup>

Why are intelligent urban women still submitting to these genital surgeries? Fran Hosken reports that women surveyed in Alexandria gave "tradition, religion, control of female sexuality; cleanliness . . . [and] beauty" as reasons for desiring the operation (130). Amnesty International found custom and tradition to be the explanations offered most often, and with this the social construct that having the procedure makes you part of the group as well as an adult, complete woman.<sup>18</sup> Shoukri al-Hamamsy suggests that women use circumcision "as a negotiating position" for education, marrying whom they want, and working after they are married; they consent to their parents' wishes that they undergo the procedure as long as they gain what they want.<sup>19</sup> Another reason is the belief that genital operations reduce sexual desire in a woman and hence prevents "illegitimate" sexual relations outside of marriage.<sup>20</sup> El Saadawi has heard this explanation for years, citing "[t]he importance given to virginity and an intact hymen" in Arab countries. "Behind circumcision lies the belief," she explains, "that by removing parts of girls' external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized. This permits a female who has reached

the ‘dangerous age’ of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity, and therefore her honour, with greater ease” (*The Hidden Face* 33). Women are indoctrinated to accept as their responsibility the control of male sexuality through control of their own, and additionally, the virginal bride ensures known patrimony and inheritance--all issues that lay behind Hamida’s expulsion from the village for her pregnancy in *The Circling Song*.

El Saadawi’s search for the reasons female circumcision came about lead her to attribute it, along with other forms of control such as the chastity belt and female infanticide, to a male structured society that

realized at a very early stage that sexual desire in the female is very powerful, and that women, unless controlled and subjugated by all sorts of measures, will not submit themselves to the moral, social, legal and religious constraints related to monogamy. The patriarchal system . . . would never have been possible, or have been maintained to this day, without the whole range of cruel and ingenious devices that were used to keep her sexuality in check and limit her sexual relations to only one man, who had to be her husband. (*The Hidden Face* 40)

Basically, men had to know who their legitimate heirs were. El Saadawi sees economic and political, rather than religious, factors lying behind the continued practice of female circumcision. El Dareer’s interview of 3,210 men and women found 82.6% in favor of continuing female genital operations, with men offering religion as the reason and women noting tradition (67). El Dareer explains that while not everyone wants the procedures to continue, there is a taboo against mentioning the topic, let alone speaking out against it. So even those who wish to end the tradition find themselves perpetuating it (66).

Those of the international community who wish to abolish all female genital operations are grappling with the issues of tradition, religion, silence, and incorrect medical information. As well, the autonomy of governments and the difficulty of

enforcing existing laws against the procedures are factors they must consider. In some countries, such as Egypt, the government's attitude toward genital surgeries may be unclear. In 1959 Egypt passed a law restricting female genital operations: only doctors could perform them, rather than midwives (*dayas*), and they would be partial clitoridectomies. Oddly, this followed a 1958 presidential decree by Nasser making such operations illegal and their practitioners subject to fines and imprisonment.<sup>21</sup> In 1978 another document was drafted that stated, "Female circumcision is forbidden in the public health units for scientific and health reasons. It is not permitted for certified *dayas* to perform any surgical operation including female circumcision."<sup>22</sup> In 1994 Health Minister Ali Abdel Fattah decreed that circumcision of males *and females* had to occur "in hospitals, with medical personnel . . . in attendance," a move that seemed to remove the previous ban on female circumcision.<sup>23</sup> Then, in July of 1996 a new Health Minister, Ismail Sallam, decreed no doctors, whether in public or private facilities, could perform it.<sup>24</sup> While many reports, some by women, say the practice no longer exists, Hosken points out that its seeming nonexistence among the highly educated upper class is deceiving: "Such women have never visited public clinics or investigated what goes on in the squatter settlements among urban immigrants to Cairo or in the villages and are not aware of the sexual practices of the vast majority of the population" (132). Surveys and clinic records of patients who have come in with symptoms from surgeries gone wrong prove its persistence and its perils. Yet in 1996, the government ban on female circumcision was challenged "on the grounds that the ban was unconstitutional," and in June of 1997 it was lifted by Judge Abdul Aziz Hammade in a mid-level administrative court, only to be reinstated on December 28, 1997.<sup>25</sup>

Some scholars see the repeal of Egypt's law on female circumcision, albeit a temporary one, as a victory for fundamentalists who seek an Islamic government. As Hosken explains, since there is no central authority and local religious leaders make their own interpretations of the Qur'an, women are told that Islam commands female circumcision (77). Yet a number of scholars have argued that female

circumcision is not specific to Islam. A pre-Islamic Egyptian female mummy from 200 B.C. has proven this,<sup>26</sup> and another source declares a 16th century B.C. Egyptian female mummy evidences circumcision.<sup>27</sup> In ancient times, Copts and Abyssinians (Ethiopians) practiced circumcision of boys and girls.<sup>28</sup> It was advocated by the nineteenth-century British gynecologist Isaac Baker Brown and performed on pre-menopausal women by gynecologists in America from mid-nineteenth century through the late 1930s to discourage masturbation, supposed lesbian tendencies, and other conjectured mental disorders.<sup>29</sup> Hosken points out that Christian converts practice female circumcision, citing modern cases within Protestantism and Catholicism, and today, most of Egypt's Coptic Christians, who comprise about 10% of the population, practice female circumcision (136). It has been practiced by Ethiopian Jews, and many of those who circumcise women are of traditional Animist religions.<sup>30</sup>

A religious practice, a national practice, a cultural practice? The reasons for female circumcision seem varied and often obscure. But there is something that underlies these practices regardless of time period or culture: the concept that women are property with which the male can do as he wishes. Underlying that is the idea that women are lesser beings. "Society had made me feel, since the day that I opened my eyes on life," El Saadawi has written, "that I was a girl, and that the word *Bint* (girl) when pronounced by anyone is almost always accompanied by a frown" (*The Hidden Face* 8-9). Some scholars do take Islam to task for this attitude in Arab society, claiming that from Muhammad comes the idea that the parent with the stronger seed determines the sex of the offspring, so if a son resulted, this showed "that the man dominated the woman, a desirable characteristic in Muslim society. Thus sons were very much more desired than daughters, if only to prove the masculinity of the father."<sup>31</sup> This attitude, unfortunately, is common to many cultures.

The contradiction that arises for Muslim women is that they *are* prized--but only as sexual creatures, and only in private. Actually, whether we look at Muslim society or western cultures, women live with this contradiction. They are expected

always to be at their rightful man's service sexually, yet almost universally women are also expected to be pure, to be upholders of morality. Such attitudes bring restriction of woman's role in society and put her at risk of practices of circumcision (or unnecessary hysterectomy, to look at contemporary American culture) and any variety of injustices enacted to keep her in her place. El Saadawi has suggested that through education men and women can come to an appreciation of the strength and dignity of both genders, lending hope to the idea that in the future female sexual surgeries won't be practiced. A wise suggestion to be sure, but one that, worldwide, takes on the overturning of more than two millenniums of attitudes and attendant practices.

El Saadawi asserts that despite "rigid and orthodox teachings which deny sex in the life of a girl and aim at moulding her into an asexual being, a parallel and contradictory educational process is going on all the time which seeks to make her an instrument of sex and a mere body which should be adorned and made beautiful so as to attract men and arouse their desire" (*The Hidden Face* 46). Zenie-Ziegler remarks that "no culture is so permeated with eroticism as the Islamic" and that Arab literature praises women's beauty and addresses sexual pleasure, while at the same time, "In Muslim Arab society, everything connected with sexuality is subject to taboos" (93). In her conversations with women of varied backgrounds, she found, "By means of evasive answers, veiled explanations and embarrassed laughter, I was made to understand that, in a traditional society, a woman has no right to sexual desires or feelings" (94).

These are the issues that Egyptian women confront everyday. And they are issues with which Firdaus of *Woman at Point Zero* grapples. When she was young, her awakening sexuality caused her confusion. Sex was not openly discussed in her family, yet her uncle made it a common practice to touch her thighs and genital area. Firdaus's youthful encounter with a village boy, Mohammadain, with whom she played "bride and bridegroom," gave her "a sensation of sharp pleasure."<sup>32</sup> But the first time she even approaches the topic of sex with her mother, asking, "How was

it that she had given birth to me without a father?" (13), her mother beats her and has her circumcised. The description of the procedure is brief--"[My mother] brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs" (13)--quick and brutal, a way by which El Saadawi conveys the normalcy of such acts of violence against girls. All these childhood events lay the basis for Firdaus's conflicting responses to sexual relations and to her body as her life proceeds. They also contribute to her ongoing sense of loss and uncertainty about herself. About the circumcision she says, "a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return" (15). Firdaus's identity is as a woman, an identity linked to her physical self, which has been mutilated. Part of her sexual self has literally been detached; later, psychological detachment will echo the physical one.

Before Firdaus tells the story of her life, however, she is introduced by the narrator. The narrator bears some resemblance to El Saadawi herself, most likely because the book is based on a real woman and El Saadawi's encounter with her. In the "Author's Preface" El Saadawi explains how she made visits to Qanatir Prison as a psychiatrist examining women prisoners and how she came to meet Firdaus, who was awaiting execution for the murder of a pimp. Impressed with the woman's courage, El Saadawi says she "vibrated within me, or sometimes lay quiet, until the day when I put her down in ink on paper and gave her life after she had died" (iii). The novel is the outcome of Firdaus's making El Saadawi feel "a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom" (iv). Firdaus was a victim all her life--of society, of her family, of every man she met and of some women she met, of the law--yet the character El Saadawi creates is not a passive, weakened person but a triumphant, undefeated one. This is what makes the novel so engaging and what, I imagine, made the real Firdaus so compelling to El Saadawi.

In fact, as we move from the true life event that sparked the fiction into the novel itself, we see that Firdaus has the respect also of the prison doctor and the

warder. The male prison doctor is trying to gain her release and the female warder declares, “Murderer or not, she’s an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged. They are the ones that ought to hang” (2), “they” being all men. After meeting Firdaus and hearing her story the narrator respects her too, although she initially bolsters a wavering self-esteem when Firdaus refuses to see her by thinking, “Whatever the circumstances, a doctor was surely to be preferred to a woman condemned to death for murder” (5). As the narrator swings between emotional, euphoric feelings in anticipation of meeting the prisoner and trying to keep her composure as a doctor (“Subjective feelings such as those that had taken hold of me were not worthy of a researcher in science,” she tells herself [5]), the reader is introduced to Firdaus’s magnetism as well as an important dynamic of the novel.

The more the narrator hears about Firdaus and the more the prisoner refuses to meet with her, the more the narrator thinks that Firdaus is the better person, “better than all the men and women we normally hear about, or see, or know” (4). Rejection makes the narrator recall the feeling she had when spurned by a man she once loved, a suggestion of the upcoming close relationship between the narrator and Firdaus as well as the initial suggestion of the lesbian undertones Fedwa Malti-Douglas discusses in her analysis of the novel.<sup>33</sup> There will be a few instances of same-sex romantic feelings as Firdaus tells the story of her lifelong pursuit of honest affection. Another connection between the narrator and Firdaus is made when the prison doctor says, “If you look into [Firdaus’s] face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder” (1-2). The narrator replies, “Who says murder does not require that a person be gentle?” (2), words Firdaus will echo when she relays her conversation with the man who turned her in to the police: “And who said that to kill does not require gentleness?” (99).

Sitting on the floor in Firdaus’s darkened cell, the narrator describes her voice as that in a dream: “It was close to me, yet seemed to come from afar, spoke from a distance and seemed to arise from nearby. For we do not know from where these voices arise: from above or below, to our left or our right. We might even think they

come from the depths of the earth, drop from the rooftops, or fall from the heavens. Or they might even flow from all directions, like air moving in space reaches the ears" (7). Such voices are inescapable. They are everywhere and we are compelled to listen to them. Perhaps it takes a dreamlike state like that the narrator describes to shake off our conceptions about others and ourselves and be open to hearing the truth. Firdaus's voice is linked with the voices of eternity, disembodied voices that tell stories, speak truths. As readers, we join the narrator in falling under the spell of this woman's voice and thus gaining access to privileged information: her life story.

Indeed, the longest section of the book is Firdaus' own story, uninterrupted and in the first person. Although Firdaus had once asked for paper and pencil, she ultimately will not write her story; we learn that she believes all published writing to be about men and thus filled with lies. Firdaus's life tale is later transcribed by the narrator but the narrator is a woman, retelling the story of a woman. El Saadawi's choice of format--the slim frames from the narrator's viewpoint and the large "transcription" of Firdaus's monologue--preserves the orality and hence the immediacy of Firdaus's story. El Saadawi also compresses what for her in real life were several meetings with the condemned woman into a one-night meeting of the narrator with Firdaus, on the eve of her execution. This heightens the drama and sense of urgency at both Firdaus's telling and the narrator's hearing of the story--and of course, this extends to the reading experience.

From early on Firdaus questioned the way she and her parents had lived. Would she be destined always to live and work in this village? Hearing about Cairo from her uncle, a student at *al-Azhar*, whetted Firdaus's appetite for the outside world and for learning. But *al-Azhar* is only for men, which is just one of the many messages Firdaus receives about women's lesser worth. When a female child in the family died, all went on as usual. When a male child died, her father beat her mother. Going hungry so that her father could eat more, suffering incestuous advances from her uncle, being denied education, seeing her mother beaten, undergoing circumcision--all lead to the early damage of Firdaus's emotional and intellectual

self. As in El Saadawi's other novels, childhood is far from an idyllic period in a woman's difficult life. It is, rather, a training period for more harshness to come.

Reiterating how oppressive the dominant male presence in the household had been, when Firdaus's father dies, things begin to change for her. Basic education becomes available as her uncle puts her through elementary school. A different way of life opens when her mother, who had endorsed the patriarchy by circumcising Firdaus and submitting to the father's control, dies. The uncle takes Firdaus to Cairo, an experience that makes her think, "I sometimes wonder whether a person can be born twice" (20). (Actually, Firdaus will have this feeling several times more.) Her relationship with her uncle is a complex one. We mustn't forget that he molested her throughout her childhood. Yet he also educates her, takes her in after her parents' deaths, and shows her the only kindness she has really known. In this context it seems logical that her awakening adolescent sexual desires become directed towards him. They share a bed in his apartment and the trembling of her uncle's hands reminds her of some memory from childhood, which seems to be of Mohammadain. When Firdaus finishes primary school her uncle takes her to see a movie depicting men and women dancing and kissing; he tells her both are sins. Yet the film arouses something in Firdaus: "Somewhere, in some distant spot within my body was awakening an old pleasure lost a long time ago, or a new pleasure still unknown, and indefinable, for it seemed to arise outside my body, or in a part of my being severed from it many years ago" (22). This refers, of course, to her circumcision, and to how essential a woman's sexuality is to her completeness as a human being.

This ambiguously beneficial period of Firdaus's life ends when the uncle marries and Firdaus is seen by the couple as a problem. The new wife has a negative influence on Firdaus's uncle and serves as a stronger example of women upholding the patriarchy than had Firdaus's mother. Firdaus is beaten and sent to boarding school for letting the servant girl sleep with her in bed on a cold night, a reinforcement of the idea that her kindness and physical tenderness are wrong, especially towards a female of a lower class. Her schoolmate Wafeya says that

Firdaus seems to be “a person who cannot live without love” (26). This observation makes Firdaus recall Mohammadain and an elusive sense of physical pleasure mixed with tender pain. But the feeling, she notices, “slipped away from me like the air, like an illusion, or a dream that floats away and is lost. I wept in my sleep as though it was something I was losing now; a loss I was experiencing for the first time, and not something I had lost a long time ago” (26). Firdaus’s sense of loss is partly the lingering trauma of her circumcision, but that loss has been compounded by subsequent losses of love--from her mother, who had neglected Firdaus to cater to the father; from Mohammadain, whom she no longer met in the fields because her mother kept her at home when she got older; and from her uncle, who shifted his attention to his wife. And the losses would continue as Firdaus’s experience broadened.

Thinking one night in the school’s yard about whether her uncle would continue to financially support her education by sending her to a university, Firdaus sees a teacher there, Miss Iqbal, and begins crying. She is drawn to Miss Iqbal’s eyes, which are described as her mother’s had been, and holding her hand makes Firdaus “tremble with a deep distant pleasure, more distant than the age of my remembered life, deeper than the consciousness I had carried with me throughout” (30). It is a feeling of something she had been born with, but had “left behind,” “A cloudy awareness of something that could have been, and yet was never lived” (30). A fleeting memory passes through her mind and is gone. “My heart faltered, stifled by a frightened, frenzied beating over something precious I was on the point of losing, or had just lost, for ever” (30). It would seem this something would be love, a true and honest love. Unlike the probing eyes that violate elsewhere in this novel and in other works by El Saadawi, here the eyes appear kind. They call up in Firdaus, albeit indistinctly and incompletely, a happy feeling, and they may represent as well that truth for which Firdaus will long seek.

Wafeya wonders if Firdaus is in love with Miss Iqbal. Firdaus seeks the teacher in the schoolyard another night and, seeing the shadowy form of a garden

wall and mistaking it for her body, Firdaus's "heart beat wildly and the blood rushed to [her] head" (34). When she is leaving school upon graduation and hasn't seen Miss Iqbal to say goodbye, as the gates to the school close, effectively shutting her off from the object of her love, Firdaus says, "I walked with heavy steps behind my uncle, carrying the image of that closed door engraved in my mind. When I ate my meals, or drank, or lay down to sleep it was there in front of me" (35). Firdaus has been separated from friends, love, and education and brought back to her uncle's home, to a way of life that, since his marriage, has become stifling.

When Firdaus overhears her uncle's wife complaining of the cost of keeping her and how at her age she should be married, and that an elderly and physically repulsive relative of the wife would make an ideal husband--plus offer a good dowry, Firdaus decides to run away, and another, albeit brief, rebirth occurs. The streets make her feel "the wonderment of an infant that opens its eyes for the first time to perceive the world around, and yet the very next moment bursts out screaming as it feels itself projected into a new environment where it had never been before" (41). Mixed just as many of her experiences have and will be, this new environment does instill fear after an initial excitement, sending Firdaus running back to her uncle's apartment because she is stared at up and down by eyes with "cold intent" (42). As a young woman unaccompanied on the street, Firdaus would be prey to sexual abuse.

Yet the environment she returns to is just as threatening and abusive, for Firdaus is indeed married off to the elderly relative and undergoes insufferable experiences. In addition to having sex with him as her marital duty (she washes thoroughly afterwards, an indication of her disgust at his physical self), she must endure his unfounded harping about her gluttony and wastefulness and take beatings her uncle's wife says are condoned by religion. When she is battered until bleeding from nose and ears, Firdaus runs away. She all too immediately meets Bayoumi, a coffeehouse owner whose voice, nose, and complexion remind her of her best memories of her father, and so, instead of recalling the abuse her father put her and her mother through, Firdaus hopes for kindness. Bayoumi buys her fruit, asking her

preference between oranges and tangerines, and as yet another new experience for Firdaus insists that she stay with him until she finds work, sleeping in his bed while he will sleep on the floor. "Never in my life had anyone put me first before himself," Firdaus declares (48). But this kindness is pretense, for suddenly Bayoumi's hands are trembling as Firdaus's uncle's had and he touches her. Because Firdaus is still searching for a loving relationship and Bayoumi's touch evokes not only her far-off memories of physical pleasure but seems to give "pleasure [she] had never known before" (48), Firdaus lives with Bayoumi for nearly a year, cooking for him and sleeping with him. She is happy because he does not hit her, does not complain that she eats too much, and thus she begins sacrificing her portion of meals so that he may have more. One day, going to the market, some school girls look down upon her and Firdaus, remembering her secondary school certificate, decides to seek work. Bayoumi becomes angry at her desire to leave him, slaps her, calls her a street walker, and hits her so hard in the stomach that she passes out.

Now that she no longer is his willing mistress who offers her body and food to him, Bayoumi locks Firdaus in when he goes to work, raping and beating her when he is at home. Soon he lets his friends use her in the same way. She learns curses from him and his friends, but instead of completing the phrase "son of a . . . ,," because she knows women are not at fault she "resorted to insulting his father instead of his mother" (51). At last she escapes when Bayoumi is at work and a neighbor woman gets a carpenter to open the door. Although her past experiences on the street had been threatening, she knows now that "the street had become the only safe place in which I could seek refuge, and into which I could escape with any *whole being*" (51; emphasis added). What goes on behind the doors of apartments ruled by men makes the public space less threatening by comparison. Firdaus has had little sense of her whole being for most of her life, only vague and intermittent senses of what that could be. As an adult, her uncle had turned on her, her husband beat and otherwise abused her, Bayoumi beat and raped her and prostituted her to his friends. Thus it seems like another rebirth and truly a salvation when Firdaus meets Sharifa

Salah el Dine.

Sharifa is the image of a new beginning, of life. She wears green clothing and eye makeup, and her eyes are green; she and Firdaus sit by the Nile--Egypt's life source--when they meet, surrounded by green trees; in fact, Firdaus observes, "everything around radiated this liquid green light which surrounded me, enveloped me completely, so that I felt myself gradually drowning in it" (52). She feels like she is sinking and then floating in the ocean, and this metaphoric death and rebirth makes Firdaus eager to tell Sharifa her past. Once in Sharifa's apartment--which is by the Nile and has a view of trees--the dropping away of Firdaus's old life and the start of a new one continues. She bathes and puts on some of Sharifa's clothes: "I felt my body was now like that of a new-born baby, soft and smooth like everything else in the flat . . . I was being born again with a new body" (53). Since her body had been abused much of her life, feeling she has a new body is a luxury to Firdaus--and, as we quickly see, it is the luxuries themselves that lend the feeling of newness.

Firdaus learns much from Sharifa, who tells her, "The only people who really live are those who are harder than life itself" (54). Speaking of prostitution but also more generally, she declares, "A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value" (55). Sharifa urges Firdaus to take pleasure from material things, from eating, from viewing nature, and not from a man's love. Initially Firdaus tries to enjoy these outward things, but luxuries are not enough. And while Sharifa gives Firdaus much, she takes from her as well, getting money from her prostitution: "Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in" (57). Sharifa, whose name, ironically, means noble,<sup>34</sup> turns out to be little better than the men Firdaus has known. When Fawzy, a customer who was more or less Sharifa's boyfriend at one point, wants to take Firdaus away, Firdaus overhears his conversation with Sharifa--a conversation that ends in physical violence and a rape that turns into consensual sex, a scene echoing one she had overheard between her uncle and his wife and reinforcing her confused views of sexual relations and love. Firdaus flees.

This time, she says, "Nothing in the streets was capable of scaring me any longer, and the coldest wind could no longer bite into my body. Had my body changed? Had I been transported into another woman's body? And where had my own, my real body, gone?" (61). These are key questions of the novel, begun with Firdaus's young experience with Mohammadain, followed by the circumcision, the beatings, the rapes, and the prostitution. Other people have always controlled and shaped Firdaus's body, so it is little wonder that the elusive memories of pleasure are mingled with pain and that, barring fleeting moments holding Miss Iqbal's hand or with Bayoumi at the start of their relationship, her body does not give her pleasure. But something else soon does.

Upon leaving Sharifa's apartment, Firdaus is forced to the home of a policeman who promises to pay for her services but doesn't. Back on the street, Firdaus has lost her imperviousness to the elements. She feels the cold and rain, notices mud and the smell of garbage. Abuse from the policeman has soiled the purifying rebirth she had undergone when first at Sharifa's until "the smell of rot seemed to envelop me on all sides, to overcome me, to drown me under it" (63). At this point Firdaus seems overwhelmed by her negative experiences. Yet quickly this is overturned: a man picks her up and takes her home, bathes her, uses her services, and pays her 10 LE. El Saadawi describes the pleasure Firdaus gets from this money as the feeling one might get from sex: "The sudden contact sent a strange tautness through my body, an inner contraction as though something had jumped inside me and shaken my body with a violence which was almost painful" (65). She uses the money to buy food, food for herself alone. In the restaurant, the money continues to be paralleled with sex as being forbidden for women to enjoy: "I held the ten pound note in my hand, and [the waiter] watched it through the corner of one eye, while his other eye looked away as though shunning the forbidden parts of a woman's body. I was seized with a feeling of wonder. Could it be that the ten pound note I held in my hand was as illicit and forbidden as the thrill of sacrilegious pleasure?" (67). She recalls the *piastre* she had begged her father for as a child; she has always known that

men are the ones with the money. Firdaus thinks, "How many were the years of my life that went by before my body, and my self became really mine, to do with them as I wished? How many were the years of my life that were lost before I tore my body and my self away from the people who held me in their grasp since the very first day?" (68). At age 25, money gives Firdaus autonomy. Buying good food is truly gratifying. And, unlike at her youthful home or with her husband, she eats without being watched by a greedy man. Money is power, and it permits Firdaus to hold her head high. Until this point her body had not really been her own. Her parents had worked it in the fields, her uncle had groped it, eyes on the street had violated it, everyone had abused and exploited it. Concomitantly, her sense of self had been vague and frustrated. She had *almost* been able to remember, *almost* been able to feel, *almost* been able to express her desire for and feelings of love. Now, becoming a high earning prostitute who picks her customers, Firdaus gets her own apartment, has a rising bank account, goes to the theater, and reads, fulfilling intellectual desires she has held since a child. She spends most of her free time in her large personal library, reading as she had when in school. The library, where her secondary school certificate hangs in a lavish frame, is her sanctuary--she won't let her customers in this room.

But her world is altered and her body violated in a different way when a customer turned friend, Di'aa, tells Firdaus that she is not respectable. She is able to shut out his voice, but the words remain in her ears, cling to her "like the spit of an insult echoing in the ear, like the spit of insolent eyes over [her] naked body, like the spit of all the degrading words [she] had heard ringing in [her] ears at one or other time, like the spit of all the brazen eyes that undressed [her] and examined [her] nakedness with a slow insolence" (72). She decides to strive for respectability, "even if the price were to be [her] life" (73), because she needs to stop the insults and the "brazen eyes from running all over [her] body" (73). Firdaus tries to use her education as a way out of prostitution, living cheaply in a boarding house and working in a company for three years. She realizes, however, that education does not

protect a woman or give her respect in male eyes. In fact, Firdaus feels she was more highly valued and respected as a prostitute; certainly she was paid more and her body was not touched for free, as it is on the crowded buses. Too, there are bosses who want to use women's bodies on the promise of a small raise, a good yearly report, or simply to remain in their good graces. "I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices," Firdaus says, "and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one" (76). But she fends off the advances of male supervisors and moves up in the company to become "the most honourable, and the most highly considered of all the female officials in the company" (76). It would seem she has gained respectability.

Then she meets Ibrahim. The scene repeats that with Miss Iqbal. Firdaus speaks with Ibrahim, another employee, in the company's garden, and their encounter covers the same ground: Firdaus doesn't know why she cries, says nothing has happened to cause her to cry, their eyes meet, they touch hands, an elusive memory comes and goes. Firdaus's post-garden conversation with a woman co-worker also echoes that of the earlier school scene. As did Wafeya, Fatheya tells Firdaus she is living in a dream world.

Firdaus, however, is pursuing love. She says she is in love, and after she sleeps with Ibrahim people tell her she has a glow. Fatheya warns her she's being used. "But he's a revolutionary," Firdaus protests, "He's fighting for us and for all those who are deprived of a decent life." "You are really to be pitied," her friend retorts, "Do you think that what they say in their meetings is true?" (83). Class is an issue here, and indeed, Firdaus overhears at work that Ibrahim is newly engaged to the chairman's daughter. Once again voices puncture Firdaus's world: "I put my hands over my ears to shut out the sound of their voices" (83). She can hear another voice through these devastating ones, her own voice, but it is sobbing in defeat. Firdaus's emotional damage is symbolized by El Saadawi's making the scene in which she leaves the company copy exactly the one in which she had left school: the building is as tightly shut up as the feelings in Firdaus's body.

As a prostitute, Firdaus had never given those feelings freely: "To protect my deeper, inner self from men, I offered them only an outer shell. I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role" (85). What she had hoped for in loving Ibrahim was "To be saved through love from it all. To find [her]self again, to recover the self [she] had lost. To become a human being who was not looked upon with scorn, or despised, but respected, and cherished and made to feel *whole*" (86; emphasis added). She is still searching for completion, for reparation from the damage that began in childhood and has accelerated over the years. She was enabled to pursue education further than some women, but not to the university level she desired. And even with education, she was thwarted from meaningful participation in work, from the fullest use of her mental abilities. She has always been just a body to men. "Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth," she says after her episode with Ibrahim.

Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low. . . .

Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (86-87)

Firdaus walks through the streets at midnight and feels peace without pain. Windows and doors are shut against her, but instead of being like the previous barriers from what she desired, this time she has "the feeling of being rejected by people and at the same time being able to reject them" (87). This sense expands until Firdaus feels "estrangement from everything, even the earth, and the sky and the trees." She goes on:

I was like a woman walking through an enchanted world to which she did not belong. She is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it.

She experiences the rare pleasure of having no ties with anyone, of having broken with everything, of having cut all relations with the world around her, of being completely independent and living her independence completely, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love. . . . (87)

Separation is the only form of freedom Firdaus has. All relationships have subjected her to the will and domination of others. She gains self-control through detachment. Having attained freedom by renouncing the search for love, Firdaus decides to use men for their money just as they have used her body for their physical pleasure.

As before, the money gives her autonomy. When a foreign politician wants her services and sends police to get her, who say it is her patriotic duty to sleep with him, she scoffs, “I refused to go to men of this sort. My body was my property alone, but the land of our country was theirs to own” (90). Imprisoned for refusing to sleep with one of these foreign officials, her money enables her to hire a lawyer to gain her release and have the court find her to be an honourable woman. The irony is not lost on Firdaus: “Now I had learnt that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one’s honour” (91). Prostitution may be the only way a woman can get rich in a male-ordered society, “Yet,” Firdaus declares, “not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven” (91). Firdaus will turn this control against them. She donates money and is subsequently reported in the papers “as the model of a citizen with a sense of civic responsibility.” “And so from then on,” she slyly observes, “whenever I needed a dose of honour or fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank” (91).

But money attracts greedy men, specifically a pimp who tries to force Firdaus under his control. He rapes her, beats her, and starts taking the money from her work. Because Marzouk has “better connections” with the police and courts than does

Firdaus, this time she loses. "I realized I was not nearly as free as I had hitherto imagined myself to be. I was nothing but a body machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense" (94). Angered that this man has the power to alter her life, Firdaus again decides to leave prostitution and use her school certificate to find work, but Marzouk refuses to let her--just as Bayoumi had refused to let her cease being *his* prostitute. Marzouk says, "There are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves," to which she replies, "In that case I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves" (95). Marzouk tells her she's "asking for the impossible," and El Saadawi here uses repetition to turn against male authority, for Firdaus says, "The word impossible does not exist for me" (95). This echoes a phrase Marzouk had uttered each time he struck Firdaus during earlier beatings for her refusal to have sex with him. She had said, "It's impossible. It's no use trying" whenever he approached her, and he had said as he beat her, "The word does not exist for me" (94). Firdaus's application of Marzouk's words and attitude against him displays her strength, and it causes Marzouk to fear her.

One glimpse of this fear in Marzouk's eyes as she tries to leave is all Firdaus needs. She slaps him and when he reaches for a knife he carries, she gets it first. She stabs him repeatedly, in the neck, chest, belly; bodily violation is no longer enacted on herself as Firdaus plunges the knife "into almost every part of his body" (95). After Marzouk is dead, Firdaus leaves her apartment, her body "feeling light as a feather" (96). She is light because her lifelong fear of men is gone as a result of her triumph over this man who tried to control her, but this also may be an allusion to the Ancient Egyptian concept of Ma'at, right order or justice, pictured in hieroglyphs as how at death, one's heart is weighed against the weight of a feather. Firdaus has no guilt over her action; she has acted justly. "I walked down the street, my head held high to the heavens, with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind" (96). The truth is coming out. Her footsteps "were the footsteps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going, and could see her

goal" (96).

Nearly overcome with this sense of self-control, she insists on the price of 3000 LE when, shortly after the murder, a prince hires her for sex. She tears up the money he gives her because she has solved "the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life" (98), which is that "right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute" (99). Once discovering the truth she must tell it, and the telling is the reason she will be executed. She confesses her murder of the pimp to the prince, who, fearful, calls in police. She says the police are the criminals, not she, and that all men are criminals. The officers call her a "savage and dangerous woman," to which she replies, "I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous" (100). Not murder so much as exposing the corruption of patriarchal society is what has brought Firdaus to jail, and to the eve of execution. Firdaus completes her narrative by explaining,

For the truth is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power. I only arrived at the savage, primitive truths of life after years of struggle. . . . And to have arrived at the truth means that one no longer fears death. For death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. (102)

When Firdaus ends her life story and is taken away to be executed, the narrator stresses, "Her voice was now silent, but its echo remained in my ears, like a faint distant sound. Like the voices one hears in a dream" (105). The words repeat those at the beginning of the book and serve to bring us out of the trance we have been under while reading Firdaus's account. Yet Firdaus's voice will haunt readers just as certain voices had haunted her during her lifetime. The narrator observes that Firdaus's "voice continued to echo in my ears, vibrating in my head, in the cell, in

the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, and as awesome as death, yet as simple and as *gentle* as the child that has not yet learnt to lie" (105-106; emphasis added). The reference to the child is not accidental: Firdaus had mentioned the feeling of rebirth several times in her story and, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas has pointed out, she will be reborn through telling her story to the narrator, who will put her life into a narrative (*Men, Women* 55). Every former rebirth placed Firdaus in a different class, higher each time: she was born into the lower class, felt that her secondary school degree and her "suppressed desires" (12) made her a member of the middle class, and that her make-up, hair and clothing when a prostitute marked her as upper class. Now she transcends class when she dies, and her rebirth in narrative form is of the highest order: truth. The narrator will transcribe that truth under El Saadawi's direction, through fiction.

Firdaus had remarked that "death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them" (102). As the narrator is driving away from the prison, she slams on the brakes. The penultimate line of the novel reads, "And at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I" (106). Firdaus had faced the truth, faced death, found courage. She had the courage to kill a man who abused her and to stand by what she had done. Firdaus realizes from repeatedly defeated attempts both to work honestly and to use prostitution to exploit men monetarily that she can't be a master in this male-run world, only a slave, and so she takes the body of the slave away from the masters. Death allows her dignity, honor. Near the end of her monologue, Firdaus had repeated and expanded upon a few lines she had hummed earlier, after her betrayal by Ibrahim: "I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us" (101). Firdaus's name means paradise,<sup>35</sup> and her strong inner spirit, her paradise, enables her to spread the truth about the male subjugation of women. She refuses to appeal her sentence to the President, refuses to have her life "given" to her by a man. She has had aspects of herself "killed"

throughout her life by the men and women who uphold the patriarchal system. She has died sexually, emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically; now she will die physically. She has given up wants, hopes, and fears to gain an awful freedom. In life neither her body nor her self have been whole; death is, oddly, a kind of completion.

The narrator sees herself as lesser than Firdaus, yet I would argue that in hearing Firdaus's story, she is confronted by truth and she will gain the courage to face that truth. Importantly, she will do so by writing Firdaus's story. For, as Malti-Douglas points out, "the literary linkage between the external and the internal narrator is the embodiment of their common female condition" (*Men, Women* 66). The narrator will learn from Firdaus's experience and take her truth to the world. Unlike the lying newspapers written by men and about men, this narrative is about a woman and will be recorded by a woman.

Firdaus, the narrator, and El Saadawi tell a new story, a woman's story. *Woman at Point Zero* can be set fruitfully in the context of feminist fiction and, even, women's autobiography. El Saadawi's early work falls within what Joseph Zeidan labels the second stage of the Arab women's novel, the 1950s and 1960s when women were asserting themselves in society and attaining a heightened sense of individuality. Rebelling against male-defined standards, their novels "exposed patriarchy and its effects on women as individuals and declared the right to self-determination for their heroines" (235). El Saadawi continued this attitude in her subsequent work, and the reaction against the patriarchy occurs not only in the content of her novels, but, as I have been pointing out, in their structure. Fedwa Malti-Douglas observes in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, "A woman writer, especially if she is also a feminist, is obliged not only to imitate but also, in a certain sense, to negate her literary predecessors insofar as these are seen as constituting a masculine tradition against which she is rebelling" (127). While it is true that many writers, of either gender, rebel against writers who have come before them, and that the Arabic literary tradition is much like western ones in that women have been marginalized or excluded, Malti-Douglas explains how she sees El Saadawi's use of

a framework narrator in *Woman at Point Zero* as recalling the story teller Sheherezad, an undeniably strong female narrator who uses fiction to control her very threatening male audience. I would add that voices had the power to hurt Firdaus throughout her life, but in her autobiographical monologue she uses her voice to carry the message of truth about her oppressors to the whole world, through the narrator.

Nawal El Saadawi's reactions against male literary traditions lead her to the creation of a continually new woman's fiction. This comes as the result of a highly innovative process. A real woman told her life story to El Saadawi. El Saadawi created a narrator through whom the fictional Firdaus's voice is heard. In turn, the reader recreates the narrative each time she reads it, repeatedly bringing El Saadawi's words and Firdaus's truths to new life. In this way *Woman at Point Zero* becomes the ultimate tribute to the strong individual who so affected El Saadawi and, in a way, serves as that woman's triumph--not over death, but over the society that led to it. For the novel will go on inspiring its readers to fight against such injustices as Firdaus underwent. An artistic success, *Woman at Point Zero*'s social and political impact deserves to be equally great. The "savage truth" must out in the end.

We will meet another strong woman who will not debase herself to a patriarchal system in *God Dies by the Nile*. Here El Saadawi turns her pen to a treatment of how family bonds are threatened by corrupt local government and religious officials, showing just how far reaching are the repercussions of viewing women as a commodity.

## CHAPTER 6

### **THE PEASANT AS PAWN: *GOD DIES BY THE NILE***

In writing about a contemporary of Nawal El Saadawi's, Fedwa Malti-Douglas observes that while Egyptian novelists have focused on social and political issues for some time, city settings and characters had predominated. Only within the past two decades have rural settings been employed. She notes that Yusuf Qa'id, "one of the most important representatives of this new generation" of Egyptian novelists, addresses the split between rich and poor and also the difference between life in the city and in the countryside in his 1978 novel, *War in the Land of Egypt* (written in 1975) ("Afterword" 186, 191). One year before, El Saadawi had taken up these very subjects, plus feminist topics, in her 1974 novel, *God Dies By the Nile*. Both Qa'id and El Saadawi have unique literary approaches to their social criticism, though each has evolved out of the same literary tradition. It is worth looking at what came before in order to better see the contribution to Egyptian literature *God Dies By the Nile* makes.

In the introduction to *Modern Arabic Literature* Muhammad Mustafa Badawi explains what changes the printing press, brought to Egypt by the Ottoman Turk Muhammad Ali in 1822, made in reading and writing habits. European scientific, technological, and literary texts were printed in translation, but also classic Arab texts became more available this way. When journalism developed (the first Egyptian periodical began in 1828), Arabic prose style began to simplify as "excessive rhetorical devices" were dropped (8). This evolution influenced fiction, not least since a number of Egyptian creative writers were journalists too. By the late nineteenth century the idea that writing should have a moral or religious influence on the reader or entertain "through mastery of language and verbal skill" was increasingly eclipsed by the belief it should address social issues (15). Formerly only

members of the court read and wrote literature, but increasingly the middle class gained access to and had influence on literary texts.

Badawi sees three periods in Modern Arabic literature in Egypt: 1834-1914, the “Age of Translations and Adaptations as well as Neo-classicism”; the inter-war period, or “Age of Romanticism and Nationalism”; and the end of WWII to the present, which contains quite varied literature but could be called the “Age of Conflicting Ideologies” (16). However one divides up Egypt’s literary history, it is important to remember that Egyptian authors were not merely imitating western styles, genres, and ideas, but were experimenting with language and format as they wrote about their own existence. Although I find it more useful to look at El Saadawi’s work in the context of all of Egyptian literature, not just that by women, Joseph Zeidan has distinguished three stages in the Arab women’s novel. He looks at the first, the 1930s-1950s, as being imitative of men’s novels, since women’s low status resulted in their limited education. In the 1950s and 1960s women were gaining education, individuality, and inroads into general society, and their novels began criticizing patriarchy. From the 1967 Arab-Israeli War to the present, women writers have sought a collective national identity as well as individual ones. Miriam Cooke sees similar stages, noting how from the 1930s until the early 1950s “women were writing in isolation from the mainstream literary tradition and from each other” (449). In the late 1950s they were experimenting with content and form and developing “a literature of angry protest” (449).

Some particular texts were landmarks in the development of Modern Egyptian literature, as well as predecessors for various reasons of the kind of fiction El Saadawi crafts. *Hadith 'Isa ibn Hisham* ('Isa ibn Hisham's Tale), a 1907 novel by Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, is cited by Roger Allen as innovative for presenting “bitingly sarcastic criticism” of the author’s contemporary society while contrasting city and country life and traditional and western values (“The Beginnings” 185-86). Lest it sound too much like the work of later decades, it is important to recognize that its narrative structure is after the *maqama*, a 10th century form that combined

picaresque adventure with a virtuoso use of language, in particular a rhyming prose that was the popular style of caliphs, professional preachers, and official secretaries. The *maquama* was delivered orally and conveyed the anecdotal experiences of roguish characters.<sup>1</sup> What links the chapters together in al-Muwaylihi's book are the narrator and his companion; aside from that each chapter could be seen as a separate work. Besides the influence of the *maquama*, this may also have been a result of the way the work was initially published: like many novels, it was first serialized in a newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas al-Muwaylihi wrote in an elevated style, using what is termed Classical Arabic, Mahmud Tahir Haqqi used colloquial Arabic for his characters' dialog in the 1906 novella '*Adhra' Dinshaway* (*The Maiden of Dinshaway*).<sup>3</sup> This extremely important advance was continued by Muhammad Husayn Haykal in *Zaynab* (1913), the title of which is a woman's name. Over the next two decades, writers of short stories--which became a favored genre--developed such techniques of dialog, as well as of characterization and theme.<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Taimur, considered to be the originator of the modern Egyptian short story, also wrote drama, and Abdel-Aziz Abdel-Meguid remarks that Taimur's stories evidence his talent for writing plays in their realistic dialog (104). After writing for nearly a decade, Taimur brought out three collections of his short stories in the same year, 1925, and drew praise for having lessened the sentimentalism that had permeated his early writing, for presenting an "accurate description of Egyptian life" (111), and for providing "a psychological analysis of the inner mental states of the main character, and their development, along with an analysis of the other characters associated with him" (110). In later decades, Yusuf Idris, who was to write in many genres, including drama and short stories, would also employ Egyptian dialect for his characters' dialog.

Not surprisingly, given Egypt's rich past, historical themes have always been popular. In the late 1930s novels focused on Pharaonic and early Islamic eras, partially in accord with the nationalism of the times. A very different focus, however,

appeared in Taufiq Al-Hakim's *Yaumiyat naib fil-aryaf* (*The Diary of a Deputy Public Prosecutor in the Countryside*), a 1937 novel that drew on its author's experience working in rural courts. Al-Hakim studied the interactions among the peasant, the law, and the government, and showed how corruption of those in power blocks any progress in the lives of the impoverished villagers. Since legislation created in the cities does not consider rural life, villagers often do not comprehend its application; as a result, the novel contains, in Hilary Kilpatrick's words, "comic descriptions of [the villagers'] bewilderment when they are faced with formalities" (*The Modern* 44). The officials are the ones who know what is going on and therefore take "a bullying attitude" toward the peasants, who themselves take an attitude of "dumb submission" (*The Modern* 45).

'Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi's *al-Ard* (*Egyptian Earth*) is an early 1950s novel that also looks at village life and contributed to the development of the novel by using the Delta's colloquial speech for dialog, transcribing "the violent, aggressive way of speaking characteristic of the peasants," and making use of oral literature "in its episodic structure, its repetitions, even the fluid state of the text."<sup>5</sup> Kilpatrick has noted that "Al-Sharqawi's novels are the first systematic attempt to consider the fellahin, the majority of Egypt's population, as people and to see their problems clearly." These problems include land ownership and the political power of the landowners, divisiveness among the fellahin, corrupt officials, the exploitation of rural areas by the city, and "the deadening effect of religion," among other things (*The Modern* 139).

Joseph Zeidan has traced themes from 1950s and 1960s novels by Egyptian women to Aminah al-Sa'id's *al-Jamihah* (*The Defiant*). This 1950 novel delves into the influence of male family members on women's lives and offers a protagonist who is an artist, the latter a device Zeidan believes writers use "to dramatize the search for personal identity by exploring the innermost psyche and the interaction between the psyche and the outside world" (95). Prior to Al-Sa'id, Egyptian women novelists had not focused on issues in their own society but on problems in other societies or on

historical topics (94). After conflicts with the British began in the mid-1940s, nationalism became a frequent backdrop for the themes of women characters seeking their identity, as with Latifah al-Zayyat's 1960 novel *al-Bab al-Maftuh* (*The Open Door*), which follows its protagonist Layla's life from 1946 forward in time (166).

These are but a few of the writers and innovations of Modern Egyptian literature; many book-length studies explain them at greater length.<sup>6</sup> El Saadawi is working in a rich tradition of socially conscious fiction, but her contributions need to be more fully recognized. In *God Dies By the Nile*, for example, her creation of an interplay among personal ideas and attitudes, familial structures and beliefs, and societal forces gives a vivid depiction of a shattered Egypt. In this story, a family's bonds are disintegrated by corrupt people who give in to the forces of lust, greed, apathy, and desire for social prominence. Social criticism is reinforced by striking literary techniques well suited to convey rural living. The novel is a tapestry in which the rhythms of life and work interweave and echo in patterns: animals, farming, and hard labor in the fields evoke memories, smells, and visions from the characters' childhoods. Appeals to the senses become a supporting structure for El Saadawi's themes about the victimization of the peasant, especially the woman peasant. Throughout the novel, imagery is linked to sensory description in order to build atmosphere, such as in this passage:

All things seemed to move at the same slow, heavy pace. The red disc of the sun climbed down from the sky slow, ponderous and suffocating as it moved closer and closer to the earth before letting itself drop below the edge. The dark, plodding lines of peasants with their donkeys, cows and buffalo advanced in slow exhaustion over the dusty road to spill like a sticky fluid into the lanes and alleys leading to the houses and stables plunged in a sombre twilight. From the open doorways emanated the mixed odour of fermented manure, human excreta, and dough ready for baking.<sup>7</sup>

The relentless heat of the sun even as it sets, the exhaustion of human and animal

workers, and the scent of feces mixed with life-sustaining food all build until a sense of inescapable fatalism pervades the story being told. Emphasizing the strong relation between senses and memory, El Saadawi has everyday sights, smells, and sounds evoke thoughts of times past. The novel's bleakness is reinforced by our realization that only through these memories do the characters find any sort of happiness; present day existence is too deadening, both spiritually and physically, to allow joy. But memories torment just as often as they afford release.

As does the day in Egypt, the novel opens with the first call to prayer. The countryside literally comes to life: a water buffalo and the Nile are given human attributes, particularly that of resignation. Houses are personified as reticent, being "small, dark, indistinct shadows huddling up for support or shelter against the river bank or perhaps afraid of sliding down into the dust-covered expanse of lowland" (4). In contrast to the subdued landscape, the main female character, Zakeya, is depicted like a machine, her methodical hoeing in the fields going on for the entire daylight period. From the beginning El Saadawi establishes a symbolism that will run through the book as people are alternately associated with machinery and animals, and animals and inanimate objects are given human attributes.

The main thrust of the plot is loss. Zakeya's niece Nefissa is missing from their village of Kafra El Teen, and her son Galal is away in the army, believed to be dead. Other characters will be "lost" in various ways over the course of the novel as people become separated and absent ones are searched for, yet no successful reuniting occurs. Along with individuals an entire way of life is lost, a hard life to be sure, but the alternative presented in El Saadawi's vision of modern society is repugnant. No one succeeds in living a happy, satisfied life, not even those whose existence is privileged, and certainly not the peasant.

Corrupt modern society is embodied first and foremost in the character of the mayor of Kafra El Teen. Importantly, he remains nameless, a universal though specific figure of the exploiter. As in other El Saadawi writings, a character's eyes reveal a great deal. The mayor's eyes "had a haughty, almost arrogant quality, like those of

an English gentleman accustomed to command” (8). Indeed, he has the attributes of a colonialist, his mother is British, and both he and his older brother are government rulers who live unlike and apart from the populace, in lush houses with modern garb and conveniences--and modern “values.” When news of an illegitimate birth spreads through the village, a birth the mayor is responsible for as a result of his seducing Nefissa, the mayor’s son says, “Girls have no morals these days.” The mayor--fully aware of his complicity in the pregnancy--agrees, “Girls and women have lost all morality” (39). Even as he says this he leers at his wife’s thighs, uncovered because she wears short skirts in the western fashion, whereupon she challenges him that it is indeed the men who no longer have any morals. Taking the patriarchal position that women are the ones responsible for male morality the mayor retorts, “Men have always been immoral. But now the women are throwing virtue overboard, and that will lead to a real catastrophe” (39). El Saadawi’s sense of right order comes in the wife’s reply, “Why a catastrophe? Why not equality, or justice?” (39). The wife goes on to expose her son’s hypocrisy by berating him for going to prostitutes, assaulting the family’s female servants, and chasing after women of his own class. The son is becoming like the father and enjoys the despotic liberties the elder’s governing position lets him take.

The mayor’s insatiable lust leads him to defile each of Zakeya’s nieces in turn. Since he is the top figure in a corrupt local government, each lower member wants to stay in his favor and thus courts him continuously, serving as the expedients for his demands. When the mayor spots Zeinab, Nefissa’s younger sister, he declares that “the youngest is always the most tasty!” (14), one of several examples of a devouring, monster-like imagery associated with his character. Soon Haj Ismail, the barber; Sheik Zahran, the Chief of the Village Guard; and Sheikh Hamzawi, the local religious leader, conspire to get Zeinab for him. Their conversations are filled with cynicism, the result both of their “work” for the mayor and of their individual pasts. Each has been made brutal by a brutality enacted upon him. We find out, for example, that Haj Ismail was raped at the age of ten by his male cousin, an act that

haunts him when he happens to see the leg of a male corpse. El Saadawi has these characters speak with double-edged irony. Haj Ismail's comment, "All of us serve God," applies to the mayor as well as to Allah. Sheikh Zahran's observation, "What matters is that we are all servants. No matter how high we rise, or how low we fall, the truth is that we are all slaves, serving someone" (53), is of the general human situation but more particularly of his own, for he has recently murdered on the mayor's orders. Knowing of this act, Haj Ismail rejoins, "We are God's slaves when it's time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time" (53). Each is as guilty as the other in serving the mayor in hopes of their own advancement, and so after this conversation the two men go to sleep "with the firm knowledge that the life of people in Kafr El Teen depended on one God ever-present in their minds. . . . Sooner or later he was going to lay his hands on [Zeinab], for like all Gods he believed that the impossible did not exist" (54-55).

Not a god but a devil is what the mayor more resembles, and Nefissa has rightfully feared him from her earliest days. She had avoided passing his house whenever possible because "somehow her imagination kept telling her that behind the gate was concealed a great giant, a monstrous devil who walked on twenty iron legs which could crush her to death at any moment if she was not careful" (20). When older, Nefissa does pass in front of the house on her daily route, but still shivers and hides whenever she sees the mayor walking in the village. At twelve years of age she is sent for, ostensibly to work in the mayor's home, but really to be his concubine. El Saadawi creates a sympathetic male character in her father Kafrawi, who is content to allow Nefissa to remain at home because she doesn't want to go to "work" for the mayor. Sheikh Zahran, arriving to escort Nefissa to the mayor's, taunts Kafrawi about letting women run his house and says he must beat them to make them do as they are told. In this way Kafrawi is coerced into sending Nefissa off, and giving in when pressed to conform to the actions of patriarchal society is the first undoing of his family. Yet really, Kafrawi has no choice. As a member of the lowest, most powerless class of society, he must do as the local authority figures

demand. The alternative, as seen later, is to be treated unjustly in some other way.

Even minor characters in this novel serve as evidence of the all-encompassing oppression of the local government. A male character who gives Nefissa a lift in his donkey cart when she is running away from her village in shame was beaten when younger for peering over the mayor's fence. Like Kafrawi had in an earlier scene, this man "bent his head with the deep sadness of a man who has just realized that the only real feeling he has known is this sense of humiliation that he carries around with him, day after day, and night after night" (24). Initially the man had been curious about Nefissa's situation, but memories cause him to whip his donkey as he had been whipped by the Chief of the Village Guard, and suddenly he wishes to be rid of Nefissa and her problems. Callousness reverberates, anger being passed on by people striking out at those beneath them just as they had been lashed at by those above them. The plight of humans is underscored by that of animals, for the whipped donkey "brayed in a long, drawn-out gasping lament" while tears fill its eyes (22). After she humanizes it in this way, El Saadawi has the donkey breathe with clock-like rhythm, but sounding like a clock about to break down, which signifies that living things are made machine-like by their grueling existence. If the peasant is the lowest creature on the human scale, work animals are only one slight level below them.

Actually, the close association El Saadawi continuously makes between animals and humans via shared characteristics throws the issue of class into question. The desire to find an ally in the face of subjugation can sometimes supersede the need to dominate another. In one of the most astonishing yet sympathetically rendered relationships in the book, El Saadawi depicts a scene of bestiality. And in a way, the relationship between Kafrawi and his water buffalo may be the most tender in the novel.

Kafrawi has grown up with this water buffalo, whom he appropriately named Aziza (precious one<sup>8</sup>), even nursing upon her as a baby. When slightly older, Kafrawi refuses to eat with his father because he beat Aziza--something Aziza ostensibly

informed Kafrawi about, for the boy and the animal spent so much time together that “they learnt to understand one another’s language” (46). Now, as a grown man, Kafrawi tells Aziza his troubles. She listens, and seems to understand and empathize:

Her big eyes were covered in a film of moisture, like tears that had not yet formed. She stretched out her neck coming so close that their heads touched. Then she started to wipe her lips up against his neck like a mother fondling her child. It seemed as though she was trying to say something to him, to ask him what was wrong. He rested his head on hers, wiped his wet eyes over her face, and brought his parched lips close up to her ear. He whispered: “O, Aziza, Nefissa is no longer here. She has run away.” (45)

When she was younger Nefissa had associated her father with the buffalo. The face of each changed in the same way; each bit her. She feared each at certain moments, especially when their expressions changed from calm resignation to anger—for like the peasant, the buffalo is put in her place as a worker, and like the peasant, sometimes wishes to rebel. Other characters too equate peasant and water buffalo: the Chief of the Village Guard says of the peasants, “They have no brain, and when they do have one, it’s like the brain of a buffalo” (54). El Saadawi makes the pairing of Kafrawi and Aziza seem natural; they are companions and comrades in a world in which they are, first and foremost, the slaves of those above them. It comes as a surprise but not a shock, therefore, when the adult Kafrawi first nurses on Aziza and then has sexual intercourse with her.

The need for love comes out differently in the character of Fatheya, Sheikh Hamzawi’s wife. Fatheya wants a child yet has not been able to have one, so when a baby—Nefissa’s—is left on their doorstep, they take it in. Fatheya’s life history proves a striking contrast to the free actions and immorality of the mayor, and indeed stands as an example of the different ways women and men are viewed and treated in Egyptian society. Like most girls, Fatheya was circumcised at age six. Her menstrual periods were viewed by all as impure. She had to undergo a virginity test

by the *daya* when she married, an arranged marriage she did not want. Along with these larger shared experiences of women, Fatheya's situation is linked with Nefissa's in the scene in which she is to leave home and be married. El Saadawi repeats what occurred when Nefissa was summoned by the mayor: Fatheya hides on top of the oven and Haj Ismail is the official who says her father must beat her into obedience. Even this specific of an experience is symbolic of what all women go through, however; men ultimately force women to do as they wish.

El Saadawi brings in also the issue of seclusion with this character. Because she will be the wife of a religious leader, Fatheya must veil and be sequestered in her husband's house. In strictest religious form, she will be seen in public only twice: when she moves in to her husband's house from her father's, and when her corpse leaves her husband's house.

Another minor character who is marginalized in this society for quite different reasons is Metwalli, the "village idiot." Son of the former Sheikh Osman, who had prayed for the deceased in the cemetery, Metwalli lives on in the graveyard, eating food left on the graves by relatives of the deceased. How much of an idiot Metwalli is is questionable, since he limps and drools while people are around but much less so when they aren't; he seems to be vying for sympathy and donations of food. In the second surprising sexual act of the novel we learn that Metwalli is a necrophiliac. He is drawn to the newly buried in the cemetery and after performing sexual acts upon them, sells their shrouds in a nearby town. His character causes both repulsion and sympathy in the reader, for although he is a sexual deviant he too feels a need for proper affection, as will come to be seen.

Love is not, however, what causes the mayor to relentlessly pursue Zeinab. As he had with Nefissa, Kafrawi tries to keep Zeinab at home, and this time the mayor takes more drastic action: he has Kafrawi framed for murder. Acting on the mayor's orders, the Chief of the Village Guard kills a villager, Elwau, who is chosen to be the victim solely because the mayor's son had made up a rumor that Elwau had been the one to impregnate Nefissa. While Kafrawi is dozing in the fields, he hears

a scream. The sound causes him to remember seeing his mother lying dead on the floor when he was a child. She had been killed by a man with “slit-like eyes” (48), an image Kafrawi sees again when he moves toward the scream and finds Elwau’s body in his maize field. At the end of the chapter we find out that the slit-like eyes belong to the Chief of the Village Guard. Ironically, those responsible for the murder use the notion of honor to implicate Kafrawi, spreading word that he killed Elwau in retribution for ruining his daughter.

The conflict between peasant and authority is extended when dogs are brought in to flush Kafrawi out of hiding. Like an animal, Kafrawi runs out of a field, jumps in the river, and then out into the orchard on the other side. The villagers watch in the hope that Kafrawi will get away, to be an emblem of their own escape from the tyranny of authority: “They hated the policeman and his dogs, hated all policemen, all officers, all representatives of authority and the government. It was the hidden ancient hatred of peasants for their government. They knew that in some way or another they had always been the victims, always been exploited, even if most of the time they could not understand how it was happening” (60). If Kafrawi reached freedom, their class would triumph in a small way. But as with the man who had whipped his donkey because he himself had been beaten, Kafrawi will be subdued by one who has been dehumanized by those above him.

This policeman who was called in to chase Kafrawi is given a name, Bayumi, but he is depicted in an extremely impersonal way. He performs his duties methodically, not seeing his object as a human but as “this animal” (61) he has been ordered to catch. Bayumi’s face was

. . . a face without feeling carrying an expressionless expression which says nothing at all. A face without features like the palm of a hand from which you can glean no feeling or thought, because they have been suppressed for so long that nothing is left any more, or a face made of bronze, or copper. . . . His body too was hard and copper-like, with arms and legs which ran or swam or walked with a steady,

swinging, untiring movement, so unchanging, so enduring that it could hardly be human, hardly come from a body of flesh and blood and bone, but only from a robot with metal limbs and joints. (61)

El Saadawi develops the robot-like imagery as Bayumi ruthlessly--yet unemotionally--captures Kafrawi. By contrast Kafrawi has not lost his emotions; he fears this officer who is “moving at a machine-like pace neither fast nor slow, like the hands of a clock moving steadily towards the hour of execution” (61). From the beginning of the chase scene there is little doubt that Kafrawi will be caught. The deliberate mechanical movements of the police officer make him an embodiment of an authority that cannot be stopped and that does not see those it governs as human.

El Saadawi reveals that there is yet another level to which insensitivity can go, however. Kafrawi inexplicably finds himself in another location, probably in Cairo, in a crowded room before three men he perceives as “sitting behind something high which looked like a table” (62). Kafrawi has not seen a courtroom before and is uncertain how to function during the proceedings. One of the three men is referred to as His Excellency, but El Saadawi transcribes the interrogation using only “the voice” or, more often, “the angry voice” to describe the speaker. Kafrawi is laughed at for his simple honesty; he says that even though he heard the rumor that Elwau had impregnated Nefissa, he never thought to kill him. “Is that normal for a man whose honour has been sullied?” the voice asks him; “Is that natural?” (63). Innocently, Kafrawi asks, “What does natural mean?” (63). Kafrawi does not find it natural to act as patriarchal society demands. He would not commit murder to preserve “honor,” just as he would not beat Nefissa to make her go to the mayor’s house. The voice becomes increasingly angry during the questioning, badgering Kafrawi until his words are twisted into construing that he killed Elwau to preserve his family’s honor. As he is led away to jail, Kafrawi testifies to the only thing he can since the testimony of his innocence is ignored: “I do testify that there is no God but Allah” (64). Kafrawi means this at surface value, but El Saadawi’s irony regarding the mayor as god is clear to the reader.

The final stage of the mayor's destruction of Kafrawi and Zakeya's family comes about through the distortion of religion. Zeinab clings to religion, asking Allah to come to their aid after Kafrawi's arrest, but Zakeya tells her, "My child, Allah alone is not enough" (67). Appalled, the faithful Zeinab encourages her aunt to pray, only to meet her loss of faith:

Zakeya raised her hands in a gesture of rebuttal. "I have not ceased praying and begging God to help us. And yet everyday our misery becomes greater, and we are afflicted with a new suffering."

Her voice was not angry. It was distant, and calm, and as cold as ice. (67)

We are thus launched into an odyssey into Zakeya's past. It is a nightmarish trip; indeed, it comes to us through dreams she has had over the course of her life, which she accesses now by going into a nearly catatonic trance-state. We witness her circumcision; incest enacted by Kafrawi and later Galal; the death of a baby (which shrinks into a "small rabbit" that she buries [69]); her husband beating her for the death of a son ("For it was like that. Every time a son of hers died he would strike out at her blindly, and beat her up with anything he could lay his hands on. And the same thing would happen whenever she gave birth to a daughter" [69]). Zakeya's life has been a series of assaults on her body and her faith, leaving her withdrawn and unbelieving.

Because she refuses to pray, the villagers perform an exorcism, bringing in the *daya* for a *zar*, a ceremony enacted to rid a person, "(usually a woman) of an evil spirit by means of a frenzied dance accompanied by incantations and verses of the Koran" (73). As the exorcism proceeds Zakeya recalls all the pain in her life and wails, "as though mourning the suffering of a whole lifetime suppressed in her body from the very first moment of her life when her father struck her mother on the head because she had not borne him the son he expected" (75). In all her memories, misery is linked to being a woman. The villagers echo her lament in a group commiseration:

Their voices joined in a high-pitched wail, as long as the length of

their lives, reaching back to those moments in time when they had been born, and beaten and bitten and burnt under the soles of their feet, and in the walls of their stomach, since the bitterness flowed with their bile, and death snatched their sons and their daughters, one after the other in a line. (76)

The exorcism is not successful; Zakeya's nightmares and visions continue. She begs Zeinab not to leave her alone, saying, "The devils are looking at me from behind the bars of the window," meaning, literally, the gate to the grounds of the mayor's house (77). Preying on her devoutness (Zeinab is fittingly named after the prophet Muhammad's daughter, who converted her husband through her devotion), Haj Ismail tells Zeinab that she must make a pilgrimage to El Sayeda Zeinab in Cairo. At the mosque a holy man will approach her, remove the amulet Haj Ismail sells her to wear about her neck, and instruct her in what to do. Unbeknownst to Zeinab, this "holy man" is part of an elaborate plan to gain her for the mayor's pleasure.

Just as Zakeya used to slip out before dawn to work in the fields, now Zeinab slips her aunt out of the village bound for Cairo before sunrise. Whereas Zakeya had been the one in the earlier scenes to gaze in angry defiance, now Zeinab does, for misery has been passed on to the next generation. The landscape changes accordingly: the Nile, the waves of which were described previously "like tiny wrinkles in an old, sad, silent face" (1), now "has resigned itself to its fate" (81). Although Zakeya has resigned herself to her fate, Zeinab still holds out hope that faith will save them. But El Saadawi is pointed in her description: as they leave the village, the roof of the mayor's house "climbed higher than the minaret" (81), indicating his triumph as a higher authority than religion.

Many peasants are at El Sayeda Zeinab mosque when the two women arrive, all crying to Allah, contributing to "one prolonged, imploring chant, more like a wail of despair than anything else. 'O God, come to our rescue'" (89). Zeinab becomes caught up by the group passion; her heart beats quickly, her eyes shine, she shivers

“with a strange fever hidden in her depths,” and she has a “virginal flush” as she undergoes a religious ecstasy (89). Since she is ripe for being tricked, the hired “holy man” approaches and tells her that in order to cure her aunt she must obey Allah because, he explains, “She is sick because you have continued to disobey Allah, and she has encouraged you to do that. But Allah is all merciful, and kind, and He will forgive both of you on condition that you obey, and do what He asks of you” (91). Since the mayor is god in Kafr El Teen, the orders of the “holy man” take on an ironic and sinister meaning for the reader. Zeinab is to bathe and pray, then ritualistically go to the mayor’s house. “He is a noble and great man,” the “holy man” says, “born of a noble and great father, and he belongs to a good and devout family blessed by Allah and His Prophet” (91). To keep her out of the way, Zakeya is ordered to work and pray in the fields while Zeinab is at the mayor’s house.

Back in Kafr El Teen, the two women carry out these orders. Zeinab is amazed by the mayor’s house, especially the conveniences of the kitchen. In an ironic commentary on the modern commodities that are the mayor’s perks, El Saadawi has Zeinab feel that “she was now in the kingdom of Allah, praised by His name and revered” (95). Zakeya is sweating while hard at work in the sunny fields, but “No matter how burning hot the noonday sun became it could never penetrate through the thick, solid concrete walls of the Mayor’s house” (97). The mayor wonders briefly if he will be discovered this time for ruining a girl, but reassures himself that “He was above suspicion, above the law, even above the moral rules which governed ordinary people’s behaviour. Nobody in Kafr El Teen would dare suspect him. They could have doubts about Allah, but about him . . . It was impossible” (98). And so he does not restrain himself when he sees Zeinab in her wet *gallabiya* scrubbing his bathtub. He fondles her breast, and at his touch the religious ecstasy Zeinab had experienced in the mosque returns, although she is confused that her physical response now is mixed with fear. But ultimately she feels “a strange new pleasure almost akin to an ecstasy, the ecstasy of salvation, of being free of the heavy load which had been weighing down on her heart. Now she could leave herself in the

hands of God, deliver her body and soul to Him, fulfil her vow, and savour the relief of having done so" (99). Her religious thoughts may be a mental trick to help her survive the forced intercourse, but when the mayor rips Zeinab's *gallabiya* and takes her to his bed the reader knows that it is not Allah to whom Zeinab "gives" herself.

The hypocritical use of religion and the power of superstition come to the forefront in Sheikh Hamzawi and Fatheya's lives as well. As Kafr El Teen's religious leader, the Sheikh feels his power in a physical way. Believing himself closest to Allah when he is leading the Friday midday prayer, "A fine shiver would traverse his body, like the fine thrill of pleasure or of that rare happiness which he had known only as a child on those occasions when he used to throw stones at the other children and watch them run away in fright" (102). Religious control and the ecstasy it brings is linked to his memory of childish control by physical force. Like the mayor, the Sheikh is concerned with personal power. Yet the Sheikh is currently worrying because he is losing respect among the villagers for having taken in Nefissa's baby. The villagers believe that the illegitimate child is the cause of all their misfortune. When Fatheya asks her husband if he has lost his faith in Allah taking care of them should the mayor oust him from the mosque, Sheikh Hamzawi's retort is telling, underscoring the real nature of power relations in Kafr El Teen--and by extension, the larger society in Egypt: "These people are unbelievers, Fatheya. They don't have faith in God nor do they worry their heads about what will happen either in this world, or in the next. In their hearts they don't fear God. What they really fear is the Mayor. He holds their daily bread in his hand and if he wants, he can deprive them of it" (106). Fatheya asks why he praises the mayor publicly if this is the case. "The Friday sermon, Fatheya, cannot solely be concerned with Allah," the Sheikh replies. "Part of it must deal with worldly affairs, and the world in which we live is controlled by the Mayor. We cannot go about our lives if we are in disfavour with him" (107).

Despite his allegiance to the mayor, Sheikh Hamzawi becomes ostracized and is finally dismissed from the mosque in a scene that echoes the brutality he had

enacted when a child. As well, it shows the chain of violence through the generations. The man who prevents the Sheikh from entering the mosque slaps him, remembering as he does so how his father had slapped him when he was young while repeating, “Allah will burn you in the flames of hell for not obeying your father” (109). The man renews the vigor of his assault on the Sheikh and begins to think it is Allah himself he is hitting, a god who had threatened him with eternal burning. El Saadawi escalates the violence of the scene by having a crowd gather to watch; someone who tries to help the Sheikh gets hit as well. While some go in the mosque to attend prayer, saying they are not responsible, others watch the fight and forget about praying. The narrator remarks, “Some people are even prepared to pay a high price just to watch a fight, and be distracted from the conflicts that go on inside them” (110). The refusal to look within and stand up against corruption continues when various people in the crowd wonder at whether they should be beating up their religious leader. No one speaks their true thoughts, instead hoping others cannot divine them. One man at first thinks “the Mayor was a devout man” and then “the Mayor was a dissolute man” (111); another fights the inner voice that tells him he’s a coward for not opposing the mob and instead repeats his father’s statement that “children of sin only bring misfortune with them” (112) to justify the beating of the Sheikh because he took in an illegitimate foundling. The people of Kafr El Teen unite, but not directly against the mayor; Sheikh Hamzawi, his lesser representative, becomes their scapegoat. The villagers have been driven to desperate action. Soon they will enact their rage on the most innocent of beings.

A child dies of smoke inhalation when an oven fire gets out of control and the superstition about illegitimate offspring is repeated. Fatheya flees with the baby, but the villagers chase her down. In perhaps the most gripping scene in the novel, El Saadawi describes the savage attack. As Fatheya tries to defend herself and the baby, she becomes alternately human and animal: “She was soft, and rounded, and female and she was a wild animal, ferociously fighting those who surrounded her in the night” (115). So too the villagers turn bestial as they surround her:

The long black nails were like the black hoofs of buffalo and cows. They sank into her breast tearing flesh out of flesh. Male eyes gleamed with an unsatisfied lust, feeding on her breast with a hunger run wild like a group of starved men gathered around a lamb roasting on a fire. Each one trying to devour as much as he can lest his neighbor be quicker than him. Their hands moved like the quick paws of tigers or panthers in a fight, their eyes circles around lit by an ancient vengeance, by some furious desire. In a few moments Fatheya's body had become a mass of torn flesh and the ground was stained red with her blood. (115)

Primordial man comes to the surface at last. The mayor has devoured women, devoured subordinates, devoured the resources and the spirit of the peasants. The villagers turn on a foundling, an "outsider," for catharsis, devouring it and its protector, Fatheya. Metwalli helps Sheikh Hamzawi carry the bodies of woman and child home, and then helps him bury Fatheya the next day, the body of the child in her arms. With this death, Metwalli cries and does not defile the grave.

Soon a new obstacle to the mayor's pleasure with Zeinab appears. After four years in the Sinai, Galal returns home from the army. Zakeya has trouble recognizing her son with the "broken look in his eyes and the back which bent" and a voice that is "weak and spent" (121). Before he left it had been arranged that he would marry his cousin Zeinab, and now that he is home he does so happily. Slightly suspicious about her work at the mayor's house, he refuses to let her go there anymore. Not to be foiled, the mayor instructs Sheikh Zahran to bring Zeinab to him. But the Chief of the Village Guard worries over his task because rising prices and taxes are lessening the mayor's popularity. Sheikh Zahran notices people are not respecting himself as they had before, either. Galal has rejected his offer of a reduction in taxes if he should let Zeinab return to work. Sheikh Zahran sits smoking with Haj Ismail, scheming how he can get Galal out of the way; night falls, and El Saadawi deepens the atmosphere: "The dark night had by now enveloped Kafra El Teen in its heavy

cloak, and the air hardly moved over the surface of the river. The sombre mud huts and the winding lanes seemed to sink into a silence as still and profound as the silence of death, as the end of all movement" (128). The suffocating stasis is an ominous foreshadowing of the coming end for all.

The plan settled upon is to plant a bag of silver coins in Galal's house and accuse him of stealing it from the mayor. False witnesses put him in jail, but also cause the mayor to lose Zeinab for good because he does not recognize the power of the bond between this husband and wife. After sitting, devastated, in a trance for three days, Zeinab sells the buffalo Aziza and departs for Cairo to seek Galal in prison. She is sent from place to place trying to get permission for a visit until she runs out of money. A "kind man" who "was one of those men who helped women in need" takes her to his room (133), and readers can only assume she becomes a prostitute since she remains in the city, never again to be heard of back in Kafr El Teen.

With the last member of her family gone, Zakeya just sits in the doorway of her house, staring "with a terrible anger like the anger of some wild beast being hunted down" (134). Very slowly she starts to realize what has gone on with Zeinab at the mayor's house. And one day, when he comes out of his gate, Zakeya gets the hoe from the stable, pauses just a moment, then strides up to the mayor and crushes his head with one blow.

Zakeya, of course, is taken to jail, where she mutters, "I know who it is. Now I know him" (138). When another prisoner asks her who it is, she replies, "I know it's Allah, my child. . . . He's over there, my child. I buried him there on the bank of the Nile" (138). She means the mayor literally, but also means that God is dead to her because of all she and her family have been through.

*God Dies By the Nile* is a novel that holds nothing back in its indictment of an immoral and hypocritical government figure and his lackeys who feel no sense of responsibility for the land or the people who work it. It is also a novel that offers no relief in the suffering of its just characters. The world of Kafr El Teen--and Cairo, as

it touches the villagers' lives--is harsh, unfair, and unforgiving. El Saadawi has an insider's knowledge of life in the village, understands the machinations of local government, the grueling work of the peasant, the unforgiving nature of the landscape. She attends to the life problems that are peculiar to women, criticizing the patriarchal systems that foster and perpetuate them. And she points out the horrible legacy of this way of life as generation after generation undergo the same torment because of attitudes, class structures, and institutions that are unchanging even as the modern world surrounds and intrudes upon village life. All of her vital social commentary in this novel is made through an affecting literary treatment. Sensory description and the building of atmosphere place the reader in such a realistic and tactile setting that many scenes become inescapably disturbing. At the same time, personification of the landscape, anthropomorphism, and the alternating mechanization and bestiality of humans give a mythic dimension to the novel.

And there is more. Memories, dreams, trances, and states of religious ecstasy lend an overtly surrealistic quality to the narrative, plunging the reader into the tormented recesses of the characters' minds. The empathy that arises from this experience is El Saadawi's special triumph. She does not glorify the peasant, nor does she romanticize life in the village. She makes the peasant human, with faults as well as finer attributes. Her wide range of characterization prevents her from falling under the criticism Hilary Kilpatrick has made of other Egyptian novelists who seem unable to understand how peasants think and feel, with the result that they project their own mental processes onto their village characters. Such novelists do not understand the peasants as individuals in their own right (*The Modern* 158-59).

Anyone who reads *God Dies By the Nile* will see that Nawal El Saadawi understands. Today in Egypt the exploitation of and discrimination against the men and women of the villages and the peasants who have gone to the cities continues. Increasing westernization contributes to social divisiveness. Luxury cars, expensive clothing, nightclubs, costly villas and other results of recent economic reforms that have privileged only some rightly cause resentment in the larger part of the

population who lives in or near poverty. There is much work yet to be done towards a new Egypt. And economic disparity, political inequality, class and sexual biases, injustices of all types continue to exist around the world. Novels, in addition to being artistic accomplishments, can help effect social change. Nawal El Saadawi's literary texts are unique to themselves and unique in world literature. Yet they are part too of a movement, one I believe should transcend the boundaries of nation or culture: feminism. Looking at the work of another writer who created what could be called feminist fiction (although the term came into existence after her lifetime) should show us that a global movement could make important advancements in the lives of people everywhere.

**CHAPTER 7**

**THE GODDESS AND GLOBAL FEMINISM:**

**SOME CONNECTIONS BETWEEN NAWAL EL SAADAWI**

**AND VIRGINIA WOOLF**

“*Everything* affects my writing,” Nawal El Saadawi stressed to me when we were talking about her fiction. “Any trip, any meeting with people, any sounds, any scenery, anything affects me. It’s like eating: the different things as you digest and it goes up into your body and it’s part of your body and your mind. So, in fact, everything intersects with everything in my life. East, west, north, south, black and white and *everything*” (Personal Interview). In another context, El Saadawi has said she has been a feminist since she was a child, when she observed that her brother played while she did housework for him, that he was allowed to travel during the summer whereas she, who had done much better in school, was not.<sup>1</sup>

The British writer Virginia Woolf found the initial impetus for her feminism in childhood as well, with her brothers receiving formal education at school and university while she and her sister were taught at home. This experience affected her writing. Despite their living at different times (Woolf lived from 1882 to 1941) and in different cultures, there are a number of similarities between the patriarchal societies in which these two feminist writers grew up. Male children are favored and privileged. As adults, most males expect women to subsume themselves to male control. Women are likely to be less educated, less experienced, and therefore less confident than men. They may repress their own needs and wants to satisfy the demands and desires of fathers, brothers, and husbands. Women receive mixed messages about their sexuality, being told it is shameful and dangerous and therefore needs to be controlled by an operation and/or by their husbands. They may suffer

sexual abuse at the hands of family members as well as strangers; in either case, women are silenced because they are powerless.

Nawal El Saadawi and Virginia Woolf, two distinctive intellectuals, both “think back through [their] mothers” (to adapt Woolf’s phrase from *A Room of One’s Own*) to find strength and a remedy for the injustices of patriarchal societies. Seeing how they do this will help us establish the underpinnings for a global feminism.

In the book-length 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf creates a narrator who has been invited to Oxbridge--a blend of the names Oxford and Cambridge--to speak about women and fiction. A contrast of the men’s university to Fernham (based on Newnham) College for women brings out financial discrepancies in the ways men and women are educated. In addition to money, a woman needs a tradition of women writers to look back upon because men compose differently. Women need their own language, their own style to express their particular ideas, which is something El Saadawi has devoted a long career to developing as well.

Another thing a woman gains from thinking back through her mothers is access to those figures in ancient cultures--in particular, goddesses--who have the ability to renew society. What Patricia Cramer says about Woolf applies equally to El Saadawi, that her use of the goddess is political, a citing of “collective representations of women’s common experiences” (221). Some of the ancient myths are quite useful for repatterning relations between men and women. Why not, then, recover those which depict women positively, with strength? This is exactly what Woolf and El Saadawi have done. Through nonfiction and fiction that alludes to antiquity, these two feminist writers seek a corrective for their sexist cultures. Woolf contributes to the early feminist reappropriation of the “eternal feminine,” away from male fantasies of Helen to the elemental power of goddesses such as Isis. Woolf had studied the classics from an early age, learning some Latin when she was six years old, being tutored by Clara Pater in Latin and Greek starting in 1899, and, more importantly, studying Greek under Janet Case in 1902. Passages in Woolf’s obituary for Case indicate that she spoke with Woolf about female figures in classic

mythology, such as the Furies.<sup>2</sup> William Herman suggests that instead of simply idealizing ancient cultures as her contemporaries Joyce, Eliot, and Pound did, Woolf viewed the present as “having a possible wholeness in its connections to the past” (267).

“Wholeness” is an important concept for Woolf. She reasons in her essay “On Not Knowing Greek” (begun in 1922 and published in 1925) that even if we are idealizing or projecting when we study ancient cultures, connecting to the past can still aid us in repairing--in making whole--the present. Our interpretation of Greek poetry may reveal more about what modern culture needs than what the Greeks were really like, but nonetheless, Woolf qualifies, the Greeks “know all that is to be known” (13). The wisdom of the ancient Greeks, who did not gloss over the tragedies of human existence in the least, is what Woolf urges us to turn to in order to renew our excitement for and engagement with life, to live honestly. As her studies expanded, Woolf learned that one could reach back beyond the Greeks for additional sources by which to rejuvenate not only one’s own life, but all of society. And this was when she tapped into the tradition of which El Saadawi would later make extensive use.

Evelyn Haller explains that Woolf knew of “things Egyptian” (109) rather indirectly: through family connections, Vita Sackville-West’s letters to her from Egypt, displays in the British Museum, and her study of Greco-Roman accounts of Egypt (110-11). These last, especially, have been shown by more recent scholars to be limited or misinformed, but they were not Woolf’s only sources of ancient society and its myths: her friendship with the archeologist Jane Ellen Harrison supplied richer fuel. Harrison, a key figure in the “Cambridge Group” that founded myth criticism, authored numerous books on the topic, several of which were in the Woolfs’ personal library: *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1918), *Aspects Aorists and the Classic Tripos* (1919), and *Epilogeomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921).<sup>3</sup> Her work uncovered the matriarchal fertility rites that had been absorbed and changed into myths involving male figures. In addition to Harrison’s theories on matriarchal

ritual, her remarks on art sound a call that Woolf seems readily to have answered. Art and community should not be divorced, Harrison writes in *Ancient Art and Ritual*, as it seemed they had been in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The arts should have a “social function,” be for “the common weal” rather than just representative of or directed at individual emotion (245–46). Certainly Woolf’s work, as much as it may connect to her individual experience, speaks to the experiences of many and, in doing so, also attempts to promote positive change for the good of all society. But this change could only occur if society recognizes that women’s status is not what it should be, and so Woolf turned her attention to exposing how male-controlled myth had subdued women.

Louise DeSalvo sees Woolf using her 1906 story about the sixteenth century, “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,” to explore the way male-controlled myth causes women to accept their lower status without question (xxix). Joan Martyn lives a cloistered life because her father owns land; as El Saadawi does in her nonfiction, Woolf criticizes the evolution of patriarchal institutions that restrict women: the medieval landowning system has made thieves and marauders out of those without, so the young Joan, who wishes to roam the countryside and travel like men do to London, must instead live on a walled estate and in fear of abduction and physical violation. Joan trembles as she wonders whether each “rattle of the big door, is the battering ram of some wandering highwayman” (47). As in El Saadawi’s work, weapons and phalluses are meant to be associated.

Woolf emphasizes how women are important primarily for acquiring land through marriage. When Joan is of age a neighbor whose lands adjoin those of her father negotiates for her hand. His marriage contract is the yardstick by which Joan measures herself, for a woman’s contract is either proof of her honor and authority or of her lack of worth--during life and after. Joan’s remark prefigures one by El Saadawi’s character Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, who also understands “that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven” (91)--or so patriarchal religions would have it.

Another element of patriarchy that concerns both Woolf and El Saadawi and which appears in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” is class domination. El Saadawi has written and said on many occasions that “there is no separation between race, gender, or class oppression” (“Women in the South” 24); not only women but lower class men are oppressed by patriarchy (“Arab Women”). Her own family background is a blend of class: her maternal grandmother came from a middle- or upper-middle class Cairean family and her paternal grandfather owned a small piece of land in the village of Kafir Tahla. When that land was divided among his nine offspring, El Saadawi’s father, “threatened by the spectre of poverty,” was sent to *al-Azhar* (“Women and Islam” 87). El Saadawi, we know, became a physician and a writer and lives primarily in Cairo, although she and her husband, Sherif Hetata, maintain a small village home and her work takes her around the world. There is not the least whiff of classist attitude about El Saadawi, either in her writing or personal demeanor.

The same cannot be said about Virginia Woolf. Her father, Leslie Stephen, was “an eminent Victorian,” meaning a highly educated and socially connected man who married William Makepeace Thackeray’s daughter and counted among his friends Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and George Meredith. He was President of the London Library after Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh, and Harvard bestowed honorary degrees upon him; and he was knighted.<sup>4</sup> Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, came from a line of colonialists, was born in India, and was courted by the artists Holman Hunt and Thomas Woolner. After her first husband, Herbert Duckworth, died, however, she began looking after the poor and sick, and exhaustion from this social work contributed to her death.<sup>5</sup> The Bloomsbury Group to which the adult Virginia belonged was notoriously snobbish, intellectually and socially. In the first version of an essay about a working women’s cooperative guild Woolf wrote that the reforms the women were fighting for “would not matter to me one jot” (1930); in the second version she revised it to they “would not touch one hair of my capitalistic head” (1931).<sup>6</sup> However, in a later essay, “The Leaning Tower”

(1940), she took young intellectuals to task for claiming solidarity with the working class yet continuing to live in the comfortable style in which they had been raised.<sup>7</sup> Given these contradictions, how are we to take her fictional depiction of workers on the Martyn estate, which seems to parallel the depictions of exploited peasants in El Saadawi's novels?

Joan, taking a walk with her younger brother in the company of the chief steward, comes upon a cottage with a straw roof, dirt floor, open fire, and no furniture but a log. The steward speaks to the nursing mother within as if she is an animal, towering over her in a threatening manner. Joan thinks, "I doubt whether she could have spoken, or whether snarling and howling was her only language" (53), and finds her husband equally animalistic, imagining him to be attracted by the bright color of her cloak and living in a burrow. "These are the people we must rule; and tread under foot," Joan writes, "and scourge them to do the only work they are fitted to do; as they will tear us to pieces with their fangs" (53). She is recording the steward's words, but she makes them her own by adding that her encounter with these people ruined her outing because she hates to think her country "bred pests like these" (53). The attitude of the elite toward those who work the land is much the same in El Saadawi's fiction, where peasants are equated with water buffalo and thought to have as much intelligence. Woolf shows us that Joan is so used to her male-controlled way of life that she assumes patriarchal attitudes herself. She fears that breaking down the barriers between her privileged world and the rest of the world--what would amount, basically, to the destruction of the class system--would reduce her to a savage. Joan's willingness to perpetuate the system under which she lives displays the negative effect of male-centered myth: a poem about Helen of Troy is what her father gives her to read, and what Joan comes to love.

More positive myths become available to characters in Woolf's first novel as she reworks the figure of Helen and adds other archetypal women as role models. In *Melymbrosia*, the earlier version of what would be published as *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf affords the character Lucilla Ambrose higher status than her husband,

according to Louise DeSalvo, who quotes as evidence the passage in which Lucilla aligns herself with the pyramids, looking down on her husband. DeSalvo sees *Melymbrosia* as “an angry novel about how the power of women had eroded since the time of the Egyptians, since pre-Olympian Greece, when people believed in the positive power of female forces” (xxxiii). As we have seen, El Saadawi argues that women’s status was elevated in cultures with these myths--until patriarchal systems changed this. Certainly the many references to ancient cultures that remained when Woolf transformed *Melymbrosia* into *The Voyage Out* evidence her own desire to reclaim the myths and women’s power.

Numerous critics have found allusions to ancient Greek texts and mythology in *The Voyage Out*, which is set primarily in South America and focuses on the experiences of a group of British tourists. Madeline Moore, for instance, believes Helen Ambrose to be suggestive of what Jane Harrison explained as the Earth Mother or Mother and Maid in primitive cultures. The character St. John Hirst sees Helen this way, as Moore demonstrates by citing the passage in which he admires the older woman’s “largeness and simplicity” that set her apart “like a great stone woman” and which put him in “a gentler mood” (90). Moore carefully delineates how the characters correlate with mythological figures, seeing the river expedition as Woolf’s way of symbolizing young protagonist Rachel Vinrace’s “entry into the primeval,” so that, with her aunt Helen and Rachel’s new fiancé Terence Hewett, “Mother, Maiden and lover descend into an unmediated pastoral landscape” (95).

There are, in fact, allusions to ancient cultures and matriarchal figures throughout. I suspect that Helen Ambrose is an empowered alteration of Helen of Troy. This Helen’s power comes from more than physical beauty, as the lines Moore quotes show. Her surname, suggestive of ambrosia, reinforces her role as a goddess of life forces. In allusions to other myths, Rachel one day looks into the courtyard onto which the hotel kitchen opens and glimpses “the wrong side of the hotel life, which was cut off from the right side by a maze of small bushes” (280). From a balcony Rachel observes in this underworld what could be termed a sacrifice made

by an old woman who chases, catches, and cuts off the head of a chicken while wearing “an expression of vindictive energy and triumph combined” (280). Rachel is engrossed by the scene, but she is able to break her gaze away from the underworld, and, importantly, when she turns she finds Miss Allan, a middle-aged literature teacher who has traveled extensively, standing beside her. Rachel goes to Allan’s room because she hopes the learned woman might be one to “remove the mystery which burdened her” (281), by which, in the largest sense, Woolf means the mystery of life.

The teacher’s room has no perfume bottles, beauty items, or fashionable clothing lying around as do the rooms of other women; she is writing a history of English literature, so manuscript pages and research books are piled about. Allan, whose face is “much lined with care and thought” (282), looks at Rachel “with great kindness and simplicity” (282), and later smiles kindly at her. Similar to the Great Mother, Allan is in a position to teach the Maid Rachel, as she has other young women. Her knowledge and experience imply that there would “be balm for all anguish in her words, could one induce her to have recourse to them” (284). The wisdom, empathy, and healing powers of the Great Mother are in Allan’s possession, but, while there is potential for the Maid Rachel to tap into these forces, I believe Allan wishes Rachel to learn for herself, albeit with her guidance. She urges Rachel to take risks, declaring that she likes to try new things and offering the young woman candied ginger and Creme de Menthe. This initiation ritual isn’t completed; Rachel spits out the ginger in dislike and refuses the liqueur--and, we find out, dies by the end of the story. Rachel’s aversion to initiation and the sustenance Allan offers cuts her off from the Great Mother and her guiding wisdom.

Allan’s qualities as a goddess are given physical terms when she changes for Sunday tea and is correlated to a pharaonic stone statue, a “massive . . . figure . . . [who] stood on a pair of thick slate-grey legs” (285). Her putting on of a suffrage pin indicates her support of a movement to elevate women’s status. In the character of Allan, Woolf creates a woman who is secure with her stage in life and in her work,

and who could help young women to gain knowledge.

Taking a different approach with other characters, Woolf mocks those who do not understand and who exploit what they call “primitive” cultures. This comes out clearly in her depiction of Mr. and Mrs. Flushing, who travel the world buying up local artifacts and crafts cheaply and selling them at high prices to fashionable women in London. An eager participant in capitalistic society, Mrs. Flushing definitely sees humans as being ranked: she is much interested in the birth and background of people, tries to impress Rachel by recalling “very clever men interested in Egyptology” she has known (261), and proposes an expedition up the river to gawk at the natives. Her husband at first seems to have an aesthetic admiration for South American art and culture, rapt over how they might find “giant gods hewn out of stone” and “colossal figures” in a lush landscape they would be the first outsiders to see (262). He imagines ancient stone temples and the idols that “primitive hunters and priests” had crafted, hoping to find prehistoric towns rich with archeological material (262). But he merely wants to plunder these sites. Once an expedition is made and a party of hotel guests reaches a village up river, all the Flushings care about is whether the objects they buy from the natives for resale in England are authentic, bickering over their antiquity and possible European traits.

Woolf herself has been accused of having a view of the natives little better than that of the Flushings. Undoubtedly, she can be placed in the Modernist camp of artists who employed primitivism. Her contrast of Mr. Flushing’s overweight and out of shape body to that of a villager, “a lean majestic man, whose bones and hollows” make Flushing look “ugly and unnatural” (316), is the standard Noble Savage view. Some of her descriptions are Conradian<sup>8</sup>—Woolf admired Conrad and wrote reviews of his work—and Conrad too has been accused of racism in his writing about African natives, such as that in *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Woolf’s women villagers, for instance, stare at the British visitors silently: “their long narrow eyes slid round and fixed upon them with the motionless inexpensive [sic] gaze of those removed from each other far far beyond the plunge of speech” (316); from the recesses of dark huts

babies and elderly women look out at the tourists as well. I would argue that neither Woolf nor Conrad are racist in their view of natives, but they could be called racialist. Rather than trying to understand native cultures in South America or Africa, Woolf and Conrad turn them into abstractions and project values upon them. Woolf calls the villagers “soft instinctive people” (316) and means this to be admired--one needs to remember the contrast Woolf is making to hotel life and, by extension, to all of British society. The microcosm of England that is the hotel is a superficial society. Rachel is disgusted by the social events, the pretensions, the roles for women that comprise this world, and Woolf sets up village life for her to respect as more honest. However, Woolf’s racism does dehumanize the “other,” no matter if the projections are positive. Her descriptions seem sentimental as well, but we might recall that this is her first attempt at something she would undertake in most of her subsequent novels: to find a new, more vital way for people to communicate.

Whereas Joan Martyn’s male-influenced view of the lower class gave her such disdain for them that she believed “snarling and howling” was their animalistic language, Woolf looks to the South American natives as positive models of communication. In later novels Woolf would emphasize successful communication by having the words seem unintelligible and letting the melody of the voice carry the message. She suggests that we must begin again, go back to the roots of human interaction to build a new language, and this lies behind her description of native communication in *The Voyage Out*. When the people of the village speak it is “to cry some harsh unintelligible cry” (316-317), but instead of the cry of the animal, Woolf makes the voices musical: “voices rose in song, which slid up a little way and down a little way, and settled again upon the same low and melancholy note” (317). The music of the voices and the vision of life they see affect Rachel and Terence, who at first feel peace and beauty in observing the village, and then cold and melancholy--melancholy because Terence declares this kind of life “makes us seem insignificant” (317), with which Rachel agrees. Crucial in the context of Woolf’s admiration for and connection with the past, the village way of life is timeless: “So it would go on

for ever and ever, [Rachel] said, those women sitting under the trees, the trees and the river" (317).

Despite this hopeful vision of continuity and honest communication, in Rachel's particular case life does not go on for much longer. The name Vinrace, vine/race, seems ironic, for Rachel does not reproduce. The teeming jungle she has visited gives her a fatal fever. Her death may even be a symbolic retreat from her individual fertility, since, as many critics have convincingly argued, Rachel fears conventional marriage.<sup>9</sup> Yet too, her death is a rebirth of sorts, a representation of Woolf's knowledge of ancient fertility myths. Rachel has the sensation that she is under water or floating upon it during much of her fever, and in many myths, including Egyptian ones, the journey of the dead to the after world is made via water on a river. Water is significant in most Woolf novels, and no doubt spending her childhood summers by the ocean had a good bit to do with her frequent use of that element. Knowing the importance Woolf placed on physical aspects of the world being reassuring signs of continuity through time, I would surmise that Woolf intends Rachel's death to be an assurance that renewal is possible when connecting to elemental forces like those water represents in ancient death and fertility myths. From this perspective, then, Rachel's name is *not* ironic; even if the particular "vine" dies off, the larger "race" of humanity--as Rachel felt when she saw the women in the village--will "go on for ever and ever."

We have seen in earlier chapters how El Saadawi represents the continuation of the past into the present and the idea of perpetual renewal by giving Isis-like powers to Bahiah Shaheen, the protagonist of *Two Women in One*, and suggesting the fraternal pairing of gods and goddesses in the twins Hamido and Hamida of *The Circling Song*. Speaking of revolution, El Saadawi notes how "words, language, culture, religion and history can become tools in the hands of the popular masses with which they can resist the tyranny of the minority ruling the world, ruling within each state or tribe or family" ("Culture" 176). Indeed, reclaiming or remaking language, drawing on myth, and demonstrating how the past continues into the present are

tremendous resources for combating oppressive forces. In her fourth novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf employs these resources to criticize patriarchy through the perspectives of two characters: the elite Mrs. Dalloway, wife of a member of Parliament, and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked World War I soldier.

J. Hillis Miller observes that past and present intermingle so frequently and smoothly in this novel that the reader sometimes has trouble distinguishing what time period she is reading about. This is true; youthful summers at Bourton are as likely to come up in characters' minds as the sirens of passing ambulances or the periodic striking of Big Ben. Miller claims that the main characters want to uncover the "continuities of present with past, of person with person, of person with the depths of himself," yet he feels this desire does not reach fulfillment (119). I would agree that no permanent state of connection is effected by the characters, but fleeting images and moments of renewal and connection do occur as the result of womanly forces linked to the power of the eternal feminine.

Suzette Henke describes Septimus Smith's role as that of a scapegoat, by which Woolf is satirizing modern "rites of tragic sacrifice" such as war and social systems that demand conformity and thus make victims of visionaries, those without power, and those who will not conform (126). Clarissa Dalloway, then, is "high priestess and empathic victim," someone who worships life and is renewed by Septimus Smith's death (126). Her dinner party is a "sacramental paean to life and regeneration," a worship toward "a composite ancestral figure whose primary aspect is maternal" (126). According to Henke, Clarissa's memories and present life are infused by her absent (because deceased) mother. The old woman she watches next door, for instance, may serve both to remind Clarissa of her mother and to suggest an eternal feminine life-giving force (143).

Throughout the novel Clarissa Dalloway does think about her own roles as mother (of a daughter) and wife, a process which causes her to define herself most positively when considering her relation to another woman. She fondly remembers her friend Sally Seton kissing her on the lips when they were young women and

marks it as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (52). In the context of these feelings for Sally, Clarissa’s current state of sleeping alone--because she suffers from heart disease--is less a sign of her infertility than it is of potentially fruitful bonds with women. In contrast, the feelings which men churn up are harsh. When Peter Walsh interrupted the two after their kiss, Clarissa felt “It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (53). Drawing strength from her memories of Sally, Clarissa is fertile in a non-heterosexual, and at times a non-sexual way: as the character Mrs. Ramsay would relentlessly draw people together in *To The Lighthouse*, so too Clarissa Dalloway organizes and runs her own parties. And importantly, the dress she mends to wear at the party we read about in the novel is green.

A very full portrait of fertility comes in the figure who stands across from the Regent’s Park Tube station singing in “the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth” (122). The figure is, in fact, a woman, and the song she is singing has been identified as a Richard Strauss song, “Aller Seelen,” the lyrics for which were written by Hermann von Gilm. Aller Seelen is “the day of a collective resurrection of spirits,” the day on which the woman whose lover has died can hope for his return,<sup>10</sup> much as Isis longed for a reunion with Osiris. But the lyrics Woolf transcribes are indeed, as the narrator says, “with an absence of all human meaning”: “ee um fah um so/foo swee too eem oo” (122). This is reminiscent of the melodic voices of the jungle women in *The Voyage Out* and suggests, as Woolf will again with children singing unintelligibly at the end of *The Years* (“Fai donk to tu do,/ Mai to, kai to, lai to see” [429]), that a new form of meaningful communication may be made by pushing back through the immediate past to ancient times. The singing figure represents the eternal feminine in that she has sung through the ages: “when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise,” this “battered woman . . . , her left [hand] clutching at her side,” has sung of love, “love which has lasted a million years, . . . love which prevails, and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been

dead these centuries, had walked . . . with her in May; but in the course of ages . . . he had gone; death's enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills" (123). The woman's ceaseless song and apparent physical sensation of loss correlates to Isis's extensive lamentation over Osiris's death. She sings of the lover who had been with her in spring but then had gone; Osiris's loss is mourned in summer. Reference to the fertility myth is clear when Woolf describes the song which comes from the woman's mouth as having "issued from . . . a mere hole in the earth, muddy. . . , matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages . . . streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain" (123). The song brings forth life, as did Isis's chant and restoration of Osiris; it is "fertilising," as is the fall flooding of the Nile that represents Isis's tears. This figure of the eternal feminine appears after Peter Walsh thinks how cold Clarissa is and how "women . . . don't know what passion is" (121). Woolf interrupts his thoughts with the woman's singing, displaying that women do know what passionate, devoted love is, and know too the power of the matriarch. For always, Woolf is thinking back through her mothers. In her next novel, she would think most particularly of her own mother.

When El Saadawi spoke to me about the activity of writing, she explained that it was a physical as well as mental process: "You don't write just with your head, you write with your whole being. So it's related to everything in your body and your life." At the time we were speaking she was a Visiting Research Scientist at The Center for Research on Women and Gender within the University of Illinois at Chicago, and she observed, "I cannot write in this university. I can write an essay, but I cannot write a novel, and I cannot write a novel in America. I have to go back to my home in Egypt and to relax and to think and to remember my childhood. It's a lot of remembering. And memory, to engage your memory, to train your memory" (Personal Interview). Much has been written about Virginia Woolf's writing process, and she herself noted the difference between composing nonfiction and fiction.

Creating the novels was a physical process for Woolf, one that absorbed her completely; her husband Leonard often worried about her exhausting herself. Writing was remembering for Woolf, and that could be painful. As she prepared to write *To The Lighthouse* (1927), she looked at family photographs and reflected on her parents and her childhood; later she said, “I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients” (“A Sketch” 81). Of course Woolf maintained that the novel was fiction and not a transcription of her early years or an exact portrait of her parents, and indeed it is a work of art, one that synthesizes personal memory and myth.

Mrs. Ramsay, the mother of eight children in *To The Lighthouse*, is strongly associated with the powers of the goddess. She is the force holding her family together as well as drawing others close. She has nurtured each of her children in turn, lavishing special attention now on her youngest, James. She bolsters her husband’s wavering sense of self by supporting his intellectual striving and encouraging his belief in the validity of his ideas. For those outside her immediate family, Mrs. Ramsay serves as someone to admire, desire, or, at times, fight against. Men tend to admire her physical beauty and ability to make them feel important and successful in their career pursuits. Some inscribe their books of poetry to her in phrases that acknowledge her goddess-like stature: “‘For her whose wishes must be obeyed’ . . . ‘The happier Helen of our days’” (43). The poet Augustus Carmichael, however, dislikes Mrs. Ramsay, perhaps because he senses her pity and resents her wanting to give him things, wanting to make him comfortable. Nonetheless, he gains sanctuary from the degradations of his “odious” wife with her (63). Likewise, while Charles Tansley resents having to attend her lengthy social dinners, for his compliance he receives attention and is “relieved of his egotism” (139) by fellow guest Lily Briscoe. Lily herself both loves and struggles against Mrs. Ramsay. The older woman wants Lily to marry, for she feels marriage is the state in which people are happiest. Lily, though, wishes to remain single and concentrate on her painting; she often is irritated at having to be nice to men. Those critics who look at Mrs. Ramsay and Lily’s relationship in terms of mythology supply a useful key to

understanding its dynamics.

Joseph Blotner uses the myth of the Primordial Goddess to analyze *To The Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay's goddess qualities are her being fruitful and urging others to be so, her giving "protection and inspiration to both art and science," and her being "possessed of an intuitive knowledge and wisdom."<sup>11</sup> Blotner sees her passing on her qualities to Lily Briscoe in accordance with the Demeter-Persephone myth.<sup>12</sup> There are numerous incidents in the novel of Mrs. Ramsay appeasing her husband and other men, and after she has died, we see Lily struggling to do the same with Mr. Ramsay. As Blotner explains it, the female force "serves to ameliorate or mitigate the effects of male violence, hate, and destructiveness."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay believed "she had the whole of the other sex under her protection" (13). In the novel's famous dinner scene, she feels "without hostility, the sterility of men" (126) and knows she is the one who will bring the party's members together, give them life. She does this by supplying physical nourishment, calling for the second bowl of soup Mr. Carmichael wants and offering William Bankes more Boeuf en Daube, but she feeds them in another way too. After setting all the diners to eating, she observes the "profound stillness" of the moment in which they were all held "safe together" (158). "It partook, she felt, . . . of eternity . . . there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change . . . she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures" (158). Like a goddess who represents the perpetuation of life, Mrs. Ramsay nourishes the spirits of those gathered around her, offering them "eternity," "coherence," "stability," and "peace" through the myth of eternal return.

If Mrs. Ramsay represents the Great Mother, Lily Briscoe would be the Maid. Whereas Lily realizes that she would have to give up her art if she were to be exactly like Mrs. Ramsay, Christine Froula explains that "to memorialize her symbolically" actually inspires Lily's art (214). In the first part of the novel, Lily is unable to successfully paint Mrs. Ramsay. One could argue that her being not only a live model

for the painting but also a model of how to nurture men and children exerted too much pressure upon Lily. It is only after Mrs. Ramsay has been dead ten years that Lily is able to complete a satisfactory painting. As she works, Lily thinks, "So much depends . . . upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us" (284). At this moment she is thinking of Mr. Ramsay sailing across the bay to the lighthouse, but the remark applies equally to the long absent Mrs. Ramsay. Lily uses her art to probe the past and come to terms with her friend, and in memory, the older woman achieves iconic status as Lily recalls the way Mrs. Ramsay sat gazing at the ocean in silence: "And Lily, painting steadily, felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently about in a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn" (255). Remembering Mrs. Ramsay's power to shape people's lives and how she had to resist the pressure to marry, Lily now feels she can overcome this. Placing Mrs. Ramsay at a distance, where she can be worshiped without sacrifice, is what Lily must do in order to paint this powerful matriarchal figure.

Right up through her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf referred to ancient times and goddesses. The character Isa has been seen as suggestive of Isis and of the Hebrew *issa*, meaning "woman."<sup>14</sup> Another character, Lucy Swithin, is connected with Isis by way of Cleopatra. Swithin tells Miss LaTrobe, writer and director of the pageant put on in the novel, that she's made her feel she could have played Cleopatra. Mitchell Leaska explains how when Cleopatra would represent herself as Isis, she used the three symbols of swallow, boat and serpent in attendant religious practices, symbols which figure also in Woolf's delineation of Lucy's character (233). Miss LaTrobe has been interpreted by several critics as "the very ancient, prepatriarchal mother-maid deity who presided over fertility rituals."<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on her abilities to make people feel as Lucy had, the director thinks that "she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world" (153). This compound allusion presents LaTrobe as renewer of life in association with Isis ("wandering bodies") and as creator of life by mentioning the cauldron. The cauldron represents

the womb of the Great Mother, signifies “cyclic recurrence, as opposed to the patriarchal view of linear time,” and in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, three cauldrons is the “hieroglyphic sign of the threefold creatress, mother of the sun, the universe, and all the gods.”<sup>16</sup> The cauldron appears in many mythologies, and as Patricia Maika points out, in *Between the Acts* Woolf “deliberately takes apart and manipulates” myths from various cultures--but especially from ancient Greece and Egypt--to stress the goddess.<sup>17</sup> She interprets the pageant as “Woolf’s version of the worship of Dionysos, . . . considerably adulterated” with myths from other cultures.<sup>18</sup> A fertility god who was another prototype of Christ, like Osiris, Dionysos was dismembered.<sup>19</sup>

Virginia Woolf and Nawal El Saadawi seek a new form of communication by breaking with the conventions of the traditional novel. They change the way prose is written, Woolf using her own idiosyncratic stream-of-consciousness style and El Saadawi working to alter the patriarchal language of Arabic. They employ different structures, Woolf selecting from and refashioning ancient myths in her plots, El Saadawi using a repetition of scenes and phrasing that connects to the cyclical nature of oral literature and ancient myth. They rebel against realism in their search for honest communication. Once while thinking about revolution and true freedom and their opponents who corrupt language in order to perpetuate injustice, El Saadawi wrote, “Struggles outside and inside the country--and inside myself too, clashing, compelling me to utter things that I have experienced in a crazed fashion. I say these things now, in words that appear small and meaningless to me. . . . I told myself I would stop writing until I could come across new words, words that have not become hackneyed with use” (“Seeking” 231). Woolf struggled similarly to voice ideas more honestly, writing near the end of *The Waves* these thoughts for the character Bernard: “What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak. . . . I need a howl; a cry” (199).

Across cultures and time, the works of Virginia Woolf and Nawal El Saadawi

transcend boundaries and contribute to the building of a global feminism in ways we can learn from. Woolf wrote in 1938, "As a woman my country is the whole world."<sup>20</sup> Feminist writers of any nation have common goals in criticizing their culture's discriminatory ideologies and national policies. In some instances, they have found common methods of achieving those goals, as Woolf's and El Saadawi's use of ancient matriarchal myth shows. These writers' works help create a world view that values women and contributes to a new narrative, a feminine narrative, which is one way to break out of constricting patriarchal genres and languages and hence truly explore possibilities for social change. Like Woolf, El Saadawi believes in the regenerative power of art, and her writing is a continual attempt to renew society. In her fiction and nonfiction appear El Saadawi's conviction that we must discard what has become harmful and retain from the present or regain from the past that which is useful. Her words and actions show her desire that men and women work together in creating a new society, and that people around the world join to fight oppression. In this sense she believes in a global feminism, recognizing, of course, the difficulties in achieving it.

No one believes that global feminism will come about easily. Some of the forces that impede its progress include "ideological, cultural, regional, and class differences."<sup>21</sup> But some obstacles may be--or *could* be--less difficult to overcome. For instance, I question those who divide eastern from western feminism or those who claim feminism is a western concept that cannot be applied to non-western cultures. For just what are "eastern" and "western" feminism? There are numerous versions of feminism and numerous types of feminists around the world. It would be more productive to accept that different versions may work better in different situations than to argue about the validity of different theories and applications. Francoise Lionnet warns how such ideological disagreements can work against communication and suggests that rather than separate ourselves by country or culture we need to emphasize community and seek "a common theoretical and ethical ground from which to argue for political solidarity" (20). I see a useful way to view

global feminism as what Angela Miles terms, in *Integrative Feminisms: Building Global Visions, 1960s-1990s*, a “multicentered women’s movement” or “multicentered nonuniform feminist solidarity.”<sup>22</sup> As an integrative, transformative feminist, Miles believes in stressing women’s “shared values and strengths as well as their oppression and diversity” (95). She feels that recognizing women’s specificity will allow “perspectives whose values offer alternatives to all dominations and can unite women across many divisions” (95). Miles cautions feminists in the west, specifically in North America, to consciously fight their possible ethnocentrism, stereotyping, attitudes of superiority, and tendencies toward assimilation as they work to build a society founded on life-giving values. Women in North America can learn much from women in the Third World because there are often fuller “women’s subcultures, identities, and organizations,” clearer views of relationships between men and women, and a better understanding of male, “imperialist, class, and race power.” As well, Miles adds, Third World women might have resources in “alternative indigenous and tribal values and/or more active and radical political cultures” (86).

Viewed this way, the benefits of a cross-cultural sharing of visions, experiences, knowledge, resources, and practices appear rich. What seems crucial if true global feminism is to come to be is that we realize that there needn’t be, indeed *cannot be*, one universal feminist movement, nor one center to it. We need to think of ourselves as a universal human community with many local neighborhoods. There must be awareness of what is going on worldwide at the same time there is an active local movement. This would be a reciprocal relationship, where strong local activity would be “both informed by and informing global perspectives.”<sup>23</sup>

In the most hopeful view, global feminism would gain a place for feminine values in politics, the kind of life-affirming values that could transform the world from a violent to a peaceful one.<sup>24</sup> This would mean an appreciation of “women’s ways of knowing,” which Betty Reardon describes as being “rooted in connectedness, cooperation, and discussion” (217). This certainly is what Nawal El Saadawi was

promoting when she was part of a delegation sent to Baghdad by Women for Mutual Security to prevent the Gulf War. She and others called for discussion to settle the dispute, called for negotiations to offset violence. Reardon explains how the call for discussion was “not only an alternative approach to conflict, but an alternative way of thinking” (226). At that time it was a way of thinking unacceptable to the political leaders involved.

Feminists fighting oppression in Arab countries are often denounced as abandoning their culture’s values for those of the west. This is one way the patriarchy--and I include women who uphold the patriarchy in this group--attempt to dismiss them and their actions. Yet in “Writing Nawal El Saadawi” Fedwa Malti-Douglas explains that El Saadawi’s work shows the feasibility of fighting the oppression of women “without taking a pro-Western stance and without forgetting the reality that class differences make in the differing patterns of women’s oppression” (289). El Saadawi has written that since the 1960s feminist writers “have played an important role in developing feminist thought not only in their own countries but also in other parts of the world. Many of them believe, however, that feminist struggles in the practical and ideological fields are limited to the Western capitalist world, and that women’s liberation movements in other countries owe their impulsion and their ideas exclusively to what has been done, said or written by feminists of the First World. . . . But this is not correct” (“Women and Politics” 280). She explains that birth control, the struggle for monogamy, and organizing for change have a long history in Arab countries. Obviously El Saadawi wants the vital exchange of ideas among feminists around the world to continue. After meeting with a wide variety of women in Britain who were involved with promoting women’s rights in all sorts of ways--through writing, demonstrations, education, providing services--she reflected, “At all moments of my visit I felt myself involved both mentally and emotionally with what was happening in the feminist movement in Britain, even though I disagreed with some of the views expressed to me. It made me more optimistic, more confident, happy to feel that we women of Egypt and the Arab

countries were not alone, and that we have friends in Britain and in many other countries of the world" ("Women and Politics" 285-86). Such emotional, intellectual, and, at times, practical support is the life blood of a worldwide feminist movement.

When I asked El Saadawi her thoughts on a global or universal feminism, she explained the very different meaning and intent the word "globalization" can take on:

The words global and globalization now have some negative resonance. Globalization can be very positive, to globalize, to come together, that we unite--we *should* unite, of course, men and women in America, or Egypt, we should unite, because we are both in the same boat. I don't think that women are free in the United States, or in Europe. Of course the degree of oppression differs and the type of oppression differs, but we are both in the same boat, oppressed by the same system. We live in one world, not three worlds, so global feminism is important, that you've got to exchange ideas. But I'm against what they call globalization [that] means domination, the powerful dominate the weak, and they call that globalization. It's not globalization, it's domination. (Personal Interview)

Later that same day when she was speaking to a group that consisted largely of Arab-American and Arab-born women now living in the United States, El Saadawi stressed that although women's problems are different in different countries, they do exist universally. These problems--sexual oppression, veiling, domestic violence--are really political and economic problems. As women and some men in the audience argued fervently with El Saadawi about the importance of veiling and women staying at home, she countered, "We leave the hot issues, the economic, the political, and discuss the veil. We need international solidarity, to work together. Know what is happening economically, nationally," she urged us. The most important thing is to unveil our minds, she said passionately, because "Our minds are veiled every day" ("Arab Women").

Nearly twenty years ago El Saadawi wrote, "At times, my sense of hope may

slide down an abyss to the lowest possible point--into the earth's depths--but then it drags itself out and takes off obstinately towards the tree branches to soar into the sky like a bird" ("Seeking" 231). She has not lost hope since and relentlessly continues her fight against the injustices of the patriarchal class system. Her fiction, nonfiction, speeches, conversations--*her life itself*--comprise an ongoing work toward a new Egypt. And even more than this, Nawal El Saadawi has given feminists worldwide vital tools to use in the advancement toward equality. Let us take them up.



## NOTES

### **Introduction**

1. Reprinted in El Saadawi, "A New Battle," 94.

### **Chapter 1**

1. 9. Acceptance of these variants from Christian and Judaic scripture depends on the interpreter. According to the Qur'an, Hawwa, the Islamic equivalent to Eve, was created at the same time as the first man. A later *hadith* (a narrative or tradition relating a saying or action of Muhammad, one of his companions, or a later authority) has Hawwa created from Adam's rib. Likewise, the Qur'an depicts Satan confronting Adam, not Hawwa, yet a *hadith* refers to Hawwa being the first to interact with Satan (Zuhur 29-30).

2. 11. Indeed, by law fathers of single women under 21 and husbands of married women must grant permission for passports and travel ("Egypt Report" 12). In 1995 a new marriage contract was proposed to replace the existing 1931 one, calling for prenuptial negotiations on divorce settlements, the wife's right to work outside the home, and her right to study and travel abroad. It has not yet been approved ("Egypt Report" 14).

3. Mikhail, 131.

4. Hatem, 31. See also "Egypt Report," 11.

5. 57. For other sources discussing fundamentalism and the family, see Beck; Moghadam; Reeves; and Yamani.

6. "Egypt Report," 1.

7. Weaver, "The Trail," 76.

8. Lancaster, "In Egypt," A27.

9. Keddie, 16.

10. Lancaster, "Nile Temple," A43.

11. Just after the signing six police were ambushed in Upper Egypt, and on September 18, 1997 a tourist bus outside the Cairo Museum was firebombed and shot at, killing 10 and wounding 26. This attack is seen as a response to death sentences issued for four Islamists at the conclusion of the subversion trial. On the day that the men charged with this September 18 incident were tried in military court, eleven policemen were ambushed and shot in Upper Egypt by gunmen who condemned them for crimes against the terrorists ("11 Egyptian" A14). In the largest massacre of tourists to date, on November 17, 1997, *al-Gama'a* terrorists, ostensibly attempting a kidnaping of tourists to seek the release of Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman (imprisoned in the United States for attempting to bomb several New York City landmarks in 1993), killed 58 tourists and four Egyptians at the Temple of Hatshepsut near Luxor; twenty-four others were wounded. Survivors contradict the kidnaping claim, describing the deliberate shooting, stabbing, and even mutilation of tourists (Lancaster, "Killers"

AO1). Islamic scholar Hussein Amin believes the attack was further revenge for the death sentences (Faramazi). A few days after the attack, *al-Gama'a* faxed a statement to foreign news agencies, saying it would cease the violence if the Egyptian government obtained freedom for Sheikh Rahman—their spiritual leader—let their imprisoned members go free, and ended their relationship with Israel (Lancaster, "Nile Temple" A43).

A paper found on one of the six terrorists killed by police in the Luxor attack read, "We are at your service, Mustapha Hamza," referring to the military leader of *al-Gama'a* who is thought to be exiled in either Afghanistan or Pakistan and in touch with Sheikh Rahman (Labelle). Hamza and other exiled leaders, including Mohammed Islambouli—brother to the main planner of Sadat's assassination—rejected the Egyptian *al-Gama'a* leaders' call for a halt to the violence. The reference to Hamza could indicate the possibility that militants in Egypt are being directed by exiled leaders. Indeed, one of the six attackers at the Temple of Hatshepsut, identified as Midhat Abdel-Rahman, is believed to have undergone military training abroad in 1993, in connection with exiled leaders of *al-Gama'a* ("Egyptian Military" A25). Another indication of the new terrorist mind set is that the group at the temple shot one of their own to death after he was wounded by police. During an attack on a train a few days before, other terrorists shot their wounded fellow in the face to prevent police identification (Labelle).

12. Lancaster, "Nile Temple," A43.
13. Nasrawi.
14. Qtd. In "Egyptian Military," A25.
15. Ghalwash.
16. Fernea, *In Search*, 242.
17. Malti-Douglas and Douglas, 399.
18. Weaver, "The Novelist," 61.
19. Moghadam, 138. For other discussions of the new veiling see Fernea, "The Veiled"; Macleod; and Zuhur.
20. Zuhur, 29.
21. 184-85. See also Azzam, 221.
22. Qtd. in Weaver, "The Novelist," 58.
23. "Egypt Report," 9-10.
24. "Revolution," 41-42. For an explanation of Egypt's judiciary system, see "Egypt Report," especially 6-8.
25. "Egypt Report," 10.
26. 137. See also Azzam, 226.
27. Weaver, "Revolution," 48.

28. 137. See also Macleod, 155.

29. For discussion of the law, and a useful history of women's status in modern Egypt, see Kader, especially 130-38.

30. Reprinted in El Saadawi, "New Battle," 94.

## Chapter 2

1. First published in Cairo in 1974 as *The Naked Face of Arab Women*.

2. Isis, Ma'at, and Neith are discussed at other points in the chapter; Sekhmet, depicted as the body of a woman with the head of a lioness, was a goddess of war but also a healer through magic; Hathor, represented as a cow or a woman with cow horns and a solar disk between them, was a goddess of pleasure and a protector of women.

3. Different scholars offer varying dates for the Ancient Kingdom, also called the Early Dynastic Period, Archaic Period, and Thinite Period. Hornung offers 3000-2705 B.C.; Kemp offers 3050-2695 B.C.; Morenz offers 3000-2780 B.C.; and Shafer offers 2950-2600 B.C. All include the first two dynasties, Shafer including the Third Dynasty as well.

4. As with other dynasties, dates vary: Hornung gives 2705-2520 B.C.; Shafer gives 2675-2480 B.C.; Kemp and Morenz do not break period dates down into the specific dynasties.

5. Trigger, et al., 188.

6. *Women*, 14. Robins discusses similar ideas in *Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art*; see especially 19-23.

7. *Women*, 14. Robins's observation is seconded by Fischer, 5.

8. See Ward, 35-36; and Robins, *Women*, 111-113.

9. Trigger, et al., 312.

10. 178. Fischer too mentions women in Old Kingdom market scenes as purchasers and in one instance as a vendor (21). In a comment on Fischer's work, Carol Delaney suggests that "what women being purchasers would show is that they had freedom of movement by themselves and also control of some of the funds" (qtd. in Barbara Lesko 27).

11. As Watterson explains, *ipt* is the ancient Egyptian word for the women's quarters of a house and is usually translated "harem" (127). The word refers to the private apartments of women rather than the Hollywood version of sexual stables. See also Robins, *Women* 39-40; and Ward 40-41.

12. Trigger, et al., 81.

13. See the color photographs of tomb paintings in M. Abdel-Kader Hatem, 9; Capel and Markoe, 56; Desroches-Noblecourt, 29, 30; and *Ramesses*, 86, 87, 93.

14. *Ramesses*, 86, 87.

15. Interestingly, women are not depicted cutting grain, and Robins surmises that there may have been some ritual explanation for not depicting women with cutting tools and, in particular, not

depicting them cutting grain (*Women* 121). Watterson says that an ancient Egyptian pregnancy test consisted of women urinating on cloth bags of wheat and barley; if the grains germinated a woman was pregnant. While we now know that it is a hormone in the urine of pregnant women that can cause this germination, Watterson speculates that “ancient Egyptian doctors first tested the effect that urine had on grain simply because they associated grain with life, and they expected that a woman who was carrying new life would have an affinity with the grain” (87). Taking these comments together with the importance of fertility goddesses in ancient Egyptian culture, it seems reasonable that women were not depicted cutting grain (whether or not they cut it in real life) because of their function and symbolism as life bearer rather than destroyer.

16. Watterson, 95-96; see also Fischer, qtd. in Barbara Lesko, 119.

17. Roehrig, 15. See also Bullough, Shelton and Slavin, 31-34.

18. 115. White goes on to offer this as a reason pharaohs married “every woman who could possibly lay claim to the throne,” leading not only to polygamy but incest (116).

19. *Women*, 26-27. The matter of Egypt having ever been matriarchal is a debate unto itself, and cannot fully be covered in this study. In her exploration of the issue, Bryan says, “The succession in Egypt has equally defied description as either patrilineal or matrilineal” (26). For a brief look at some of the influential scholars in the debate, see Bullough, Shelton, and Slavin, 25-30.

20. The male pharaohs were believed to be Horus incarnate and a son of Ra, and with the Fourth Dynasty they began hyphenating their names with Ra (Trigger, et al. 71-72). Neith, chosen for inclusion in their name by the first two female leaders of Egypt, was a goddess known for her wisdom.

21. Lesko, xiv.

22. Badran, 5. See also Mernissi, xv; and Keddie, 2.

23. 95. For El Saadawi’s fuller analysis, see 94-100.

24. 99-100. See also Bullough, Shelton and Slavin, 35-36.

25. For details see Leonard H. Lesko, especially 91-93.

26. Erman, 143.

27. Hornung gives 664-305 B.C. for the Late Period and includes Dynasties XXVI-XXX; Kemp gives 525-332 B.C. and includes Dynasties XXVII-XXXI; Morenz gives 1085-341 and includes Dynasties XXI-XXX; Shafer gives 718-332 B.C. and includes Dynasties XXV-XXX.

28. Trigger, et al., 294.

29. Morenz, 263.

### Chapter 3

1. First published in English in 1984; initially published in 1974 in Beirut.

2. Kassis, 329.

3. Stewart, 124.

**Chapter 4**

1. Qtd. in Malti-Douglas and Douglas, 402, 403, 402.
2. Allen, *Modern*, xi.
3. The *maqama* was introduced by al-Hamad Hani, who died in 1007. Similar to the Spanish picaresque genre, it took social life as its topic. Stylistically it grew out of a rhymed prose called *saj'*, which is found in early Quranic passages and, before that, was used by pre-Islamic Arabian soothsayers (Allen, *Modern*, xii).
4. Silverman, 236.
5. Silverman, 232-33.
6. Silverman, 136.
7. Silverman, 239.
8. Silverman, 239.
9. Silverman, 92.
10. Silverman, 118.
11. 7. *The Circling Song* was first published in English in 1989; it was initially published in 1976 in Beirut.
12. Armour, 155.
13. Armour, 155-56.
14. Armour, 155.
15. Armour, 156.
16. Silverman, 132-33.
17. Kassis, 493.
18. Armour, 20.
19. Armour, 197.
20. Armour, 192.
21. Bryan, 35.

**Chapter 5**

1. See Barker-Benfield, 120-131; and Hosken, 289-91.

2. El Dareer, 1 (regions surveyed were northern Darfur and Kordofan, Khartoum, Khassala, and Blue Nile); “Female Genital Mutilation Information Pack,” sec. 1 (this source will subsequently be cited as “FGM Info. Pack”).
3. El Dareer, 1-2; and Hosken, 38.
4. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
5. El Dareer, 2.
6. Hosken, 38; “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
7. Hosken, 38.
8. El Dareer, 7-8.
9. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
10. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
11. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
12. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
13. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 9.
14. Hosken, 129.
15. Lancaster, “Egyptian Court,” A26; and “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 9.
16. Qtd. in Fernea, *In Search*, 275.
17. Hosken, 130.
18. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
19. Qtd. in Fernea, *In Search*, 274.
20. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
21. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 9.
22. Hosken, 131-32.
23. Fernea, *In Search*, 270.
24. Lancaster, “Egyptian Court,” A26; and “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 9.
25. “Egypt Report,” 2; Lancaster, “Egyptian Court,” A26; and “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 9.
26. El Dareer, iii.

27. Hosken, 74.
28. Hosken, 76; and Kader, 36.
29. Barker-Benfield, 120; and Lightfoot-Klein, 180. The Orificial Surgery Society, formed in the United States in the 1890s, published a journal promoting surgeries of the clitoris “for everything from measles to melancholia, including kleptomania” (Hosken 295).
30. “FGM Info. Pack,” sec. 1.
31. Bullough, Shelton, and Slavin, 121.
32. El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, 14. First published in English in 1983; initially published in 1975 in Beirut.
33. See *Men, Women, and God(s)*, 48-50.
34. Stewart, 120.
35. Kassis, 433.

#### **Chapter 6**

1. Abdel-Meguid, 9, 24-25.
2. Allen, “The Beginnings,” 185-86.
3. Kilpatrick, “The Egyptian,” 223.
4. Kilpatrick, “The Egyptian,” 226.
5. Kilpatrick, “The Egyptian,” 250.
6. See Allen, *Modern*; Badawi; Kilpatrick, *The Modern*; and Zeidan.
7. 50. First published in English in 1984; initially published in 1974 in Beirut under the title *The Death of the Only Man on Earth*.
8. El Saadawi, *A Daughter*, 82.

#### **Chapter 7**

1. Malti-Douglas and Douglas, 395.
2. Herman, 262.
3. Hussey, 108.
4. Hussey, 270.
5. Hussey, 267.
6. Qtd. in Hussey, 159.

7. See Hussey, 159 and 143-44, as well as Woolf's essay.

8. Hussey notes Woolf's various allusions to Conrad, including *The Voyage Out's* debt to *Heart of Darkness*.

9. See Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1990) especially page 45; Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Amor Vin-": Modifications of Romance in Woolf," *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Homans (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1993) 115-35; and Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), especially page 34.

10. Miller, 115.

11. 172, 174. Anne Golomb Hoffman also writes on such allusion in *To The Lighthouse* in "Demeter and Poseidon," *Studies in the Novel* 16 (Summer 1984): 182-96.

12. 183-84. In her own study of Woolf's use of myth, Anne Golomb Hoffman sees Augustus Carmichael as playing Poseidon to Mrs. Ramsay's Demeter. His reading of Virgil, in the context of the novel's literary allusions, is taken by Hoffman "to articulate the theme of the survival of culture amid the ravages of time and war" (184).

13. Blotner, 187. Another critic, Herbert Marder, goes so far as to suggest that *To The Lighthouse* "is based on the premise that only the eternal feminine can keep men on course toward spiritual illumination" (154).

14. Haller believes Isa is meant to suggest Isis (118); Froula finds the word closer to *issa* (217).

15. Maika, 11. See also Jane Marcus, "Some Sources for *Between the Acts*" (*Virginia Woolf Miscellany* (Winter) 1977; and Judy Little, "Festive Comedy in Woolf's *Between the Acts*" (*Women and Literature* 5.1 (1977): 26-37.

16. Walker, 236-37.

17. 3. Eileen Barrett notes too that the vase/urn in the dining room, as do other elements of the book, "confirms the suspicion that Greek ritual and Greek and Egyptian myth lie in the interstices of the novel" (21).

18. 9. See 9-10 for a thorough explanation of the connections between Woolf's pageant and worship of Dionysos.

19. Walker, 236-37.

20. *Three Guineas*, 109.

21. Conway-Turner and Cherrin, 8.

22. 43, 62. Miles's is an important study that presents crucial ideas for fostering global feminism; see especially chapter 8, "Global Practice," 109-130. See Fernea's *In Search of Islamic Feminism* for a westerner's view of feminism in Egypt as well as interviews with several leading feminists there who have differing outlooks (240-88).

23. Miles, 99.

24. Reardon, 221.



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