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**Muslim Feminisms and Fictions in a
Postcolonial Frame: Case Studies of
Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Aboulela**

By

Norah Hassan Alqahtani

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

The postcolonial condition has had life-shaping effects on millions of individuals, in the Third World in particular. This study focuses on the different positions embraced by two authors recognized as 'Muslim feminists.' I explore how they engage with postcolonial subjects and particularly address women's questions in their contemporary societies, through analyses of such 'Muslim fictions' as *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Zeina* by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Translator*, *Minaret*, and *Lyrics Alley* by Leila Aboulela.

Because a feminist movement is not autonomous, but bound to its sociopolitical context, the rise as well as the failure of secular political and social movements in Egypt have had an impact on feminist struggles. El Saadawi starts her independent secular feminism and inscribes her female characters as revolutionary subjects who rebel against Islamic patriarchal law. Using Caroline Rooney's concept of 'revolutionary spirit' and Linda Alcoff's positionality, this study demonstrates how El Saadawi enables her female characters to counter the brutality of Arab women's lives through different strategies, even hostile ones. Moreover, El Saadawi is as much a nationalist writer as she is a feminist one, so this study illustrates how the tale of the country has been interwoven with the private lives of women, in alignment

with Fredric Jameson's paradigm. Whatever the limitations of El Saadawi's secular feminism have been, however, it is undeniable that her version of secular feminism prepared the ground for the new emergent movement that is Islamic feminism.

This study examines Aboulela's novels as a comparative paradigm with El Saadawi's. From a committed Muslim point of view, Aboulela inscribes Islamic faith extensively in her writings. Her work offers a potentially universalizing, although not universal, rallying point; it offers a chance for women to create an Islamic spiritual site of belonging and possible solidarity that transcends social classes, ethnic differences and geographical boundaries. However, Aboulela's work for emancipation is confined to a spiritual level and seems to be less radical in the feminist focus regarding women's rights.

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Introduction

Literature produced by Arab writers, and by feminists in particular, in the postcolonial era is significantly informed by the experience of living after Empire. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin confirm that “more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism.”¹ This life shaped by the experience of colonialism and postcolonialism appears not only in physical practices but also in a “textual exercise.”² Elleke Boehmer defines postcoloniality as “that condition in which colonized people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world.”³ This striving for historical agency in the twentieth century has often meant that the writings of colonized people which came after empire not only resist colonial perspectives but also engage in national identity formation.

Generally, postcolonialism is a disputed term; the difficulty of defining it arises from challenging and debatable issues of defining difference without undermining diversity and possible solidarity. Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley’s definition of postcolonialism confirms this idea and warns against essentialism in defining this term. Postcolonialism is “not a question of choosing, but of negotiation and transgression,”⁴ and it works in “a way of deconstructing, or negotiating the difference between consent and

¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

² Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ B.J. Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley, eds., *Postcolonial Criticism*. (USA: Longman, 1997), 2.

descent.”⁵ In other words, postcolonialism entails the negotiation of different positions and perspectives and the possible transformation of places. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin classify postcolonial literature according to four critical models: the first is the national model, which emphasizes distinct features about a specific culture; the second is the race-based model, which underlines shared qualities of different national literatures; the third is the comparative model, which identifies particular historical, or linguistic cultural elements in two or more postcolonial literatures; and the fourth is the more comprehensive model that looks for characteristics such as hybridity, which prevail in postcolonial writings produced today. Thus, as the four models have developed over time, postcolonial theory has also undergone gradual transformations. From the 1980s to the present time, postcolonial writings have transformed “from national bonding to international wanderings, from rootedness to peregrination” as “many writers` geographic and cultural affiliations became more divided, displaced and uncertain.”⁶ Elleke Boehmer describes the postcolonial writer as follows:

In the 2000s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an ‘extra-territorial’, than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic, or regional background.⁷

According to Boehmer, literature produced by postcolonial writers in the beginning of the new millennium is departing from the regional precincts to be

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial*, 225.

⁷ Ibid, 227.

more likely cosmopolitan literature while at the same time maintaining its cultural background. Boehmer further explains that this postcolonial literature is “transplanted, displaced, multilingual, and simultaneously, conversant with cultural codes of the West: it is within Europe/America though not fully of Europe/America.”⁸

Based on Boehmer’s definition and Ashcroft et al’s models, this study takes postcoloniality as a condition seriously affecting the lives and literature of Arab feminists, namely Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Aboulela, as reflected in their works. It seeks a fresh perspective by which to investigate the diversity of postcolonial Arab feminists, which includes writers such as El Saadawi, who maintains national and regional interests in her novels *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), *The Fall of the Imam* (1988) and *Zeina* (2009). This diversity also includes a very different writer, Leila Aboulela whose novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006) are classified as belonging to the new literature of cosmopolitan Arab Muslim authors. Aboulela’s novels narrate the painful displacement in exile where a postcolonial subject searches for belonging and negotiates a hybrid identity position in a Western context.

While the postcolonial condition is a feature that highly characterizes both authors’ writings, some other issues arise from El Saadawi’s and Aboulela’s novels, in dealing with Islam and Arab culture, which question the adequacy of postcolonial theory. As discussed by many critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Wail Hassan, Amin Malak and Anouar Majid and defined by Boehmer in the above passages, postcoloniality is characterized by its Eurocentric features. In addition, as argued by Amin Malak, it is highly secular. Malak claims that postcolonial literature and theory imply a “marginalization of

⁸ Ibid, 230.

religion as a force or factor with its own complex dynamics [that] reflects privileging a secular, Europe-American stance that seems to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses.”⁹ In his argument, Malak refers to Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism: An Historic Introduction* and criticizes how Islam is neglected in Young’s observations and confused with nationalism in the Algerian liberation war. According to Malak, due to its secular stance, postcolonial discourse fails to take religion fully, or at all, into account. He writes, “It is odd that ‘postcolonial theory’ cannot offer insights about the activism of Islam, despite the fact that one of its seminal texts, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, that ‘opened up the fields of postcolonial studies’ (Kennedy 16)”,¹⁰ was focused on the largely Islamic Arab Middle or Near East, the closest area to Europe within the Muslim world.

Similarly, Wail Hassan argues, in his essay, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application,” that postcolonial theory is categorized as Western and criticizes its limitations in terms of understanding Arabic culture and literature. Hassan writes, “Postcolonial theory has developed out of four European traditions of thought: Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and feminism.”¹¹ He goes further to claim that postcolonial theory maintains the role of neocolonialism, colonial discourse, and Eurocentrism. Speaking about the neocolonialism, Hassan sees postcolonial theory as working to “inscribe neo-colonial hegemony by privileging the languages of the major colonial powers, Britain and France.”¹² He also believes that postcolonial discourse might become more dangerous

⁹ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

¹¹ Wail Hassan, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 33, no. 1 (2002): 45-64, (47).

¹² Ibid, 46.

than colonial discourse: “postcolonial theory sometimes homogenizes Asia and Africa in more subtle way than the older paradigms or colonial discourse itself.”¹³ Moreover, Hassan criticizes postcolonial theory for staging an anti-humanism which proves its incapability to understand non-Western thought: “it seems sometimes to deploy a sort of reverse-Eurocentrism. The almost complete reliance on the western tradition of antihumanist critique of metaphysics—from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida—has meant that the ‘non-Western’ Other remains inaccessible and unknowable.”¹⁴ As such, according to Hassan, the limited applicability of postcolonial theory fails to deal with issues related to Arab culture and Islam.

Broadening the scope of the argument, Anouar Majid discusses the limitations of postcolonialism in relation to Islam in his article, “Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak? Orientalism and the Rushdie Affair.” Majid criticizes the role of postcolonial critics in dealing with Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. He argues that postcolonial critics’ ignorance of Islam and their commitment to Western traditions of thought must affect their articulation of postcolonial theory. As a result, according to Majid, postcolonial critics such as Said and Spivak “appear unsettlingly unreliable to many Muslims.”¹⁵ So, it could be inferred from the above discussion that postcolonial theory cannot be combined with Islam or Arab culture on account of its Eurocentric and secular perspective¹⁶, but other critics such as David Thurfjell and Hasan Majed, have different views.

¹³ Ibid, 46.

¹⁴ Ibid, 51.

¹⁵ Anouar Majid, “Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak? Orientalism and the Rushdie Affair.” *Cultural Critique*, 32 (1995): 5-42, (9).

¹⁶ For further publications that have responded to the relation between religion and postcolonial theory, see Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims* (Cambridge, MA:

In his article, “Is the Islamist Voice Subaltern?” Thurfjell contends that “the core of postcoloniality is the ambition of decentralizing ‘the West’, or western modernity. Islamism has successfully managed to provide an alternative centre among its adherents. This, arguably, makes it one of the most obvious examples of a subaltern postcolonial voice today.”¹⁷ As Islamism seems to be the strongest subaltern voice in the world today, Thurfjell argues that an Islamic postcolonial voice can challenge the Western hegemonic discourse which is colonial in its attitude, and could expose the “hypocrisy in the postcolonial trend because if we really want the subaltern to speak, it seems inconsistent to say that s/he should do so only when s/he says what we want to hear.”¹⁸ So, Thurfjell suggests that postcolonial critics should in fact welcome Islamist interventions in spite of the secular prejudice that has attached itself to postcolonial studies.

Postcolonial studies would, in Thurfjell’s account, benefit from genuinely subaltern interventions; my argument is that Islamic and Islamist subalterns would benefit from postcolonial understandings of colonialism after empire. In this regard, Hasan Majed believes that “Muslims might come to regret losing the space it provides for them to participate in the process of challenging the colonial assumptions that inform the prevailing images of Islam and Muslims in the contemporary world.”¹⁹ According to Majed, despite the secular attitude of postcolonialism, it is a literary theory that is open to being critiqued and

Harvard University Press, 2011), Esra Mirza Santesso and James McClung, eds. *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse: Purity and Hybridity* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁷ David Thurfjell, “Is the Islamist Voice Subaltern?” in *Neither East Nor West: Postcolonial Essays on Literature, Culture and Religion*, ed. Kerstin W. Shands (Sweden: Sodertorns Hogskola, 2008), 157-161, (160).

¹⁸ Ibid, 161.

¹⁹ Hasan Majed, “Rushdie, Said, Islam and Secular Postcolonialism,” in *Postcolonialism and Islam: Theory, Literature, Culture, Society and Film*, eds. Geoffrey Nash, Kathleen Kerr-Koch and Sarah E. Hackett (NY: Routledge, 2014), 88-100, (97).

developed from the perspective of the cultural background of the intellectual who practices it. He argues that:

the role of Muslim intellectuals should not be limited to critiquing postcolonialism`s secularism, but should extend to the practice of postcolonialism with the intention of incorporating into it a major component of the identity and the native cultures of many areas in the non-western world.²⁰

So, Majed agrees with Thurffjell that instead of rejecting postcolonialism, Muslim writers might generate their own form of postcolonialism—Islamic postcolonialism—in which they emphasize the centrality of Islam in their postcolonial writings.

As is evident in the writings of postcolonial writers after the defining event of 9/11, Islam has been incorporated in fiction as a major component in the postcolonial identity. In his article, “Defending the Faith: Islam in Post 9/11 Anglophone Fiction,” Mustafa Shakir suggests that new relations between religion and literature have emerged post 9/11. In his view, Anglo-Arab writers in the West attempt to stress the positive aspects of Muslim communities as they consciously produce a counter narrative to face the increasing hostile public sentiments toward Islam and Muslim. He confirms that, “In the aftermath of 9/11, however, Muslim writers in the West have been presenting characters who find in the Qur`an a source of positive power and find in their faith a refuge from an environment that has suddenly become less hospitable.”²¹ So, Shakir believes that in this case in literature, the boundaries between faith and ideology fall, as evidenced in the literary representations of

²⁰ Ibid, 97.

²¹ Mustafa Shakir, “Defending the Faith: Islam in Post 9/11 Anglophone Fiction,” *Religion and Literature* 41, no.2 (2009): 281-288, (282). <http://www.jstore.org/stable/25676913>.

Muslims` assertion of Islamic values and their attachment to their faith despite the increased secularism in Western countries.

Incorporating postcolonial theory with Arab feminism seems compatible, as Anastasia Valassopoulos suggests in her book, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*. Speaking about feminist postcolonial theory and Arab representation, she refers to Lila Abu-Lughod`s discussion about the Arab encounter with Europe. This encounter has influenced the Arab cultural and sociohistorical contexts, which makes postcolonial theory pertinent to the Middle East as a mode of thinking. Valassopoulos states that:

Postcolonial theory [then], seems an apt (both geographically and historically) tool with which to investigate certain experiences in Arab women`s writing to do not only with issues of dislocation and hybridization but also with the discourses of modernity and cultural influence. In many ways, it is these moments of discursive encounter that reveal the potential of feminist postcolonial theory to produce contextualized, nuanced and productive readings of women`s writing.²²

So, Valassopoulos finds that postcolonial theory can be easily applicable across literary studies where similar themes are negotiated. In her view, postcolonial theory does not only offer a fresh representation and self-representation of Arab women, but also enriches the spectrum of critical theory.

Thus, in view of the above discussion, alongside emphasizing the diversity of Arab Muslim writers, postcolonial Muslims, whether secular or conservative have different readings of and attitudes to Islam. While both feminist authors—El Saadawi and Aboulela—deal with issues of religion and

²² Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 27.

the experience of Arab women, their stance on the issues is very different. El Saadawi in her novels produced before 9/11, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and *The Fall of the Imam* (1988) or after it, *Zeina* (2009) criticizes the use of Islam as a tool to enslave women in Muslim societies, while Aboulela`s literary representation portrays how faith can be used as a power that eases the trauma of displacement and provides the individual with a sense of belonging and rootedness in their self-imposed exile. Interestingly, Amal Amireh, in her article, "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers," confirms this need for diversity in Arab women`s writings. She comments on the critiques articulated by the novelists Alia Mamdouh and Ahdaf Soueif about the writings of El Saadawi. Alia Mamdouh declares that she has "large question marks about the West's celebration and focus on el-Saadawi," and adds that "Nawal el-Saadawi does not present the true picture of the creativity of Arab women."²³ She criticizes the way in which El Saadawi "turns 'creativity' which is imagination and living memory into a lab to show sick samples which are deformed and which she represents as generalized social types."²⁴ Ahdaf Soueif also concurs with Mamdouh's assessment; she maintains that El Saadawi " writes scientific research which is good. But she writes bad novels and it is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represents Arab women's creative writing."²⁵ Amireh agrees that Nawal El Saadawi is popular in the West because her works play into Western prejudices, but she believes that this fact should not downgrade her literary achievements. Amireh points to the historical factors and political events

²³ Amal Amireh, "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers," *Al Jadid: A Review and Records of Arab Culture and Arts*, 2, no. 10 (1996): para. 7 of 22. <http://www.aljadid.com/content/publishing-west-problems-and-prospects-arab-women-writers> [accessed 10 Oct. 2016].

²⁴ Ibid, para. 7 of 22.

²⁵ Ibid, para. 8 of 22.

behind this literary reception of El Saadawi`s works in the West and calls for diversity in the writings of Arab women:

The complexity and diversity of the Arab world and its literatures can be represented best by a wide range of works ... Diversity guards against stereotyping and pigeon-holing. Once Western readers are exposed to a range of styles, nuances, and ideologies, they will learn that Arab writers are individual artists, who speak in multiple tongues and belong to vibrant and diverse cultural movements.²⁶

Amireh encourages diversity to defy stereotyping and rigid modes in Arab women`s writings. So, El Saadawi and Aboulela have produced postcolonial novels from diverse and different feminist speaking positions.

Anastasia Valassopoulos participates in this debate surrounding Arab women`s diversity. She states that, “diversity is on the rise, making it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to define the Arab women writer.”²⁷ Valassopoulos points to the fact that it is a healthy practice for Arab women writers to be individual and diverse in their literary representation and to get rid of what Amin Malak describes as the strictly “mimetic mode”²⁸ which otherwise dangerously comes to define Arab women`s writing.

Rationale of the Study

This study is based on my belief that it is important and necessary to investigate Arab Muslim women`s writings in order to grasp not only the

²⁶ Ibid, para. 20 of 22.

²⁷ Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women*, 24.

²⁸ Ibid, 24

diversity of views held but also the historical trajectories of Arab feminism in a newly religionized world, for many purposes:

Firstly, this thesis, far from being exhaustive in covering this research area, aims to contribute to the elimination of a gap in the literature. Despite the extensive literature on Arab Muslim feminism, these studies tend to ignore the extent to which ideological shifts are reflective of indigenous social change. There has been a tendency to see the feminist debate solely as a cultural phenomenon with little rigorous analysis of its sociopolitical context and background.

Secondly, the research will demonstrate through close reading how the radical protests of writers such as El Saadawi prepared the ground for the new Islamic feminists. While failing to achieve the kinds of social change they hoped within a dominantly secular framework, the later generation of writers such as Aboulela attend with greater alertness to the situation of many women in the Arab world, including many of the most oppressed and exploited. In their feminist quest, religion has become the ground on which they must define their identities and stake any claim to social action or feminist change.

Thirdly, the study will contribute to the level of professional development of the researcher. I associate my career aspirations with becoming an active feminist advocating women`s rights. Therefore, in-depth knowledge of feminism and its historically various aspects will contribute to my chances of success in my chosen path.

In my study of Nawal El Saadawi's and Leila Aboulela's works, I attempt to explore the local and crosscultural female experience in Arab Muslim and non-Muslim societies as portrayed in diverse ways by indigenous Arab Muslim women writers in a postcolonial framework. Examining Arab women's emancipation with a rigorous analysis of the sociopolitical context, this thesis will answer the following questions: How can the women's movement be related to the failure or success of the country's sociopolitical movements? Did the failure of the women's movement result from failures in other social or political movements in Egypt? The fundamental question is whether the new-found Islamic feminism represents a step backward for the women's emancipation or an opportunity for Arab women to discover their unique identity and offer broader solidarities among women. Since women's liberation was bound to the national liberation, as Kumari Jayawardena emphasizes that "the struggle for women's emancipation... was necessarily bound up with the fight for national liberation and formed an essential part of the democratic struggles,"²⁹ the thesis will also investigate how both writers respond to nationalism through their female characters' struggles for freedom and independence. To answer this question, a close reading of Arab feminist fiction by El Saadawi and Aboulela needs to be engaged in, in the following chapters. Thus, their own construction of religious and national female identity, the avenues through which female characters fight to achieve female agency, their experience of location, cultural influence, sexuality, the female body and national allegory and how the texts negotiate these arenas are the major concern of this study. Then I will offer a critique of their contributions from a postcolonial perspective.

²⁹ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), ix-x.

Before introducing the two authors—El Saadawi and Aboulela—and positioning them in the appropriate categories, it is significant to explain why the term “feminist” is attributed to both of them. First, Margot Badran, in an interview by Azza Basarudin, argues that:

while in South Africa where I met women from different African countries, I noticed that some referred to themselves as “gender activists.” This distances them from association with the term feminist, which for many still holds unacceptable colonialist connotations. Yet, other women refuse to toss out the powerful word feminism or feminist with the colonial bathwater. Indeed, some feminists in Egypt stress, “We had ‘feminism’ before colonialism” and refuse to get bogged down in etymological debates. Women know the environments and historical moments in which they are operating. If they feel a label will be used against them they may prefer not to assume it. Yet, others may believe it crucial to name and claim their feminism and find this is integral to the empowerment process.³⁰

Badran points out that some women may act or speak like feminists but do not claim, or like, the label. Their discourse and behavior can be analyzed and recognized as “feminist” but women who may be seen as speaking or behaving like feminists may not identify themselves as feminists.

However, the term “feminist” is used here in line with Michele Le Doeuff’s definition that refers to a “woman who does not allow anyone to think in her place.”³¹ Based on this definition, the term “feminist” is used in this study to

³⁰ Azza Basarudin, “Re-defining Feminism/s, Re-imagining Faith? Margot Badran on Islamic Feminism,” *Al-Raida*, xxii, Nos. 109-110, (2005), 57-65, (59).

³¹ Quoted in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. *Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143.

refer to the Muslim woman “who thinks, believes and acts subjectively on her own conviction and in a way that contradicts social norms,”³² and by acting in such a way resists oppression and social injustice by using Islamic or secular matrices. This also entails distinguishing between the terms: “Muslim feminist” and “Islamic feminist”. This is because El Saadawi, alongside Zaynab al-Ghazali, has been described by miriam cooke as an Islamic feminist, despite the sheer diversity in their debates about the role and the rights of women within Islamic tradition.³³

So, in order to distinguish between Muslim women who are committed to Islam and those who merely bear Muslim names, Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman discusses this issue in detail.³⁴ According to Uthman, the label “Muslim feminists” refers to feminists among whom Muslim women may also be found, but who work mainly within secular matrices. Muslim feminism is used to refer to their struggle within Muslim tradition in a secular milieu. However, “Islamic feminists” refers to those Muslim women who hold tenaciously to the Islamic teachings and use Islamic matrices in their struggle for change in their societies that will benefit all, especially women. Islamic feminism refers to their struggle against injustice in all forms, including gender injustice and oppression. Uthman maintains that Islamic feminists attach great commitment to the Islamic faith while opposing the sociocultural and political systems as represented by “established” Islam which has continued to suppress and

³² Ishaq Tijani, *Male Domination, Female Revolt: Race, and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3.

³³ miriam cooke, *Women Claim Islam* (New York & London: Routledge, 2001), 61.

³⁴ Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, “A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazali and the Feminist Movement in Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 65-79 (66-67). https://www.jstor.org/stable/41429245?seq=11#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed July 4, 2016].

oppress Muslim women.³⁵ In this sense, I argue that El Saadawi does not fit into the same descriptive role of “Islamic feminist” as al-Ghazali in accordance with Cooke’s classification, as this study will demonstrate in detail in the first chapter. Thus, El Saadawi can be labeled a Muslim feminist—with a secular orientation—while Aboulela should be labeled an Islamic feminist.

Nawal El Saadawi

El Saadawi occupies a central place in the history of Arab feminism. Her work demands critical attention in terms of the questions and problems she raises in her literary achievements for both contemporary Egyptian society and Egyptian feminism. Currently, El Saadawi is one of the most prominent feminists in the Arab world. Her life and works have influenced many Arab women. Many young Arab women are deeply stimulated by her polemic and controversial debate in defense of women’s rights. However, for Western readers, El Saadawi is considered a bold feminist who challenges the patriarchal hegemony in Egyptian society and breaks the snare of silence.

El Saadawi’s writings unconventionally delineate the battle lines of the feminist struggle against the oppressive system in Egyptian society. Leila Ahmed notes that most of El Saadawi’s works are banned in many Arab countries, yet she is still the most famous literary figure and outspoken feminist in Arab society.³⁶ Some of the issues raised by El Saadawi, such as circumcision, female sexuality and psychic illness in Egyptian society have

³⁵ Ibid, 70.

³⁶ Leila Ahmed, “The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World by Nawal El Saadawi, edited and translated by Sherif Hetata: Book Review,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6 (The University of Chicago), no. 4 (Summer 1981): 749-751 (749).

never been tackled before in detail by an Arab woman writer. Leila Ahmed comments on El Saadawi`s representation of social issues:

I know of no other woman within her society who has attacked its patriarchal values—particularly those enshrined in such notions as that of honour or the all importance of virginity—as openly, cogently, and uncompromisingly as she.³⁷

El Saadawi`s importance as an Arab woman writer lies not only in speaking the previously unspoken, but also in the way in which her argument is displayed frankly and uncompromisingly.

Nawal El Saadawi is a feminist writer and activist, psychiatrist, novelist, short story and play writer. She was born in 1931 in an Egyptian Muslim family in the village of Kafr Tahla in Egypt`s lower delta. She received her degree in 1955 from the medical school at the University of Cairo.³⁸ In her early life, she worked as a medical doctor at the rural health center in Tahla. Until the early 1970s, she was general director of public health education in the Egyptian Ministry of Health.³⁹ Then, she was appointed as United Nations officer at the Economic Commission for Africa. El Saadawi and her husband Sherif Hetata worked as advisors on Women`s Programs for Africa and later as Senior Program officers in charge of the Women`s Voluntary Fund for West Africa. They lived between Beirut and Addis Ababa while working for the UN in this position. She left the job after two years.⁴⁰ El Saadawi has married three times;

³⁷ Ibid, 750.

³⁸ Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El-Saadawi*, trans., Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 2009), iii.

³⁹ Ibid, iii.

⁴⁰ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 58.

she has one daughter from her first marriage and one son from her third.⁴¹ Under Anwar Sadat`s regime, she was jailed as a prisoner of conscience in 1981 for two and a half months, and then released after his assassination by fundamentalist Muslims.⁴² At present, she no longer practices medicine and dedicates herself to writing for the Arab feminist movement. El Saadawi has succeeded in publishing forty literary works and feminist essays, which have been translated into nine foreign languages. She has also participated in several international conferences about women`s issues and gives lectures in universities and on television and radio stations.

During her life, El Saadawi has encountered constant challenges and crises. Despite her birth into a rural society which subordinated women to men, she continued her education to become a medical doctor and later a general director in the Ministry of Health. In 1972, she published her first work, *Women and Sex* and was dismissed from her job in the Ministry of Health; her books were banned in Egypt because of her controversial religious and social views. She also worked as Chief Editor for the magazine *Health*, which was concerned with women`s issues and was banned in 1973.⁴³ From that moment onwards, she engaged in a struggle against religious and state institutions as they constantly attacked her and prohibited her from speaking or appearing on national radio or television. Despite all the threats, El Saadawi has continued defending Arab women`s issues and expressing her own views through her writings.

⁴¹Nawal El Saadawi, "Interview with Nawal El Saadawi," interview by Helena Frith Powell. Oct. 10, 2013, para. 3 of 17. <http://helenafriithpowell.com/uncategorized/interview-with-nawal-el-saadawi> [accessed Aug. 11, 2016].

⁴² Ibid, para. 5 of 17

⁴³ Ibid, para 16 of 17.

In 1982, El Saadawi established the Arab Women`s Solidarity Association (AWSA), which is a pan-Arab feminist organization, and was elected president. The Egyptian government under Sadat`s regime refused to grant registration of the AWSA until 1985 when it formally came into existence. This organization is detached from any political parties and is open to all Muslim women. The members of AWSA have established a publishing house in Cairo and encouraged the writings of young Arab women. AWSA`s slogan is “Women`s Power Together to Unveil the Mind.” On 15 June 1991, the government issued a decree which closed down the Arab Women`s Solidarity Association; six months before this decree it had closed down the magazine *Noon* which was published by AWSA.⁴⁴ This organization founded by El Saadawi seeks to make changes in Egyptian society, especially by advocating freedom for Arab women: “The freedom of the Arab people will not be attained without gaining the freedom of Arab women. And the freedom of women will not be attained without the emancipation of its land, economy, culture, and knowledge. Both of these—the freedom of woman and the freedom of the nation—need solidarity for power. Since right without power is ineffective and weak, it easily perishes.”⁴⁵ El Saadawi`s main concern is to free women and the country from the oppressive patriarchal hegemony to achieve social, economic and political justice.

So, AWSA`s agenda is mainly set to defend women`s rights politically, economically, socially and culturally on the public level and to empower and protect them individually on the private level. This organization calls women to revolt against the conventional gender roles in Egyptian society and advocates

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Challenges of Arab Women at the End of the 20th Century* (Cairo: AWSA, 1986), 8.

women`s equal rights and free participation in all aspects of life. While AWSA supports democracy in Egypt and rejects the regressive movement calling for the return of women to the home, it resists Western influence. Even though it was opposed by the conservative right wing movement, the Islamic reform movement and the leftist movement, AWSA succeeded in holding its first international conference in Cairo in 1986. Many Arab women from several Arab countries took part in this conference, *The Challenges of Arab Women at the End of the 20th Century*, and twenty-four articles were presented by many speakers, including El Saadawi. Not only did she found AWSA, but El Saadawi also co-founded the Association of African Women for Research and Development. This organization seeks to achieve the liberation of African women both white and black as they work together.

Since her childhood, El Saadawi has raised many controversial questions. She has opposed any limitations and conventions that might confine her freedom intellectually or physically. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988), she describes herself as the little girl asking bold questions to embarrass her elders. In her childhood, she shocked her father by asking why only women wear veils and was scolded by her teacher when she wondered why God is male not female. She later asked her society why all the religious and political leaders were men and women were not allowed to be imams or presidents. It was only during her experience as a gynecologist in rural Egypt that El Saadawi became aware of Arab women`s struggle initiated by the gender hierarchy. She states that, "All the tragedies of the society enter into my clinic. All the results of disguise and swindle are exposed before me on the examination table. The bitter realities which people deny come and lay under my hand on the

operating table.”⁴⁶ Her profession as a doctor exposed to her Arab women`s struggle to cope with social burdens in a male-dominated society. Her job not only allowed her to see the body naked but it also starkly revealed the human conditions in her society.

El Saadawi was able to examine women`s issues in a more global perspective when she was sent to study psychiatry at Columbia University in the 1960s. At that time, America was dealing with the activities of the civil rights movements post the Vietnam War and the feminist movements calling for equal rights. She was interested in anti-government movements and in the literature advocating freedom and opposing the conservatism and fundamentalism which had prevailed in America during the past years. Growing up in a social and political environment between the two world wars which was marked by fluctuations and turbulence in the domestic and international spheres, El Saadawi has been influenced as many other thinkers and writers have been. New ideologies and theories were flowing into the Arab intellectual world from the West. Romanticism still prevailed, but surrealism and realism were gradually arising in literature and philosophy. Popular fiction and non-fiction works were translated from English, French and Russian during the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, many Arab intellectuals were enlightened by Western revolutionary ideas of liberation. Numerous Arabic novels were inspired by themes of protest, frustration, alienation and futility. Dissatisfaction, turbulence and upheaval dominated Arab countries and appeared in literature as a phenomenon of that time.

⁴⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 1988), 86.

Many famous Arab writers expressed their revolutionary ideas in their fiction. Hillary Kilpatrick illustrates the radical changes that governed Arab countries during that time:

Influenced by the Western European countries, Egypt and other Arab societies made radical changes: new political, economic, and social structures have arisen and modern ideologies have been introduced. Education has been expanded and largely secularized, and new aspirations have appeared in all sections of society. Determining factors in this process of change have been admiration for the technical and scientific progress of the West, resistance to Western colonialism and ambitions to dominate, and the endeavor to preserve the Arab identity, partly by revitalizing the Arab cultural heritage.⁴⁷

In Egypt, that period was marked by the rising of a strong nationalism against British colonization. In addition, in 1948 the state of Israel was founded in Palestine and the conflict between the Arab countries and Israel created much agitation. In his work *The History of Egypt*, P. J. Vatikiotis explains the political situations that affected Egypt post the Second World War:

... suffering from the deprivation and difficult economic conditions of war occurred in the crucial period 1945-9. This was not simply the result of disillusionment with the old Wafd leadership and/or performance of the various parties of the ruling establishment. It was also the result of new factors which changed the nature and content of the national movement. Even though the latter was still mainly taken up in the first five years after the war with the ending of the relationship with Britain -

⁴⁷ Hillary Kilpatrick, "Women and Literature in the Arab World," in *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America*, ed. Mineke Schipper (London & New York: Allison and Busby, 1985), 72-90 (73).

the evacuation of British troops from the Suez Canal area and elsewhere in the country - it had already acquired a radical socioeconomic content. This, in turn, was influenced by the emergence of the Soviet Union as one of the two super powers after the war, by the impact of anti-colonial independence movements in parts of Asia, and later by the impact of the Communist revolution in China. Simultaneously, the end of British imperial rule in India in 1947, the termination of the French mandates in Lebanon and Syria, the Palestine Question and the emergence of the State of Israel, and generally the recession of Anglo-French power and influence from the Near and Middle East had an effect upon the radicalization of the Egyptian national movement. Finally, the exhaustion of old political ruling groups from their internecine struggle left them divided among themselves, thus permitting the greater autocracy of the monarch.⁴⁸

Between the modern nationalism and humanitarianism mostly imported from Europe and their allegiance toward their own cultural and religious heritage, the Egyptians encountered a challenge to find their identity which demarcated them from outside intruders and bound them together.

Being a product of Egyptian society, El Saadawi`s concern with nationalist issues is inevitable, as with so many Egyptian writers. She describes herself as a fearless and creative person who would always have protested and created forms of critique rather than submit to any form of injustice.⁴⁹ Like many Arab writers, El Saadawi employed political slogans of revolution, nationalism and

⁴⁸ P. J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt: From Muhammad Ali to Sadat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 356.

⁴⁹ Nawal El Saadawi, "Interview with Nawal El Saadawi," interview by Helena Frith Powell, para 9 of 17.

anti-colonization in her writings. However, it was only later that she became engaged in feminist writings. El Saadawi`s growing interest in feminist theories occurred particularly after her second divorce and her experience as a doctor in rural areas. She became aware of women`s conflict caused by gender roles and patriarchal oppression in her society. Her consciousness of female tragedies entailed her to write about women`s life in Egyptian society. El Saadawi started publishing her fiction during the second half of the 1960s, and in the 1970s, she became one of the most prominent feminist figures in the Arab world. She dedicated her life to fighting the oppression and discrimination of the patriarchal class system. El Saadawi in her works links and criticizes the colonization of her land by Western imperialist powers and the colonization of Arab women by Arab men; she argues: “women were victims of a double exploitation: they shared class exploitation with men, but in turn they were subject to exploitation by men, to sex discrimination, to patriarchy.”⁵⁰

Moreover, in all of her novels, she despises the conventional role of the housewife and considers it as a form of slavery. Constantly she depicts the negative image of the woman who complies with patriarchal demands and serves them without questioning. Criticizing this unavoidable role of woman in Egyptian society appears early, when El Saadawi blames her mother for confining her feminine role to the kitchen:

The world of woman is limited and ugly and diffuses a garlic smell. I did not escape into my small world until my mother dragged me into the kitchen saying that “your fate is bound to marriage. You have to learn cooking, your fate is marriage! marriage! marriage!” That hateful word my mother repeated every day until I denied it. Whenever I listened to

⁵⁰ El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, 58.

it, it always makes me picture a man before me with a big belly full of food inside him.⁵¹

El Saadawi's life story defies the restricted role enforced upon her by her mother, and she blames her mother for ignoring her intelligence. This theme of the negative woman who perpetuates submissiveness to men's hegemony appears constantly in her novels.

Similarly, in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Adrienne Rich writes about the mother who teaches her daughter how to be attached and dependent on a man:

Women have had neither power nor wealth to hand on to their daughters; they have been dependent on men as children are on women; and the most they can do is teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in the patriarchy by pleasing, and attaching themselves to, powerful or economically viable men.⁵²

Rich further illustrates the impact of such a passive mother on the psyche of her daughter:

Many daughters live in rage at their mother for having accepted, too readily and passively, "whatever comes." A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her—as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound, Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother's self-

⁵¹ El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 10.

⁵² Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York, London: Norton & Company, 1979), 42.

hatred and low expectations are binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter.⁵³

This type of submissive woman or mother who surrenders to humiliation and oppression is portrayed by El Saadawi in her novels to emphasize the fact that psychological effects are not limited to the mother but are rather inflicted upon her daughter, as well.

In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir also writes about woman`s negative image in how a submissive mother is perceived by her daughter:

The rebellion is the more violent when, as often happens, the mother has lost her prestige. She is the one who waits, submits, complains, weeps, makes scenes: an ungrateful role that in daily life leads to no apotheosis; as a shrew, detested; her fate seems the prototype of rapid recurrence: life only repeats itself in her, without going anywhere; firmly set in her role as housekeeper, she puts a stop to the expansion of existence, she becomes obstacle and negation. Her daughter wishes not to be like her, worshipping women who have escaped from feminine servitude; actresses, writers, teachers; she engages avidly in sports and in study, she climbs trees, tears her clothes, tries to rival the boys.⁵⁴

This feeling of alienation and detachment from mother—as de Beauvoir describes—is experienced by El Saadawi in her relation with her mother. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, she confesses that she is more attached to her father than her mother, as he praises her academic excellence. Her relationship to her mother is characterized by a split. She perceives her mother

⁵³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and institution* (New York, London: Norton & Company, 1976), 247.

⁵⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 332.

as an oppressor who confines her to the traditional role. El Saadawi portrays her mother and grandmother as tyrannical figures as they force her to follow their traditional path. Later during her study of medicine and after an anatomy class, the narrator asks herself:

Why did my mother put such horrible differences between me and my brother, and make the man a god over me that I spend my whole life cooking for him? Why does the society always try to convince me that masculinity is an advantage and noble, while femininity is a trial and weakness. Could my mother believe that I stand in front of a naked man with a lancet in my hand to open a man's belly and head? (Or the society believe that I can contemplate a man's body, and dissect it without any feeling of his sex?)⁵⁵

She discovers that femininity, which is characterized by weakness, submissiveness, docility, is the product of culture, rather than the destiny of biology. She blames her mother for treating her as inferior to her brother even though she knows there is nothing superior in him. As a result, in her early life, she identifies more with her father than her mother.

Thus, El Saadawi's attraction to the superiority, liberty and freedom men enjoy makes her identify herself with men rather than with women. This is evident in her attitude and her statement of national politics when she advocates male politics and becomes a spokesperson for the male reformists. Mary Daly comments on the natural attraction so that the woman tends to be identified with men in a male-dominated society: "Her repugnant reactions for the realm of the distaff and the male kingdom of texts are seen as an appealing escape from the confinement of women's world are natural among token

⁵⁵ El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 24-25.

women in patriarchal society.”⁵⁶ Daly argues that women who identify themselves with men search for an exit from the confinement imposed on them.

It is only later that El Saadawi`s views toward her mother and women change to become more sympathetic and she begins to identify herself with women. The narrator of *Memoirs from the Women`s Prison* (1986) portrays her mother as a progressive woman who inspires her to continue her education and to revolt against the subjugation of women. She writes about her mother with affection and grief. Her mother spends her life in giving birth and at the age of forty-five, while she is pregnant with her tenth child, she decides to abort the fetus. She jumps off a high wall and dies with her dreams of independence unfulfilled. The daughter laments her mother`s death, which leaves her with a deep pain. She pities her mother and the futility of women`s lives. The narrator is a figure for El Saadawi, who depicts the misery of her mother`s life and women in Egyptian society affectingly:

My mother's voice, while her eyes were looking at mine, “If my father did not marry me off, I would have completed my education! I used to love reading and writing. I used to hope that I can do something important for my life, instead of the mere procreation of children like cats! ... old, long pain,” since my mother grasped my hand and widened her eyes in embarrassment and then died without granting me her name. She bequeathed me life and revolution since childhood.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 154.

⁵⁷ Nawal El Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women`s Prison*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 160.

A love/hate relationship characterizes the bond between El Saadawi and her mother. The oppressive mother who drags her to the kitchen and limits her activity to the house in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is unmistakably the same mother who bequeaths her life and revolution in *Memoirs from the Women`s Prison*.

Not only do her views toward women change, but also those toward men. After her second divorce, El Saadawi developed a deep antagonism toward men who subjugate women and practice an authoritative role. She criticizes the institutions of her society which deny the single mother`s identity. She attacks the idea that a woman cannot be identified on her own unless a man or a husband completes her. In Egypt, constitutional law denies a married woman`s independence or obtaining of a separate identity. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi recalls her experience at Cairo Airport when an officer prevents her from traveling until she shows a permit from her husband. She tells him that she had divorced her husband. Then, she is required to present the divorce document. El Saadawi considers the divorce papers as a birth certificate.⁵⁸ Marriage in her society is seen by El Saadawi as enslavement where the husband is the owner and the wife the owned. She adds that the marriage contract is treated as business contract and is constitutionalized; she describes the process of writing her second marriage contract with sarcasm:

The old man with a big white turban on his head was looking at him [her husband] with all respect and listened to him. But he did not see me or listen to me as if my existence were not there before him. In his hand he had a pen and a big ruled notebook.

⁵⁸ El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 66.

“How much in advance, sir, and how much afterward?”

What are these sad words which come out between his dry lips? In advance? Afterward? Is he the one who will pay me for marriage? Is this man going to pay me for his marriage to me? Is he the one that possesses what is allowed to him?

The turbaned man does not know who among us is the one who possesses. He sees him [the husband] as a man, and me a woman. The man in his view is the one who possesses. I looked at the old man with superiority and told him; “do not write anything.” He looked at me with disdain. How could a woman speak in the presence of men!

He spoke, his intonation scholarly; “the contract becomes useless.” I asked why? He said; “the law ordered us that way.” So I said; “you do not know the law.” The man jumped from his seat, while grabbing his turban on his head from falling, and shouted; “My God, my God please forgive this!”⁵⁹

El Saadawi discovers that her life during the marriage melds with her husband`s world and she is deprived of privacy or freedom. Her intellectual excellence threatens his male ego. He starts opposing her work outside and imprisons her in the house. She gets rid of him and divorces along with him all traditions, law, religion and customs which support men`s authority over women.

However, in her earlier works, El Saadawi does not consider marriage or motherhood as factors that hinder a woman`s independence or freedom as long as she has the ability to work outside the family. If the spouses care about

⁵⁹ Ibid, 65.

and understand each other, that is a satisfactory condition for women. Unlike El Saadawi, some Western feminists stand fiercely against motherhood, marriage and family. For example, Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, that "being a mother these days is a real slavery ... Marriage is really the biggest trap of all ...The family ghetto must be destroyed ...Love can be a trap which makes women put up with a great deal."⁶⁰ In contrast, El Saadawi is not opposing marriage based on mutual love or the family itself. She criticizes the backwardness in which virginity determines the honour of a girl and her family.

So, as discussed above, El Saadawi as a feminist is a product of Egyptian society which has undergone complex historical and political events. This history cannot be simply dismissed as irrelevant and these political events cannot be seen as marginal in shaping the feminist movements in the Middle East. Between secularism and Islamism, Arab women novelists—El Saadawi and Aboulela—still carry the burden of this history, whose effects are too obvious to ignore in their literary production. El Saadawi not only criticizes religion and the patriarchal class system, but also Western racial prejudice. She insists that nationalism cannot be separated from Arab feminism, since Arabs and Muslims are oppressed by Western colonizers. In this sense, she rejects Western prejudice and intervention.

Clash of Arab Feminism and Western Prejudice

International feminism calls for women`s solidarity despite different racial or religious backgrounds, to oppose universal oppressive patriarchy and to defend women everywhere in the globe. Mary Daly states, "The oppression of women knew no ethnic, national, or religious bounds. There are variations

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 73,75,77.

on the theme of oppression, but the phenomenon is planetary.”⁶¹

Nevertheless, splits and conflicts occur in the relation between Arab/Muslim feminism and Western feminism; in other words, Arab feminists believe that Western superiority interferes frequently with feminism. Arab feminists think they must encounter the racial prejudice and superiority of Western feminism and also Western imperialism in their region. Even though Arab feminists still believe in international feminist power, they refuse the impact of Western societies over them.

Therefore, Arab feminists encounter a complex dilemma, since they have allegiance toward their own countries and yet have responsibilities toward the emancipation of women. This entails that some Arab feminists reject the stereotypical image of Arab woman which has frequently appeared in the Western feminist discourse. For example, Nawal El Saadawi argues that everything related to Arab Muslim women is viewed negatively in the West. She adds that:

The colonizers tended to alienate us from our past and our history and to impose only the negative part of our history. We have discovered that the Arab woman of many years ago was very strong. We are restudying our history—that of people, not of kings and governors—the history of people's participation in political power and revolution.⁶²

She blames the Western colonizers and feminists for imposing the negative image of Arab women and neglecting their history of participation in different

⁶¹ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 39.

⁶²Nawal El Saadawi, “Feminism in Egypt: A Conversation with Nawal Sadawi,” interview by Sarah Graham Brown. *MERIP Reports*, no. 95, Mar.-Apr., 1981, 24-27 (27) http://www.jstor.org/stable/3011518?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents. [accessed Aug. 13, 2016].

aspects of life. Thus, Arab feminists find that it is essential to recover their cultural and racial identity and to reject the oppressed and inferior self-image imposed on them by Westerners.

It is not only Nawal El Saadawi who rejects Western superiority and established criticism, but also Fatima Mernissi, who writes:

Is there a nascent female liberation movement similar to those appearing in Western countries? This kind of question has for decades blocked and distorted analysis of the Muslim woman's situation, keeping it at the level of senseless comparisons and unfounded conclusions. It is a well-established tradition to discuss the Muslim woman by comparing her, implicitly or explicitly, to the Western woman. When the Muslim countries were defeated and occupied by the West, the colonizers used all available means to persuade the defeated Muslims of their inferiority in order to justify foreign occupation. Muslims were dismissed as promiscuous, and many crocodile tears were shed over the terrible fate of the Muslim woman.⁶³

Mernissi believes that Western imperialism perpetuates the negative image of Muslims and Arabs to justify Western occupation in the Middle East.

Consequently, Arab women, in Mernissi's view, are alienated and suppressed by Western feminists' discourse.

Similarly, Leila Ahmed describes her experience of racial prejudice in America and clarifies why Arab feminists hold a defensive attitude in the presence of Western feminists:

⁶³ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* (London: Saqi Books, 1985), Preface.

In 1980, at the National Women's Studies Association conference in Bloomington, Indiana, I attended a presentation on "Women in Islam," and found myself hotly speaking up from the audience because the panel of three Arab women were, it seemed to me, presenting an unwarrantably rosy picture of women in Islam. Islamic societies were, if anything, surely rather remarkable—so had been my thought—for their unequivocal placement of women under the control of men, and their equally explicit licensing of male sexuality and exploitation of women. Islam had, as that panel maintained, brought about a number of positive gains for women in Arabia at the time, had granted women certain rights, such as the right to own property (not granted to women in the West until the nineteenth century, and even, as with the right to bear witness, still not granted women, for example, under rabbinical law), and clearly one could not judge Islam to be more malevolent in its attitude to women than the other two monotheisms. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that this still did not warrant playing down Islam's blatant endorsement of male superiority and male control of women, or glossing over the harshness for women of, in particular, its marriage, divorce, and child custody laws. But this was over two years ago and before I'd lived in America. Now that I have, I see perfectly why the women making the presentation took the stand that they did. For if one is of Arabic or Islamic background in America, one is almost compelled to take that stand. And what compels one is not only that Americans by and large know nothing at all about the Islamic world, which is indeed the case, despite America's heavy embroilment in the area and despite the fact that Muslims constitute something like one quarter of the world's population: it is, rather, that Americans "know," and know

without even having to think about it, that the Islamic people—Arabs, Iranians, whatever they call themselves—are backward, uncivilized peoples totally incapable of rational conduct. This is overwhelmingly the attitude of the media and of the society at large and also, unfortunately, often that of the smaller groups supposedly representing American informed opinion.⁶⁴

Ahmed continues to describe East-West relations in history. She explains that for nearly a thousand years, from the time of the Crusades until the fall of the last Islamic empire, the Western world and Muslims have been in a state of war.⁶⁵ So, Arab women feel that they are not only oppressed by patriarchy but also alienated by Western feminists' racial prejudice.

El Saadawi, in this regard, criticizes the superiority and racial prejudice of Western feminists and their misunderstanding of Arab women's situation. El Saadawi believes that Western sisters lack a true understanding of Arab societies, so they should trust Arab women to deal with their problems according to their experience and points of view, since they know their situation better than any outsider. In her interview with Sarah Brown, El Saadawi states, "Others cannot liberate us ... The enemy is the same but the struggle is different."⁶⁶ She suggests that Western sisters, with their misunderstanding and prejudice, cannot help or support Arab women. Rather, Western feminists, in El Saadawi's view, destroy Arab women's plan for their own liberation because of the already established criticism and expectations of the role of Arab women by the West. She justifies her attitude through their experiences being different, and also their strategies. She believes that they

⁶⁴ Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3, (Fall 1982): 521-534 (521-522).

⁶⁵ Ibid, 523.

⁶⁶ El Saadawi, "Feminism in Egypt," 26.

obtain the power to determine how they can emancipate themselves from the patriarchal hegemony, and that their paths to liberate Arab women cannot be those of Western feminists.

El Saadawi's attitude reflects Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's view in "French Feminism in an International Frame."⁶⁷ This is a key essay where Spivak critiques Julia Kristeva's portrayal from a Western perspective of Chinese women. Spivak attacks the way in which a universal definition of the female subject is constructed through the lens of a Western Orientalist vision of the Other and points to the need for a recognition of the cultural specificity. That is to say, in Spivak's account, the feminist work needs to continue by learning from Third World subjects, not by imposing false interpretive models upon them. She continues to address this primary question of subaltern subject in "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988).⁶⁸ Spivak criticizes the method by which Western feminists investigate other cultures and uses the example of Indian Sati practice (widow suicide). Spivak claims that Western intellectual knowledge has served as a prime tool to justify their conquest of the Third World culture. According to Spivak, Western knowledge and research about the Third World stem from their political and economic interests. So, she believes that the Western scholars in their investigation maintain their subjectivity, which is opposite to the investigated object. Spivak rejects the essentialist underpinnings of Subaltern Studies and asserts that the subaltern subject is heterogeneous. Her strategic mode of writing represents a resistance

⁶⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, no. 62. (1981): 154-184.

⁶⁸ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1988), 271-313.

to essentialism, closure and to totalizing thought as will be discussed later in her critique of Fredric Jameson`s theory.

Similarly, El Saadawi accuses the Western portrayal of Arab women of distorting the Arab-Islamic identity. She goes further to offer her counterattack by making negative depictions of the West. El Saadawi`s writings aim to describe the Western colonizers in a negative way. She portrays Westerners as arrogant rich people without concern for others, and as exploitative of other races and countries. El Saadawi repeatedly expresses her antagonistic attitude toward Western imperialism and colonialism over Arab countries and highlights the problematic relationship between the two cultures. While resisting Western political authority and economic exploitation over the East, El Saadawi maintains that ancient Egypt and the Arab countries were the inspiration for Western civilization:

The forces of imperialism which hurled themselves in successive waves on the Egyptian river valley and the Arab countries were able to plunder many of their material and cultural riches, to conceal many historical truths and facts, and to distort or falsify the contributions that great Arab thinkers and savants have made to the cause of human progress and to laying the foundations of important areas in science and art.⁶⁹

So, she accuses the West of neglecting and concealing the long history of Arab achievements in the fields of science and the arts. Moreover, she criticizes the Western capitalism which enslaves Western women and exploits them as a tool of sexual excitement and material consumption, stating that, "The veiling and the nakedness of women are two sides of the same coin. It is the same oppression at work. When I see naked bodies of women being used for

⁶⁹ Nawal El Saadawi, *Hidden Face of Eve* (London: Zed Books, 1980), 251-252.

advertisements and to make profit I am horrified.”⁷⁰ She claims that Western women in the capitalist world are still valued less than Western men and fall as victims of a class society. Leila Ahmed also points out that in spite of Western women’s participation in various male-dominated professions, they continue to be dominated by the same male system. She believes that comparison of one form of patriarchy with another does not help achieve women’s emancipation.⁷¹

Thus, the need to recognize differences between cultures is essential to achieve the tasks of the feminists, as Michele Aina Barale points out:

The need to integrate—that is to say, allow—differences among women, but also ask that real confrontation take place. If this is to happen we must not seduce ourselves into believing that it will not entail anger and the upheaval of re-vision. Anger is the normal response to racism, that other thorn in feminism’s side, just as fury is the appropriate reaction when old attitudes do not change but are hidden beneath liberal rhetoric.⁷²

Barale suggests that despite the efforts of international feminism to support women worldwide, the differences in women’s experiences should not be eliminated. According to her, racism and stereotypical images will only abort the mission of feminism and evoke the antagonism and anger of the other. The Arab feminist project, as Anouar Majid argues, is challenged with the monumental task of contesting simultaneously and dialectically global

⁷⁰ Nawal El Saadawi, “Interview with Nawal El Saadawi,” interview by Helena Frith Powell, para 10 of 17.

⁷¹ Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem,” 531.

⁷² Michele Aina Barale, “Reviewed Works: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde; *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, 8, no. 1. (1984): 71-73 (73) https://www.jstor.org/stable/3346098?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed March 2, 2015]

capitalism and a male-dominated version of Islam.⁷³ Majid insists that in order for a feminist movement to provide “a new revolutionary paradigm,” it should enunciate “an Islamically progressive agenda—democratic, antipatriarchal, and anti-imperialist.”⁷⁴ He also believes that a progressive Islam is a “way to break away from Eurocentric structures and redynamize progressive non-Western traditions in a genuinely multicultural world.”⁷⁵ So, for Majid, an Islamic feminist movement empowered by gender equality and social justice can offer dynamic contributions of women and extend full rights to minority groups.

Majid’s argument envisaging Islamic feminism as “one of the best platforms from which to resist the effects of global capitalism and contribute to a rich, egalitarian polycentric world,⁷⁶” seems to be a response to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s call to subvert global capitalists’ influence on women. It is worth quoting Mohanty at length here, because of her influence on other advocates of transnational feminisms:

Activists and scholars must also identify and reenvision forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives. It is their particular exploitation at this time, their potential epistemic privilege, as well as their particular forms of solidarity that can be the basis for reimagining a liberatory politics for the start of this century.⁷⁷

Mohanty focuses here on forms of collective resistance that can be the basis for global feminist movements. As I will argue, the works of Aboulela show

⁷³ Anouar Majid, “The Politics of Feminism in Islam,” *Signs* 23, no. 2. (1998): 321-361 (324).

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 324.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 325.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 355.

⁷⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), 236.

through their plots and characterization how Islam as a form of resistance empowers the protagonists to overcome their differences and offers solidarity. To use Haideh Moghissi's words, Islam becomes "a blanket under which people from Islamic cultures are huddled together regardless of their regional, ethnic, cultural, class and gender differences."⁷⁸ In this sense, Islamic feminism offers an alternative feminist practice for Muslim women engaged in anti-capitalist struggles.

Like Majid, miriam cooke suggests that scholars who want to remain part of public discourse need to know how to use Islamic discourse, which has pervaded the public and private spheres. She writes, "Abdullahi an-Na'im, a Sudanese scholar of Islamic law, has written that 'the advocates of the human rights of women should realize that they have no alternative but to engage in an Islamic discourse. Whatever they may think of it, the fact of the matter is that Islamic groups have already succeeded in 'Islamizing' the terms of reference of public discourse in most Islamic societies' (an-Na'im 1995:59)."⁷⁹ She adds that Islamic feminists challenge globalization and at the same time find ways to benefit from it. Networking with each other across the world, identifying themselves as belonging and sharing a specific religious faith, more and more women are engaging with the values and norms of Islam as religious practice and discourse.⁸⁰

Majid's and cooke's argument for utilizing Islam in the feminist movement as a powerful stance to resist the forces of capitalism and globalization are quite useful in framing readings of Aboulela's *The Translator*

⁷⁸ Haideh Moghissi, "Women, War and Fundamentalism in the Middle East," *Social Science Research Council*, (para.5 of 11) <http://essays.ssrc.org/10yearsafter911/women-war-and-fundamentalism-in-the-middle-east-2/> [accessed Oct. 23, 2016].

⁷⁹ cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, xviii.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, xx.

and *Minaret*, since the narratives of both novels highlight the dilemma of Muslim women who have been displaced in a capitalist society. In *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Islam crisscrosses social classes, ethnic differences and geographical boundaries and creates a site of belonging and possible solidarity for women. The way in which Aboulela portrays how Islam provides a ground of belonging and a site for a feminist solidarity confirms cooke`s argument that Islamic feminists take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims. cooke criticizes intellectuals, like Haideh Moghissi, who are skeptical of the intellectual and political viability of Islamic feminism. She explains:

Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning. Actions, behaviors, pieces of writing that bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail.⁸¹

For cooke, Islamic feminism is a speaking position; it is “an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women.”⁸² She believes that even if this label seems to be mutually exclusive, it describes a particular kind of self-positioning that will inform the action of writing and does not necessarily describe identity. However, Margot Badran rejects the claim that Islam and feminism are “mutually exclusive.” She argues that rights-depriving by patriarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive since Islam did give women as human beings their rights 1400 years ago. Badran asserts that Islamic feminism is an affirmation of the rights Islam gave to women and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur`an.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid, 59.

⁸² Ibid, 61.

⁸³ Basarudin, “Re-defining Feminism/s,” 58.

Thus, Islamic feminists are claiming their right to be free and strong women within this religion. They link their religious gendered identities to claim allegiances, so they can resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization and the patriarchal system that pervades them all. In this sense, Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret* can be read and analyzed as Islamic feminist narratives. She says "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me."⁸⁴ For Aboulela, a personal, religious identity provides more stability than national identity.

Leila Aboulela

Aboulela was born in 1964 in Cairo, Egypt to a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother, and grew up in Khartoum. She spent her childhood in Sudan and received her degree in Economics from Khartoum University in 1985. Then, she continued her higher education in London, where she gained a Master's degree from the London School of Economics. She lived between Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen for many years and her own experience with immigration to Scotland inspired her to write her fiction. Her novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006) were long-listed for the Orange Prize and her short story "The Museum" in the collection *Coloured Lights* won the Caine Prize in 2000 for African writings. She received the Scottish Book Awards for the novel *Lyrics*

⁸⁴ Leila Aboulela, "Keep The Faith," interview by Anita Sethi. *The Guardian*, June 5, 2005, para. 9 of 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2> [accessed Oct. 15, 2016].

Alley (2012), which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer Prize.⁸⁵ Her most recent novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) is a contemporary and historical narrative about Muslim woman`s identity and belonging. Being a traveler to various countries, Aboulela continuously engages in negotiating multiple identity positions throughout her life. In an interview with Daniel Musiitwa, Aboulela asserts that traveling made her a writer:

I started to write in 1992 after I had left Sudan and was living in Scotland. I was very homesick for Khartoum. People around me did not know much about Sudan or about Islam, the two things that made up my identity. This increased my feeling of alienation. The late eighties were the start of the anti-Islam sentiments in the Western media and my presence in Britain made me defensive. Suddenly I needed to express that life in Khartoum was good, that the people were good, that it was circumstances that had made us all leave rather than choice. I was in a culture and place which asserted every minute that “West is Best,” Africa is a mess, Islam oppresses women and that I should be grateful that I had escaped. Youth and pride made me resist this description. And this, I believe is what triggered my writing. I found my voice in fiction.⁸⁶

Aboulela`s experience of migration and self-imposed exile create her desire to write a counter-narrative to that prevailing in the West about Islam. She becomes aware of the struggle between East and West and finds herself in a position to defend the subordinated East in the Western discourse. It is not that Aboulela did not know about this dichotomy before, but living in Britain, she was exposed more to the negative descriptions attached to her race and

⁸⁵Leila Aboulela, “Sudanese Author Leila Aboulela Finds her Voice in Fiction,” interview by Daniel Musiitwa. *African Book Club*, Aug. 1, 2011, para. 2 of 16. <http://www.africanbookclub.com/?p=4705> [accessed Aug. 12, 2016].

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

religion which are the salient features that make up her identity. Unlike being in Sudan, Aboulela finds herself in the West perceived as the oppressed oriental female.

Aboulela`s writing has been labeled as African writing, British Muslim writing and Halal Fiction. Sadia Abbas considers this title “Halal Fiction” as a formal puzzle, because Aboulela`s novels, in her view, do not really deal with religion. According to Abbas, divine representation is absent in Aboulela`s novels.⁸⁷ Abbas`s point of view is partially true, but it is incomplete. It is true that Aboulela does not tackle religious issues directly related to God, theological questions, heaven and metaphysics. Rather, she renders a simple representation of religion and how faith is experienced by ordinary people in everyday life. In this regard, Ferial Ghazoul clarifies, “what makes her writing ‘Islamic’ is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living.”⁸⁸ Thus, Islam in Aboulela`s fiction, as Abbas describes, works as a “psychic salve” that helps the Muslim person in exile to tranquilize the pain of displacement and other losses. Islam gives a sense of order in a world that is otherwise marked by chaos. In Aboulela`s novels, characters` lives directed by faith and rituals help in the process of integration into exile and it becomes possible for all Muslim to feel home wherever they are since home is where the faith is.

Aboulela repeats that misrepresentation of Islam in the Western media urges her to write fiction from a Muslim`s perspective and to emphasize Muslim assertions of Islamic values. She says, “My ambition is to put practicing Muslims in English literary fiction, to write novels that are infused with Muslim

⁸⁷ Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom`s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Fordham: University Press, 2014), 93.

⁸⁸ Ferial Ghazoul, “Halal Fiction,” *Al-Ahram Weekly online*, no.542, 12-18 July (2001): para. 1 of 13. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2001/542/bo4.htm> [accessed May 4, 2015].

aesthetics in the same way that many of the Western classics were formed by a Christian ethos.”⁸⁹ That is to say, Aboulela represents Islam in her fiction as a faith from which Muslims regulate their daily behavior and lives. Her fiction is a faith-derived narrative from an immigrant’s perspective. In Wail Hassan’s view, Aboulela’s literary narratives, which introduce practicing Muslims into the Western literary scene, position her in a prominent place among other Sudanese writers. Hassan argues:

Aboulela’s fiction completes the project of [Tayeb] Salih’s: Whereas his are narratives of failure (of the national project, of the colonial bourgeoisie, of postcolonial intellectuals, of secular Arab ideologies of modernity), hers are narratives of redemption and fulfillment through Islam. While Salih’s work reflects the disappointments of the 1960s, Aboulela’s embodies the slogan of the Islamist movement that emerged in the mid-1970s: “Islam is the solution.”⁹⁰

Hassan considers Aboulela’s fiction as a narrative influenced by Tayeb Salih’s works, but at the same time representing a significant departure from the secular orientation of Arab writing in which Islam is seen as a problem rather than a mode of living and identification.

Claire Chambers points out that until the 1980s, Muslims in the UK were classified as “Black”. Then, in the 1990s, Muslims in Britain were defined as “Asian”, however, since 9/11 and 7/7/2005 of London bombings, the

⁸⁹ Leila Aboulela, “Sudanese Author Leila Aboulela is dreaming of a Lost Future,” interview by Malavika Vettah. *The National*, Nov. 5, 2013, para. 8 of 9. <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/books/sudanese-author-leila-aboulela-is-dreaming-of-a-lost-future> [accessed Aug. 13, 2015].

⁹⁰ Wail Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 183.

identification has been more specific as “Muslim” or “British Muslim.”⁹¹ In parallel with this, new descriptions appeared in the literary field, too. “Muslim writing”, “Halal Fiction” and “Halal Novelist” are some of the labels with which writers are identified. Halal Fiction includes literary Islamic fiction written by Muslim authors and primarily for Muslims. Within the British context, Halal Fiction can be regarded as a counter-narrative to the one produced by both white English and writers of Muslim background, such as Salman Rushdie, whose novel *The Satanic Verses* offends worldwide Muslims. According to Chambers, Halal Fiction is a response to the narratives produced by:

eye-catching, secular, on-trend and often Oxbridge-educated writers such as Hanif Kureishi in the 1990s, and Zadie Smith and Monica Ali in the early 2000s, [who] focus in their fiction on the sensationalist image of the fundamentalist or Islamist at the expense of other, arguably more pressing issues relating to Muslims, such as poverty, social exclusion and Islamophobia.⁹²

Aboulela’s first novel *The Translator* (1999) was described by *The Muslim News* as “the first Halal novel written in English.” When asked by Chambers about this label, Aboulela says:

People are appalled by that in Sudan. In Sudan, writers and intellectuals are usually very liberal, leftwing, and so on, and people want me to be like that, they want me to be the liberated woman, so they are appalled at this *halal* writer thing. But when this was written in *The Muslim News*,

⁹¹ Claire Chambers, “Multi-Culti Nancy Mitfords and Halal Novelists: The Politics of Marketing Muslim Writers in the UK,” *Textus* 23, no. 2 (2010): 389-403 (390).

⁹² *Ibid*, 395.

it was written meaning that “she’s authentic, she’s one of us”; it was meant in positively, so I take it as a compliment.⁹³

As revealed in the above extract, the label Halal Fiction indicates the authenticity of a Muslim author who writes about the life of average devout Muslims. Aboulela maintains that in her writings she highlights the non-political part of Islam and demonstrates how many Muslims are not interested in politics. Instead, she consciously presents Islam as a faith for individuals, not simply as part of an imagined, organically communal culture. Thus, despite the increasing number of Muslim writers who write different kinds of Muslim fiction, there remains no question that the “religious element is heightened”⁹⁴ in Aboulela’s novels.

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One explores the history of the feminist movement in Egypt, beginning with Mohammed Ali's progressive reforms to contextualize the literary production of El Saadawi and Aboulela. It also looks at the impact that Western colonial powers have had on gender roles as reflected in the early reformers` demands and women's movements in the Middle East. Initially upper and middle class women embraced secular Western feminist ideology and all that it entailed. This stance would place them in a direct encounter with religious scholars as well as the state apparatus. In this chapter, I will first examine pro-woman ideas expressed by the forerunners of social movements such as nationalism and religious reform

⁹³ Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 105.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 108.

in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Egypt, and their concerns for the condition of women in connection with the nation's social, political and religious reform movements. Qasim Amin's pro-woman ideas and then those of Huda Shar`awi, Malak Hifni Nasif will be examined to show ideological similarities or differences in their focuses on the subject of women's emancipation. Certain issues are clearly important: Can the nationalist and religious reformist writings be called feminist writings in a strict sense? Furthermore, what are the ideological limitations of Egyptian pro-woman writings and their repetitive dilemmas during this period? Can the failure or success of the women's movement be related to other sociopolitical movements in Egypt? Then, a new trajectory of feminist thought would begin to emerge. In their convergence between secularism and Islamism, these Islamic feminists were not interested in giving up their identity or their agency. They sought to re-engage in the gender debate on their own terms and under the auspices of what they viewed as Islamic feminist experience. In the following chapters, a close reading of Arab feminist fiction by El Saadawi and Aboulela needs to be engaged in.

Chapter Two demonstrates El Saadawi's secular perspective toward feminism in her novels *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), *The Fall of the Imam* (1988) and *Zeina* (2009). It also explores how her perspective leads her to portray Arab women's role in terms of the experiences they are likely to have, as defined by their social environment. These three novels are chosen, in particular, because of the narratives' engagement with postcolonial questions including the place of religion, specifically Islam for feminism. In her earlier novels—such as *The Absent* (1968) and *Two Women in One* (1974)—she believes that the male leftist revolution will simultaneously bring women's liberation, so eagerly supports women's participation in their struggle. Being

disappointed in the male nationalistic movement, El Saadawi emphasizes—in these novels *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam* and *Zeina*—the living and working conditions of peasant and working-class women by portraying concrete experiences of the poorest and most brutally exploited women under fundamentalist Islam and socioeconomic and political oppression.

Questions of national allegory and women's figuration in El Saadawi's selected novels are the main focus of Chapter Three. This chapter employs postcolonial theory and its issues, in particular the work of Fredric Jameson,⁹⁵ to analyze the author's works. It also proves how the problems of women are symptomatic of those of the nation; being subject to patriarchy, the two cannot be divided. Her narratives depict women's struggle as national struggles for independence, against either an outside colonizer or an internal corrupt power structure. In other words, El Saadawi creates a discursive space calling for liberation from the colonization of the body through patriarchal practices, including patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Through her depiction, El Saadawi calls for a destruction of class-patriarchy.

Chapter Four shows how Aboulela departs from El Saadawi's perspective in dealing with postcolonial issues related to women and Islam, and how she offers a different path for feminism. This chapter analyzes Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006) and situates them within the emerging global trend of Islamic feminism. In both novels, gender is experienced in a specifically Muslim way, which marks a dissent from secular feminism as reflected in El Saadawi's fiction. This chapter demonstrates that Aboulela is writing back to emphasize Islamic spirituality; she presents Islam as a religion divested of any cultural form or political activism. Thus, it investigates how

⁹⁵ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in The Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, No.15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88.

Islamic feminism transcends and destroys old binaries that have been constructed between religious and secular, East and West and acknowledges imbrication between them. In this study, I engage less copiously with her recent novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) because it does not fit easily within the comparative feminist paradigm I wish to explore in relation to El Saadawi's fiction. This novel is politically alert and discusses the racial politics of the war on terrorism in the West without any special consideration of feminist questions. Therefore, in this chapter and the following one, I deal with it but only in relation to its representation of Sufism since it reveals insights into this spiritual mode of Islam.

Then Chapter Five discusses Aboulela's third novel, *Lyrics Alley* (2012) as a narrative of national allegory of the political relationship between Sudan and Egypt in the 1950s. It examines how the author represents a number of marginalized characters in a way that enables them to express their opinions about Sudan's imminent independence. The voices of these characters vibrantly resonate throughout the novel in a way that draws attention to the continuing usefulness of Fredric Jameson's theory. Jameson's work provides a key to contextualizing and unpacking Aboulela's novel. This chapter highlights the author's depiction of Sudanese women's role in building the nation. In *Lyrics Alley*, women's bodies are portrayed as the battlefield of the postcolonial cultural struggle between new capitalist forces and old traditional ones.

Chapter One

History of the Feminist Movement in Egypt

“Feminism is not autonomous,
but bound to the signifying
network of the national
context which produces it.”⁹⁶

The liberation of women and women`s education in Egypt in the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have become issues that have been much discussed. Thomas Philipp, a Middle Eastern historian, states that the issue of women`s emancipation in Egypt has been “an essential one, directly touching the life of everyone.”⁹⁷ Nationalism provoked women`s emancipation, which has become an important social demand in Arab societies and has been taken as a serious concern more than ever before. Kumari Jayawardena in her book *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* explains “there was a flowering of books, novels, journals and articles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, written both by women and men and dealing with issues concerning women`s role in society ... Egyptian women were told of innovations and legislative reforms in Turkey; such journals also informed their

⁹⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 376-391 (380).

⁹⁷ Thomas Philipp, “Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. L. Beck and N. Kiddie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 277-294 (278).

readers about the suffragist and feminist struggles in Europe.”⁹⁸ However, Egyptian feminism is viewed by its reactionaries as a construct of the Western world imposed upon the Middle East by imperialism and capitalist forces.

Margot Badran insists that the Egyptian feminist movement was first begun in the 1890s by native Egyptian women, not by Egyptian men or foreigners.⁹⁹ She argues that early Egyptian women wrote on women’s issues and feminist demands, but their works were never published and their voice never heard in public. Badran maintains that “historians have all missed women’s hidden feminism, crediting Qasim Amin with founding feminism in Egypt.”¹⁰⁰ However, Juan Cole and Thomas Philipp believe that the feminist movement in Egypt started in the early nineteenth century, and most works on women’s liberation were written by Egyptian men or foreign women.¹⁰¹ It is true that in the nineteenth century some Arab Renaissance intellectuals and national reformists—such as Rifa`a Al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905), Saad Zaghlul (1859-1927), Qasim Amin (1863-1908), Ahmad Lutfi Al-Sayyid (1872-1963), and many others who were mostly French-educated—were much concerned with women’s inferior position, but they advocated that women should still be expected to remain under male rule.

Mohammad Ali (1805-1848) encouraged the modernization of Egypt’s educational, cultural and administrative structures. Within the new social

⁹⁸ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 17.

⁹⁹ Margot Badran, “Independent Women: A century of Feminism in Egypt.” Paper presented at the eleventh annual symposium *Women and Arab Society: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, Georgetown University, Washington D.C. 10-11 April 1986.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰¹ See Juan Cole, “Feminism, Class and Islam in Turn-of-The-Century Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 13, No.4 (1981): 387-407

https://www.jstor.org/stable/162906?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

and Thomas Philipp, “Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. L. Beck and N. Kiddie, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 277-294.

structure, two classes emerged: the upper class of landlords who benefited from colonial British and Western industrial capitalism in Egypt; and the bourgeoisie, who had split into two categories. On the one hand, there were merchants, old shopkeepers and ulama (religious leaders) who opposed European culture, which they considered a threat to the native culture. On the other hand, there was a new class of Westernized professionals who saw a better outlook for Egyptian society in European systems. The bourgeoisie of both categories were more nationalistic, and among them the reformists and heroes of the Egyptian revolution were to be born.¹⁰²

In her book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Nawal El Saadawi devotes a whole chapter to discussing the contributions of Arab pioneers in women`s liberation. She states that:

Gamal El Dine El Afghani was one of the notable pioneers and leaders of this awakening. Together with a group of his disciples, he played a prominent role in propagating progressive ideas on many important issues. One of his disciples, Ahmed Fares El Shidyak, published a book called *One Leg Crossed Over the Other* in 1855. This is considered one of the first books written in support of women`s emancipation. Another leading thinker was Rifa`a Rafi`I El Tahtawi who insisted on the need to educate women and liberate them from the numerous injustices to which they were exposed. His two books, *A Guide to the Education of Girls and Boys* published in 1872 and *A Summary Framework on Paris*

¹⁰² Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2004): 521-536 (530-531)
http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993823?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed Nov. 10, 2016]

published in 1902, are considered milestones as far as the cause of women is concerned.¹⁰³

El Saadawi explains that these pioneers called widely for a popular Arab movement to resist imperialism and all the limitations imposed upon their freedom and independence. Similarly, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley in her article, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" contends that, "Arab feminism was not imported from the West. It was an inevitable result of the changes that took place in the area, which encompassed all aspects of life. Arab feminism was born out of the struggle between the dying, traditional, religious, feudal Ottoman way of life and the rising, modern, secular, capitalist European ways of life."¹⁰⁴ So, these nationalist reformists realized that women`s liberation was one of the crucial fronts in their battle against foreign colonialism, internal reactionary forces and backwardness.

The feminist concerns of some of the nationalist or religious reformists, who were outspoken in the late nineteenth century, "became more and more difficult to ignore the process of change and not to react to them in some way."¹⁰⁵ Thus, early Egyptian feminism was closely linked to Egyptian nationalism. Debbie Gerner-Adams remarks that, "[B]oth—the feminist movement and the nationalist movement—were heavily influenced by increased contact with European nations and an ensuing awareness of the political and economic reforms which were changing the face of European society."¹⁰⁶ Those who advocated women`s emancipation—such as El Tahtawi,

¹⁰³ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" 529.

¹⁰⁵ Leila Ahmed, "Feminism and Feminist Movement in the Middle East; A Preliminary Exploration; Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, People`s Democratic Republic of Yemen," *Women`s Studies International Forum* 5, No.2 (1982): 153-168 (153).

¹⁰⁶ Debbie Gerner-Adams, "The Changing Status of Islamic Women in the Arab World," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1979): 324-353 (329).

and Abduh—did not identify themselves as feminists, but as reformists or pioneers of nationalism and modernization.

The first Egyptian nationalist who identified himself as a feminist was Qasim Amin.¹⁰⁷ The ideas of women's liberation which represent the dominant modern ideology of the time were expressed in Amin's works. His first book, *The Liberation of Women* (Tahrir El Mara'a), published in 1899, caused serious debates on the position and roles of women among Egyptian nationalists and intellectuals, since it was considered a Western-influenced ideology. So, pro-woman writers such as Amin or the feminist movement itself have been accused of "Westernization", or being an upper-class fashion or un-Islamic. In this sense, David Gordon suggests that, "[T]he reform of the status of women in Islam has resulted from factors external to Islam (imitation of the West, industrialization, the impact of Western-type universities, and the like) as well as from internal factors (the reformism of men like 'Abduh and others.')"¹⁰⁸ So, Western colonial power and the encounter with Europe had an unavoidable impact on intellectual life and movements in the Arab world.

Nawal El Saadawi observes that the debate about women's liberation in the Arab world first attracted public concern through the works of distinguished Arab male writers.¹⁰⁹ Arab intellectuals had either traveled in European countries or studied abroad for long periods; for example, Mohammad Ali Pasha had sent many students on an educational mission to study in France, among them Rifa'a Al Tahtawi and Amin. They were impressed by Western technical progress and attributed it to secularism. These intellectuals were struck by the social status of European woman and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 329.

¹⁰⁸ David Gordon, *Women of Algeria: An Essay on Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 12.

¹⁰⁹ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 253-255.

concerned to counter the generally negative image of Arab woman as reflected in Western discourse. To some extent, they were embarrassed by the degrading position of Arab women, since Amin argued that the degree of civilization of any nation is measured by the status of its women.¹¹⁰ Qasim Amin, Saad Zaghloul, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, Rashid Rida and many others wrote on Arab women`s education and frequently compared it with that of Western women.

The male writers and reformists were primarily concerned with reforming their country. They were dazzled by Western women`s active participation in revolutionary movements and believed that progress in Egypt would be achieved by women`s liberation. Thus, the inferior status of Egyptian women at the time was a sign of the lack of justice and tyranny of the totalitarian government of Khedive Ismail, who was involved in the barbaric exploitation of Egyptian people, including women.¹¹¹ Reformists considered women`s issues such as veiling, seclusion, lack of education and illiteracy to be among the main problems they should tackle for a revolutionary society. Women`s liberation became an essential and integral part of the nationalists` struggle. Leila Ahmed explains the pro-women movement in the late nineteenth century:

In Egypt as in Turkey the advocates of feminist notions, those who most strongly urged upon their society the importance of educating women and of raising their status, were, initially, men. As in Turkey these ideas grew not out of a new concern for women per se or a new pressing sense of the wrong done women, but out of conviction that educating

¹¹⁰ Qasim Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a* (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2011), 29.

¹¹¹ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 255.

women and raising their status was part, and perhaps even the chief part, of a necessary process of regeneration and transformation that society must undergo for the sake of progress and the advancement of the nation (men) ... In perceiving the status of women as perhaps the single most important aspect of their society in need of reform, Middle Eastern thinkers were therefore, to some extent, accepting and endorsing the diagnosis of their societies arrived at by Western men.¹¹²

As Ahmed points out, the reformists and nationalists of the time were exclusively male and their eventual goal was to establish a modern democratic country. In this sense, pro-women theories and thinking were linked tightly to the interests of the nationalists.

Nationalists such as Amin believed that the backwardness of their societies resulted from the corruption of religion and the power structure. They started to re-establish society by reforming Islam in ways compatible with modern civilization. They reinterpreted the Holy texts of the Qur`an and condemned the regressive practices of male domination over women which had been instituted in the name of Islam. For Amin, equal rights, social justice and women`s emancipation were already stated in the Qur`an and had been established by Prophet Mohammad. So, according to Amin, women only had to recover the rights and status given to them by the Prophet and to resist the un-Islamic traditions prevailing in their society.¹¹³

Amin found that in the pre-Islamic era, women were sold and bought like slaves under the patriarchy. Women had no rights such as inheritance rights and were subject to death for losing their virginity, while men were free

¹¹² Ahmed, "Feminism and Feminist Movement,"158.

¹¹³ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 76.

to have unlimited wives and concubines. He maintained that the Prophet recovered human dignity and social justice for women. Amin argued that Islamic law (Shari`a) gave women inheritance rights, allowed men to have four wives under certain conditions, abolished concubinage and prohibited biases against women.¹¹⁴ El Saadawi emphasizes that Amin`s two pro-women books, *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman*, became central texts dealing with the questions of women`s emancipation.¹¹⁵ As one of the most prominent outspoken nationalists, Amin advocated women`s education and called for the abolition of polygamy, the veil and seclusion as un-Islamic practices and customs. He supported marriage based on love, since the cooperation between a married couple allow them to educate and raise their children to improve society. To achieve this task, Amin argued, the partners of men and women needed to be properly educated and free to participate in social activities.¹¹⁶

In his argument for emancipating women, Amin reinterpreted the Qur`an and demanded the practice of what he considered the authentic Islamic law to eliminate the corrupt and regressive customs which had deprived women of their rights and freedom. For example, the Holy Qur`an states that:

(فانكحوا ما طاب لكم من النساء مثنى وثلاث ورباع فإن خفتن ألا تعدلوا فواحدة¹¹⁷)

This verse indicates that “ ‘...Marry of the women that please you; two, three, or four; but if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly; then only

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 78.

¹¹⁵ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 245.

¹¹⁶ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 31.

¹¹⁷ The Holy Qur`an, *Al Nissa*, Sura 4, Verse 3.

one...”¹¹⁸ Traditionally, this verse had been misinterpreted as an unconditional permitting of polygamy, but Amin reinterpreted it as a restriction of marriage to one woman only (monogamy), since no man can treat his wives equally.¹¹⁹ He also discussed the issue of veiling and argued that its use increased men`s sexual desire instead of decreasing it, the veil hindered women from participating in different kinds of works, and a woman`s behavior ,not the veil, defines her chastity.¹²⁰

Amin maintained that this newly free Muslim women could build a modern society. The modern society, he imagined, was based on science and technology and was constructed as in Western liberal ideology to enhance socioeconomic life. Amin envisaged the new Egyptian woman to be modeled after the Western woman in her education and free public participation.¹²¹ According to him, scientific thinking helped to get rid of discrimination based on sex and class, and technology was used to free women from being confined to manual labor. Golley maintains that the “educated, while still admiring European culture and life styles, felt unhappy with the aggressive and colonial behavior of Britain. They had to show their nationalistic and patriotic feelings in times of threat, thus in some cases supporting the call to adhere to an Islamic identity.”¹²² In his first book, Amin did not deny the role of Islam, despite his tendency toward Western modernization to free women. He praised the precursory role of Islam as the first doctrine providing rights and equality to women and men. Amin defended Islam against the accusations

¹¹⁸ Abu Ammenah Bilal Philips and Jamila Jones, *Polygamy in Islam* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 13.

¹¹⁹ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 82.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 43.

¹²¹ Ibid, 70.

¹²² Golley, “Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?” 531.

prevailing in Western discourses and corrected the misunderstanding of the term “Islamic law”; he believed that:

سبق الشرع الاسلامي كل شريعة سواه في تقرير مساواة المرأة للرجل: فأعلن حريتها واستقلالها يوم كانت في حضيض الانحطاط عند جميع الامم، وخولها كل حقوق الانسان، واعتبر لها كفاءة شرعية لاتنقص عن كفاءة الرجل في جميع الأحوال المدنية من بيع وشراء وهبة ووصية من غير أن يتوقف تصرفها علو إذن من ابيها او زوجها، وهذه المزايا لم تصل الى اكتسابها حتى الان بعض النساء الغربيات كلها تشهد على ان من اصول الشريعة السمحاء احترام المرأة والتسوية بينها وبين الرجل.¹²³

[Islamic law preceded all the other laws in allowing the equality of women with men. It announced her freedom and independence in the days of deprivation in other countries. It granted her human rights and legal equality which were not lower than men`s in every situation. In Islam, buying and selling was allowed to women without the consent of their fathers or husbands.]¹²⁴

According to Amin, Western women do not necessarily have these options even today. All these proved the high status of Islamic law in respect to women and equality between the sexes. He emphasized that Muslim women had been given rights in Islam which would make them supreme among women on Earth.

Amin`s call for reforming religion and the state had been influenced by the reformists Gamal El Dine El Afghani and his disciple Mohammad Abduh. Thus, in his first book, Amin based himself strictly on the teachings of Islam. Like El Afghani and Abduh, he maintained that Islam is a religion compatible with modernity, science and technology.¹²⁵ Moreover, he insisted that women`s emancipation can occur within the Islamic framework, as he

¹²³ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 13.

¹²⁴ My own translation as there is no existing English translation of Qasim Amin.

¹²⁵ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 66.

attempted not to provoke the antagonism of religious authorities and thinkers of El Azhar University.

However, Amin`s call for women`s liberation led to much controversy among Egyptian intellectuals and nationalists. He became the target of violent accusations and was attacked by religious leaders and politicians of the time.¹²⁶ Then, in his second book, *The New Woman (El Mara`a El Jadida)*, published in 1900, Amin openly abandoned the Islamic texts for the liberation of women and based his argument on liberal European theory. Instead of the Qur`an, he used the progressive ideas of European thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Charles Robert Darwin and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and admired Western secular liberal thought.¹²⁷ Amin argued that Western civilizations were morally and materially superior because their social and political systems were based on science rather than religion. Amin wrote:

"المرأة الجديدة هي ثمرة من ثمرات التمدن الحديث بدأ ظهورها في الغرب على أثر الاكتشافات العلمية التي خلصت العقل الانساني من سلطة الاوهام والظنون والخرافات، وسلّمته قيادة نفسه، ورسمت له الطريق التي يجب أن يسلكها"¹²⁸

[The new woman is one of the fruits of modern civilization. She first appeared in the West as the result of scientific discoveries which released the human mind from the bondage of delusive fancy, suspicion and superstitions, and delivered it to self-guidance and specified the path to follow.]¹²⁹

He called for adopting Western science and technology to achieve a revolutionary society and eliminate the bondage of customs and superstition.

¹²⁶ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 255.

¹²⁷ Qasim Amin, *El Mara`a El Jadida* (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2011), 64-83.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

¹²⁹ My own translation as there is no existing English translation of Qasim Amin.

In *The New Woman*, Amin used Darwin's theory to interpret women's inferior mental and physical ability to men's. He believed that women could not participate in work that required wide intelligence, such as legislation and political leadership.¹³⁰ Amin further explained that women were superior to men in their possession of emotion and paradoxically maintained that they were not less intelligent than men, but had different functions in society.¹³¹

Albert Hourani comments on this kind of liberal thought:

There is thus an equality of rights, but there is an inequality of fact, for men are stronger, more intelligent, have greater aptitude for learning and most types of action. So they have predominance over women but, like that of the ruler over the state, this power should be expressed not despotically but by consultation.¹³²

Hourani observes that nationalists' theory—such as Amin's theory—in the early twentieth century in Egypt failed to bring real equality of rights for women. It is true that Amin's theory of women's liberation was still limited within conventional gender roles and women were expected to be controlled by patriarchal regulations. Amin restricted women's education to the elementary level, so women would be able to keep house and raise children properly.¹³³ Thus, Amin's notion of "the new woman" was exclusive to the bourgeois class. In this case, the struggle of peasant and working-class women was ignored in Amin's theory of liberation. Lower-class women were excluded from the discussion of women's emancipation.

While Amin's works receive much appreciation by El Saadawi as the

¹³⁰ Qasim Amin, *El Mara`a El Jadida*, 47.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 60.

¹³² Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in The Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 238-239.

¹³³ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 32.

most important books dealing with women`s emancipation, Leila Ahmed criticizes Amin for representing Egypt as inferior to Europe. Ahmed points out:

In Amin`s work only the British administration and European civilization receive lavish praise. Among those singled out as targets of his abuse were the `ulama`. Amin characterizes them as grossly ignorant, greedy, and lazy. He details the bleakness of their intellectual horizons and their deficiencies of character in unequivocal terms ... Amin`s book thus represents the rearticulation in native voice of the colonial thesis of the inferiority of the native and Muslim and the superiority of the European.¹³⁴

Ahmed blames Amin for playing the role of native informant in the discourse of Orientalism. She denounces Amin`s attempt to use the issue of women and the call for unveiling to conduct his assault on society, especially on Muslim scholars, the `ulama.`

The question might be raised here as to whether Amin`s feminist perspective intended a real emancipation of women or whether he planned to use the cause of women to establish a modern capitalist patriarchy. Joan Kelly confirms that through the various revolutions of history, nationalists believed that women`s situation needed to be improved for the sake of men and society. Kelly demonstrates how the European Renaissance had been assessed from the vantage point of men:

For a period that rejected the hierarchy of social class and the hierarchy of religious values in its restoration of a classical, secular culture, there was also, they claim, no question of woman's rights, or female

¹³⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 156,162.

emancipation, simply because the thing itself was a matter of course. Now while it is true that a couple of dozen women can be assimilated to the humanistic standard of culture which the Renaissance imposed upon itself, what is remarkable is that only a couple of dozen women can. To pressure this problem is to become aware of the fact that there was no "Renaissance" for women. There was, on the contrary, a marked restriction of the scope and powers of women.¹³⁵

In her discussion on whether women had a Renaissance or not, Kelly finds that the Renaissance was a male product and expressed new subordination, since there were now new constraints placed upon women`s social and personal lives for the interests of men.

Similarly, Jayawardena argues that capitalism changed the pattern of women`s exploitation, from that of mere sex object to be used for the sake of the labor force and industrial expansion. She describes the capitalists` notion of women`s liberation as follows:

While it is true that women had toiled in the fields and plantations and domestic industries in the pre-capitalist phase, it was with the development of capitalism in a colonial or semi-colonial context, that they were to become available as potentially the largest and cheapest reserve army of labor. Women's labor was therefore very important to local and foreign capitalists; traditions and practices which restricted women's mobility or enforced their seclusion were thus detrimental to capitalism in its search for cheap "free" labor.¹³⁶

Jayawardena explains that women`s emancipation in the colonial context was

¹³⁵ Joan Kelly, *Women, History, Theory* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1984), 3.

¹³⁶ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 8.

not for the sake of women but in the interest of capitalist patriarchy. She adds, "The development of capitalism in Asia brought the participation of women in the labor force, and women's emancipation struggle were geared towards further acceptance of such participation in all major sector of economy."¹³⁷ In this regard, Egypt is no exception to the Asian countries. To achieve their revolution, men needed women`s participation in labor outside and inside the home. Since upper-middle-class women remained secluded, they could not be utilized as cheap laborers. Thus, male capitalists developed the concept of "civilized" housewives and trained industrial workers to legitimize their interests.

In this context, Amin rejected the veil because it hindered women`s participation in outdoor activities and work.¹³⁸ He believed that women`s free and independent movement would enable them to contribute to the development of society. In their discussion of the veil, as Leila Ahmed suggests, Amin and his opponents prescribed either Western or indigenous male dominance over women. She states that:

Tal`at Herb`s nationalist response to Amin, in contrast, defended and upheld Islamic practices, putting forward a view of the role and duties of women in society quite as patriarchal as Amin`s; but where Amin wanted to adopt a Western-style male dominance, describing his recommendation as a call for women`s liberation ... Their prescriptions for women differed literally in the matter of garb: Herb`s women must veil, and Amin`s unveil. The argument between Herb and Amin centered not on feminism versus antifeminism but on Western versus indigenous

¹³⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹³⁸ Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 41.

ways. For neither side was male dominance ever in question.¹³⁹

Ahmed sums up that Amin's argument did not adhere to real feminism and utilized women's issues to achieve a new modern patriarchal dominance.

Interestingly, Amin's revolutionary ideas about the veil and culture may be regarded as the precursor of the debate that has recurred in a number of Muslim and Arab countries. For example, the Turkish nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal, later Ataturk, in his modern reforms abandoned Islamic law and his loyal attitude toward Islam, and advocated a secular state in Turkey. Ahmed adds that, "Ataturk, who introduced westernizing reforms, including laws affecting women, repeatedly denounced the veil in terms that, like Amin's, reproduced the Western narrative and show that his concern was with how custom reflected on Turkish men, allowing them to appear 'uncivilized' and objects of 'ridicule.'"¹⁴⁰ So, Ahmed remarks that Amin's works mark the entry of the colonial narrative of women and Islam in which the veil and women's treatment represent the inferiority of Muslim Arabs.

However, Ahmed points out that "Western economic penetration of the Middle East and the exposure of Middle Eastern societies to Western political thought and ideas, though undoubtedly having some negative consequences for women, nonetheless did lead to the dismantling of constructive social institutions and the opening up of new opportunities for women."¹⁴¹ It is true that in the first years of the twentieth century, reforms introduced by upper-middle-class political leaders, who had accepted emulating Western technological and political accomplishments, led to legal reforms benefiting women. For example, Salama Musa, who was a distinguished journalist of the

¹³⁹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 163.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 168.

period, noted two events that could be considered landmarks in women's progress in Egypt. Musa wrote, "we witnessed Miss Nabawiyya Musa's success as the first young woman who obtained her secondary-school certificate, though Dunlop had placed many obstacles in her way."¹⁴² The second event Musa reported was that "for the first time, Egypt saw a woman contributing to newspapers."¹⁴³ This was Malak Hifni Nasif, who wrote feminist articles and published them in the newspaper of the liberal secular Umma party, *Al-jarida*. Nasif published her works under the pseudonym Bahithat al-Badiyya (Seeker in the desert).¹⁴⁴

In Egypt, upper-middle-class literate women such as Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) and Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918) had been greatly influenced by Amin's works, which raised their feminist consciousness. Sha'rawi and Nasif were among the first women who started to demand their right of education, abolition of polygamy and seclusion, changes in the law of marriage and divorce, and unveiling. Amin's two books motivated women to resist oppression practiced in the name of Islam and "discovered that the veil and sex segregation were not required by Islam but were simply a function of patriarchal control. They also understood that they as women had rights with Islam which patriarchy withheld from them."¹⁴⁵ So, the feminist consciousness of Muslim women in Egypt and Middle East emerged with the rise of nationalism and exposure to Western thought.

¹⁴² Douglas Dunlop was a British adviser to the Ministry of Education and refused to let Miss Nabawiyya Musa attend the examination because she was a woman. Miss Musa stood her ground, took the examination and passed in 1908. See Salama Musa, *The Education of Salama Musa*, trans. L.O. Schuman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), 50.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 50.

¹⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 171.

¹⁴⁵ Huda Sha'rawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of An Egyptian Feminist*, trans. and introd. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986), 7.

However, Badran argues that feminism began with Egyptian women. She emphasizes that “it has been indigenous” and “there has been a broader class solidarity among women feminists than is commonly acknowledged.”¹⁴⁶ She observes that early feminism lacks a body of texts written by women. Women’s writings of feminist essays, letters, memoirs, etc. have never been published and remain unknown according to Badran.

The first woman feminist to come to public attention was Huda Sha`rawi, who participated in the nationalist demonstrations against British domination in 1918-1919. Sha`rawi was the pre-eminent feminist leader in the Egyptian women’s movement during the 1920s and 1930s. Sha`rawi and other upper-class women—such as Saiza Nabarawi and Nabawiyya Musa—founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923, and were involved in girls’ education at all levels. The Union demanded the improvement of girls’ educational opportunities, women’s jobs, the abolishment of polygamy, and raising the minimum age of marriage to sixteen years for girls.¹⁴⁷

In contrast to Nasif, Sha`rawi believed that veiling and female seclusion were major obstacles to women’s public activities. It was upon their return from a trip to participate in the International Women’s Alliance in Rome in 1923 that Sha`rawi and Nabarawi took off their veils as a symbolic act of emancipation. Leila Ahmed contends that:

Sha`rawi’s valorization of the European—perhaps over the native—is suggested by the fact that in her public presentation of herself it is the influence of the West that she chose to bring into the foreground as critical at a formative period in her life. She presents her reading of

¹⁴⁶ Badran, “Independent Women,” 1.

¹⁴⁷ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 176.

French books (probably novels) and her friendships with French or French-educated young women as sources of intellectual nurturance at an important time—when she extricated herself from a marriage into which she had been forced, and devoted herself to music, books, and friends and to “creating” herself. Similarly, she is careful to acknowledge her debt to Eugenie Le Brun’s discussion of the veil and the position of women as having guided her ideas.¹⁴⁸

So, it was the influence of Western thought that Sha`rawi emphasized in her public act of unveiling and, as Ahmed argues, this was a source of Sha`rawi’s feminism. Sha`rawi’s French friend and mentor Eugenie Le Brun, who married Rushdi Pasha, an upper-class Egyptian, conveyed to her the common Western belief that the veil stood in the way of Egyptian women’s liberation.¹⁴⁹

While calling for political and social equality for women, Sha`rawi insisted on the moral code set up by the principles of Islamic law. In Cairo in 1944, Sha`rawi made a strong case advocating women’s political rights at the Arab Feminist Conference hosted by the EFU, saying, “the woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights, rights granted to her by the Sharia and dictated to her by the demands of the present.”¹⁵⁰ Despite her aspiration to emulate Western ways in women’s emancipation, Sha`rawi maintained the balance between feminist demands and Islamic values because of her fear of losing public support.

As a matter of fact, Sha`rawi’s feminism was politically nationalistic; encouraged by male Egyptian nationalists, she organized street

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 178.

¹⁴⁹ Sha`rawi, *Harem Years*, 80.

¹⁵⁰ Margot Badran & miriam cooke, eds. *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 338.

demonstrations against British colonization and demanded political emancipation from British control. In 1919, Sha`rawi was elected by the Wafdist Women`s Committee to be its president; Sha`rawi and upper-class women—mostly wives of the leaders and founders of Wafd political party—marched through the streets and presented resolutions to the British authorities.¹⁵¹ However, in her feminist struggle, Sha`rawi lacked class awareness and a true understanding of the predicament of poor people. Her social activities were limited to representing the political needs of the liberal intellectuals of her class, and ignored the needs of the lower class, which was economically exploited. Sha`rawi`s major concern was to adopt Western political institutions and their secularist understanding of the state.¹⁵²

While Sha`rawi espoused a Western-looking feminism, Nasif`s articulation of feminism did not affiliate itself with Westernization. El Saadawi considers Nasif as a contemporary of Qasim Amin, but her writings were a development of El Tahtawi`s ideas, which she supported as reformist, whereas Amin considered his ideas as being a call for women`s liberation.¹⁵³ In her writings, Nasif reflected the upper-class feminist tradition. She primarily focused on increasing and improving opportunities for girls` education. Like Amin, Nasif`s interest was limited to upper-middle-class women, while the majority were poor and lower-class women. Her demands for education, the abolition of polygamy, marriage and divorce were influenced by Amin.¹⁵⁴ But unlike Amin and Sha`rawi, Nasif opposed unveiling and criticized some issues suggested by Amin and other male writers concerning women`s liberation. Ahmed comments on Nasif`s thought as “the precision of her [Nasif`s] understanding

¹⁵¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 174.

¹⁵² Ibid, 178.

¹⁵³ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 256.

¹⁵⁴ Philipp, “Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt,” 283.

of the new varieties of male domination being enacted in and through the contemporary male discourse of the veil.”¹⁵⁵ As a matter of fact, Nasif in her book, *Nissa`yat* (Feminism) viewed the veil as an oriental fashion and rejected the idea that Eastern women needed to look like Western women in order to show modernization. Nasif argued that since Muslim women had been wearing the veil for centuries, it was natural for them to keep their veil. She believed that unveiling would cause more harm to women and society.¹⁵⁶ Nasif wrote politely in order not to provoke men. From her own feminist perspective, Nasif contributed to the debate about veiling and articulated her opinion that:

”ورأيي أن الوقت لم يأن لرفع الحجاب؛ فعلموا المرأة تعليما وربوها تربية صحيحة وهذبوا
النشئ وأصلحوا أخلاقكم بحيث يصير مجموع الأمة مهذباً ثم اتركوا لها شأنها تختار ما يوافق
مصلحتها ومصحة الأمة”¹⁵⁷

[The time had not yet matured for lifting the veil. Men should teach women real knowledge, and give them the correct education, to improve the young generation and their morality so that the whole country could proceed toward improvement.]¹⁵⁸

Nasif believed that once woman was educated, men should leave it to herself to choose what was agreeable for their benefit as well as for the country.

Nasif attempted in her writings to persuade people to adopt a positive stance toward girls` schools and send their daughters to school to raise their consciousness, since only poor families used to send their daughters to school in the period.¹⁵⁹ She was more concerned with women`s health problems

¹⁵⁵ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 179.

¹⁵⁶ Malak Hifni Nasif, *Nissa`yat* (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2014), 18.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 19-20.

¹⁵⁸ My own translation as there is no existing English translation of Malak Hifni Nasif.

¹⁵⁹ Nasif, *Nissa`yat*, 24.

caused by men`s maltreatment than with their appearance as being civilized or modern. Nasif resented polygamy as humiliating and unhealthy, not only for women, but also for children and eventually society. She believed it caused socioeconomic and psychological problems, and shattered the sense of family, since co-wives compete with each other for the husband, and a man could often not support two wives and their children.¹⁶⁰ She also called for the right to divorce rather than remain a prisoner in an unsuccessful marriages. In regard to marriage, Nasif advocated marriage based on love between the couple, as did Amin.

However, Nasif`s argument, like Amin`s, reflected her naïve and romantic view of poor and working-class women. She viewed their lives as more independent and healthier than those of upper-middle-class women in the urban cities.¹⁶¹ Class distinction was taken for granted in Nasif`s argument despite her demands for social change. In addition, her demands were limited within an Islamic and traditional frameworks and did not advocate social or political revolutionary changes for women. Nasif articulated that political and public matters were better left for men, while women were responsible for social roles as wives and mothers. She not only avoided discussing the existing male power structure, but also accepted avowedly the traditional gender roles as defined by the patriarchy.¹⁶²

Moreover, Nasif disagreed with Amin`s suggestion that women should mix with men and participate in public social activities. She believed that such mixing would cause the decay of women`s morality and that of society, and called on upper-class women not to imitate Western women. Nasif suggested

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 31.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁶² Ibid, 82.

that lower class women who took off their veils in order to work on farms and in factories with men must lose their manners and fall into shame, while the secluded environments of the middle class were the best for women to preserve their decency and chastity.¹⁶³ Despite the common idea in her society making women completely responsible for morality, Nasif reversed this convention. She argued that if men deviated from Islamic doctrine and mistreated women, then women would be corrupted.¹⁶⁴

Both Amin and Nasif emphasized that women's roles at home as wives and mothers were more important than public participation in social activities or work. However, Nasif adopted a more restrictive and conservative stance on the liberation of women than Amin did, since she viewed women's labor outside the home as evil. Thus, Nasif's feminist perspective on women's emancipation exhibited a complementary attitude and reflected an acceptance of Islamic patriarchal law. Nasif neither insisted on women's participation in the political sphere nor advocated women's emancipation beyond the limits set by Islam. Ruth Woodsmall indicates that women feminists' ideological position of the time can be assessed as a diplomatic strategy; she believes that "this policy of maintaining a careful balance between Islamic teaching and social reform, which is followed by Madam Sha'rawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union is dictated more by political expediency than by religious conservatism."¹⁶⁵ So, Woodsmall, finds that this complementary attitude taken by women feminists was for political reasons and did not reflect genuine conservative beliefs.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 17.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 62.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Woodsmall, *The Role of Women: A Study of the Role of Women, Their Activities and Organizations in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Syria* (London & New York: The International Federation of Business and Professional Women, 1956), 404.

In this regard, Leila Ahmed suggests that women`s conservative attitude was not chosen voluntarily by them but rather imposed on them by male nationalism. She points out that the efforts made by the early feminists to emulate Western modernization as well as preserve the Arab-Islamic identity were complex and difficult. Ahmed explains the link between nationalism and feminism:

However this blend of conservatism, decorousness, of zeal in wishing to be seen to be observing the proprieties, even to be emphasizing them, and to be seen to be absolutely and irreproachably “correct” in one’s position with respect to Islam/Arabness is a fundamental trait not only of Sha`rawi’s feminism but of feminism and feminists in the Arab world generally. And far from being a matter simply of diplomacy, of astute women practising “the art of the possible.” It is rather, I would argue, a position imposed upon feminism and feminists by the internal needs of the Islamic civilization ...¹⁶⁶

In Ahmed`s view, to resist imperialism and patriarchal colonial discourses—which attacked Islam and Arab culture for degrading women to legitimize Western domination—nationalism in the twentieth century utilized feminism as a tool to reinforce the fundamental traits of a culture which respected women`s rights but within patriarchal Islamic law.

Thus, to some extent, both Sha`rawi`s and Nasif`s activities and struggle for women`s rights remained within the male domain and lacked autonomy. The male nationalists recruited women to support their nationalistic struggle; once their problems were overcome, women were expected to return to their

¹⁶⁶ Ahmed, “Feminism and Feminist Movement,” 161.

conventional female roles as housewives. Michelle Perrot discusses the recruitment of women's social power and at the same time the lack of autonomy. Perrot gives an example of this in the bourgeois ladies of northern France who were dismissed from their responsibilities in 1860 after they had actively participated in the administration of factories:

Bourgeois ladies—women of the world—were increasingly called upon to leave their firesides and devote themselves to charity or philanthropy, as did Bonnie Smith's northern ladies. But this also marked the limits of their influence. Encouraged when they were helping to manage society, their “good works” were criticized and even attacked by the northern factory-owners who, faced with the violence of the labor movement, opted for the secular republican administration deemed more appropriate to the circumstances, and labelled their own wives and mothers reactionary.¹⁶⁷

In the case of Egypt, after Independence, the female successors of Sha`rawi and Nasif were persecuted by male nationalists. When women's voices became loud and they organized social activities in defense of their interests, they were violently attacked and opposed by men.

For example, Doria Shafik (1908-1976), who succeeded Sha`rawi and continued the feminist movement in Egypt during the 1940s-1950s, was placed under house arrest by Jamal Abdel Nasser's regime—the Egyptian President 1956-1970—and her feminist journal and group were shut down in 1957. Shafik resisted both foreign imperialism and domestic dictatorship. Unlike Sha`rawi and Nasif, Shafik's political approach was more militant and

¹⁶⁷ Michelle Perrot, “Women, Power and History: The Case of Nineteenth-Century France,” in *Women, State and Revolution*, ed. Sian Reynolds, (Massachusetts: Massachusetts University Press, 1987), 57.

autonomous. In 1945, Shafik established her monthly feminist journal *Bint al-Nile* (Daughter of the Nile), which continued until 1957. She also formed a political party called Bint al-Nile which organized over two hundred members and advocated the equality of women at all levels.¹⁶⁸

In 1952, the feminist members of the party led by Shafik carried out several hunger strikes, demanding women's political rights. Shafik urged the participation of women in national policy decision-making and the election of women representatives in Parliament. Her demands were rejected and she organized demonstrations that led to the seizure of Parliament and the Egyptian National Bank by women. Shafik's militant action provoked Islamic conservative authorities such as the Muslim Brethren and Azhar Ulama Front and they accused her of challenging Islamic beliefs. As a result of her protest against Nasser's military dictatorship, Shafik was arrested and never allowed to participate in public life.¹⁶⁹ Shafik was educated in Paris and sponsored by Sha`rawi, who was a mentor to a number of women feminists and activists, notably Amina al-Said.

Amina al-Said (1914-1995) was selected by Sha`rawi for a scholarship to study at Cairo University; she became Sha`rawi's assistant and was active in journalism. al-Said was an outspoken Egyptian feminist who opposed the corruption of morality and oppression of women in her society. Calling for the restoration of equal rights in politics, education, economics and social participation as established by the Prophet Mohammed, al-Said accused the religious institutions of being corrupt and oppressive of women. Like Sha`rawi, Nasif and Shafik, al-Said emphasized the need for the higher education of

¹⁶⁸ Cynthia Nelson, "The Voice of Shafik: Feminist Consciousness in Egypt from 1940 to 1960," *Feminist Issues* 6, no. 2 (1986): 15-31 (20).

¹⁶⁹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 203.

women to achieve national and individual progress and to achieve economic independence for women. In 1954, al-Said founded the first magazine for women in Egypt, called *Hawaa* (Eve).¹⁷⁰ Leila Ahmed affirms that, “Nassef’s premature death and the organizational and political success of Huda Sha`rawi and her Egyptian Feminist Union were perhaps both important factors in the emergence of the westernizing voice of feminism as the prevailing, uncontested voice of feminism in the Arab context in those early years.”¹⁷¹ It is true that Sha`rawi and her female successors promoted secular feminism and achieved, to some extent, sociopolitical changes, but there was a divergent voice in Egyptian feminism that affiliated itself to a different trajectory.

The dominant trajectory of feminism in Egypt at the time affiliated itself, albeit discreetly, with the Western secular tendency of society. This tendency of the upper, upper-middle, and middle-middle classes developed a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies. The alternative trajectory of feminism appeared to be wary of and even opposed to Westernization. This newly emerged voice sought for a way to assert female agency within a native popular Islamic discourse in terms of social, cultural and religious renovation.¹⁷² It is significant here to shed light on the political and social context which led to the formation of this trajectory in Egyptian feminism.

On the political level, the Wafd party lost its political effectiveness and its appeal to the masses. These decades witnessed the rise of popular

¹⁷⁰ Adel Darwish, “Obituary: Amina al-Said,” *Independent*, Tuesday 5 September 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-amina-al-said-1599537.html> [accessed June 11, 2016].

¹⁷¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 175.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 174.

nationalist parties with strong anti-Western tendencies, such as the Communist party, Young Egypt and the Muslim Brethren. The most important was the Muslim Brotherhood, which gained power and grew rapidly. This organization was established by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) in 1928 and was fiercely anti-British. Al-Banna led people back to a purified Islam which would impact on every aspect of personal and national life and free the nation from Western domination. The Brethren opposed the government and political parties, which they viewed as tools of Western domination and importations of Western ideology. Education was an important part of their program and they were active in establishing schools. The urban lower-middle class and rural working class were impressed by the Brethren's setting up mosques, schools and cottage industries and found hope in this organization to lead the country to a prosperous future.¹⁷³ However, a comforting sense and bonding connected the Brethren and the community; men were enormously attracted to join the Brethren but it was not the same for women. Those women who joined the Brethren were wives or relatives of the members.

Al-Banna emphasized the important role of women in Islamic reformation and established a branch for women: The Society of Muslim Sisters. He attempted to promote membership among women by establishing an Institute for Mothers in 1933. Despite the efforts made by the Brethren to recruit women, the Society of Muslim Sisters did not succeed in attracting the educated women, who saw the movement as a return to the harem.¹⁷⁴ Women who joined the branch wore a head covering; Muslim Brethren rejected Western women as a model for Muslim women and condemned the West for exploiting women in the service of capitalism. They viewed feminism

¹⁷³ Ibid, 191-193.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 194.

as only relevant to Western women and claimed that the pursuit of women's rights for Muslim women should come in other terms.¹⁷⁵

Mervat Hatem, in her article, "Gender and Islamism in the 1990s", observes that, "in response to the patriarchal tendencies of the Islamist cultural revolution, a small group of Islamist and other Muslim women have reclaimed Qur`anic and other textual interpretation for their own purposes. The result is a new space for women within the Islamic tradition."¹⁷⁶ The discussion of women's interpretation of Qur`anic verses was joined by Muslim women such as Zaynab al-Ghazali (1917-2005). Al-Ghazali started her political life working for Huda Sha`rawi. Finding herself in disagreement with Sha`rawi's Western secular tendencies, she resigned and established her own organization, the Muslim Women's Association. Hasan al-Banna attempted to persuade al-Ghazali to join the Muslim Brethren, but she rejected his offer, as she wished to maintain autonomy. Eventually, al-Ghazali made an oath of personal loyalty and allegiance to al-Banna.¹⁷⁷ In her memoirs, *Ayyam Min Hayati* (Days from my Life), she considers it expedient to document the suffering and torture that the Muslim Brethren experienced at the hands of Jamal Abdel Nasser.¹⁷⁸

In her struggle for women's rights, al-Ghazali believed that Muslim women did not need liberation in Islamic society but rather the political and especially the despotic interpretation of Islam needs to be reformed. She advocated the veil and remained covered, since she viewed the Islamic

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 195.

¹⁷⁶ Mervat Hatem, "Gender and Islamism in the 1990s," *Middle East Report*, no. 222 (Spring 2002): 44-47 (44). https://www.jstor.org/stable/1559270?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed Aug. 17, 2016].

¹⁷⁷ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 197.

¹⁷⁸ Zaynab al-Ghazali, *Ayyam Min Hayati* (Days from my Life) (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1986), 305.

covering as a form of liberation.¹⁷⁹ Hatem points out that al-Ghazali's "recent writings are more focused on debates within the Islamist community and how they reproduced the secularist argument regarding the subordinate status of women, which she considered to be a false issue."¹⁸⁰ Al-Ghazali was preoccupied with the challenge of the Western and secular feminists' debate on women and Islam. However, it was noted in 1952 that al-Ghazali had worked with Western secular feminist organizations when her Muslim Women's Association joined the Women's Committee for Popular Resistance in their independence struggles.¹⁸¹ However, al-Ghazali's primary emphasis was on how to educate Muslim women to build a healthy family and to restore the glory of Islamic society. She carried out the work of fighting for women's rights within the limits of Islam.

Al-Ghazali did not seek equality with men in the Western secular sense, but called for a gender equity that she believed was granted in Islam. She suggested an Islamic way of life for all Muslim women in marriage, raising children, education and the duty of reforming Islamic society.¹⁸² Al-Ghazali adopted a movement to free women from the shackles of a poorly understood Islam. She argued that Islam did not prohibit women from active participation in *Dawah* (the calling for the continual reforming of Islam) and public life as long as their activities did not impinge on their primary role as mothers and wives. In her view, the primary duty of Muslim women as trainers was to cultivate in their children the highest caliber of men and women to fill the ranks of the Islamic world.¹⁸³ Although the family and marital life must receive

¹⁷⁹ Uthman, "A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazali," 69.

¹⁸⁰ Hatem, "Gender and Islamism in the 1990s," 45.

¹⁸¹ Uthman, "A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazali," 71.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁸³ al-Ghazali, *Ayyam Min Hayati*, 236-37.

priority in her view, al-Ghazali believed that these responsibilities did not preclude public activism. Her advocacy of this conditional public work came in tandem with the views of most Muslim scholars and was in contrast with some feminists who portrayed women`s participation in political activities as being unconditional. In addition, mainstream feminists have objected to her views on the biological role of women, as they believe women should control their own bodies and their own reproductive functions instead of turning into breeding machines.¹⁸⁴

Al-Ghazali articulated that “[Muslim woman`s] first, holy, and most important mission is to be a mother and wife. She cannot ignore this priority. If she then finds she has free time, she may participate in public activities.”¹⁸⁵ In response, Leila Ahmed contends that al-Ghazali does not indicate whether she expects women to have the authority and autonomy to decide if they intend to accomplish their first holy mission, or whether she accepts the law of male-defined Islam that men have the authority over women to decide in such matters.¹⁸⁶ Ahmed believes that al-Ghazali did not challenge the idea of male control and authority and that the idealistic vagueness of her statements implies contradictory perspectives.

An interview conducted by miriam cooke seems to vanquish the “vagueness” of al-Ghazali`s views as expressed by Ahmed. In summer 1995, cooke asked al-Ghazali whether she believed that women should return to the home once the mission had been successful in establishing Islamic states. Al-Ghazali explicitly pronounced that women “should continue doing what they had been doing up to that point, their eventual status should be decided by

¹⁸⁴ Uthman, “A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazali,” 73-74.

¹⁸⁵ al-Ghazali, *Ayyam Min Hayati*, 237.

¹⁸⁶ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 199.

the authorities in the new Islamic state.”¹⁸⁷ This statement would seem to indicate we should draw the conclusion that al-Ghazali’s advocacy for the conditional public participation of women alongside their domestic work is not a choice that can be made by women on their own, and it is not for the sake of women’s own liberation, but rather for another cause, the establishment of an Islamic state.

In 1965, al-Ghazali was imprisoned by the Egyptian authorities because of her alleged collusion in a plot by the Muslim Brethren to assassinate President Abdel Nasser, and the Muslim Women’s Association was dissolved.¹⁸⁸ She spent one year in the War Prison with members of the Brethren, then she was moved to the women’s prison in Qanatir. In 1981, when El Saadawi was thrown into the same prison, she found herself with women members of an Islamist group such as Safinaz Qazim (a leading member of an Islamist group) and al-Ghazali. El Saadawi describes them as mostly ignorant, blindly following Islamic dictates.¹⁸⁹ In prison, both El Saadawi and al-Ghazali found themselves sharing a “common lot with fellow prisoners,” and together they proposed to “rewrite the social order to include a vision of new relational possibilities which transgress ethnic, class, and racial divisions as well as family ties.”¹⁹⁰ However, as becomes clear from El Saadawi’s unsympathetic description, they found a fundamental difficulty in forming alliances. cooke observes of this split that it may seem to “detract from the feminist nature of their testimonies ... In a prison, women may be less

¹⁸⁷ cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 105-106.

¹⁸⁸ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 198.

¹⁸⁹ cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 99.

¹⁹⁰ Barbara Harlow (1987) quoted in miriam cooke, *Women Claim Islam* (New York & London: Routledge, 2001), 99.

interested in founding a sisterhood than in surviving to tell the tale.”¹⁹¹ So, the diversity of their feminism in terms of strategies, ideologies and goals as well as their condition as prisoners impeded their solidarity at the time.

After she had been released, al-Ghazali continued to lecture and work for the Islamic cause. Al-Ghazali`s interpretations of the Qur`an were carefully conservative; cooke states that this caution “is not surprising, since her religious and social position did not allow her to conduct an Islamic feminist hermeneutics.”¹⁹² This means that al-Ghazali`s major priority was not women`s emancipation but rather nationalism in the language of Islam. She realized that raising the awareness of women about their responsibilities was crucial and that their domestic roles could become a source of resistance in the war for establishing an Islamic state.

Leila Ahmed argues that al-Ghazali was the exact opposite of her contemporary Doria Shafik. Whereas al-Ghazali campaigned for women and the nation in Islamist terms, Shafik campaigned for women`s rights in the language of secularism and democracy. Al-Ghazali was proud of the Islamic heritage and its rich resources while Shafik underscored the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the native.¹⁹³ Al-Ghazali dismissed feminist claims and denied the notion that Islamic tenets on women were oppressive. While rejecting the maltreatment women were suffering in some Muslim societies, she claimed that this was one of the areas in which Muslim practices violated the tenets of Islam, especially the advancement of women as permitted in Islam. Al-Ghazali concluded that it was in Islam that women`s true liberation

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 99.

¹⁹² Ibid, 105.

¹⁹³ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 202.

lay.¹⁹⁴ Thus, al-Ghazali and some Muslim activists—like Heba Raouf Ezzat, an Egyptian scientist and the key public voice of the Islamist women within the the Labor party—rejected the attempt to label them as Islamic feminists. She considered feminism to be a secular Western construct that opposed the Islamic tradition that guided her.¹⁹⁵

However, the failure of feminist writings in these periods to achieve societal acceptance and to bring about sociopolitical change for women can be attributed to many causes. The lack of awareness of the struggle of the lower classes and peasants, the limitation of feminist theory within the boundary of patriarchal Islam, the attachment of the feminist movement to male politics, the lack of group identity, over and against Western feminism, and the ignoring of the need for women`s ongoing involvement in political activities limited the progress of the early feminist movement.

Regardless of women`s education, expectations of and values pertaining to women remained unchanged. The women`s movement was mostly composed of upper-class women—such as Shar`awi and Nasif—and their primary concern was to improve women`s personal freedom inside the family as wives and mothers. They ignored women`s rights to political involvement and expression. Nasif, for example, maintained “لنترك له السياسة التي يحبها”¹⁹⁶ ; (women should leave politics to the male, which he loves so much.)¹⁹⁷ Without political involvement, women would have to depend on men and to wait for men`s consideration for women`s liberation. Michelle Perrot contends that:

Finally, we might ask about the attitudes of women themselves,

¹⁹⁴ Uthman, “A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazali,” 74.

¹⁹⁵ Hatem, “Gender and Islamism in the 1990s,” 46.

¹⁹⁶ Nasif, *Nissa`yat*, 151.

¹⁹⁷ My own translation as there is no existing English translation of Malak Hifni Nasif.

especially towards political power—the one that really causes the problem. In France did their attitude not to some extent embody a certain inhibition and acceptance of the patriarchal society? Was feminism in France more a social than a political phenomenon? The idea that politics was not for women, that they were not at home in the political world, remained until very recently embedded in the minds of both sexes. Women themselves have tended to accord higher value to social or informal than to political activity, thus internalising traditional norms. Once again, the whole question of consent is raised. Both in the past and in the present, power remains central to relations between men and women.¹⁹⁸

Perrot points out that women`s political participation can improve their social situation and help determine relations between men and women.

The movement also ignored the predicament of the class struggle; poor and working-class women have been left out, or even cast out of their conception of feminist debate. Thomas Philipp indicates that, “Until the 1930s all evidence points to an exclusive restriction of the movement to women of the middle and upper class. The emancipatory movement had no intention of being a mass movement addressing women from all classes of the nation.”¹⁹⁹ So, the early feminists tackled only issues related to women of the same class and background.

For example, the issue of women`s seclusion and the veil were limited to the upper-class women of the time. El Saadawi discusses this issue:

A man who belongs to the working or poor peasant class is forced to buy

¹⁹⁸ Perrot, “Women, Power and History,” 58-59.

¹⁹⁹ Philipp, “Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt,” 282-83.

a loaf of bread to feed himself, rather than a veil with which to cover his wife or daughter's face ... That is why it is only women belonging to the middle or upper classes who have known what it is to wear a veil or to be imprisoned in their homes. For the economic need to send women folk out to work does not arise in such families.²⁰⁰

Poor people`s continual struggle to obtain their daily bread made them supposedly insensitive to certain traditions and social customs. Their primary concern was to work in the fields and factories, where they were exploited by capitalism and the state. Their rights to improve conditions of work and wages were thus ignored in the early feminist movement.

The feminist movement in its early years in Egypt failed to improve women`s situation significantly within the patriarchal structures of society. Early women writers on feminism did not directly challenge the fundamental Islamic or traditional structure of society. Their feminist consciousness, with rare exceptions, remained within domestic and traditional roles. Jayawardena criticizes the failure of women`s movements in Third World countries: “Many of the ‘new women’ of the period, unfortunately, relapsed into their domestic roles or showed concern only with ‘equal rights’ struggles within the framework of capitalism and the post-colonial state in which the bourgeoisie retained power.”²⁰¹ Their demands were still confined within the conventional roles for women, and they expected men to maintain their superiority over women. Early feminist writing was, in this sense, limited within the boundaries of male-centered Islamic ideologies and conspicuously lacked awareness of women`s problems in the context of the economic, political and social

²⁰⁰ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 259.

²⁰¹ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, x.

consequences of the patriarchal rule. There was no deep understanding of the oppression of the female body as the key issue for the emancipation of women.

Jayawardena further suggests that a “women's movement does not occur in a vacuum but corresponds to, and to some extent is determined by, the wider social movements of which they form a part.”²⁰² Thus, the failure of the political and social movements in Egypt had an impact on other social movements, such as feminist struggles in the country. Badran explains that politics in Egypt “became locked in the scramble for power within the new parliamentary system resulting in a protracted struggle between the Wafd, liberal constitutionalists, the palace, and British authorities and in the process most lost sight of ideals.”²⁰³ So, the predicament of political parties had its impact on the feminist movement. It was, then, only after many decades that Arab feminism has separated from male struggles among nationalist and religious reform movements and began to form separate groups. For example, El Saadawi in the 1980s started her independent feminism. Her work will be shown in the following chapters to constitute a major turning point in Arab feminist thinking.

From the beginning, Egyptian secular feminists were conscious of the fact that they lived in a society pervaded by Islam and its traditions. Therefore, they avoided any argument regarding the elimination of Islam. Their strategy was to modify the prevailing understanding of Islam and its principles to make the religion more compatible with the present time and to improve women`s situations within society. In this regard, El Saadawi as an active Arab feminist emphasizes the positive aspects of Islam, which can be interpreted as

²⁰² Ibid, 10.

²⁰³ Badran, “Independent Women,” 12.

advocating for women`s rights: “In the traditions and culture of the Arabs and Islam, there are positive aspects which must be sought for and emphasized. Negative aspects should be exposed and discarded without hesitation. Women at the time of the Prophet obtained rights of which today they are deprived in most Arab countries.”²⁰⁴ El Saadawi is interested in Islamic history and in studying religion and uses her Islamic knowledge to support her feminist ideas.

Like the Muslim patriarchs who used Islam as an effective tool to exploit people and consolidate their political purposes, El Saadawi relies on reinterpretations of Islamic principles as an effective feminist tool. El Saadawi always maintains that religion should guarantee justice and the equality for people despite their race or gender and protect them from oppression; thus she states, “Islamic beliefs did not conflict with reality and the need of men and women having equal access and opportunity to work.”²⁰⁵ So, she claims that if you want to be a true Muslim, you should comply with and obey the progressive spirit of Islam.

However, Deniz A. Kandiyoti considers that the Arab feminists` attitude toward the ideology of Islam confirms “a relatively uncritical stand on the possible role of religion in legitimating women's oppression.”²⁰⁶ But El Saadawi sees Islam as only a part of the system oppressing women. The most essential is the patriarchal class system, which subjugates women and derives its sanctified authority from Islam. She argues that, “women are not oppressed by religion. They are oppressed by political and economic systems. Whenever

²⁰⁴ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 212.

²⁰⁵ Nawal El Saadawi, “In Conversation with Nawal El Saadawi,” interview by Marcel Farry. *Spare Rib* 217, 1990, 22.

²⁰⁶ Deniz A. Kandiyoti, “Emancipated But Unliberated? Reflection on the Turkish Case,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 317-338 (318).

these systems change, the interpretation of religion changes with them.”²⁰⁷ So, the interpretation of Islamic texts is based on the economic and political interests of Muslim patriarchs. El Saadawi also explains that “the veil has nothing to do with Islam; it is not historical and it is not positive. It began with the evolution of the slave society, when a woman is considered as property and is guarded by her husband. In the Koran there is not a single verse with the conception of the veil.”²⁰⁸ According to El Saadawi, there is no relation between veiling and Islam and no evidence in the Holy texts to legitimate the veil.

Thus, in El Saadawi`s view, the religion of Islam should not be blamed and attacked by women; instead, they must attack the political system in which Islam is utilized to serve the system itself. In her book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, she states that:

Religion, in particular, is a weapon often used in traditional societies to cut short and even cut down, the efforts of researchers, and seekers after truth. I have come to see more and more clearly that religion is most often used in our day as an instrument in the hands of economic and political forces, as an institution utilized by those who rule to keep down those who are ruled. In this it serves the same purpose as juridical, educational, police and even psychiatric systems used to perpetuate the patriarchal family, historically born, reinforced, and maintained by the oppression of women, children and slaves. Thus in any society it is not possible to separate religion from the political system, nor to keep sex separate from politics.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ El Saadawi, “In Conversation with Nawal El Saadawi,” 21.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 21.

²⁰⁹ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 5.

El Saadawi argues that the Islamic texts that are used by patriarchy to underestimate women's ability and confine their contributions in society are general and vague. So, she believes that to seek that truth, women must reinterpret Holy texts in ways that correct their common understanding for the sake of women.

Moreover, El Saadawi's writings are characterized by inconsistency toward the monotheistic religions. She considers Judaism as a religious doctrine which perpetuates the patriarchy, through which arose the story of Adam and Eve and the idea that woman is the sinful one. Judaism influenced Christianity and Islam in many ways related to their fundamental concepts and teachings.²¹⁰ However, El Saadawi praises Prophet Mohammad and early Islamic society; she maintains that Prophet Mohammad was the first social reformer who set the basic rights of women and elevated their positions to that of men and even higher in some regards.²¹¹ So, there are contradictions between El Saadawi's accusation of Judaism as a monotheistic religion that reinforced class and sex discrimination, and her praise of the Prophet as the enlightened liberator who defends women's rights and freedom.

Unlike El Saadawi, Soha Abdel-Qadir writes more clearly about the injunctions of the Qur'an which, in her view, relegate women to limited female roles in society. She claims that:

In spite of the many privileges accorded to women by Islam, there are Koranic injunctions that state that women are not equal to men and are in fact inferior to them in some respects. One such Koranic verse states: 'Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one

²¹⁰ Ibid, 143.

²¹¹ Ibid, 187.

superior to the other, and because they spent their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They veil their unseen parts as Allah has veiled them'.²¹²

In her traditional interpretation of this Holy text, Abdel-Qadir has found evidence that Islam commands men to hold a superior position to women and control them.²¹³ Later on, El Saadawi launched a movement called The Global Solidarity for Secular Society. This movement aims at promoting secularism and fighting religious fanaticism. She says: "We have to separate religion from the state." El Saadawi calls for the abandonment of religion from the Egyptian constitution: "We need to separate religion from the constitution, state and legislation. Because whenever you have a religious law, it's a racist law, and women are inferior... Women will benefit from secularism, because women are inferior in all religions. They suffer from religions. So when we separate religion from the legal system, the family code, culture, and the media – women will benefit, because you're going more towards an egalitarian society."²¹⁴ El Saadawi explicitly adopts a secular feminist perspective and rejects Islamic law for women's emancipation.

²¹² Soha Abdel-Qadir, *The Status of Egyptian Women, 1900-1973* (Cairo: The Social Research Center, American University in Cairo, 1973), 7.

²¹³ This erroneous interpretation does not represent the true meaning of the Qur`anic text which, in fact, holds man accountable for supporting and spending on his wife. In this line, Haideh Moghissi contends that "This traditionalist view may be traced back to al-Imam al-Ghazzali (1050-1111), whose school of thought dominated the Islamic establishment and put an end to further reinterpretation of the Koran." See Haideh Moghissi, ed. *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, Vol. 2. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 151. However, this traditionalist trend is rejected by a progressive reformist trend which attributes subordination of women to misinterpretation of Islam and Qur`an rather than to Islam itself.

²¹⁴ Nawal El Saadawi, "Women Will Benefit from Secularism," interview by Cam McGrath. *Inter Press Service*, Oct. 3, 2009, para. 4 of 7. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/10/qa-women-will-benefit-from-secularism/> [accessed July 3, 2016].

To overcome the predicament of Arab feminism, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley suggests that:

Arab feminism was born within, and continues to suffer from the predicament caused by, the double struggle: internally against the old religious, social and economic order; and externally against European colonization. While challenging European domination, the reformists still admired modern European ideals ... Taking into consideration the rising hostility against the West and many Western values in modern Muslim societies, an Arab feminist can be accused of preaching rape, pornography and family disintegration. In such circumstances, Arab feminists would do better if they sought the support of and solidarity with other women who might, due the fact that they are veiled, see them initially as non-feminists.²¹⁵

Golley's suggestion parallels Harlow's vision of new relational possibilities which transgress feminists' differences. Without any systematic efforts, secular feminism nevertheless prepared the ground for Islamic feminism.

1.1. From Secular Feminism to Islamic Feminism

The rise of Islamic feminism took place in the late twentieth century. Secular feminism is constituted by varied discourses, including secular nationalist, human rights, democratic and sometimes Islamic modernist strands. Islamic feminism is grounded in religious Islamic discourses, taking the Qur'an as its central text.²¹⁶ Margot Badran insists on considering the sociohistorical factors that led to the rise of Islamic feminism. The disappointment of the secular regimes in the Middle East which failed to offer

²¹⁵ Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" 529.

²¹⁶ Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminisms," 6.

democracy and economic prosperity to their people led to the emergence of Islamist movements in the early 1970s. Both secular and religiously oriented women started to be concerned by the imposition and growing predominance of the conservative reading of Islam by Islamists and realized that “a progressive Islamic voice” was urgently needed to respond to this form of Islamism.²¹⁷ Islamist movements call for a retreat of women to the home, which disquieted women as they discovered their second-class status, so they countered this conservative reading of Islam with a progressive one guaranteeing equality and the active participation of women.

Badran, in an interview with Azza Basarudin, maintains that Islamic feminists have advocated a strong position on gender equality, affirming the full equality of men and women in public and private spheres.²¹⁸ She adds that Islamic feminists are “self-identified women who are interested in balancing women`s human rights claims within the boundaries of their faith.”²¹⁹ So, Islam has become a central point of reference for Islamic feminists in their debates. However, Badran argues that, “[S]ecular was given a new meaning in the 1970s by proponents of political Islam who used it to signify un-Islamic, anti-Islamic, and non-Islamic.”²²⁰ The 1970s and 1980s was a time when secular feminism distanced itself from the regressive patriarchal definition of religion, and therefore Islamists came to regard “secular” as an epithet of condemnation. This history means that in the latter years of the twentieth century, secular feminism and Islamism seemed at war with each other. Islamic feminism departed from the gender-conservative reading of Islamism and it is significant

²¹⁷ Ibid, 9.

²¹⁸ Basarudin, “Re-defining Feminism/s,” 61.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 57.

²²⁰ Badran, “Between Secular and Islamic Feminisms,” 10.

to say that it sprang from secular feminism and developed its own agenda by re-employing religious discourse.

Many Arab secular feminists believe that Islam is interpreted by Muslim patriarchal leaders to perpetuate the traditional and negative role of Muslim women and to serve their political interests. As a result, Arab feminism's main focus is women's liberation in relation to Islam and its positioning of women. Islam is perceived by them as either negative, as a force subordinating women to men (in secular feminism) or as positive, as a useful source confirming women's rights (in Islamic feminism). In order to discover the origin of women's oppression, Arab feminists have often discussed the history of Arab women's power in society and politics in the Jahiliah (pre-Islamic era) and compared it to women's situation in Islam. Their findings are significant: Arab feminists today have confirmed their now established theories and inspired women with confidence, and defied Western theories about Islam as the main cause of Arab women's degradation.²²¹ At the same time, these Arab feminists accuse the corrupt Islamic institutions of deliberately distorting the original canons of Islam.

Many Arab feminists—such as Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi—see Islamic institutions, like all the religious institutions around the world, as dishonest and oppressive of women.²²² They maintain that Muslim Imams and leaders are only interested in gaining political, economic and social authority, supported by unchangeable doctrines. Thus, Arab feminists criticize the static nature of Islamic doctrines, declaring that truth is

²²¹ Saneya Saleh, "Women in Islam: Their Status in Religious and Traditional Culture," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 2, no. 1 (1972): 35-42 (35), https://www.jstor.org/stable/23027836?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed April 12, 2015)

²²² cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 61-62.

liable to change, development and discussion. El Saadawi in *Woman is the Origin* argues that, "The holy truth during one period becomes in another period a truth that is unholy, or totally untrue."²²³ She denies Islamic patriarchal interpretations and seeks new understanding of religious texts and the Qur`an.

El Saadawi is doubtful about the honesty of institutionalized religions and rejects Islamic institutions. She questions and re-examines many customs, for example, circumcision and polygamy, practiced in the name of Islam but which originated as practices to subordinate women and the poor. El Saadawi argues that these customs are disconnected from Islam and matters of faith, and established by Muslim patriarchs to control people. She believes that Islam is used as a convenient tool to brainwash people and enslave them by imposing false morality. In "Gender, Islam and Orientalism," El Saadawi attacks religious and political institutions as a negative force oppressing women.²²⁴ She rejects some holy truths and encourages women to use their intelligence to seek the truth and oppose the oppressive religious system. El Saadawi views religion as a sociological phenomenon and not a divine revelation. She claims that true religion advocates free thinking and does not contradict justice and equality among individuals.

Like other Arab feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed and Alya Baffoun, El Saadawi adopts a view opposing that of the Islamic feminists.²²⁵ She argues that before the advent of Islam, women experienced equal rights

²²³ Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman is the Origin*, 4th edition (Cairo: Madbuli Publishing House, 1985), 10.

²²⁴ Nawal El Saadawi, "Gender, Islam and Orientalism: Dissidence and Creativity," *Women: A Cultural Review* 6, no. 1 (1995): 1-17 (10).

²²⁵ Alya Baffoun, "Women and Social Change in the Muslim Arab World," *Women`s Studies: International Forum*, 5, no. 2 (1982): 227-242.

and freedom. In "Woman and Islam," El Saadawi claims that "the greater recognition accorded by the Prophet and early Islam to the rights of women was the direct result of the comparatively higher position occupied by the Arab woman in the pre-Islamic era."²²⁶ She argues that women in pre-Islamic societies were not forced to don the veil or to be secluded; women intermingled freely with men and participated in all social activities. Pre-Islamic women had marriage and divorce rights, and many prominent figures occupied important social, economic and political positions in their societies according to El Saadawi. But the rise of Islam and its patriarchal successors, she claims, denied women these rights and agency, and women become subjected to a strict doctrine of marriage, sexual segregation and seclusion at home. These Arab feminists declare that they want to recover the freedom, independence and agency their foremothers enjoyed before Islam.

Opposing them, Islamic feminists support the Islamic principles of an original Islam which guarantees the rights of Muslim women and corrects the social injustice and corruption of the pre-Islamic era. They believe that Muslim women do not have to seek a new morality from which to develop a new feminist society; they claim that an enlightened view of women and a fair law exist in their religion. Islamic feminists maintain that women have to rediscover with new eyes the hidden and distant land of Islamic principles which their foremothers experienced. Consequently, they examine Islamic history to explore the historical structures and basic features which may contribute to the formulation of women`s ethics.

²²⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, "Woman and Islam," *Women`s Studies: International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1982): 193-206 (196).

Islamic Arab feminists, such as Nazirah Zein Ed-Din and Azizah al-Hibri, argue that Islam and Prophet Mohammad elevated the position of women and protected them from the degradation, slavery and injustice practiced upon them by pre-Islamic patriarchy.²²⁷ Islam gives women human dignity, equal rights and freedom. They distinguish original Islamic principles, those which were taught by the Prophet from the later Islamic traditions which were developed by his patriarchal followers after his death. Saneya Saleh, an Islamic feminist, insists that Islamic principles are compatible with female emancipation and do not exclude women from public activities, as many European scholars have claimed.²²⁸ Islamic feminists consider that the original Islam as preached by the Prophet was against the patriarchal oppression of women, but it was corrupted by Muslim dignitaries who violated the fundamental morality of his teachings.

Azizah al-Hibri suggests that Prophet Mohammad's successors deliberately misused the original Holy texts of the Qur'an to serve their economic and political interests by prohibiting women from participating in social affairs and secluding them. She believes that Muslim scholars misinterpret the Qur'an, and that the Holy texts of the Hadith and Qur'an should be reinterpreted to bring to light the proper Islamic treatment of women.²²⁹ Thus, al-Hibri and other feminist Muslims work on reinterpretations of the Holy Qur'an and re-examination and debating of the Hadith from a fresh female perspective. Al-Hibri insists on the necessity of such tasks and argues that:

²²⁷ See Nazirah Zein Ed-Din, "Removing the Veil and Veiling," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, no. 2 (1982): 221-226. Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get into This Mess?" *Women's Studies: International Forum*, 5, no. 2 (1982): 207-219.

²²⁸ Saleh, "Women in Islam," 35.

²²⁹ al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," 218.

How could interpretations of the Qur'an vary so widely? For one, as I argue in my essay "A Study of Islamic Herstory" patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the Prophet. This meant, among other things, that many passages in the Qur'an were interpreted by patriarchy, loosely and out of context, in support of a vicious patriarchal ideology. These interpretations were then handed down to women as God's revealed words. Also, the Arabic language is a very rich language, and thus it is not uncommon to run into sentences that can be interpreted in a variety of ways.²³⁰

Al-Hibri continues further to justify their right of participation as feminist Muslims in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts:

However, feminist Muslims should not be intimidated by the Muslim patriarchal authority. Instead, they should be guided by the fact that there is no clergy in Islam, each person being responsible directly to God for her own beliefs. Furthermore, if patriarchy itself was able to justify within its ideological bounds the existence of five different schools of thought, then feminists can surely justify the addition of at least one more.²³¹

She minimizes the sanctified position of male Muslim scholars who interpret the Holy texts without taking into account women's rights. Al-Hibri encourages Islamic feminists to seek equity and justice for women through their own Islamic hermeneutics.

²³⁰ al-Hibri, "Introduction," *Women's Studies: International Forum*, 5, no. 2 (1982): vi.

²³¹ *Ibid*, vii.

The discussion of women's interpretation of Qur'anic verses is joined by Islamic feminists such as Zaynab Radwan and Omaima Abou Bakr.²³² As academics with training in law, Islamic philosophy, English and comparative literature respectively, they bring new discourses to the discussion. Mervat Hatem gives an example of how Radwan reinterprets the Qur'anic verse that stipulates that the testimony of one man equals that of two women. Hatem points to Radwan's suggestion that women of the time had limited familiarity with financial and commercial transactions, so, the purpose of having two women was to ensure that if one strayed the other would correct her. In Radwan's view, once women become literate and more active in the financial arena, the need for the testimony of two women was invalidated.²³³

A significant contribution to the discussion of Islamic feminism is made by Omaima Abou Bakr. She differentiates between an Islamic feminism which is part of Muslim self-definition and the Western concept that was designed to contain the "Other." Islamic feminism, in Abou Bakr's definition, refers to "work done by Muslim women of different generations and orientations to a textual category/approach, to veiled women, to oppositional counterweights to secular feminism and to tactical constructs used by Arab feminist critics."²³⁴ For the concept to be meaningful, Abou Bakr suggests, it needs to be applied in a discriminating way to those who critique the Islamic tradition and develop alternatives inspired by Islamic ideals. In other words, Islamic feminists should produce an Islamic discourse that problematizes gender injustice in the context of an Islamic worldview. Abou Bakr believes that Islamic feminists' defense of

²³² See Zaynab Radwan, *Al-Islam wa Qadaya al-Mara'a* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya, 1993), and Omaima Abou Bakr, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?" *Middle East Women's Studies Review* 15, no. 4 (2001): 1-4.

²³³ Hatem, "Gender and Islamism in the 1990s," 47.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

women`s rights is part of the defense of Islam against the corruption of its own values.²³⁵ Hatem argues that “Abou Bakr`s definition of Islamic feminism places the works of Nawal El-Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi outside the faith-based project.”²³⁶

In spite of the disparities and contradictions in views among Arab feminists, whether they believe in the religion or not, they agree on the necessity of revolutionary change of the formerly existing constitutions. They try to convince their societies that the freedom and equality of women had been once established in their region`s history and thus women need to retrieve the enlightened thought of their ancestors. In Margot Badran`s words, Islamic feminism “transcends and destroys old binaries that have been constructed. These included polarities between religious and secular and between ‘East’ and ‘West’.”²³⁷ It closes gaps and demonstrates common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of Aboulela`s novels.

²³⁵ Ibid, 47.

²³⁶ Ibid, 47.

²³⁷ Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, no. 569, January 17-23, 2002, para. 10 of 30, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu> [accessed Nov. 2, 2016].

Chapter Two

Revolutionary Spirit in El Saadawi`s Novels

“A novel ... is like living fish swimming against the current, and is very different from the dead fish floating on the surface and moving with the current.”²³⁸

Some critics allege that El Saadawi`s works evoke the West`s anti-Muslim sentiments by re-enforcing negative stereotypes. In her essay, "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers," Amal Amireh proposes that El Sadaawi`s appreciation in the West "is not innocent, [as] some critics believe. They argue that she is acclaimed not so much because she champions women's rights, but because she tells western readers what they want to hear."²³⁹ Also, in a review of El Saadawi`s *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Juliet O'Keefe, writing for the online journal *Democratiya*, recalls how she felt reading the book's first (1980) publication. A White, Western woman, Juliet O'Keefe affirms, in her reaction, the validity of Amireh`s concerns:

The chapters on female genital mutilation are unforgettable, and drew attention for obvious reasons; a 1982 New York Times review by Vivian Gornick was entitled 'About the Mutilated Half' and focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the book. For me, as for many other young (white, North American) feminists in the early 1980s, the horror of

²³⁸ Nawal El Saadawi, *Zeina* (London: Saqi Books, 2009), 209.

²³⁹ Amireh, "Publishing in the West," para. 6 of 22.

genital mutilation, of which we had largely been ignorant, overwhelmed us, and—and I say this carefully—fixed to an unfortunate degree our opinions on women's situation under Islam. The images of brutalized girls, damaged by fingernails and razors, are overwhelming, as are El Saadawi's reports of the physical and psychological trauma suffered in consequence. That genital mutilation is not a specifically Islamic tradition but an African one, with a history long predating the Islamic conversions of nations where it is still practiced, was elided in our understanding, and we became (and Aparajita Sagar writes of this tendency in her Western students) 'fixated on clitoridectomy and the veil'. This response to *The Hidden Face of Eve* was an honest one, for if ever a book were writ with flame, this one was; but its outrage became our own and had its own momentum, eventually obscuring El Saadawi's other concerns so that we took from the book a one-dimensional afterimage of the Arab woman as wholly victimised and held under the thumb of a rigid, ahistoric theocracy.²⁴⁰

El Saadawi had a story to tell about the lives of Arab women, but how was that story heard? O'Keefe admits that as a White woman living in the West, she read El Saadawi's study through an Anglo-American lens, and it indeed became a stick with which to beat Arabs out of their "rigid, ahistoric theocracy."

In the same regard, building on the works of Karl Abraham and Freud, Georges Tarabishi—a Syrian-born writer, translator and critic—criticizes El Saadawi for reducing the males and females in her novel to mere warring "types," rather than creating a complex psychological narrative. Tarabishi sees

²⁴⁰ Juliet O'Keefe, "The Vision of Nawal el Saadawi," *Democratiya*, no. 15 (2008): 123-129 (123-124).

http://www.academia.edu/1584371/Une_si_longue_pr%C3%A9sence_comment_le_monde_arabe_a_perdu_ses_Juifs_1947-1967 [accessed Dec. 2, 2014].

her narratives as too simple, and her characters one-dimensional—and says, "abstractions do not make for good literature."²⁴¹ Furthermore, he believes that El Saadawi's pro-feminist ideology is interwoven with an anti-feminist one. Tarabishi argues that El Saadawi has been identified with her colonizer (man) and has internalized man's hostile ideology.²⁴² In other words, he criticizes El Saadawi for adopting a masculine ideology in sketching her female characters and deviating from representing women according to their natural mission of humanizing the world. In response to Tarabishi, El Saadawi maintains that "[I]t is surely unjust to judge a revolutionary hero or heroine as psychologically sick or neurotic merely because we have not studied the social and political conditions which forged such characters and which forced them to take the path of struggle and rebellion."²⁴³

Anastasia Valassopoulos comments on the "rawness" of El Saadawi's writing. She quotes Daphne Grace, who asserts that El Saadawi's works are raw and not refined enough to be classified as major works of literature. Grace also indicates that El Saadawi deals with problems in her own society and radically engenders women's varied means of negotiating a new subjectivity, including women having to resort to murder to survive.²⁴⁴ Valassopoulos finds that this rawness and narrative approach that Grace speaks of is necessary for El Saadawi's struggle; she engages with "what Caroline Rooney in *African Literature, Animism and Politics* gestures towards when she asserts that El Saadawi is involved in a struggle for the emancipation of the spirit."²⁴⁵ In this

²⁴¹ Georges Tarabishi, *Woman against her Sex: A Critique of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. Basil Hatim and Elizabeth Orsini, (London: Saqi Books, 1988), 18.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 10.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 211.

²⁴⁴ Daphne Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), 82.

²⁴⁵ Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women*, 31, citing Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 27.

process of emancipation, Valassopoulos maintains, the spirit informs the actions of both body and mind.²⁴⁶ However, Valassopoulos` reading of El Saadawi`s novels demonstrates the potential for a universal feminism, writing “This seems to me to aspire to the universal. It is in this spirit that I want to read the novels.”²⁴⁷ According to her, El Saadawi aims at exposing the local structures of domination in order to engage with the global discourse of women.

In this regard, I will use this term “emancipation of the spirit” which is initially formulated by Rooney and used by Valassopoulos, but I will employ it to take a different course. In this chapter I will elaborate on the actions and strategies that are informed by the revolutionary spirit to face injustice. Whereas Valassopoulos suggests the potentiality of universalism in El Saadawi`s novels, I argue that this revolutionary spirit is mainly constructed by the author in an attempt to bring solutions and changes in the lives of Arab women where occurrences of brutality are normalized facts. The spirit revolts against all kinds of oppression and emancipates the body and the mind from the religious and societal constraints. I will employ Linda Alcoff`s concept of positionality; she explains how the identity becomes fluid and shifting in accordance with the constantly shifting context.²⁴⁸ In doing so, I will demonstrate how El Saadawi enables her female characters to counter the brutality of Arab women's lives, challenge the patriarchal discourse and assert their independence and rights in a hostile and oppressive context by defining

²⁴⁶ Valassopoulos, 31.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 33.

²⁴⁸ Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” *Signs* 13, no. 3 (1988): 405-436.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174166?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
[Accessed Aug. 3, 2016].

themselves according to their own terms and taking different paths, even hostile ones; as El Saadawi makes clear in her reply to Tarabishi, the social and political circumstances forge female characters and force them to take the path of struggle and rebellion.

In an interview, El Saadawi claims that “we as women are oppressed by this division between the spirit and the body. Because in religion, god became the symbol of the spirit and mind, and man was created in the image of god, so man represented spirit and mind. As for women, they were degraded to be the symbol of the body, of the devil and of bad manners.”²⁴⁹ Challenging the above fixed notion, El Saadawi liberates her female heroine from being confined in a body that is controlled by the patriarchy and unleashes the spirit that revolts against injustice. I want to argue here for a revolutionary spirit constructed by El Saadawi in her novels as a means to negotiate a new identity and to deconstruct all the constraints and paradoxes inherent in social or religious institutions. This spirit, as Valassopoulos suggests, informs the actions of the body and the mind, not merely one or the other. To achieve this purpose, the heroines in her novels experience prostitution, lesbianism and murder to overcome the authoritarian patriarchy and institutionalized religions that plague them.

Woman at Point Zero is about an orphan girl of under nineteen called Firdaus, who against her will, is given in marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, an old man of almost sixty, by her own uncle, who raised her after her parents’ death. But she no sooner gets married than she realizes that she is living in hell. She does not love her new husband and worst of all is ill-treated by this dirty, greedy and sexually impotent old man whose swelling chin has the “odor of

²⁴⁹ El Saadawi, “Women Will Benefit from Secularism,” para. 5 of 7.

dead dogs."²⁵⁰ When she marries Sheikh Mahmoud, he wraps his body around her at night, and she washes herself thoroughly immediately he finishes with her body. For the old man, she has become his own property because he has bought her with his own money, and this entitles him to do whatever he likes with her. Right from the cradle, this man has been taught to consider women as chattels, and many women in that society have the embedded feeling that the ideal life for a woman is to slavishly and blindly obey her husband. Firdaus runs away from her husband and eventually chooses the profession of prostitution.

In contrast to Aboulela, women's oppression is, according to El Saadawi, religious. El Saadawi specifically criticizes religious leaders in *Woman at Point Zero*, in which so-called men of religion are no more than hypocrites and tyrants. Firdaus' first encounter with a holy man is with her Azharite uncle; he is kind and caring toward her. Then, her uncle repeatedly fondles and molests her. Firdaus remembers, "I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement."²⁵¹ As a child, she does not understand that this man of God is taking advantage of her body. It is not until she is older and sees other couples kissing and revealing their bodies at a public cinema that her uncle explains that this behavior is sinful. At this point, Firdaus can no longer bring herself to look her uncle in the eye or to sit on his bed because of her awareness of what has been happening to her and what may very well continue to happen to her each night.²⁵² El Saadawi pairs the

²⁵⁰ Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1983), 43.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 21.

image of the holy book with sexual violence. When Firdaus is first molested, her uncle is reading a book. Because he is a student at Al-Azhar, it would be logical to presume that the book he holds on his lap as he begins violating his young niece contains religious knowledge, and may even be the Holy Qur'an itself. This image of the learned religious man, holy book in hand, molesting the young girl during his tutoring of her in religion is discomfiting. El Saadawi's juxtaposition of the two images sears upon the reader's mind the hypocrisy religious men can disguise.

In her novels, El Saadawi highlights the problem of religious hypocrisy in Muslim societies, where men misinterpret Holy texts to enslave women. That is, they claim God will banish women if they disobey the orders of their male guardians (father, husband or brother), unveil their faces or even dare to go outside home without man`s permission. Firdaus sarcastically wonders about the paradoxes in her father`s daily life, she reveals that her father:

knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time, how to be quicker than his neighbor in stealing from the fields once the crops were ripe ... how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night ... I would see him walking with the other men like himself as they commented on the Friday sermon, on how convincing and eloquent the imam had been to a degree that he had surpassed the unsurpassable. For was it not verily true that stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honour of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin ...?²⁵³

²⁵³ Ibid, 10-11.

The hypocrisy of poor peasant farmers like Firdaus` father plagues the Imam himself, who is supposed to be well-informed religiously. Contradictions in their daily life distort the image of religion: they cheat, steal and beat women, while invoking Allah`s name and calling upon his blessings.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the hypocrisy of the Imam is highlighted by the narrator. During Friday prayer, the Imam likens the love and obedience of the ruler to that of God; he articulates “that love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible.”²⁵⁴ This analogy suggests the God-Satan dichotomy where man is introduced as a divine being and woman the evil opposite. In another example of religious hypocrisy, Firdaus recalls the story of her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud. In the Hadith and the Qur`an, it is clearly stipulated that the bridal dowry is to be paid directly to the bride, not to her family. The dowry is hers to keep and spend as she sees fit. It is hers to keep in the event of divorce or widowhood. Allah said:

" فَآتُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي مَا تَرَضَيْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْفَرِيضَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا
حَكِيمًا"²⁵⁵

[As to those whom you profit by (marrying), give them their dowries as appointed. And there is no blame on you about what you mutually agree after what is appointed (of dowry). Surely Allah is ever Knowing, Wise.]²⁵⁶

As in the case of Firdaus, whose avaricious uncle pockets the bride price, this Qur`anic mandate has been usurped by patriarchal custom throughout many Muslim societies. The Qur`an and Hadith also have strict stipulations for protecting orphans from exploitation. It is forbidden to spend their

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 11.

²⁵⁵ The Holy Qur`an, *Al Nissa*, Sura 4, Verse 24.

²⁵⁶ Maulana Muhammad Ali, *English Translation of the Holy Quran*, ed. Zahid Aziz (London: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore Publications, 2010), 111.

inheritance. It is also forbidden to force a daughter, adoptive or not, into marriage.

When Firdaus marries Sheikh Mahmoud it should be a joyous occasion because she has married a man of religion, but Sheikh Mahmoud is old and controlling. He beats her frequently for small mistakes that she makes as a new bride. Firdaus recalls her husband`s mistreatment: "[H]e got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not."²⁵⁷ In the holy Qur'an, God urges married couples to be garments for one another and to love and protect one another as clothing protects the body. Allah said: **هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ** ²⁵⁸ **لَهُنَّ**; (They [women] are an apparel for you and you are an apparel for them.)²⁵⁹ Men of religion such as the Imam or Sheikh Mahmoud would be conscious of such verses in the Qur'an, but Sheikh Mahmoud, like many men, neglects these verses in favor of verses which can be read as condoning beating one's wife and treating her as subservient. When Firdaus complains about the constant beatings she says:

My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment.²⁶⁰

No further explanation of the verse permitting husbands to beat their wives is given and, as Firdaus suggests, the general consensus is that "A virtuous

²⁵⁷ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 46.

²⁵⁸ The Holy Qur`an, *Ali-Imran*, Sura 2, Verse 87.

²⁵⁹ Maulana Muhammad Ali, *English Translation of the Holy Quran*, 43.

²⁶⁰ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 46.

woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience."²⁶¹

In El Saadawi's narratives, the religious men of God are no better than the lowliest of men as Firdaus' pimp beats her in the same way as her husband. The pimp's violence is inflicted upon Firdaus: "I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me."²⁶² The Imams and Sheikhs of God are hypothetically meant to lead people to faith and to happiness, but as El Saadawi makes clear, all these men use the power their knowledge affords them to twist and manipulate those who will listen into conforming. This manipulation is especially detrimental to women.

El Saadawi's harshest condemnation of religious leaders comes in her novel *The Fall of the Imam*, in which she criticizes the title figure, the Imam, for his many ungodly crimes and hypocrisy. In the preface to her novel, El Saadawi fleshes out her intent with regard to the novel and the ever-elusive figure of the Imam, confessing that one of her goals was to capture the figure of the Imam on her own terms. She goes on to write, "I could not allow him to exercise absolute power in my story, just as he had done in everything else. I said to my self, at least where my novel is concerned I should enjoy some freedom, exercise some control over the Imam, and not let him do just as he likes."²⁶³ I have no doubt that the Imam El Saadawi speaks of is not only her fictional character, but the idea of the Imam as a sacred religious leader within Islam or religious cults, for example, Muslim Brethren in Egypt who were trained in Afghanistan and Hizb Allah in Lebanon who were trained and

²⁶¹ Ibid, 47.

²⁶² Ibid, 104.

²⁶³ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Fall of the Imam*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Methuen, 1988), Preface.

fostered by Iran. In this novel, these cults are a target for El Saadawi as will be demonstrated in the following chapter on national allegory.

El Saadawi describes the hell that the Imam and his followers bring into the world, writing, “For the Imam ruled according to the laws of God’s Shari`a. Stone adulterous women to death. Cut off the hands of those who commit a theft. Slash off the tongues of those who spread rumours about irradiated milk. Pour all bottles, all casks, all barrels of alcoholic drink, into the waters of the river.”²⁶⁴ Modern history testifies that what El Saadawi depicts in her novel is true. She envisages the brutality and horrors women endure under the rule of the religious extremists and fanatics who utilize Islam and twist the interpretations of the Holy texts to sanctify their crimes against humanity and women in particular. Al-Qaeda and The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) enslave women, behead captives and spread terror in the Middle East and beyond. Malcolm Nance, an analyst and international expert, explains the terror women face at the hands of the ISIS cult:

A major role for Khansaa/Umm Raynan units is to beat women who wear proscribed clothes, make up, any type of high heels, or anyone who dares talk back to a Hisbah officers [religious police]. These women receive forty lashes of the cane. Women who attempt to escape receive more severe punishments, such as sixty lashes with a horsewhip, or are being beaten to death by the Hisbah or the husband of the victim.²⁶⁵

ISIS members exercise absolute power and control over women and vilify them as corrupt and sinful. The Imam and his blind fanatical followers were sketched out by El Saadawi long before the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, Al-Qaeda and ISIS belong to a common ideological precursor, the Muslim

²⁶⁴ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Fall of the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 12.

²⁶⁵ Malcolm Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe*, (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), 244.

Brethren. The trajectories of these three Islamist movements, or cults, emphasize the significant ideological overlap between today's most extremist violent groups—Al-Qaeda and ISIS—and the Muslim Brethren movement in Egypt.²⁶⁶ Their barbaric practices shock the world and make their names in the marketing of savagery. In Fedwa Malti-Douglas' introduction to El Saadawi's novel, *The Innocence of the Devil*, Malti-Douglas suggests that *The Fall of the Imam* was the beginning of a project El Saadawi was to undertake concerning religion and its intersection with political and social oppression.²⁶⁷

The Fall of the Imam moves back and forth through time, piecing together the story of Bint Allah, an illegitimate daughter of the Imam. The narrative reveals that the Imam, although considered Allah's representative on Earth, is no more than a symbol of corruption and hypocrisy, going against all that his position and Islam are meant to stand for. David Lawton in his book *Blasphemy* maintains that women's writing has been an important site of blasphemy in the twentieth century and challenges theological orthodoxy. Lawton writes that, "[T]he point is even more valid in Islamic cultures, in, for example, the work of Nawal el Saadawi, whose *The Fall of the Imam* shows the Imam as father and rapist as well as spiritual leader and political tyrant."²⁶⁸ Lawton believes that El Saadawi violates what is most sacred in Islamic cultures. I agree with Lawton up to a point, but the blasphemy here is the author's violation, not of the divine being, but of the Imam, whose masculine sacred authority is practiced in the name of God. It is not God whom such a narrative would affront but the religious leaders and Imams who manipulate

²⁶⁶ Denise N. Baken and Ioannis Mantzikos, *Al Qaeda: The Transformation of Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2015)

²⁶⁷ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Introduction," *The Innocence of the Devil*, trans. Sherif Hetata, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), xi.

²⁶⁸ David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 140.

religion to deceive people, enslave women and resist any transformation of their existing law.

The reader is first introduced to the character of the Imam as he is creeping out of the room of a woman, "his mouth exhaling an odour of wine and of sweat from the bodies of unhappy women."²⁶⁹ A dog then bites his bottom and tears his pants and he is left with a hole over the left buttock revealing his shame. This image of the Imam is repeatedly revisited by El Saadawi as she moves from the Imam's childhood to his present. The hole inflicted by the dog has plagued the Imam from his very beginnings, first as a symbol of the poverty he aspires to overcome, but ultimately as a symbol of his own shame.

Hence, religion and its unjust rule over the marginalized of society were to come under fire. It should be understood that while El Saadawi criticizes both the Imam and Islam, she openly argues that all Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, are equally unjust in their treatment and construction of the female and femininity. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi discusses the inferior position of women: "the position of women remained inferior to that of men, in all three religions, but especially in Judaism."²⁷⁰ The author believes that most of the religions of the world subordinate women to the superior gender, the masculine. She considers all religions are patriarchal, class-stratified religions with the authority of men that makes women suffer first. Institutionalized religion rationalizes stereotypes about the mental and emotional inferiority of women.

In her writings, El Saadawi depicts religious teachings as failing to liberate women. In the arranged marriage for Firdaus, her uncle's wife believes

²⁶⁹ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 22

²⁷⁰ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 172.

that Firdaus is lucky to get married to Sheikh Mahmoud only because he is a man of religion, no matter how old he is or whether she agrees with the match or not. This marriage is based on duty from Firdaus's side only, so that her husband can "find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness."²⁷¹ Christianity endorses much of the same anti-feminist rhetoric that debatably can be found in Islam. For example, in *The Fall of the Imam*, Katie, a Christian figure, is seen running to Jesus and devoting herself to him in a lover-beloved relationship.²⁷² Katie is never lifted to a transcendent state through her worship of the male being. Christianity does not liberate Katie from her sense of oppression in her life either in the Middle East or in the West. She devotes herself in a subservient position, to the male God figure.

In *Zeina*, religious figures are firmly criticized as the main reason for the corruption and subjugation of women. Ahmad al-Damhiri, Bodour's cousin, has acquired the title of Eminent Sheikh by raising the slogan "Islam is the solution." Hypocrisy characterizes al-Damhiri, whose fingers "held the rosary by day and the wine glass at night. With these very fingers he stroked the bodies of prostitutes before dawn."²⁷³ Although al-Damhiri adheres to Islam and preaches to his followers, he never perceives its teachings correctly. This superficial adherence to religion provides men with an opportunity to gain more respect and power to serve their sociopolitical interests. miriam cooke states clearly that what El Saadawi opposes is "the political, ideological use of religion."²⁷⁴

El Saadawi seems to come to the conclusion in her fiction that all men, regardless of their religions, beliefs or principles, are unfaithful and deceitful

²⁷¹ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 37.

²⁷² El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 108.

²⁷³ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 104.

²⁷⁴ cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 75.

by nature. Every single man in her novels is cheating on his wife, whether he be a man of God or secular. Safi's, the life-long friend of the protagonist Bodour, unsuccessful marriage summarizes this truth. At first, Safi abandons God and the Prophet for the sake of love of her Marxist university colleague. Her husband vows undying loyalty and fidelity. But he breaks his vows to her, for he has an affair with the housemaid in her apartment. He dares to confess that: "[M]en were polygamous by nature and that change was a constant and unchanging natural principle."²⁷⁵ El Saadawi contends in an interview with Sarah Brown that women's liberation cannot be achieved by men even if they claim to be progressive; she says "[E]ven those [men] who say they are socialist or Marxist or the left, even if they are convinced mentally, still at a psychological level they have this schizophrenia."²⁷⁶ She believes that even progressive men have double standards and their principles are applied unfairly, in different ways, to women. Women who join left parties or trade unions feel themselves powerless, coming at the back of the queue for raising issues or making demands because women's problems have not been treated as priority for men in the liberal parties.

After Safi is divorced, she gets married to a man who believes in God and the Prophet. When her new husband vows love and fidelity, Safi gives up Marxism and follows her husband. Two years later, she catches him living in another place with another wife. He simply replies: "You believe in God and the Prophet, Safi. God's law gives me the right to marry another woman. The law of the land gives me the same right. Go to court if you wish!"²⁷⁷ So, the author directly targets and criticizes religious leaders and their use of religious doctrine to enslave women and legitimate polygamy:

²⁷⁵ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 51.

²⁷⁶ El Saadawi, "Feminism in Egypt," 27.

²⁷⁷ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 52.

Polygamy was widely practiced by the 'Sons of Israel', especially among the richer families and kings. David is known to have married many women and in addition to have kept a retinue of slaves and concubines ... Christianity was against polygamy at the outset. But with the establishment of the feudal system, accompanied as it was by wars and famines and a heavy death toll, the head of the family, apart from satisfying his sexual desires, wished to have numerous children on whom he could depend to supervise and run his estates and participate in labour. As a result, polygamy and concubinage crept back on the scene ... The continual tribal wars, in which many men were killed, the need to build up the new Islamic order, the large numbers of women prisoners of war and slaves, all tended to make out of polygamy a practice responding to social needs.²⁷⁸

Religion's inequality relies on the restrictions applied to women's sexuality while men are free to have four wives and as many concubines as they wish. Unlimited sexual freedom is accorded to men in the monotheistic religions while monogamy remains, in practice, a moral code only for women.

Moreover, some non-religious customary or traditional practices play their role in the sexual life of Arab women. Sexual satisfaction is forbidden to Firdaus as a result of the female genital mutilation she undergoes as a child. Firdaus used to play "bride and bridegroom" with Mohammadain and felt a sensation of a sharp pleasure.²⁷⁹ She started developing an awareness about sexuality, and for that her mother beat her and brought in a woman who cut her. Later, in Sheikh Mahmoud's house, Firdaus becomes nothing more than a

²⁷⁸ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 173, 180, 181.

²⁷⁹ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 12.

body, used for sex and abuse.²⁸⁰ Firdaus becomes aware of her body as a sexual vessel with no sensation early on when she is molested by her Azherite uncle; she says, "He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure."²⁸¹ Her uncle abuses her sexually the same way her child-mate Mohammadain had aroused her in the past. Firdaus makes it clear that when her uncle molests her, she feels no pleasure because she has been circumcised. Firdaus' circumcision leaves her body unable to feel sexual pleasure and so she does not search for the fulfillment of sexual desires. She does, however, seek out love, which she cannot find after she is married off by her uncle to an elderly man.

What is called by some female 'circumcision', but is not properly comparable with circumcision in men, dates back at least 2000 years, as the Phoenicians, Hittites and Ethiopians as well as Egyptians undertook operations to alter female genitals. It is usually to be found in a traditional group or community culture that has patriarchal social structures.²⁸² Anika Rahman and Nahid Toubia argue that female genital mutilation "is a cultural, not a religious, practice. The practice predates the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Africa and is not a requirement of either religion. In fact, FC/FGM is practiced by Jews, Christians, Muslims and indigenous religious groups in Africa."²⁸³ Female genital mutilation is neither mentioned in the Qur`an nor approved in the Sunnah.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 45-47.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 13.

²⁸² Comfort Momoh, ed., *Female Genital Mutilation* (Oxford & Seattle: Radcliffe Publishing, 2005), 5.

²⁸³ Anika Rahman and Nahid Toubia, eds., *Female Genital Mutilation* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2000), 6.

However, the practice is perpetuated among some Muslims in order to ensure a girl's virginity. The most frequent Prophet's saying (Hadith) concerning female circumcision reports a debate between Prophet Mohammad and a woman called Um Atiyya who used to circumcise female slaves (jawari) before the advent of Islam. According to this narration, this woman was one of a group who had immigrated with Mohammad. Having seen her, the Prophet asked her whether she kept practicing her profession. She answered affirmatively, adding, "unless it is forbidden and you order me to stop doing it." The Prophet replied, "Yes, it is allowed. Come closer so I can teach you: if you cut, do not overdo it, because it brings more radiance to the face and it is more pleasant for the husband."²⁸⁴ Such accounts are the subject of vast debate. Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have scrutinized the hadiths to see how authentic they may be. George C. Denniston, Frederick Mansfield Hodges and Marilyn Fayre Milos find that Muslim scholars believe that "many of these hadiths are contradictory and contain affirmations that gave a bad impression of the Islamic religion. One of the explanations given for the presence of these affirmations inside the hadiths' collections is that they were introduced by Jews."²⁸⁵ So, Muslim scholars claim that this hadith which validated female genital mutilation was false and fabricated by the Jewish Arabs in Medina (339 kilometers from Makkah) who intrigued against the Prophet Mohammad to distort Islam. Denniston et al. add that, "[R]egardless of the result of such research, it is clear that even the supporters of circumcision (male or female) acknowledge that the hadiths on this subject

²⁸⁴ Ibn Dawud, *Kitab al-Adab*, Bab 45, Hadith no. 4587, quoted in Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Women in Muslim Societies* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 44.

²⁸⁵ George C. Denniston, Frederick Mansfield Hodges and Marilyn Fayre Milos, eds. *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice* (New York & London: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, 1999), 148.

that are attributed to Muhammad offer little credibility.”²⁸⁶ Despite the fact that FC/FGM is not approved in Islamic law, it is strongly identified with Islam in many African countries, and many conservative Muslims or religious cults advocate the practice.

For example, in the present time, ISIS has ordered that all females between the ages of 11 and 46 in Iraq`s northern city of Mosul should undergo circumcision. Jacqueline Badcock, the number two United Nations official in Iraq, says that female genital mutilation “is a fatwa (or religious edict) of ISIS.”²⁸⁷ According to Badcock, this religious fatwa produced by ISIS would affect 4 million women and girls and is against the will of the Iraqi people in general and women in particular.²⁸⁸ The act itself is a violation of girls` and women`s rights to physical integrity and is intended to show woman her confined role in society and control her sexual desires.

El Saadawi believes that female genital mutilation, like the veil, is a political issue rather than a religious one. The veil and female circumcision are accepted and claimed to be religious by certain Muslim groups because the veil ensures seclusion and segregation and circumcision/FGM preserves virginity and hinders promiscuity.²⁸⁹ El Saadawi sees this practice as a product of male-dominated interpretations of Holy texts to serve their political interests and to control women as passive bodies. The passivity noticed in Arab women is not one of their inborn qualities or inherent characteristics, but has been forced upon them and then enforced by society. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 148.

²⁸⁷ Staff Writer, “U.N.: ISIS orders female genital mutilation in Iraq,” *Al ARABIYA ENGLISH NEWS*, Thursday, 24 July 2014 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/24/-ISIS-order-female-genital-mutilation-in-Iraq.html> [accessed Dec. 22, 2016].

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Bodman and Tohid, eds., *Women in Muslim Societies*, 46.

affirms that, “Many Arab women have succumbed to the heavy load of a patriarchal class society and have ended up prisoners of the home, of the veil and of a system which prevents them from participating in the economic and social life of their society.”²⁹⁰ She adds that stripping a woman of her natural positive features is similar to stripping her of her duty as a human being.²⁹¹ In other words, it is like discharging her from the very core of what makes up a human being`s personality, her bodily integrity being part of the fundamental essence of the human being, distinguishable from non-human being.

This trait of passivity is repeated frequently along the journey of naïve Firdaus until the very end when she becomes a killer and hostile Arab woman. Firdaus has been a victim of her uncle and his wife when they arrange a marriage for her with an ugly old man. Her only attempt to resist this unjust marriage is to run away; then she surrenders and comes back to be Sheikh Mahmoud`s wife.²⁹² Firdaus admits her passivity and inability to resist her husband`s violent attack: “I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance, without a movement, as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood or old neglected furniture left to stand where it is, or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair.”²⁹³ It is clear that Firdaus can see herself as nothing more than a being like a piece of wood, furniture or shoes; she is like an inanimate object in that she has lost her personality as a human being.

The absence of personality haunts Firdaus; when she is given the right to choose, she does not know how to redeem herself. Bayoumi asks Firdaus if she prefers oranges or tangerines: she tries to reply but her voice fails her. She

²⁹⁰ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 197.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 110.

²⁹² El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 44.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 47.

realizes, “As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred oranges to tangerines, or tangerines to oranges.”²⁹⁴ Even though Bayoumi treats her well in the beginning, Firdaus is still the prisoner of her submission. She cooks the food and leaves the table without satisfying her hunger. Eventually, this man who offers her food and shelter and treats her with respect abuses her and rapes her several times.

Every time Firdaus is raped by Bayoumi and his friends, she lies there without any resistance. The only way of defense is, as she confesses: “Kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe.”²⁹⁵ The same scenario is repeated when she is raped by the policeman and finds that she cannot refuse or fight back; “He made me lie down on a bed. He took off his clothes. I closed my eyes as I felt the familiar weight bear down on me.”²⁹⁶ So she does not even try to scream or seek help. Again, when her pimp Marzouk violates her sexually, Firdaus is still the unresisting victim, even though she becomes a successful prostitute who learns how to choose and reject men.²⁹⁷

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus` passivity is rendered as a result of the frequent violation of her body, e.g., circumcision/FGM, sexual harassment and rape. So, the victim suffers a lack of integrity between the body and the soul. Louise du Toit in her *Philosophical Investigation of Rape* confirms this rift is inflicted on the victim, arguing that “[F]or the victim of rape, then, there occurs

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 50.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 53.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 67.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 102.

a deep rift or split and even an opposition between her body and her soul.”²⁹⁸ When Marzouk attacks her, Firdaus relates that: “... my body withdrew, turned in on itself away from me, like some passive, lifeless thing.”²⁹⁹ Thus, the author sums up this act of detachment when her heroine Firdaus offers men the outer shell which is her body and protects her deeper, inner self from them. Firdaus uses her imagination painfully to split herself into soul and body in an attempt to save a sense of self and disconnect it from the body that has never experienced fully belonging to her since childhood. Firdaus asserts that, “I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role.”³⁰⁰ So, *Woman at Point Zero* introduces passivity to the reader as an outcome of the recurrent physical violence and abuse faced by Arab woman.

In *Zeina*, the author proves that passivity is not exclusive to poor or illiterate women but also educated upper-class women might succumb to the family`s will either in marriage or in their future professions. Bodour, who is highly educated and a professor at the university, is unable to make her own choice. Even though she hates literary criticism, she cannot give up her career because it is imposed on her by her father. The author says: “Deep down, Bodour al-Damhiri didn`t want to be a literary critic.”³⁰¹ In another incident in the novel, Bodour confesses to her psychiatrist that all her life she has had no respect for literary critics and considers literary criticism as a parasitic profession.³⁰² Likewise, Mageeda, the daughter of Bodour, becomes a journalist, yet she hates writing. Even the title of her column is suggested by her father. The author tells that: “She [Mageeda] inherited writing from her

²⁹⁸ Louise du Toit, *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2009), 98.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 102.

³⁰⁰ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 93.

³⁰¹ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 31.

³⁰² Ibid, 73.

parents like the five prayers every day, the fasting of the month of Ramadan, and the shape of fingers and toes. There was no way she could get rid of it.”³⁰³ This suggests that even an educated woman`s profession is determined for her as a fate or foregone conclusions based on her social and economic circumstances.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi sustains the above claim. She elaborates on how passivity is interwoven into the life of Arab women. According to her, beauty in Arab culture concerns the outer look. Since beauty is conceptualized in a distorted and fractional sense, it is reasonable that concepts of femininity and honour should succumb to the same logic. She believes that Arab femininity or femaleness means weakness, naivety, passivity, negativeness and resignation where girls and women are concerned. In El Saadawi`s view, these are all traits that well-suit the role of Arab woman as inflicted upon her by society; the role of devoted wife to serve her husband and her children. Femininity requires a woman to be an obedient and efficient servant in order to fit with her inferior position.³⁰⁴ She goes further to argue that:

Even this outer shell in the Arab woman, this external physical appearance, is not hers to deal with as she wishes. It is others who decide for her what she should look like, those who own the industries catering for women in the major capitals of the West. The modern woman in Baghdad, Cairo or Tunis does not wear the clothes she wishes, but rather puts on what a capitalist fashion king in Paris or New York considers suitable for her.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Ibid, 31.

³⁰⁴ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 117.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 111.

In her opinion, both poor Arab women and elite, self-styled modern and fashionable Arab women are unable to make their own choices and fall victim not only to the hegemony of Arab patriarchal society but also to Western trends.

As a matter of fact, the above notion has been rendered frequently in Orientalist discourse and paintings. In *Gendering Orientalism*, Reina Lewis comments on Henriette Browne's image of harems. In the portrayal of the harem, Arab women are depicted as depending on the heroism of Western man to release them from their prison. Lewis adds, "Women are established as passive victims of unjust regimes, rather than as active self-directing subjects formed by the praxis of both power and resistance."³⁰⁶ Repression and passivity are characteristics of many representations of Arab women in the harem. Thus, the Arab woman in El Saadawi's writings has been subjected to a double bind of passivity in relation both to the tyranny of Arab men and to the influence of Western modernity.

To avoid being crushed into patriarchal or other people's fantasies, El Saadawi lets her female characters define themselves for themselves. Arising from the miserable living conditions the protagonists experience, they seek to establish their own identities in societies where institutionalized or gendered religion alienates them and patriarchies oppress them for their gender. Firdaus, Zeina and Bint Allah use every available opportunity to empower themselves. Linda Alcoff maintains that the "place of the free-willed subject who can transcend nature's mandates is reserved exclusively for men."³⁰⁷ Alcoff goes on to assert that feminists must respond to this situation by claiming that they have the exclusive right to describe and evaluate women

³⁰⁶ Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 182.

³⁰⁷ Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism," 406.

and by rejecting the possibility of women being defined by men or by any misogynist discourse.³⁰⁸ So, having recognized how contaminated the female body is by misogynist discourse, El Saadawi attempts to transcend this discourse. She allows her heroines to take different paths, even hostile ones, to liberate themselves from societal constraints and patriarchal religious oppression. In contrast to Tarabishi's claim that women's mission is to humanize the world, El Saadawi deconstructs any essentialism or traits limiting women's ability to liberate themselves, especially in a hostile context oppressing women.

El Saadawi develops a new concept of powerful women and maps out new choices for them. Alcoff argues that when "the concept 'woman' is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position."³⁰⁹ Alcoff points out that the concept of positionality allows for a determinate though fluid identity of woman that rejects essentialism. So, this positional definition by Alcoff makes the identity of woman relative to a constantly shifting context. Anticipating Alcoff's logic, El Saadawi rejects the claim that women's capacities are innately subordinate and shows that it is only their position within the religious/patriarchal-oriented society, lacking power and mobility, which requires radical changes. She creates a revolutionary spirit that transcends the inferior social position of women and constitutes identity or subjectivity in a new position—for example, a prostitute and murderess—to challenge the existing attributes that are identifiable and contest patriarchal domination. She

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 406-407.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 433.

offers some strategies that can be adopted by the Arab woman to alter her inferior position in society and to assert her true self through fighting the oppressive patriarchal society. Such strategies come closer to forced choices, since the subject's positioning within the particular context makes the chosen action the only possible choice. Prostitution is the most recurrent choice in El Saadawi's writings because it can challenge male hegemony, and lesbianism is also entertained. Murder figures in El Saadawi's fiction as a last resort tactic for Arab women's emancipation.

2.1. Prostitution

Sex and sexuality are policed in Islam, as indeed they are in all the Abrahamic religions; however, what is permissible and not permissible is defined in terms of one's sexuality understood as fundamental to human behavior. Sexuality is venerated, not celibacy. In spite of this acceptance of sexuality, within Islam sex is not permissible unless constituted within a marital relationship between two members of the opposite sex. Therefore, homosexuality is *haram* (prohibited). El Saadawi believes that it is female sexuality which is stringently monitored and controlled through religious and political interpretations of Islam. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi condemns what she understands as the Islamic attitude toward woman which is prominent in Islamic societies. She adds that woman, "always remained a source of danger to man and to society on account of her power of attraction or *fitna*."³¹⁰ Women are seen as the gatekeepers of sexuality, making them responsible not only for their own sexual desires and actions but also for those

³¹⁰ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 204.

of men. This tradition with regard to female sexuality and promiscuity still pervades modern-day Arab thought.

Furthermore, in Arab societies women's bodies are sites of male honour, and a woman must maintain her chastity and virginity until her wedding night to uphold her family honour. If a woman is found to have lost her virginity prematurely, the consequences can be dire. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi relates a number of stories from her time as a doctor in Egypt where young women were injured or even killed because their virginity was in question.³¹¹ El Saadawi goes on to explain:

Arab society still considers that fine membrane which covers the aperture of the external genital organs is *the most cherished and most important part of a girl's body*, and is more valuable than one of her eyes, or an arm, or a lower limb. An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen.³¹² [My emphasis]

El Saadawi elucidates the reason that the consequence of a woman's loss of her virginity is often violence on the part of male family members:

This is due to the fact that patriarchal class society has imposed premarital virginity on girls and ensured that the very honour of a girl, and her family, is closely linked to the preservations of this virginity. If virginity is lost, this brings almost everlasting shame which can only be "wiped out in blood," as the common Arab saying goes.³¹³

Arab women's bodies, then, are sites for males to assert their own self-worth and prove their own honour to the men around them.

³¹¹ Ibid, 26,30.

³¹² Ibid, 40.

³¹³ Ibid, 41.

El Saadawi also points out the startling double standards that exist within Arab cultures with regards to sex and sexuality, for while female virginity is insisted upon, the same standards are not applied to men. She claims that male promiscuity is a known and accepted fact in many Arab societies. El Saadawi's explanations also make it easier to understand the Imam in *The Fall of the Imam* and his constant need to conceal his impoverished beginnings as a marker of shame while continuing to be promiscuous. The only source of shame that the Imam outwardly acknowledges is his boyhood poverty, which constantly haunts him;³¹⁴ the Imam recognizes no other source of shame and so he continues to be promiscuous because his money reassures him that he is honourable. She further asserts that while Islam maintains that both males and females should remain chaste until married, Arab cultures place the burden of purity, honour and respect on the female body only; the male body is held to a different set of standards that classify male virility and sexual experience as markers of worth. For a man to have many partners is not as shameful as it is for a woman in Arab society because “nothing shames a man but an empty pocket”;³¹⁵ that is to say, the only source of shame for a man is to lack wealth.

In this regard, I find that Arab cultural standards with regards to gender and sex are still conservative because in the Muslim world sexual freedom, whether male or female, is still taboo. So, because of the attention placed on the Arab female body and the energy invested in maintaining the desired conduct of such a body within religious and cultural constraints, the body becomes a perfect site for El Saadawi to wage war against the oppression of Arab women. In her narratives, the author uses sex, sexuality and the Arab

³¹⁴ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 32.

³¹⁵ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 38.

female body as a site of resistance against oppressions faced daily by Arab women. In *The Fall of Imam*, *Woman at Point Zero* and *Zeina*, El Saadawi chooses to uncover an area of sex which has existed arguably for as long as humanity but has often been an undesirable topic to discuss openly. In doing so, El Saadawi introduces prostitution as a profession that brings women's independence in her novel in order to challenge Arab culture by means of resistance to the religious patriarchal law. This Islamic law, she thinks, places all its constraints on women despite the fact that it recognizes the existence of sexual passion in both men and women.³¹⁶ El Saadawi's heroine Firdaus is a convicted murderer and prostitute; it is through her story that the reader is introduced to the world of prostitution.

Prostitution is said to be the world's oldest profession; however, in most societies it is still illegal and considered morally wrong.³¹⁷ Even though, in Arab society during the pre-Islamic era, women were so highly cherished that blood would be easily shed in defense of their honour, there were other social facts: prostitution and indecency were rampant and in full operation, sometimes under the guise of marriage. The famous Persian collector of prophetic Hadith, Abi Dawud, on the authority of Aishah—Prophet Mohammad's wife—reported four kinds of marriage in pre-Islamic Arabia:

The first was similar to present-day marriage procedures, in which case a man gives his daughter in marriage to another man after a dowry has been agreed on. In the second, the husband would send his wife – after the menstruation period – to cohabit with another man in order to conceive. After conception her husband would, if he desired, have a sexual intercourse with her. A third kind was that a group of less than

³¹⁶ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 206.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 147.

ten men would have sexual intercourse with a woman. If she conceived and gave birth to a child, she would send for these men, and nobody could abstain. They would come together to her house. She would say: 'You know what you have done. I have given birth to a child and it is your child' (pointing to one of them). The man meant would have to accept. The fourth kind was that a lot of men would have sexual intercourse with a certain woman (a whore). She would not prevent anybody. Such women used to put a certain flag at their gates to invite in anyone who liked. If this whore got pregnant and gave birth to a child, she would collect those men, and one would tell whose child it was. The appointed father would take the child and declare him/her his own. When Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace) declared Islam in Arabia, he cancelled all these forms of sexual contacts except that of present Islamic marriage.³¹⁸

Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam* sheds light on women's sexuality in pre-Islamic Arabia in the sixth century C.E. She asserts that the dominant type of marriage was the matrilineal or uxorilocal marriage. In this type, the woman remains with her tribe where a man visits her or stays with her, and her children belong to her tribe not to the father. Polyandrous marriage was also practiced, where a woman could have more than one husband, as well as polygamous marriage.³¹⁹ However, in Islam now such sexual practices outside the conjugal marital framework are not allowed. Even with modernization, Islamic societies deny any tolerance to pre- or extramarital sexuality. This results in restrictive and hidden practices of prostitution.

³¹⁸ Abi Dawud, "The Book of Marriage 12," *English Translation of Sunan Abi Dawud*, eds. and trans. Hafiz Abu Tahir and Yasser Qadhi, vol. 2 (New York & Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008), 541.

³¹⁹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 41.

In Arabic art and literature, there is no trace or evidence of rendering prostitution or the prose of 'pornography' (the writing of prostitutes) as a challenge to the phallic power or as a symbol of women's solidarity. This kind of topic is still considered evil and anti-God. A never-ending stream of Arabic songs, poems and novels praise romantic love, which is considered by El Saadawi as a fundamentally sick emotion, since it is deprived of the quality of action.³²⁰ However, examining the famous English pornographic text *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* by John Cleland, which first appeared in London in 1749, clarifies how much of this erotic novel can be found in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.³²¹ Firdaus is the Arab duplicate of Fanny Hill. Both of them were orphans at an early age and raised in very poor conditions. Fanny Hill and Firdaus moved to big cities where they were fostered by experienced courtesans who initiated the novices and gave both a sense of independence and power.

Prostitution in *Zeina* is elevated by the author as much as any respectable job. When Bodour wonders what the difference is between psychiatry and prostitution, her psychiatrist replies: "Nothing. I have more respect for prostitutes than for husbands and wives who lie to one another."³²² He considers that prostitution as a profession follows a code of honour because a whore does not harm others. Workers of this profession ease the pain of men and cure their sadness like psychiatrists. El Saadawi resorts to prostitution to challenge the religious patriarchal oppressive system to which she attributes Arab women's suffering and oppression. Bodour makes this clear when she abandons her husband and her job at the university, for it

³²⁰ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face*, 110.

³²¹ John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000).

³²² El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 222.

cannot help to free her from shackles and constraints: "I am neither a wife nor a widow and I shall not grieve, like *Babylon, the whore in the Bible*" [emphasis added].³²³ The Whore of Babylon is an anti-God rebellious figure who challenges the rule of religions and patriarchy, as mentioned in the Christian New Testament. Bodour compares her autonomous self that revolts against constraints to Babylon, the whore. This term Babylon is used figuratively and widely in Western discourse, songs and art to refer to any government, system or institution that subjugates people or shows bias against race or gender. For example, in William Shakespeare's play *King Henry V*, the last words babbled by dying Falstaff refer to the whore of Babylon.³²⁴ Shakespeare portrays Joan as a whorish figure and strong woman who subverts patriarchal authority.

Likewise, in *Woman at Point Zero*, the author resorts to the profession of prostitution to empower her women characters and to resist patriarchal domination. When the beatings by her husband become too severe, Firdaus runs away and meets Bayoumi who treats her well until she wishes to be independent.³²⁵ It is at this point that Bayoumi calls her a "low woman" and uses her as a prostitute, bringing his friends over every night to have sex with her and verbally abuse her.³²⁶ When she escapes from Bayoumi, she falls back into a life of prostitution once again, but this situation is somewhat better than her life with Bayoumi in El Saadawi's view: the possibility of resistance, as Sharifa teaches Firdaus, lies in learning how to value oneself as a sex worker. The author depicts how the value and agency of woman lie in the price of her body; it is clear from Sharifa's advice that "you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who

³²³ Ibid, 246.

³²⁴ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. Roma Gill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Act 2, Scene 3, 38.

³²⁵ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 48.

³²⁶ Ibid, 52.

determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth."³²⁷ The higher the price she claims for herself, the more valuable her body.

It is only once she meets Sharifa that she can truly begin to learn about herself. Firdaus says:

I became a young novice in Sharifa's hands. She opened my eyes to life, to events in my past, in my childhood, which had remained hidden to my mind. She probed with a searching light revealing obscure areas of myself, unseen features of my face and body, making me become aware of them, understand them, see them for the first time. I discovered I had black eyes, with a sparkle that attracted other eyes like a magnet, and that my nose was neither big, nor rounded, but full and smooth with the fullness of strong passion which could turn to lust. My body was slender, my thighs tense, alive with muscle, ready at any moment to grow even more taut.³²⁸

It is as though she has never seen herself or cared for herself before this moment because of the rift between her soul and her body which results from the frequent physical abuse (e.g., FGM, sexual harassment and rape.) It is clear that since her childhood, Firdaus has been valued in terms of her body but lacking the connection to her body impedes awareness of her feminine beauty and power.

In the above passage, according to El Saadawi, there is a new-found awareness of the body and the power of the body in prostitution. Her thighs are "alive with muscle, ready at any moment to grow even more taut." There is also a pleasure associated with the body and the sexuality of the body,

³²⁷ Ibid, 58.

³²⁸ Ibid, 58.

although this pleasure is not sexual pleasure. Looking at the beauty of her own body, Firdaus seems to find pleasure in its power, and revel in its image. As a child, Firdaus felt unattractive, and these positive visual connections are established only after she meets Sharifa and begins a life of prostitution. Firdaus learns that valuing her body literally can translate into figurative value and reaching womanhood. But the experience with Sharifa is not completely good, as Firdaus tells us that "Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in."³²⁹ The sexual encounters are revolting and force her to turn her face away from the stench of the male body every time, but this is a stepping-stone to something even more liberating for Firdaus.

At this point in the narrative, there are few options for Firdaus, because she is only just starting to learn about herself. She chooses to stay with Sharifa for the time being, because life as a prostitute is better than life with her abusive husband. She declares that "marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women."³³⁰ This is a strong statement; that Firdaus continues along this path rather than returning to her family illustrates how the author prefers prostitution to marriage as the only way in which an Arab woman can assert her independence. It is obvious that Firdaus is also intrigued by the new feelings of power she is experiencing through reconnecting with her sexuality.

When she leaves Sharifa, she begins to engage clients on her own and to put her sexual power to her own use. She sells her own body, as Nadjé Al-Ali explains: "For the first time in her life, it is actually she who controls her body. No one but herself, no pimp or 'Madame.' She sells her body. Holding a ten-pound note in her hands makes her tremble and induces 'an inner contraction

³²⁹ Ibid, 61.

³³⁰ Ibid, 94.

as though something had jumped inside me and shaken my body with a violence which was almost painful' ... she feels free and independent."³³¹ As Nadge Al-Ali notices, for the first time since the narrative began, Firdaus has made her own choice. No one is pushing her into doing something, selling her, or exploiting her; she chooses her clients independently. Usually societal constraints have a hand in turning a woman to a life of prostitution, and in this narrative the prostitute is read as a victim of patriarchal domination searching for empowerment. This view of empowerment is also shared by Al- Ali in her comments on the representation of women in El Saadawi`s work.

In prostituting herself, Firdaus has taken control away from Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi, and even Sharifa. She is her own master and she is the one who reaps the benefits of her own body as she regrets her lost years: "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?"³³² Firdaus has few options available to her as an Arab woman in Arab society, but rather than consigning herself to life as an abused wife, she finds another way to return power to herself in El Saadawi's view. Firdaus confirms this truth:

A woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I was able to convince myself that I had chosen this life of my own free will. The fact that I rejected their noble attempts to save me, my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my

³³¹ Nadge Sadig Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/ Writing Gender* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1993), 23.

³³² El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 74.

choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women.³³³

Firdaus' strong voice relates that she does not wish to be pitied and she is not just another victim and she cherishes her profession.

El Saadawi makes a clear statement that the independence of women can come by means of education and earning a living: “[A]t least she can escape and do something.”³³⁴ El Saadawi refers to the helplessness of economically dependent women in the face of oppression and mistreatment. Once a woman is able to pay her own way in life, she is able to make her own choices. But this is not the case in *Woman at Point Zero*; education and any respectable profession guarantee no liberation—as will be returned to later in this chapter—with the exception of prostitution, women’s independent means to a livelihood is nonexistent. Female dependency is shown as chronic to the point of being pathological. Growing up in her father's home as dependent, Firdaus is not allowed to eat until he has finished eating. If there is not enough food, her mother hides the food from the children for her husband.³³⁵ Firdaus' husband also controls her food because she depends on him. Many of her beatings revolve around food. Sheikh Mahmoud shouts at her or beats her if she eats too much, wastes food or uses too much when preparing food.³³⁶ Firdaus never feels comfortable when eating in his presence, as he watches her constantly, ready to pounce. When Firdaus first sells her own body and receives ten pounds, she goes and buys herself roast chicken.³³⁷ In Egyptian society, meat is not generally eaten by the poor. The money also affords her something else: the ability to eat without being watched. The waiter averts his

³³³ Ibid, 97.

³³⁴ El Saadawi, “Feminism in Egypt,” 26.

³³⁵ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 18.

³³⁶ Ibid, 46.

³³⁷ Ibid, 70.

eyes from her plate at the sight of the money. She can eat in a relaxed environment. Money gained from prostitution has given her the power of men, if only in a limited capacity.

The link between power and consumption should not be overlooked, as it plays a central role in the story of the prostitute. The metaphor of power and consumption can be applied to the sexual act. The power of the money owned by men allows them to sexually consume Firdaus. This is because Firdaus lacks financial stability; however, as her wealth amasses, Firdaus can turn away clients. This newly acquired freedom suggests that men's ability to consume her sexually has been curbed by Firdaus' own economic independence: because she possesses the body and the wealth, she also has the power. As her new independent self, Firdaus rejects one of her clients because prostitution gives her the ability to choose: "I examined him carefully from head to toes and said, 'No.' He enquired: 'Why no?' I replied: 'Because there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go.'"³³⁸ Finally, Firdaus gets over her passivity so as to be able to choose and make up her mind. She possesses her body when she confirms, "My body was my property alone."³³⁹

Tarabishi argues that it is the prostitute's frigid exterior that gives her power metaphorically to, using Karl Abraham's terminology, "castrate" men by not feeling. A man's inability to bring her to climax reduces him to nothing more than an animal through the prostitute's frigidity. She does not need him as he needs her, searching her out for the purpose of enacting his basest animal desires. Tarabishi does not agree on the power of the prostitute or this empowerment for women. He criticizes El Saadawi for presenting prostitution as a general behavioral attitude, a total principle or canonical tenet which

³³⁸ Ibid, 73.

³³⁹ Ibid, 99.

should direct the life of every woman. He condemns the author for emblematising Arab women`s liberation in this practice: “[A]ny other route to the liberation of women is a dead-end, even having a job.”³⁴⁰ It seems that Tarabishi ignores what El Saadawi sees as social, economic, religious and political factors as he turns prostitution into merely a psychological or biological problem within the woman herself. Also, the problem is not simply that women having jobs will liberate them; as El Saadawi argues, the problem “is, rather, the concept of work, the type of work and the moral and material rewards for work. Work can be a way of liberating women, but it can also be a way of further enslaving and demeaning them.”³⁴¹ The contention of *Woman at Point Zero* and *Zeina* is that the employment or formal education Firdaus and Bodour receive is a farce designed not to foster independence and enlightenment but to prove its absent role in defying the patriarchal power and demeaning women.

The satirical elements in *Woman at Point Zero* are rather blatant. One of the most salient is that each time Firdaus has to flee from an abusive relationship, she carefully packs away her secondary school certificate, which proves repeatedly to be useless. The irony, of course, is that even though she is well-educated by her own society`s standards, she is unable to make a comfortable living through respectable means. When Firdaus confronts Bayoumi about work and reminds him that she has a secondary school certificate, he informs her that his coffee house is patronized largely by university graduates who cannot find work. She tells him she is going to go out and look for work. He becomes furious that this “street walker”, this “low

³⁴⁰ Tarabishi, *Woman against her Sex*, 25.

³⁴¹ *Ibid*, 208.

woman”, would dare to speak to him in such a way.³⁴² He beats her, locks her in his apartment and begins pimping her out to his friends.³⁴³ He has staked his claim that she is his property. A woman with no respectable family to care about her is fair game. Firdaus plays her female role dutifully, staying confined to the home and taking care of her male benefactor. She is also dependent on him as her master to use his male-oriented social connections to find work outside the home for her.

The education that Firdaus receives at school demonstrates its inadequacy to face real life`s hardships. Firdaus experiences isolation at the boarding school as she watches classmates who have families depart to spend the Islamic weekend, Thursday and Friday, at home. She compares herself to a prisoner watching parolees. The school provides her only stability and what she mistakenly perceives as her ticket to a bright future: “If I had something to say, therefore, it could only concern the future. For the future was still mine to paint in the colours I desired. Still mine to decide about freely, and change as I saw fit.”³⁴⁴ She dreams of a prestigious career as a doctor, judge or engineer. She takes part in an anti-government demonstration. The government is not named but it could be easily inferred from the location and El Saadawi`s autobiography, that it is a protest against the British occupation of Egypt. She is fired up by this experience of being part of something of major importance. She is an orphan living on the fringes of her society, yet feels a sense of belonging in taking part in her country`s fight for independence. She reads about heads of state but realizes that women do not become heads of state.³⁴⁵ This is a typical repetition of history dating back to the pre-Islamic and early

³⁴² El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 52.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, 53.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 24.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

Islamic period when women fought battles alongside men for common goals. After said goals were achieved, the women were summarily dismissed, and in many cases, laws enacted to hold them back and keep them subservient. Her ambitions are much loftier than those of her classmates. She becomes aware that her goals and seriousness make her somehow different from most of her peers, who are mostly interested in trivial things like romance and marriage toward which they have been socialized and educated.³⁴⁶

Although education has certainly brought some social changes for women, El Saadawi has little reverence for the value of the education system itself, which she considers as a tool for controlling people and not necessarily a means of enlightenment. She argues that this is “because of the curriculum itself. Whether education is free or paid, it’s the same,” it creates civil servants “not creative people who can rebel against the system. Education is a tool of oppression also.”³⁴⁷

In spite of being educated to a standard above the mean of her society, the protagonist is unable to find legitimate gainful employment and does not have the means to continue her education to a higher level. While a higher education might provide more of a safety net, it is not a guarantee of economic success. Firdaus would probably have a low-paying government job, similar to the one she finds when she quits prostitution, and be subject to sexual exploitation by her male bosses. The only so-called respectable work Firdaus eventually finds is as an entry-level government clerk. She gets the government job after being told by a male friend that her work as a prostitute servicing men like him is not respectable. This makes her feel bad about

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 25.

³⁴⁷ El Saadawi, “Feminism in Egypt,” 26.

prostituting herself as she reflects: "I was not a respected woman"³⁴⁸ and begins to consider how to become a "respectable" woman rather than a sex worker. This fact which she realizes makes her accept a low-paying job in order to be respectable in men`s gaze. Her standard of living plummets and she finds that it is an unwritten rule that if the women of her rank want to advance, or even keep their jobs, they must comply with requests for sexual favors from their male superiors. After three years in the company she realizes:

As a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included ... I felt sorry for the other girls who were guileless enough to offer their bodies and their physical efforts every night in return for a meal, or a good yearly report, or just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly, or discriminated against or transferred ... I came to realize that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is in fact better than hers. And so she pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body and her mind. She pays the highest price for things of the lowest value. I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one.³⁴⁹

Ironically, she finds that what her female coworkers fear the most is descending into prostitution, while she herself has been a prostitute and found it preferable in many ways.³⁵⁰ She got more respect, had more leisure time, and a much better standard of living. The life of a "respectable woman" only

³⁴⁸ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 78.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 81-82.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

leads Firdaus back to a life of submission to upper-level, male employees instead of the reign of her husband, father, uncle, pimp or Madame. The female employees she observes are no less prostitutes than she. But they are paid inappropriately, or with meager dinners. They, too, sell themselves to men for something in life, but Firdaus quickly determines that to be expensive is better than to be cheap.

In *Zeina*, the dilemma of educated women is more complicated than that of Firdaus, because the regular education at home and at school is responsible for controlling women`s minds. The protagonist Bodour is a respected university professor, yet her education and profession cannot guarantee her self-integration and independence. Despite Bodour`s literature degree, she suffers from a suppressed mind and imprisoned soul.³⁵¹ The narrator reveals, “Since childhood, Bodour had absorbed all his [her father`s] ideas. At school, she sang patriotic songs alongside her schoolmates.”³⁵² This suggests that Bodour and all educated women have been brainwashed at school and at home and fed the same culture that honours men over women. It is clear when Mageeda is ashamed of saying the name of her mother aloud at school and prefers to say the name of her father; she says about her mother: “... for she was a distinguished professor and her name was Bodour al-Damhiri, the wife of the great writer, Zakariah al-Khartiti. I wrote his name next to mine on the blackboard.”³⁵³ So, according to her society`s standards, even a highly educated woman is respected less than a man.

Highly educated women are unlucky in marriage and love, according to El Saadawi. Safi, who fails twice in marriage, discovers this truth, as she has been told by her psychiatrist: “You are a great woman, Safi, a professor with a

³⁵¹ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 15.

³⁵² Ibid, 15.

³⁵³ Ibid, 88.

mind. Any woman with a mind cannot find the man who deserves her. All the men are made of tinsel. They`re all sick liars and hypocrites.”³⁵⁴ The author depicts Safi as a brave, educated woman who rebels and chooses divorce over a miserable life within marriage. Unlike Safi, Bodour does not have enough courage to leave her husband, who is “jealous of her mind and the words she put down on the page.”³⁵⁵ In this regard, Bodour is portrayed—like most of El Saadawi`s educated Arab women—as a dead fish floating with the current.³⁵⁶ Even if the educated woman moves up in society and achieves an advanced place in her career as a doctor, professor or minister, her natural place according to society`s standards is beneath her husband and inferior to him, never equal to him.

Thus, education and respectable jobs for the protagonists in their patriarchal culture and time periods, as portrayed by the author, place girls on one of two tracks: to become either submissive wives or prostitutes. Firdaus realizes this dilemma: at the age of twenty-five, she has decided that by raising her price she raises her perceived worth; she now has prestige. She recognizes herself as a commodity and her body as capital. She becomes her own boss and a savvy businesswoman operating on her own terms, recognizing that by making her price less obtainable she makes herself a more lusted-after commodity. Finally, she has the leisure time and discretionary income to pursue her intellectual interests.³⁵⁷

Firdaus's new-found "independence" in prostitution also gives her a new view of honour and respect. In this narrative, she reduces all morals to materialistic commodities that can be sold and bought. Because she is a

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 122.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 123.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 209.

³⁵⁷ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 99.

wealthy woman now, she can donate large amounts of money to different charities. Firdaus remembers:

One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And so from then on whenever I needed a dose of honour or fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank.³⁵⁸

She realizes that "respect" can be bought, like anything else in life. The author interweaves her belief through the story of Firdaus; that is, in a double-standard Arab society, respect and honour for women cannot be obtained by education but only by money, as men used to be valued. Firdaus suggests that "a person`s price goes up as he climbs the social ladder."³⁵⁹ In fact, that money alone buys some independence but not emancipation. This is part of a critique of capitalism as well as of Islam and patriarchy.

However, caught up in the capitalist marketplace, nevertheless, in her life as a prostitute, Firdaus feels independent. She is able to live well and afford the things in life that make her feel powerful and important. Firdaus celebrates "being completely independent and living her independence completely, [of] enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love; [of] being divorced from all limitations whether rooted in rules and laws."³⁶⁰ The respectable life has done nothing but reduce her to poverty. After falling in love with Ibrahim and finally being rejected by him in favor of the boss's daughter, Firdaus decides:

[t]he time had come for me to shed the last grain of virtue, the last drop of sanctity in my blood. Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 99-100.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 99.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 95.

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 deceptions. Men impose deceptions on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. Now I knew that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women.³⁶¹

The phrase, "Now I knew what I wanted" speaks volumes for the agency Firdaus displays at this point in the narrative.

The passage also depicts a juxtaposition of the saint figure and the whore which prevails in much religious iconography. This split utilized in Islamic discourse suggests that a woman may fit into only one of two groupings, that of the saint or "honest woman" or that of the prostitute or "low woman." The suggestion is that the saint is privileged and a woman should aspire to fall into this category rather than that of the prostitute; but Firdaus suggests that "a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint," inverting the normalized equation and privileging the benefit of sexual experience for women over that of religious knowledge. This inversion can be viewed as yet another criticism of the established religion. Women's reality is not the male reality which constructs and maintains the prevailing discourses surrounding women's sexuality. The narrative lines in *Zeina* and *Woman at Point Zero* often merge. The fact that Firdaus realizes about prostitution is also verified by Zakariah al-Khartiti, who admits that "I only love the woman who hurts me and deserts me. I love her after I lose her. This is the reason why prostitutes and unfaithful women triumph over us men, while virtuous women

³⁶¹ Ibid, 94.

and faithful women suffer in their love for us.”³⁶² Firdaus sees this fact and responds accordingly.

If prostitution forms one basis for women`s solidarity and challenges to patriarchal domination, the other strategy that El Saadawi has recourse to as an anti-phallic challenge is lesbianism.

2.2. Lesbianism

Lesbianism is a recurrent theme in El Saadawi`s novels, exemplified by *Zeina* and *Woman at Point Zero*. The author takes the reader in *Woman at Point Zero* to probe deeply the heroine`s emotion toward her teacher Iqbal. In this respect, Firdaus feels a pleasure when she touches the hand of Iqbal; she says: “[T]he sudden contact made my body shiver with a pain so deep that it was almost like pleasure, or pleasure so deep that it bordered on pain.”³⁶³ She tries to deny this attraction when she is asked if she is in love with Iqbal. Her friend Wafeya puts it clearly when she asks:

‘Firdaus, are you in love with Miss Iqbal?’

‘Me?’ I said with amazement.

‘Yes, you. Who else then?’

‘Never, Wafeya.’

‘Then why do you talk about her every night?’³⁶⁴

The same conversation is repeated regarding Ibrahim, the revolutionary man with whom she falls in love. Firdaus cannot distinguish between her feelings toward Iqbal and Ibrahim. As she experiences sexual love with Ibrahim, she wonders, “I could no longer distinguish between the faces of my mother and

³⁶² El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 102.

³⁶³ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 33.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

my father, of Wafeya and Fatheya of Iqbal and Ibrahim.”³⁶⁵ Firdaus pairs Iqbal and Ibrahim together because she has been attracted to them both and has fallen in love with them in the same way. However, an explicitly sexual component is absent in Firdaus’ relation with Iqbal.

In a like manner, in *Zeina*, female homosexuality as a challenge to gender norms highlights Safi’s rebellious attitude. Safi—Bodour’s life-long friend—confirms her attraction toward the same sex. She has two experiences in marriage with men; one is Marxist and the other is Islamist; both end with failure. She admits to Bodour:

As a matter of fact, men don’t attract me. In my adolescence, I was in love with a woman. Now, at this advanced stage of my life, my adolescence is coming back to me. To be frank with you, Bodour, I’m attracted to women. I sometimes catch myself feeling hopelessly in love with a woman. One day, I dreamt of embracing Zeina Bint Zeinat. Imagine!.³⁶⁶

Safi’s infatuation with Zeina is proven to be a sexual attraction. When Bodour comments on Safi’s feeling as a sisterly or a motherly embrace, Safi corrects her friend: “there’s no innocent embrace.”³⁶⁷ Safi chooses to adopt a lesbian identity which signifies independence, freedom and a challenge to all societal and patriarchal constraints.

Lesbianism in El Saadawi’s novels can be read as analogous to the Western concept initiated in Orientalist discourse regarding the harem. In Orientalism, documents associated lesbianism and sexual deviance with Arab women’s subjectivity because they were imprisoned in the same place—the harem—for a long period of time. For example, Emily Apter in “Female Trouble

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 87.

³⁶⁶ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 82.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 82.

in the Colonial Harem” argues that sexual relations between harem women constitute a challenge to the male power around which the harem is understood to be organized. Working from the ground that the harem plays the role of the occidental brothel, Apter argues that it creates a threat to phallic absolute domination and defiance by keeping him out.³⁶⁸

Apter’s assumption about the harem as resisting phallic power shares some ground with Wendy Leeks’ psychoanalytical argument. According to Apter, Leeks suggests that the portraits of the French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Bain Turq* (1862) constitute a denial of the woman’s lack. Thus, female homosexuality is characterized by a return to the *jouissance* of the pre-Oedipal. In the pre-Oedipal, the self reunites with the mother’s body and rejects any third part.³⁶⁹ In this respect, this psychoanalytic reading of the harem and Arab women’s lesbianism as documented in Oriental discourse proves that women constitute, in El Saadawi’s narratives, a dyadic relation between the self and the mother. In this phase, which characterizes lesbianism, there is a complete rejection of the Other, Phallus, Name-of-the-Father or Law. So, lesbianism is an anti-phallic strategy through which El Saadawi finds a way to resist patriarchy.

El Saadawi’s deployment of the concepts of prostitution and lesbianism is to challenge the law of the father and to assert Arab womanhood and independence, which cannot be denied in her writings. However, at a certain point in the narrative, money and prostitution can no longer assert Firdaus’s independence. The hopelessness of her situation as an Arab woman can only be redressed by a capital crime, murder.

³⁶⁸ Emily Apter, “Female Trouble in the Colonial Harem,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (1992): 203-24 (219).

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 219.

2.3. Murder

The successful prostitute—Firdaus—has been told by her pimp that she cannot protect herself and she finds herself facing a new threat which shakes her new independent identity. Marzouk is the new intruder who threatens her independent self; he says:

'Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police. That's what I'm going to do.'

'But I can protect myself,' I said.

'There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself.'

'I don't want your protection.'

'You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out.'³⁷⁰

Firdaus refuses this protection, which she perceives as a threat. Firdaus' illusions of independence are shattered when this dangerous, well-connected pimp muscles in on her business. The pimp informs her that there are only two types of people in the world: masters and slaves, and that a woman on her own can never be a master. In the Marxist view, the only two major types are the proletariat and the bourgeoisie which, like the master and slave, have opposing interests. She stabs him with the knife he intended to use on her and finds that it is very cathartic, as if she is exacting a culmination of revenge against every male injustice she has suffered in her life. Prostitution no longer provides her with agency in this situation. Because she deals with a pimp who strips her of power and controls her, she resorts to a different strategy of defense. Firdaus kills Marzouk and sticks the knife into every part of his body.³⁷¹ She turns from a successful prostitute into a murderess. With only this

³⁷⁰ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 100.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 104

forced choice, Firdaus finds herself once again, this time as a murderess and admits "[T]hey know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death."³⁷² Murderess is the new identification of Firdaus since the subject's positioning within particular circumstances has determined it. This action of murder is the only possible and perhaps the best option which guarantees her freedom, as she wonders "Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid."³⁷³ This confrontation with the pimp proves that money alone cannot empower women. After Firdaus kills her pimp,³⁷⁴ she is eventually released from the fear that shackled her constantly, and she realizes that no amount of money can empower her. She rather finds murder empowering and inspirational as she marches out into the street with her head held high.³⁷⁵

Firdaus is then invited by an Arab prince.³⁷⁶ She sets her price and enters his room. He angers her and she tells him that she is a killer. When he refuses to believe that she is capable of murder because she is too gentle, she replies, "And who said that to kill does not require gentleness? ... I might not kill a mosquito, but I can kill a man."³⁷⁷ Firdaus kills her pimp when he raises his knife to kill her. She is not a murderess by nature, so she is incapable of killing a mosquito. But, unlike a mosquito, when a man threatens her life and treats her violently, she reacts in the same way to defend herself. When she is paid, she tears the notes:

I snatched the notes from his hand and tore them up into little pieces with a pent-up fury. The feel of those notes under my fingers was the

³⁷² Ibid, 110.

³⁷³ Ibid, 104.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, 109.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 105.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 106.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 108-109.

same as that of the first piastre ever held between them. The movement of my hands as I tore the money to pieces, tore off the veil, the last, remaining veil from before my eyes, to reveal the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life ... it was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held, my father's piastre, my uncle's piastre, all the piastres I had ever known, and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known, one after the other in a row: my uncle, my husband. My father, Marzouk and Bayoumi, Diaa, Ibrahim, and tearing them all to pieces one after the other, ridding myself of them once and for all, removing every trace their piastres had left on my fingers, tearing away the flesh of my fingers to leave nothing but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all.³⁷⁸

So, when she demands an extremely high price from a client who claims to be a prince, she takes his money and rips it up. Her mind goes back to the first Piaster that a man, her father, ever gave her. She feels that by destroying the money she can erase all vestiges of the men throughout her life who have turned her into a prostitute.

This tearing of the prince's money is symbolic of Firdaus' resistance against all the men who have oppressed her in one way or another during her life. She is shocked at how easy it is to rid herself of men and wonders why she has not done so before. She knows exactly what she is doing and is in total control of her actions. Tarabishi in his critique of El Saadawi's works suggests that Firdaus' destruction of the prince's money in front of him is likened to castration because "money equals penis."³⁷⁹ What Firdaus is really doing,

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 107-108.

³⁷⁹ Tarabishi, *Woman against her Sex*,30.

however, is shattering the economic ties between the prince and herself. There is no more money and she owes him nothing more. His money cannot buy her body any longer. In tearing the money, Firdaus is also excising all the men from her life and all the oppression she has ever felt. The only way of resisting the patriarchal hegemony which impedes her womanhood is to become a murderess. El Saadawi in her reply to Tarabishi's critique points out that Firdaus is capable of defending herself physically, a capability which finally integrates with her new personality.³⁸⁰ So, Firdaus finds her lost subjectivity or selfhood in killing men who threaten her life, which makes her fear nothing and feel free from everything.

Hostility is expressed openly towards men, even though El Saadawi insists that in *Woman at Point Zero* the protagonist does not hate men and is open to love.³⁸¹ In *Woman at Point Zero*, the heroine does not hide her hostile attitude at different points of the narrative as she asserts: "[E]ach time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them, I would spit on it."³⁸² Then, she meets Sharifa, and both of them agree that all men are like a plague, as Sharifa claims: "[T]hey're all the same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names. Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi."³⁸³ At the end of the novel, Firdaus says: "I became aware of the fact that I hated men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully."³⁸⁴ Firdaus kills the pimp and slaps the prince not only because she wants to redeem her subjectivity and independence but also because she hates men. She finally concludes that: "you are all criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 193.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 195.

³⁸² El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 9.

³⁸³ Ibid, 55.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 96.

journalists, and all men of all professions."³⁸⁵ She finally sees the truth, that prostitution does not achieve self-independence and freedom; she cannot be free of a patriarchal system. She has already killed and wants to kill more to destroy any domination asserted over her.

In *Zeina*, murder is introduced in a fantasy form. Bodour does not have the courage as Firdaus does to commit a real murder, even though she dreams of it. This desire to kill her husband visits her every morning at the breakfast table. Once she holds a knife, she wishes to plunge it in her husband's chest. Bodour realizes that she conceals herself out of fear; that is why she has to invent a character Badreya who is brave enough to kill: "Bodour realized that it was Badreya holding the knife, for Badreya had the courage to commit murder without being found out by the police."³⁸⁶ Bodour's husband has a desire to kill her as she notices: "... the buried desire in his eyes. In their hearts, the desire for murder was just as strong as that for sex ... The instinct for destruction and death went hand in hand with sexual lust."³⁸⁷ The knife evokes Bodour's eagerness to murder as she imagines: "[T]he knife descended little by little from the chest to the belly."³⁸⁸ Murder has not been committed by the protagonist or her husband, yet it is still a buried desire. Eventually, the heroine revolts against the injustice of her situation and decides to get a divorce. She realizes that freedom and courage come at a price. When injustice reigns, loneliness becomes the only civilized option; she says to herself that: "loneliness is far better than an obnoxious companion. Divorce, Bodour is the solution. You need to free yourself from this abhorrent marriage."³⁸⁹ She no longer fears divorce, separation or loneliness. Bodour becomes another

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 110.

³⁸⁶ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 77.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 77.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 219.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 208.

woman who is born the moment she opens the door and leaves. The author affirms that fear, like inherited faith, is blind. Once women open their eyes, it vanishes like “a drop of rain into the waters of the sea.”³⁹⁰ In doing so, the heroine breaks the chains that kept her in shackles from head to toe. Her flesh and bones are released from captivity and the reins restraining her are loosed.

However, in her response to Tarabishi, El Saadawi criticizes his adherence to the Freudian duality between the concepts of femininity and masculinity. She finds that this view regards femininity as a set of fixed traits including weakness, submission and becoming absorbed in the role of wife or mother as the only way of coping with her inferior nature. She argues that, “it is men themselves who laid the foundations of modern psychology and sexology. And it is only recently that women have started writing about themselves.”³⁹¹ El Saadawi contends that this view of Tarabishi cannot possibly humanize women; Tarabishi believes that women have no need to fight and they can win the war by annulling it. So, El Saadawi maintains that this philosophy of non-violence is only to justify another kind of violence. In other words, this double-standard philosophy leads to further aggression against women rather than its abolition. She adds that, “[H]umanity necessitates justice and justice demands that if someone points a gun at me, I do more than present him with a flower and my chest as a target.”³⁹² El Saadawi points out that war will never be abolished until there is a correct balance of power between countries, and the same logic holds true for men-women relations. So, to achieve human relationships between them, there should be an equal balance of power addressing all social, economic and intellectual powers. Moreover, humanizing the world necessitates humanizing political, economic

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 233.

³⁹¹ Tarabishi, *Woman against her Sex*, 198.

³⁹² Ibid, 199.

and social systems in such a way that a just distribution of authority and wealth is made regardless of sex, race or creed.

El Saadawi has been subject to further criticism that there lies a danger in the harrowing tales of her polemics and novels. As O'Kefee argues, the problem is not only that the effect of reading such stories is that the complex conditions of women's lives under Islam became caricatured, but that El Saadawi has been seen as anomalous and isolated. Also, El Saadawi is granted the position of singular representative of Arabic women, when she is part of a long and complex history of Egyptian feminism which has been largely contemporaneous with the movement for women's rights in the West. In an interview with Helena Frith Powell, El Saadawi clarifies why her novel *Woman at Point Zero* is studied in schools and universities around the world, but not in Egypt; "Never, never will it be studied here," she exclaims. "It was never even published here [in Egypt], I gave it to a feminist editor here and she asked me how I could defend a prostitute. The critics called me a man-hater."³⁹³ Powell confirms how she receives El Saadawi's writing: "It is true that after reading five books by Nawal El Saadawi I can hardly bear to look at Egyptian men. I imagine them at best as cruel bordering on sadistic wife beaters with several child slaves hidden in their damp cellars. Her portrayals of men are relentlessly negative."³⁹⁴ In fact, El Saadawi uses her novels to take the struggle from the homes of the oppressed women to the streets, using the written word as a revolutionary tool. The vivid symbolism that emerges throughout the novels is nothing but a means to that end: an instrument to show the sources of oppression in society. Prostitution, murder and religious oppression are themes reiterated by Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* and the protagonists in

³⁹³ El Saadawi, "Interview with Nawal El Saadawi," para. 6 of 17.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, para. 7 of 17.

Zeina and *The Fall of the Imam*. The stories are from the same culture, religion, language, and time periods; they are nearly identical. They connote the low status and precarious circumstances of Arab females and the hypocrisy of an Islamic patriarchal society.

So, women`s livelihoods are intimately bound up with their oppression in the Arab world. For El Saadawi, strategies for contesting patriarchal and religious power range from prostitution to murder. Each can offer a challenge to female oppression and male domination but none can guarantee happiness. The heroines pave their own ways in search of self-liberation despite the authoritarian patriarchy and institutionalized religion that plague them and rationalize the mental and emotional inferiority of women. El Saadawi's novels emphasize the issue of religious hypocrisy in Arab society, whereby men manipulate religion to enslave women. Such manipulations of Islam significantly result in the distortion of the image of religion as a potential solution that might cultivate gender equality. As a result, Firdaus, Zeina and Bint Allah neither value religion nor ever think of it as a good solution in their daily lives. They also challenge the religious teachings their parents and communities promote.

El Saadawi strongly criticizes the use of religion as a tool to enslave those who are uneducated and fearful of God`s punishment. In contrast to Aboulela`s Islamic spirituality, as shown in Chapter Four, El Saadawi seeks to create a secular-oriented revolutionary spirit. She believes that women will benefit from secularism, because women are inferior in all religions: they suffer from religions. So when religion becomes separate from the legal system, the family code, culture, and the media, women will benefit more from secular moves toward an egalitarian society.

In speaking of the secular revolutionary spirit, El Saadawi not only discusses ways of challenging the family and patriarchal law, but also employs the discourse of national allegory in new and striking ways to liberate women and country, and offers new paradigms for thinking about women as land and nation. In this respect, too, she has been a pioneer and her creative works are worth close analysis.

Chapter Three

The Female Body as Site of National Allegory in El Saadawi`s Novels

“Mum is coming back,
coming soon,
coming with a gift ...”³⁹⁵

In the anti- and postcolonial era, the mid-twentieth century, nationalism spread in the Arab countries. Twenty years after Egypt`s independence in 1922, anti-imperial male writers engaged in novels of national allegory. In their writings, women are objectified by the authors to explore the situation of the nation. They deal with women as symbols of the nation or land rather than as people with real problems affecting their lives. Muhammad Haykal started this project of writing national texts in his *Zainab*³⁹⁶ (1912), which has often been considered the first novel in Arabic. Roger Allen claims that the novel is “an extremely important step in a continuous process [the development of Egyptian literary production], one of the best examples of the early novels.”³⁹⁷ Anti-Colonial and, later, postcolonial, novels by male nationalists include works by Tawfik Al Hakim, Yahya Haqqi, Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi and Nobel prize winner Naguib Mahfouz.

In his novel, *Bird of the East* (1938), Tawfik Al Hakim employs the female body of the Egyptian heroine to represent the Islamic nation and contrasts her

³⁹⁵ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 247.

³⁹⁶ Muhammad Haykal, *Zainab* (London: Darf, 1989).

³⁹⁷ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novels: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

with the Frenchwoman who functions as a symbol of Western civilization.³⁹⁸ Likewise, Yahya Haqqi's *The Saint's Lamp* (1944) uses figures of women to represent Islamic tradition versus the values of Western cultures.³⁹⁹ Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi is no exception to his male predecessors. In his novel *Egyptian Earth* (1953), the female character Wasifa symbolizes the fertile land, the property of her peasant fiancé. Sharqawi romantically describes land/country as a woman over whom there is much male competition.⁴⁰⁰ In all these narratives of national allegory, the female body or femininity functions as romantic symbolism, yet the tales fail to address issues affecting women, let alone provide detailed analysis of them.

Timothy Brennan posits that the tale of the nation is often depicted in the form of national allegory in the discourse of the colonized people: "[I]t is specially in Third World fiction after the Second World War that the fictional uses of 'nation' and 'nationalism' are more pronounced."⁴⁰¹ So, according to Brennan, the tale of the nation comes to the forefront in the literature of the Third World. However, Fredric Jameson offers a more comprehensive view of Third World literature in this regard. In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson asserts that all Third World literature is national allegory. He maintains that Third World discourse cannot "be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world imperialism— a cultural struggle that is itself a reflection of the economic

³⁹⁸ Tawfik Al Hakim, *Bird of the East*, trans. R. Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayats, 1966).

³⁹⁹ Yahya Haqqi, *The Saint's Lamp and Other Stories*, trans. M.M. Badawi (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1973).

⁴⁰⁰ Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi, *Egyptian Earth*, trans. Desmond Stewart (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

⁴⁰¹ Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," in *The Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 44-70 (47).

situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization.”⁴⁰² This life-and-death struggle with Western imperialism, Jameson argues, produces the texts of such societies. He adds, “even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*”⁴⁰³ Jameson contends that all Third World literature, even that which appears to represent private sexual dynamics, should be read mainly in political and social terms.

Doubling one text by another within a text is defined by Jameson as a “transcoding”; that is, a way of inventing “a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or ‘texts,’ or two very different structural levels of reality.”⁴⁰⁴ Jameson believes that a political unconscious operates in all social and cultural activities, including writing. He argues that narrative can be read as a socially emblematic description of the political situation and the status of the nation through transcoding.

Transcoding is a type of mediation that connects the seemingly distinct phenomena of reality.

Clint Burnham goes further to explain Jameson’s transcoding. He explains transcoding in terms that it “offers a similarity between two or more different levels ... that is figural; but the allegorization is then

⁴⁰² Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, no. 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88 (68).

⁴⁰³ *Ibid*, 69.

⁴⁰⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 40.

negated by the realization that the world is one totality or whole.”⁴⁰⁵ This means the abuse of women within the family is linked to the abuse of the nation by nationalists. Even though they are disparate phenomena, “[T]ranscoding searches out that point of mediation or joining—the gristle that connects even while it separates—and the transcoding operation is performative.”⁴⁰⁶ Thus, in terms of El Saadawi’s narratives of national allegory, women/nation abuse may appear as distinct issues, yet transcoding functions as a symbolic use in which a part is made to represent the whole.

In response to Jameson’s article “Third-World in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Aijaz Ahmad, a Marxist theorist, criticizes him in “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory.’” Ahmad criticizes Jameson’s terms which divide the world into what the latter calls the “first” and the “third” worlds.⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, Ahmad disagrees with Jameson for his inclusive statement about the omnipresent nature of national allegory in Third World literature.⁴⁰⁸ Another critic, Reda Bensmaia, takes up Ahmad’s concern that Jameson points to a process of essentializing or reductionism.⁴⁰⁹ However, Bensmaia agrees that the postcolonial texts are often allegorical; “if it is indeed true that an allegorical dimension persists in most so-called postcolonial texts, allegory is almost never the primary or singular ambition of the authors in question.”⁴¹⁰ Bensmaia believes that the nation—in this case, Algeria—“is not a place of history,” rather it is “a place, in the process of becoming, a place to be

⁴⁰⁵ Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 108.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 109.

⁴⁰⁷ Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25 (3).

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁰⁹ Reda Bensmaia, *Experimental Nations: or, the Invention of the Maghreb*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 68.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, 68.

made, constructed (re)written. In order for this place to happen, to be able to enter history, however, it is imperative that we wrest it from the commonplaces that have been stuck on it; we must wrest it as well from the allegories that made it lose its way in the desert."⁴¹¹ Thus, this chapter examines how El Saadawi in her narratives employs or subverts national allegory. Doing what Bensmaia hopes for, El Saadawi writes back to the commonplaces of national allegory and rewrites the nation in her own terms.

Amal Amireh writes about literary production in the Arab world after the 1967 defeat in the Arab-Israeli war and the reaction of the intellectuals:

This defeat was a turning point for many intellectuals, who, as a result, directed their critical gaze inward towards themselves and their society. They believed that the unexpected and crushing military blow and the ensuing loss of land were caused as much by a corrupt Arab society as by Israel's military might. Not merely directed at leaders and their corrupt regimes, this approach attempted to scrutinize and expose the roots of the problem as these writers saw it, not its outward manifestations.⁴¹²

Amireh argues that El Saadawi's non-fiction books produced between 1971 and 1977 can be located within this category. She explains that the critiques of these intellectuals "were part of a radical project that aimed at questioning and undermining the various structures of power governing both the individual and the group."⁴¹³ However, in my view, El Saadawi's novels *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Zeina* engage in questioning and undermining the power structures of the specifically theocratic patriarchal nation and direct

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 81.

⁴¹² Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World," *Signs* 26, no. 1 (Autumn, 2000): 215-249 (230) http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175385?seq=16#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed Jan. 4, 2017].

⁴¹³ Ibid, 230.

their criticism at the hypocritical leaders and their corrupt regimes, as will be demonstrated in the following analysis.

Unlike her male predecessors, El Saadawi engages in novels of national allegory with a profound analysis of class and gender and the intersection of those two categories. Writing back to those novels of male nationalists, El Saadawi creates a discursive space calling for women`s liberation from the colonization of the body through patriarchal practices. She narrates the story of the nation and offers a critique of this nation as a prison for its women. In her narratives of national allegory, female characters take part as autonomous subjects to describe the nation and their struggle for independence in their own terms, as defined by Fredric Jameson: “the coincidence of the personal story and the ‘tale of the tribe.’”⁴¹⁴ In this tale, land or country has been figured in the symbol or image of revolutionary or submissive women.

Woman at Point Zero, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Zeina* are not mere fictionalized narratives of the Egyptian nation and its women. I contend that national allegory is a dynamic trope operating in many of the texts produced in the former colonies. This chapter`s primary concern is to show how El Saadawi`s narratives of national allegory invert the traditional symbolism between men and women,⁴¹⁵ allow women to speak out and to resist patriarchal nationalism, and work to bring institutionalized Islamic law and law of the father into question. El Saadawi maintains that “[b]ecause the effect of fiction is deep, but remote. It takes a longer time. It touches life. It eliminates gradually.”⁴¹⁶ So, through her writings, the land and its women may be cured

⁴¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, “A Brief Response,” *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 26-27 (26).

⁴¹⁵ In El Saadawi`s symbolism, the father figure represents culture or nation and the female body represents land or country.

⁴¹⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, “Reflections of a Feminist,” interview by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, eds., Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 394-404 (402).

of the compulsive constraints and repression of their freedom. In these novels, El Saadawi subverts the paradigm of male-written national allegory by reversing the directions of symbolism.⁴¹⁷

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus has been treated as property or land in a class-stratified and patriarchal society. Eventually, she rejects the concept of being land and revolts against this law by murdering her pimp who epitomizes the class-patriarchal system. Throughout the narrative, Firdaus represents Egypt and its women who are abused by the false revolutionary leaders and fall victim to their betrayal. In this novel, El Saadawi offers a powerful critique of the Egyptian power structure during Sadat's regime and its tolerance of the Muslim Brethren or Brotherhood. *The Fall of the Imam* is another allegory of Egypt through the female character Bint Allah. She is the daughter of the God-like figure, the Imam, and frequently reincarnates her mother, the Goddess of Earth. In their struggle against the religious patriarchal oppression of the Imam, Bint Allah and her mother figure are the emblematic use of the land. In order to resist the phallic-symbolic Imam, the female character Bint Allah borders on blasphemy to subvert the religious paradoxes and hypocrisy inherent in institutionalized Islam.

Likewise, in *Zeina*, the illegitimate daughter of Bodour, Zeina, is abandoned in the streets of Cairo by her mother. In her youth, Bodour had an affair with a revolutionary activist who was murdered for his political activity. This fictionalized tale of love, loss, and courage can be read in political terms. It is a national allegory that offers a critique of the nation and at the same time a

⁴¹⁷ For Example, Tawfik Al Hakim in *Bird of the East* and Yahya Haqqi in *The Saint's Lamb* employ Sayda Zainab Mosque to represent the spiritual cure of illusion and materiality, while in El Saadawi's texts, Azhar Mosque produces male-interpreted texts that permit exploiting women (embodying Egypt) in favor of men and legitimate their abuse to achieve male political objectives.

hope for a better future which can be achieved by a new revolution bringing social and political change to the nation.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the analysis focuses on the question of women's position in society post-Egyptian Nationalism as it relates to practices of Islam. Through close reading, I will investigate whether the nation and its nationalism brought social freedom to Egyptian women, or if it functioned as a prison for women, in an attempt by the author at subverting the traditional national allegory. Power relations are also examined in relation to the gendered subject; and how women's private aspects of love, sexuality and honour intersect with the nation and power structure as proposed in Jameson's thesis.

El Saadawi portrays the prostitute Firdaus's morals and sexuality to serve the purpose of the political allegory rather than depicting the life of a poor woman for its own sake. In contrast to the previous national allegories written by men which employed prostitution to criticize the colonial (British) exploitation of Egypt,⁴¹⁸ this profession and sex worker are used by El Saadawi to criticize the internal corrupt religious patriarchal system and its collusion with capitalism. Citing Amy Katz Kaminsky in "Women Writing About Prostitution," Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues that men and women write differently in their literary portrayal of prostitute subjects. So "Firdaws [sic] had the good fortune to emerge from a feminist's pen, a fact that may account

⁴¹⁸ For example, Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1946). Mahfouz associates Hamida the prostitute with Egypt. In her struggle with the nature of the power relations between herself and her Europeanized pimp, Mahfouz draws a symbolic connection between Egypt and England in their commercial, political and military relationships. In this sense, Egypt aspires for its independence from the Empire. However, Hamida is portrayed negatively because she chooses this profession of prostitution freely and is blamed for her destiny in a remark regarding Egypt's collusion with imperialism. Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, trans., Trevor Le Gassick (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

for the consistency and universality of the message in her saga.”⁴¹⁹ El Saadawi’s portrayal of prostitution and Firdaus exposes another side of the story that remains ignored in Mahfouz’s *Medaq Alley*. In creating it, she condemns father, husband, Imam, pimp, policeman, politicians, rulers and all male figures who exert patriarchal authority and capitalist oppression against women in Nasser’s and Sadat’s regimes.

Thus, the ultimate reading of El Saadawi’s portrayal of prostitution and the sex worker, Firdaus, is not a glorification of the profession, as Tarabishi claims, or a simple fictionalized story. It is rather a story of a revolutionary female character forged by socioeconomic and political conditions, forced to take the path of rebellion, and at the same time an embodiment of a national struggle against exploitation by indigenous politicians and rulers. Precisely, El Saadawi condemns the practices of gendered Islam that she believes were embedded in the patriarchal capitalist system that governed politics and economy under Sadat’s rule. Mohammad Husein in his “Islamic Radicalism as a Political Protest Movement,” explains that, “Egypt was integrated into the western world a long time ago, since Mohammed Ali in the nineteenth century, and it has been a bridge between the West and the Middle East.”⁴²⁰ He goes further to argue that following Nasser’s socialism and Sadat’s Open Door Policy in the 1970s, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood grew overtly. Husein states that President Anwar Sadat “came to power in 1970. He initiated a reconciliation, with the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, and he used them to balance the Nasserites who opposed him, and the communists

⁴¹⁹ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 65.

⁴²⁰ Mohammad Husein, “Islamic Radicalism as a Political Protest Movement,” in *Islamic Fundamentalism: A Debate on the Role of Islam Today* (London: Institute for African Alternatives, 1990), 31-33 (31).

because he was anti- Communist and anti-atheist.”⁴²¹ Husein also contends that the Muslim Brotherhood were the most dominant political force in the country under Sadat.⁴²² So, when Sadat came to power after Nasser, he shifted the political allegiance from the Soviet Union to the United States. However, Nasser’s influence and socialism continued and threatened Sadat’s political power. As a result, he used the Islamist groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, to purge residual Nasserism. He encouraged Islamic ideology to counter Nasserite socialist ideology to his advantage.

Mervat Hatem also criticizes the nationalist leaders Nasser and Sadat for their betrayal of Egyptian women’s rights by approving the Muslim Personal Status Law that subjugates women as gendered subjects in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.⁴²³ Hatem believes that the domination of indigenous patriarchal systems in the national struggle for liberation has affected women’s rights; while the national movement was committed to bringing transformation to the country, it failed to bring about any change regarding women inferior status.⁴²⁴ She adds that since independence, different regimes when discussing women’s rights have shown the same contradictory approaches in the public and private spheres.⁴²⁵ In other words, while advocating gender equality and the increasing public integration of women, the Egyptian male-dominated system legitimates gender asymmetry within the family in the name of Islam and nationalism.

In “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” El Saadawi offers explicit criticism of the practice of patriarchal Islam implicated in capitalism as it runs through

⁴²¹ Ibid, 32.

⁴²² Ibid, 33.

⁴²³ Mervat Hatem, “The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism and Patriarchy in Muslim Personal Status Laws: The Case of Modern Egypt,” *Feminist Issues*, no. 6 (1986): 19-43 (19).

⁴²⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 24.

her novels of national allegory, *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam* and *Zeina*. According to her, the rise of the slave system has led to the division of society into two classes: masters and slaves, and then into gender disparity: men and women, because class and gender go hand in hand in what she terms the class-patriarchal system.⁴²⁶ El Saadawi explains that “the slave system turned from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to pseudo-socialism but we are still, in a sense, in a master-slave relationship, whether sexes or classes. And this system resulted in what we now suffer: war, aggression, invasion, colonialism, neo-colonialism.”⁴²⁷ She also criticizes the male-interpreted Holy text for its expectation of monogamy only for women.⁴²⁸

Woman at Point Zero is set against the backdrop of the period following the Free Officers Revolution in 1952, from the beginning of Nasser’s regime to the beginning of Sadat’s era. In the “Author’s Preface,” El Saadawi says that she was inspired after interviewing a woman prisoner in Qanatir Prison for her research on “Women and Neurosis in Egypt” in 1972. El Saadawi writes, “I developed a feeling and admiration for this woman who seemed to me so exceptional in the world of women to which I was accustomed.”⁴²⁹ She continues, “[T]his woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me ... a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom.”⁴³⁰ In the novel, Firdaus tells the story of being abused by the class-patriarchal power exerted by the male figures, politicians, religious leaders and ordinary men

⁴²⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” in *Islamic Fundamentalism: A Debate on the Role of Islam Today* (London: Institute for African Alternatives, 1990), 1-11 (2).

⁴²⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

⁴²⁹ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, xi.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*, xii.

who enjoy power at various levels in the system. Eventually, Firdaus becomes conscious of how to play the class-patriarchal game. In condemnation of the double standards of religious society, El Saadawi presents a reversal where the prostitute is innocent and righteous while the patriarchal society is criminal and corrupt.

El Saadawi offers such a harsh critique of her society and nation because she believes there is no cure or change that can be made unless men`s and women`s consciousness is sufficiently raised. Her narrative is meant to criticize the material reality of the power structure and its relation to class and gender. The first words uttered by Firdaus that reveal her possession of power occur when she states: “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you.”⁴³¹ At this point, waiting for her death, Firdaus fears nothing and frees herself from everything. She believes in her own superiority, which transcends male power, and possesses control over her destiny and even the interviewer.

Firdaus has narrated her story since childhood when she first encountered the very first trauma of being female in her society. She has been subjected to female genital mutilation (circumcision).⁴³² The practice of so-called circumcision inscribes the patriarchal system and its control over women`s bodies.⁴³³ Women`s bodies are transformed into a battleground in the struggle between nationalism and imperialism, so female genital mutilation is practiced by some Egyptians to assert national difference. In *Colonial Fantasies*, Meyda Yegenoglu emphasizes that “the very construction

⁴³¹ Ibid, 9.

⁴³² Ibid, 12.

⁴³³ The historical and political aspects of this practice and its health consequences were discussed in the previous chapter, while in this chapter, so-called female circumcision will be read symbolically in relation to the nation. The law-of-the-father, which I consider here within the cultural system of patriarchal traditions that have sometimes been claimed to be Islamic, such as a female circumcision, instantiates patriarchy within that system and symbolically represents God`s word.

of national difference is possible only through the mediation of woman, a mediation which nevertheless has to be repressed.”⁴³⁴ According to Yegenoglu, women are regarded as the principle site for expressing the nation’s culture. In the novel, Firdaus’s mother participates in her daughter’s genital mutilation, and that breaks the bond between them. This incident is Firdaus’s first experience of betrayal and loss of love. Ironically, despite the mother’s attempt at suppressing her daughter’s sexual desire and controlling the female body in fulfillment of the patriarchal dictates, Firdaus turns out to be a successful prostitute. Forouz Jowkar comments on the sexual double standards of the Middle East and mentions El Saadawi as a source:

In reports from more urban settings of the Middle East, however, the existence of severe sexual double standards for men and women becomes noticeable. While for women virginity and sexual modesty are the prime definitions of their worth in their own eyes and those of society, for men, sexual experience is a source of pride and a symbol of virility [El Saadawi 1980]. This particularly characterizes a large sector of urban society and of the upper classes in rural areas. In urban areas, access to low-cost prostitution allows for the sexual ventures of the majority of single and married men, while for the women the code of honor and shame leads to early marriage and motherhood as the life project.⁴³⁵

Jowkar indicates that family honour comes as a priority in most patriarchal Muslim societies and is attached to the female body. To control female sexual behaviour, Jowkar argues, patriarchal society seeks to instill notions of female

⁴³⁴ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards A Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126.

⁴³⁵ Forouz Jowkar, “Honor and Shame: A Feminist View from Within,” *Feminist Issues* 6, no. 1 (1986): 45-65 (51).

honour in a woman`s mind or even cut off her organs. However, Firdaus challenges this system by questioning the discourse on honour and shame. She unveils the religious patriarchal deceit of her society by exposing her paradoxical findings that money can protect one`s honour, but money cannot be obtained without losing one`s honour.⁴³⁶ So, honour, like religion, needs earthly power to protect it such as money, arms or media. Capitalism`s collusion with religion plays a crucial role in maintaining the position of men in power. Firdaus realizes this truth and donates some money to a charitable association. Newspapers publish her picture and praise her as a model citizen.

Practicing prostitution, in El Saadawi`s view, is like practicing medical treatment and like the national revolutions in Egypt. In this sense, principles and moral codes can be exchanged for money. In her *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi narrates a significant incident that happened to her in her youth when she suffered from an illness. At the clinic, she discovered that physicians in Egypt scheduled regular appointments at a fixed price, but for a higher price, these appointments were cancelled to schedule “emergency appointments” so that the rich can have faster access to see a doctor. El Saadawi considers this practice to be prostitution of the medical profession.⁴³⁷ In the novel, the prostitute Firdaus asks for money to offer a time to her friend Di`aa; being sarcastic with her, Di`aa says, “You make me feel I`m in a clinic. Why don`t you hang up a price list in the waiting room? Do you also have emergency visits?”⁴³⁸ Once the profession of medicine lacks moral principles, it turns into a type of prostitution.

Likewise, the revolutionary leaders exploit the country and their principles, as Firdaus articulates, “[T]hey used their cleverness to get, in turn

⁴³⁶ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 99.

⁴³⁷ El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, 205.

⁴³⁸ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 76.

for principles, what other men buy with their money. Revolution for them is like sex for us. Sometimes to be abused. Something to be sold.”⁴³⁹ So, the Egyptian revolutionary leaders trade the country and their ideals the same way as a prostitute treats and trades her body. El Saadawi considers that revolutionary nationalists sell their principles for pleasure and power. They exploit the nation`s resources and abuse its people as the sex worker exploits her body. Firdaus`s revolutionary Ibrahim betrays her faith and his own principles when he marries his boss`s daughter. In the historical and political contexts, this betrayal echoes the disappointment that many Egyptians felt over the politics of the revolutionary leaders Nasser and Sadat.

In *Women, Islamism and the State*, Azza Karam observes that “[e]ven the Wafd, the first nationalist and liberal secular movement/ organization/ political party in Egypt, shifted some of its positions and loyalties over time in attempts to gain power.”⁴⁴⁰ Karam remarks that for many Egyptians, the postcolonial state of Egypt has disappointed the political hopes aroused by the nationalist movement. According to Karam, critics charge that a bureaucratic elite was formed during Nasser`s regime and inherited by Sadat and Mubarak.⁴⁴¹ Such an elite thereby monopolized state power in Egypt and thus the liberation of the nation has not been followed by the political liberation of Egypt`s people.

Hassan Hanafi, a professor of philosophy at Cairo University, maintains that Islam is the most potent source of Egyptian culture and “is the mainstream from which all ideological trends originate or deviate. Religious reform, represented by al-Afghani, M. Abdu, R. Reda, H. al-Banna, etc., was and still is one of the major trends in Egypt. Egyptian nationalism came out of

⁴³⁹ Ibid, 96.

⁴⁴⁰ Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 56.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 58.

it.”⁴⁴² Hanafi argues that despite the combination of Islam and secular ideologies embedded in the Free Officers Revolution in July 1952, it failed and devoured its own principles. According to Hanafi, the trajectory of Egyptian nationalism from 1952 to 1982 turned the country from:

national dignity to national humiliation, from independence to dependence, from anti-imperialism to pro-imperialism, from nonalignment to alignment, from anti-Zionism to recognition of Zionism, from public sectors to private sector, from socialism to capitalism, from nationalism to Egyptian isolationism. The poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer.⁴⁴³

Thus, the corruption in the country is widespread as a result of the false revolutionary politics of Nasser and Sadat. The country and its people have been betrayed by their leaders and suffered under their rule.

Despite the political gains of the revolution, Hanafi summarizes the tremendous losses: “the suppression of freedom, the oppression of the opposition right as well as left, the torture of political prisoners, the police system, the press monopoly of the one-party system, the formation of a new class which inherited the privileges of the feudal class of the old regime, the defeat of 1967.”⁴⁴⁴ Hence, Nasser and Sadat, the so-called revolutionary leaders, have been seen by El Saadawi and many Egyptians as unfaithful to nationalism and Egypt. Sadat’s Open Door Policy represents disloyalty to the country and loyalty to capitalism, which puts Egypt’s economy and power at the service of international capital. El Saadawi’s motif and criticism of

⁴⁴² Hassan Hanafi, “The Relevance of the Islamic Alternative in Egypt,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1-2 (Spring 1982): 54-74 (56)
https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857617?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
[accessed Feb. 12, 2016].

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 72-73.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 70.

capitalism and betrayal by the revolutionary leaders are set against the backdrop of the historical events and the continuing corruption of the status quo.

Firdaus is betrayed by the revolutionary Ibrahim; in terms of national allegory, Firdaus represents Egypt as she feels disappointed:

I had never experienced suffering such as this, never felt a deeper pain. When I was selling my body to men the pain was much less. It was imaginary, rather than real. As a prostitute I was not myself, my feelings did not arise from within me. They were not really mine. Nothing could really hurt me and make me suffer then the way I was suffering now ... But I expected something from love. With love I began to imagine that I had become a human being. When I was a prostitute I never gave anything for nothing, but always took something in return. But in love I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster, freely ... But when I was a prostitute I protected myself, fought back at every moment, was never off guard ... I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing to a world of my own.⁴⁴⁵

Firdaus realizes that Ibrahim has never loved her and used her only for free sex, since she has not asked for money and thinks their relationship is built on love. In like manner, revolutionary or religious leaders used the principles of justice, patriotism and loyalty to deceive people and serve their own interests. Nationalism has not brought freedom and economic prosperity to Egypt as promised. Thus, poor people and women are exploited in this class-hierarchical and patriarchal society.

In her reply to Tarabishi, El Saadawi clarifies:

⁴⁴⁵ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 93.

the political climate in the Arab world has produced a number of false revolutions bandying the slogans of justice and socialism, only to murder or imprison the genuine socialists and seekers after justice. In the shadow of such false revolutions, new breeds of revolutionaries have sprung up, mouthing the slogans of revolution, but in fact oppressing and exploiting those under their domination. This schism between words and deeds is prevalent in our part of the world.⁴⁴⁶

Firdaus`s disappointment epitomizes the whole nation`s disappointment. Man`s unfaithfulness is not only confined to an individual fictitious tale of love, but rather, on a large-scale, national phenomenon that Egypt has suffered and struggled with. Firdaus`s yearning for justice and freedom echoes that of the whole nation.

So, being disappointed in Ibrahim and the whole system, Firdaus refuses to serve the government despite the threats. When a policeman comes to take her to a very important personality from a foreign country and tries to convince her this action is a sacred national duty, Firdaus narrates:

[h]e explained to me that refusing a Head of State could be looked upon as an insult to a great man and lead to strained relations between the two countries. He added that if I really loved my country, if I was a patriot, I would go to him at once. So I told the man from the police that I knew nothing about patriotism, that my country had not only given me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had, including my honour and my dignity.⁴⁴⁷

The author puts great emphasis on the double moral standards. Paradoxically, the head of state wants to prostitute Firdaus to a foreigner for the sake of

⁴⁴⁶ Tarabishi, *Woman against her Sex*, 203.

⁴⁴⁷ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 98.

patriotism, and she will be awarded the highest honour. In this sense, leaders and nationalists can justify their crimes against the country and its people as acts of patriotism. They contradict the slogans and moral principles that have been used to deceive people.

However, Firdaus rejects this offer, since she has had no sense of nationalism. Patriarchal nationalism has done nothing for lower-class women. The author chastises Egyptian nationalism for exploiting women—the symbol of Egypt—and chastises the paradoxes and hypocrisy of the government in acting like a common pimp and abusing women/the country, Firdaus says:

I felt like exploding with laughter at the ridiculous stance he was taking, the paradox he personified, his double moral standards. He wanted to take a prostitute to this important personality's bed, like any common pimp would do, and yet talk in dignified tones of patriotism and moral principles. But I realized that the man from the police was only obeying orders, and that any order issued to him was elevated to a sacred national duty.⁴⁴⁸

It seems that the prostitute has more power than any loyal soldier or leader, and the irony is that it is the prostitute who refuses to prostitute herself to imperialist interests. As they use the prostitute's body, they exploit the land's resources and abuse its people; they betray their principles and their country for the sake of money and foreign interests. Emphatically, Firdaus's conscription for the sake of nationalism conjures up remembrance of female recruitment to the national movement at the beginning of the twentieth century as analysed in Chapter One. Jayawardena describes the attempts by the nationalists as unsuccessful:

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, 98.

The earlier democratic and nationalist struggles in Egypt gave rise to an intellectual debate on the status of women, ... However, expectations of the early years were not fulfilled and feminism did not survive into the 1930s. ...the internal structures of traditional society—including the monarchy and religious orthodoxy—continued to dominate during the period under consideration and attempts to achieve radical changes for women were therefore unsuccessful.⁴⁴⁹

Thus, the earlier activism of nationalists with regard to women`s emancipation petered out and remained very conservative.

El Saadawi is aware of the exploitation of women in the national movements and revolutions. In an interview with Sarah Brown, El Saadawi explains that:

Nasser came in Egypt and said we will have socialism. Then he died and the whole thing collapsed. Who guarantees the rights of people—men, women, workers, poor people? It`s those people, not the governments, not the leaders. This is why I am convinced that women should be politically powerful inside a revolution. [Otherwise] they may be used by the revolution as tools, as cheap labor, cheap fighters—to die first and be liberated last.⁴⁵⁰

El Saadawi is completely conscious of women`s struggle within national movements and believes that their recruitment will not automatically lead to their liberation unless they are politically powerful. She links Egypt`s situation to Algeria`s: “[T]he Algerian revolution tried to get rid of the French. They needed women at that time. After they succeeded, they returned to the same patriarchal class system of oppressing women. If the Algerian women had been

⁴⁴⁹ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 55-56.

⁴⁵⁰ El Saadawi, “Feminism in Egypt,” 27.

organized and powerful as a group, nobody could have taken their rights from them.”⁴⁵¹ Firdaus is also aware of the result and chooses to be alienated from political participation, as she will be cast out once her mission is complete.

Thus, El Saadawi`s female character is merciless in her critique of past and contemporary post-independence nationalist leaders. Firdaus develops a negative attitude toward the nationalism, the politicians, their policies and the abuse of power during the era of Nasser and Sadat. She describes the politicians and rulers as “avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power.”⁴⁵² She continues in her condemnation of the leaders who instill a false concept of “patriotism” which means that “the poor should die to defend the land of the rich, their land, for I knew that the poor had no land.”⁴⁵³ In this sense, nationalism has done nothing for poor people or lower-class women apart from exploiting them and using them as pawns.

Firdaus refuses to give her body to the important foreigner, as she says when the pimp offers to marry her: “[I]t is enough that you take what I earn. My body at least is mine.”⁴⁵⁴ The pimp replies, “I`m in business. My capital is women`s bodies.”⁴⁵⁵ The author configures women`s bodies as capital or land, and a hierarchal relationship is set up with rulers, pimps and husbands above women`s bodies. This shows women`s bodies as men`s property to achieve physical pleasure and capital to achieve money. The woman`s right to control her own body is stressed; the same right is jeopardized by the rulers, just as

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵² El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 26-27.

⁴⁵³ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 101.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 101.

the land has been “theirs to own.”⁴⁵⁶ Having doubled women’s bodies and land, El Saadawi stresses how both have been abused by the patriarchy.

In opposition to the traditional pattern of national allegory, *Woman at Point Zero* takes a different path. In Sharqawi’s novel, Wasifa is portrayed romantically as the land and property of her peasant fiancé, who clings to her despite male competitors. Firdaus is a body abused by husband, or pimp as a tyrant ruler abuses the land or country. While they seek to exploit Firdaus’s body, the author calls this motif of national allegory that links land or country with the female body into question. This narrative calls for women’s right to control their bodies and to put an end to their exploitation in a class-stratified patriarchal society. The heroine narrates her final confrontation with the pimp; she “saw from the expression in his eyes that he feared [her] only as a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman.”⁴⁵⁷ Religious patriarchal tradition posits man’s superiority on the inferiority of women; thus, a woman can destroy this hierarchy by disbelieving in his superiority. So, Firdaus decides to act like a controlling subject rather than a controlled object. Eventually, she revolts and kills her abuser. She states, “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.”⁴⁵⁸ This passage alludes to the false revolution that people believed brought freedom and independence to the country. Despite the fact that it liberated the country from the outside colonizers, the revolution and its leaders exerted internal corrupt colonization and exploitation of the country and the poor.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 99.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 104.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 103.

Once Firdaus frees herself from fear and kills her pimp, the power balance has been tipped in her favour. She can walk down the street with her head held high towards heaven, “with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind.”⁴⁵⁹ This murder can be read symbolically as killing the man’s superiority, power and belief in his right to rule and control others. This new-found independent subject makes Firdaus tear up the money handed to her by the prince: “as I tore the money to pieces, tore off the veil, the last remaining veil from before my eyes, to reveal the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life.”⁴⁶⁰ She finally realizes the gendered power structure and the relation between men and women. It seems that the capitalist class system and its controlling ideology turns poor women into prostitutes; Firdaus affirms, “I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute.”⁴⁶¹ Firdaus believes that she is condemned to death not because she kills a pimp, but because she exposes the truth about the roles in class-patriarchy, as she is a threat to this system. She asserts:

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.⁴⁶²

Like Firdaus, El Saadawi, in her writings, reveals the truth of class-patriarchy: the truth that cuts through patriarchy like a knife. In doing so, El Saadawi

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, 105.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 107.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, 108.

⁴⁶² Ibid, 1120

hopes to bring justice and a cure for sociopolitical and economic hardships and inequalities in lower-class Egyptians` lives.

What has fueled the harsh criticism of El Saadawi`s portrayal of religious and national revolutionary leaders can be read historically. In “The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism and Patriarchy in Muslim Personal Status Laws,” Mervat Hatem sets the groundwork of the discussion which highlights the role played by the indigenous patriarchal system in the national movements. National leaders had committed themselves to transforming society, yet more domination was exerted over women.⁴⁶³ Hatem explains:

Even as public gender inequality was undermined from the 1920s up to the 1970s ... laws passed in the 1920s preserved private gender inequality in the name of political and cultural nationalism. This tension between public liberalization and continued private control gave the personalized nationalist patriarchal system its autonomous dynamic. Its particular definition of gender relations was not challenged by the otherwise different bourgeois, radical, and reformist development models followed by the monarchy, Nasser and Sadat.⁴⁶⁴

Hatem describes this system as a “personalized nationalist patriarchal system” to indicate the social-sexual context within which national goals were set. Women`s rights or gender equality within the family, Hatem argues, were not challenged since the 1920s. However, even though the modern patriarchal system may show some tolerance towards public gender equality in work, education and seclusion, it still maintains private control through the Personal Status Law. Fueled by cultural-religious nationalism, Hatem contends that the

⁴⁶³ Hatem, “The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism,” 22.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, 23.

Egyptian patriarchal system has been characterized by its resistance to Westernization and change in people`s private Muslim practices.⁴⁶⁵

The Personal Status Law, according to Hatem, treats women as having far fewer rights than men and not as individuals with equal rights.⁴⁶⁶ In spite of some changes in this law in 1920, Hatem considers the changes minimal. For example, women might be granted the right to divorce, but only on specific conditions, while men need no grounds to divorce. However, an improvement was introduced in 1929 which was the concept of harm (mental, physical or emotional) as a reason for women to be granted divorce.⁴⁶⁷ Hatem argues that this patriarchal system continued during Nasser`s regime. In Nasser`s centrally planned economy, public planners and private employers ignored legislation meant to protect women`s rights when female applicants were overlooked in favour of men, to avoid the possibility of women`s leaving for pregnancy or maternity.⁴⁶⁸ The Personal Status Law still undermined gender equal rights in the private sphere.⁴⁶⁹ According to Cynthia Nelson, only literate women could vote in 1956, while male voters were not required to be literate, and many feminist organizations were banned in the 1950s.⁴⁷⁰

Sadat`s policies, using the Open Door Capitalist model, were no exception and demonstrated many contradictions. Hatem points to the collusion between Sadat`s capitalism and the fundamentalist Islam of the Brotherhood which produced a more conservative attitude toward women`s rights:

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, 28.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁷⁰ Nelson, "The Voices of Doria Shafik," 27.

The switch from Nasser's centrally planned economy coincided with a shift to a more conservative nationalist alliance between men and women. This new alliance took a more militant position on the Muslim character of Egyptian society, which challenged the secular basis of the previous consensus. The new Muslim discourse on women, supported by the state for a limited period strengthened the mechanisms of Muslim control within the family and led to public hostility to women's work. Paradoxically, the intensity of the economic crises which have plagued the open door system has led to state reluctance to withdraw its commitment to women's work for fear that it would cause the further squeezing of the Egyptian middle class.⁴⁷¹

In 1971, the new constitution gave major recognition to the Islamists. For example, Rule 9 stressed that women's primary roles were as wives and mothers, as prescribed by Islam. Hatem and El Saadawi find this rule a step backward and a violation of women's rights. Equality is reduced to occasions when such equality is supported by Islamic law.⁴⁷² So, the same contradictory attitudes between the public and private spheres during Nasser's regime were perpetuated under Sadat's rule. As a result, Egyptian women found themselves in an inconsistent situation between having been integrated into public participation and suffering gender asymmetry within the family.⁴⁷³

This is the situation in which the heroine of *Zeina* finds herself. Bodour has a distinguished status at the university as a highly educated professor; nevertheless, at home she struggles with her inferior position and the humiliation she receives from her husband. The author stresses the dilemma of

⁴⁷¹ Hatem, "The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism," 31.

⁴⁷² Ibid, 31.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 39.

educated Egyptian women who are in an anomalous situation between the public and private spheres:

[A] woman could not raise her eyes to meet those of her husband, just as a slave could not raise his eyes to meet those of his master. By the same token, a husband had the right to hit his wife, just as the master had the right to hit his slave. A woman had no such right. This was prohibited by religious and secular laws, by social customs, and by family ethics. Bodour took the belt and beat the wall really hard as though it were her husband, father, uncle, grandfather, Satan, or God.⁴⁷⁴

What makes the identity of man superior relative to that of woman is the gendered religion. Male-interpreted Holy texts judge women to be deficient in reason and religion. Ahmad al-Damhiri, the Emir or leader of religious groups in *Zeina*, has been raised and ideologized on such a gender dichotomy:

Since childhood, his father taught him to be violent in order to make a man of him. His mother, like his father, told him, "You`re a man like your father and grandfather and great-grandfather." His mother was intensely proud of him. She thanked God for giving her the gift of a male child, for males were superior to females by one degree, as God in his Glorious Book had pointed out. Men were the maintainers of women, for they spent out of their own property. God preferred men to women because women were deficient in reason and religion. This was His wisdom and His will. Women were born of a crooked rib that could never be straightened. If one tried, it might break. A crooked rib was beyond redemption or repair.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 64.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 197-198.

The above extract reveals the collective suffering of women in Muslim societies because of the misinterpreted Qur`an and the false inherited family ethics. El Saadawi considers the Family Code of 1985 backward because under it women lost more rights.

In “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” El Saadawi criticizes the Personal Status Law: “Women never had real political power, to change the family code and marriage law, and that’s why the only law that was kept Islamic in Egypt, up till now, is the family code.”⁴⁷⁶ Her criticism extends through her non-fiction works to *Zeina*. The author expresses her view of the inherited religion that constitutes Family Law in Egypt and its double standards in relation to its gendered subjects: “Religion in fact has double or triple standards as far as values and ethics are concerned, a standard for men and another for women, a standard for the ruler and another for the subjects, the slaves, the hired hands, and the poor.”⁴⁷⁷ El Saadawi sees the overtly Islamic groups as the dominant power in the political sphere, and observes that they affect women`s position negatively. In “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” she writes:

In Egypt, we have a multi-party system consisting of the left, the right, the government party and the liberals. Now most of them are flattering the Islamic groups and they are sacrificing women’s issues to gain their votes. The government is doing the same because they are afraid of the Islamic groups and they need their votes. In 1985, Egyptian women were left to fight alone to keep the family code— it was still Islamic but there were some minor rights that we had gained over the years.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ El Saadawi, “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” 4.

⁴⁷⁷ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 240.

⁴⁷⁸ El Saadawi, “Feminism and Fundamentalism,” 5.

So, the government sacrifices women`s rights and cedes them to the dominant Islamist parties. The government flatters those parties on account of women because religion as the ideology succeeds in keeping the ruling class in power.

In *The Fall of the Imam*, the fictional nation led by the Imam (the earthly ruler who represents God) has an authoritarian command, ruling by means of a radically conservative Islam. In resistance to this government, the bodies of the female characters such as Bint Allah and other orphans become sites of struggle. Their frequent resistance to theocratic patriarchal domination functions as non-stop revolutions. The Imam represents various abusive leaders and regimes in the Islamic world. In the dedication, El Saadawi mentions four nationalities of women: Iranian, Sudanese, Egyptian and Lebanese, in an allusion to their suffering under various regimes and the same oppression. In this sense, the Imam could be Sadat, who jailed El Saadawi in 1981, Numeiry, the president of Sudan, Hizb Allah of Lebanon or Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran.

El Saadawi`s novels of national allegory function as a critique of the theocratic system from which much of the existing injustice and oppression have been generated. In her view, religions cause sectarian tensions and pogroms. In *Zeina*, the journalist Mohamad Ahmed is charged with contempt for religion and violation of public order and God`s law. The journalist defends himself before the Public Prosecutor:

Some priests and Sheikhs rape children and embezzle money. There are women and men who believe in no religion, but they have integrity and fight for truth. They would die defending justice and freedom. Music lifts the spirit and revives the conscience. It never causes rifts or wars.

Religions cause sectarian tensions and pogroms. There is no connection between justice and religion, for justice can exist in a world without

religion. There is also no connection between morality and religion, for there are people who have no religion but act in a perfectly moral manner.⁴⁷⁹

He realizes that he will be executed because he exposes injustice, hypocrisy and corruption hiding behind the cloak of God's name. The text raises the question of terrorism committed in the name of Islam; the journalist asks: "who are you exactly? You're a group of mercenaries, hired by the governments inside and outside, trained for killing in the wilderness of Afghanistan. You receive money and arms, swap women, slave girls, and concubines. You let your beards grow until they cover your faces, but your heads are empty."⁴⁸⁰ The mercenaries who trained in Afghanistan are emphatically an allusion to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Al-Qaeda, or, with a Shi'a difference, the Iranian-trained Hizb Allah in Lebanon.

In *The Fall of the Imam*, the author's portrayal of the government and its structures led by the Imam suggests two possibilities; the Imam could be Sadat in Egypt or Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 and leader of the Iranian revolution. In his adulthood, the Imam alleges himself to be the reappearance of an ancient holy man or Islamic Guide: "I realized immediately that I was the very soul of the Imam, and that I was none other than the Imam in his previous phases and that God had delivered to me all the secrets of the universe."⁴⁸¹ This belief in the reincarnation of a holy man reflects Shi'a's traditions; Bernard Lewis, in his book *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, notes that "Among the beliefs attributed to them [the Shi'a] are these of reincarnation, the deification of the

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 240.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 241.

⁴⁸¹ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 151.

Imams.”⁴⁸² In the novel, the Imam acts like God, thinking that he possesses God-like power and is able to read what people hide in their hearts. Moreover, the Imam gives his recognition to two parties that support his rule: Hizb Allah and Hizb Al Shaitan. Both of them have been legalized and blessed by the Imam: “[T]hey were like rivals united by their common love for the same women.”⁴⁸³ The political interests joining the Imam and Hizb Allah suggest “Hizb`allah`s [of Lebanon] close ideological identification and its adherence to the line and authority of Ayatollah Khomeini.”⁴⁸⁴ Magnus Ranstorp explains the relationship between the Shi`a`s religious leader in Iran (Khomeini) and Hizb Allah`s current Secretary-General Shii, Sheikh Hassan Nasserallah. Ranstorp writes:

Hassan Nasserallah received his theological education in Najaf under the tutelage of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Najaf experience of the Hizb`allah leadership explains both the depth of personal ties between leading Hizb`allah and Iranian leaders as well as the movement`s ready assimilation of, and adherence to Islamic Iran`s ideological doctrines.⁴⁸⁵

So, most of the members of Hizb Allah`s leadership received their education in the Najaf religious academies and were influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini. Hizb Allah`s revolutionary ideology calls for a comprehensive jihad under the guidance of Shi`a`s religious leaders. This ideology is translated into a series of suicide operations against their enemies.⁴⁸⁶ Questions of faith and Islamic

⁴⁸² Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 75.

⁴⁸³ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 42.

⁴⁸⁴ Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb`allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 46.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

loyalty underpin the works of Hizb Allah and Khomeini, and they use this authority to excuse their crimes.

The other suggestion is that the assassination of the Imam reflects Sadat`s assassination. The narrator depicts the Imam being shot while standing on a platform. This scene is reminiscent of Sadat`s assassination in 1981.

Heather Lehr Wagner describes the scene:

On October 6, 1981, Anwar Sadat participated in the annual celebrations that marked the anniversary of Egypt`s victory over Israel. It had been eight years since Sadat gave the orders that sent Egyptian troops into battle. On that anniversary, Sadat was dressed in his military uniform as he sat in the reviewing stand and watched the military parade. Sadat nearby were his wife, Jehan, and Sadat`s four grandchildren. As the military paraded past and jets did aerobatics overhead ... Three men rushed toward the stands holding machine guns. A grenade exploded and smoke filled the air, followed by the reports of gunfire. When the gunfire ended, Anwar Sadat was dead. Muslim fundamentalists operating within the military had killed him.⁴⁸⁷

This depiction of the religious militants conjures up the rise of the politicization of Islam. It means that Islamic leaders posit a political role for Islam. The politicization of faith occurs when religious militants or certain groups want to eliminate Western influence and presence in the Middle East—signified by Israel and America, for example—or to rule internally in accordance with their beliefs. For this purpose, they use violence to achieve this political goal and use the military to protect it.

⁴⁸⁷ Heather Lehr Wagner, *Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin: Negotiating Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 90.

Sadat was not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but he supported them and gave his recognition to their political activities. In the sociopolitical sphere, after the 1967 defeat in the War with Israel during Nasser's regime, the charismatic secular leadership of Nasser was undermined. The popular belief was that the Muslims had been punished by God because they had strayed from His path and this led to the rise of fundamentalism. Sabri Sayari writes about Islamic fundamentalism as a revivalist movement:

In the social sphere the current Islamic phenomenon is expressed in revivalist religious movements, in the regeneration of Islam's cultural heritage and in the apparent rise of an Islamic consciousness as manifested in the greater observance of religious traditions. In the political realm it is apparent in the rising influence of fundamentalist political parties such as the *Jama`at Islam* in Pakistan and the *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* [Muslim Brethren] in Egypt ... in the increasing vehement criticism of the West; and in the growing politicization of Islam throughout the region ... In many cases the reaffirmation of Islamic traditions has been actively encouraged, both by the governing elites and political opposition movements.⁴⁸⁸

This belief, that the solution to the nation's problems is a return to religion and a complete obedience to God, His Prophet Mohammad and His rulers on Earth, is repeated in El Saadawi's novels. Although the date of the Arab-Israel War is not stated in *The Fall of the Imam*, people believe that they have done something wrong and God's wrath has been inflicted upon them. Bint Allah questions, "But why should God be angry with them? They do not know. They do not know what crimes they have committed. They do not know God's word,

⁴⁸⁸ Sabri Sayari, "Politicization of Islamic Re-Traditionalism," in *Islam and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Metin Heper and Raphael Israeli (New York: Routledge, 2013), 119-128 (119, 123).

nor what it says. God`s word is written and they can neither read nor write. They do not know what words are.”⁴⁸⁹ However, in *Zeina*, the narrator makes it clear that “After the great defeat and the opening trade links with America, the creation and establishment of religious groups became legal.”⁴⁹⁰ Thus, the religious groups take advantage of the defeat to convince people to join them; in addition, politically, the government acknowledge the Islamists, and their implicated politics are meant to exploit ignorant and poor people, as depicted in the narratives.

Regarding the 1967 defeat, Yvonne Haddad makes a number of points, contending that “The rise of Islamic consciousness is in no small part the result of the Arabo-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973.”⁴⁹¹ She adds: “It is crucial to the understanding of the Islamic view of history to see that for Muslims the existence of Israel is a condemnation and a sign that the forces of darkness and immorality, of wickedness and apostasy, have for reasons yet unexplained, taken the ascendancy in the world.”⁴⁹² Haddad also remarks, “Crucial to an understanding of the wars with Israel is the perception of victory and defeat within the Qur'anic context. The Qur'an is very explicit that victory will be given to those who are with God. Israel’s victories then stand as a condemnation of the Muslim Umma. The Arabs apparently lost because God has forsaken them.”⁴⁹³ Finally, Haddad further explains this view and some other less prevalent ones: “For conservative Muslims ... [t]he defeat [of 1967] came as a punishment from God because the Muslims once again had placed their faith

⁴⁸⁹ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 18.

⁴⁹⁰ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 172.

⁴⁹¹ Yvonne Haddad, “The Arab-Israeli Wars, Nasserism, and the Affirmation of Islamic Identity,” in *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change*, ed. John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980), 107-121 (107).

⁴⁹² *Ibid*, 108.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid*, 110.

in alien systems and devoted their energies to the posited purposes of these systems rather than zealously working for the purposes of God.”⁴⁹⁴

Furthermore, to paraphrase Haddad, others ascribed the defeat to poor preparation and planning, while still others ascribed it to Arab (Islamic) nationalist socialism being a form of atheism.⁴⁹⁵

The Muslim Brotherhood were prosecuted during Nasser’s regime, which promoted imported ideas, namely the socialism of the Marxist atheist variety. Hassan Hanafi explains that the defeat of 1967 “was viewed by the Brethren as that divine revenge they had long awaited. The regime [of Nasser] was shaken. Religion was used by the regime for a certain kind of a ‘moral rearmament.’”⁴⁹⁶ Hanafi continues: “After Nasser’s death on September 30, 1970, the new regime needed a legitimating device. Religion was the easiest way to achieve this purpose.”⁴⁹⁷ In this atmosphere, “the Muslim Brothers, although still outlawed, began to appear. The ruling elite used them to purge the campuses of the last Nasserite student waves.”⁴⁹⁸ Thus, religion is used by ruling leaders as a means of social control. It gives the ruling elite a legalizing device through Islam as a legal system which the masses do not question. Islam is used by politicians to discredit any political opponents who are actively promoting the process of social or political change.

However, the political influence and authority of the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalists continued even after Sadat’s death. The author portrays the resurrection of the Imam: “[H]is body drops down between his feet, and after a short while it is gone. Nobody sees it go, it just goes, and *power is shifted from one to the other* as rubber face is shifted from

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid, 119.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, 119.

⁴⁹⁶ Hanafi, “The Relevance of the Islamic Alternative in Egypt,” 61.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid, 62.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid, 62.

one face to the other.”⁴⁹⁹ Thus, the reincarnation of the Imam reflects the continuation of the same tyrant regime from one leader to another, from Nasser to Sadat to Mubarak. Like the Imam, Ahmad al-Damhiri, the Emir in *Zeina*, is a religious leader who uses military power to reaffirm his beliefs violently if necessary. The narrator explains:

No religion in history had become stronger without the support of military power, while military might always needed a god or a religion to protect it. The emir walked among his soldiers strutting like a peacock, calling them God`s army. He was God`s deputy, chosen for the sacred mission of upholding God`s words above human words, and of applying God`s rules and laws gently or violently as necessary.⁵⁰⁰

The Emir al-Damhiri has a mysterious power, which he calls the power of God. He meets the officials of the government in secret and opposes its policies in public, pretending to be its enemy. He receives money and arms from abroad and hires fighters for God from everywhere. He has eyes in all establishments, even the police, and has assistants in government offices, schools, universities, unions and courts.⁵⁰¹ Thus, this collusion of government and religious groups in the politics of the country harmed the religious minorities (such as Coptic Christians |) and women, as they were politically alienated and lost their rights.

El Saadawi creates narratives in which women are locked in a continuous struggle against a patriarchal cultural heritage and a political system which include practices of corruption, nationalist political manoeuvring, abuse of power and manipulation of religious discourses. This culture and system are associated with father figures and male power. From the religious political aspect, the Imam and Ahmad al-Damhiri represent the nation and its culture

⁴⁹⁹ El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 66. (emphasis is mine)

⁵⁰⁰ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 169-170.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*, 110.

and are set in opposition to the female bodies; Bodour, Safi, Zeina, the Mother-Goddess and Bint Allah are representatives of land and country. In *The Fall of the Imam*, the Imam is a political and religious leader who is considered as representative of God on Earth as in Shi'a's traditions. Throughout the narrative, the Imam is elevated to the status of God and becomes confused at times. In the opening scene, the eyes of Imam, which could be the eyes of the Chief of security and his men, are following Bint Allah while she is looking for her mother, the Goddess of Earth, to help and secure her. They chase her all night and hit her in the back. Bint Allah describes them as frightened fish: "[T]hey do not know how to fight, have no honour, have no pride, they always hit you from behind."⁵⁰² They accuse her of committing fornication and losing her honour, yet she rejects the accusation and insists on her virginity. She asks "Why do you always let the criminal go free and punish the victim? I am young. My mother died a virgin and so will I.' They said, 'You are the child of sin and your mother was stoned to death.'"⁵⁰³ Indeed, she is the illegitimate child of the Imam, who denies her. This makes her an outlaw who should be punished for the crime of the Imam.

However, Bint Allah insists on the importance of her mother rather than her God-like Imam. She stresses that "[E]ven if I lose my memory, I mustn't forget the face of my mother."⁵⁰⁴ The Mother-Goddess of Bint Allah represents the land and nature. Bint Allah dreams of going to the hill and returns to her mother in the hope of liberation. She says, "I could smell the odour of my mother's body, like fertile soil. This was my land, my land."⁵⁰⁵ While the mother is linked to the land, she is disconnected from the nation. In their

⁵⁰² El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 11.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

nationalistic discourse, the nation is associated with the Imam, as his followers constantly proclaim together, "God, the Imam, and the nation."⁵⁰⁶

Bint Allah decides to complain about the Imam, but she is told that she can only complain to him. When her written complaint is found, it is considered as evidence against her, evidence of her crime,⁵⁰⁷ because they believe that to oppose the Imam is to oppose God. Bint Allah experiences the same torture her mother suffered at the hands of the Imam and his men. She becomes a natural monument like her mother: "[H]er dead body was turned to stone, become a status of rock."⁵⁰⁸ The struggle for freedom is rendered as perpetual. So, the transformation of Bint Allah into stone is repeated in the text. Finally, she is irrevocably tied to the land when she dies: "while they were trying to pull out her head from her body they discovered that her roots were plunged deep in the soil."⁵⁰⁹ Thus, the female body and land are figuratively and physically linked in the national allegory of El Saadawi's most explicitly religiously-critical novel.

Likewise, in *Zeina*, the illegitimate abandoned daughter of Bodour is proud of her adoptive mother, Zeinat. The teacher Miss Mariam tells her, "[B]e proud of your mother and your name Zeina Bint Zeinat. There`s more honor in a mother`s name than in a father`s, because a father often gives up his children for a passing sexual whim, but a mother never abandons her children unless she is psychologically ill or mentally deranged."⁵¹⁰ Zeina is abandoned by her biological mother, Bodour, for the sake of religious cultural traditions. However, she grows up as a successful singer desired by many important figures. Ahmad al-Damhiri puts Zeina Bint Zeinat on the death list because she

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid,188.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, 162.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 230.

⁵¹⁰ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 188.

refuses to succumb to him in spite of what he offers her. He writes many messages to her, but she answers none of them. He finally imagines himself speaking to God, as he is God`s deputy:

I want her, oh Lord! I want that woman, Zeina Bint Zeinat! I want those eyes blazing with the blue black flame, burning with the desire to challenge and violate your laws, oh Lord, and the laws of nature, and *the laws of private property, and the laws of free market*. This woman is depriving me of my freedom to possess her.⁵¹¹ [emphasis mine]

Her refusal of al-Damhiri is considered as opposing the patriarchal system, violating religious principles and threatening public order. Zeina`s resistance to being possessed by a man offers a challenge to al-Damhiri, who presumes to conflate earthly power and Godly sanctity. Thus, like the Imam, to challenge al-Damhiri is to violate God`s law, *the laws of private property, and the laws of free market*. Emphatically, this is a direct condemnation made by El Saadawi of the Personal Status Law which enslaved Egyptian women and deprived them of their rights, and of the Open Door Policy of Sadat which led to the deterioration of the economy of the country.

This male fusion, of the Imam and the Emir al-Damhiri, with nation and God on the one side links earthly power and the divine ability to control and oppress. Bint Allah realizes that in this patriarchal religious system, “[T]o obey God is an unbreakable law and without obedience to father and husband there can be no obedience to God.”⁵¹² Bint Allah realizes that the tyrant ruler—he can be also a husband who governs his wife`s body—wants a throne on Earth and a throne in heaven.⁵¹³ So, the power of this patriarchal culture, father figure and God have a muting effect on women, the lower class and poor

⁵¹¹ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 191.

⁵¹² El Saadawi, *the Imam*, (London: Telegram, 2009), 35.

⁵¹³ *Ibid*, 22.

people. Bint Allah loses her voice when some men accuse her of exposing her shameful part [her face]; she describes her reaction: “[A] sudden fear took hold me and my tongue was tied.”⁵¹⁴ These men are illiterate and cannot read the Qur`an, but they insist that God`s word declares that she should veil her face. They associate the Imam`s power and his word with that of God as they point to the omnipresent picture of the Imam hanging above.⁵¹⁵ This system, in *Zeina*, causes Bodour to hesitate to speak her mind: she “couldn`t comprehend the fear lurking in her heart since childhood, the terror that she lived with throughout her youth and maturity. Terror paralyzed her mind and made her unable to write. But why was she terrified? Was it God or the Devil? Or was it her husband, their deputy on earth?”⁵¹⁶

Thus, the binary opposition to God, governing authorities and male figures are the Mother-Goddess and female bodies, a national allegory for the land of Egypt as continually denigrated and oppressed by the former. In *Zeina*, women are associated with dirtiness, inferiority and the Devil while men are the godly opposite. The Emir`s driver thanks God for creating him male and not female: “He heard his father and grandfather say that women were Devil`s allies. Cleanliness was godly while dirtiness was womanly, they often asserted.”⁵¹⁷ In the narrative, women struggle against this patriarchal culture which insists on women`s inferiority. Women`s suffering and abuse are symptomatic of the land or country that is abused by patriarchy. Safi, the friend of Bodour, embodies the abused land that has suffered in the name of God or Karl Marx. In a session with her psychiatrist, she complains about betrayals by her Marxist and Islamist husbands:

⁵¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, 19.

⁵¹⁶ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 186.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, 174.

Secrecy was their [Marxists and Islamists] established practice, both in politics and in sexual affairs. In their infidelity, lies, and evasiveness, they were identical. They were also similar in their concealment of corruption and their use of pompous words in the service of God or Karl Marx. But the Marxist was more cautious than the Islamist, because Marxists are used to secrecy and underground activities, while the Islamists are stupid and transparent. My Marxist husband was so cautious that he lived with me for nine long years and cheated on me every day without my knowledge.⁵¹⁸

This sexual abuse and exploitation of the female body by the Marxist and the Islamist allude directly to the political conflict between the Nasserite socialism and Islamic ideology of the Muslim Brethren.

Following the nominal independence of Egypt in 1922, the nationalists tried to win full self-determination from the British, who still exerted political influence. During this period, the military Islamist groups played a crucial role in supporting the cause of national liberation. The Muslim Brethren coordinated closely with the Free Officers and their tasks focused on maintaining law and order and rallying popular support for the army's mission during the revolution of 23 July 1952. Once the Free Officers came to power, Azza Karam observes what happened, which has "been referred to as 'honeymoon' ended. Not surprisingly, the various reasons given have to do with the basis and legitimation of power."⁵¹⁹ The result was a legacy of animosity between Nasser (and his socialism) and Hodaybi (the Muslim Brethren's leader). The Free Officers and the military junta were politically threatened and challenged by the popularity and mobilized power of the

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, 120-121.

⁵¹⁹ Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State*, 57.

Brethren, who were disappointed at their exclusion from power. The repressive power of the junta ruthlessly crushed any opposition, banned political parties, tried and sentenced their opponents. Because they threatened Nasser`s regime, a series of trials and executions of prominent members of the Muslim Brethren were carried out. Nasser`s period was referred to as a “reign of terror.”⁵²⁰ Muslim Brethren members were rounded up, arrested and tortured, and many of them were executed in 1966.⁵²¹ Some of the Islamist members preferred complete withdrawal from the political sphere to avoid the horror of prison. However, others decided to collaborate with the regime, to Islamize it from within. This led to direct conflict between the secular socialism of Nasser and the Islamist ideology of the Muslim Brethren.

Despite this criticism of Arab socialism, El Saadawi subscribes to some tenets of Marxism in her novels. As opposed to its more sophisticated Western counterpart, Jameson argues, Third World literature is characterized by the collective revolutionary consciousness associated with Marx rather than with the individual cultural self-reflexivity associated with Freud.⁵²² Lois Tyson observes that Marxist theory examines the relationship among socioeconomic classes within societies and the dynamics of economic power on human activities. Tyson explains that “getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities including education, philosophy, religion, government, arts, science, technology and media.”⁵²³ According to Tyson, ideology, the belief systems, like religion and capitalism, have a role of maintaining those in power, and the proletariat will spontaneously develop

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁵²¹ Ibid, 62.

⁵²² Jameson, “Third-World Literature,” 69.

⁵²³ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 54.

class consciousness which leads to a violent revolution against their oppressors.⁵²⁴

In El Saadawi's novels, religion is utilized by the ruling elite to keep the poor and oppressed women satisfied with their lot in life. In *Zeina*, Zakariah al-Khartiti writes in his column that "God was just and that the head of the state in Egypt wielded his power fairly. If God deprived a child of family or wealth, He might bless him with intelligence, music, or the love of God and the homeland. A poor person might still be morally rich."⁵²⁵ He is a famous journalist from the upper class and his writing praises the ruler and pacifies the poor by such morals. Likewise, in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus complains to her uncle, who is well versed in the teachings of religion, about her mistreatment by her husband. He gets into the habit of beating her whether he has a reason for it or not. Her uncle's wife tells her that all men, even respected Sheikhs, beat their wives, as religion permits such punishment. She adds, "[a] virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience."⁵²⁶ So, the precepts of religion are used by those in power to maintain their position and superiority over the poor and women.

El Saadawi's novels demonstrate how economic power determines the superstructure, since most of the characters are motivated by having material power in every action they undertake. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi and Sharifa take advantage of their positions and exploit Firdaus. Once Firdaus becomes economically independent, she obtains the power to choose or reject her male clients. In *Zeina*, Bodour's father and husband, who both belong to the rich class take advantage of their power to

⁵²⁴ Ibid, 56.

⁵²⁵ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 31.

⁵²⁶ El Saadawi, *Point Zero*, 47.

exploit and rape homeless children in exchange for food or clothes. Bodour recalls from her childhood when her father raped an-eight-year-old boy who was her age, but from a poor class which her father despised and looked down on.⁵²⁷ So, El Saadawi criticizes capitalism and imperialism in Egypt for institutionalizing religion to exploit and oppress the poor and women.

Her fiction further reflects the socioeconomic conditions in which her novels were written. In *Zeina*, the narrator describes the poor class and the masses as crowds who revolt against injustice: “there were laid-off workers of shut-down factories, unemployed and unhopeful university graduates, widows, divorced women, bereaved mothers, government employees with heads bent low, oppressed housewives, housemaids, shoe-polishers and nannies.”⁵²⁸ The description is set in Egypt during the rule of the king (Khedive Ismail) in conjunction with British Imperialism and is repeated in the following years to describe the same situation during the postcolonial rule of Egyptian presidents in conjunction with American Capitalism: “The cheers also changed. Instead of ‘Down with the king and the English’ the slogans became ‘Down with America and the president.’”⁵²⁹

Thus, the class differences underscore the tension between the high and lower classes, between the rich and the poor, and between the oppressor and the oppressed, which leads to violent revolution that destabilizes the tyrant system. In *Zeina*, Nanny Zeinat tells Bodour that a demonstration is coming and millions of voices are coming from afar: “Everybody. Even the newborn kittens, Miss Bodour, are demonstrating and saying, ‘Long live justice.’” Bodour wonders how cats can speak. Then, Zeinat confirms, “it`s a different world

⁵²⁷ El Saadawi, *Zeina*, 100.

⁵²⁸ Ibid, 85.

⁵²⁹ Ibid, 224.

now, and the blind kittens have opened their eyes and can speak.”⁵³⁰ Thus, the blind kittens represent the poor class and women who are oppressed by capitalism, imperialism and religion. At the end of the narratives, Bodour joins the demonstration against injustice and Firdaus kills the pimp and tears up the money of the prince. Both heroines realize that the mother land is “coming back, coming soon, coming with a gift.” This is a Marxist revolution undertaken by the heroines once both of them gain consciousness of their oppressed gendered class. Firdaus`s murder and Bodour`s divorce are the results of socioeconomic problems rooted in capitalist ideology which works through a deceptive religion that simultaneously pacifies and exploits the poor and women.

Zeina is not the end of El Saadawi`s writing about the religious oppression plaguing her society. In late December 2010, she convened a conference entitled *Women and the 21st Century: Feminist Alternatives* under the aegis of the revived AWSA to discuss solutions to religious violence.⁵³¹ Later, her speculation of coming revolution comes true; democratic uprising broke out on January 25, 2011 in Cairo in a chain of insurgence that became known as the so-called Arab Spring. El Saadawi participated in her country`s revolution and demonstrated in Tahrir Square. In her article “Nawal El Saadawi: Writer and Revolutionary,” miriam cooke writes:

In 2011, she [El Saadawi] is again “that schoolgirl walking in the demonstration and shouting: Down with King! Down with the English! As though time did not exist” (97-9). Protesting injustice and corruption was a way of life for her but also, she insists, for the Egyptian people.

⁵³⁰ Ibid, 248.

⁵³¹ miriam Cooke, “Nawal El Saadawi: Writer and Revolutionary,” in *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, ed. Robin Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 214-229 (223).

Tahrir was merely another, if more exciting link in a chain of revolutionary events that made all of her struggles worthwhile.⁵³²

In a permanent struggle, El Saadawi fights injustice, corruption, imperialism and religious oppression. She published two books about the revolution: her memoir *al-thawrat al-arabiya* (Arab Revolutions) (2013), and a novel *Inahu al-dam* (Indeed It Is Blood) (2014).⁵³³ In her books, she criticizes the brief Islamist regime of the elected Muslim Brotherhood and its hypocrisy.

The hotly debated politics of postcolonialism in full are beyond the scope of this chapter, but I have discussed one influential strand in the current postcolonial debate; that is, Jameson's influential attempt to theorize the relationship of literary production in the Third World to the nation and its politics. According to Jameson, there is an obsessive return of the national situation in Third World literature. This chapter offers a way of conceptualizing the relationship between literature and politics in the works of Nawal El Saadawi that constitutes a liability rather than an assertion for cultural and literary studies. The author offers a harsh critique of the nation. In this theocratic patriarchal nation, the country, the land, female bodies and all of femininity are abused. Firdaus's, Bodour's and Bint Allah's bodies are similar to the exploited land.

However, unlike the traditional national allegory written by Egyptian male writers, El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Zeina* are postcolonial narratives which, while telling the story of oppressed women, also tell the story of the nation and bring its problems into question. In these texts, women are linked and associated with the land; their stories have double meanings that link love, betrayal and sexuality with the national

⁵³² Ibid, 224.

⁵³³ Nawal El Saadawi, *al-thawrat al-arabiya* (Beirut: All Prints Distributors & Publishers, 2013); *Inahu al-dam* (Beirut: Publishing House, 2014).

struggle for independence, either against Western imperialism or internal corrupt power structures. Eventually, the heroines claim their bodies as their own. Thus, along the same lines as Reda Bensmaïa, El Saadawi hopes for a place to be made, constructed and rewritten. She calls for a recognition of women`s right to control their bodies and for an end to the exploitation of the country and its women in a nationalist, class-hierarchical patriarchal society. In doing so, she hopes for a cure and a change that leads to the birth of a healthy nation where women can enjoy equal rights and opportunities in an egalitarian society. El Saadawi hopes that her writing might cure what mere medical practices, or science alone, cannot. In contrast to El Saadawi, who lives within a majority Muslim country and practices secular feminism, the Muslim migrant Aboulela embraces Islam enthusiastically and emphasizes its centrality in the lives of her female characters.

Chapter Four

Islamic Spirituality in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator and Minaret*

In the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century, Muslim identity has become an emergent category that foregrounds race and ethnicity in Europe.⁵³⁴ In spite of their wide diversity of nations and cultures, individuals and communities chose the term Muslim as their primary identity signifier in the 1980s. In his report, Humayun Ansari writes, “[I]t is Islam, they [Muslims] assert, that perhaps plays the most important part in their lives.”⁵³⁵ Because they feel themselves to be a minority in Europe, their Muslim identity empowers them in the way it identifies them with global Islam, to see themselves as part of a potentially powerful community. In Aboulela's novels, the protagonists are ascribed a distinct Muslim identity that might even be more firm and fervent than that of their counterparts in the Muslim countries. Olivier Roy offers a helpful gloss on this possibility when he observes:

Especially in times of political crisis (such as 9/11), ordinary Muslims feel compelled (or are explicitly asked) to explain what it means to be a Muslim ... This task falls on the shoulders of every Muslim, rather than on legitimate religious authorities, simply because ... there are so few or no established Muslim authorities in the West. Each Muslim is accountable for being a Muslim ... To publicly state self-identity has become almost a civic duty for Muslims.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Geoffrey Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity* (London & New York: Continuum, 2012), 7.

⁵³⁵ Humayun Ansari, *Muslims in Britain* (London: Minority Rights Group, 2002), 18.

⁵³⁶ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for the New Umma* (London: Hurst, 2002), 24.

Examining El Saadawi`s novels, even the one published post 9/11, *Zeina*, religion is criticized for its utilization as a tool to persecute women in Muslim countries, and she conflates the role of Islam with political and socioeconomic conflict in the lives of Muslim women. So, her female characters embrace a revolutionary secular spirit to achieve personal freedom, and their religious faith loses significance for their identity formation. By contrast, Roy`s assumption about the duty of being Muslim is directly relevant to Aboulela`s novels. It is important to note that Islam, in her narratives, is not depicted as a tradition or part of the culture, but rather as a faith. Aboulela aims to contextualize her protagonists` experience in a secular setting to emphasize that they are free to choose Islam rather than it being inherited or forced upon them.

Many studies lay excessive emphasis on Aboulela`s *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006) as symbolic of the conflict between the postcolonial and colonial cultures, or East versus West.⁵³⁷ In her reading of Tayeb Salih`s *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) and Leila Aboulela`s *The Translator*, Alexandra Schultheis examines the articulation of Europe for the Sudanese postcolonial elite in relation to modernity.⁵³⁸ Schultheis argues that the narrative of modernity offered in *The Translator* invests the University of Aberdeen with contradictory functions as ideas of Europe that imprison the African or Arab students or employees within an Orientalist discourse while also offering possibilities for self-invention. She reads the university as a counter-site which presents an imagined projection of power relations in

⁵³⁷ Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999); *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁵³⁸ Alexandra Schultheis, "From Heterotopia to Home: The University and the Politics of Postcoloniality in Salih`s *Season of Migration to the North* and Aboulela`s *The Translator*," in *Africa writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition. Entanglement*, eds., Maria Olausson and Christina Angelfors (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), 187-216.

society in terms of Foucault's concept of heterotopia. The heterotopic mirror, Schultheis contends, works to reflect Europe for the postcolonial Sudanese, in a reversal of the colonies functioning as reflections for the Europeans, as in Foucault's theory. In *The Translator*, Schultheis proposes that this narrative is a confrontation with the politics of Empire and a conflict of two opposing cultures, worldviews of "the ex-colony and the imperial centre."⁵³⁹

In the same vein as Schultheis, Tina Steiner reads Aboulela's *The Translator* as an ideological instrument for subverting the authority of Orientalist and Imperialist discourses. For Steiner, nostalgia and faith are important ingredients in the politics of dissent and function as a defense mechanism against acculturation. Steiner's article takes three trajectories. Firstly, it sketches how Aboulela addresses Orientalist and Islamist discourse. Secondly, it explores how nostalgia becomes a lens through which Aboulela's female characters critique the new environment. These trajectories lead to the third, which elucidates Aboulela's claim that Islam provides an identity position that resists assimilation into a Western secular culture. Steiner argues that Aboulela's protagonists are marginalized by race, gender and religion in the West, and the only way to free up a space of agency lies in claiming an identity. If they give up their identity through tolerance of Western culture, they will be annihilated. So, Aboulela, Steiner contends, constructs a religious grounding that allows "a successful politics against assimilation."⁵⁴⁰ Steiner continues to read Rae's conversion to Islam as Aboulela's attempt to translate the "asymmetrical power relation" in terms of race and gender. In this sense, the white man returns to the African woman on her terms; while Sammar resists

⁵³⁹ Ibid, 189.

⁵⁴⁰ Tina Steiner, "Strategic Nostalgia, Islam and Cultural Translation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Coloured Lights*," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 20, no. 2 (2008): 7-25 (4).

the Western secular culture, the convert—Rae—becomes a candidate for assimilation.⁵⁴¹ Like Steiner, Geoffrey Nash, in "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," sees Rae's conversion as "a subtle exercise in counter-acculturation."⁵⁴² Nash suggests that Aboulela reverses the usual dynamics of acculturation, in which the supposedly superior, civilized West influences the Other.

In *Immigrant Narratives*, Wail Hassan suggests that the strategies of Arab immigrants' confrontation with Orientalism have evolved since the 1970s.⁵⁴³ He points out how Aboulela's literary representations of the travels undertaken by her female characters, Sammar and Najwa, from Sudan to England parallel the travel from South to North in Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*.⁵⁴⁴ In this sense, Hassan illustrates the ways in which Aboulela's literary works both assimilate and contradict the North/South encounter that was established by Salih. He argues that Tayeb Salih rewrites Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but Aboulela moves away from:

the reactive position of "writing back," which has so far served as the primary paradigm of postcolonial literature. ... Aboulela is less concerned with reversing, rewriting, or answering back to colonial discourse than with attempting an epistemological break with it.⁵⁴⁵

According to Hassan, Aboulela seeks to articulate an alternative episteme derived from Islam in order to displace the Orientalist dichotomy between East

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁴² Geoffrey Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," in *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 135-151 (138).

⁵⁴³ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 181.

⁵⁴⁴ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans., Denys Johnson Davies (London: Heinemann, 1969)

⁵⁴⁵ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 182.

and West. Hassan contends that Aboulela works to clear a space for Islam in the “West”, which is defined by hostility to Islam and Muslims. For Hassan, the novels operate on a political and cultural level, symbolic of a dialogue between the disparate North and South. Ultimately, he argues that Aboulela’s version of Islam reinscribes male supremacy.⁵⁴⁶ He believes that, in Aboulela’s writing, feminism is rejected in favor of patriarchal gender roles.⁵⁴⁷

In contrast to Hassan, Nash, in *Writing Muslim Identity*, asserts that secularism in the West is not hostile to religion, and that conditions in the Western city may facilitate the flourishing of the protagonists’ faith.⁵⁴⁸ The key issue for Nash is how to articulate Aboulela’s engagement of postcolonial and Islamic constituents in her writing. Nash argues that Aboulela shows an awareness of Orientalism without setting out directly to deconstruct the West’s image of Islam, but rather to Islamize the process of writing back. In writing back, Nash concludes that Aboulela utilizes the Western secularized space to imagine Muslim identity in her own terms.

In this chapter, I argue that Aboulela in *The Translator* and *Minaret* is writing back to the Orientalist and Colonial discourse because the centralization of Islam in Aboulela’s fiction follows a postcolonial paradigm in the sense of being “writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives.”⁵⁴⁹ But she is not writing back by reversing the dynamics of power relations between East and West or subverting the politics of Empire, as Nash, Steiner and Schultheis suggest; she is writing back to emphasize the spiritual aspect of Islam, which is divested of any cultural form

⁵⁴⁶ According to Hassan, “West” is a code word for secularism, Orientalism and Islamophobia.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, 196.

⁵⁴⁸ Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity*, 44-49.

⁵⁴⁹ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 3.

or political activism. Aboulela presents Islam as faith that is translated into a Muslim's daily life on a spiritual level, facilitates the organization of quotidian issues in secular culture and eases the pain of dislocation in exile. In religious faith, female protagonists find spiritual belonging and rootedness amidst social and geographical dislocation. It is not among Aboulela's interests to address the issues of conflict between West and East, the colonizer and colonized, and the struggle of such confrontation. It is rather Aboulela's Islamic feminism that offers an approach which allows to balance her "religious, specifically Islamic loyalties, with other allegiances, initiating new forms of conversation across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms."⁵⁵⁰ Also, in contrast to Wail Hassan, I argue that Aboulela does not reject feminism; feminism in her fiction addresses gender ideology from an Islamic perspective that goes beyond differences to reach a peaceful relationship between male and female. Thus, Aboulela seeks to conciliate Islam, secular modernity, freedom and women's empowerment on a spiritual level in *The Translator* and *Minaret*.

In an interview in a British newspaper, Aboulela affirms that Islam is depicted as faith in her novels and divested of any political implications:

I want to write about the faith, but it's so difficult to talk about it like this when everyone else is talking about the political aspects. I'm concerned that Islam has not just been politicised but that it's becoming an identity. This is like turning religion into a football match, it's a distraction from the real thing.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁵⁰ miriam cooke, "Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World," *Cultural Critique*, no. 45 (Spring 2000): 150-184 (177).
https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354370?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [accessed Jan.2, 2017]

⁵⁵¹ Leila Aboulela, "Back to Khartoum: Leila Aboulela returns to the land of her fathers," *INDEPENDENT*, Dec. 17, 2010, para. 25 of 25.

What Aboulela is concerned about is the politicization of Islam, which causes a deviation of the religion from its established spiritual core and leads to the deployment of this politicized Islam as an identity. In another interview with Anita Sethi, Aboulela states that her religious identity provides more stability than any other national or geographical affiliation.⁵⁵² This need to find the Islamic faith leads Aboulela to set her works in a secular setting in which the protagonists of her novels feel free to experience Islam as a faith rather than it being inherited, imposed on them or affiliated to any political or cultural trend of the homeland.

Aboulela's treatment of Islamic faith as a matter for individuals is, I assume, presenting a contrast with the imposition of certain modes of Islam in Muslim countries or Islamists' political programs such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. Her recent novel *The Kindness of Enemies*, which is politically astute, confirms this claim.⁵⁵³ In this novel, Aboulela weaves together contemporary narratives of university lecturer Natasha, her student Oz and his mother Malak in Scotland with the historical narrative of Imam Shamil and his Jihadist resistance against the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. The narrative speaks volumes about the Islamic faith and how it has been altered by Islamists to score political points. For example, Malak makes the following disclosure about the meaning of Jihad: "Ever since 9/11, jihad has become synonymous with terrorism I blame the Wahabis and Salafists for this. Jihad is an internal and

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/back-to-khartoum-leila-aboulela-returns-to-the-land-of-her-fathers-2162261.html>

[accessed Jan. 16, 2017].

⁵⁵² Leila Aboulela, "Keep The Faith," interview by Anita Sethi. *The Guardian*, June 5, 2005, para. 9 of 14.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2> [accessed Oct. 15, 2016].

⁵⁵³ Leila Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015).

spiritual struggle.”⁵⁵⁴ In her own Sufi perspective, Malak’s Jihad is practiced on a spiritual level to uphold Islamic values in a secular context, and is different from the “horrible crimes of al-Qaeda.”⁵⁵⁵ Thus, in Britain, Malak chooses to embrace Sufism as an Islamic faith whereas in many Muslim countries, “Sufis were perceived to be not only passive and traditional, but often, also, reactionary and neo-cons.”⁵⁵⁶ That is to say, in Aboulela’s account, unlike Sufism, political Islam, Wahabism, Salafism or the Shia doctrines that prevail in today’s theocratic regimes suppress dissent and critical opinion.

Aboulela testifies from personal experience when she reports that it was only in Britain, where she arrived from Sudan in 1989 to study for her PhD, that she began to feel able to express her faith.⁵⁵⁷ At this point, Aboulela explains, “the word ‘Muslim’ wasn’t even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So I then felt very free to wear the hijab.”⁵⁵⁸ She admits that she had the inclination to express herself religiously in Sudan but the atmosphere was not conducive to it growing.⁵⁵⁹ In terms of spirituality, there is more freedom for Muslim women to be religious in a secular country. In the same vein, Geoffrey Nash makes a comment on Aboulela’s faith in a secular culture:

[T]he secularized godless western metropolis has not only freed humans from ‘metaphysical control’ (Cox 1966: 182), it has also provided the space in which an individualized faith commitment can grow free from

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, 208.

⁵⁵⁷ Aboulela, “Keep The Faith,” para. 6 of 14.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, para. 6 of 14.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, para. 8 of 14.

the tyranny of ‘*the* officially enforced world-view beside which no others are tolerated’ (ibid.: 69; original italics).⁵⁶⁰

So, despite secularism in a Western country—namely Britain, which asserts the individual’s right to be free from religious rule, teachings, or belief—Nash argues, an individual’s faith can grow out of free will without the pressure of the authoritarian Islamist regimes of the homeland. Aboulela’s concern about the excessive politicization of Islam becoming an identity leads her to present religion as what she refers to as “the real thing,” which is a faith.

The Islam Aboulela addresses in her fiction is the same Islam that Ansari writes about:

In the early 1960s, Islam played a cohesive role among many Muslim workers since it transcended ethnic, linguistic and political frontiers, and stimulated a sense of identity that ignored doctrinal and other differences ... These bodies were concerned primarily with the promotion of religious life, the provision of assistance and moral support, and the improvement of social, cultural and educational conditions.⁵⁶¹

For those Muslims in Britain, religion is an integral part of their lives and an important strand of their identity which surpasses all differences. Moreover, Aboulela’s portrayal of Islamic faith as unconcerned with sociopolitical activism reflects Saba Mahmood’s targeting of the distinction between pious and more nominally Muslim women’s forms of religious practice, neither of which is part of a political project, when she points to a:

⁵⁶⁰ Nash, *Writing Muslim Identity*, 45.

⁵⁶¹ Ansari, *Muslims in Britain*, 6.

conception of religiosity that discriminates between a religious practice that is part of the larger project of realizing Islamic virtues in the entirety of one's life, and a practice that is Islamic in form and style but does not necessarily serve as a means to the training and realization of a pious self.⁵⁶²

In her study of the role of the mosque in Egypt, Mahmood draws attention to the faith-inspired positions defining women's action. She stresses the need to observe "religious knowledge, as a means of organizing daily life,"⁵⁶³ not as an identity marker or part of tradition, but rather as part of the formation of religious disposition in "resolving the mundane issues of daily life."⁵⁶⁴

Mahmood argues that the religiously grounded position of women in dealing with daily issues helps in organizing life and resolving problems. She explains that secularism in Egypt reduced Islam to an abstract system of beliefs that had no direct bearing on the practicalities of daily living, yet the following Islamist movement and women's mosque movement seek to educate ordinary Muslim women how to organize their daily conduct in accordance with Islamic faith to reach a virtuous life. She emphasizes that as quotidian acts are performed from a faith-inspired position, religion becomes usable and has a meaningful presence in Muslim life.⁵⁶⁵

In the same vein, miriam cooke argues that Islam is not gender-specific but rather "a faith system and way of life open equally to women and men."⁵⁶⁶ cooke continues to explain that "those who position themselves as Islamic

⁵⁶² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 51.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*, 44.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 46.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 47.

⁵⁶⁶ cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, xiv.

feminists, are inventing ways to navigate between forced changes necessary for survival, a critique of globalized modernity, and a viable means of self-projection that retains dignity, morality, and integrity. In this balancing act, women are gaining symbolic importance."⁵⁶⁷ From this perspective, bringing into focus the need to balance the heroines' worldviews with secular modernity and the need to have a sense of belonging in their self-imposed exile, Sammar's and Najwa's growing religious faith serves as a means for training and realizing the pious self.

The Translator narrates the story of Sammar, a young Sudanese widow, living and working as a translator in a university in Aberdeen. She loses her husband, Tarig, in a car accident in Aberdeen, but instead of going back to Sudan with her young son, she abandons the child in Khartoum and puts him in her mother-in-law's care. Deciding to remain in Aberdeen without family and friends, Sammar works as a translator for a Scottish professor, Rae Isles, who specializes in Middle Eastern studies, particularly of Islam. In the course of their working together, Sammar and Rae develop romantic feelings for each other. However, due to religious, cultural, and worldview differences, the lovers encounter misunderstandings; Sammar believes that Rae's conversion to Islam can resolve their problems by unifying them because a Muslim woman is forbidden to marry a non-Muslim, but Rae is reluctant to convert. Being disappointed at not finding a solution to her union with Rae and to feel like she belongs in Aberdeen, Sammar decides to move back to Khartoum. Eventually, Rae decides genuinely and sincerely to convert to Islam and live by the tenets of the religion. Sammar and Rae reconcile their differences and misunderstandings by sharing one religious identity.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, xix.

Similarly, *Minaret* is the story of an upper-class Sudanese girl living a secular Westernized life in Sudan. Her family is aristocratic and her father is a close friend of the president. Najwa enjoys traveling to Europe, attending parties in the American Club in Khartoum and wearing Western fashion. A coup in Sudan suddenly changes her life. She becomes a refugee in London, her father is executed, her mother dies, and her twin brother is jailed for drug dealing and attacking a policeman. In London, Najwa is free to have an affair with Anwar, who was her friend at Khartoum University, yet she is disappointed in him and decides to break up. After leaving Anwar, Najwa finds solace and belonging at Regent Park Mosque. She wears the hijab and becomes religious. In order to support herself in London, Najwa works as a maid for an Egyptian family where she falls in love once again, with Tamer, the younger brother of her employer, Lamya. In spite of their different class and age, Najwa and Tamer's similar shared religious identity leads Tamer to insist on marrying her, but his family refuses. Najwa's cross-cultural encounter, which intersects with her religious gendered identity, is employed by Aboulela to present the growing of Islamic spirituality that provides the protagonist with agency, a sense of belonging and independence.

4.1. *The Translator*: Self and Cultural Translation

The Translator shows many travels that the female protagonist, Sammar, goes through between her home country Sudan and host country Britain. The two most significant journeys that most impact upon Sammar's psyche are the one to Aberdeen when she travels with her husband, Tarig, to obtain his medical degree, and the other when she moves back to Aberdeen to work as a translator for Professor Rae, with whom she falls in love. The first

journey is marked by the death of her husband in a car accident, which leaves Sammar devastated and takes her back to Sudan with her little son Amir. The second involves the failure of a romantic relationship with Rae and again she decides to return back home. Traveling back and forth between Sudan and Scotland literally and figuratively, which parallels translating texts from Arabic to English, presents a central theme for the diasporic self which has a continual engagement with home and exile. In the case of Sammar, the character engages constantly with both Khartoum and Aberdeen and negotiates her gendered Islamic identity accordingly. Travelling serves to outline Sammar`s personal geography and to attach her Islamic worldview to it in spite of her geographical location.

Sammar`s job of Arabic-English translation can be read figuratively as cultural and religious self-transformation. For Iain Chambers, "...to translate is always to transform. It always involves a necessary travesty of any metaphysics of authenticity or origins."⁵⁶⁸ Chambers argues that translation always speaks of the incomplete, the never fully "decipherable," and betrays any hope of transparency.⁵⁶⁹ Sammar is involved in the continuous translating of herself, her culture, worldview, texts and religion, which is a hard job to do and sometimes seems to be impossible because of the differences between the two locations. Dwelling between two worlds will engage Sammar in translating Arabic into English, and Islamic worldview into a secular one and the culture of the South into the North. Despite her quest to translate these basics, Sammar does not realize that some aspects cannot be translated by their nature. Sammar`s diasporic self, living between the disparities of the two cultures,

⁵⁶⁸ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

languages and religions, entails that some elements can be translatable, mistranslatable and untranslatable.

The conversation between Rae and Sammar puts it clearly. He says, "Translations don't do it justice. Much is lost ... yes, the meaning can be translated but not reproduced."⁵⁷⁰ Three main themes are emphasized in the above conversation. Firstly, in translation, meaning is lost because of cultural and linguistic differences. Secondly, meaning cannot be reproduced, especially in translating an Islamic religious text from its original into any other language, which entails the insufficiency of such a task. For example, when Sammar experiences that she finds herself unable to translate her Islamic faith to Rae, it is because some aspects are untranslatable as a consequence of the different worldviews and cultures they hold. Thirdly, even if the Holy texts or Islamic faith are translated, it does not necessarily mean that people will believe in them. It is highly important for Aboulela to emphasize the difficulties that her protagonist will encounter while engaging in cultural and religious translation for Rae.

The title of the novel, *The Translator*, suggests that translation signifies movement, in the sense of shifting texts from one language to another. Throughout the novel, translation as movement or shifting is displayed as three types of shifting. Firstly, the physical journey from Khartoum to Aberdeen entails Sammar's translation of her culture, faith and identity into the new location and her translation of the new culture into a familiar zone she can connect with. Secondly, there is linguistic translation from Arabic to English, which occurs as the result of a second movement to Aberdeen to work as a translator at the university. Thirdly, there is Sammar's shifting in time

⁵⁷⁰ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 121.

between the past and the present, which is displayed in the flashbacks in which vivid memories of past events are recalled constantly in her present. This redemption of the past allows Sammar to tackle the oppression inflicted upon her. On the one hand, she deals with the oppression of grief for her husband by relating it to God's will and the Islamic concept of destiny, which on the other hand empowers Sammar to confront the oppression of her mother-in-law, who blames Sammar for the death of her son. It is significant that during Sammar's negotiation of her identity through these types of translation, she has romantic feelings toward Rae and attempts at the same time to translate her Islamic viewpoint for him by translating this romantic feeling into the bond of marriage. It seems that translating place, time, culture and selfhood is difficult for Sammar at the beginning because of the contradictions of the two zones she moves between, Sudan and Britain. However, connecting spiritually and emotionally to the places where she has her experiences makes it possible for Sammar to translate herself across and despite the differences of these geographical sites.

Sammar's entrapment in grief—losing her husband and being dislocated alone in exile—is also reflected in the way her senses relate to the weather, the colors and smells of the new country. She cannot harmonize herself with the harsh Scottish weather and feels uncomfortable with the misty weather and “the hostile water”. She feels anxious, immersing herself in a dream where she is captured at home and afraid to confront the outer world:

She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned. She could not walk through the hostile water, risk blurring the ink on the pages he had asked her to translate. And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it an urgency that

was astringent to grief. She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such time she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn't do: Children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their walking sticks. They were superhuman, giants who would not let the elements stand in their way. Last year when the city had been dark with fog, she hid indoors for four days, eating her way through the last packet of pasta, drinking tea without milk.⁵⁷¹

The first encounter with a foreign land creates a feeling of estrangement in the diasporic subjectivity. In the case of Sammar, her uncomfortable feeling toward the unfamiliar weather—rain, snow, fog and wind—is established because of her sense of alienation which arouses within her a feeling of weakness, disability and fear. In addition, the hostile water of rain might ruin Sammar's documents which have been translated for Professor Rae and make her effort in vain. In addition, Aboulela's portrayal of the physical elements of the harsh weather in Scotland and how it isolates Sammar and confines her mobility at the beginning of the novel represents the obstacles Sammar will confront while translating her identity into the new context. The above extract reveals the protagonist's dilemma whereby the contradictions happen between Sudan and Britain in terms of weather, culture, language and worldviews and make it difficult for Sammar to interact. Once Sammar wakes up, she realizes that it is just a dream and there is only "grey October sky, Scottish grey with mist from the North Sea. And she did go out to meet Rae Isles as planned, clutching her blue folder with the translation of *Al-Nidaa's*

⁵⁷¹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 3.

manifesto.”⁵⁷² In fact, the weather is not as harsh and aggressive as she dreamed and cannot confine her movements.

It is important to note that Sammar meets Rae at the “Winter Gardens (an extended greenhouse in Duthies Park).”⁵⁷³ The Winter Gardens brings to mind the image of cold weather that Sammar avoids; however, this garden is designed as a greenhouse where several tropical plants have been uprooted and transferred from their original place and treated in specific conditions to maintain their survival. What is significant about these plants is their adjustment to survive in the new environment and how they, as Anna Ball puts it, “set down their roots in order to flourish; a deeply symbolic gesture towards the natural and generative need of all living things to find a terrain—whether literal or spiritual—in which to root themselves, and so to grow.”⁵⁷⁴ In Anna Ball’s account, Rae rather than Sammar, the Western academic rather than the diasporic subject, “must gradually move to root himself in spiritually as well as academically, constituting on Aboulela’s part a ‘subtle exercise in counter-acculturation’ (Nash 2002: 30).”⁵⁷⁵ So, according to Ball, who quotes Nash, Sammar’s rootedness offers her a mode of resistance to acculturation and guides her through the cultural conflict that she experiences during her travels which entails Rae to seek spiritual acculturation as an attempt from Aboulela to counter and challenge the colonial discourse. However, I believe this image of the Winter Gardens which house tropical plants portrays Sammar’s dislocation in self-imposed exile. Tropical plants root themselves and survive in

⁵⁷² Ibid, 3.

⁵⁷³ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁷⁴ Anna Ball, "Here Is Where I Am: Rerooting Diasporic Experience in Leila Aboulela's Recent Novels," in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, eds. Sarah Lawson Welsh, Cristina Sandru and Janet Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 118-127 (120).

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, 120.

a different terrain because of the nourishing conditions offered to them; similarly, Sammar's quest for a site to survive in exile is inevitable once any nourishment is offered. Islamic faith becomes the ground which Sammar invokes for a possibility of re-assessing and re-inventing her sense of identity and belonging against all odds. Eventually, her Islamic faith offers her a spiritual home in exile.

Moreover, the portrayal of the tropical plants in the Winter Gardens aims to bring to mind the image of Sudan, which emphasizes the distinction between Aberdeen and Khartoum: "The cacti were like rows of aliens in shades of green, of different heights, standing still, listening. They were surrounded by sand for the room was meant to give the impression of a desert."⁵⁷⁶ This description of a desert-like greenhouse juxtaposes the scene of South/Sudan with the scene of North/Scotland, which seems "irrelevant above the glass ceiling."⁵⁷⁷ For Sammar, this familiar scene of plants creates a nostalgic moment when her past—which is related to home and to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences—is recalled. Even Sammar's name is nostalgic; her parents picked this name upon her birth in Aberdeen which reveals their yearning for home. Sammar confirms this when Professor Rae asks her if her name is pronounced as the word Summer; yet she adds that it has a different meaning: "It means conversations with friends, late at night. It's what the desert nomads liked to do, talk leisurely by the light of the moon, when it was no longer so hot and the day's work was over."⁵⁷⁸ It is obvious that the diasporic self of Sammar yearns for the desert and social gatherings with her people. It is highly significant that Sammar's name is attached to a social and

⁵⁷⁶ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 4-5.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

geographical place that would have provided her with summer nights and conversation with friends, and from which she has moved away; she is surrounded now by feelings of displacement, disintegration and loneliness in her chosen exile. These discrepancies between the meanings of Sammar`s name and her life in Aberdeen—which is loaded with oppositions to that name—further articulates the distinctions between Sudan and Scotland. In addition, Sammar`s existence in Aberdeen, which is marked mainly by seclusion and friendlessness, does not relate to any of the notions her name carries. It seems to be difficult for Sammar to translate herself into this new site because she lacks interactions and communication with Scottish people.

Furthermore, the greenhouse fills Sammar with feelings of ambivalence. Once she feels comfortable and familiarizes herself with the scene, she recalls the suppressed past. So, grief for her deceased husband comes back through flashbacks. These flashbacks convey images of her mother-in-law, Mahasen, with whom Sammar used to have a close intimate relationship before the death of Tarig, as well as her sister-in-law, Hanan, and Sammar`s little son, Amir, from whom she detaches and whom she leaves behind in Sudan. These flashbacks also recall how Sammar`s Islamic faith has assisted her to heal from the double oppression of losing her beloved husband and living alone in a diasporic location. Sammar feels comfortable articulating this past to Rae, but is still “wondering which parts of narrative to soften, to omit.”⁵⁷⁹ Her first memory relates to her grief upon the death of her husband and how the Muslim community, especially women, supported her from losing herself in pain:

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, 6.

They prayed, recited the Qur`an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. She went between them dazed, thanking them, humbled by the awareness that they were stronger than her, more giving than her, though she thought of herself as more educated, better dressed. She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing hijab, the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahideen. Now the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up ... Only Allah is eternal, only Allah is eternal.⁵⁸⁰

Sammar`s Islamic religious subjectivity is rendered through articulation of her grief: she prays that she might be spared after this grief because she believes this life is temporary and only God is eternal. The community of Muslim women, her belief and her spirituality help Sammar to survive and bear the loss. The protagonist can negotiate the sense of loss spiritually, even though she covers her head and body to cope with the Muslim women who support her and make it evident that they are stronger and more giving than her, while she thought of herself as “more educated, and better dressed.”⁵⁸¹ It is obvious from the above paragraph that Sammar wears the headscarf only after this trial of losing her husband, to express her obedience and submissiveness to God`s will and to express her grief over her loss.

Moreover, five prayers connect Sammar to reality physically and give her a sense of time`s flow when she is dislocated in exile as the only “last touch with normality; without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid, 9.

shift of day into night.”⁵⁸² Sammar’s religious consciousness is confirmed while she recalls her experiences and memories of home and exile, which are narrated to Rae through flashbacks. Sammar’s journey to Aberdeen to apply for a job as a translator takes place during the Gulf War, when there is a high demand for Arabic, religious and political documents to be translated into English:

She had been lucky. There was a demand for translating Arabic into English, not much competition. Her fate was etched out by a law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply.⁵⁸³

So, she is able to get the job because she holds the British passport as her parents lived in the UK and she was born in this country, so by law she is eligible for British citizenship. However, Sammar reminds herself that it is not just a mere matter of luck but that her “fate is etched out by Allah Almighty.”⁵⁸⁴ Sammar’s religious consciousness is rendered as a site of negotiation that organizes all her daily issues.

In addition, the flashbacks carry a bundle of memories to Sammar from which she chooses to tell Rae some and omit others. For example, she emphasizes the lovely pleasant bond with her mother-in-law before the death of Tarig. However, Sammar hides the fact that her mother-in-law frowns when someone mentions Sammar’s name because this bond has been supplanted by an unpleasant friction since the accident and she blames Sammar for what happened to her son. Sammar also speaks about her son, who lives with her mother-in-law in Sudan. However, she does not dare to tell the fact that she

⁵⁸² Ibid, 16.

⁵⁸³ Ibid, 71.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, 71.

“was unable to mother the child” because “the part of her that did the mothering has disappeared” with Tarig.⁵⁸⁵ Sammar remembers how she looked at her son and said to him, “I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you.”⁵⁸⁶ She projects her anger upon her son because of the irretrievable loss. So, the trial of losing her beloved husband, the hostility of Mahasen, and the vanished motherhood insist on rising to the surface through flashbacks, and they are like “froth that could rise if she started to speak.”⁵⁸⁷

Even though Sammar realizes that the only way to “clear” herself is to start speaking, she remains selective of the memories to be articulated. She believes that the heavy pain she has been through cannot be translated. Sammar fails to translate her grief as much as she tries because she keeps it suppressed inside her. As a result of her inability to articulate or translate this pain, it starts to mark her body visibly and takes a sensory shape:

Her invisible mark shifted, breathed its existence. [...]. Four years ago, this mark had crystallised. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled on to her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach. She knew it was translucent, she knew that it had a mercurial liquid which flowed up and down slowly when she moved. The diamond shape of grief made sense to her: her forehead—that was where it hurt when she cried, that space behind her eyes; her shoulders—because they curled to carry her heart. And the angle at the top of her stomach—that was where the pain was.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, 4.

Despite Sammar`s struggle to suppress this pain, which is untranslatable, it becomes a tangible experience, marking her body. However, Sammar`s inability to attach herself to the new location and translate it into a familiar one is the reason why she cannot translate the pain into words. The inscription of the pain as outlining a geography on Sammar`s body is an embodiment of the pain of loss and the pain of displacement in exile due to her recent geographical experience.

Because in reality pain is invisible or difficult to represent, Aboulela`s representation of Sammar`s pain as a visible outline is a difficult task. In reading Aboulela`s description of her protagonist`s agony, Brenda Cooper, in her article "Everyday Objects and Translation," restates the assumption of Elaine Scarry on pain and the body, claiming: "The novel works hard to describe the body in pain, something which Elaine Scarry (1989) has warned us is notoriously difficult to represent."⁵⁸⁹ Cooper attempts to read this tangible pain Aboulela represents by connecting the geographical marks of pain on Sammar`s body which result from the grief upon her husband and the untranslatable conditions of the new location: "We see the physical agony written onto her body is the result of her attempts to negotiate between her worlds, [...] Khartoum and Aberdeen."⁵⁹⁰ So, Sammar cannot tell Rae the depth of her pain and she keeps it as a visible mark engraved on her forehead, her shoulders and the top of her stomach where it is most located.

The similarity of the Winter Gardens` tropical plants to those of Sammar`s home brings to mind the migrant experience of deracination and

⁵⁸⁹ Brenda Cooper, "Everyday Objects & Translation Leila Aboulela's *The Translator & Coloured Lights*," in *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language* (Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 43-65 (45) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1bh2kxb.6>. [accessed Aug. 5, 2016].

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, 45.

loneliness. Geoffrey Nash, in his chapter "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," emphasizes that Aboulela applies the technique of defamiliarization in sketching the Western scene and its relationship to the "émigré's deracination." Nash argues that Aboulela pairs "the flavor of Africa against a Western setting" which reflects a "usual exile routine."⁵⁹¹ Even though I agree with Nash's assumption about the technique used to emphasize immigrant dislocation, I argue that Aboulela shows a non-stereotypical way of representing immigration, dislocation and the possibility of alternative forms of rootedness. She avoids the usual understanding of geographical belonging and gives a chance for the diasporic self to be translated into spiritual rootedness through the growing sense of Islamic faith that transcends traditional national borders. According to Thomas Tweed, religion offers a chance to achieve this purpose by helping believers "make homes and cross boundaries" through their faith.⁵⁹² Moreover, the discrepancies between Aberdeen and Khartoum are gradually decreased when Sammar starts to develop a mutual emotional bond with Rae. Thus, the emotional and spiritual journeys Sammar undertakes help her to build a mental homeland in exile and a space of belonging. Initially, the two journeys run in parallel, but toward the end of the narrative, they emerge and culminate in Rae's conversion to Islam.

Aboulela employs this technique in juxtaposing the familiar scene with an unfamiliar setting to enhance Sammar's perception of her personal untranslatable agony, so it becomes familiar to her, and to enable the protagonist to translate herself into the new exile gradually, especially with the company of Rae and her new-found Islamic faith. During this process in which

⁵⁹¹ Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," 137.

⁵⁹² Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge & Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

the protagonist encounters the de-familiarized setting, home appears in the Scottish landscape whenever Sammar tries to translate cultural, viewpoint and religious experiences to the new location. Furthermore, the romantic feelings which attach Sammar to Rae also unite the two places temporally and spatially. However, Sammar is always occupied with interrogating herself as to whether this emotional feeling connecting her to Rae is adequate to connect and relate her to this diasporic exile.

It is not only the Winter Gardens that is de-familiarized in such a way that it is foreign yet familiar which facilitates Sammar`s communication with her new setting, but also Rae. He is rendered in a de-familiarized way; being a Scotsman yet possessing the manners, features and looks to which Sammar is accustomed. Rae makes Sammar comfortable with speaking to him and reminds her of her own people in Sudan:

He knew the letters of the Arabic alphabet, he had lived in her part of the world. Rae looked like he could easily pass for a Turk or a Persian. He was dark enough. He told her once that in Morocco he could walk as if disguised; none suspected he was Scottish as long as he did not speak and let his pronunciation give him away. With others, he looked to her to be out of place, not only because of his looks but his manners. The same manners which made her able to talk to him made the world vivid for the first time in years.⁵⁹³

So, Sammar does not feel alienated from Rae because of his looks and his knowledge of her culture and her world. Rae is familiar with Sammar`s language and she recognizes that his manners, his old-fashioned civility, make him seem out of tune with modern Scotland and more like someone belonging

⁵⁹³ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 6.

to her remembered homeland, which leads to the close communication between them which progresses gradually into love, as the narrative reveals. In addition, because Sammar feels that Rae is different from the other people she meets in Scotland, she becomes open to speaking to him and he gives time to listen to her, “[from] the beginning she had thought that he was not one of them, not modern like them, not impatient like them. He talked to her as if she had not lost anything, as if she were the same Sammar of the past.”⁵⁹⁴

As the narrative unfolds, Sammar’s relationship with Rae develops—beyond her job as his translator—into a personal and intimate one. When she visits Rae’s house with her Muslim friend, Yasmin, the departmental secretary, Sammar feels closer to Rae than before. During their gathering, the three discuss Rae’s concern about studying Islam and the Middle East. He confesses that his interest sprang initially from the influence of his uncle, who settled in Egypt and embraced Islam. At this point, Sammar starts to harbor a dream that Rae could convert to Islam and the bond of marriage would be possible. Even though it seems early for Sammar to expect Rae’s conversion to Islam, she asks Yasmin once they leave Rae’s place, “Do you think he could one day convert?”⁵⁹⁵ Once Sammar becomes familiar with and emotionally closer to Rae, she imagines a homecoming:

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and potholes. A bicycle tinkled, frogs croaked, the

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, 21.

muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the Isha prayer. But this was Scotland and reality left her dulled, unsure of herself.⁵⁹⁶

The two worlds unite where home emerges in the Scottish setting and images, smells and sounds related to home come on the scene. Thus, the Scottish scene is not hostile and alien anymore because of her romantic emotional stance toward Rae. Sammar feels able to translate herself from dislocation into rootedness with the company of Rae, who becomes "sort of familiar, like people from back home."⁵⁹⁷ This signifies the beginning of Sammar's process of cultivating her Muslim faith, which proceeds alongside the cultivation of her relationship with Rae in order to translate the suffering of exile into spiritual and emotional belonging.

The protagonist's feeling of familiarity is a result of her emotional stance; her feelings toward Rae make her see a potential coexistence in the exile. She starts to see the surroundings from a different perspective: "[S]he had seen the ugly curtains, the faded bedspread ... as if seeing them for the first time."⁵⁹⁸ Sammar looks around her room and says to herself, "I am not like this. I am better than this."⁵⁹⁹ She decides that "there was no grief, no burning in her head and chest," and to "rinse her life" by throwing away everything that reminds her of her own self-neglect and isolation.⁶⁰⁰ With her new feeling, she is able to see the city and its people as familiar, or at least, as non-threatening:

⁵⁹⁶ *ibid*, 20-21.

⁵⁹⁷ *ibid*, 21.

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid*, 65.

⁵⁹⁹ *ibid*, 65.

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid*, 66.

Even certain people`s faces had become familiar over time. Years ago, these streets were a maze of culture shocks. Things that jarred—an earring on man`s earlobe, a women walking dogs ... Now, Sammar did not notice these things, did not gaze at them, alarmed, as she did years before.⁶⁰¹

All these are external indicators of Sammar`s emotional state. Sammar`s feeling of belonging to the new environment becomes related to her emotional state with Rae; if he is away or distant from her, she feels dislocated and irrelevant to the surroundings.

During the winter break and holidays when Sammar cannot connect with Rae for a time, her perception of the surroundings emphasizes the distinctions and contradictions between home and exile:

She said that colours made her sad. Yellow as she knew it and green as she knew it were not here, not bright and vivid as they should be. She had stacked the differences; the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the muezzin, then found that the colours of mud, sky and leaves were different.⁶⁰²

Sammar`s yearning for home occurs because of her emotional feelings; she can no longer relate herself to Aberdeen, nor can she see or feel Khartoum in exile. In the absence of Rae, Sammar`s perception of Aberdeen is different; the vivid images, smells and sound from home that were able to spring up in the foreign scene are now remote, just as Rae is physically remote. Once Rae is back and Sammar is able to reconnect with him or with her emotional feelings toward him, the unity of the two places occurs again. When Rae calls Sammar at the

⁶⁰¹ Ibid, 68.

⁶⁰² Ibid, 43.

end of the winter break, she redeems the smells, sounds and senses related to home:

She ran up the stairs that she has often taken a step at a time, dragging her grief. Now the staircase has a different aura, a different light. [...] Where was she now, which country? What year? She climbed the stairs into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home and the past had come here and balanced just for her.⁶⁰³

Reconnection with Rae and with her emotional feeling make it possible for all the spatial and temporal disparities to vanish. Sammar feels partially comfortable in her exile, despite her displacement.

However, connecting her sense of home and landscape to her emotional state is not adequate for Sammar to get a complete sense of belonging in exile or feeling at home. Sammar realizes that cultivating her spiritual faith with her emotions toward Rae will help her to find a sense of belonging in exile. After Rae returns from the winter break and after Sammar`s experiencing a well-founded attachment to him, she begins to consider intensely whether he would embrace Islam. Yasmin triggers Sammar`s concern when she suggests that Rae would probably be an agnostic or atheist and he might consider “religion is the opium of the people.”⁶⁰⁴ Sammar feels like her world has fallen apart. She does not hesitate for a moment to call Rae and find an answer that will hold her world together. When she calls Rae, she feels with every unanswered ring “a windy place.”⁶⁰⁵ Sammar usually feels relief when speaking to Rae or at his existence, which brings up images of home, yet this time she feels shattered because she starts to think about the different religions they

⁶⁰³ Ibid, 40.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid, 89.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid, 91.

hold. This fear leaves Sammar vulnerable where she feels the Scottish wind and cold can permeate through her body easily. Once Rae picks up the phone, Sammar asks him, “‘Rae do you believe in God?’... ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I do.’ ‘You’re not a ... an ... atheist?’”⁶⁰⁶ Rae confirms to her he is not an atheist; however, Sammar remains uncomfortable, because even if he believes in God, Islam must become his faith if they are to marry, as in accordance with Islamic law, a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man.

The coexistence Sammar feels in exile, connected to her emotional state with Rae, is short-lived because Rae is reluctant about the idea of conversion to Islam, and this will make their marriage unachievable. This moment upsets the stability of Sammar’s emotions and attachment to exile, which leads her to return home. Sammar’s feelings of disappointment raise in her the sense of alienation and displacement in exile; the foreign place she worked hard to familiarize herself with becomes exotic and she becomes detached from it. Once she leaves Rae’s office, after he declares unwillingness to convert to Islam, Sammar feels the freezing harsh weather of Aberdeen, where everything is “clear and cold. Her breath smoke, the snow speckles of diamonds to step on.”⁶⁰⁷

In spite of Sammar’s decision to go back home to experience the belonging and attachment of which she is deprived in exile, following Rae’s refusal to convert, she is confused regarding her feelings toward home: “[A]ll she had now was reluctance and some fear.”⁶⁰⁸ However, the first thing that Sammar yearns to do is to join her people in a group prayer at the mosque, which links her with spirituality and the faith that is rooted at home:

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, 92.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid, 126.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid, 95.

When she stood her shoulders brushed against the women at each side of her, straight lines, then bending together but not precisely at the same time, not slick, not synchronized, but rippled and the rustle of clothes until the foreheads rested on the mats. Under the sky, the grass underneath it, it was a different feeling from praying indoors, a different glow. She remembered having to hide in Aberdeen, being alone. She remembered wanting him to pray like she prayed hoping, for it. The memory made her say, *Lord, keep sadness away from me.*⁶⁰⁹

The above extract reveals an insight into the protagonist's displaced self which experiences belonging at home. Reading superficially, it seems that Sammar's feelings of home and belonging originate from placing herself physically into the landscape of home (Sudan) and its community, or from practicing its Islamic rituals collectively such as group prayer. However, home and its Muslim community are not enough to provide Sammar with complete satisfaction regarding her sense of belonging. Lacking an emotional bond with people in Sudan evokes Sammar's established emotions related to Rae. While praying at home with her community, she imagines Rae converting to Islam and praying with her instead of this group. Only this will provide Sammar with spiritual and emotional satisfaction and settlement, despite her location. The supplication Sammar articulates at the end of her prayer "*Lord, keep sadness away from me,*" suggests the pain and grief she carries on feeling Rae is unattainable in the geographical sense and does not share her Islamic faith. After Sammar experiences home, she realizes that a full sense of belonging is yet to be achieved, as she still carries her agony due to her failure in a romantic relationship. Thus, Sammar realizes that even connecting home and faith cannot help to relieve her pain completely.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid, 155-156.

What completes Sammar`s emotional detachment from home is the friction and problematic relationship with her mother-in-law, Mahasen. Sammar finds that Mahasen has not yet overcome the trauma of losing her son and still blames her for the incident. Once Sammar speaks back to her, Mahasen starts accusing Sammar, ““You`re a liar and you killed my son.”... ““You nagged him for that car and that car killed him.””⁶¹⁰ Mahasen goes further, accusing Sammar of escaping to Aberdeen for an improper job that does not pay much precisely so that she is not able to help her aunt financially. As a result, Sammar falls back into the same dullness, dreams and hallucinations that impede her from connecting to the reality of her setting. Immobilized by the grief which is revived in Khartoum and frustrated by the cruelty of home, Sammar becomes emotionally detached from the people at home, and imagines that Aberdeen has appeared in Khartoum. This vision visits her when she is annoyed by the hot summer weather and goes to bring a cold glass of water out of the fridge for her controlling mother-in-law:

The sudden chill when she opened the fridge door on a day that was too hot; the blue cold, frost and it was Aberdeen where he was, his jacket and walking in grey against the direction of the wind. White seagulls and a pale sea, until her aunt behind her shouted, “What are you doing standing like an idiot with the door of the fridge wide open. Everything will melt.”⁶¹¹

This image includes Rae walking against the direction of the wind. However, upon this image which comes to her vanishing, Sammar realizes that despite being at home, she is still experiencing alienation and estrangement. So, she withdraws into sleep: “She wanted a bed and a cover, sleep. She wanted to

⁶¹⁰ Ibid, 166-167.

⁶¹¹ Ibid, 177.

sleep like she used to sleep in Aberdeen, everything muffled up and grey, curling up, covering her face with the blanket, her breath warming the cocoon she had made for herself.”⁶¹² Sammar`s sense of belonging to Sudan is not fulfilled and is diminished, as the images of home she dreamed about in Aberdeen have not materialized in reality. Sammar`s constant quest for a landscape to translate her self, emotions and identity into has failed despite the sense of spiritual fulfillment she finds at home.

Sammar`s feeling of cold in Khartoum—the opposite of what happened in Aberdeen—and her feeling of the hot desert in the greenhouse highlight the disparities between the two places that impede her full sense of belonging to either. In Aberdeen, Sammar feels a partial sense of belonging through her emotional attachment to Rae, but it is still incomplete. Similarly, in Khartoum, her faith upon joining community group prayers gives her a sense of spiritual belonging, but she still lacks satisfactory emotional fulfillment. Thus, her life is confined within lack until she comes to a point where her sense of belonging is achieved in spite of the location she dwells in. This can only be achieved when Sammar becomes aware of the reality that religious faith is an inspiration from God and spiritual and emotional fulfillment are not attached to the physical location; a truth she grasps at the end of the novel.

Along the same line as Iain Chambers, Anna Ball contests that there is something untranslatable and innate about the nature of faith: “Sammar`s untranslated and definitive location of herself within the geographies of diaspora reflects her rootedness within what is described as the specific ‘place of Allah`s mercy.’”⁶¹³ This means that Sammar cannot translate herself into a Western secular setting and insists on her Islamic rootedness, while Rae is the

⁶¹² Ibid, 167.

⁶¹³ Ball, "Here Is Where I Am," 121.

one who translates himself spiritually into Sammar`s faith-based geography. Ball maintains that this is expressed in Sammar`s refusal to translate her response to Rae`s marriage proposal, which can be read as a commitment to the distinctness of cultural codes. Ball suggests that Aboulela constructs an interesting alignment of sociopolitical approaches toward Islam with a postcolonial commitment to dispelling neo-Orientalist thought. So Aboulela, in Ball`s account, offers an unusual reversal of power dynamics between male and female/ West and East which entails that Rae the Western male translate himself—in a process of acculturation—to the Muslim female Sammar. Even though I agree with Ball`s view of the innate nature of faith, her own reading operates at a political and ideological level. I contend that Rae`s conversion makes Sammar realize that the obstacle that separates them has been diminished, so she writes two letters to Rae: “They would say the same thing but not be a translation.”⁶¹⁴ Sammar`s act of writing two letters in two languages without translating them represents her decision to stop working as a mediator between two different languages, cultures and worldviews as the differences have been overcome.

It is a fact that at a certain point of the narrative, Sammar finds herself incapable of translating effectively between Arabic and English, Sudan and Aberdeen, and Islam and secularism. However, she tries hard to push Arabic into English and English into Arabic and goes further to mistranslate Rae`s subjectivity and his own worldview to match her own. Rae studies Middle Eastern politics, history, culture and religion in an objective way, and does not hold prejudices against Arabs or Muslims. He engages in this field academically, and is aware where to position himself in the Western discourse regarding the Middle East:

⁶¹⁴ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 184.

'I wanted to understand the Middle East. No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North African he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism.'⁶¹⁵

Rae emphasizes the significant role of Islam and its impact on the politics of the Middle East. His research is always interested in this area and makes a link between Islam and anti-colonialism. Rae discards the Orientalist and Imperialist discourses dealing with Islam and the Middle East as being inauthentic and inaccurate. According to Rae, even Frantz Fanon could not predict the possible consequences of the interaction of Islam and politics. Despite Fanon's writing against colonialism, racism and its psychological aspects, he never linked Islam explicitly to anti-colonialism. Based on his first-hand experience with Muslim people in North Africa, Rae realizes that the state of mind of colonized and postcolonized people is fully supported by a religion that resists being colonized by Western Christianity in the past and Western secularism today.

When Sammar becomes aware of his attitude toward the Middle East, she imagines him taking his attitude a step further toward embracing Islam. At this point, Yasmin, her friend, stresses the hopelessness of such an expectation and proposes that he would be seen in the West as joining "the religion of terrorists and fanatics. That's how it would be seen. He's got enough critics as it is: those who think he is too liberal, those who would have accused him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture ... A traitor to the

⁶¹⁵ Ibid, 106.

West. You know, the idea that West is best.”⁶¹⁶ Being involved between two worlds—East and West—Rae has been constantly mistranslated by the West and by Sammar. His own people consider him a traitor to his own culture, which is evident in their abusive mails and phone calls, in addition to Sammar, who mistranslates his political viewpoint and his scholarly interest in Islam as a desire to convert.

Yasmin feels it is necessary to clarify for Sammar her naive mistranslation of Rae`s scholarly interest into personal conviction; she says:

‘Are you hoping he would convert so you could marry him?’

‘Don`t be silly, I was just wondering.’ She breathed in and out as if it was an effort. Her eyes ached, her nose ached. ‘I was just wondering because he knows so much about Islam...’

‘This annoys him.’

‘What annoys him?’

‘That Muslims expect him to convert just because he knows so much about Islam.’⁶¹⁷

As the narrative shows, Rae`s scholarly pursuits of Islam and Middle Eastern politics are not the main reason for his conversion. Upon Rae`s confession that he has romantic feelings toward Sammar and her mistranslation of this feeling into a desire to convert, he clarifies to her that his interest in Islam is confined to the academic field and does not stem from a personal quest for spirituality:

‘It`s not in me to be religious,’ he said. ‘I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for

⁶¹⁶ Ibid, 21-22.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, 22.

something spiritual. Some people do. I had a friend who went to India and became a Buddhist. But I was not like that. I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who were reasonable and right.’⁶¹⁸

Rae is dedicated intellectually to researching Islam and the Middle East and his method is being “objective” and “detached,” since his dedication originates from an academic not spiritual interest.

This fact makes Sammar unable to translate some of the words Rae articulates when she asks him to convert. He tells her that he has never had “much empathy” for anyone in his life before; Sammar struggles with the meaning of the word “empathy” and mistranslates it: “It sounded like ‘sympathy’, and, she thought, he feels sorry for me. To him I must have always looked helpless and forlorn.”⁶¹⁹ The emotional trauma inflicted upon Sammar results in her mistranslation of Rae’s words and becomes an obstacle in communication and translation from the foreign language English to her Arabic. Sammar misinterprets Rae’s word “empathy”, which suggests his kindness and his willingness to share her feeling, and understands it as “sympathy” which means to her feelings of pity and sorrow over her situation.

It is particularly Rae’s empathy which allows him to convert to Islam. C. E. Rashid in her “Academia, Empathy and Faith,” suggests that empathy means to hold a faith in the other. He goes further to explain that faith is that:

⁶¹⁸ Ibid, 123.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, 124.

which Derrida has defined as foundational to a future form of democracy:

One's relationship to the other, addressing the other, presupposes faith. One can never show, one can never prove that someone is or isn't lying—it is impossible to prove [...] consequently, when someone is speaking to us, he or she is asking to be believed. [...] This faith is the condition of the social bond itself. There is no social bond without faith (Cherif, 2008, pp. 57-8). This is a faith that amounts to belief in the words and values of others, a faith in another's sincerity, which is essential to sincere and utopian social relations.⁶²⁰

In Rashid's account, Rae's empathy leads him to believe in Sammar and accept her Islamic worldview. His faith in Sammar develops into a strong social bond which is "essential" for a perfect coexistence. At first, Rae's empathy arises from the academic setting. He employs Sammar post-Gulf War while he is receiving hostile responses to his sympathetic attitude toward Muslims. Rae's academic faith has been a principal in his profession: he states, "I view the Qur'an as a sacred text, as the word of God. It would be impossible in the kind of work I'm doing, in the issues I'm addressing for me to do otherwise but accept Muslims' own vision of the Qur'an."⁶²¹ So, this academic faith by understanding and conversing with Muslims informs the academic more than any collected materials.⁶²²

⁶²⁰ C. E. Rashid, "Academia, Empathy and Faith: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*," in *Postcolonialism and Islam: Theory, Literature, Culture, Society and Film*, eds., Geoffrey Nash, Kathleen Kerr-Koch and Sarah E. Hackett (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 131-141 (135).

⁶²¹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 86.

⁶²² Rashid, "Academia, Empathy and Faith," 140.

It is significant to know that holding academic or social faith does not necessarily mean converting to the Other's religion. Rashid raises this question: "Is there a form of faith which is open to the other whilst recognising, as Derrida says, a certain 'rupture' between ourselves and others ...?"⁶²³ To answer, Rashid quotes Derrida, "'To relate to the other, as other ... is not simply to be linked to the other; it is also to respect the interruption.'"⁶²⁴ Thus, Rae's empathy is premised on respecting his differences with Sammar. Despite the fact that they hold different worldviews, social faith can guarantee a perfect social relation between Rae and Sammar.

However, I argue that Aboulela develops the social relation between lovers to a bond of marriage in order to align with the concept of "Halal fiction" which arises from her Islamic vision of male-female relationships. It is not Islamic to have friendship between males and females, and a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim unless he converts. So, the Islamic logic of the narrative necessitates Rae's conversion to Islam to facilitate the happy ending of the romance. Rae takes this decision to convert to Islam after the spiritual journey he goes through while located in Scotland. Even though he has made many trips to Morocco and Egypt for the sake of his research about the Middle East and collected vast materials and knowledge about Islam, faith only finds its way to his heart in Aberdeen: "[K]nowledge is necessary, that's true. But faith, it comes direct from Allah."⁶²⁵ He realizes that in "'the spiritual path, everyone is on his own'" and "'it's a lonely thing.'"⁶²⁶ This means religious faith cannot be translated by others, it comes as inspiration out of a spiritual need. Later on, Sammar reaches a realization that everything is linked

⁶²³ Ibid, 136.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, 136.

⁶²⁵ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 191.

⁶²⁶ Ibid, 195.

to God`s will, whether she wants this to be the case or not. At this point, she matures as a Muslim woman who reconciles God`s will and her inclination; she learns to negotiate what she can obtain out of her own choices as mainly organized through God`s will.

Islam is central in Aboulela`s novels and the perspective from which she writes. In order to understand her novels, Aboulela asks the Western reader to respect that centrality and perspective, as she respects the centrality of the West while reading Western novels. Speaking about Rae`s conversion to Islam in *The Translator*, she explains, "I was often asked 'Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle etc., etc?'" In my answer I would then fall back on *Jane Eyre* and say 'From an Islamic point of view, why can't Mr. Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane?' In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathise with Jane`s very Christian dilemma, I want western/Christian readers to respect and empathise with Sammar`s very Muslim dilemma."⁶²⁷ Thus, Rae`s conversion is not necessary in order to have empathy with Sammar, but the author develops the narrative to give a happy ending to the romance from an Islamic perspective. This means that Aboulela does not expect the political reading of Nash, Steiner and Ball regarding Rae`s conversion.

By the same token, Rashid proposes that the intervening logic of Islamic conversion insists on a difficult dialogue that is punctured by compromise and sacrifice on the part of Sammar.⁶²⁸ As Rae implies that they will marry and leave for Aberdeen, Sammar responds:

⁶²⁷ John A. Stotesbury, "Genre and Islam in Recent Anglophone Romantic Fiction," in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, eds. Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi: 2004), 69-82 (81).

⁶²⁸ Rashid, "Academia, Empathy and Faith," 140.

'If I was someone else, someone strong and independent I would tell you now, I don't want to go back with you, I don't want to leave my family, I love my country too much.' Her voice was teasing and sad.

He did not look taken aback. 'You're not someone else,' he said.⁶²⁹

Similarly, Wail Hassan claims that Aboulela's version of Islam repudiates freedom in dealing with women and gender and reinscribes male supremacy, as he reads Sammar's response as obedience and submission.⁶³⁰ Although Rashid and Hassan rightly point out that Aboulela breaks stagnant binaries of West and East, both, nevertheless, narrow Aboulela's attempt to a rejection of feminism in favor of Islamic logic. However, I contend that Aboulela structures her women's spiritual experience to transcend the usual areas of conflict relevant to gender roles. Indeed, this is not an explicit form of feminist resistance like that of El Saadawi's female protagonists. Aboulela presents the relationship between Rae and Sammar with full empathy. It is significant to notice that Islam's centrality in their lives marginalizes all their differences. They use conversation to reach a coexistence free from conflict. Sammar and Rae negotiate their spiritual and emotional belongings. Sammar points out that she loves her family and her country where she is attached spiritually, but she cannot stay because she is attached emotionally to Rae. So, Rae's conversion brings up the most essential theme the novel revolves around: Faith is not confined within geographical borders. He states after his conversion to Islam, "'Ours isn't a religion of suffering', 'nor is it tied to a particular place.'"⁶³¹ Rae's words disperse Sammar's melancholy and make her "feel close to him,

⁶²⁹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 191.

⁶³⁰ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 196.

⁶³¹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, 191

pulled in, closer than any time before.”⁶³² Immediately, conciliation between them has been made; Rae considers Sammar and his freshly acquired faith a place of belonging, like Sammar does.

It becomes possible for Sammar and him to reunite as they share the same religious identity and worldview. Rae has given Sammar a sense of home in Aberdeen before, but he has not given her a complete sense of belonging because of their different religious worldviews. However, his conversion enables him to provide Sammar with complete emotional and spiritual belonging despite the geographical differences. Sammar has undergone fragmentation and disintegration through her physical journeys between Khartoum and Aberdeen, yet she defeats this displacement when she navigates her selfhood spiritually. At this point, Sammar realizes that all the splinters of her come together.⁶³³ Aboulela attempts to establish at the end of the novel that in this globe which goes beyond national boundaries or interest, “location is not an essential ingredient of Muslim practice anymore.”⁶³⁴ Thus, the protagonist finally obtains a sense of belonging and home while disconnected from any particular location, which emphasizes that this sense is universal and can be everywhere and anywhere.

While, in *The Translator*, spirituality is somewhat circumscribed by the emotional attachment between Sammar and Rae, in the later novel, *Minaret*, the protagonist, Najwa, pursues her faith despite the prospect it offers of living a solitary life.

⁶³² Ibid, 191.

⁶³³ Ibid, 66.

⁶³⁴ Steiner, “Strategic Nostalgia, Islam and Cultural Translation,” 3.

4.2. *Minaret*: Diasporic Subjectivity and Religious Replacement

This story is displayed in three temporal settings. The first sheds lights on the protagonist's former life in Sudan as the daughter of an upper-class family living a fancy lifestyle. The second period handles Najwa's displacement in exile after the destruction of her family. She suffers a degraded social status and encounters financial crisis, working as a housemaid for a rich Arab family in London. During this time, Najwa has to encounter her new status and navigate between her recent downgraded identity and the previous privileged one. Moreover, after the death of her mother and being connected to the Muslim women at the mosque, she struggles between her past in Sudan and the secular worldviews she holds and her newly acquired religious consciousness. It is not possible for her new religious self to emerge until she decides to abandon her past life, including friends and relatives from home. The third part of the narrative occurs in London in 2003, when the protagonist has established her Islamic faith with strong and close attachment and devotion to the Muslim community at the mosque. Najwa finally becomes aware of her newly constructed Islamic subjectivity in London and attempts to resettle herself and her sense of belonging to her faith.

In the prelude of the novel, the protagonist and narrator, Najwa, begins by expressing her present status in the world and continues by telling of her life back home in Sudan and her early displacement in exile with her family. After being forced to experience exile and being deprived of her social and financial privilege, Najwa narrates her sense of anxiety and isolation in the place she lives: "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room for me to move."⁶³⁵ These words

⁶³⁵ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 1.

describe the physical and spatial space within which Najwa moves. The description emphasizes a downwards movement: Najwa has “come down” and “slid” to a place that is “low”, and her movement is restricted because of the limited space she occupies. The narrator clarifies later that this place where “the ceiling is low” is a small flat in London purchased by her mother because of a lack of sufficient income to live well. Najwa`s expression “come down in the world” represents her awareness of her degraded social and financial status after losing her family. She was born in Khartoum to a wealthy family, but living in exile makes their financial resources dwindle. Her brother becomes an addict and goes to prison and her mother suffers from blood cancer and spends what is left of her money on her medication.

However, before proceeding to narrate her past in Khartoum, Najwa highlights her present life and her strategy for coping with her degraded social and financial status:

Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I`m good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent`s Park Mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn ... Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent.⁶³⁶

⁶³⁶ Ibid, 1.

It seems that Najwa has surrendered to her degraded status and has no ability to change, since it has been forced upon her and determined by her past. Once Najwa engages in a new beginning as a housemaid, she recalls her past that has led to this present. But, in contrast to the downward movement Najwa has suffered in London, she keeps her sight upwards, where she can see the minaret at the Regent's Park Mosque. Shifting moods characterize Najwa's status as she describes the boredom surrounding her life by routine; then suddenly she is enchanted by the beauty of London in autumn and the appearance of the minaret in this landscape. At this time of the year, London is "at its best," like a potent mature woman. The simile the narrator makes between London in autumn and a mature woman seems to represent Najwa herself: a woman in her mid-thirties managing her life independently in London despite social and financial loss but still strong and potent due to her Islamic awakening, which gives her a sense of identity and belonging. The minaret signifies the site of survival to which Najwa resorts by connecting with the Muslim community of women at the mosque.

During the first part of the narrative, the reader encounters the different subjectivity of a Najwa who is completely unlike Najwa in exile after the loss of her family and privileges. Najwa in Khartoum is solely characterized by her social class, which provides her with the privileges of a Western lifestyle and education in the 1980s. In this place, Khartoum, where the protagonist was born and raised, her family luxuriates in a life of excessive spending and affluence; this type of life becomes the reason for her family's destruction. Najwa's former life in Khartoum is defined by her socioeconomic class, how she deals with people and how she views the world around her. When she introduces her father in the narrative, she defines him in terms of his social background and describes her feeling toward it: "He had married above

himself, to better himself. His life story was of how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the president's office via marriage into an old wealthy family. I didn't like him to tell it, it confused me. I was too much like my mother."⁶³⁷ Najwa from her birth enjoys the life of splendor and is not sympathetic to her father's conflict to climb the social ladder. Furthermore, it is inconvenient to listen to her father's story and she is unwilling to know about his experience. Najwa only acknowledges the fact that she belonged to a wealthy family and this is the only identification she wants to define herself with. During the conversation with her father, when Najwa expresses how she cannot identify herself with his early struggle, he replies, "'spoilt,' ... 'the three of you are spoilt.'" She realizes what her father was thinking when he articulated those words, as if he could predict that his family would not be able to deal with hardships because they were born into prosperity and did not work for it.

Moreover, Najwa's consciousness of her upper class and privilege is mirrored in her views and life, especially when she is driving a car to the university, as she thinks: "Was I not an emancipated young woman driving her car to university? In Khartoum only a minority of women drove cars and in university less than thirty per cent of students were girls—that should make me feel good about myself."⁶³⁸ In her views, emancipation is confined to her upper class, who enjoy social freedom and economic privilege in Khartoum. Due to the socioeconomic class she belongs to, Najwa keeps herself away from the underprivileged girls who do not enjoy social freedom like her or cannot afford a car. Her awareness of her privileged class and the freedom she enjoys in society reveals the shallowness and arrogance in her character which will

⁶³⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, 10.

play a role later in her struggle to survive in exile. However, upon exposing how privileged she is, Najwa prefers to rely on her brother Omar to drive. She lacks the confidence to drive on her own and being always dependent is a theme that constantly appears during her experience in Khartoum.

To a great extent, socioeconomic status reflects the religious experience; the lower classes are more likely than the upper classes to have intense religiousness. Najwa at the university has no friendships with other girls from lower classes. As she passes two girls at the library, they smile at her and Najwa observes the class difference through their clothing and its connection to religiousness:

They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses. Many girls ... made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobés that covered their slimness—pure white cotton covering their arms and hair.⁶³⁹

Najwa is totally aware of the class difference that isolates her from other girls in Khartoum, especially those who belong to rural places as opposed to her urban and Westernized lifestyle. Moreover, the dress code emphasizes the class distinction and the degree of religiousness: Najwa's too short and too tight dress reflects her Western modernized trend and upbringing because of her social class, whereas the tobe or hijab the girls from villages or towns don reflects their traditional and humble upbringing. During her life in Khartoum, Najwa perceives Islamic dress as a signifier of the lower class and traditional conservative families in Sudan from which she has been detached. Moreover,

⁶³⁹ Ibid, 14.

she confesses that the sight of those girls wearing hijab on campus irritates her.⁶⁴⁰ Thus, these social religious differences are barriers that hinder Najwa from making friendships with girls. Later, during her humble life in London, Najwa re-establishes her connection to Islam and dons the veil as the Islamic dress code to emphasize her Islamic affiliation. She also attaches herself to the Muslim women from different ethnicities and social classes at the Regent's Park Mosque.

Likewise, Najwa's brother, Omar, plunges into the Westernized lifestyle: he drinks alcohol, goes to Western nightclubs to dance, listens to pop music and decides to move to London permanently once he finishes school in Sudan. Omar goes further to admire modern life and Western trends, so Najwa narrates how he perceives the West as an advanced civilization and advocates colonialism: "[He] believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left."⁶⁴¹ Even though Najwa plunges into the same life as her brother, she cringes when Omar defends colonialism. Unlike her brother, Najwa never thinks of moving away from Sudan to settle in London, while she still clings to the Westernization that is associated with her class in Khartoum. Najwa refuses her father's suggestion to send her to study abroad and her brother sarcastically describes her attitude as being "'very patriotic.'"⁶⁴² Hence, Omar represents the Orientalist discourse which reflects a persistent prejudice against Arab-Islamic people and their culture as inferior, uncivilized and needing to be rescued.

However, Najwa's Muslim environment in Khartoum has influenced her even though she does not know it. Even though Najwa adopts the Western

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, 134.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, 11-12.

⁶⁴² Ibid, 17.

modernized lifestyle, she still feels unsatisfied. Despite the lavish expenditure and privilege she enjoys, her sense of happiness and tranquility has not yet been achieved fully. At a certain point, Najwa thinks seriously about her life:

I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream.⁶⁴³

This sense of lack is eventually turned into a realization that her privileged class and fancy lifestyle are not adequate to provide her with a full sense of subjectivity and identity. After Najwa's father has been arrested on the eve of the overthrow, she, her mother and her brother are smuggled out of the country and sent into exile. This traumatic experience of losing her social and economic advantages, being uprooted out of her original country and forced into exile and losing her national identity continue to haunt Najwa. At this point, Najwa reaches the lowest point of her life and has come down in the world to the status of servant. In London, she loses her social and economic class and receives different treatment from her relatives and friends on the basis of her current status.

The diasporic subjectivities of Najwa and her friend Anwar constantly dwell in a sense of loss. The last friendship Najwa retrieves from her life back in Khartoum is with Anwar, and their romantic feelings are re-established. Anwar is forced into exile despite his opposition to the government and his call for the overthrow, because the political party which he supports fails to take over and

⁶⁴³ Ibid, 15.

another stages a successful coup. Najwa`s reconnection to Anwar is considered her only attachment to her past and home. Confusion and instability define their existence:

‘What`s wrong with us Africans?’ I asked Anwar and he knew. He knew facts and history. But nothing he said gave me comfort or hope. The more he talked, the more confused I felt, groping for something simple. Everything was complicated, everything was connected to history and economics. In Queensway, in High Street Kensington, we would watch the English, the Gulf Arabs, the Spanish, Japanese, Malaysians, Americans and wonder how it would feel to have, like them, a stable country. A place where we could make future plans and it wouldn`t matter who the government was ... A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams.⁶⁴⁴

Even though Anwar is aware of the facts and history that have led them to this state of displacement in exile, it seems that Najwa is still confused about what has caused her downfall. Her past experience in Khartoum and the way she was raised have not provided her with the ability to endure a harsh life in exile. She suffers from feelings of unsettlement and anxiety, of having been uprooted from her home and her inability to plan her own future. Being deprived of a stable country reflects her sense of losing her identity. While she is working as a housemaid for her aunt and paid £20 during Christmas, Anwar laughs and remarks, “‘So you`re now celebrating Christmas. You`ve become a true citizen of London’.”⁶⁴⁵ Najwa then states, “‘I don`t know what I`m becoming.’”⁶⁴⁶ She knows that her displaced self in London has been

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid, 165.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid, 151.

transformed, yet she is unaware exactly who she is becoming in the absence of a stable sense of home and belonging.

Once her sense of belonging has been fragmented, Najwa`s identity is fragmented along with it. At a certain moment, she envies the Londoners their sense of belonging in their own city and contrasts it with her sense of alienation, saying “I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused.”⁶⁴⁷ In contrast to the fluctuation her country suffers from, stability in London provides its people with a sense of belonging. Despite her Westernized upbringing and secular worldview, Najwa does not experience a sense of belonging to London and remains detached from her surroundings. The sense of loss and alienation encompasses her, which proves that it is not her lifestyle or worldview in London that can provide her with a sense of belonging and identity. Thus, Najwa`s attachment to Anwar becomes deeper and stronger, since he is the only person who can give her a partial sense of belonging.

The first site of negotiating Najwa`s identity is Anwar`s flat in London. As Najwa becomes closer to Anwar, she starts visiting him at his flat which he shares with two Sudanese students. Anwar and his friends are living in London temporarily, unlike Najwa who has no hope of returning home. Najwa likes being at Anwar`s place, which becomes a site for her to reconnect with her Sudanese identity. This apartment provides her with a sense of security and cultural familiarity, especially with one of Anwar`s friends, who belongs to a Westernized upper class in Khartoum. Najwa enjoys chatting with him as he reminds her of friends from back home. This apartment offers Najwa a site of identity negotiation, especially when discussing politics and religion. During

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid, 174.

their discussions, Najwa realizes that she becomes interested when they exchange views about Sudanese politics. However, she is annoyed when they discuss Islam and religion, not only because she considers it a part of the tradition and culture she is detached from but also because she feels that it is an absent element in her identity. Najwa is shocked when Ameen, one of Anwar's friends, tells them he must leave because he has been invited by his relatives to a Ramadan breakfast. She realizes that Ramadan has been essential for giving her a sense of time in exile, just as Sammar feels in performing her five prayers. When she emphasizes how Ramadan is a special Islamic practice and she always fasts during this month in Khartoum, her friends comment on her as being "Westernized" and "detached from *Sudanese traditions*."⁶⁴⁸ It is significant that Najwa's fasting in Khartoum has been a nominal Islamic practice like an inherited tradition without spiritual meaning or value. At this point, she knows that despite their companionship, she is "all alone." From this moment, Najwa feels emptiness inside her and this site fails in providing her with belonging or stability.

Unlike in *The Translator*, Najwa's emotional attachment to Anwar does not give her a sense of belonging. At the beginning of their relationship, Anwar personifies home and belonging to Najwa. Yet he refuses to marry her and she starts to experience further displacement and alienation. Najwa's dream of getting married to Anwar is shattered since Anwar has no intention of proposing to her because he does not want children with her father's blood flowing in their veins. After she has paid for his graduate studies, she feels that she has been let down by Anwar and all the Sudanese people she knows in London. She is shocked by the hostility she receives from people she thinks of herself as being part of in Khartoum. All the respect and kindness she was

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, 230 [emphasis mine].

treated with when she was in her prime have disappeared along with her socioeconomic status, and this social hypocrisy is part of her past identity that she no longer identifies with. Najwa also feels confused and disturbed because of the month of Ramadan which is connected to tradition and culture of home; she has not noticed when it started because she is busy and preoccupied with Anwar. Najwa becomes conscience-stricken and searches for redemption at the Regent's Park Mosque, where her spiritual awakening is revived.

Connecting to the past and to the national identity come to nothing in vanquishing the sense of alienation. Najwa decides to search for a substitute in the Regent's Park Mosque after she is abandoned by friends and relatives in London and realizes that there is no hope of returning to Khartoum. This means that she will never try to connect or reconnect with the past, as her former attempt has failed. She finds in the Regent's Park Mosque a site of negotiation to ground her identity in a specific location, enjoy the feeling of integrated selfhood and construct her new sense of spiritual home and belonging. This Islamic religious setting in London teaches Najwa how to re-establish a personal individual identity that belongs to the shared faith of multiethnic Muslim women. In this Islamic setting, she connects to the Muslim community of women, who help her to become grounded in time and place and provide her with a sense of stable identity and belonging that she has always been deprived of while in exile. Najwa feels comfortable enough to locate the site and place that provide her with a sense of stability and belonging which equals the sense of home. She says, "In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum again."⁶⁴⁹ The mosque becomes the spiritual space where she can negotiate her subjectivity and ground it on a basis of faith. Attaching

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, 244.

herself to the mosque and experiencing a sense of belonging to it assists Najwa to overcome her sense of deprivation from social and national belonging.

This newly acquired religious identity entails Najwa to demonstrate her Islamic spiritual attachment materially. She chooses to don the veil in a secular setting and appears a visibly Muslim woman. Using Olivier Roy's term, Geoffrey Nash in *The Anglo-Arab Encounter* comments on Najwa's "re-Islamisation" as a need physically to prove her belonging to the Islamic religion in a Western context. He quotes Roy:

Re-Islamisation means that Muslim identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context. The construction of a 'deculturalised' Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture (Roy, pp. 23-24).⁶⁵⁰

Because in Khartoum Islam means a nominal affiliation to Najwa and she has only borne the label Muslim, in London, Najwa has become disconnected from her traditional Muslim culture and encounters Islam as a faith to which she has a spiritual affiliation. This newly acquired faith marks her re-Islamization, which means a rediscovery of Islam. The Islam she adopts is no longer linked to an ethnic culture; it is rather a faith shared by the multicultural women at the Regent's Park Mosque in London.

A new homeland is established for Najwa through a collective practicing of the Islamic faith. At the mosque, waiting for time of prayer, Najwa feels home:

⁶⁵⁰ Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," 144.

I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, [and] a quiet room to rest in.⁶⁵¹

At this religious site, Najwa goes beyond her present and reconnects with a time of peace and quiet similar to what she experienced at home with her family. Her attachment to the mosque becomes a way to gather the pieces of her fragmented self that she suffers from after her uprooting from the “fractured country” and “broken home”.⁶⁵² Thus, the mosque becomes the religious replacement where Najwa can find the sense of home, family and community she has lost. Najwa`s experience at the mosque and gathering with Muslim women from various social classes, ethnicities, ages and degree of religiousness offers her a space for identity negotiation.

Islam as a religion in the West no longer depends on traditional Muslim culture or territories. She notices at the mosque that the experience with Islam of Muslim girls who are younger than her is completely different from hers; Najwa has not experienced Islam as a faith until later in her life in exile and she is also a first generation immigrant in London:

Usually the young Muslim girls who have been born and brought up in Britain puzzle me, though I admire them. I always find myself trying to understand them. They strike me as being very British, very much at home in London. Some of them wear hijab, some don`t. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn`t have when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵¹ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 74-75.

⁶⁵² *Ibid*, 165.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid*, 77.

It seems that these second generation Muslim girls who were born and raised in London—despite their cultural and ethnic backgrounds—have a different sense of belonging and religion from Najwa`s. They have a stable sense of belonging as Muslim British citizens who have inherited their religion from their parents, yet they have their own individualized ways to practice it, while the diasporic self of Najwa rediscovers Islam in London as a ground to negotiate her identity. Nash, who depends on Roy`s analysis of Islam, maintains that a globalized and deterritorialized Islam is being influenced and reshaped by Western languages, cultures and ways of life.⁶⁵⁴ So, Najwa realizes that those Muslim women are diverse in approaching faith and in practicing their religion; for example, some choose to cover their heads with the hijab and others do not, which emphasizes their personal and individualized Muslim subjectivities.

The globalized and deterritorialized Islam represented in *Minaret* offers Muslim women a chance to negotiate their Islamic individualized places despite their shared collective Islamic identity. At the mosque, Najwa engages in religious debates and discussions in which she has to negotiate her religious position and ground herself, whether through her previous religious knowledge or the one newly acquired from those discussions. She also has to negotiate her knowledge and religious opinions with and against other women`s opinions:

But I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or the one I like best. And I become anxious that someone`s

⁶⁵⁴ Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," 143.

feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque.⁶⁵⁵

It is obvious that Najwa`s feeling of fragmentation among the women, who debate confidently and demonstrate a strong sense of a well-established Islamic identity and belonging, parallels her feeling toward the Londoners who belong to the city as they are “grounded, never displaced, never confused.”⁶⁵⁶ At the mosque and during the religious lessons, Najwa gradually realizes her personal identity and imposes her own voice among these Muslim women. Her initial sense of fragmentation is replaced by the sense of inclusion that encompasses her at the mosque as she negotiates her Islamic individualized places among the multicultural Muslim women. Those women can provide Najwa with a sense of security and guidance as she navigates her personal relationship with Islam:

My guides chose me; I did not choose them. Sometimes I would stop and think what was I doing in this woman`s car, what was I doing in her house, who gave me this book to read. The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory. Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world. Was it natural, was it curable?⁶⁵⁷

Not only does Najwa find a sense of solidarity among those women who assist her in negotiating her religious experience with and against them, but they also provide her with all the answers that Anwar was unable to give. Even though

⁶⁵⁵ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 79.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 174.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 240.

her spiritual awakening takes place suddenly, Najwa`s religious identity is constructed gradually through the process of negotiation and identification with Islam.

Significantly, the mosque is not only a place where faith is strongly grounded; it is portrayed by Aboulela also as a site for the negotiation of social and ethnic identity. Where Najwa used to identify herself with friends and relatives belonging to the Westernized elitist upper class in Khartoum, class and ethnicity are not the grounds on which she builds her relationship with the Muslim community at the mosque. Racial and social hierarchies are insignificant identifications when Najwa socializes with other women. Her new friends, Wafaa, who is originally Arab and married to an English Muslim, and Shahinaz, who is from South Asia, support Najwa and offer her a sense of inclusion among women from multiethnic backgrounds. Nash confirms that Najwa`s negotiation of her Islamic identity goes beyond cultural and political differences:

[It is] indicative of a modern globalized environment in that she makes an individual choice in becoming a born-again Muslim. In the process not only does she reject the secular values of a westernized world that stretches from London to Khartoum, she adopts a position that is a conscious riposte to these ... But she uses this experience in London to embrace a religiosity that emphasizes personal behavior over culture and politics.⁶⁵⁸

I agree with Nash that the non-Muslim environment, where Shari`a or Islamic rituals are not imposed by the state or society, helps Najwa to make her

⁶⁵⁸ Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," 145-146.

individual decision to be a pious Muslim who splits from traditional or political Islam.

Najwa's response to Western modernity and secularism in London triggers her to search for spiritual fulfillment. She has felt emptiness and bleakness since she was in Sudan where her Islamic affiliation was devoid of spirituality, yet she has not felt the urgent need until she experiences the secular West, as a migrant, where her feeling of emptiness is fortified. Najwa's developing religious identity upon attaching herself to the Muslim community at the mosque reminds her of how she envied the group of Muslim students at Khartoum University: "I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it. Whenever I heard the azan in Khartoum, whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and a space would open up, hollow and numb."⁶⁵⁹ Then she realizes that it is spiritual pleasure she was looking for:

I reached out for something new. I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realized this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This was what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Qur'an, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I hear the Qur'an recited, there wasn't bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert.⁶⁶⁰

In fact, the need for a sense of spiritual pleasure to get rid of the emptiness and bleakness—when she sees Muslim students praying at the university in Khartoum, or the gardener reciting the Qur'an at home—inspires Najwa to search for spiritual rootedness. So, her decision to ground herself in a faith-

⁶⁵⁹ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 134.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 243.

based identity and connect to the Islamic faith stems from a personal desire in London where there are no established Muslim authorities.

The last site for negotiating identity for Najwa is at Lamya`s place; Lamya is an Egyptian PhD student and lives in London with her brother Tamer. Najwa works for Lamya as a housemaid and develops a strong relationship with her brother since Najwa and Tamer have a shared sense of religious identity. However, the relationship between Najwa and Lamya is unfriendly; Lamya adopts a modern Westernized lifestyle and socializes with Arab girls who belong to the social upper class while expelling Najwa because of her inferior status and social identification. Significantly, Aboulela portrays the character of Lamya to represent Najwa`s former subjectivity in Sudan, who socializes only with the upper class and distances herself from the rural and lower class girls, in order to demonstrate the transformation Najwa achieves in terms of constructing a new religious selfhood. Najwa, thus, can identify with Tamer who is the only member of his family who practices Islam as a faith.

In her analysis of Aboulela`s *Minaret*, Marta Cariello discusses religion as the place for Najwa`s identity formation. She maintains that in the Regent`s Park Mosque, "[O]ne life literally stops, [and is] replaced by a completely different one."⁶⁶¹ However, Cariello continues that cultural and class relations are doubled at Lamya`s flat and exclusion is practiced upon Najwa. Indeed, I agree with Cariello that class distinctions operate oppressively in this space, but I contend that Islamic spirituality in *Minaret* functions to pacify and reduce the class and gender differences between the poor Najwa and the rich Tamer. As in Islam, Aboulela offers a religious model that challenges the economic

⁶⁶¹ Marta Cariello, "Searching for Room to Move: Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela`s *Minaret*," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 393-349 (340).

model in which a person's worth is measured in monetary terms. Despite the material differences between the upper class and the lower one, Muslims believe that the basic principle on which people are measured is piety, as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an: "O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with God is the most pious. Verily, God is All-Knowing, All-Aware."⁶⁶² Thus, piety defines an individual's worth on religious grounds. Bryan S. Turner in his "Acts of Piety" maintains that, "[W]e can in principle measure a person's inspirational worth in terms of 'acts of piety', where piety creates a hierarchy of values or grace."⁶⁶³ Piety provides Najwa with a sense of satisfaction as the economic hardship the poor face has been justified through the possibility of a better afterlife.

Moreover, in her relation to Tamer, despite their class difference, Najwa and Tamer identify themselves with the same religion:

'My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese, though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?'

I talk slowly. 'I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim.'⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶² *Holy Quran*, Chapter 49, Verse 13.

⁶⁶³ Bryan S. Turner, "Acts of Piety: The Political and the Religious, or The Tale of Two Cities," in *Acts of Citizenship*, eds. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielson (London: Zed Books, 2008), 121-136 (123).

⁶⁶⁴ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 110.

Tamer prefers to identify himself on a religious basis and so does Najwa, which confirms that the religious piety both of them have creates equal value or grace. Unlike his sister Lamya, Tamer talks to Najwa about his personal life and thoughts and asks her about hers. He appreciates her religiousness and trusts her. Whenever she is humiliated or blamed by Lamya, Tamer tries to calm her down. He accompanies her while going out with the baby. In general, he always tries to take care of her, and that is what Najwa is mostly in need of.

The romantic relationship links Najwa and Tamer, and he asks her to marry him despite their differences in age and class. From Aboulela`s Islamic feminist perspective, which aligns with the ‘halal’ credentials of her novels like *The Translator*, this romance should end with marriage despite any difference because men and women have equal status and value before God, and piety alone differentiates one individual from another. Although they share the same religious identity—like Sammar and Rae by the novel’s end—their romantic relation does not end happily. Another important issue is raised by the author in *Minaret*: Tamer`s mother rejects this relation. Wail Hassan insists on the incompatibility of Islam and feminism, which forecloses the possibility of appreciating an Islam that bypasses social class and ethnic differences in his view:

The version of Islam propagated in Aboulela`s fiction involves a complete disavowal of personal liberty as incompatible with Islam, of feminism as a secular and godless ideology, of individual agency in favor of an all-encompassing notion of predetermination and political agency as well.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶⁵ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 195.

Hassan argues that Aboulela's Islamic novels maintain the traditional patriarchal hegemony and reject women's personal freedom. For Hassan, Islam and feminism are incompatible in Aboulela's fiction. In the same regard, Nash maintains that "Aboulela's discourse is never stridently feminist nor does it set out to condemn male Muslim practice per se."⁶⁶⁶ He finds in Aboulela's fiction traces of "traditionalism that still adhere to ... [her] representation of Muslim women."⁶⁶⁷ Hassan criticizes Aboulela's Islamic perspective which rejects feminism and Nash condemns her for complying with patriarchal tradition. Najwa expresses her consent for Tamer to have a second wife, which is an explicit acknowledgment of polygamy: "'You must promise me you'll take a second wife.' ... 'Because I might not be able to have children'."⁶⁶⁸ I believe that Hassan's and Nash's assessment of Aboulela's Islamic feminism is partially true. Aboulela minimizes Najwa's options within Islamic discourse which, I argue, is inspired by the male-interpreted Holy texts, yet at the same time they ignore the Islamic centrality and perspective she asks to be respected while reading her novels.

In this respect, I will discuss Aboulela's Islamic perspective on gender conflicts according to three trajectories. Firstly, the way Aboulela delineates the relationship between Tamer and Najwa takes into account religious piety. Secondly, her acknowledgment of polygamy should be read from within her character's Islamic perspective. Thirdly, addressing women's questions from Aboulela's Islamic perspective leads to the need to open up further possible solutions to gender conflicts—which in fact are offered by Islamic feminism and minimized by her.

⁶⁶⁶ Nash, "Leila Aboulela: Islam and Globalization," 141.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, 148.

⁶⁶⁸ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 254.

The attraction between Tamer and Najwa is grounded on the Islamic faith they share. Aboulela attempts to emphasize how the pious self overlooks all differences and gives up inclination in favor of spiritual growth. Najwa meets Tamer with whom she falls in love despite their differences in age and position. In Najwa's words, Tamer "is so devout and good. No cigarettes, no girlfriends, no clubbing, no drinking. He has a beard and goes to the mosque every day."⁶⁶⁹ He insists on marrying her because "it's not very Islamic for a man and woman to be friends."⁶⁷⁰ This does not mean Aboulela portrays an idealized Muslim character, because Tamer still has some negative characteristics: "[I]t disturbs me when he is harsh about his parents. It is the only fault I find in him."⁶⁷¹ However, Tamer's relationship with Najwa challenges the image of the male conservative Muslim who oppresses women. Their relationship is full of sympathy. Najwa suffers social and geographical dislocation and loneliness, complaining, "there are nights when I want nothing else but someone to stroke my hair and feel sorry for me."⁶⁷² She has been looking for someone like Tamer for years, in whom she finds the respect, sobriety and understanding that she is looking for. As a result, Najwa expresses her wishes, especially after being left alone in London, and then experiences a sense of belonging with Tamer: "I would like to be his family's concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom."⁶⁷³ In this context, Najwa's wish which is referred to by Hassan as her "absurd preference for slavery,"⁶⁷⁴ should be read instead as her longing for security and inclusion out of love, not as

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, 211.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid, 210.

⁶⁷² Ibid, 117.

⁶⁷³ Ibid, 215.

⁶⁷⁴ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 197.

submission or persecution. Tamer offers sympathy for Najwa, calms her down, and encourages her to overcome her problems; these are some of the reasons behind her love for Tamer.

The important issue raised by Aboulela in the novel is that marriage between Najwa and Tamer is given up for the sake of religious piety. The piety of Najwa and Tamer is tested when their relationship encounters Tamer's family's disapproval. His mother, Doctora Zeinab, visits Najwa at her place and asks her to stay away from her son because Najwa is "old enough to be his mother."⁶⁷⁵ However, Najwa understands the mother's deep attachment to Tamer and realizes that in Islam to be pious is to obey both God and parents. In Regent's Park Mosque, she learns that in the afterlife there are men on the Heights between Paradise and Hell because they "broke their parents' hearts, they are deprived of Paradise."⁶⁷⁶ So, she decides to give up her love for Tamer for the sake of his spiritual growth. Najwa makes this sacrifice because she "will not let him fail," and "will not let her [Tamer's mother] curse him, not like [her] mother cursed Omar."⁶⁷⁷ Then Najwa advises Tamer to beg his mother for forgiveness because he hurts her by leaving the house. It is religious piety that empowers them to ignore their differences and give up their inclinations. Tamer realizes that piety provides a sense of empowerment and satisfaction "with what Allah gives."⁶⁷⁸ Thus, Aboulela's Islamic feminist perspective prioritizes dialogue, understanding and engaging the protagonist with Islamic principles that empower her.

Aboulela's Islamic centrality and perspective introduce polygamy as an Islamic practice her female protagonist does not come into conflict with. In the

⁶⁷⁵ Aboulela, *Minaret*, 263.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 257.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 264.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 270.

Qur`an, polygamy is allowed, in that men may have up to four wives. Mashood A. Baderin explains that Islam permits polygamy under certain conditions, without which a plurality of wives is prohibited, because Islam favors monogamy. Baderin points out that:

Muslim scholars and jurists have advanced reasons such as demographic needs, economic factors, barrenness of the wife, chronic illness of the wife ... In their attempt to justify the conditional permissibility of polygamy in Islamic law.⁶⁷⁹

In their interpretation of the Qur`an, Muslim scholars who justify the practice of polygamy believe that in the case of a barren wife, it is often better to take a second wife than either divorcing or having offspring outside the marriage through an adulterous relationship with another woman. Given such reasons, they argue that polygamy is a remedy for some social problems. From this perspective, Najwa asks Tamer to take a second wife because she might not be able to have children. Indeed, Aboulela writes from within an Islamic centrality and wants her readers to respect this centrality. It is her pride in Islam which makes Aboulela address gender for Muslims in the same way that Amin Malak describes: that gender ideologies “only be grounded in the *specificity* of locale and accordingly negotiated while avoiding abstract, universalist formulae, since each culture and community has to arrive at them separately.”⁶⁸⁰ This specificity would include Islamic principles in the Muslim world.

Given this centrality of Islam in the novel, Aboulela confines Najwa`s choice of polygamy to the male-dominated interpretation of Islam. As an Islamic feminist, Aboulela should be expected to reinterpret Holy texts to bring

⁶⁷⁹ Mashood A. Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73.

⁶⁸⁰ Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, 14.

to light the proper Islamic treatment of women. Islamic feminists work on reinterpretations of the Holy Qur`an and debates on the Hadith from a fresh female –and feminist—perspective which Aboulela fails to do. Azizah al-Hibri, for example, insists on the right of Islamic feminists to reinterpret Islamic texts. She states that there is “no clergy in Islam, each person being responsible directly to God for her own beliefs. Furthermore, if patriarchy itself was able to justify within its ideological bounds the existence of five different schools of thought, then feminists can surely justify the addition of at least one more.”⁶⁸¹ Also, Qasim Amin argues that the verse of polygamy indicates that men can marry such women as seem good to them, two, three, four, but if they fear they will not be equitable, then one. Traditionally, this verse was misinterpreted as an unconditional permitting of polygamy, but Amin reinterprets it as a restriction of marriage to one woman only (monogamy), since no man can treat his wives equally.⁶⁸² Such an approach to Quranic verses can in time open the way for radical transformation and positive changes in Islamic law to accommodate principles such as gender equality and human rights. In this light, Aboulela should be understood to be seeking equity and justice for women by means of her own feminist Islamic hermeneutics, her questioning and her characters` questioning of community orthodoxies.

To sum up, for Aboulela, Islam is a faith that exceeds the reach of any political or imperialist discourse, a discourse that she acknowledges, but does not address directly in her fiction. She writes sympathetically about people who have faith and about the challenges of practicing one`s faith in the modern secular world. *The Translator* and *Minaret* reflect the integration of Islam into the Western secular scene. Such an integration would encourage

⁶⁸¹ al-Hibri, “Introduction,” *Women`s Studies*, vii.

⁶⁸² Amin, *Tahrir El Mara`a*, 82.

and enable the balancing of religious loyalties, specifically Islamic, with other allegiances, thus initiating new forms of conversation across cultural identities. For all the nuanced differences between the two novels, they share a preoccupation with the religious dimension, which is a reality in the lives of many subjects, particularly those who experience forms of dislocation and loss. Eventually, both Sammar and Najwa find a spiritual home in their Islamic faith and challenge stereotypical assumptions of women`s oppression in Islam. If *The Translator* and *Minaret* appear to be detached from or divested of any political activism, *Lyrics Alley* (2012), as a narrative of national allegory, directly addresses the political relationship between Sudan and Egypt in the 1950s.

Chapter Five

Lyrics Alley: A National Allegory

Unlike *The Translator* and *Minaret*, which appear divested of any overt political commitment, Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (2012) is a perfect illustration of a national allegory because the predicament of its central characters can only be fully understood from the perspective of the nation; the novel explicitly traces the evolution of national and political consciousness in Sudan under the Condominium's rule.⁶⁸³ Thus, in this chapter, I engage again with Fredric Jameson's theoretical work and ideas, especially his concept of national allegory, and examine their possibilities and limits for use in my analysis of the novel.⁶⁸⁴ *Lyrics Alley* could be said to be Aboulela's answer to Jameson's call, but answered very deliberately from a feminist perspective. Even the novel's title, *Lyrics Alle-y*, bears a punning relationship to alle-gory.

Jameson's influential work theorizes the relationship of literary production in the third world to the nation and to politics. However, Jameson's argument have met with criticism. Aijaz Ahmad denounces Jameson's reduction of third-world literature to allegories of national cultures. Ahmad points out that the generalization made by Jameson could imply a process of essentializing and totality.⁶⁸⁵ The criticism of Jameson by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is relevant here. She argues that "Jameson's desire to allegorize

⁶⁸³ Leila Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* (London: Phoenix, 2012).

⁶⁸⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88.

⁶⁸⁵ Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25 (22).

produces allegory's most dangerous tendency: moving toward a single, overarching, even totalizing meaning".⁶⁸⁶ For Spivak, Jameson assumes he knows what the text is before reading it, and consequently this determinate account erases those who are not subjects of this nationalist brand, such as women, gays or lesbians and other racialized groups.⁶⁸⁷ So, Ahmad and Spivak contend that reading the literature of the formerly colonized through the lens of Jameson's paradigm means that different literary productions in the so-called third world are defined and configured in one singular way, and the subalterns or subordinated are thereby marginalized. In the same vein, Homi Bhabha in his article "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," queries Jameson's notion of national allegory. Bhabha criticizes Jameson for denying third-world literatures their capacity to fashion an independent individual postcolonial subjectivity.⁶⁸⁸

However, while I would agree that not all third-world texts conform to the paradigm of national allegory, and that Aboulela's previous work in *The Translator* and *Minaret* does not, the use of allegory is certainly a valid subject of study in *Lyrics Alley*. Indeed, the novel tells the story of ordinary people while it also tells a story of a nation. Women are linked with the country or nation, and their stories have double meanings that link love and conflict with the national struggle for independence. *Lyrics Alley* is populated by heterogeneous characters whose differences in opinions and thoughts are tremendously influenced by their diverse sociopolitical backgrounds, so the nation is defined, delineated and configured in infinite ways. To emphasize the

⁶⁸⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 280; quoted in Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 156.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid, 156.

⁶⁸⁸ Homi Bhabha, "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 199-244 (201).

plurality in *Lyrics Alley*, this chapter examines how the author efficiently employs multiple narrative points of view in the novel which are different and diverse. The novel depicts the experiences of numerous characters whose opinions and positions in the nation are dissimilar. Thus, this chapter reads Aboulela`s novel of national allegory through Jameson`s paradigm, at the same time rejecting the totalizing meaning that Ahmad and Spivak speak of and showing how points of view are different within the same novel and also different from the points of view in El Saadawi`s narratives of national allegory.

This novel is based on a true story inspired by Leila Aboulela's uncle Hassan Awad Aboulela who suffered an accident in 1948, but the author begins the story in 1951 to coincide with the progress and independence of Sudan, and adds fictitious characters and their plotlines. The narrative reflects the life of the Sudanese merchant, Mahmoud Abuzeid, who is married to two women, a Sudanese and an Egyptian. Abuzeid is trying to cope with the wave of modernity and the technology revolution in order to expand his work and trade in the new postcolonial period, where it is expected that the Sudanese nation will progress by increasing the investment in education. For this reason, he is interested in the education of his younger son from his first marriage. Nur is a promising student at the prestigious Victoria College in Alexandria and is in love with his cousin Soraya, the youngest of the three daughters of Mahmoud Abuzeid's widowed brother and business partner, Idris. Unlike Mahmoud, Idris lacks a progressive vision and opposes Soraya's education. One summer, as Nur is swimming off the beaches of the Egyptian resort of Alexandria, a strong wave hits him and leaves him disabled. As his hopes for marrying his cousin fade away, his talent as a poet gradually emerges.

The politics of polygamy represents the wider political sphere. The conflict between Mahmoud's two wives, the illiterate traditional Waheeba, and the modern sophisticated younger wife Nabilah, reflects the tension between Sudan and Egypt. Waheeba is Mahmoud's first Sudanese wife and Nabilah is his second Egyptian wife: "They belonged to different sides of the saraya, to different sides of him. He was the only one to negotiate between these two worlds [Waheeba's world and Nabilah's world], to glide between them, to come back and forth at will. It was his prerogative."⁶⁸⁹ Mahmoud spends the summer months in Egypt, as he promised Nabilah when they got married, and the rest of the year in Sudan in Umdurman. In Sudan he lives with Nabilah in her own Egyptian-styled apartment with her Egyptian maid and Egyptian cook. At the same time, he continues to live with Waheeba in her part of the saraya next to Nabilah's apartment.

Mahmoud's relation to the 'ignorant' Sudanese wife and the 'sophisticated' Egyptian wife is an allegory of the sociopolitical backdrops against which the novel is written.⁶⁹⁰ The British and Egyptian governments ruled Sudan from 1899 to 1956, so Sudan was under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. In her interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela makes it clear that "the relations between Sudan and Egypt have long been fraught".⁶⁹¹ So, in her novel, she delineates this relation between the two countries from different perspectives.

In the social sphere, marriages between Sudanese and Egyptians were very common.⁶⁹² Anita Fabos remarks that besides the strong commercial and professional relationships, there is also a heritage of Egyptian-Sudanese

⁶⁸⁹ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 43.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

⁶⁹¹ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 101.

⁶⁹² *Ibid*, 102.

marriages; for example, President Anwar Sadat's mother was Sudanese.⁶⁹³ However, despite the shared language, religion, culture and strong fraternity between the neighboring countries, Egypt exerted imperial rule and colonized Sudan. In the sixteenth century, the Ottomans defeated the Mamluks, occupied Egypt and nominally extended their rule to the Sudan, and in modern history, the Ottoman-Egyptian forces of Mohammad Ali Pasha conquered Sudan and joined it to Egypt in 1821.⁶⁹⁴ A. L. Fabumni contends that Mohammad Ali Pasha had two principal objectives in Sudan; the first was the gold and precious minerals, and the other was the capture of slaves.⁶⁹⁵ Thus, the Egyptian administration of the Sudan was cruel; they preserved imperial domination and excessive taxes were collected from the poor Sudanese. Under these conditions, the seeds of discontent were sown, and religious inspirations were also a source of rebellion. The Muslims in Sudan were looking for a religious leader to rescue them from political domination by the foreigners from the north. In 1881, the Mahdi led the rebellion, which was transformed into a 'Jihad'. Sudan was governed by the Mahdi and his successors until they were defeated in 1898, and Sudan came under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in 1899.⁶⁹⁶ Thus, the political conflict between Sudan and Egypt continued in the Condominium.

Sudanese perspectives regarding independence from Egypt have varied. Amir Idris argues that Sudan's transition from colonialism to political independence marks the start of a "political conflict over the identity of the

⁶⁹³ Anita H. Fabos, *'Brothers' Or Others?: Propriety and Gender For Muslim Arab Sudanese in Egypt* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), 66.

⁶⁹⁴ A. L. Fabumni, *The Sudan in Anglo-Egyptian Relations: A Case Study in Power Politics, 1800-1956* (London: Longman, 1960), 22.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

postcolonial state,” throwing the country into “a national identity crisis”.⁶⁹⁷ In Sudan, politics are shaped by “tribal affiliations” and people’s allegiances are to ancestors and family because ethnic divisions run deep in this country.⁶⁹⁸ As the novel portrays the hopes, expectations, fears and disappointments of characters who are socially and politically dissimilar, it also dramatizes the failure of the nation as a political unit. *Lyrics Alley* depicts characters’ political perspectives from different angles. In the case of Mahmoud Abuzeid, he believes that Egypt and Sudan are “historically, geographically and culturally tied”.⁶⁹⁹ He “supports a proposed union with Egypt” because of his Egyptian roots and his aspiration toward modernity.⁷⁰⁰

Since women represent land or country, Mahmoud’s political position is expressed in his feeling toward his two wives:

In his mind, he associate[s] [Waheeba] with decay and ignorance. He would never regret marrying Nabilah. It was not a difficult choice between the stagnant past and the glitter of the future, between crudeness and sophistication.⁷⁰¹

The above lines validate Jameson’s paradigm of national allegory “where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself”.⁷⁰² Mahmoud’s politics in his private sphere reveals the attitude of some Sudanese, especially those who have socioeconomic interests in Egypt. Mutual interests and personal contacts so tightly intertwine this link

⁶⁹⁷ Amir Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 44.

⁶⁹⁸ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 194.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 195.

⁷⁰⁰ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 102.

⁷⁰¹ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 45.

⁷⁰² Jameson, “Third-World in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” 86.

of Sudan to Egypt; among them, a steady stream of Sudanese shoppers, traders, vacationers and job-seekers were traveling to Egypt. The Egyptian Westernized school system, elementary through university, attracted many high-class Sudanese because of the pervasive influence of Egyptian media on the culture in Sudan. In *Lyrics Alley*, Mahmoud sends his son Nur to study in Egypt and he is proud that “his son [is] excelling at Victoria College. Every penny spent on the fees was worth [his] joy.”⁷⁰³ Thus, Mahmoud cares that Nur receives a British education at Victoria College in Alexandria (Egypt), which puts his son on the right path to being a valuable asset in the independent Sudan, either as a merchant continuing his father`s project in steering the family business or as a politician where contact with former colonizers is frequent.

Some Sudanese had allegiance to a pan-Arab movement of nationalism and advocated union with Egypt either because of their Egyptian origin or the modernizing influence of Egypt. Douglas Hamilton Johnson, a specialist in the politics of North East Africa and Sudan, remarks that:

In the 1920s a pan-Arabist form of nationalism, associated with Egyptian nationalism and proposing the Unity of the Nile Valley, was advocated by a small group of Sudanese intellectuals, mainly associated with the Egyptian army in the Sudan ... Their most prominent leader, Ali abd al-Latif, had been born in Egypt, the son of a Nuba soldier and a Dinka slave woman. Joining the Egyptian army as a cadet, he received much of his education in Egypt and Khartoum before being commissioned as an officer in the army ... Ismail al-Azhari was in the forefront of a movement to forge an alliance with Egypt, advocating union with Egypt ... The

⁷⁰³ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 42.

nationalists were thus divided according to ultimate goals, tactics, and personalities.⁷⁰⁴

Johnson points to the various national attitudes of Sudanese toward their country's future. Ismail al-Azhari, who became the Prime Minister of the independent Sudan, supported union with Egypt because he opposed the British administration of the Sudan. Thus, tribal affiliation, political agenda, economic interests, and religious motivations participated in shaping nationalism in Sudan. The real question occupying the Sudanese was whether it was best to achieve independence for the Sudan on its own, or in formal union with Egypt.

However, Sudanese who support union with Egypt because of "the uncertainties of self-determination" are still willing to contribute to the progress of their country.⁷⁰⁵ The Egyptian wife Nabilah desires to contain Mahmoud's Sudanese identity and delimit it with spatial classification, but "she had mistaken his spirited love of modernity for a wholehearted conversion".⁷⁰⁶ Despite Mahmoud's inclination toward Egypt, sophistication and modernity, he still has a strong commitment toward Sudan. He is aware of the misery and backwardness in Sudan, but "this misery was *his* misery, and this backwardness his duty" and he was filled with satisfaction "that he was contributing to his country's progress".⁷⁰⁷ He never divorces Waheeba, and when Nabilah asks for a divorce he never divorces her, either. Mahmoud thinks that:

⁷⁰⁴ Douglas Hamilton Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Peace Or Truce* (Rochester, New York: James Currey, 2011), 23.

⁷⁰⁵ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 40.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

[Nabilah] had shared his life and not understood him. Not understood that he could not leave Umdurman, not understood that Waheeba, for all her faults, was Nur`s mother and always would be. Umdurman was where Mahmoud belonged. Here on this bed was where he would one day die and down these alleys his funeral procession would proceed.⁷⁰⁸

Mahmoud wants to contribute to the reformation and modernization processes in his country. He knows that he cannot leave Umdurman in spite of its underdevelopment, because it is simply where he belongs. He elevates the Abuzeid firm by “the drive to modernise” and wants to “stake a place in the new, independent country”.⁷⁰⁹ Mahmoud`s vision of modernization enables him to glide successfully not only between Sudan and Egypt, but also between his sentiment of nationalism and the colonizers with whom he continues to work.

The economic expansion and capitalism had their impact on the nationalistic perspective of merchants and the capitalist class in Sudan. Mahmoud, who is proud of his Sudanese traditions, ancestors and family, sets up commercial ties with foreign investors and British bankers in the interest of free, fair trade. He is pragmatic and views religion as a private matter that should not impede honest transaction with non-Muslims. In his view, the same flexibility should be applied to one`s political stance. He makes it clear to Nigel Harrison, Barclays Bank manager:

‘While other men fight and hate, we give and take. We negotiate with everyone, Christian, Jew, pagan. Money and goods are what makes men equal. That is my creed. And true righteousness is not in taking a political

⁷⁰⁸Ibid, 267.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid, 40.

stance or on serving slogans. It is in fair trade. I am not a religious man by any means, but there is one saying of the Prophet Muhammad that I cling to. He said: "The truthful and honest merchant will be with the prophets, affirmers of truth and martyrs".⁷¹⁰

Instead of taking a militant Muslim and nationalist stance, Mahmoud's perspective on nationalism is to contribute in any way he can to the progress of his country. He invests his money in building high-modern, Egyptian-like buildings in Khartoum. Expanding into cotton ginning, he needs a large loan from Barclays Bank. His commerce necessitates negotiation with locals as well as with colonizers and he considers it a noble profession. Moreover, Mahmoud fervently supports the nationalistic cause that is founded on the modernization of Sudanese agriculture, irrigation, and industry.⁷¹¹ When Sudan gains self-determination, Mahmoud realizes that it is time to start initiating a good relationship with those most likely to form the first national government, in order to facilitate his future business.⁷¹² Mahmoud's capitalist goals and investments are counted by him as a contribution to modernizing Sudan, as he hopes to steer the nation toward a sophisticated future through his private business. Thus, hopes associated with independence are displayed by Mahmoud's point of view.

However, the uncertainty of Sudan's future and fear of the friction between the Condominium powers, Britain and Egypt, which might lead to the division of Sudan made some Sudanese oppose self-determination. In the same vein, Dr. Mohamed Hassan Fadlalla explains that:

⁷¹⁰ Ibid, 196.

⁷¹¹ Ibid, 52.

⁷¹² Ibid, 274.

The nationalists feared that the eventual result of friction between the condominium powers might be the attachment of northern Sudan to Egypt and Southern Sudan to Uganda and Kenya. Although they settled most of their differences with the 1936 Treaty of Alliance, which set a timetable for the end of British military occupation, Britain and Egypt failed to agree on Sudan's future status. Nationalists and religious leaders were divided on the issue of whether Sudan should apply for independence or for union with Egypt.⁷¹³

In *Lyrics Alley*, the author underlines the fear and negativity regarding Sudan's self-determination as displayed in the character of Idris Abuzeid, Mahmoud's brother and business partner. While Mahmoud keeps an open mind and a determination to go with the flow, Idris is pessimistic about an independent Sudan and self-government. Idris believes that Sudan had a more graceful colonial experience and "the British officials ... were refined and educated, well-travelled and diplomatic".⁷¹⁴ He cannot help but feel sorry to see them leave. He admires them, not for the modernity they are establishing but for the business opportunities they bring with them.⁷¹⁵ Despite the fact that Mahmoud holds the same feeling toward the British officials, the two men hold two different perspectives on the future of postcolonial Sudan.

Moreover, Fadlalla comments on the achievements of The Foreign Office in Sudan:

Britain sought to modernize Sudan by using technology to facilitate economic development and by establishing democratic institutions to

⁷¹³ Mohamed Hassan Fadlalla, *Short History of Sudan* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2004), 35-36.

⁷¹⁴ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 49.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

end authoritarian rule. Even as late as 1991, many of Sudan's political and economic institutions owed their existence to the British.⁷¹⁶

Fadlalla finds that Sudan's post-independent history has been shaped largely by the conflict between the north and the south, which retarded the country's social and economic development, encouraged political instability and led to an endless cycle of weak and ineffective governments in Sudan.⁷¹⁷ Thus, in Fadlalla's account, independence brings instability and conflict to Sudan. In a similar vein, Aboulela turns the issue of independence into a heated discussion in *Lyrics Alley* to display characters' national sentiments of aspirations and disillusionments.

The Sudanization of administration and termination of the colonial policy of any indirect rule were advocated by many nationalist Sudanese. Despite the pro-Egyptian sentiment, this was not to the extent that "it would hamper a Sudan free of Egyptian influence".⁷¹⁸ To appreciate this view, Heather Sharkey contends that, "It is important to understand the close relationship between Arabic literature and political expression in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan".⁷¹⁹ She remarks that "many [Sudanese] used literature to vent their feelings, by encoding anti-British or pro-Egyptian sentiment in Arabic poems that were intended for recitation among friends".⁷²⁰ In the novel, the poetry of the Sudanese lyricist, Nur, functions to reflect the sentiment of nationalism. Nur's emergent talent of poetry gives vent to his personal feelings. However, one of his poems, which is a tale of stricken love between two souls, is interpreted by

⁷¹⁶ Fadlalla, *Short History of Sudan*, 17.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

⁷¹⁸ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 194.

⁷¹⁹ Heather J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 104.

⁷²⁰ Ibid, 102.

the Sudanese as an anthem and yearning for Sudan's independence from Egypt. The title of the novel suggests this relation between poetry or lyrics and nationalism as there is a pun on *Alley* and national allegory.

It is significant to note that in *Lyrics Alley* the dominant clash is not between Sudan and Britain, but rather between Sudan and Egypt. Nur attributes his perpetual pain to the accident that happened on the beach of the Egyptian resort of Alexandria, referring literally to his own personal situation and current status as crippled. However, living in a political context which is replete with nationalism and patriotism, some Sudanese misinterpret this poem as anti-Egyptian and a nationalist call to end the Egyptian presence in Sudan, since the former is the source of Sudan's troubles:

One day on campus Soraya passed a 'Sudan for the Sudanese' rally and stopped to listen. The speaker was adamant in his rejection of any kind of Egyptian influence over a future, independent Sudan. He spoke with passion and serious purpose, then, as if to change tactics, he smiled and said, "Haven't you heard the poet say *In you Egypt is the cause of my troubles?*"⁷²¹

The act of reading Nur's love poem as a national allegory conflates private with public, and individual with collective. In this regard, Jameson maintains that the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the political situation of the public third-world society.⁷²² Most Sudanese oppose union with Egypt and opt for self-determination as they "do not want outsiders to come between [them]".⁷²³ Eve Troutt Powell maintains that the slogan promoted by nationalists was "Sudan for the Sudanese," which was an idea of eventual

⁷²¹ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 244. (Italics in original).

⁷²² Jameson, "Third-World in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," 69.

⁷²³ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 52.

Sudanese independence that rejected ideals of political or cultural unity with Egypt.⁷²⁴

Anti-Egyptian sentiment was aroused in many Sudanese because of the Egyptians' prejudiced point of view. In the novel, this is best expressed in the clash between the co-wives, Waheeba and Nabilah. Waheeba blames Nabilah for her feeling of Egyptian superiority over the Sudanese:

'If I learn from you I would learn to be hard-hearted. You are without tenderness. You live with us, but you have no sympathy for us. Your heart is as black as can be your eyes are hot and envious. You don't wish us any good! We were living well before you came from your country; we had nothing to complain of'.⁷²⁵

Waheeba is sensitive about her Sudanese culture and tradition and feels that Nabilah is not sympathetic and behaves as superior, as the latter keeps herself isolated from the rest of Abuzeid's family. It is true that Nabilah views Sudan "like the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history".⁷²⁶ Nabilah's opinion on Sudan is replete with stereotypes long established within Egyptian cultural life. Moreover, for Nabilah, "[s]ome of the Sudanese don't understand. They don't appreciate the title" which irritates her and they don't "understand about proper modern child-rearing".⁷²⁷ Nabilah criticizes Sudanese for not using polite forms of address such as Sir or Madam. Not only Nabilah, but also the Egyptian wife of another character, Ustaz Badr Hanniyah, "hated the Sudanese-style house they

⁷²⁴ Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 180.

⁷²⁵ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 175.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid*, 25, 26.

had been allocated by the school and complained about it day and night”.⁷²⁸ In her interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela states that “Egypt did pursue imperialistic interests in Sudan and, in the popular Egyptian imagination, Sudan existed as a back door to Egypt ... The Egyptians in *Lyrics Alley* see Sudan from a colonizer’s prejudiced point of view.”⁷²⁹ Thus, the novel testifies to how many Egyptians privately tended toward viewing the Sudanese as intellectually inferior and backward.

In *Lyrics Alley*, the remarks made about Sudan by Egyptian characters seem to reflect Rifa`a Al-Tahtawi’s—the Egyptian national reformist (1801-1873)—image of Sudan. Eve Troutt Powell argues that Mohammad Ali Pasha conquered Sudan and joined it to his “small empire”.⁷³⁰ Powell continues that Mohammad Ali’s “attempts to colonize the Sudan had great impact on the future of the Nile Valley and how Egyptians came to draw boundaries in their sense of nationhood and nationalism”.⁷³¹ So, she contends that the writing of Rifa`a Al-Tahtawi, who sowed the first seeds of an Egyptian sense of nationalism, “set down on paper important tropes about the Sudan, a place he despised yet considered intrinsic to the territorial and historical integrity of Egypt”.⁷³² In Powell’s account, Al-Tahtawi wrote a poem to lament his “exile” in Sudan. In his poem, Al-Tahtawi “offer[s] stark images of hateful Sudanese, to whom he attributed no tribe, no religion, no language, no identity except that of slave or ‘a blackness in a blackness in a blackness’”.⁷³³ Consequently some Sudanese, who are hypersensitive to perceived Egyptian insults to their dignity,

⁷²⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁷²⁹ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 102.

⁷³⁰ Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 27.

⁷³¹ Ibid, 27.

⁷³² Ibid, 23.

⁷³³ Ibid, 54.

viewed Egyptians as outsiders, unwanted intruders and invaders, as depicted in Waheeba`s assault on Nabilah.

Rejecting union with Egypt, the ‘half-caste’ children—half-Sudanese, half-Egyptian—seem to face a disadvantaged future. In her novel, the author accentuates this problem which emerges with nationalism and the assertion of Sudanese identity. In the interview by Chambers, Aboulela addresses this important issue in *Lyrics Alley*:

The ‘half-caste’ children do have a foot in each nation but, with Sudan rejecting a union with Egypt and asserting its national character, the children (unless they assimilate either way) are poised towards a somewhat disadvantaged future. In the Sudan they would not be Sudanese enough and in Egypt they would be held back because of their Sudanese origins.⁷³⁴

Aboulela herself is the daughter of a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother like Nabilah`s children, and many Sudanese people`s lives are shaped by this mixed heritage. In another interview by C. E. Rashid, Aboulela engages in the same issue of ethnicity:

I myself grew up with parents of different nationalities—even though arguably Egypt and Sudan are neighbours and share many similarities. However, growing up with this mixed heritage was a source of tension. Which accent should I speak: Egyptian or Sudanese? Should I dress Egyptian like my mother or wear the Sudanese national dress like my

⁷³⁴ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 103.

cousins and aunts? And on what basis should I decide? Personal feelings, peer pressure, or acquiesce to the more dominant culture?⁷³⁵

So, in Sudan and Egypt, hybridity is a source of tension. Bearing in mind the politically fraught relationship between Egypt and Sudan, the ‘half-caste’ would bear the brunt of this relationship. Thus, their dress, accent, lifestyle and even loyalties come under attack by the Egyptians as well as by the Sudanese.

‘Half-caste’ offspring face a dilemma as they cannot fit fully into Egyptian or Sudanese life. In *Lyrics Alley*, Nabilah’s son Farouk receives racist comments in Cairo because of his dark skin and kinky hair. The man at the shop she frequents makes comments:

“I don’t understand how the mother can be so pretty and the son something else!” he would say, or with an exaggerated expression of astonishment, “Can all this beauty have such a dark son?” He was getting bolder with time. “Why did they marry you off to a foreigner, Madam? What’s wrong with your fellow countrymen?”

Nabilah delighted in these comments ... But deep down, she was troubled about her children. They were like centaurs, neither fully Egyptian nor fully Sudanese, awkward, clumsy, serious and *destined to never fit in*.⁷³⁶

Powell argues, “the Sudan helped Egyptians identify what was Egyptian about Egypt, in an idealized, burgeoning nationalist sense; yet one’s presence in the

⁷³⁵Leila Aboulela, “Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative: An Interview with Leila Aboulela,” interview by C. E. Rashid. *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 4, (2012): para. 25 of 45.

<http://tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/1369801X.2012.730863> [accessed Jan. 2, 2017].

⁷³⁶Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 280. [Italics mine]

Sudan was an exile, a detachment from home in Egypt, a disgrace”.⁷³⁷ So, the Sudanese receive the sense of superiority of the Egyptians with sensitivity. As a result, Farouk is doing badly at school and Nabilah’s daughter Ferial starts to wet her bed. In Cairo, their sense of integration is troubled and they want to go back to their country. However, even in Sudan they do not fully fit in as pure Sudanese. Jack D. Forbes remarks that in Sudan the ‘half-caste’ or half-breed people are called ‘muwalladin’ and treated differently. Forbes maintains that, “In Sudan, the lighter-skinned offspring of mixed Egyptian-Sudanese marriages is a *muwallad*, a term often used in a pejorative sense by the darker Sudanese Muslims”.⁷³⁸ This explains why Nabilah views her children like centaurs, destined never to fit in.

Their names Farouk and Ferial have significance within a national allegory in that they allude to the Egyptian King Farouk—King of Egypt and Sudan—and his eldest daughter princess Ferial. During his reign, the Egyptians and Sudanese were unified under the Egyptian crown. Dunstan M. Wai examines the situation in Sudan during the rule of King Farouk and post the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement to establish Sudan as independent:

For years Egypt, insisting on unity of the Sudan and Egypt under the Egyptian crown, had opposed any moves toward Sudanese independence. But with the overthrow of King Farouk and the coming to power in July 1952 of General Neguib, himself half-Sudanese by birth, the whole situation changed. Neguib signed agreements with all the Northern [Egyptian] political parties providing for self-determination, free elections and the evacuation of all British officials and

⁷³⁷ Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 51.

⁷³⁸ Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 145. [Italics in original]

administrators within three years. In February 1955 the British also signed. But no Southerner [Sudanese] was invited to Cairo, and there is no record of their ever being consulted on the agreement which was to shape the future of their country. From the beginning, Southerners had hoped for a long period of economic and educational growth before independence, accompanied by attainment of political maturity. These hopes were not to be realized.⁷³⁹

So, with the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, the way was clear to Sudan's independence, but the Sudanese found themselves caught up in a rush of political events they were not ready for. Under King Farouk's rule, Egyptians and Sudanese were citizens of the same country and referred to themselves as Northern and Southern. Moreover, Sudan took advantage of the educational and economic development in Egypt. However, the Free Officer Movement, which led to the overthrow of King Farouk, and Sudan's independence changed the situation. The inflexible borders and the rising of national identity atomized multi-ethnic populations. Many 'half-castes' like Nabila's children suffered in the new era. The author puts it clearly that "[t]heir names were not helpful, Nabilah had to admit. The King her son was named after was now deposed and Princess Ferial was out of the country. This was a new Cairo, a new era."⁷⁴⁰

Aboulela effectively examines colonialism, and aspirations and disillusionments about postcolonialism, from the dissimilar viewpoints of those who lived, experienced and worked in Sudan during turbulent times. She highlights the hopes of those who advocate independence and the fears of

⁷³⁹ Dunstan M. Wai, ed., *The Southern Sudan: The Problem of National Integration* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), 98.

⁷⁴⁰ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 281.

others about the uncertainty of the future of independent Sudan. As Amir Idris reminds us:

In the case of the Sudan, we have to distinguish between two types of history: official history, which tends to be institutionalized by state policy, and the subaltern histories of those who are excluded from the state. While the former consolidates and justifies the existing nation-state, the latter seeks to question its legitimacy by reconstructing and reinterpreting the subaltern.⁷⁴¹

Idris's words help us to understand the plurality of opinions regarding the nascent nation in *Lyrics Alley*. By focusing on a plurality of narratives rather than one singular narrative of independence, Aboulela efficiently employs Idris's paradigm of "the multitude of levels of history" which, Idris insists, helps clarify "the relationship among history, identity, and conflict in the Sudan".⁷⁴² By means of this approach Aboulela employs, she rejects the totalizing meaning ascribed to Jameson's notion of national allegory.

In *Lyrics Alley* read as national allegory, Aboulela lets the subalterns speak. She gives space to the question of gender and women's participation in building the nascent postcolonial Sudan. Sudanese women can express their hopes, aspirations and resistances in different ways. Soraya, the daughter of Idris Abuzeid, realizes that they are on "the brink of a new dawn of self-determination and independent rule" which she supports, unlike her father.⁷⁴³ Idris opposes Soraya's higher education and his position reflects the conservative traditions among Sudanese in the colonial period. Heather Sharkey remarks, "[f]emales had no place at Gordon College, nor was

⁷⁴¹ Idris, *Conflict and Politics*, 16.

⁷⁴² *Ibid*, 18.

⁷⁴³ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 153.

education providing basic literacy easily accessible to girls throughout the colonial period”.⁷⁴⁴ Sharkey further notes that, “[t]he conservatism of Northern Sudanese society” and “the reluctance of British officials to spend scarce funds on [...] girls` schools, stifled the development of girls education until late in the colonial period”.⁷⁴⁵ Thus, Soraya encounters a common tradition and position taken by the Sudanese and colonial authorities on the subject of the education of women.

The author not only depicts dissimilar point of views among Sudanese regarding the independence of the nation, but also reflects the clash between the revolutionary younger, educated generation and the stagnant worldviews of the old generation regarding gender issues. So, Soraya decides to put education as her priority despite her father`s conservatism. When she complains to Nur that her father is preventing her from going to university, Nur condemns his uncle`s decision as short-sightedness; “[t]he hostility to her father was always around the corner, ready to pounce”.⁷⁴⁶ Nur`s and Soraya`s criticism of Idris` position is, in fact, a comment on male-traditional mentality on national issues which were hotly debated particularly in postcolonial Sudan. Sharkey argues that “men of the young educated classes had strained relations not only with the British, but with their fathers, as their changing worldviews and expectations clashed with both colonial and parental authority”.⁷⁴⁷ Thus, women`s education was among the national issues that marked generational conflict and were considered as a challenge to traditional paternal authority. Nur and Soraya have started a revolution against the older generation`s narrow-mindedness and backwardness.

⁷⁴⁴ Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, 8

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁷⁴⁶ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 153.

⁷⁴⁷ Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, 104.

In a patriarchal Sudanese society, women's simple rights turn out to be a challenge. Some traditional Sudanese view reading as a masculine act and inappropriate for women. However, Soraya finds in reading a source of inspiration and hope. She reads many romantic novels featuring happy endings and high-spirited heroines, such as *Lorna Doone*, *Rebecca*, *Liza of Lambeth*, *Emma*, and *The Woman in White*, and listens to Nur's enthusiastic narration of Shakespearian plays.⁷⁴⁸ In contrast to a patriarchal father who was traditional and illiterate, and two sisters who read very little, Soraya highly appreciates words that speak to everyone, regardless of age or gender:

But for Soraya, words on a page were seductive, free, inviting everyone, without distinction. She could not help it when she found words written down, taking them in, following them as if they were moving and she was in a trance, tagging along. A book was something to hide, the thick enchantment of it, the shame, almost.⁷⁴⁹

Her father forbids her to read newspapers because he believes they "were written for men," and represent an act of defying his authority.⁷⁵⁰ Moreover, he forbids Soraya from wearing glasses. Soraya's reading glasses are thus turned into a metaphor of gendered resistance against her patriarchal father, who punishes her whenever she reads or wears glasses. Writing a diary is another metaphor of gendered agency that allows Soraya to criticize the traditional norms of her family and society. Identifying herself with her sister Fatma who is snatched out of school and married to their no-good cousin Nassir, Soraya writes in English to escape the inspection of her father and

⁷⁴⁸ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 154.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

sisters: "*How I would have escaped marrying Nassir, had I been Fatma*".⁷⁵¹ The last sentence in her diary conjures up anger and a deep sense of injustice. Thus, both reading and writing function as metaphors to resist the established masculine image of women and work as paragons of progress and empowerment.

In colonial Sudan, women's education was opposed because it was considered by many conservative Sudanese as revolt against tradition and equal to mutiny against male authority. Soraya resists this patriarchal constraint when she manages to enroll at Kitchener's School of Medicine with the assistance of Sister Josephine—the head of Soraya's Catholic school—and her uncle Mahmoud, who convinces her father. Unlike her elder sisters Halima and Fatma, who left school for the sake of marriage, Soraya "could be the first Abuzeid girl to step into university, the first girl in the alley to get a university degree".⁷⁵² From the perspective of her patriarchal society, Soraya knows that after Nur's accident, "she [is] available on the marriage market" but "*her imperfections [are] all on display: short-sighted, loose-limbed and soon to be over-educated*".⁷⁵³ She realizes that attending university may cause her to be excluded from marriage proposals because education is an imperfection in the view of many traditional Sudanese. Soraya's position is not different from the few other Sudanese girls who continued their higher education after school. Sudanese girls who pursued their university education, Lilian Sanderson argues, "often lived in two diametrically opposed worlds—the emancipated one of the College and their home environment, where their newly-developed spirit of independence was often regarded as tantamount to impertinence".⁷⁵⁴

⁷⁵¹ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁵² Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 235. [Italics mine]

⁷⁵³ Ibid, 238.

⁷⁵⁴ Lilian Sanderson, "The Development of Girls' Education in the Northern Sudan, 1898

In the novel, Soraya is rebuked by her sister Fatma when she decides to marry a progressive man who transgresses the traditional Sudanese norms of their families and is not threatened by educated women.

Thus, in the imminent independence of Sudan, the dilemma encountered by educated Sudanese women was the clash between conservative traditionalism and emancipated modernity. They hoped to bring modernity to Sudan. In the novel, Soraya aspires to be sophisticated and modern like Egyptian women. She loves to visit Egypt because she “[does not] have to wear a tobe in Cairo”.⁷⁵⁵ Her admiration of Nabilah is an admiration of a modernity she desires to bring home: “Nabilah was everything that Soraya considered modern”.⁷⁵⁶ She looks to Nabilah as a model city lady who looks like a cinema star, whose elegant clothes are modeled on the latest European fashions, whose rooms are filled with flowers, ornaments, a gramophone, books, and magazines, and who has the only White wedding Soraya has ever attended.⁷⁵⁷ Then, she turns down the marriage proposal of her friend’s brother because he does not meet her “specific requirements”. Soraya wants to embrace modernity and freedom from traditional norms; she wants “to live in a modern villa in Khartoum, ... to travel, ... to have short hair and smoke cigarettes”.⁷⁵⁸ In fact, Soraya’s aspirations shock her sister Fatma, who rebukes her: “[h]ave you lost your mind? What kind of [Sudanese] man is going to put up with all this?”⁷⁵⁹ In this sense, Soraya represents the educated Sudanese women who

-1960,” *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 8, no. 1 (1068): 120-152 (150).

⁷⁵⁵ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 4.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 145.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 145.

aspired to independence, and wished to achieve self-determination not only from colonialism, but also from strict traditionalism.

Education nurtures gendered agency for Soraya and many young Sudanese women, whose culture is marked by fluidity and culture-crossing. Soraya is educated at foreign schools, the Catholic Sisters' school administered by Italian nuns in Umdurman and Kitchener's School of Medicine, and is skillfully able to read and write English and Arabic. British colonialism has left everlasting marks on the identity of Soraya and millions of Sudanese students through education and the rhythm of British life. In her interview with Rashid, Aboulela explains that people who experienced late colonialism "were also the generation that was postcolonial, nationalistic, against the West but also very close to the West".⁷⁶⁰ As Soraya re-visits her school one afternoon, she recalls memories of childhood:

Soraya walked around the empty, shady courtyard. She could hear the faint drone of the teachers in various classrooms, and the younger students chanting out their times tables. Part of her grievance against British rule, she had come to learn in university, was how they established missionary schools to undermine and lead astray the Muslim population.⁷⁶¹

As the above quotation demonstrates, Soraya's university education provides her with autonomous thinking skills and evokes in her anti-colonialist sentiments. In *Islam's Perfect Stranger*, Edward Thomas notes that "[t]he British were ambivalent about the value of education ... education was part of a 'civilizing mission', but it could create an articulate class that might threaten

⁷⁶⁰ Aboulela, "Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative," para. 19 of 45.

⁷⁶¹ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 247.

the colonialists` authority”.⁷⁶² Thus, education created a young generation of Sudanese who carried a strong sense of their Sudanese belonging and were stirred by patriotic sentiments.

Moreover, Soraya’s solitary walk around the courtyard of her childhood school turns into a contemplation of how British colonialism has shaped the identities of millions of Sudanese through its educational policies in colonial Sudan. In this sense, this episode seems to validate Jameson`s assumption on the nature of third-world literature. Here, Soraya`s “psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms” as Jameson reminds us of how third-world texts project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory.⁷⁶³ However, Aboulela enables female Sudanese characters to express their opinions about their nation as subjects of the history of Sudan, and they are not erased as Spivak argues.

Soraya`s education encourages her to take part in defining the nation`s future. She thinks that she has a role to play in the nascent nation. She plans to be at the forefront of the nation and push forward the wheel of progress in her country. Soraya`s future seems to be intertwined with that of the emergent nation. Through Nur's support, who also receives a British education at Victoria College in Alexandria, she engages in politics and the public sphere. Soraya inserts herself, though not officially, inside a world that is not made for girls according to the Sudanese tradition; she follows the updates on discussion forums, poetry recitals, and political lectures. Furthermore, Soraya has a strong political stance on the issue of union with Egypt. Like Nur and many nationalist young Sudanese, her opinion is different from that held by the older

⁷⁶² Edward Thomas, *Islam`s Perfect Stranger: The Life of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, Muslim Reformer of Sudan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 37.

⁷⁶³ Jameson, “Third-World in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” 69.

generation represented by Mahmoud and Idris Abuzeid: "The younger generation carried a strong sense of their Sudanese belonging. Their glittering future was here, here in this southern land where the potential was as huge and as mysterious as the darkness of its nights".⁷⁶⁴ So, in addition to the progress and empowerment her skills of reading and writing provide, education consolidates Soraya`s sense of independence. She becomes more reliant on herself and wants to be useful to her country.

For Soraya, 'work' means helping build the nation on solid grounds, a mission that Sudanese women should wholeheartedly contribute to, but of which her sisters have been unaware. Unlike her older sisters, Soraya is conscious of the responsibility she has to shoulder once the new era commences. She even envisages how her sisters "would do her housework for her and look after her children while she went to work".⁷⁶⁵ Soraya is preoccupied with the socioeconomic and political changes that Sudan`s independence is expected to engender. She is eager to discuss the political situation in her country with her elders.⁷⁶⁶ When she is not allowed to attend nationalist poetry readings, she is about to cry "because exciting, transforming things would happen and she would only hear about them and not be part of them".⁷⁶⁷ In summary, she "want[s]to be at the centre of everything".⁷⁶⁸

As a new Sudanese young woman, Soraya`s identity embraces modification and divergence. She likes to piece together the traditional desire for marriage with the modern civilized one for self-reliance, and intellectual and cultural improvement. Soraya's awareness of Nur's injury and disability

⁷⁶⁴ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 12.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 239.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 158.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

motivates her to join Kitchener's School of Medicine to achieve at least self-reliance and a real sense of personhood: "If she was not going to marry Nur, she told herself, she would have a vocation where she could be passionate and useful, respected and more reliant on herself".⁷⁶⁹ Although Soraya enrolls at Kitchener's School of Medicine and marries a Western-educated man, her dream of freedom and progress, like those of her nation, remains constrained. Soraya represents the new generation of Sudanese young women who embrace the modern ideals of independence and self-determination and yet respect the traditional ethics of the big house and the familial norms of solidarity and intimacy. Soraya is like the young women of her postcolonial generation:

[w]hich dictates that, ideally, women must be assertive, autonomous, and self-determining, but they must also retain aspects of traditional femininity, including heterosexual desirability and emotional sensitivity to others.⁷⁷⁰

So, despite her modern aspirations, Soraya still respects her family and Sudanese tradition, which is exemplified by her keen interest in family gatherings and occasions such as weddings, births, illnesses, or funerals.⁷⁷¹ A definite example of traditional femininity is Soraya's wedding party: "She [has] her dream of more than one party, more than one celebration, traditional gold and African dancing and, on another day, a long white dress like Nabilah's, with veil and a train".⁷⁷² She has both an African traditional wedding party and

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid, 237.

⁷⁷⁰ Shelley Budgeon, *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 54.

⁷⁷¹ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 6.

⁷⁷² Ibid, 248.

a modern one because it matters deeply to her Sudanese identity, which is characterized by a mix of two opposite worlds.

As Aboulela represents the national sentiments of male characters from different perspectives, she also enables the female characters to express their national resistance from different angles. While Soraya`s patriotic feeling motivates her to pursue education to participate in the progress of her country, traditional uneducated Waheeba views in female genital mutilation a patriotic resistance to the influence of colonialism. The Anglo-Egyptian government declares that female circumcision is illegal, but Waheeba insists that her granddaughter Zeinab and Nabilah`s daughter Ferial must follow the Sudanese tradition without the consent of their mothers.⁷⁷³ In *Lyrics Alley*, female genital mutilation turns out to be an issue which is hotly debated like any other national issue from different points of view. Mahmoud Abuzeid, Nabilah and Soraya severely oppose the Sudanese habit of female genital mutilation (so-called female circumcision) and view it as “barbarity”.⁷⁷⁴ Mahmoud forbids circumcision and believes it is one of the “old customs, which have no basis in ... religion and are unhealthy. Besides, it`s against the law.”⁷⁷⁵ Like Waheeba, the backward Idris supports the practice of circumcision; he states, “Who cares if the British outlawed female circumcision? The practice has just gone underground, that`s all. Consider it a patriotic act of resistance.”⁷⁷⁶ In the feminist national narrative of Aboulela, this practice of female genital mutilation becomes an example of the social and physical abuse or barbarity inflicted upon women that represents "institutionalized political oppression," enforced by the violent hand of society

⁷⁷³ Ibid, 186.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid, 47.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid, 199.

and the family.⁷⁷⁷ Hence, this primitive treatment of women is introduced in *Lyrics Alley* and practiced by some Sudanese to assert the national identity.

Such gendered politics of resistance, enacted through women's bodies and represented as crucial to characterizing the nation, is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's theory of the veiled Algerian woman as a possible weapon in the anti-colonial struggle.⁷⁷⁸ In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon contends that "the veil belongs to the clothing traditions of the ... national societies. For the tourist and the foreigner, the veil demarcates both Algerian society and its feminine component."⁷⁷⁹ Fanon suggests that the veil is a mechanism of resistance to French colonial authority in Algeria. He notes that "[t]he veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria".⁷⁸⁰ For Fanon, the veil is a symbol of national liberation and indigenous identity. In her feminist reading of Fanon's "Algeria Unveiled", Winifred Woodhull offers a critique of Fanon for assigning no agency to Algerian women in his account of the revolution. Woodhull argues that Fanon links women's agency to male designation and "obscure[s] tensions that have always existed between nationalism and feminism in Algeria."⁷⁸¹ Woodhull considers Fanon's account of the revolution as one of the "most progressive cultural texts [that] may be used to underwrite the exploitation of women by various nationalisms—fundamentalist and conservative, secular and 'progressive.'"⁷⁸² In alignment with Woodhull's perspective, in *Lyrics Alley*, female genital mutilation can be read as a form of

⁷⁷⁷ Christopher Larkosh, *Re-Engendering Translation: Transcultural Practice, Gender/Sexuality and the Politics of Alterity* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 5.

⁷⁷⁸ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 35-36.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 63. [italics in original]

⁷⁸¹ Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1993), 22-23.

⁷⁸² *Ibid*, 24.

women`s oppression and exploitation by Sudanese nationalism; some Sudanese embrace certain ancient cultural practices that are outlawed by their colonialist occupiers and condemned as primitive in order to assert national identity, as Idris puts it clearly, as a “patriotic act of resistance”. To quote Bhabha on how the political unity of the nation is consolidated, the national identity has been asserted by invoking “the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism”⁷⁸³ that is female genital mutilation in *Lyrics Alley*.

Aboulela introduces sexuality, especially female genital mutilation, as a sexual dimension of colonial domination and traditional backward national practices. In the novel, the practice is performed by women on other women and young girls without the consent of patriarchy. The clash between Mahmoud Abuzeid and his wife Waheeba who practices female circumcision reveals that this practice is not linked to patriarchal domination. In her interview with Chambers, Aboulela maintains that:

Only urban, educated families distanced themselves from this practice. And it was largely men rather than women who were keen for the practice to end. The situation described in *Lyrics Alley* where the father/grandfather is opposed to the procedure and the women strongly in favour, is sadly typical, and stories abound of wives who take advantage of their husband`s absence to enforce the procedure on their daughters. With time, and greater education and empowerment of women, the rates of performance have dropped, as has the severity of the type of mutilation itself. (In order to protect girls from the adverse physical side effects of procedure, Sudanese doctors developed less radical, clinically safe methods. These measures found popular support,

⁷⁸³ Bhabha, *The Location*, 213.

although they did not, as was hoped, eradicate the practice altogether.)⁷⁸⁴

In the above lines, Aboulela links female genital mutilation to the traditional society of women. It is carried out by 'backward', as opposed to politically conscious, empowered or feminist women, and is a characteristic of the uneducated. Nevertheless, the invisible hand of patriarchy is involved, because women are so strongly attached to the gender roles assigned by the patriarchal societies. In many of these societies, men dictate what is considered to be the virtuous and acceptable female image. Thus the control of woman and feminine sexuality through female circumcision is carried out by women not for their own benefit but for men's benefit. In the novel, Idris' political stance on female genital mutilation as an anti-colonial practice confirms how men define their masculinity or national identity through controlling the female body.

However, this primitive practice, which is harmful and unnecessary, is satirized in the novel by the enlightened characters and causes endless nightmares to the female victims. Nabilah keeps recalling "the horror stories she had heard since arriving in Sudan. Brides, whose wedding nights were a disaster because of too tight an infibulation" and the story of a "baby's head damaged during labour, endless complications".⁷⁸⁵ With such an ancient cultural habit rooted in the ethnic tribalism of Sudanese society, Nabilah believes "a progressive, liberal man might not even want to marry her [daughter] in the first place" because of her having been a victim of such genital mutilation.⁷⁸⁶ Nabilah is disgusted to come across such a barbaric

⁷⁸⁴ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 105.

⁷⁸⁵ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 188.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 188.

practice in her own marital family, one that she had thought only exists among the uneducated and peasants. Similarly, Soraya`s future dreams include having daughters “who were not circumcised”.⁷⁸⁷ As Aboulela remarks, with education and the empowerment of women there is a chance for this practice to be eradicated in Sudan. Like the politics of Sudanese nationalism as such, Aboulela's gendered politics of national resistance is portrayed from the perspectives of different generations and orientations.

Not only does Aboulela represent the nation from the perspectives of different generations, but also from different classes, national origins and religious alignments. Regarding Sudanese independence, she portrays the hopes and fears of different characters with different shades of religious devotion. While the Sudanese upper-class Abuzeid family express their opinions from secular matrices, the lower-class Egyptian character Ustaz Badr is very religious. When Aboulela is asked by Chambers if she made a conscious decision in *Lyrics Alley* to move away from the ‘halal’ credentials of her novels *The Translator* and *Minaret*, she replies:

Not at all. The character of Badr is central to the novel. He is the one who sets out to make sense of the dilemma “Why does Allah Almighty make bad things happen to good people?” As a believer, he worships an All-Powerful, All-Compassionate God and, in exploring this question from a theological point of view, I feel I have gone deeper in writing about Islam—and about the meaning of faith—than in my other novels.⁷⁸⁸

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid, 239.

⁷⁸⁸ Chambers, *British Muslim*, 103.

Lyrics Alley reflects the political turbulence of anti-colonialist nationalism in a Muslim setting and within a Muslim culture. However, because of the rise of secularism in the 1950s, and the urban Muslims in Cairo and Khartoum not particularly “feel[ing] the need to assert their religious identity,” the author portrays the character of Badr as a devout practicing Muslim to depict nationalist aspirations from a religious perspective.⁷⁸⁹ Despite the fact that the precolonial rule of the Mahdi was heavily religious in nature, the urban educated Sudanese, who were trained to take over from the British, were encouraged to distance themselves from any Islamic rule.⁷⁹⁰ Hence, the author employs the single self-consciously religious character Badr to incorporate Islam into the novel.

Lyrics Alley carries the awareness of different class-determined approaches to Islam. Rural-urban migration was responsible for bringing religious people into the cities, so, the poor and the servant class are more pious in comparison to the more secularized and Westernized characters. In the interview with Rashid, Aboulela maintains that demographics and also generational difference have played a key role in approaching Islam: she further argues:

This is not only to do with class, but also generational difference. The generation that came before me were very secular. They just didn't see the resurgence of Islam coming *at all*: they were completely unaware of it, and they distanced themselves from the peasants in the village who were ‘backward’ and ‘veiled’ ... Then, of course, there came disillusionment and running parallel to it a huge influx of rural-urban migration. A lot of villagers poured into the cities, bringing with them

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid, 104.

their customs and their practices; these people hadn't experienced the British colonizers, they hadn't seen the British ladies and their clothes and their 'freedom'. The families from the countryside came in with their customs, and they brought their own version of Islam along. Hence the popularity of the veil and more conservative habits.⁷⁹¹

Through this lens, Badr, who belongs to a rural village in upper Egypt that is not influenced by colonial rule, comes to Sudan and carries with him Islamic teachings and lifestyle. Badr feels uncomfortable in the residence allocated to him by the Sudanese government, which evokes the sense of exile in Sudan. However, Badr's faith empowers him to endure the hardships of displacement, alienation and marginalization, much like Sammar and Najwa in Aboulela's previous novels. Thus, to borrow Sadia Abbas's words, Islam in Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* works as a "sociopsychic tranquilizer," that helps the Muslim person in exile to tranquilize the pain of displacement and other losses.⁷⁹² Like Aboulela's previous novels, *Lyrics Alley* portrays a character's, Badr's, life being directed by faith, and shows how religious rituals help him in the process of his integration into exile in Sudan. Badr, like the female protagonists of Aboulela's previous novels, exemplifies how it can become possible for all Muslims to feel at home wherever they are. Badr's faith bolsters him in moments of distress and despair.

The concept of fate is thus very much at stake in the novel. Badr's Islamic vision of coping with his hard living conditions, and the unfulfilled social demands of his family, requires that he be patient and accept his fate. He believes that the endurance of misfortune and pain without complaint is basic to every believer's faith in Allah:

⁷⁹¹ Aboulela, "Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative," para. 19 of 45.

⁷⁹² Abbas, *At Freedom's Limit*, 93.

Why do things happen? For pedagogical reasons, so that we can experience the power of Allah, catch a glimpse of Hell and fear it, so that we can practice seeking refuge in Him and, when relief comes give thanks for his mercy. Darkness was created so that, like plants, we could yearn and turn to the light. Badr had observed this in himself whenever one of the children were ill, or when he faced difficulties at work, or when his plans suffered a setback, or when he was thwarted or in pain...Badr repeated to himself the verse, “... *And give good tidings to the patient ...*”.⁷⁹³

Thus, in hardship, Badr becomes ardent in his supplication, more receptive to the words of the Qur`an and more eager in his pleas. Rather than passive submission, Badr`s concepts of faith and fate provide him with the psychological strength to endure, and he concludes that it is wrong to despair.

Realizing that the shortest journey to become close to Allah is facing difficulties with patience, Badr finds solace in his Islamic faith at the moment of misfortune. When he is accused of theft and imprisoned unfairly, he recalls what the Prophet Jonah did when he was in the belly of the whale:

He called out to his Lord saying, “There is no god but You, subhanaka, I was one of the transgressors.” The dark belly of the whale—that was where Badr was now. Imprisoned and at the bottom of the sea, darkness upon darkness.⁷⁹⁴

The dark belly of the whale is symbolic of Badr`s imprisonment, yet to a large extent, it reflects his existence in Sudan. Aboulela`s portrayal of Badr seems to be referring back to Rifa`a Al- Tahtawi`s poem which laments his existence in

⁷⁹³ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 217.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 213.

Sudan as an exile and a disgrace in a land of slaves and blackness.⁷⁹⁵ Unlike Al-Tahtawi or Nabilah, Badr as a devout Muslim believes that Allah has appointed him to be in Sudan to fulfill a mission. As an educated Egyptian, he has to participate in educating Sudanese people, building the nation and spreading Islamic teachings, a mission that Al-Tahtawi did not fulfill.

In this sense, Badr's Islamic faith enables him to develop a bond with Sudan that transcends political borders, geographical locations, national origins and social status. He expresses his sorrow for Egypt's lack of Islamic influence in Sudan: "We could have spread Islam further ... squashed the seeds of religious deviations with more vigour, we could have nurtured and taught Arabic and enlightened."⁷⁹⁶ Fortified with Islamic spirituality, Badr feels that he has a responsibility toward Sudan, that this new nation needs religious guidance and reform and that it is fate's mandate for him to be there and to contribute to Sudan's progress. He believes that everything happens for a reason, and his presence in Sudan is because the "Sudanese needed rescuing from superstition and deviation— this was why the Shariah judges were Egyptians and why it was important for Badr to be here, to teach Arabic and Religious Education".⁷⁹⁷ From this perspective, despite his national origin, Badr is allowed in the novel to express his aspirations for the independence of Sudan, and he decides to continue his religious educational mission of enlightenment even if the proposed union with Egypt has failed.

In her Islamic narrative of national allegory, Aboulela conflates Shariah with Sufism in representing her country. Sufism is the prevalent mode of Islam in Northern Sudan. In Sudan, Badr experiences "that two worlds, the spiritual

⁷⁹⁵ Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 54.

⁷⁹⁶ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 296.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

and the material, had touched each other".⁷⁹⁸ His faith makes him feel comfortable in Sudan where he experiences "more benign spirits".⁷⁹⁹ As a result, he thinks that he gains insight and sees Sudan as "a place of wayward spirituality, a place where the impossible and the romantic pulsed within reach. A place where intangible, inhuman, forces still prevailed, not yet tamed and restrained by the rules of religion and men."⁸⁰⁰ Thus, Badr is portrayed as a practicing Muslim who functions as a spiritual mentor to other characters, namely Nur, helping him to overcome his depression after the accident, and who perceives faith as his main source of stability and security at home and in exile. In this novel, Badr's spiritual journey is emphasized in a Sufistic manner. In her interview with Rashid, Aboulela tells a story in which the symbolism indicates that Islamic Shariah without Sufism is like a dead body:

A man wants to give a gift to the king, so he brings him a beautiful woman to be his concubine. She's stunning—perfect, even—and she's got beautiful hair ... everything about her is beautiful. But she's dead. And then another man brings the king a gift of a woman who's alive, but she's totally hideous [laughs]. So neither the corpse nor the hag are suitable as concubines, as gifts for the king—and they are both rejected. The symbolism of the story is that the dead, beautiful woman represents the laws of the shariah, without the Sufism ... In that case, the heart is alive with love and goodness but the body is hideous because the outside form of the shariah has been rejected. So if Sufism is aligned

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid, 59.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid, 58.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid, 60-61.

with the inside, and the shariah with the outside, then as Muslims we have to put the two sides together.⁸⁰¹

Thus, Badr realizes that it is not enough to practice the rituals of Shariah, but his heart must be filled with love for what he is doing. Through this lens, he is convinced that his educational mission in Sudan should not cease with Egypt's withdrawal from Sudan. He takes the decision to continue educating the Sudanese and guiding them as he is "overwhelmed by His Lord's mercy and generosity".⁸⁰² So, Badr's Sufi belief enables him to transcend the boundaries of the mind and physical body to reach the soul's activism.

Like *Lyrics Alley*, Aboulela's following novel *The Kindness of Enemies* is much more identified with Sufism. Natasha is considered as belonging to the second postcolonial generation, like those characters in *Lyrics Alley* who are frustrated by the independent Sudan. She left Sudan with her Russian mother and fought to build life and to fit in in Scotland. She has longed for a place of belonging until she meets Malak who is "petite but ... spiritually strong."⁸⁰³ Malak acts as Natasha's mentor, preaching the Sufi faith and taking Natasha to modern zikr (lessons). In one of the Sufi lessons, the Sheikh says:

our souls have unlimited capacity for knowledge and will ever be thirsting for more. As long as the soul is imprisoned by the senses of the physical body, our mind will hold it down. The mind is the guardian over the soul and keeps it passive, inactive. The situation will remain so until we transcend the boundaries of the mind and open ourselves up for the soul's activity.⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰¹ Aboulela, "Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative," para. 29 of 45.

⁸⁰² Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 296.

⁸⁰³ Aboulela, *The Kindness*, 219.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 217.

It is obviously this Sufi faith that liberates Badr and Malak's souls and encourages them to endure hardship, as Malak puts it clearly: "If I didn't have my faith, I would go mad."⁸⁰⁵ My reading of Aboulela's embrace of spirituality associated with Sufism as the right path within Islam in *Lyrics Alley* and *The Kindness of Enemies* has been inspired by Caroline Rooney's pioneering arguments about the spirit as it applies to Sufism. In her article "Sufi Springs: Air on an Oud String," Rooney contends that, "While the Islamists regard this [Sufism] as shirk (idolatry), it seems to me that the Islamists find the liberated spirit of Sufism and its orality at odds with their strict textual authoritarianism: nothing outside of the one and only text."⁸⁰⁶ Rooney finds that the Wahhabi or Salafi Islamists are indeed vehemently opposed to Sufism because it encourages liberated spirits and democratic culture, which are absent in their ideology. While the Islamists contradict Sufism and its principles, Rooney asserts that, "Islamic feminism is much more identified with Sufism than Islamism."⁸⁰⁷ It is important to note that Rooney's article addresses Egypt and the Arab Spring and Sufism. Egypt is, after all, in Africa, as is Sudan; Sufism has a long history here connected with African animism, as Rooney has explored in her earlier work.⁸⁰⁸ In her representation of female characters in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela is more identified with Sufism than Islamism.

Islamic spirituality associated with Sufism empowers Natasha, Malak and Imam Shamil's women. Natasha realizes that she will be able to connect to her spirituality only if she fights her weakness, and Malak will be her guide in this quest:

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid, 215.

⁸⁰⁶ Caroline Rooney, "Sufi Springs: Air on an Oud String," *CounterText* 1, no. 1 (2015): 38-58 (54).

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁸⁰⁸ Rooney, *African Literature, Animism, and Politics* (2000).

Sufism delves into the hidden truth behind the disguise. Malak, the teacher disguised as an actor. Natasha the student, acting the part of a teacher. I had come to her [Malak] today needing to connect, wanting to spend time in her company. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual. She was ready to be a guide and I would fight my weakness in order to follow.⁸⁰⁹

For twenty years, Natasha yearns for an identifiable place where she can belong and she finally knows that what she is after is spirituality. In this Sufi spiritual journey, Natasha realizes the truth of her hidden self that is a student disguised as a university lecturer. Likewise, in the Caucasus in their resistance against Russian invasion, Imam Shamil's women practice their roles behind a disguise. In Aboulela's feminist representation, they are brave warriors disguised as wives and mothers: "[T]hese wives and daughters were as eager as any man to pitch themselves at the enemy, to help protect their homes, to win the day. And if they died in battle, they too would become martyrs, granted everlasting life."⁸¹⁰ Empowered by Shamil's Sufi spiritual teachings, women are fighting, as they are equal to men in the battlefields and martyrdom. However, while advocating gender equality in the battlefield, Sufism still legitimates gender asymmetry within the family in Aboulela's feminist representation.

While her trajectory is changing to a more obviously politicised focus within Islamic spirituality, Aboulela is still engaged with a less radical emancipation of women than she could be representing because she adheres to classic patriarchal interpretations of Holy texts, as I have argued in relation to her previous novels. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, polygamy is not challenged

⁸⁰⁹ Aboulela, *The Kindness*, 314.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

by the Muslim women of Imam Shamil; Chuanat, his second wife, reveals that “behind him [Shamil] I am happy. I am peaceful.”⁸¹¹ Granted that Shamil’s women are capable of resistance as they are empowered spiritually, Islamic logic, from which Aboulela writes, fashions Muslim women’s lives to accept gender roles and the superiority of men. Apparently, this Islamic logic which marginalizes the conflict of gender roles to reach a coexistence is not shared or grasped by the Christian character Anna, of whom it is said, “Polygamy disgusted her.”⁸¹² Not only is polygamy not challenged in Sufism, neither is man’s superiority. The Sufi mentor of Imam Shamil advises him to control his wife, saying, “When a man cannot control his wife it must be the end of Time coming upon us.”⁸¹³ Thus, in Aboulela’s account, Sufi faith strengthens Muslim women’s souls to accept their duties as they serve Allah and not their desires.

In *Lyrics Alley*, unlike Badr and Imam Shamil’s women, Nabilah, who lacks religious commitment, has no influence in Sudan. When Soraya pays her a visit in Egypt, Nabilah realizes that she could have been a ‘native’, though Egyptian, role model for the civilizing mission had she been a more observant Muslim:

Life in Sudan would have had a meaning if Nabilah had been able to make a difference, if she had thrived as a role model, as a champion of progress, as a good influence. She could have taken a younger person's hand and guided them ... She had not been able to rise and fill that leadership position. She had allowed Waheeba, the dust, the heat, the insects, the landscape and customs to defeat her. She had not fought back.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹¹ Ibid, 151.

⁸¹² Ibid, 151.

⁸¹³ Ibid, 233.

⁸¹⁴ Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley*, 286-287.

Nabilah`s presence in Sudan has no significance. Her prejudice and her refusal to adapt to the new environment function to isolate and alienate her in Sudan. However, after Soraya`s visit, she realizes that she is loved, respected and admired by her Sudanese family. Finally, Nabilah comprehends that she has a role to play in building the new nation. Like Badr, she can participate in improving living standards in the country of her husband and children.

In contrast to El Saadawi`s narratives of national allegory, injustice, corruption and repression are absent in portraying the nation in *Lyrics Alley*. In prison, Ustaz Badr does not find political detainees, fundamentalists, or the impoverished, but only archetypal “thugs and criminals.”⁸¹⁵ Also, undeniably, Aboulela addresses women`s issues in *Lyrics Alley* from the viewpoint of urban women. In fact, women of the lower class and women living in the countryside who experience extreme poverty and high illiteracy are often largely invisible in her narrative of the nation. The prominent Sudanese social and political female activist Khalda Zahir, who was the first Sudanese woman to chair the Sudanese Women`s Union in the 1950s, explains women`s situation in Sudan:

I do not exactly remember when I started to feel that women had been oppressed in my country and how I could speak out and show my contempt, resentment, rancor and indignation against the situation. I was lucky that I continued my education and entered the Faculty of Medicine at Khartoum University and that gave me a chance, which many of my generation`s girls did not enjoy.⁸¹⁶

⁸¹⁵ Ibid, 212.

⁸¹⁶ Khalda Zahir quoted in Charles Degol, *How The Sudanese People Adapt to The Trends in Marriages in America and The Popularity of Divorce* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2011), 31.

Obviously women`s rights were crushed or curtailed by nationalism and traditionalism in 1950s Sudan. Only urban and privileged women had the chance to continue their education and participate in public life. Like Khalda Zahir, Soraya is one of few urban women while the majority of women are living in the country and facing completely different problems throughout their daily lives.

In short, *Lyrics Alley* is a narrative of nation in which feminist concerns are taken into account. It reflects the hopes, fears, expectations and disillusionments of the Sudanese regarding the independence of Sudan in the 1950s. The story of the nation is interwoven with the private lives of ordinary characters which exemplifies Jameson`s paradigm of national allegory. However, the opinions of these characters are dissimilar and varied as they are from different genders, generations, classes, and modes of religious faith and devotion to Islam. The different characters take up different positions so that the allegory is not as homogenizing as Aijaz and Spivak have claimed that Jameson`s paradigm either predicts or prescribes. Mahmoud Abuzeid encourages independence and union with Egypt at the same time, while his brother Idris fears the future of self-determination. The younger generation, Nur and Soraya, are stirred with patriotism, advocating an independent Sudan and termination of the colonial policy of any indirect rule.

In a strand of the novel that should be read as a feminist narrative, Soraya is portrayed in such a way as to represent the experiences of privileged urban, upper-class, educated Sudanese women. Soraya crosses the boundaries that limit women`s spaces, makes the binaries fluid, and opens the horizon for some change, more self-valuing and empowerment. The feminist tropes inscribed in Aboulela's narrative are a definitive example of how women`s

agency and independence can be achieved in terms of intellectual and psychological maturity rather than simply be means of eroticism and physical sexuality, as in El Saadawi's novels. By the same token, Soraya's intellectual attachment to reading and writing is portrayed as inseparable from her personal struggle in challenging patriarchal norms in *Lyrics Alley*. Aboulela's feminist narrative of nationalism appears to be confined to the urban women of the upper class in *Lyrics Alley*, yet she declares that her next literary project and among what motivates her to continue writing fiction is to address the dilemma of "oppressed Muslim women":

I still have lots and lots to say about the lives and dilemmas of ordinary Muslims. There are still very few examples of Muslims in contemporary literature and most of these examples are those of the 'Islamic terrorist', the 'oppressed Muslim woman' or on the other side of the spectrum examples of liberal Muslims whose lifestyles and ways of thinking are not different from non-Muslims. I agree whole-heartedly that all these variations do exist in Muslim society and should be represented in fiction. And I do admire the many deep, complex and insightful novels that have tackled these subjects.⁸¹⁷

As shown above in her recent novel *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela is still engaged with Islamic feminism but her contribution makes less of a case for the radical emancipation of women through the mediation or amelioration of Sufism. It is arguable that *The Kindness of Enemies* may be her best novel so far. It identifies and analyzes the legacy of political Islam and terrorism and its threats on the lives of Muslim immigrants in the West. This fresh perspective offered by Aboulela emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the

⁸¹⁷ Aboulela, "Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative," para. 40 of 45.

Islamic faith of the mainstream Muslim population and the ideology of conquest of Al Qaeda and other fanatic groups. Nonetheless, this novel seems less directly focused on feminist concerns. Islamic feminists such as Aboulela might be expected to go further and bring about, or at least prefigure in their fictions, radical and positive changes regarding gender equality in the Muslim world—because there is a concord between the egalitarian spirit of Islam and the feminist quest for women`s rights and justice. I am hopeful that her future writings will remain politically alert and astute and become a powerful resource for emancipation.

Conclusion

Identities are discursively generated. The postcolonial condition, as suggested by Elleke Boehmer, is one of those discourses that have had life-shaping effects on millions of individuals, in the Third World in particular. This study has focused on the different positions embraced by two authors recognised as 'Muslim feminists.' I have explored how they engage with postcolonial subjects and particularly address women's questions in their contemporary societies, through analyses of such 'Muslim feminist fictions' as *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam*, and *Zeina* by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Translator*, *Minaret* and *Lyrics Alley* by Leila Aboulela. My reason for selecting these two prominent authors and including them in one category despite their differences is that both are from the inside of Muslim culture, whether or not they commit to Islam in creedal terms. From a secularized critical category, El Saadawi inscribes her female characters as revolutionary subjects who rebel against the Islamic patriarchal law, while Aboulela, from a committed Muslim point of view, inscribes Islamic faith extensively in her writing. She engages with female Muslim subjects in a Western secularized environment and situates her Islamic perspective there.

When speaking of postcolonialism in Muslim fiction, some issues arise among the critics. As the postcolonial condition remarkably shapes both authors' writings, Islam has been incorporated in their fiction as a major component. Many critics such as Spivak, Wail Hassan, Amin Malak and Anouar Majid claim that postcoloniality is characterized by its Eurocentric and secularized features, which implies a marginalization of religion and non-

Western subjects. However, Thurfjell and Hasan Majed suggest that Muslims can develop their own form of postcolonialism in which they emphasize the centrality of Islam in their writings. Thus, incorporating postcolonial theory with Arab feminism seems possible, and the two perspectives compatible, as when Anastasia Valassopoulos suggests that postcoloniality appears as a mode of thinking in Arab women`s writings.

A feminist movement is not autonomous, but bound to the national struggle which produces it. So, it appears to be inevitable to need to examine Arab feminism with a rigorous analysis of the sociopolitical context. Arab women`s emancipation was born out of the struggle between the dying, traditional, religious way of life and the rising, modern, secular, capitalist European way of life. In the late nineteenth century, anticolonial and national reformists realized that women`s emancipation was one of the crucial fronts in their battle against foreign colonialism, internal reactionary forces and backwardness. They were impressed by Western technical progress and attributed it to secularism. The leading reformists and nationalists of the time were exclusively male and their eventual goal was to establish a modern democratic country. In this sense, pro-women theories and thinking were connected tightly to the ultimate goals of the nationalists. Consequently, nationalists` theory—such as Qasim Amin`s theory—cannot be called feminism in a strict sense. It did not succeed in bringing real equality for women because it was limited within conventional gender roles and women were expected to be controlled by patriarchal norms. In addition, Amin`s notion of ‘the new woman’ was exclusive to the upper and upper-middle classes.

Following Amin, Huda Sha`rawi`s and Malak Hifni Nasif`s feminist theories were politically nationalistic and dictated by male nationalists. Huda

Sha`rawi worked according to the agendas of the Wafd political party and Malak Hifni Nasif wrote feminist articles in the newspaper of the liberal secular Umma party. In their feminist struggle, Sha`rawi and Nasif lacked class awareness and a true understanding of the predicament of the poor and peasant women. Their social activities were limited to representing the political needs of the liberal intellectuals of their class, while the problems of the lower class, which was economically exploited, were ignored. Poor women were excluded from the discussion of women`s liberation. They also avoided discussing the existing male power structure, and accepted the established traditional gender roles as designated by the patriarchy.

Thus, the early feminist movement in Egypt affiliated itself, albeit discreetly, with the Western secular tendency of society. Women remained within the male domain and lacked autonomy. The male nationalists recruited women for the interest of their nationalistic struggle; once their missions were accomplished, women were dismissed and expected to return to their conventional female roles as housewives. However, the failure of feminist writings in these periods to achieve societal acceptance and to bring about sociopolitical change for women can be attributed to many causes. Ignoring the class struggle, the limitation of women`s emancipation within the conventional roles established by patriarchal Islam, the affiliation of the feminist movement to male politics, the lack of group identity, and the lack of awareness of the need for women`s ongoing involvement in political activities limited the progress of the early feminist movement.

It was, then, only after many decades that Arab feminism separated from male struggles among nationalist and religious reform movements and began to form separate groups. El Saadawi started her independent secular

feminism. Like Doria Shafik's, El Saadawi's feminist approach was more militant and autonomous than that of previous female writers and activists. Her works constitute a major turning point in Arab feminist thinking. This study demonstrates, through a detailed analysis of selected El Saadawi novels, how the author constructs a revolutionary spirit that revolts against all kinds of oppression and emancipates the body and the mind from patriarchal religion and societal constraints. By employing Linda Alcoff's concept of positionality, I reveal how El Saadawi's female characters' subjectivities become fluid and shifting in accordance with the constantly hostile context.

To avoid being crushed into patriarchal discourse or other people's fantasies, El Saadawi enables Firdaus, Bint Allah and Zeina to counter the brutality of Arab women's lives, and lets her female characters define themselves in their own terms and take different paths, even hostile ones. The sociopolitical circumstances forge female characters and force them to take the path of struggle and rebellion. Prostitution and lesbianism are rendered by the author as rebellion to dramatize the restrictions placed on women's sexuality by religion and to challenge the patriarchy. Capital crime is also portrayed as a strategy for women's emancipation. However, murder, I argue, can be read symbolically as killing the man's superiority, power and belief in his right to rule and control others.

El Saadawi is as much a nationalist writer as she is a feminist one. Her position as both a nationalist and a feminist is somewhat controversial. Her nationalist struggle seeks to liberate the country of Egypt, as symbolized by women's bodies, from the domestic corruption of nationalist politicians and Islamic fundamentalists. In her novels, the struggle for Arab women's emancipation and their land takes place within a contradictory context of

religious and nationalist struggles. Thus, El Saadawi in her narratives of the nation writes back to the commonplaces of male writers' national allegory and, doing what Bensmaia hopes for, rewrites the nation in her own terms. Unlike her male predecessors, El Saadawi calls for women's liberation from the colonization of the body in a theocratic patriarchal nation. She offers a critique of this nation as a prison for its women. The tale of land or country has been interwoven with the private lives of revolutionary or submissive women in alignment with Fredric Jameson's paradigm.

El Saadawi seeks to create a secular-oriented revolutionary spirit in her feminist and nationalist struggle. She believes that women will benefit from secularism, because they suffer in all religions. So, when religion becomes separate from the legal system and the family code, women will move toward an egalitarian society. In societies that are governed by Islamic religious doctrines and witness the decline of secularism, El Saadawi's secular feminist project has not been welcomed and has been subjected to further criticism. Her novels and non-fiction works are banned in some Muslim countries. Not only is she condemned for being a native informant assaulting Islam, but she has also been seen as anomalous and isolated, a singular representative of Arab women writing in Arabic about women's struggle, when in fact she is part of a long and complex history of Egyptian feminism. Whatever the limitations of El Saadawi's secular feminism have been, however, undeniably her version of secular feminism has prepared the ground for the new emergent movement that is Islamic feminism.

Because the failure as well as the rise of secular political and social movements in Egypt has had an impact on other social movements, such as feminist struggles, this specific political and social context has led to the

formation of an Islamic tendency or trajectory for Egyptian feminism. The disappointment caused by the secular regimes in the Middle East which failed to offer democracy and economic prosperity to their people led to the emergence of Islamist movements in the early 1970s. Both secular and religiously oriented women started to be concerned by the growing predominance of the conservative reading of Holy texts by Islamists and realized that a progressive Islamic voice was urgently needed to counter this form of Islamism. Islamist movements call for a retreat of women to the home, which did not satisfy women once they had recognised the injustice of their inferior status, so they countered this conservative reading of Islam with a progressive one guaranteeing equality and the active participation of women. Islamic feminists, Badran argues, have advocated a strong position on gender equality, affirming the full equality of men and women in the public and private spheres. Islamic feminists are self-identified women who are interested in advocating for women`s human rights as embedded in the Qur`an. So, Islam has become a central point of reference regarding gender justice for Islamic feminists in their debates.

In contrast to El Saadawi`s secular feminism, Leila Aboulela appears as a committed Islamic feminist who represents Islam in her fiction as a spiritual force that fortifies her female characters in their displacement. In *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Aboulela portrays her protagonists` experience in a secular context to emphasize that they choose Islam without the religion being inherited or forced upon them. While many critics lay excessive emphasis on Aboulela`s novels as being symbolic of the conflict between East and West, this study argues that the author in *The Translator* and *Minaret* is writing back to the Orientalist and Colonial discourse, not to reverse the dynamics of power relations between East and West or to engage with global politics, as Nash,

Steiner and Schultheis claim. She is writing back to foreground the spiritual aspect of Islam, which is divested of any cultural form or political activism. In Islamic faith, Sammar and Najwa find spiritual belonging and rootedness amidst social and geographical dislocation. Aboulela's Islamic feminism offers a balance of religious, specifically Islamic loyalties, with other allegiances, as Cooke suggests, and initiates new forms of conversation across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms.

Given the centrality of Islam in Aboulela's novels, she adheres to some conservative readings of Islam in dealing with women's issues such as polygamy. Wail Hassan and Geoffrey Nash criticize Aboulela harshly for rejecting feminism for the sake of traditionalism; however, I contend that she attempts in her fiction to address women's questions from an Islamic perspective that goes beyond conflict to reach a peaceful relationship between male and female. Nevertheless, as an Islamic feminist, Aboulela can also be understood as engaged in radically reinterpreting Holy texts to bring to light the proper Islamic treatment of women and open up further possible solutions to gender conflicts that will benefit women.

Unlike in her previous novels, Aboulela in *Lyrics Alley* devotes the narrative to representing the hopes and fears of the characters regarding the independence of Sudan and its future politics. The formations of national identity and political consciousness are demonstrated through the private stories of characters in a perfect illustration of Jameson's theory. In this narrative of nation, Aboulela effectively and fairly incorporates the subaltern voice into the discussion of Sudan's future. Women's bodies and sexualities are represented as crucial to characterizing the nation; for example, female genital mutilation. Female genital mutilation is read, in Chapter Five, as a form

of women`s oppression and exploitation by Sudanese nationalism. Because of the secular tendency of the Sudanese generation of the 1950s, the author incorporates Islam through the Egyptian tutor Badr. Badr`s Islamic faith allows him to develop a bond with Sudan that transcends nationality, political struggle, geographical locations and social status. However, Aboulela addresses women`s issues in *Lyrics Alley* from the viewpoint of privileged women like Soraya. In fact, poor women and lower class women living in the countryside, who experience extreme poverty and high illiteracy, are often largely invisible in her narrative of the nation.

The fundamental question of this study is whether the new trajectory of Islamic feminism represents a step backward for women`s liberation or an opportunity for Arab women to discover their unique identity and offer broader solidarities among women. Undeniably, Aboulela`s narrative of Islamic feminism offers a potentially universalising, though not universal, rallying point; it offers a chance for women to create an Islamic spiritual site of belonging and possible solidarity among themselves that transcends social classes, ethnic differences and geographical boundaries. However, Aboulela, as an Islamic feminist, might be expected to go further than she has done so far to bring to light radical and positive changes regarding women`s rights. If egalitarian justice is embedded in the Qur`an, then the egalitarian spirit of Islam should be capable of being incorporated into feminist and postcolonial writings and transforming them in the service of women`s and humanity`s emancipation. I am hopeful that Aboulela`s work future will take up this challenge. I look forward to a more radically Islamic feminist call for emancipation in Aboulela`s future work.

Thus, inspired by Caroline Rooney`s paradigm of revolutionary spirit, I hope to engage myself in activism associated with the Islamic faith, activism that can bring about social changes and women`s emancipation. Aboulela`s working for emancipation through her fiction is confined to a spiritual level and to a classic interpretation of Qur`an and Hadith, while I look forward to moving a step further to bring about the emancipation and equality for women that I find to be embedded in the Qur`an. In this case a new reading of the Holy text may emerge from a fresh Islamic feminist lens, claiming our right to be free and strong women within this religion.

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