

University of Kent at Canterbury

*Tales of Two Houses: A Comparative Study between
Some Arab and British Feminist Novels*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comparative study of some of the English feminist novels by Michele Roberts and Sara Maitland on the one hand, and some of the Arab feminist novels by Hanan Al-Shaykh and Ahdaf Soueif on the other. It consists of a general introduction and six chapters.

The “General Introduction” deals mainly with the theoretical and methodological issues which have both informed and manifested in the analyses. It also includes some background information about the intellectual strands within a feminist discourse and a purview of the major issues as tackled by specifically feminist critics. Some of the basic objectives that the study attends to are also pinpointed.

Chapter one is entitled “Feminism: An Historical Context”. It attempts to expose the complex relationship between an Arab feminist discourse as informed by historical relations with the West in colonial and postcolonial eras. A particular emphasis is placed on the emergence of feminism within an Arab-Islamic context. A socio-cultural and political interpretation of such relations is provided to promote a method of reading the novels as necessarily contextualised activities.

Since genuine and constructive visions of transformation as pertaining to women’s issues need be inherently embedded in certain political and historical realities, the second and third chapters are basically devoted to unfolding the entwining dynamics as informing the realities of both the Western and Arab “houses”. How authentic both the Arab and British writers are in depicting their own distinctive realities in the different feminist novels are highlighted and assessed. Also examined is the extent to which feminist political concerns could be seen as pursued at the expense of the aesthetic aspects of the novels.

Chapter Four is devoted to analysing images of men in the feminist novels at hand. It also unravels how these images can be integrated into a comprehensive vision of change. The

relation between reductionist and stereotypical representations of men and the tenability of transformative visions are also discussed.

Chapter Five, “Absences and Presences: Religious Icons and Ephemeral Images”, is concerned with analysing the politics of certain exclusions and inclusions in the feminist novels especially in connection with some religious and other cultural forces pertaining to specific realities. Relating that politics to wider socio-cultural contexts helps in accounting for the convergences and divergences between the Arab feminist novel and its English counterpart and works to expose the nature of the intricate relationship between the two.

Chapter Six, “Conclusion”, underscores the most important findings of the study. The tenability of visions of change that would affect the lives of women and their societies at large as disseminated by the feminist novelists are assessed against various socio-cultural and political givens. How the profundity and comprehensibility of these visions are inherently linked to the novels’ aesthetic value is also discussed.

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General Introduction:
Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The Scope of the Study

My thesis is a comparative study of novels by two British feminist writers, Sara Maitland and Michele Roberts, on the one hand, and two Arab feminist writers, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Lebanese, and Ahdaf Soueif, Egyptian, brought up in Egypt, now living in London and married to a British husband, on the other. All of them write in English apart from Al-Shaykh who writes in Arabic, though I am using translations here. Each of these novelists has written novels and short stories; Roberts and Maitland have also produced critiques of patriarchal culture in non-fictional texts – essays, memoirs, interviews and social studies of various kinds, and Roberts has composed poetry. Hanan Al-Shaykh and Ahdaf Soueif have been writing during the postcolonial period that coincides with feminism's second wave in the West – from 1968 till the present, which is also the time when Maitland and Roberts started writing fiction. Thus, these Arab and British novelists are contemporaneous, writing about women's issues from different socio-cultural and religious contexts.

Literature is a dynamic and powerful discourse that can transform attitudes, perceptions and actions. How effective the feminist novelists at hand are in developing insights for constructive changes in the lives of women is a basic concern of the study. Unfolding the different forms of oppression that women undergo across the different cultures, whether Arabic or Western, is inextricably linked to fashioning any constructive change in the lives of women. Susan Hekman (1995), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Chandra Mohanti (1991), and others have argued that women's oppressions are varied and multiple, requiring specific local treatment designed for the particular situations that women face.

In order not to end up with a laboriously lengthy study, I have chosen to focus on those novels that represent each writer's main artistic and intellectual orientations in relation to issues of resistance and change. My references to the novelists' short stories are very minimal. Included in this study are Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978), *Three*

Times Table (1990), and *Home Truths* (1993); Michele Roberts' *A Piece of the Night* (1978), *The Visitation* (1983), *The Wild Girl* (1984), *Daughters of the House* (1992), and *Impossible Saints* (1997); Ahdaf Soueif's first novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992)¹; Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (*Hikayt Zahra*) (1980), and *Deer Musk* (*Miskul Ghazal*) (1988)².

The above novels are not chronologically considered in the study. The same novel is dealt with in various sections of the thesis as long as it continues to be relevant to certain themes as emphasised in a particular section. Tracing the artistic and intellectual development of the feminist novelists is not pivotal to the purpose of the thesis, which is a comparative study focused on exposing the complex labyrinth of relations underlying the structural and thematic aspects of both the Arab feminist novels and their English counterparts. It does not merely seek to locate convergences and divergences between some British feminist novelists and two of their Arab counterparts in terms of images, topics, and style so much as it seeks to interpret the dynamics of the relations between them and how such dynamics can inform visions of change. This is important as we consider the historical and political relation between the Arab and the West during and after colonisation.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* maintains that "the study of 'comparative literature' originated in the period of high European imperialism and is irrecusably linked to it," but "when most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture they were principally celebrating ideas and values they ascribed to their own national culture" (1993: 49, 51). For various political and historical reasons, the field has become "epistemologically organised as a sort of hierarchy" (1993: 52), strengthening the notion that "Europe and the United States together were the centre of the world, not simply by virtue of their political positions, but also because their literatures were the ones most worth studying" (1993: 54). This study, however, aims at exploring if the two Arab feminist novelists included here might be seen as,

¹ Ahdaf Soueif has just published another novel this summer (1999) *The Map of Love*. It came out too late for me to include in the thesis.

² The mentioned novels are noted by the year of original publication and not necessarily by the year of the copies I am using in the study.

consciously or unconsciously, reinforcing and reproducing any such “hierarchy”. Developing interpretative politics of convergences and divergences is instrumental to the above pursuit. Yet, pinpointing divergences, rather than convergences, can be conducive to moral practices. Susan Hekman in *Moral Voices, Moral Selves* describes moral practices as “constituted in different ways in different cultural settings and in varying ways even within cultures. In order to understand those moral practices, we must seek to understand that contextualized constitution. Defining the broad, universal parameters of human moral practices will not lead to the kind of moral knowledge we require” (1995: 40). How sensitive the chosen feminist novelists are in depicting their cultural contexts as shaped by overlapping and individual histories is one of the issues to be tackled and assessed in the study.

A concern with women’s rights issue was introduced to the Arab world, and more specifically to Egypt, in the early nineteenth century during the rule of Mohammad Ali which began in 1805 (Ahmad, 1992: 131). He organised educational missions to Paris, which gave some Egyptian men the opportunity to be exposed to ‘women’s status’ in the West. Influenced by Western women’s ‘progress’, especially in the field of education, those Egyptian men urged the opening of schools for girls. During the British occupation of Egypt which began in 1882, there emerged a colonial discourse emphasising Muslim women’s need to advance their oppressed status as necessarily caused by a ‘backward’ and ‘androcentric’ Islam (Ahmad, 1992: 133, 150-2). (The emergence of feminism in the Arab Islamic world is discussed in *the first* chapter of this study.) Since Egypt is central to the Arab world for many historical, political and cultural reasons and since it is the country into which a feminist discourse was first introduced and from which diverse responses to that discourse began to emerge, it has become generally a representative of the Arab world as far as women are concerned (Bin Maso’ud, 1994: 24).

Problems of definition arise here not only because a feminist discourse has been associated with the colonial West, but also because the novel as a genre in the Arab world has

been a Western effect (Zeidan, 1995: 231). Zeidan argues that Arab feminist novels “besides effecting changes in writing itself, also helped change the culture at large for women and for Arab people in general” (1995: 234). It is important to assess the extent to which Zeidan’s observation holds true, and whether the Arab feminist novelists included in this study have been able to transcend Western ideological paradigms as inherent in a feminist colonial discourse to address local feminist issues. Transcending is not the same as avoiding. Hence, it is important to find out whether they have been able to take these forms and work them into articulating Arab women’s experiences, at least partially.

Some Arab Muslims’ receptions of feminist discourses have been marked with hostility. The colonial power sought to link women’s oppression with Islam. The fact that promoting Arab women’s status was structured along Western agendas to serve hegemonic plans has been largely responsible for shaping the different responses to feminism within an Arab Islamic context, as will be argued in chapter one. These responses have been anything but simplistic. At one level, they tend to echo other ideological and political debates among intellectuals and political trends on how to go on about developing and modernising the Arab world against a complex background of Western colonisation and encounter with a dominant and ‘progressive’ West. Responses have been shaped roughly along different trends: one calling for copying the Western model, another calling for the protection of a threatened cultural identity and traditions by reviving past historical models, and yet another advocating an eclectic and reconciliatory approach between the first and second trends.

How Soueif’s and Al-Shaykh’s novels tend to echo some of the above trends is pivotal to understanding some of the dynamics of the relations between the Arab-Islamic world and the Western one. Through tackling how their novels diverge and converge from those novels by Maitland and Roberts, these relations are illuminated and women’s cultural specificities are attentively addressed. It is important to assess the extent to which the Arab feminist novel has been influenced by a colonial discourse invoking stereotypical images of Islam as

‘ahistorical’ and ‘backward’, and the extent to which it has been influenced by ethics of feminism as it ascribes values to the different realities informing women’s oppression and hence women’s resistance to different modes of patriarchy.

Feminist theories and critiques, especially of the 1980s and 1990s, have been considerably attentive to issues relating to the ‘other’, whether colonised people or subordinated women. It could be argued that the ‘other’ women, or more specifically the women of other non-western cultures hardly surfaced in the early writings of Western feminists. However, it is only natural for the self to begin by addressing its own immediate needs as conditioned by its own specific cultural context. The development of new levels of consciousness and of dialectical activities among cultures and intellectual trends has paved the way for new perspectives, emergences, and human considerations. Some strands within the Western feminist discourse, like those of radical feminism, have had their orthodoxies despite the fact that they continue to embrace ethical stands. The fact remains that a feminist discourse now derives part of its ‘humanist’ value and significance from its advocacy of the rights of the oppressed in general and from non-westerners’ contributions to it. Within a discourse of feminism, there have emerged many authentic debates sensitive to issues of cultural differences. The moral and methodological value of these debates cannot be denied. While they cannot afford to encompass in detail the operative factors within each local context, they can still draw the attention to the necessity of depicting contextualised visions to aid women’s ‘progress’. Thus, for example, within an Arab Islamic context, it is important to find out how reducing certain Islamic women’s practices, such as wearing the veil, to mere signs of oppression, and failing to conceive their meanings within a specific historical and cultural context can work to hamper the progress of women’s issue.

As stated by Macleod, “the veil has been an obsession of Western writers...serving as the symbol *par excellence* of women as oppressed in the Middle East, an image that ignores indigenous cultural constructions of the veil’s meanings and reduces a complex and ever

changing symbolism into ahistorical reification” (1992: 537). “[F]rom a Western vantage point,” Macleod affirms, “women in the Middle East are often pitied as the victims of an especially oppressive culture, generally equated with Islamic religion” (1992: 534-5). To attack the practice often leads to marginalizing those who practice it. This grows more significant upon the realisation that the majority of the women in the Arab world are veiled. I will attempt to show how visions that fail to incorporate within their scopes the orientations of the majority will definitely be lacking in potential. Kitty Warnick asserts that “the absence of editorial comment or texts on the relation of feminism to Islam is a serious lack for a western reader, given our unfamiliarity with Islam and the high profile of Islamic fundamentalism today” (1990: 34).

Consciousness of one’s own position is always instrumental to effecting changes in the different cultural locations. Within a Western context, it remains to be seen how Roberts and Maitland have incorporated visions of change sensitive to their own realities too. Both envision Western patriarchy as oppressive not only to women but also to other nations. Although neither of them has been specifically concerned with exposing the hegemonic relationship between a Western ‘centre’ and a peripheral Arab Muslim world, still both have developed a sexual political narrative which unravels the hegemonic tendencies inherent in Western patriarchy. Often, the political merges with the sexual and the one becomes the trope for the other. Whereas in Soueif’s and Al-Shaykh’s novels the West is a persistent presence, in the novels by Maitland and Roberts the Arab world hardly surfaces. This could be accounted for in many ways. The Arabs’ direct encounters with Western nations have been either with the British or the French. These powers have existed on the Arabs’ lands and not vice versa. As such they remain such vivid presences in the Arabs’ imagination and consciousness. The Westerners have occupied many different lands and colonised different nations, not only the Arabs. Hence the ‘other’, not specifically an Arab, could be summoned in narratives with overtly constructive political tendencies like the feminist novel.

The politics of a feminist discourse is considerably dependent on exposing and deconstructing structures and systems of values that directly or indirectly contribute to women's subordination. Gender is one but not the only factor to construct moral voices. Feminist aesthetics have for long been associated with feminist movement and feminist politics (Marcus, 1992: 20-22). Feminist novels as such are informed by a political feminist discourse essentially focused on "construct[ing] a variety of oppositional strategies to the depiction of gender institutions in narrative. A writer expresses dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain, or embody the values and attitudes in question" (DuPlessis, 1985: 34). The immunity and evasive workings of powers and yet the alterities characterising today's world have led feminists to be more perspicacious as to devising transformative strategies.

To advance women's status at different socio-cultural and economic levels, feminists have found it indispensable to work with available cultural materials and manipulate social forces not by way of complying to them so much as by way of disrupting them from within. Christian mythic impulses and Christian religious images are some of those cultural elements deployed by Maitland and Roberts to question instituted religious values as prescribed by androcentric authority. It is their consciousness of the compelling and deep hold that religion has on the conscious and unconscious structure of the mind that leads them to make use of religious symbols and biblical rhythms. In "A Feminist Writer's Progress", Maitland finds in incorporating mythic and religious images and some other modes of fantasy as treasured in the human tradition the 'safety net' that ascribes to art a special communicative value (1983: 19-23). Roberts in "Questions and Answers" also talks about her desire to construct her own version of myth as woven out of familiar ingredients: "I'm influenced by the rituals and forms of worship of the Catholic church, by their language and rhythms...the Mass which celebrates union and community in a complex symphony of prayers and psalm" (1983b: 66).

The almost exclusively male images of divinity in the Judaeo-Christian tradition create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate. As held by Merry E. Wiesner “[it] may seem somewhat odd to think of Christianity or Judaism as religions which empowered women, for both contain strong streaks of misogyny and were in the early modern period totally controlled by male hierarchies with the highest (or all) levels of the clergy reserved for men (1993: 180). On the other hand, it is important to mention that the Virgin Mary, “the symbolic mother of the Church...also stands as a model of perfect humanity” (Warner, 1976: xxiii). Her divine motherhood and her virginity represent “the quintessence of many qualities that east and west have traditionally regarded as feminine: yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, meekness, tolerance, withdrawal” (Warner, 1976: xxiv). The cult of Mary even if it is being now “stripped of its original strength, survives as a stock in trade of contemporary prayer and ritual” (Warner, 1976: xxiii). Roberts, in particular, has invoked the image of Mary in many of her novels, most notably in *Daughters of the House* and *The Wild Girl*.

The fact that Maitland’s and Roberts’ narratives have been considerably influenced by religious symbols and biblical imagery could be traced back to some biographical elements. Maitland was married (now separated) to an Anglican priest, and Roberts was educated in a convent. Nevertheless, their preoccupation with developing biblical revisionism is a profoundly political task in the process of empowering women. In all their writings, they reveal that patriarchal values, including religious ones, can be oppressive to both men and women, though more specifically to women. In her various novels, Roberts has summoned primordial human values through religious images to reflect that essentially wholeness and integration are the core of the relations between not only the two sexes but also between body and soul. “The body is the way into that other [spiritual] world. We do not have to transcend the body in order to find it” (Roberts, 1983b: 68). Roberts and Maitland work sometimes by reviving and recontextualising biblical stories in parallel contemporary settings to generate

new feminist visions and spiritual powers. The tenability of incorporating elements of religion, myth, and fantasy to help engrave transformative potentials in the literary text is examined in this study.

In “An Approach to the Social Functions of Science Fiction and Fantasy” Charles Elkins holds that “as a contemporary genre, fantasy negates the very essence of modern bourgeois culture – the rationalisation and disenchantment of everyday life” (1980: 24). Montefiore similarly observes that “in the 1980s and 1990s, radical writers imbued with cultural politics do not aim to document the unacceptable realities of their societies or to produce chronicles of suffering and resistance ... instead, they have characteristically exploited the mode of fantasy” (1996: 144). ‘Dismantling reality’ that is abusive to women is pivotal to transformative politics. On the other hand, there are others like Philip Rahv who finds that

the one essential function of myth stressed by all writers is that in merging past and present it releases us from the flux of temporality, arresting change in the timeless...Myth is reassuring in its stability, whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future. (1966: 111)

Because “historical time” is “unrepeatable,” Rahv argues, “the historical event is that which occurs once only, unlike the event of myth, recurring again and again, is endlessly present” (1966: 114). Still, the political usefulness of using mythic or religious material need not be valued outside the literary text. It is through developing a meticulous textual reading informed by cultural understanding, and not by making general value judgements, that the deployment of mythic and religious elements in the novel can be assessed as either occluding or promoting transformation. Hence, my readings of the English novels here are focused on revealing how and when the integration of mythic imagery can either yield or occlude insights for change.

In the Arab world, traditional religious beliefs form the most powerful sources of legitimation and moral order. Other legitimating sources, whether constitutional, or governmental, or, at a more complex level, literary, must conceptually and interpretively fit

within the religious constraints, whenever there seems to be a conflict between religion and legitimation. The forms of Arab women's oppression whether in the name of religion, or tradition, or cultural axioms are multiple and varied. Still, religion can barely be described as a strong presence in the novels by Soueif and Al-Shaykh. We come across some veiled women and Islamically committed people. They pass like shadows or entities often darkening any prospect for positive change. They rarely step into the narrative space to speak up their desires and their minds. For example, although Soueif *In the Eye of the Sun* explores the conflictual relation between the Arab culture and the Western and excels in merging the sexual with the political, religious axioms hampering women's progress are only occasionally addressed. Soueif and Al-Shaykh do not erode Islamic signs completely from their narratives. Yet, Islam as a shaping social and cultural force in the Arab world is rendered a dormant presence.

Before proceeding further, it is important to mention that throughout my critical analyses of the study novels, the potential transformative value of each novel included in the study is persistently considered. In very general terms, transformation in this context implies positive change of the current situation of women. However, a novel which extends a political message through its aesthetic code of signification is not expected, and should not be required, to effect direct change. It is expected, however, to contribute to creating more awareness, understanding, and motivation. This entails much more than direct advocacy of political dogma which often manifests in stereotyping, oversimplification, reductionism, absolutism, cultural alienation and depictions of exclusively one-dimensional characters and mutually exclusive spaces and figures. Such shortcomings frustrate the political message as much as they manifest in the aesthetic code itself. Feminism, after all, implies a political discourse situated in time and space. Literature, on the other hand, is a cultural and communication form rendered in aesthetic codes of representation. Thus, consideration of the message does not, and should not, reduce literature to a mere source. In literature and

aesthetic forms, it is rather the structural and stylistic features which articulate the message.

The medium becomes the message itself.

Consideration of the potential transformative value of a feminist novel does not mean that I take the stand of imposing a coherent and comprehensive political framework or ideology against which the study novels are judged and evaluated. Feminism, on the other hand, involves various trends and many disputed issues. Nevertheless, the debating process itself may be viewed as part of the dynamics of change and social transformation through which common values and goals are bound to emerge. Yet, although the condition of research work and its code seem to be less subjective than that of the literary works under study, the researcher, implicitly or explicitly, also extends a message. Critical literary research may be seen to involve building a text on the literary texts it studies. My criteria for the evaluation of the potential transformative value of the study novels go along the above mentioned broad lines and may be better understood through their specific applications in the study.

Theory in Research

A feminist discourse has been informed by both the realities of women's oppression and various ideological and theoretical formations and intellectual trends. Realities are constructed by us and are made objective through our interpretative interactional work. Theorists and social actors construct realities and make theoretically or culturally informed definitions of phenomena – definitions which in turn inform action. However, both these definitions and actions become part of the situated interactional process which may, at later stages, trigger redefinitions and even modifications, alterations and expansion of some of the available and established theories and concepts. Although “[a] suspicion of theory is widespread throughout feminism, faced as we are with a long history of patriarchal theory which claims to have proved decisively the inferiority of women” (Eagleton, 1991: 5), “anti-theoreticism is a dangerous position to adopt” (Ruthven, 1984: 25), for ““primitive

subjectivism' which is 'characteristic of some of the most reactionary social organisations in existence'" can emerge (Evans, qtd. in Ruthven, 1984: 25).

It is the need to transform oppressive realities which has motivated the development of diverse voices advocating the rights of women along certain theories and lines of thought. Despite these voices' problematic relations with already constructed paradigms of knowledge, they are primarily grounded in effecting positive change in women's lives. Feminists' urge to expose political and socio-cultural dynamics abusive to women has led to developing useful analytical tools that are of considerable importance to many subordinated, excluded, marginalized, and oppressed groups working to pursue justice and devise strategies for resistance. Literature, and more specifically the novel, has been a suitable site for understanding modes of resistance and their relations to political and cultural engagements.

One can hardly talk about an indigenous Arab feminist literary or political theory along which the Arab feminist novel can be read or explicated. A discourse of feminism in the Arab world has been motivated and structured along responses to the 'other', namely the West (Abu-Zaid, 1994: 110). There have been many anthologies and studies of Arab Muslim women and Arab feminist novels written and edited by both Arabs and non-Arabs³. Still, those are mainly preoccupied with initiating dialogues, sometimes antagonistic, at others collaborative, with Western feminist and ideologies. Arab Feminist critics have drawn on specific realities of their local histories, politics, and cultures. Yet, their modes of analysing certain local phenomena or Arab feminist novels have been significantly grounded in one Western theoretical position or another. McKee (1996), for example, uses René Girard's paradigm of triangular desire as a framework for introductory readings of four Arabic novels.

³ Some of these are: Bin Mas'oud, *Al-Mara'h wal kitabah, (Woman and Writing)* (1994); Juliette Mincez, *The House of Obedience* (1982); Kandiyoti, *Gendering the Middle East* (1996); Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, 1995; Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992); Badran and Cooke (ed), *Opening the Gates*, 1990; Yamani (ed), *Feminism and Islam* (1996); Abu Zaid, *Al-Mara'h fi kitabil azma (Woman in the Discourse of Crisis)* (1994); Tucker ed., *Arab Women* (1993); Accad, *Sexuality and War* (1990); Farraj, *Al-Horreyyah fi adabel mara'ah (Freedom in Women's Literature)* (1985); Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (1996); Ferna, *Middle Eastern Women Speak* (1978).

The incorporation and deployment of intellectual paradigms not produced by Arab intellectuals in specifically Arab locations are expected in the absence of an indigenous Arab feminist theory. However, incorporating 'outside' theories or others' paradigms of knowledge by way of analysing local phenomena should not be necessarily viewed as a morally or politically suspect project or a testimony of complicity with the West. Still, perceptive critical insights are needed to come to grips with any 'hegemonic' stances or premises inherent in certain 'extraterritorial' paradigms or theoretical frames of reference that might prove detrimental to one's own position if uncritically adopted or blindly emulated. While any such precaution is necessary, especially on the part of the less powerful whose histories and politics are deeply intertwined with the more powerful, dogmatic rejections of all that is exogenous risks forsaking vital ontological truths and 'patterns' underlying various human relations and experiences.

Third World intellectuals and theorists from postcolonial spaces have enriched and demarcated the map of today's intellectual world. Their writings reflect consciousness of their own peripheral positions in relation to a dominant West and alertness to theoretical dogmas inherent in certain debates sustaining those already in power. Fanon, Said, Spivak, Bhabha, Aijaz, and others have left their prints on the making of postmodern cultural theories. Many of these Third World intellectuals do not write in their native languages and do not live in their original countries. Yet, as maintained by Bhabha, it is the migrant's double vision of being simultaneously 'here' and 'there', in and out, and the migrant's position of hybridity that can initiate constructive cultural engagements and insightful recognition (1995: 1-18). Literature, and more specifically the novel, according to Bhabha, becomes a metaphor for intersecting human situations. Inhabiting the 'outside' and the 'inside' and emerging from 'beyond' certain geopolitical spaces and temporalities are comparable to the aesthetic project of the novel which is a combination of two positions; it is "seeing inwardness from the outside" (1995: 16).

To advocate, in the name of authenticity, a dogmatic disavowal of the Western intellectual heritage, and to decline from engaging critically with Western thought necessarily reflect defective visions. The human knowledge and cultural heritages, including the Western, are configurations of accumulative civilisations and human experiences along different geographical spaces and ethnicities (Bassnett, 1993: 77). As seen by Bhabha, “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures” need always be questioned (1995: 37). A self-imposed separation from the ‘other’ overlooks the fact that the ‘other’ has always been implicated even in what seems to be the ‘rival’ discourses owned by the powerful.

The human subjectivity is neither a transcendental formation nor a purely essential entity. The writer is the outcome of the I’s incessant interaction with the ‘other’ and different cultural surroundings. Hekman asserts that “in almost every branch of intellectual life, the twentieth century has witnessed a move away from the universalism and absolutism of modernist epistemology, toward conceptions that emphasise particularity and concreteness” (1995: 2). She also holds that “man the abstract and transcendental, the linchpin of the Enlightenment epistemology” has been substituted by a subject that is “embedded and situated,” constituted by language, culture, discourse, and history (1995: 2). ‘Situated’ literary writings have been “important as well as powerful in our understanding and analysis of ourselves, the relations among ourselves, and the culture we participate in, share, and can imagine transformed” (Davis and Schleifer, 1992: 3). These concerns, however, should not undermine the aesthetics of the literary text which, if rendered a mere sociological tool, can lead to crudely reductive readings.

Literature and Cultural Politics

The intricate relationship between literature and culture has been the concern of many critics, whether feminist or not, like Edward Said (1991;1993), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Kate Millett (1977), Homi Bhabha (1995), Raymond Williams (1977; 1983), Susan Hekman (1995). Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (1992). Elaine Showalter (1977: 1992). and many

others. Their literary reading approaches as tenaciously informed by cultural considerations help to foreground and assess cultural values implicit or explicit in the feminist novels at hand. Examining to what extent social, political, and historical settings shape literary texts is central to their arguments. They all affirm that literary values are not transcendental since they are deeply grounded in cultural processes. And yet, culture is not a static external objective reality that resides outside the collective and individual awareness of the social members dictating and predetermining in advance individual and collective behaviour. Rather, culture is a dynamic processual phenomenon which is produced and reproduced by activities and people through continuously situated and negotiated actions.

The interaction between authors and texts on the one hand, and authors and their cultural surroundings on the other, is underscored by Said who does “not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are...very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience” (1993: xxiv). Spivak, too, conceives of the subject as a process, always forming (1988: 212). Although her major interest is cultural politics as pertaining to women’s issues, especially Third World women’s, and Said’s cultural politics aims at unfolding the dynamics of colonialism as inherently embedded in literary texts, each develops reading strategies emphasising that textuality is ‘being’ and interacting with the world. To Said, “mysticism and disinfected subject matters” are hardly the founding forces of a literary text or theory. The “existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events [and] the realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to the readers” (1991: 5).

Literature is integral with culture and language, according to Williams, and it should be “approached in ways other than reduction, abstraction or assimilation” (1977: 71). Considering literature as “a specialising social and historical category” is a “crucial

theoretical break,” and seeing it as such should not be seen as “diminish[ing] its importance” (1977: 53). Both Said and Williams stress the importance of not subsuming the literary institution under some social or political powers despite their acknowledgement that literature can act as a social and political force and can endeavour to disrupt one mode of oppressive behaviour or another. Although they are not specifically concerned with transforming oppressive aspects of women’s lives, still their critical literary insights help in the process of exposing how and when certain texts can be seen as complying with, or propagating, dominant ideologies of patriarchal powers working to impede changes that could be seen as threats to these powers.

The possibility of a literary text, according to Said, is conditioned not only by its relation to powers and actualities, but also by “the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies” (1991: 5). Yet, if texts are worldly and authors are implicated in their cultures, Said asks, “what does it mean to have a critical consciousness?” In fact, Said discredits criticism that “can succumb to the inherently representative and reproductive relationship between a dominant culture and the domains it rules” (1991: 24). He also maintains that texts like novels “are not only selective and affirmative but centralising and powerful.” They can “mystify” “the network binding writers to the State” or to other hegemonic powers (1991: 176). Cultural manifestations, including the novel, should not, then, be seen as given states of being, but rather as contested spheres of human activities. For Said, resistance does not solely emanate from the text itself; it can be nourished through critiquing strategies which go beyond “the contemplative effort or an appreciative technical reading method,” implying that “literature [is] an isolated paddock” and “the harmless rhetoric of self-delighting humanism” (1991: 224-5). Figuring out the workings of some oppressive forces as they operate in the text is conducive to the act of resistance and change. Even if literature is rendered a plausible field where the different workings of ideologies and powers can be exposed, for Said “aesthetic genesis” is viewing the literary text

as a dynamic field, rather than as a static block, of words...[with] a certain range of reference, a system of tentacles (which I have been calling affiliative) partly potential, partly actual to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present. In one sense no text is finished, since its potential range is always being extended by every additional reader. (1991: 157)

Said's view of the aesthetic calls that of Williams who holds that "we have to reject 'the aesthetic' both as a separate abstract dimension and as a separate abstract function" (1977: 156). Literature as a form of cultural politics is also stressed by feminists like Felski (1989) and Hekman (1995). They work to deconstruct cultural 'givens' and socio-political institutions that (re)produce the same power-relations subordinating women. Feminists have allied themselves with many of the ideologies and intellectual strands inherent in their specific cultural contexts, added to them, modified their premises, or undercut their epistemological assumptions in order to redeem them feminist in perspective. Others have engaged with deconstructing different intellectual and cultural practices and with devising theoretical strands that are inherently feminist. The different complex intellectual strands, whether literary, philosophical, religious, or cultural as have been emerging in France, England, or the United States cannot be satisfactorily accounted for in far too little space. It is important to maintain, though, that irrespective of their different critical and theoretical approaches, feminists have been genuinely interested in effecting political change in favour of women at the private and public levels.

Rather than being entrapped within one intellectual paradigm or maintaining a peripheral position in relation to different fields of knowledge, feminist critiques of gender formation have significantly contributed to the transformative concerns of cultural studies. Biological, psychological, linguistic, and religious grounding of gender inquiry is giving way to diverse cultural approaches. This expanding sphere of cultural inquiry has also been sensed in the fiction of many feminist novelists, including Roberts and Maitland. Despite the fact that they draw on some religious and psychological elements more than others in their fiction, still they are conscious of integrating these elements into more comprehensive cultural visions and socio-political spheres. Neither religion, nor psychology, nor biology is shown to be

evolving in the abstract. Each is perceived and constructed as interacting with other cultural constituents and ‘givens’. Roberts and Maitland work to undercut androcentric religious premises as shaping and shaped by various cultural constructs abusive to women. Many branches of feminism, including Marxist/socialist, liberal, radical, lesbian, psychoanalytic, and religious, have developed sophisticated analyses and critiques of cultural values and systems of power. It is usually misleading to identify each branch with one single intellectual, ideological, or political position. Novels and other forms of feminist writings do not emerge from the void. They are historically and culturally situated and draw upon “complex range of theories which enable women to understand how institutions operate, how ideologies work, how images produce meanings for their viewers and thereby construct those viewers” (Pollock, 1992: 363).

Roberts’ and Maitland’s works are heavily saturated with religious and mythic modes. The politics of this incorporation often resembles, but not always, those feminists generally interested in theology and myth. Mary Daly in “The Spiritual Dimension of Women’s Liberation” finds all establishments, including religious, as the free domain of male bias. She reverses male myths and languages to create a woman’s space through metaphorical and erotic journeys. She affirms ‘sisterhood’ as a substitute for a Judaic-Christian tradition that has been oppressive to women, as a potential to release authentic values and revelatory powers (1991: 341). Aware of the important achievements of radical feminists and others in relation to social, secular, and cultural issues, she endeavours to underscore what is often neglected by them, namely creating spiritual ties with the self and with other women. Daly points out that women cannot afford to turn away from organised religion: “it is necessary to understand institutional religion’s role in the oppression of women, which it continues to exercise in this culture whether they personally relate to it or not” (1991: 335). While Daly works to celebrate women’s community outside male’s domain, Roberts and Maitland expose patriarchal structures of organised religion and institutions as potentially oppressive to both

males and females, though more specifically to females. In fact, they both emphasise that no transformative visions can be promoted if men's experiences are not perceptively included in the novels. They rethink fields relating to divine revelations, thus enriching feminist discourses and working to transform oppressor/oppressed relationships to create a new community of justice and peace. Feminist aesthetics is considerably informed and enriched by different intellectual strands and cultural constituents, including religious. A further value is ascribed to feminist discourses through the insightful contributions made by 'others', non-westerners and coloured.

The Contributions of 'Others' to Feminism

The need to recognise women's multiple identities as interrelating to their own specifically diverse social and cultural settings was attended to as early as Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate*. Status, ethnic, and cultural differences, Mitchell advocates, must not be obliterated (1971: 60), "but the position of women as women takes precedence: oppressed whatever their particular circumstances" (1971: 182). Western feminism has been criticised by Third World feminists, like Spivak (1988), Mohanty (1991), Johnson-Odim, (1991), black feminists like Audre Lorde (1991), Alice Walker (1986), and even by Western feminists themselves like Michele Barrett (1986; 1986a) for failing to acknowledge the specificities of other (non-western) 'women's problems'. Spivak argues that Western feminism as a culturally and historically situated discourse reproduces power relations reinforcing the postcolonial hegemonic relation to the postcolonised (1988: 136-8). Mohanty also maintains that Western feminist movements are guilty of "short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism and homophobia" (1991: 7).

From within the Western Woman's Movement itself there has been a growing awareness that British feminists "are not free of the tendency to universalise and thereby to construct an exclusionary norm" (Gunew, 1991: 3). Showalter in "Feminism and Literature," also tries to qualify the term 'difference' in relation to women by holding that to argue for

“‘difference’ is not to insist that all women are different from men in the same way, or to celebrate motherhood or any other trait as the fundamental condition of femininity” (1992: 196). Whether a critique of the ‘universal’ white woman has emanated from Western or Third World intellectuals, the fact remains that now feminism’s “greatest strength” lies in its “heterogeneity” (Whelehan, 1995: 20). On the other hand, a perceptive incorporation of the ‘other’ in feminist debates could have been induced through postcolonial writers’ intellectual contributions like Said’s *Orientalism*, or postmodernism’s emphasis on freeing theories “from overarching philosophical givens, to ground social criticism within specific contexts and locales” (Whelehan, 1995: 199), or even an ingenious emergence of ethics of feminism.

Western feminism is indispensably shaped by specific national priorities and national politics. Exclusions within feminist discourses are inevitable – exclusions that are necessarily conditioned by the position of the writing self. Even if exclusions are never haphazardly groundless, a moral voice like that of feminism should be self-critical and continuously reshaped, revised, and rectified to accommodate different needs and newly emerging imperatives. Hence, we come across critics like Susan Hekman defending that “there is not just one subject called ‘woman’, but many; there is not just one different moral voice, but many. What is needed is a theory that can encompass this multiplicity” (1995: 110).

There have been significant contributions of ‘other’ women, whether black, aboriginal, Asian, or Third World to the discourse of feminism, especially to the issue of the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity—an issue first arising “in the political arena, with the claim by women of colour that the feminist movement was dominated by white, middle-class women” (Hekman, 1995: 102). Black feminists (often associated with lesbian feminists) discussed in detail their growing conviction during the 1970s and 1980s of how feminism’s mainstream regularly excluded their concerns. Black women were “fighting for visibility within a movement which claimed to embrace their interests beneath the umbrella term of ‘sisterhood’, but which had developed a methodology that used as its paradigm white, heterosexual and

middle-class female experiences” (Whelehan: 1995: 106). Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith in their article “The Politics of Black Women” assert that “to use the term Black women’s studies” and “to act on it in a white-male world is an act of political courage.” To “exist consciously,” black women need to name themselves (1991: 399). They attack Western objective scholarship since it “changes nothing in what we strive for...Everything that human beings participate in is ultimately subjective and biased, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that” (1991: 401).

Black women place a great emphasis on women’s personal and domestic experiences within a specific black context – a tendency which recalls the most important slogan of *the* Woman’s Movement: ‘the personal is political’. Angela Davis focuses on the strengths that a black woman gains from her family community and reproductive roles. She finds that ‘othermothering’⁴ empowers black women and integrates them into the community (1992: 129-32). In the literary field, black women have reflected on that literature “is integral with other social activities; it is not ‘high art’.” In addition, they have worked to ascribe to the oral history, of songs, cooking and gardens specific values (Collins, 1992: 123). A crucial contribution to American feminist criticism is the invocation of maternal cultures by Afro-American women and women of colour. For example, Alice Walker “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” evokes her mother’s aesthetic skills as a gardener and underscores how with the racist economy of slavery “the creativity of the black woman [was] kept alive” (1986: 32).

Amina Mama grew up in Nigeria and worked with a range of black women’s organisations in Britain and the African Women’s Movement. In “Black Women, the Economic Crisis and the British State”, Mama talks about the various ‘parent cultures’ and new cultural and political forms evolving out of the Black British “woman’s unique experience, textured as this is by contemporary forms of racial, class and sexual oppression,

⁴ It is “assisting “blood mothers in the responsibilities of childcare for short-to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements” (In Whelehan, 1995: 115).

and the corresponding patterns of rebellion and resistance” (1992: 155). In the same article she also discusses the history and institutionalisation of British racism.

Asian, Aboriginal, and black feminists all take the point that white women are unable to confront their own racism. Gunew finds that “whereas white feminists are concerned with infiltrating dominant male power structures, Aboriginal women have always maintained their separate spheres” (1991: 4). Diane Bell does not speak of a war between the sexes but of promoting dynamics of dialogue: between men and women on the one hand, and with white women on the other (1991: 13-23).

The term ‘women of colour’ has been interchangeably used with ‘Third World women’. For both ‘women of colour’ and ‘Third World women’, the concept of resistance is not dissociated from race, class, ethnic and often religious postcolonial contexts. Women in the Third World have made radical challenges to the whole fabric of political life, and feminism has become a culturally varied international movement whose political aims have been endorsed world-wide.

Considerable attention has been paid to black women, Asian women (the Japanese, Indian and Chinese), Aboriginal women, and other ‘women’ categories by Western and non-western women. Marginalized women’s activities, whether inside or outside the Western world, are included and their contributions are frequently alluded to in many Western feminist anthologies, studies, and surveys. Books which include articles by Arab and non-Arab feminists as solely intended to survey Arab feminism and Arab women are not difficult to find (see, for example, *Arab Women Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith Tucker (1993) *Feminism and Islam*, ed. Mai Yamani (1996), and others). However, in books surveying Third World women’s feminism, works by Arab feminists have been absent (see, for example, Chandra Mohanty ed. (1991) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*) where even those issues pertaining directly to women in the Middle East are presented by non-Arabs). They have also been absent from anthologies and studies focusing on feminists’

contributions internationally, like for example, *Feminist Knowledge* (1991); *Modern Feminisms* (1992); *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1996) *Critical Feminism* (1992); *Feminist Literary Theory* (1986); *Feminist Literary Criticism*, (1991); *Modern Feminist Thought* (1995).

Nawal Al-Sa'dawi is one of the most renowned feminists in the Arab world and is widely acknowledged in Western feminist circles. She wrote both fiction and non-fiction. None of her studies on Arab women appears in the above cited anthologies and studies. Fatima Mernissi is also another renowned and prolific feminist scholar from Morocco whose works too are not included in the above-cited books. The absence of Arab feminism (at least from the above cited books) raises some questions: Do feminists in the Arab-Islamic world lack the intellectual intensity and courage to name themselves as, for example, black women have done? Is the Arabic feminist discourse devoid of passionate and committed research to enable Arab feminists to produce an indigenous theory or other feasible contributions to world-wide feminism so as to be included in international feminist anthologies? In other words, has an Arab feminism been too insignificant to be considered by others? Have Arab feminists been so indulged in emulating Western models of feminism to such a degree which occludes the emergence of a distinctive character of Arab feminism? Has Arab feminism been too strictly grounded in Islamic terminology to be of any relevance to Western feminism or international feminism? Or could it be that Arab feminists have been wrongly ignored, or that their major field has been fiction rather than theory? Some answers will be attempted in the course of the study.

The Feminist Novel: an Act of Resistance and a Site for Pleasure

For the purpose of my study, it is important to deal with the feminist novels at hand as sites for both political and cultural activities. Analysing not only what the narrative includes but also what and how it excludes can be helpful in the process of understanding how interactive power relations, cultural constituents, and politics work to shape specific human

phenomena. Many critics like Said (1991; 1993), Williams (1977), Spivak (1988), Felski (1989), DuPlessis (1985), and Barrett (1986) are concerned with fiction as an activity inscribing political instances, ideological stands, and cultural values. Ruthven underscores that treating literature as “symptomatic of tendencies discernible in other cultural practices” can rescue it “from its self-imposed isolation” (1984: 25). Like Said, Williams and Spivak, DuPlessis highlights the inherent relation between politics and narrative. She points out that all human processes are inherently ideological, including narratives and that “[n]o convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic” (1985: 2). The political dimension and the impact of a work of art have also been stressed by many critics: “dialectically oriented critics like George Lukàcs and Raymond Williams,” Davis and Schleifer contend, “began to reconceive of history as a field of discourse in which literature and criticism make their own impact as political forces and, in effect, participate directly in the historical dialectic” (1992: 195).

The issue of resistance and change is particularly important in relation to feminist novels. The feminist novel as a genre derives part of its significance from women’s, or rather feminist politics. Felski argues that “feminism does not after all merely address immediate social and political problems, but is deeply conscious of the importance of effecting changes in the cultural and ideological spheres.” Thus, a feminist novel should be addressing “themes in some way relevant to feminist concerns” (Felski, 1989: 7). Pollock and DuPlessis also maintain a similar position when holding that a work of art is feminist when it “subverts the normal ways in which we view art,” opposes “the depiction of gender institutions in narrative...and express[es] dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain, or embody the values and attitudes in question” (1992: 364; 1985: 34). Feminism is credited because of its “transformative potential, and the opportunity not merely to understand but to change culture” (Davis and Schleifer, 1992: 228-9 .

The interest in the political dimension of different works of art, Said, Felski, and Williams assert, should not render literature reducible to a political message or an instrumental approach that would subsume the literary institution under sociology or other disciplines. Williams, Hebdige observes, “tentatively endorsed the new mass communication but was concerned to establish aesthetic and moral criteria for distinguishing the worthwhile products from the trash” (1979: 18). Within a feminist context, Myra Jehlen in her article “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism” is aware of the conflict that an intersection of feminist politics with aesthetic might cause: “to require a simple and uncomplicated answer to the highly complex problem of the relationship between politics and aesthetics is surely the most reductive approach of all...without an aesthetic effect there will be no more political effect either” (qtd. in Moi, 1985: 85). Showalter, too, would not isolate the text as a formal criterion from other shaping forces or “from its ‘extra-literary’ contexts nor [see] questions of interpretation...as apart from gender and culture” (1992: 189).

Feminist critics might be more specifically concerned with exposing patriarchal powers that continue to recondition and reinforce the subordination of women—a concern which has often led them to tackle important cultural, political, and overall-developmental issues. Jehlen contends that “an aesthetics recommending organic unity and the harmonic interaction of all parts of the poetic structure for example, is not politically innocent” (qtd. in Moi, 1985: 85). By way of underscoring feminist politics in relation to a literary text, many critics like Barrett (1986a), Steiner (1996), and Spivak (1988), assert the need to rethink or/and burst the canon and to reconsider the legacy behind formal conventions. Some have chosen to disrupt founded literary conventions by drawing the attention to specific women’s literary heritage. Showalter (1977) and other women writers were concerned with uncovering a female writing tradition. Michele Barrett (1986) finds it important to discuss a female tradition that is not grounded in a male aesthetic tradition, holding that this canonises males’ values oppressive to women.

Sara Maitland in "Futures in Feminist Fiction" associates the situation of fiction at a particular moment with that of a dominant culture. She chooses to work within some conventions only to have them rethought. So far, feminist novelists, she acknowledges, have not succeeded in constructing specifically feminist genres, but have succeeded in extending traditional boundaries (1989: 197). Her own novels reflect that developing feminist aesthetics should not necessarily lead to trashing completely what is already there: "it is extremely... hard to decode this literature [that of the Christian tradition] now, especially as it has so profoundly informed our ideas of what is beautiful in literary terms" (1989: 195). Like Maitland and Showalter, Felski discusses feminist aesthetics in connection with other cultural and literary inheritances pertaining to realism and experimentalism as two distinctive modes of narrative. "A feminist aesthetic theory," she concludes, "must take into account the institutionalised status of art as exemplified in existing ideological and discursive frameworks"(1989: 158). "Because many women writers of the last twenty years have been concerned with addressing urgent political uses and rewriting the story of women's lives, they have frequently chosen to employ realist forms which do not foreground the literary and conventional dimensions of the text, but encourage a functional and content-based reading" (Felski, 1989: 79).

Both Maitland and Roberts have been concerned with addressing women's private experiences and various political needs as related to a wider socio-cultural context. The artistic form has been as important to them as the content. Their narratives have been fluctuating between two modes of representation, one realistic, and the other mythic. Soueif, too, has employed realist forms without neglecting the literary dimension of the text. Her detailed account of historical events is not carried out at the expense of blurring the aesthetic dimension of the text. Al-Shaykh has endeavoured to employ realist forms and to mirror women's oppressed situations in the Arab Islamic societies. Nevertheless, a narrative that

solely aims to copy or mirror surface reality can often reduce or blur deeper structures and cultural constituents shaping realistic phenomena.

As pointed out by Mary Eagleton, “[e]ager to establish women writers and sensitive to dismissive criticism, feminists have often overcompensated; ‘good’ or ‘mediocre’ does not exist at all; all women writers are ‘great’. For feminist publishing companies every reprinted book is a forgotten ‘classic’, guaranteed to rival *War and Peace*” (1986: 4). Such eagerness might lead to transgressing literary boundaries. It also leaves the problem of aesthetic value unsolved (Eagleton, 1986: 4). The question which Eagleton raises and which she notes that Barrett has raised too is very important here: “why do we find certain works more pleasurable, relevant, important than others?” (1986: 4).

Even though aesthetic values should not be perceived as universal or as eternal since they can also be historically and culturally specific, there continue to be intrinsic qualities in a certain text which make it more literary than another. A novel inscribing certain political stances or offering transformative visions need not be a political manifesto. The intrinsic qualities of the aesthetic text necessarily merge with the external world to which this text belongs, thus enhancing its value. A feminist novel, supposedly oppositional, might prove to be manifesting, though sometimes unconsciously, a degree of compliance with a male-dominated power or an affiliation with one ideological orientation or another. Such ‘affiliation’, using Said’s word, attests to the impossibility of distancing literature from a particular context and from ideological powers. The novel becomes symptomatic of power workings and hence a site furnished to expose such powers. Even if the writer herself might be seen at different levels of her narrative as not specifically aware of the working of some oppressive powers, her work becomes the locus for others to unfold many ‘suspect’ or abusive practices.

A work of art which reflects diverse visions, sensitivity to cultural specificities, awareness of disseminating potentials for constructive changes heedful to the real desires and

needs of the majority of women must be special and worthy of attention. Imbuing novels with insights for resistance, and showing that some forms of reality are oppressive and hence need to be transformed naturally require a level of political and social consciousness and involvement. Not all novels can prove competent in realising all of that. This demands an “individual talent,” acquisition of different strands of knowledge, and artistic abilities. Whereas an acquisition of different strands of knowledge alone might qualify for purely political writings and for other forms of writings, an “individual talent” and artistic abilities that prove insensitive to ‘existential’ (Said’s word) qualities pertaining to a specific setting might lead to ahistorical and apolitical inscriptions which transcend all resisting impulses that are culturally grounded and historically shaped. It is a special form and competent style that can attend to the above different inquiries while simultaneously inducing pleasure in the act of reading. It is my concern to show whether the chosen novels achieve both artistic excellence and promote political insights. My critical readings of the novels included in this study will be informed by the above perspective.

An Outline of the Theoretical and Methodological Stances in this Study

Adducing one specific paradigm to account for different texts from two worlds apart could prove reductive and problematic for various reasons. It is not only that theoretical positions are culturally specific and historically grounded, but also ethics of feminism have been considerably shaped by plurality of visions and alertness to human differences. Feminist discourses taken as a whole have shown veritable tendencies to revise paradigms that could be seen as inflicting harm on others. J.W Scott stresses that “twentieth-century feminism has no *Das Kapital*, no *New Testament*, no *Little Red Book*, no originating or primary text from which it derives and to which it constantly defers for guidance”(1992: 13). In fact, a feminist discourse derives a great deal of its strengths from its intersections with different theoretical, intellectual, and methodological considerations. Davis and Schleifer hold that “the accomplishments of feminist criticism in literature and popular culture – are now resetting the stage for all critiques of contemporary culture that are creating the direction and future of

literary and cultural studies with methods that are conspicuously interdisciplinary in orientation” (1992: 215).

Feminist critics like Jane Miller in *Women Writing About Men* (1986), Moi in *Sexual, Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985), and Showalter in “Feminism and Literature” (1992) have reflected on the importance of envisioning literary texts as culturally bound products and have worked to deconstruct and dismantle ‘universal’ paradigms with the tendency to blur differences or subsume some human ‘categories’ and specific needs under others. Introducing a single methodology or being enraptured within one theoretical paradigm stemming from one specific context could lead to limiting the scope of certain readings or even to imposing some interpretations that do not encompass the variables and dynamics inherent in the different cultural realities. Said asserts that “[n]o one can take stock of everything, of course, just as no one theory can explain or account for the connections among texts and societies” (1993:385). Kristeva in “Women’s Time” (1979) attempts to deconstruct didactic and dogmatic discourses with the tendency to replicate oppressive powers and dogmatic stands whether in the theoretical or political fields. Said, who uses Lukacs as a model, also finds that resistance theory “risks becoming a theoretical overstatement, a theoretical parody of the situation it was formulated originally to remedy or overcome” (1991: 239).

It is true that many assumptions formed by psychology, philosophy, linguistics, history, Marxism, and other areas of studies “make certain kinds of understanding possible by organising the play of discourses,” (Davis and Schleifer, 1992: 219). To ground one’s analysis strictly in one theory can result in what Davis and Schleifer call ‘imperialism’. A critic should be alert to the dangers of reinforcing the “‘imperialism’ of each of the grounds” (1992: 219). This “grounding gesture,” they continue to assert, tends to marginalize what “it cannot describe” and “situate itself as a self-evident explanation for ‘everything’ and then dismiss further inquiry” (1992: 220, 219). An eclectic approach in itself seems to have

become a theoretical stance with the effect of ascribing more values to interdisciplinary studies. In *Criticism and Culture* (1992) Davis and Schleifer argue how theoretical reconfigurations are now turning out to be increasingly pursued activities and loci for cultural engagements. They set out to explore different theoretical strands and define and redefine concepts relating to discourses of psychoanalysis, linguistics, history, and philosophy to show first their relations to each other, and second the impact these interacting epistemological disciplines have on the development of literary studies as culturally situated practices. A cultural approach to feminist novels informed by a diversity of discourses seems to me to be in conformity with ethics of feminism aiming at deconstructing some rigid and morally suspect ‘universal’ paradigms connoting and privileging some groups at the expense of others. A movement like feminism so deeply rooted in politics of transformation cannot afford to be captivated within the presuppositions and insights of one specific theoretical location. The shifting epistemological boundaries of feminism today prevent feminist discourses from becoming an ideological dogma or fixed stand not sensitive to alterities within not only the one space, but also to cultural diversities of other vast and remote spaces.

Deconstructing different epistemological and foundational theories has been a significant feminist attribute. Disharmony and conflicts are located within a discourse of feminism itself like for example that overtly manifest in the debated relation between Anglo-American feminism and French feminism (Felski, 1989). At one point, the emerging debates informing the two feminist orientations work to consolidate politics of change. On the other hand, the mutual impact each theoretical strand has had on the other cannot possibly be overlooked. Spivak, for example, in “French Feminism in an International Frame” impinges on the problematic relation between French feminism and Anglo-American to develop ethics of difference and address the politics of the ‘other’, non-western women (1988: 150).

Said acknowledges that “one desires pleasure from actually making evidence fit or work in a theoretical scheme, and of course it is ridiculously foolish to argue that “the facts”

or “the great texts” do not require any theoretical framework or methodology to be appreciated or read properly” (1991: 241). Relegating theories to a marginal position in feminist studies at the expense of emphasising women’s politics not only can preclude feminism from occupying a prominent space in the academia, thus allowing for different modes of patriarchy to take over, but it also has the tendency to undermine the inextricable link between theory and politics. Bhabha asks, “[m]ust we always polarise in order to polemicise? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory vs. politics” (1995: 19). For Bhabha, theory and politics “are both forms of discourse and to that extent they produce rather than reflect their objects of reference...The latter does not justify the former; not does it necessary precede it. It exists side by side with it – the one as an enabling part of the other” (1995: 21-22). Said also maintains that “[t]heory we certainly needed, for all sorts of reasons that would be too tedious to rehearse here. What we also need over and above theory, however, is the critical recognition that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful”(1991: 241). One, though, has to make her/his attempt while being prepared to accept correction. The use of theories rather than *a* theory in a comparative study focusing on texts from two different cultures might prove safer for accommodating cultural diversities. Said stresses that a theory “can never be complete, just as one’s interest in everyday life is never exhausted by simulacra models, or theoretical abstracts of it” (1991: 241).

I choose to place my study within theoretical frames that explicitly attend to literary texts as loci for pursuing and untangling issues of culture, diversities, and power relations. Resistance to some oppressive modes is hardly tenable if cultural specificities within the one location are not closely examined. As held by Hekman, “[t]here is no master narrative that can command the allegiance of all the moral voices that assail us. To try, falsely, to impose such a narrative can result only in rigidity and in silencing those moral voices that fail to

conform to the norm” (1995: 112). Drawing on Hekman’s emphasis on the necessity of attending to different moral voices, I seek to find out whether the feminist novelists included here articulate a ‘moral’ voice which, while it might prove satisfactory to some groups of women, remains insensitive to the different needs of other women in the same culture. The arguments of feminists like Hekman and earlier Pollock do not essentially diverge from Said’s argument as informed by “Foucault’s interest in textuality...to present the text stripped of its esoteric or hermetic elements, and to do this by making the text assume its affiliations with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, guilds, ideologically defined parties and professions” (Said, 1991: 212).

In the present study discovering how literary texts can be affiliated to ideologies, institutions, and different forms of power centres is particularly important considering that the feminist novels included here belong to different cultural contexts which often geographically overlap and historically entwine. Still, they are interconnected through various ‘worldly’ relations including hegemonic. My strategy depends on promoting a close reading of feminist novels as cultural activities significantly implicated in relationships of power, whether informed by politics of gender or colonial relations. Kaplan asserts that “for feminist critics, the literary is always/already political in very obvious and common sense ways” (1986: 59). Spivak’s stance is illuminating to my work; she explores the necessity of filling one’s “vision of literary form with its connections to what is being read: history, political economy—the world. And it is not merely a question of disciplinary formation. It is a question also of questioning the separation between the world of action and the world of the disciplines” (1988: 95).

The kind of reading I am suggesting redeems literature as an ongoing activity and not merely a passive product – a view strongly defended by Davis and Schleifer who assert that situating literature as a cultural phenomenon makes it “important as well as powerful in our understanding and analysis of ourselves, the relations among ourselves, and the culture that

we participate in, share, and can imagine transformed” (1992: 3). My critical approach to the texts is also intended to render criticism a “business to reveal. For if texts are a form of impressive human activity, they must be correlated with (not reduced to) other forms of impressive, perhaps even repressive, and displacing forms of human activity” (Said, 1991: 225).

Effecting constructive changes in the lives of women is possible when resistance is envisioned as “not requir[ing] reference to a core, disembodied, autonomous self who appeals to universal principles. Rather, resistance can be crafted in the subjugated knowledges that we already possess” (Hekman, 1995: 112). Although it can be said that women all over the world are oppressed by virtue of their sex, discarding other important variables relating to social, cultural and political differences is seriously detrimental. This is why I stress that Arab women’s quest for ‘progress’ should not be measured against a Western criterion of change and ‘progress’. “Feminist politics must discard the assumption that only our common identity as *women* can serve as the basis for a feminist politics. The politics of difference suggests that we can unite politically without positing a common identity, that we can unite *through* our differences” (Hekman, 1995: 158). Reading feminist literary texts as reflecting or grappling with political tendencies and positions is advocated by feminists like Showalter, Kaplan, and others. Laura Marcus points out that “a ‘feminist’ aesthetic does involve evaluations of the relationship between women’s writing and feminist politics” (1992: 12).

Said focuses on “individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire” (1993: xxiv). I also read the feminist novels at hand individually as cultural activities and sites of power workings. True, Said is not particularly concerned with feminist novels, yet his reading strategy is instrumental to exposing specific political affiliations and cultural constituents as informing some feminist novels. In the Arab feminist novels, I underscore those stances which at face value might appear to be promoting Arab

women's cause. However, my close reading of the Arab feminist novel against a historical and political Arab Islamic context is intended to uncover if and how certain imperialist and Orientalist discourses are being reproduced, whether consciously or unconsciously, by some Arab feminist novelists, thus effacing some of the Arab Muslim women's specific needs, and reinforcing the peripheries' annexation to the Western centre. It is one of my concerns in this study to illuminate those stances of 'authenticity' or 'emulation', or more specifically, Westernisation, as depicted in some of the Arab feminist novels at hand. I also attempt an interpretative approach to expose the very socio-political and historical dynamics informing our constructed definitions or conceptualisation of these stances. For, the terms upon which these stances stand have been considerably conditioned by complex cultural and political responses involving the 'self's' relation to the 'other', the Arabs' to the West.

Said (1978, 1993) has been preoccupied with explicating the paradoxical relation between colonised and coloniser—relations often fluctuating between affiliation and opposition. Fanon (1986), a pioneering postcolonial and psychoanalyst thinker writing a generation earlier than Said who interpreted him has also conceived of the profoundly paradoxical nature of cultural relations. While Fanon depicts such dialectical relations in psychoanalytic Sartrean terms, Said deploys political and cultural terms. Although both condemn the coloniser's politics and ethical stands towards the 'other', they do not project complex psychological and political relations in simplistic terms. The colonised in their studies do not emerge as victimised parties deprived of all sorts of power. Through the different stages of resistance, including when nationalists lead anti-colonial movements, affiliative stances between the coloniser and colonised have been recurrently spotted. Likewise, my reading of the Arab feminist novels will not be prompted in a manner which "exempt[s] the aggrieved colonised peoples from criticism; as any survey of postcolonial states will reveal, the fortunes and misfortunes of nationalism" (Said, 1993: xxvi).

The cognate discourses can be echoed in texts of different cultures. Whether convergencies are indicative of a mode of complicity or ‘universal’ human truths is pivotal to my discussion. The texts’ properties have been the stimuli behind incorporating one theoretical framework rather than another. Dwelling on those properties is not meant to be a codification of certain practices as necessarily correct or inevitable or culturally overdetermined. Describing oppressive realities and untangling the forces and constitutive elements underlying those realities within fiction are preconditions for resistance and change. Resistance is neither a core nor an abstract ‘given’; it is generated by “the discursive subject [that] is neither relational, feminist, postmodern, nor a product of theories of race and authenticity, yet it borrows from each of these discourses” (Hekman, 1995: 109).

Chapter One Feminism: An Historical Context

Introduction

Arab feminism has been articulated in the vernacular of its era, and so has Western feminism. A historical background of feminism within an Arab-Islamic context is needed to shed some light on how Arab feminist novels are informed by various interacting historical forces and constituents. Feminism implies a political discourse/message situated in time and place, that is, in socio-cultural and historical contexts. Literature, on the other hand, is a cultural form rendered in aesthetic modes of representations. The comparative aspect of the study entails historical orientation, especially when situated in cross-national culturalisation and power relations. This becomes more eminent when such power relations involve colonization – a relation between dominant and subordinated cultures.

The feminist discourse as we know it now originated in the West, and yet it has extended its space to be universally inclusive. This necessarily poses the question about the inescapable tension between universal claims on the one hand, and cultural and historical specificities on the other. Obviously, the universal aspects of the discourse can be easily confused in a subordinated socio-cultural context set against a historical background of colonialism, with the coercive univertalisation (globalization) of the imperial dominant culture. Therefore, a discourse associated with the West and claiming to address a universal problem may be countered by local resentment as being part of a Western scheme to sustain Western dominance. A claim to defending national cultural identity against cultural imperialism can be easily manipulated by traditional local powers to neutralize transformative action and ideologies, and thus to sustain local oppression. In this context it is not difficult to confuse calls for change with Westernisation. The irony is that local oppression breeds on claims of resistance to international oppression, with the ironic result that the oppressed in the local situation may view an external source offering support to his/her cause as a manifestation of the oppressor.

Literature is symptomatic of historical relations and ideological formations. Certain texts could work to rationalise or stabilise social structures, or protect various interests, including patriarchal ones, or create pressure for action and change. I would like to think of the feminist novels I am including in this study as active sites from which certain forces can emanate to oppose a certain status quo that is detrimental not only to women but also to different human groups. Despite Said's contention that literary studies and novels can investigate attitudes and destabilise certain cultural givens, literature, he maintains, is "created to serve various worldly aims, including and perhaps even mainly aesthetic ones" (1993: 382). In order to grasp instances of resistance or lack thereof in a certain work, it is crucial to know how this work "begins *from* a political, social, cultural situation, begins *to do* certain things and not others" (Said, 1993: 383).

Knowing the historical context within which feminist novels are produced helps to define the meanings and links that these novels maintain with the different intellectual schools and social movements as evolving in the different eras. Within a Western context, feminists today have endeavoured to contest many of the underlying presuppositions of various theoretical paradigms founded by white and male-dominated cultures. They have also challenged what used to be "the prevailing view that art and culture are apolitical and universally humanising because 'human' so often excludes women" (Sheridan, 1992: 346). Feminism's opposition to hierarchical powers and cultural models rendering women either marginal or oppressed redeems feminism as a humane and constructive cultural discourse. As maintained by Davis and Schleifer, "[t]he relationship between art and society...is thoroughly dialectical so that the very 'utopian' element inhabiting even a negative vision of social life remains an imaginative possibility of changing the world" (1992: 196). Feminists have always articulated a diversity of voices or rather a history of debates emanating from different positions, whether theoretical or geographical. The different feminist discourses have always been motivated by an urge to transform the conditions that reinforce, or contribute to, women's oppressions. It is through constructing "historically relevant social struggles" by way of "unsettl[ing] the dominant 'regime

of truth” that “a genuine intervention” can be “sustain[ed]” (Pollock, 1992: 365). The process of tackling social and historical specificities is not only important to promote a transformative vision, but also to counter the emergence of a unitary hegemonic feminism insensitive to the actual needs of women across the different cultures. “A moral voice [is] a voice rooted in ...social, linguistic, and cultural situation” (Hekman, 1995: 129-30). Accordingly, a feminist discourse that is solely defined and appropriated from Western vantage points indifferent to issues of race and class could prove detrimental to the cause of non-western women even if it could be argued that women are unified by the actuality of their oppression.

Western and Arab feminist discourses have evolved in the context of responding to certain political forces or historical occurrences, shaping and shaped by them. Western colonial discourses and Western feminism have significantly shaped feminist discourses within an Arab-Islamic context (as will be argued in detail later in this chapter). In reality, though, Arab women who have benefited from some of the principles held by Western feminism in its advocacy for education and ‘freedom’, if one excludes the élite, are very few (Minces, 1982: 23, 107). Thus, for example, investigating the power relations between the dominant West and the subordinated Arab is indispensable to understanding Arab feminism and the conditions which led to the emergence of a discourse of feminism in the Arab world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Spotting narrative stances within an Arab feminist novel that can be seen as resonating with a colonial discourse or a Western feminist discourse is important to analysing and assessing how Arab feminists have attended to issues of local differences and hegemonic influences.

In my study I attempt to argue how the feminist novel can be a complex nexus imbued with historical and cultural signs conducive to modes of resistance. This is not to undermine the writer’s subjectivity as inscribed in the very act of writing. For, “the novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects... individualist and innovative reorientation” (Watt, 1957: 13). Human subjectivity is not developed in a vacuum, and “authors are...very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in

different measure. Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience” (Said, 1993: xxiv). Spivak’s reading approach is also very useful to the purpose of my study as it helps to promote interpretations of various narrative stances and assess their ‘moral’ voices as articulated within specific historical and cultural settings. She asserts that in order not to continue being a “custodian” of a dogmatic system of values or “policing” an oppressive power, one needs to appropriate a method of reading that interconnects the text with “history, political economy – the world” (1988: 95). She subjects literary texts to different levels of interpretations to unravel how specific histories inform literary texts. It is only by “break[ing] down... distinctions” such as “the text itself,” “the poem as such” “intrinsic criticism” “and *actively* interpret ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” that texts can emerge as locations “for involvement as well as for change” (1988: 102).

Roberts and Maitland: An Historical Perspective

Although a survey of the history of Western feminism is expected to retain a methodological balance in a comparative study which tackles, among other issues, the historical emergence of feminism within an Arab Islamic context, the fact remains that no account of Western feminism can be satisfactorily done in the short space accorded to the history of feminism in this chapter. The subject is too large and the different strands of thought and argument have a too complex history. Data and specialised studies on the subject are immensely available. The reader of this study might be more interested in finding out a satisfactory account of the emergence of feminism within an Arabic-Islamic context, considering that research on Arab feminism is a much younger field and studies available are limited.

Despite the fact that many aspects of women’s oppression have been redressed since the beginning of the twentieth century, still one cannot say that Western societies now are no longer permeated by male powers. Both Roberts and Maitland started writing in the late seventies and both show real interest in exposing patriarchy and women’s oppression at different historical moments. Their works reflect sensitivity to various historical occurrences as affecting feminist

activities in the different eras. Maitland's novels, more than Roberts', reflect sensitivity to the power of history in shaping attitudes and responses. In *Three Times Table*, she develops a sharp historical sense to assess the achievements of three women generations. She begins from older women involved in the suffragette movement to other contemporary women preoccupied by concepts relating to the reality of alterities, 'differences', and political myths inherent in some concepts like 'absolutism', or the absolute 'truth', or 'objectivity'. In fact, historical events as constructed by patriarchy and their links to different intellectual trends within feminism are often subtly represented in Maitland's and Roberts' works. Situations and arguments within their narratives have evolved to assess women's past political engagements with feminist movements and other intellectual trends. For example, Maitland in *Daughter of Jerusalem* develops a critical eye not only towards Western societies as still dominated by patriarchal values but also towards specific feminist practices and slogans as raised by Woman's Movement in the 1970s. She also attempts to expose those polarities inherent not only in male discourses but also in those specifically feminist, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.

In their different novels, especially the ones written in the 1970s, Roberts and Maitland attend to women's groups and 'consciousness-raising' as important feminists achievements advocating 'no leaders' and 'non-élitism' (Mitchell, 1971: 60) – movements and slogans that did not survive the 1980s and were mutated into 'workshops' and 'support groups'. Juliet Mitchell calls 'consciousness-raising' a "process" politicising the personal by "transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems" (1971: 61). (It is worth noting that no mention of women's organised movements can be found in the novels by Soueif and Al-Shaykh, since women's unions in the Arab world are usually headed by élitists and in reality hardly exercise any significant influence on the lives of the overwhelming majority of Arab women who do not know of their existence in the first place.)

The different intellectual strands within feminism show that, like other social phenomena, feminism cannot evade intersecting with already founded paradigms of thought evolving at

certain historical moments even by way of critiquing them. There are the divisions, radical, socialist/Marxist, psychoanalytic, religious and liberal feminisms, which often either diverge, converge, or intersect. However, within the different feminist strands, the urge to contest cultural givens that contribute to women's subordination has always been persistently manifest. Such engagements with founded paradigms of knowledge prove that "Western feminists do not ... call for the abandonment of the entire Western heritage and the wholesale adoption of some other culture as the only recourse for Western women; rather, they engage critically and constructively with that heritage in its own terms" (Ahmad, 1992: 128). In fact, Maitland's interest in highlighting the historical contexts of many events in her narrative does not prevent her from developing a critical account of these events as relating to, and sometimes subduing, not only women but also societies and other oppressed groups.

Roberts' and Maitland's works reflect a deep desire to induce positive changes in the lives of women through various engagements, most notably in the field of psychoanalysis and religion. Roberts, for example, has emphasised in *The Visitation* and *A Piece of the Night* how femininity and gender roles are culturally constructed rather than inherently biological. Maitland's and Roberts' interest in rectifying some masculinist notions in psychoanalysis has led them to emphasise cultural and social constructs as interacting with the human subjectivity. This emphasis is conducive to stressing some of the primary goals of feminism, namely grounding feminist ethics in historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural critiques of specific locals to redress prevailing philosophical 'givens'. Hekman sets out to explore the different approaches which might lead to the construction of a moral feminist subject, one that is necessarily embedded and not transcendental; "the oppressions that women face are varied and multiple; they require specific (local) resistances designed for the particular situations that different women face" (1995: 152).

Interventions made by the 'other' non-western women and men and the diversity of intellectual strands within feminism have been instrumental in extending the moral purview of

feminism and in undercutting the hegemony of many ethically suspect discourses. An awareness of today's changing cultural sphere has been revealed in Roberts' and Maitland's works. Sexuality, for example, has been entwined with various political, historical, and cultural constituents relating to imperialism, oppressed groups, war genocide, and cultural and individual differences. Also, conceptualising 'difference' has been fundamental in the feminist discourses and studies of the late 1980s and 1990s. Maitland has attended to women's differences across the different cultures in many of her novels, most notably in *Home Truths* where she interrelates the issue of Western women's sexuality with that of Western imperialism. Still, whether feminists have expanded the concept of 'difference' enough to accommodate all categories of women, or if the concept has been too expandable to be pinpointed as a basis for feminist politics and constructive changes in the first place, is a crucial question to explore. In fact, the 'other' woman has significantly surfaced in contemporary feminist discourses. Postcolonial feminist theorists like Spivak, Chandra Mohanty and others are only expected to address different political, social, and economic issues as pertaining to non-western women. Western critics, such as Hekman (1995), have also been interested in emphasising the concept of 'difference' between and among women within the same culture and the different cultures. Hekman has also pointed out the threats of deploying one intellectual paradigm to different situations within different cultures. Feminism in the West has succeeded in stimulating different levels of awareness and in offering many tools for others to benefit from. This is not to suggest that the 'other' woman has to be grateful for being granted a tool and a space within a huge and powerful domain that belongs to the West. Still, I believe that it is politically unsound if Western feminism is regarded simply as another discourse constructed by the more powerful and thus be disregarded by Third World women simply as morally suspect.

Deconstructing some forces and unfolding historical relations abusive to women are also some of Maitland's and Roberts' concerns. They construct their own spiritual and religious myths to disrupt historical religious foundations from within. The sexist structure of the church

emerges in Roberts' *Impossible Saints* as the microcosm of other worldly patriarchal institutions which throughout history have worked to relegate women to subordinated positions. Maitland and Roberts seek to show that rejecting patriarchal or historical religions should not imply that women need not explore spiritual dimensions of faith as necessarily empowering for women's communities. They also draw in their narratives on how religious symbols and icons shape women's psyches and how they can be utilised and reconstituted to induce political and social effects.

Whereas distinctive feminist discourses in Britain, and the Western world in general, have been inspired by historical specificities, and their evolutions have been stimulated by socio-cultural and political developments and influences, the emergence of feminism in the Arab-Islamic world has been considerably influenced by the local history of the area as interacting with Western colonial ideology and Western feminism. Arab feminism has been considerably governed by historical dynamics featuring the relations between the coloniser and the colonised, between the centre and the periphery, and between the powerful and the less powerful.

The Emergence of Feminism in the Arab-Muslim World

Contemporary Arab and Islamic thought seems to have been preoccupied by the relationship with the West since the first modern encounters of the Arab world with modern Western civilisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of the area then was dominated, formally or informally, by European colonial powers. The need for national and social advancement, political and economic independence, and cultural reform was an extremely critical issue that Arab intellectuals debated – and still do – by way of confronting colonial powers. Ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, the issue of development has been reproduced over and over again, albeit in new forms, in the light of the ever problematic relation between the Arab and the West. The treatment and status of Arab women have always intertwined with national political and developmental issues addressed by Arab thinkers.

In accounting for the emergence of feminism in the Arab-Islamic world, I rely considerably on Leila Ahmad's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), a book that reflects a comprehensive vision, sensitivity to historical and social reality of the Arab world and wide inquisition in the field of Arab feminism. Said finds the book:

a serious and independent-minded analysis of its subject, the best informed, most sympathetic and reliable one that exists today. It is most powerful and compelling in its absence of clichés and hedgings, and more than anyone before her Ahmad discusses women and gender in Islam as a lived and contested reality. (qtd. from the back cover of Ahmad's book, 1992)

Doris Lessing also says about the book in *Independent on Sunday* (qtd. from the back cover of Ahmad's book), "I read it in a sitting for the fascination and unexpectedness of the information." To me, the book not only reflects deep knowledge in the history of the Arab world and women's position in this history, but also familiarity with Western feminism and colonial ideologies. Her endeavours to research the oldest classics relating to feminism in the Arab world make of the book an academically reliable reference. In addition, the book tackles an important area which is of direct relevance to my study, namely the impact of colonial discourses on shaping responses to feminism in the Arab world whether in the intellectual, political, or social fields. Its comprehensive argument is neither grounded in stereotypical images of Islam and Muslim women nor in engraving an idealised notion of the status of women in Islamic discourses. The book also provides accurate figures and verified information relating to the changing Arab women's status in the different historical phases. The abundance and accuracy of the information have helped me pursue various analyses impinging on Arab women's issues as will be shown in the course of the study.

It is important to mention here that in my discussion of the emergence of feminism in the Arab world I focus on movements, intellectual trends, and thinkers in Egypt. This is not to overlook the local variations within one Arab region and another. But, the early modern encounters of the Arabs with the West were to occur through Egypt, and as maintained by Leila Ahmad: "Egypt was at the forefront of the changes overtaking the Arab world over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, and in many ways it was, and continues to be, a mirror of

developments in the Middle East” (1992: 130). Ever since the Arab world came into direct contact with the West during the nineteenth century starting with the Napoleon campaign in Egypt, the debate has been going on among intellectuals and political trends on how to develop and modernise the Arab world against a complex background of Western colonisation and encounter with a dominant and developed West. The subject of women has been inextricably linked to dominant socio-cultural and political discourses advanced by both men and women. The debates have been informed by much of the political conflicts and ideological divisions and trends in the Arab world.

One of these trends which started to evolve in the last decade of the nineteenth century was that calling for copying the Western model; some of its proponents from males was Qasim Amin (1865-1908), and from females Huda Sha’rawi (1879-1947). This trend, adopted by the upper and middle classes, “affiliated itself, albeit generally discreetly, with the westernising, secularising tendencies,” and “promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies” (Ahmad, 1992: 174). The interpretation of this process of emulation on the part of the Arab or, more generally, the colonised, has engendered a diversity of intellectual responses informed by nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Islamism, and sometimes the intersection of these with Marxism, socialism, and other Western ideologies.

Another trend, the *Salafi* (fundamentalist), was calling for the protection of a threatened cultural identity and traditions by reviving past historical models; Tal’at Harb, for example, argued for “an Islamic patriarchy, presenting his views quite simply as those of traditional, unadorned, God ordained patriarchy.” He wrote many articles opposing Amin’s advocacy for women (Ahmad, 1992: 163). Reforms, it was argued, were to be instituted within an Islamic framework. This trend manifests the assertion of authentic Islamic identity based on reviving historical examples (Minces, 1982: 24). Sheikh Ali Yusuf, who owned *Al-muayyad* newspaper, rejected Amin’s writings and Western domination and values; he was “emphatic about the importance of preserving Islamic tradition in all areas” (Ahmad, 1992: 148).

In the middle between, a third trend evolved advocating an eclectic and reconciliatory approach towards a system comprising ‘good’ and effective elements borrowed from the West while holding the best in our culture to maintain an independent identity as Muslim Arabs (Ghalyoon, 1993: 8-16). Some of its representatives were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and his student Mohammad Àbdu (1849-1905). They were committed religious thinkers “who argued for the ‘acquisition’ of ‘modern’ sciences and ‘modernisation’...for reforms in the intellectual and social fields and for the elevation of women’s status” (Stowasser, 1993: 8-13). Mohammad Àbdu addressed the need for reforms in different fields including women’s rights. He called for the necessity of learning modern science. Introducing internal reforms, Àbdu stressed, were preconditions for not becoming dominated by other nations (Ahmad, 1992: 138-9). He also called for inducing change in Islamic thought and for abolishing polygamy arguing that “[a] nation that practices polygamy cannot be educated. Religion was revealed for the benefit of its people; if one of its provisions begins to harm rather than benefit the community...the application of that provision has to be changed according to the changed needs of the group”(qtd. in Stowasser, 1993: 9).

It can be misleading to identify each of the above three approaches with one single, political, and ideological movement such as the Islamic movement, or the pan-Arab movement, or the nationalistic movement. Liberalism, for example, is not one unitary well-defined movement to be exclusively identified with Westernisation. Many of those who may be defined as liberals like Borhan Ghalyoon would not go as far as preaching full affiliation with the West, or as far as being insensitive to their cultural and historical context, or as far as posing the Western model as the only universal model of progress and modernity (Ghalyoon, 1993: 639-72). The same applies to the pan-Arab nationalistic movements which reflect a diversity of approaches in its management of the relationship with the West ranging from radicalism to more flexible and practical approaches.

The emergence of these trends within an Arab-Islamic context is inextricably connected with the history of the area intricately shaped by imperialism. It is true that the Western culture has influenced the Arab history, but equally true is that each has influenced the other. Said holds that “imperialism after all is a co-operative venture. Both the master and the slave participate in it, and both grow up in it, albeit unequally” (1990: 74). The history of colonisation is imbued with all sorts of tension, including intellectual, psychic and political. Even though resistance and subversion are considerably shaped by these tensions, they are not “simply a belated reactive response to Western imperialism” (Said, 1993: 268). Fanon, for example, in his psychoanalytic account of the relation between the coloniser and colonised metaphorically unfolds the dynamics of emulation in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “[t]he colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards”(1986: 18). Through emulating, and establishing a connection with, the superior, the ‘other’ seeks the fulfilment of a desire: “I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine” (1986: 63). The immorality of the Western colonial project cannot be denied. The fact remains, though, that the Western culture, in the present context of the Arab world, has been an ontologically vital constituent in shaping the Arab culture. Dismissing it or pleading for a separation now is reductionist and works to misinterpret the altogether long, complex, often intimate, distant, but never easy historic relationship between East and West—a relation that is further intensified by religious differences.

Said confirms that Islam has always been depicted by the West as regressive and dangerous (in Cockburn, 1995: 20-3), especially in the field of women’s rights (Macleod, 1992: 533-51). This depiction has its impact not only on Western people but also on some Arab Muslims who have been led to believe that to move upward, towards the West is the criterion for development and for the advancement of the status of women. The progress in legal, economic, religious, and familial structures is to be measured and assessed by Western standards. Even

more, the practices of other non-western men towards their women are also judged from within a Western vantage point. Evelyn Baring, British consul general (later Lord Cromer), did not hesitate to announce his views on the inferiority of Islam and Muslim women in different contexts during the British occupation of Egypt. He used to reiterate that Muslim men are inferior to European ones, and their inferiority is basically derived from their religion (Ahmad, 1992: 152). As made clear by Said's *Orientalism* (1979), any such colonial discourse is part of the colonial thesis affirming that colonised societies are alike in that they are inferior to Western societies but differ as to their specific inferiority. However, Cromer goes on to assert that Muslim/Oriental men are essentially responsible for the degrading situation of their women;

the European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may have not studied logic; he loves symmetry in all things...his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 152)

By way of responding to a Western colonial discourse on Islam and Arab women, there evolved fervent advocacy to revive an 'idealised' past model of an 'Islamic woman'. Any discussion of women's rights outside the historical Islamic frame of reference would instigate anger and tension within an Arab-Islamic context. Some of the Islamic responses reinforced a polarity of thinking corresponding to a monolithic discourse initiated by the coloniser (Abu Zaid, 1994: 80-102). This polarity emerges because, according to Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*,

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. (1995: 35)

In order to reinforce "a relation of structural domination" the coloniser has suppressed often violently the heterogeneity of the 'other'. Third World women have been rendered "a category" "automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read 'not progressive'), family-oriented (read 'traditional')" (Mohanty, 1991a: 72). Bhabha also sees the colonial discourse as constructed out

of the “complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism” most manifest in the stereotypical racial discourse, one which constitutes a protection “in the face and space of the disruption and threat from the heterogeneity of other positions” (1995: 77). Whether local feminist voices within the Arab world have been sensitive to Arab Muslim women’s specific needs as influenced by their economic, social, and psychological realities, or have contributed, consciously or unconsciously, to reinforcing a colonialist image of Arab Muslim women calls for analysing a discourse on feminism as promoted by the main figures known to have shaped the history of feminism in the Arab Muslim world.

Before the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, a new discourse on the rights of Arab women had already been emerging. Mohammad Ali who became the ruler of Egypt in 1805 (Ahmad, 1992: 131) was intent on modernising his army and promoting the social and political conditions of his country. His developmental plans had their impact on women. He encouraged many Egyptian young men to travel to Europe to study in its modern schools. Rifaah al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) was one of those Arab men who were sent in an educational mission to Paris. “In a descriptive work on French society, he recommended that girls be given the same education as boys, saying that this was the practice in the strongest nations, that is in European ones” (Ahmad, 1992: 133). Impressed by al-Tahtawi’s *Al-Murshid al- Amin lil Banat wal Banin (A Guide for girls and Boys)* (1870), Mohammad Ali recommended its use in schools. The Educational Council of Egypt, then, issued a statement recommending public education for women. Many women from the upper classes, like for example, Aisha Taymour (1840-1902), were encouraged to receive instruction from European tutors. Women of middle and lower classes also began to attend European-type education by joining missionary schools (Ahmad, 1992: 127-136).

A central figure in the arena of Women’s rights within an Arab Islamic context during the British occupation was Qasim Amin (1863-1908). He went to Paris for his advanced law studies and came back to Egypt deeply impressed with the freedom of expression and women’s status he observed therein. He noted the relationship between women’s economic independence and their

social emancipation, arguing that the exclusion of Muslim women from economic activities is the main reason for their loss of rights (Zeidan, 1995: 15-17). Amin's *Tahrir Al-Mar'ah (The Liberation of Woman)*, published in 1899 has traditionally been regarded as marking the beginning of feminism in the Arab world (Ahmad, 1992: 145). Ahmad finds Amin, "the French-educated upper-middle-class lawyer," to have been deploying a rationale that is specifically Western. She holds that "his call for abolishing the veil was essentially the same as theirs [the colonial British]" (1992:155), and "[f]ar from being the father of Arab feminism...Amin might more aptly be described as the son of Cromer and colonialism"(1992: 162-3). It is ironic that while Western colonial discourses endeavoured to stress the oppression of women within an Arab context, within a Western context, feminism was not given a warm welcome by Western patriarchy and its emergence was a process full of obstacles. Western Feminism "on the home front...directed against white men was to be resisted and suppressed; but taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonised peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man" (Ahmad,1992: 153). Thus, the language of Western feminism and "the notion of men's oppressing women" were "captured" and "redirected" "in service of colonialism" by colonialists (Ahmad, 1992: 151). Cromer wrote that "it was to this [Islam's] degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced" (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992:153). Ironically, "[t]his champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women was, in England, founding member and sometime president of Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage" (Ahmad, 1992: 153).²

Qasim Amin and later Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid worked to revise the traditional roles of women in the 1920s and 1930s, advocating reforms in the status of women as a necessary step towards attaining the Arab national developmental plan (Zeidan, 1995: 39). Yet, Qasim Amin praised the British administration and European civilisation and expressed "a generalised

² See Constance Rover, 1967. *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866-1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.) 171-173; see also Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1978).

contempt for Muslims” (Ahmad, 1992: 156) and for the physical habits and moral qualities of Egyptian women. About the *ulama* (men teaching religion and Arabic language), he says, “if you talk with them about the organisation of their government and its laws and economic and political condition, you will find they know nothing. Not only they are greedy...they always want to escape hard work, too” (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 157). He also gives the following account of Egyptian women: “[They] are not in the habit of combing their hair everyday...nor do they bathe more than once a week...They do not know how to rouse desire in their husband, nor how to retain his desire or to increase it...If she tries to rouse a man, she will usually have the opposite effect” (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 157). However, Amin demands that women be granted access to education, jobs, and social freedom. His conviction is that some education will enable women “to plan the household budget...to supervise the servants...to raise the children, attending to them physically, mentally and morally” (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 159). (Amin’s above argument is reminiscent of Defoe’s concerning women’s education).

Although the Egyptian Muhammad Àbdu is rarely referred to by writers researching Arab feminism, Leila Ahmad, I think rightly, cites him as one of the most influential thinkers on reforms with respect to women (1992: 138-40). He responded to the Western challenge from within Islam: criticising Arab-Islamic reality in terms of a more enlightened understanding of Islam and even legitimating some Western values by ascribing them to Islam (A’mara, 1973: 68). He was a student of al-Sayyid Jamal al-Din- al-Afghani (1839-97), a figure of enormous intellectual influence in both Egypt and Turkey, as well as in Iran and in other parts of the Islamic world. Al-Afghani was concerned in his teachings and writings with reforming and reviving Islam from the condition of “‘ignorance and helplessness’ into which it had lapsed and which had resulted in Islamic lands becoming prey to Western aggression” (Ahmad, 1992: 139). Mohammad Àbdu in the early 1880s published many articles on the necessity of reforming the conditions of Arab women and argued that “men and women are equal before God in the matter of reward, when they are equal in their works...There is therefore no difference between them in

regard to humanity, and no superiority of one over the other in works” (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 139). A basic feature of his argument was that the ‘backward’ status of Islam had its source not in Islam per se but in the “misinterpretations that had beset Islam over the centuries” (Ahmad, 1992: 140). While he deplored the unthinking imitation of the West, he called for the acquisition of “knowledge, skills, and intellectual and other developments of the modern Western world in the cause of national and Islamic renaissance”(Ahmad, 1992: 140). Àbdu insisted that it was Islam and not the West to first recognise the full and equal humanity of women. He maintains:

Anyone who knows how all nations before Islam gave preference to the man, and made the woman a mere chattel and plaything of the man...it will be clear to him that the claim of Europeans to have been the first to honour woman and grant her equality, is false. For Islam was before them in this matter...the Muslims have been at fault in the education and training of women, and acquainting them with their rights; and we acknowledge that we have failed to follow the guidance of our religion, so that we have become an argument against it. (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 139-40)

The female writer Malak Hifni Nassef (1886-1918), better known by her pen name Bahithat al-Badiyah, was convinced that the first step towards women’s emancipation was education (Zeidan, 1995: 21). She published a collection of articles and speeches in a book entitled *Al-Nisaiyatt* (1909), a term connoting feminism, because *nisaiyatt* conventionally signifies something by or about women. *Al-Nisaiyatt* argued for advancing women’s status by granting her more access to education and work opportunities. It is Nassef’s book, rather than Amin’s, to be considered as the founding discourse of Arab feminism (Ahmad, 1992: 174). Nassef “neither believed that religion dictated anything specific on the matter to women nor that women who veiled were more modest than women who did not” (1992: 180). Unlike Amin who saw in women’s education a source for enhancing men’s convenience, Nassef found in woman’s education the means through which she can assert her individuality and reclaim her humanity in full. She was opposed to unveiling, not for religious reasons though (1992: 182).

Apart from the fact that Islam has always urged the education of women, geographical proximity and historical overlapping between the Arab world and the West contributed to the process of furnishing for the transformation of ideas. Before the British occupation of Egypt and

other parts of the Middle East, calls for educating women and granting them freedom of choices in matters that relate to marriage and work were concomitant with Mohammad Ali's national enterprise of acquiring European knowledge to promote the internal conditions of Egypt. He neither sought Westernisation, nor abandoning local culture and values for the sake of emulating Western ones. His developmental project, however, was drastically aborted with the coming of the colonial powers which worked to ensure the Arab nation's subordination to the West. As mentioned earlier, Rifaah al-Tahtawi (1801 -73) recommended Arab women's education, having been sent to Paris by Mohammad Ali. Yet, the language he used to support women's education and their taking up occupations that men took was specifically Islamic and not structured along Western terms of reference and values. He emphasised that men differed from women only in features pertaining to femininity and masculinity, but in matter of the heart and reasoning they were equally competent (A'mara, 1973: 393).

Debates encouraging women's education and improving their status economically had already been emerging by the time Britain occupied Egypt. Emphasising the importance of education for women, and advocating reform in the matter of marriage and work were not debated along the lines 'the West versus the East', but were grounded in religious and indigenous language. Exposure to the West worked to awaken certain feelings pertaining to the need for promoting local conditions in different fields. Mohammad Àbdu, for example, resorted to Quranic verses to support women's rights and to encourage the pursuit of science and knowledge. Many contemporaries like, for example, Bin Maso'ud, still argue that what sustains an Islamic argument of women's rights is the availability of a great deal of historical evidence proving that "with the coming of Islam the status of women has drastically changed and become much better both in the public and private spheres" (1994: 11-14).

One of the most prominent feminists in Egypt and then the Arab world is Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), the founder of the EFU (Egyptian Feminist Union) on March 16, 1923. The main objective of the union was fighting for women's suffrage. The EUF drafted a constitution to

raise “Egyptian women’s ‘intellectual and moral’ level and enable them to attain political, social, and legal equality.” It also started sending young Arab women to Europe on scholarships in 1920s (Ahmad, 1992: 176). Sha’rawi is often affiliated with Westernisation and her connections with Western feminists had been her forte (Abu Zaid, 1994: 81). She took off the veil in public in 1923. Islamic fundamentalists, according to Barbara F. Stowasser in “Women’s Issues in Modern Islamic Thought”, resented her knowing that “she was none other than Muhammad Sultan Pasha’s daughter. He had received high decorations from the British as well as large sums of money for his collaboration with them” (1993: 21-2). Ahmad finds that “Sha’rawi’s feminism...was politically nationalistic; it opposed British domination in the sense that the liberal intellectuals of her class and the upper-middle classes opposed it, rather than opposing the British and everything Western with the extremity expressed by other groups and parties that had a base among the popular classes” (1992: 178).

Sha’rawi’s connections with Western feminists were very strong. Ahmad writes: “Well-meaning European feminists, such as Eugénie Le Burn, [who took the young Huda Sha’rawi under her wing] earnestly inducted young Muslim women into the European understanding of the meaning of the veil and the need to cast it off as the essential first step in the struggle for female liberation” (1992: 154). She and the members of the union regularly took part in the international women’s meetings in Europe. It was in 1930, however, that she called for a feminist conference to defend the Palestinian cause. Malak Nassef and Sha’rawi worked together in the EUF, attending and organising conferences. In contrast to Sha’rawi whose command of the Arabic language did not enable her to write her own memories, and thus ended up dictating them to her secretary, Nassef was eloquent in Arabic and lectured and wrote prolifically. Sha’rawi was from an immensely wealthy upper-class family and well-informed in French books and novels. She was overtly opposed to the act of veiling (Ahmad, 1992: 174-8). With other feminists like Doria Shafik and Mai Ziyada, the famous poet and writer, Sha’rawi and

Nassef founded social activities, charitable institutions, magazines and unions to resist injustice and open more schools for women (Ahmad, 1992; 179-84).

The dominant voice of feminism in the 1920s and 1930s reflected the desirability of women's progress toward Western-type societies and models. Another Egyptian voice was beginning to emerge in the 1940s articulating a native Islamic vernacular: Zeinab al-Ghazali's voice (1918-). She was a follower of Sha'rawi at the beginning, but later "reacted against the implicit valorisation of the Western over the Arabic in Sha'rawi's feminism and turned away from it, seeking to forge a feminist path—or a path of female subjectivity and affirmation—within the terms of the indigenous culture" (Ahmad, 1992: 179). She was the founder of the Islamic Woman's Association which was annexed to the Muslim Brethren Movement (Ahmad, 1992: 185). The Muslim Brethren started by Hasan al-Banna (1906-49) in 1928, were fiercely anti-British and anti-Western. Al-Banna was appalled to see the social gap between the rich and the poor in Cairo reiterating that "the Arabs and the Muslims have no status...and no dignity...They are not more than mere hirelings belonging to foreigners" (qtd. in Ahmad, 1992: 192). The Brethren were opposed to the government and its stands and were resolved to attain religious revivalism. They advocated moral purification and internal reform to win over the Western encroachment. Promoting education, including religious education, and reclaiming Palestine from Zionists were the basic agendas of their political programme (Ahmad, 1992: 193, 194). Al-Banna was murdered in 1949, and Al-Ghazali "had been imprisoned and tortured for six years (1965-72) at the hands of the Nasser regime" (Ahmad, 1992:197).

Kandiyoti in "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies" (1996) proposes 'a crude periodization' of the Arab feminism in the Middle East. She emphasises different elements in relation to these phases. The first wave she calls feminism and nationalism: women were encouraged by nationalist movements like the National party, the Constitutional Reform party founded between 1906-7, and the Wafd party (1919) to participate in the public life and to set their gender interests within the terms specified by the nationalist discourses. The

second wave, 1950s and 1960s, witnessed the rise of social science paradigms. The family and women's roles were questioned from within the perspectives of modern discourses most remarkably, Marxism. The third wave, dialogues within feminism, is characterised by its incorporation of the liberal approaches, whether those emanating from local specificities or informed by Western intellectual thoughts to overcome obstacles to gender equality (Kandiyoti, 1996: 10-13). According to Kandiyoti, the fourth phase, of the late 1980s, emphasised the concept of 'difference' drawing on multiculturalism and identity politics which originated in the West, arguing that Edward Said's critiques of Orientalism and his analysis of power hierarchies implicit in the construction of the 'Other' have been central to women's perception of gender representations (1996: 16).

On the other hand, Ahmad divides Arab feminism into two distinctive phases: the first phase, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, she calls was "an era of dynamic feminism" marked by a diversity of organisational activities and prolific literary forms. During this phase and exactly in the year 1956, the State of Egypt embraced Arab socialism and granted women the vote and the right to run for political office and education. Women's enrolment rose rapidly and at much faster pace than men's in higher education (Ahmad, 1992: 211). In the second phase, the 1980s, the use of the veil became most prevalent, and an overt discussion of feminism and the oppression of male-dominated societies has been replaced by political and economic concerns grounded in Islamic idioms. Women's affiliation with Islamic parties grew significantly. It seems that Al-Ghazali's feminist defence of women's rights in the 1940s and 1950s, set along an Islamic frame of reference, is the one being adopted by the majority of Arab women now (Ahmad, 1992: 214-222). The increase of these Islamic voices can be traced back to the year 1967 when Egypt and many countries of the Middle East were defeated by Israel, a defeat which, according to many investigators, led the people, having lost faith in Jamal Abdel Nasser and his nationalistic plans, to revive 'Islamism' (Ahmad, 1992: 216-17). However, along with Al-Ghazali's campaign for women and the nation in Islamist terms, there was also in the 1950s

Doria Shafik's feminist voice articulated in the language of secularism and democracy. Shafik was jailed and then killed herself in 1976 (Ahmad, 1992: 188). Islamic fundamentalists, Stowasser points out, regarded her

a true client of imperialism, she is said to have been celebrated on her many trips abroad for the damage she did to the Muslim family at home by way of her militant demands for women's political rights, the introduction of European divorce law, and the abolishment of polygamy in Egypt. Her personal links to Zionism were established by the fact that she retained contacts with Israeli feminists even during the years of the Arab boycott of Israel in the fifties. (1993:22)

The power that Islam and Islamic groups currently exercise among people, though not on the official governmental level, leads many women and men to view feminism with scepticism. The few Third World feminists who happen to be educated in the West tend to feel alienated from their own women; "their concern to liberate themselves and their sisters is quite legitimate, but their way of proceeding separates them from their own community" (Minces, 1982: 13). The fact remains that a feminist vision which proves insensitive to one's own local culture and socio-political realities is necessarily lacking in its transformative potential. Structuring an Arab feminist discourse along Western feminist values leads Arab Muslim women to view the whole issue of women's rights with scepticism, considering the specifically Islamic orientation of the majority of Arab women.

On the literary level, the first novel which was written by an Arab woman was *Ghadatul Zahirah (The Beauty of the Zahirah)* (1895) by Zaynab Fawaz, a Lebanese living in Egypt, followed by another by the same writer *Korosh Malikul Furs (Korosh the Persian King)*. Then Labiba Hashem, a Palestinian who also came to stay in Egypt, wrote her first novel, *Kalbul Rajol (The Heart of a Man)* and then her second *Fatatul Sharq (The Oriental Girl)* in 1907. Two years later the Lebanese Mikhael Swaya wrote *Hasna'a Saloniq (The Beauty of Salonique)* followed in the year 1912 by Farida A'tayyiah's *Bain A'rshayin (Between Two Crowns)* (Al-Qadi, 1992: 21-6). These novels cannot be said to have distinctive features of their own that can draw them apart from other novels by male writers of the same historical era, neither in terms of style nor in subject matter. The plots are typically based on love affairs between two people who represent

absolute purity and goodness yet ruthlessly disturbed by malicious men and women conspiring to destroy their love. Between 1935 and 1957, other novels were published by women writers but, they too, cannot be described as specifically feminist in orientation. In the years 1958 and 1960s the number of novels published by women writers significantly increased. Leila Ba'lbaki's novel *Ana Ahya (I Live)* (1958) and Kolut Khor's *Ayyami Ma'ho (My Days with Him)* (1959) mark the advent of a new phase of women's literary writing. In *Ana Ahya*, Al-Ba'lbaki depicts the life of Lina, a young Arab girl who rebels against her family because they do not treat her with respect. Her feelings of alienation from her relatives, friends, and the whole society lead her to surrender and then commit suicide, thus proving incapable of any confrontation.

In the 1950s and 1960s writers like Alifa Rifaat and Andree Chedid addressed situations involving psychological aggression against women in their novels. Nawal Al-Sa'dawi has also dealt with prostitution and illegitimacy, as well as with psychological and sexual abuses that women in Arab Muslim societies suffer from. "Explorations and exposés of the sexual politics of domination and the victimisation of women in the informal and personal realms of life" were emerging (Ahmad, 1992: 217). In the 1970s and 1980s a bolder literary attack on patriarchal institutions and traditions was further pursued by feminists like Al-Sa'dawi, Latifa Zaiyyat and others (Badran and Cook, 1990: xxvi-xxx). Nawal Al-Sa'dawi, Emily Nasrallah, Ghada al-Samman, Daizy Al-Amir, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and others continue to be concerned with depicting oppressed women's experiences in their novels and with exposing many of the male-dominated social values and constructs. Their novels reflect that Arab women are still denied full equality with men before the law and in daily life. Tradition, religion, politics, and economy all collaborate to suppress women. However, some feminist novelists, like Ahdaf Soueif, show that it is far too superficial to say that all women are equally exploited and subordinate, overlooking thus all the differences that the specific history of one society implies, and undermining the workings of powers not only within male-dominated societies but also within the female communities.

Arab Feminist novels can be suitable spaces for one to detect how stereotypical images of Muslim women as engraved by oriental discourses are conjured up in the different narrative levels. They are also interesting locations to expose how women actually aid their own subordination and how Arab societies deeply permeated by androcentric values structure situations in which women are unable to perceive the ways they are subordinated. Badran and Cooke point out that some women's writings "show that feminist activism comes not only from conscious, organised, collective actions but may occur as everyday acts of life carved out with little or no clear feminist consciousness" (1990: xxi). Exploring expressions of consciousness beyond the horizon of Western expectations and pertaining to the writer and her indigenous surrounding are among the aims to be tackled in the present study. Other questions are also to be tackled such as: Are the deeper connotations which far exceed strictly formal levels of the Arabic novel the same as those of the English feminist novel? If the answer is yes, could this imply a deeper political affiliation between Arab and Western feminists? Or could it be indicative of the impossibility of evading a 'universal' paradigm accounting for the reality of women's oppression? It would not be right to assume that the category of Arab-Muslim woman is as homogeneous as the name might suggest. Arab women today live in more than twenty sovereign Arab states, each of which has its own distinctive history and cultural specificities. Women's issues are inextricably accommodated by those local specificities. However, because lots of Arab women live under occupation, or in emigration, it is not difficult to find some commonalities within the diversity of their situations (Badran and Cook, 1990: xxi). While it can be argued that colonialism in the Arab world has not been completely thrown off, and that it is assuming different economic and cultural forms other than military, still the common history of subjugation and revolt makes it rather difficult to draw upon Arab feminism without invoking the nationalist and political dimension of Arab women's struggle. What should be invoked too is Islamic discourses' antagonistic relation to feminism – any such relation will be drawn upon in detail in chapter five of this study.

However, it is not only conservative Islamic forces that threaten women's progress and women's freedom of expression (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xxxii), but also the state itself often does. Jamal Abdel Nasser, the strongest nationalist leader the Arab world ever knew, and a fervent enemy of the Muslim Brethren, placed Doria Shafik under house arrest. Abdel Nasser also threw Zaynab Al-Ghazali, the Islamic feminist, and thousands of men of the Islamic Brethren in prison and executed many of the Islamic leaders like Mohammad Al-Qutob (Ahmad, 1992: 240). During Al-Sadat's rule, Nawal Al-Sa'dawi lost her job at the Ministry of Health (Badran, 1993: 140). So-called liberalising regimes continue to support the 'emancipation' of women unless at one stage or another some women start asking for basic structural changes which might be seen as threats to the interests of these regimes. Fighting a conservative Islamic force seen as the sole and real cause behind Arab women's 'backwardness' and oppression—a force which in the Arab world at the present time seems to be attracting a great number of women—is a simplistic way of analysing feminists' relation to various powers at work in the Arab world, including those of Islamic and Western influences.

Some examples of Arab feminist writings, including Arab feminist novels, have created the common feeling that Arab feminist writers are more informed by Western resources than by the actual situation of the Arab women, that some are more motivated by a desire to reflect a Western-style intellectual image for themselves than by sincere commitment to advancing Arab women's status; that they are inclined to reproduce stereotypical images of the Arab women which have originated in oriental discourses in order to satisfy the expectations of the Western recipient. By this they may be seen as overlooking that the West is as much the problem as it may be part of the solution. I seek through specific examples from the novels by some Arab feminist writers, namely Hanan Al-Shaykh and Ahdaf Soueif, to analyse how certain social, political, and historical forces mapping the cultural and intellectual scene of the modern Arab world are operating in the different narrative levels. How the contents of these novels can be seen to be affecting the artistic styles of the different works, and how effective these novels are in

yielding a feminist vision promoting a constructive change in the lives of the Arab Muslim world will also be highlighted.

Whether or not the Arab novels could be seen as echoing some of the structural and thematic elements common to the Western novel is also to be explored in the following chapters. Convergences could be symptomatic of overlapping histories and problematic political and cultural relations between the Arab and the West. Seeking to construct homology between these novels, however, is not the aim of this comparative study. Divergences as informed by the different historical and cultural contexts of both the Arab and Western novels, not to mention individual differences between one writer and another, are bound to surface. Underscoring what specific histories inform theories and ideological orientations inherent within one narrative layer or another in the novels at hand is also another concern of mine. Whether the incorporation of a diversity of trends such as the liberal, Western, Islamic, or anti-Islamic has been conducive to promoting the issue of Arab women in particular and their societies in general continues to be an important question. The feminist novels have been shaped not only by modes of identification with one trend or another, but also by modes of resenting a particular trend. Although Al-Shaykh's and Soueif's novels can hardly be seen as articulating any Islamic voice, their narratives seem to be considerably and variably shaped by the absence of, or resentment to, this voice often seen as detrimental to women's development.

The Politics of Interpreting Divergences and Links

What is included or excluded, or made present or absent, by writers is not always the outcome of their conscious personal choices. Images and ideas can be so internalised that reproducing them often becomes inevitable. Spivak concedes that "it is difficult to speak of a politics of interpretation without a working notion of ideology as larger than the concept of individual consciousness" (1988: 118). Spivak's readings of literary texts, MacCabe observes, are firmly grounded in "radically transgress[ing]...the disciplines, both the official divisions of anthropology, history, philosophy, literary criticism, sociology and the unofficial divisions

between Marxism, feminism, deconstruction” to be able to reflect on texts as “the micro-politics of the academy” and its relation to “the macro-narrative of imperialism” (1988: x). This reading approach necessitates a degree of familiarity with historical and political dynamics giving impetus to the creation of a particular text – an inquiry that is indispensable for stimulating appropriate visions of change by writers of fiction or non-fiction.

Convergences between the British novel and its Arabic counterpart cannot be ascribed to purely universal inclinations and patterns characterising general human activities. This is not to say that there is no such thing as universal human feelings or experiences; rather, the problem is caused by the values embedded in a definition of ‘universalism’ as set by the more powerful. The term has often been devised to sustain those in power and redeem ‘others’ serviceable to them. Said, for example, critiques “the way in which the alleged universalism of fields such as the classics (not to mention historiography, anthropology, and sociology) was Eurocentric in the extreme, as if other literatures and societies had either an inferior or a transcended value” (1993: 51). Hekman (1995) and Spivak (1988) also unfold the dynamics of appropriating ‘universal’ notions to pressure others, less powerful, into accepting Western ideals and precepts. They sound very sceptical as to the alleged adaptability of ‘universalism’ to accommodate diverse social and cultural traditions everywhere. The deployment of the term ‘universal’ and its exploitation by the West to privilege some and subordinate others render ‘universality’ an ethically suspect project.

Cultural constituents and intellectual paradigms inherent in setting out a definition for ‘universalism’ should not be viewed as purely Western in origin. For the assumption that they are can prove indifferent to the complex cultural and historical intersections between the West and the East and the mutual influence the one has on the other throughout the different historical phases. To equate ‘universalism’ and all values and intellectual heritage inherent in structuring this term with the West is an issue which has deep political implications. It works to reinforce a Western sense of supremacy and tends to overlook other important facts. Thus, for example,

Susan Bassnett in her article “Comparative Identities in the Post-Colonial World” discusses how during the Dark Ages in Europe, civilisations flourished in other parts of the world and Europe benefited from that but “what has been denied and all but erased is the enormous influence of the Arab world on that process of development” (1993: 77).

The Arab and British feminist novels as cultural activities could be appropriate sites where a politics of ‘universalism’ can be identified either to untangle the centre’s historical relation to the periphery, or to illuminate some common ‘universal’ patterns thought to be underlying different human experiences within different histories and locations. There is nothing morally or politically suspect in using the term ‘universal’ to connote what we share as humans. Bearing in mind the Arabs’ encounter with the West and the intellectual trends demarcating the modern Arab era as shaped by some responses to this encounter, structural and thematic resemblances, among other things, could be a form of complicity between some Arab feminists and Western modes of thinking. However, complicity is telling not only of intricate historical and political relations, but also of social and psychological factors relating to both the writer and the conditions of writing. If, in the course of analysing the Arab novels at hand, convergences prove to be, consciously or unconsciously, a mode of complicity with the West, could divergences be interpreted as indicative of the emergence of an authenticated counter-narrative within the Arab context and one implicative of actual resistance to Western domination?

The English and Arab novels dealt with here are women-centred narratives. This commonality, however, should not be conducive to transcending different ethnic, religious, and even class identities. Within the category ‘woman’, there is a huge diversity. Restoring to Western criteria of women’s development to advance women’s status could be detrimental to women’s cause from within an Arab-Islamic context. Juliette Minces asks the following question: “Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of Western women as the only democratic, just and forward-looking model?” (1982: 25). She provides the following answer: “I do not think so. The demands of Western feminists seem to me to represent the greatest advance

towards the emancipation of women as people. Ideally, the criteria adopted, like those for human rights in general should be universal” (1982: 25). Even if I believe that a Western feminist discourse has been effective in stressing the issue of difference and cultural diversity and in devising theoretical and experimental tools which promote resistance to oppression, the fact remains that Minces’ contention risks lacking a comprehensive vision and sensitivity to historical and cultural realities shaping non-western women’s needs.

Linda Gordon in “What’s New in Women’s History” argues that setting a frame of reference to define what is actually meant by ‘difference’ is needed if the term is not to become “a substitute, an accommodating, affable, and even lazy substitute, for opposition” intended “to obscure domination, to imply a neutral asymmetry” (1991: 78). The concept of ‘difference’ should be accounted for not only in relation to the differences between two disparate cultures but also in relation to the differences within the one culture. Feminists in the Middle East, Kandiyoti points out, “have been both intensely local, grappling with their own histories and specificities, and international, in that they have been in dialogue, both collaborative and adversarial, with broader currents of feminist thought and activism”(1996: 7). On the theoretical and academic levels, there have been different debates voicing idioms for change whether grounded in Islam, or nationalism, or Westernisation. In the majority, if not in all, of the Arab feminist novels, voices oscillate between different idioms; none, however, seems to be interested in summoning a reformative vision debating Islamic discourses or even responsive to the needs and desires of Islamically-committed women who want to improve their status but not at the expense of demeaning or abandoning Islam.

Even if Soueif and Al-Shaykh have summoned Islam in different positions of their narratives, its depiction is not carried out in a manner responsive to its reality as one of the vital constituents informing the lives and choices of the majority of Arab women and in delineating the structure of the present fabric of the Arab-Muslim society. How Islamic discourses and Islamic politics can be seen as interacting with visions of change is hardly tackled in the novels.

Dismissing Islam, or summoning it merely as essentially inimical to the issue of Arab women's liberation without endeavouring to critique or expose its workings at different psychological and socio-cultural levels would prove unsatisfactory in advancing women's rights.

However, emerging in the present Arab intellectual studies is an "Islamic feminism" that is specifically concerned with revising laws and traditions held for long as part of Islamic practices. Contemporary women writers like Ghada Karmi, Raga' El-Nimr, Munira Fakhro, Mai Yamani, and others are introducing Islam as a new complex of references and debates and examining the phenomenon of Islam within an Islamic socio-cultural framework: "contributors to the debate have been considered 'new feminist traditionalists', 'pragmatists', 'secular feminists', 'neo-Islamists', and so forth. For all these thinkers, however, there is a common concern with the empowerment of their gender within a rethought Islam" (Yamani, 1996: 1-2).

Religion has been pivotal in structuring the narrative and meaning of many of the novels by Michele Roberts and Sara Maitland. This actually leads one to ask why in the so-called 'secular' West there have emerged feminist novelists concerned with integrating religious visions and language into their narratives. This process of appropriation has been seen as primarily political, promoting spiritual values aiding women's cause. Proclaiming a religious heritage to fit in within a feminist perspective is one of the sources leading to women's empowerment (Reuther, 1992: 277-80). In the so-called 'religious' societies of the Arab world, religious interpretations have been very restricted to a specialised group of male scholars for centuries (Siddiqui, 1996: 49-8). Arab Muslim Women are denied the access to religious interpretations, and androcentric notions have come to inform the corpus of Islamic discourses on women (Afshar, 1996: 199). It is even worse when certain historical and cultural precedents, like those pertaining to women's appearance and work in the household, are seen by many as inextricable components of the ethical and religious paradigm (Karmi, 1996: 75-8). If Islamic visions are easily detectable in different Arab feminist studies, their absence in an Arab feminist novel is necessarily implicative of some psychological and affiliative modes. The issue,

however, is not dissociated from other elements relating to the context of receiving feminist texts, particularly feminist novels, and the writer's desire for recognition.

To Felski, one writes to be read and "the writing self is profoundly dependent upon the reader for validation, specifically the projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathise, and identify with the author's emotions and experiences" (1989: 110). Felski finds that contexts have their impact on the manner texts are received and evaluated (1989:116-7). Structuring Arab feminist agenda along the lines of Western models could work to undermine the credibility of many Arab feminist novels within an Arab-Muslim context. Islamists and traditionalists would view audacity in handling sex matters and relations as an imitation not only of a specifically Western feminist type of writing but also of a Western way of living. It is not helpful if Islamists continue to dismiss feminist discourses as necessarily anti-Islamic or if feminists continue to exclude Islamists as necessarily anti-feminist. This can only work to engrave polarities and extremist reactions. Both should show some concern for, and understanding of, each other's position if a constructive vision of change is to be attained.

Colonisation has played an important role in the process of structuring Arab feminist discourses and responses to feminist texts. Ridley's *Images of the Imperial Rule* is concerned with unfolding the dynamics of colonial relations, asserting that narrative is complicit with certain powers and that many English novels are complicit with colonialism (1983: 1-5). Hence, not only the Arab feminist novel will be dealt with as a site pointing out workings of power relations whether complicit or adversarial with the West. The British feminist novels included here will also be examined as one of such locations where to gain an understanding of how images of the 'other' are constructed and how aspects of narrative and meaning might influence others' lives and collaborate in yielding new concepts and/or conflicts.

Said observes that "a comparative or, better, a contrapuntal perspective is required in order to see a connection between...experiences that are discrepant" of the coloniser and the colonised as "co-existing and interacting with others" (1993: 36). Working with the novel as a

site of complex interrelations between the 'self' and the 'other', the 'outside' and the 'inside', and the impact of these interrelations have on shaping attitudes redeems it as a valuable human force. To Raymond Williams, even if a novel is set in a specific region, it cannot be called strictly regional. The novel, he believes, involves "a very wide and complex, a fully extended and extensive, set of relationships" (1983: 233).

SouEIF, Al-Shaykh, Maitland, and Roberts have dealt with women's experiences as informed by different settings and cultural locations. The core of these experiences has been structured along the theme of women's oppression. I will attempt to show whether the common theme of women's oppression has produced overlapping images, or themes in works coming from different cultures. Also, it is important to find out whether certain similarities are the outcome of an engagement with the novel genre. The "gynocritical project,"³ Showalter maintains, "had uncovered intertextual relations between women writers that had previously gone unnoticed, and demonstrated traditions of influence and revision that did not come from an essential female consciousness, but from mutual engagements with genre" (1992: 193). If intertextuality with a Western text proves latent in Arab feminist narratives, could this attest to that underlying the different forms is a universal human experience? Or could it be seen as an attempt to affiliate with 'the superior other' and as such should be viewed adversely? Or could the resemblance be simply the outcome of Arab feminist novelists' readings of Western feminist novels?

Showalter in "Feminism and Literature" holds that women can afford to define themselves "in terms of being black, lesbian, South African or working class; but to deny that they are affected by being women at all is self-delusion or self-hatred, the legacy of centuries of denigration of women's art" (1992: 190). She also asserts in her older work *A Literature of their Own* that "women have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and

³ A term "introduced by Elaine Showalter in her essay 'Toward Feminist Poetics' (1979) to describe what she finds the most necessary form of a feminist criticism: namely, the study of women's writing; the relating of that writing to female experience; and the development of critical theories and methodologies appropriate to women" (In Eagleton (ed.), 1991a: 227).

have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviours impinging on each individual” (1977: 11). Homogeneity, it must be noted, is not peculiar to subcultures; within the one subculture there are different levels and forms of experiences.

The tenability of deferring an ‘aesthetic’ project in relation to feminist artifact is an important issue to be addressed when discussing feminist politics. This deference might be seen as politically temporal and ‘temporary’ necessity in favour of advancing women’s conditions in societies which continue to be permeated with male-biased values. If one concedes the assumption that feminist novels are formal variations to be subsumed within the framework of primarily political writings, then it is likely that just like all other contingent events which have political moments and transitory tenets, the feminist novel might as well be considered from the vantage point of the politics it cherishes. Having done its purpose, it awaits its demise. Despite the fact that novels intersect and interact with a diversity of ontological and ideological fields, they also attain a degree of considerable autonomy and value. Some of their specificities are derived from the pleasure they induce among the readers. Said (1991, 1993) has offered a reading approach to show how aesthetic narratives are parts of the historical relation between culture and empire, and how authors are implicated within their own histories. Similarly, one of the basic contributions of a feminist literary critique is providing yet another analytic category by way a literary text, not only specifically feminist, can be approached—that is a gender-focused analysis. Williams’ position as regards the status of art is also illuminating: “Art offers its images as images, closed and real in themselves (following a familiar isolation of the ‘aesthetic’), but at the same time represents a human generality: a real mediation between (isolated) subjectivity and (abstract) universality; a specific process of the ‘identical subject/object’” (1977: 151). Whereas Williams’ statement helps to secure art a degree of autonomy, it also emphasises the importance of underscoring common images as they keep recurring between different writers.

A sense of ‘human generality’ is also implied in Cixous’ rather rhetorical questions:

I never ask myself “who am I?” (*qu suis-je?*) I ask myself “who are I?” (*qui sont: -je?*) an untranslatable phrase. Who can say who I are, how many I are, which I is the most I of my I’s?

Of course we each have a solid social identity, all the more solid stable as all our other phases of identity are unstable, surprising. At the same time we are all the ages, those we have been, those we will be, those we will not be, we journey through ourselves. (1994: xvii).

Cixous not only emphasises the importance of historical processes in shaping the human self, but also the universal dimension of human experiences. She describes herself in the same article as an entity shaped by different locations and relations. She is Algerian of a Jewish origin living in France (1994: xv). While notions of commonality and universality should not be simplified as to blur specific contextual differences, recognising them is crucial for developing constructive dialogical relations between the 'self' and the 'other'.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been the elucidation of the historical contexts within which feminist discourses, specifically Arabic, have been produced. While the narratives of both Soueif and Al-Shaykh have been informed by various national and political struggles characterising the intellectual scene of the Arab world in general, they have also been particularly shaped by the conflictual relations between the West and the Arab world – relations which in their turn have been demarcating the modern Arab thought since the Arabs' early encounters with the West at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although aware of the impact that the colonial powers have had on their parts of the world, Soueif and Al-Shaykh cannot be described as directly echoing specifically Western feminist theories as moralising discourses. One cannot locate their narratives in relation to a specific Arab feminist strand or theory, considering that at a theoretical level, one can hardly talk about an indigenous Arab feminist theory transgressing male-founded paradigms and patriarchal notions. Soueif has voiced visions and depicted situations which make one believe that she has been exposed to postcolonial theories and has perceived the intricate dynamics constituting these theories. Al-Shaykh has been less skilful in depicting the intricacy of such dynamics while extremely persistent in pinpointing that women in the Arab-Islamic world are oppressed. It has been the labour of the two feminist writers to entwine the political with the personal, the public with the private. Echoing Islamic notions or

empathising with Islamists hardly constitutes an area of interest to them. This is not unexpected, considering the antagonistic relations Islamic discourses have with a 'feminism' constructed along responses to colonial discourses on Arab women. The historically aggressive relation commonly envisioned between Islam and feminism has led, or has been so internalised to lead, some feminist writers like Al-Shaykh and Soueif to refrain from engaging critically with Islamic notions or from seriously depicting Islamic figures. This politics of exclusion can be seen as affecting the tenability of certain artistic transformative visions and thus should be analysed.

While feminism in the Arab world has been considerably informed by the languages, notions, and ideas developed and disseminated along political and intellectual trends already forming in the area, Western feminists have worked to advance peculiarly feminist intellectual trends, theories, and practices. Although sensitive to historical emergencies and conscious of male-dominated mainstream theories, intersecting and interacting with them, Western feminist discourses are continuously transgressing and surpassing these theories. The need to develop distinctive feminist voices cautious of a long history of patriarchal paradigms of knowledge and practices has been found necessary to empower women. Western feminists have developed an energy of their own to promote a variety of studies and practices that have come to shape the cultural and intellectual scene of the Western world. While Western feminists have been sensitive to historical forces shaping intellectual strands at a particular era, their works neither neutralise nor accept male-dominated establishments and masculinist values.


The Western world has been witnessing the formation of prolific intellectual strands and multifarious theoretical paradigms since the Renaissance. This has significantly contributed to enriching feminist discourses and to promoting diverse studies by way of responding to, or displacing, or critiquing these strands and paradigms. Roberts' and Maitlands' works have also revealed an interest in grappling with different historical, religious, and theoretical notions informing the Western culture and thought. Specifically feminist practices have been highlighted and even critiqued in many of their novels. The drawbacks of Women's Movements and the

polarities engraved in some feminist notions or slogans have continually surfaced in their works. It is true that novels are not theoretical forms, but at one level of the narrative or another, some situations evolve in a manner which reflects the writers' familiarity with, and probably adoption of, certain theoretical notions and stands. Whereas in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novels certain narrative instances can be described as influenced by Western colonial discourses on Arab women, one cannot say that situations as evolving within the boundaries of her fiction reflect interest in particular Western feminist theories or intellectual strands. For, despite the fact that one needs to be very wary as to the threats accompanying the incorporation of one Western theory or another within an Arab-Islamic context, it is my belief that the ethics which some Western feminist discourses promote and the analytical tools they provide are truly humanist and 'universal' in dimension and can be incorporated by 'others' as to yield some positive transformative insights.

However, Maitland's and Roberts' oeuvres clearly reflect their commitment to feminism and they publicly stress their identification with 'the Women's Movement' (See Maitland's "A Feminist Writer's Progress" (1983), and "Futures in Feminist Fiction" (1989). Also see Roberts' "Write, She Said" (1986)). As for Soueif and Al-Shaykh, it is their concern with exposing Arab women's oppression which leads one to identify them with an Arab feminism – a term which has not been specifically defined outside the general frame of nationalism, or Islamism, or liberalism in the Arab world. Al-Shaykh has declared publicly her resentment at being called a feminist, believing that any such labelling is necessarily reductionist (See Charles Larson "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, a Reluctant Feminist" (1991)).

Various phenomena continuously shaped by and in history such as religion, male-dominated foundations, masculinist paradigms whether in relation to psychoanalysis, or Marxism, or left-wing groups, official histories of wars, and subjugated groups of people, not only women, are addressed from a specifically feminist perspective by both Roberts and Maitland. Religion, in particular, assumes a significant presence in their novels. Biblical images

and mythic constituents are reconstructed to help empower women and advance their status.

However, as in some of Roberts' novels, the 'anxiety' to create a specifically feminist vision and feminist myth has worked to transgress time that is historical and to blur the text's transformative quests for promoting women's politics. 

Chapter Two The Embracing House of Rachel

Introduction

Compared with international works, notably from Latin America, Africa or the Far East, Modern Arabic literature is still relatively unknown in the West. Apart from English translations of works by internationally recognised Arab writers, like the 1988 Nobel prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz, and some feminists like Nawal Al -Sa'dawi, translations from Arabic poetry or prose are rarely seen but in academic and specialised studies. It is true that works by some other Arab feminists have been translated into English like those by Hanan Al-Shaykh, Liana Badr, Salwa Baker, and Hoda Barakat among others; still these works have not been pivotal in academic and comparative studies. They have been read, analysed, and discussed by Western and Arab readers by way of “conjur[ing] up stereotypical images” of Middle-Eastern women (Fernea, 1995: 60) and exposing the different forms of their oppression seen as primarily attributed to their sex in a male-dominated Islamic culture and system of values

The dynamics of woman's oppression have always been too diverse and intricate to be satisfactorily accounted for by one mode of analysis strictly structured along *an* intellectual paradigm belonging to one discipline or another. While one can talk about a linguistic and religious unity of the Arab world, it remains difficult to find absolute political or social homogeneity not only across different societies but also within the one society. ‘Modernisation’ has mainly affected those women who have had access to education and information, or, as is often the case, those who belong to the privileged classes. The fact that the majority of Arab women continue to be dominated, suppressed, and denied freedom calls for deploying diverse techniques and processes to encompass as many causes and aspects of their oppression as possible. Heterogeneity of political, educational, and social conditions is as true of Arab societies as of Western ones. An interdisciplinary study not only can be more instrumental in promoting the cause of women, but also it can respond more ingeniously and practically to the labyrinth behind, and forms of, women's oppression in the West and in the Arab world. I shall

choose some Arab and English feminist novels that explore a diversity of approaches and literary styles. Whether these feminist novels are informed by realism, anti-realism, modernism/experimentalism, psychoanalysis, fantasy, myth, fable, or any other modes of writing, an urgent question will continue to give impetus to this study: Do the novels at hand appropriate modes of fixity or visions imbued with constructive transformative potentials?

Cultivating consciousness and resisting oppression are preconditions for women's emancipation. I seek in the novels I am dealing with here the location of moments and stances which render any such quest historically, culturally, and politically possible. Davis and Schleifer find that the concept of transformative critique as described by Seyla Benhabib very illuminating. She calls transformative critique "defetishising critiques" as opposed to "institutional critique" or "immanent critique" which "attempts to discover as does Kant, the invariant conditions that govern the existence of any phenomena" (Davis and Schleifer, 1992: 23). Transformative critique, on the other hand,

aims at criticising 'positive' existing phenomena but not, as Kantian idealist critique does...it aims to make something happen: to assert that things could be otherwise, that what exists is not necessary...and that critique can allow us to imagine and to articulate *narrative* in which things would be different from what they are. (1992: 25)

Davis and Schleifer argue that feminist studies have succeeded in demonstrating that culture can be a subject of a transformational critique and that "the discovery of contemporary feminism – is the promise of understanding and [the] power of transformation that cultural studies offer"(1992: 234). Regardless of their diverse theoretical and intellectual orientations, feminists have endeavoured to show that reality can be transformed. Despite the claim of many radical feminists like Susan Hawthorne (1991), Anne Koedt (1991), and others that 'separatism' at all levels whether sexual, political, or economic is conditional for the transformation of women's lives and for attaining liberation, an insistent issue emerges. It impinges on the possibility of inducing change in women's lives while concurrently maintaining the whole structure of the society intact. Another equally crucial issue, and one which directly falls within the scope of this literary study, surfaces: Do political commitments in feminist literary texts,

especially those aiming at disrupting male-dominated cultural values, have any bearing on the feminist aesthetic writings? This question is rendered more problematic by the continuous plea of many feminists like, for example, Kate Millett (1977), Rita Felski (1989), Elaine Showalter (1977), and many others, to be wary of deploying aesthetic criteria defined by male-dominated visions and values. Holding to such criteria means falling prey to male-institutionalised powers and, thus, ending up, may be unconsciously, replicating patriarchal values and constructs oppressive to women. However, Kathleen Wheeler finds in *'Modernist' Women Writers and Narrative Art* that a return to male aesthetic criteria could be instrumental provided that they are manipulated by feminist writers in such a way which leads to demystifying, diminishing, and finally engorging male powers informing and inscribing these criteria: women writers can use familiar literary conventions to break the set boundaries of these conventions and have the "hidden assumptions underlying" them "ironised" (1994: 3).

Attempting to see whether there is an affinity between a feminist literary writing imbued with authentic transformative potentials on the one hand, and the aesthetic value attributed to it on the other, emerges as one of the central themes in the study. Do fixity and intellectual stagnation even within the framework of a novel limit the potential of language and its capacity to ever yield rich instances and moments of true insights? On the other hand, do modes of alterity and a rejection of an oppressive status quo necessarily enrich the potential of the text and its use of language? Do limited literary visions, ones that are found to be evasively opposing change, or reinforcing directly or indirectly patriarchal institutions, or celebrating already existing systems with the ability to repatriate themselves continually, contribute to creating strictly structured narratives heading towards a closure, and as such, can be seen as treasuring the seeds of their own demise as works of art?

Felski (1989) and other feminist writers like Millett (1977) share the contention that feminist literature includes all the writings that show a critical awareness of women's inferior and marginal positions in the different human spheres, and show gender roles as inherently

complex matters. Despite its importance, the above definition of feminist literature remains indifferent to the issue of pleasure gained from literature and to those aesthetic constituents sustaining works of art. Raymond Williams's position is more satisfactory in this context. While stressing the importance of effecting social transformation, he goes on being concerned about "establish[ing] aesthetic and moral criteria for distinguishing the worthwhile products from the trash" (In Hebdige, 1979: 8).

The House of Power

Hebdige quotes Williams as saying that

I am in fact physically alone when I am writing, and I do not believe, taking it all in all, that my work has been less individual, in that defining and valuing sense, than that of others. Yet whenever I write I am aware of a society and of a language which I know are vastly larger than myself; not simply 'out there', in a world of others, but here, in what I am engaged in doing: composing and relating. (1979: 261)

According to Williams, any form of writing necessarily manifests cultural forces and is informed by the language of the era. No matter how detached the 'I' of the writer claims to be, the 'I' is a process whose formation is continuously interlinked to other cultural and historical processes operating in the society. Culture conditions any form of human activity including the apparently individual act of writing. Working from within a certain power, Williams asserts, is a precondition for a "decisive change" and for making "any genuine system of common interest and control" coming from a certain abusive power "impossible" (1973: 288). While Williams' transformative visions are not specifically feminist, his interpretations of culture and cultural studies hold solid ground with many feminists' insights as to emphasising the necessity of transgressing oppressive social and political boundaries.

The importance of working from within a powerful symbolic order and available cultural tools by way of disrupting them from inside has been stressed by many feminists. Cora Kaplan (1986), Hélène Cixous (1994), Maggie Humm (1991;1992), Kate Millett (1977), and many other feminists belonging to different intellectual schools have endeavoured to question economic, political and social situations where women are objectified, essentialized, or unified. They have

carefully scrutinised existing cultural paradigms and sought different methods to break away from their hegemony. Accordingly, it is important to find if some feminist novelists resort to available cultural tools whether those in relation to aesthetic or content-based criteria, and still manage to break away from them into a more woman liberating vision. Concurrently, we need to develop an insight which helps us to perceive if feminist novelists continue to deploy such tools in a way that works to sustain existing power structures and values abusive to women in any context.

Maitland has written many novels, beginning with *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1979). Yet, my treatment of her novels and the other feminist novels in the study will not be dependent on their chronological publication. The first of the novels I choose to deal with is *Three Times Table* (1990). This novel deploys a metaphor that keeps recurring in many of her other novels and also in many of the novels by the other Arab and English feminist novelists included in this study: this is the metaphor of the house. More than in any of the other chosen novels, the house in *TTT* displays a remarkably strong presence and is depicted as a site fraught with different meanings. The haunting image of the house not only works to untangle the relations developed among the characters, values, and institutions inside the specific world of the novel, but also outside it: the novelist's own cultural world and her historical setting. The house can be 'read' in such a way as to help expose the dynamics governing the relations which criss-cross the different Western ideologies and systems of values as they coexist in a particular historical phase. The house could also be seen as emblematic of the Western power. It does not merely shelter some local inhabitants but it also gives them power. The house emerges as *the* power. What this power is, what seems to be sustaining it, and whether it is, by any sense, a transferable kind of power are some of the questions to be examined next.

In *TTT* and many of her other novels, Maitland explores both realist and non-realist forms of writing in the same novel and deploys extended symbols and other figures of speech. Ideally, such figures could function as vehicles to communicate "a truth which is incommunicable"

otherwise (Holman, 1975: 314-5). Finding out whether Maitland holds to this traditional use of these figures of speech or endeavours to transcend the premises of a truth that is 'absolute' has bearing on how far she can go to transgress already set social and political boundaries.

If the house stands for the truth, we need to ask what kind of truth this is, by whom it is spoken, and who has the authority to claim it as *the* truth. Assuming that the truth is the emergent construct of Western ideologies, then we must find out if Maitland has developed the necessary insight which would enable the reader to interpret how a Western construct of the 'truth' might be seen as possessing the potential to oppress other women or probably other nations, and as such can be seen as totally exclusive of 'others'. In other words, we need to examine if Maitland has surpassed an egocentric vision of cultural constructs and succeeded in producing other more truly 'universal' human visions. Hekman (1995), Said (1993), and others have been ethically sceptical about the word 'universal' and its political implication. The kind of 'universal' visions which I am inclined to appropriate in this context is neither that treasured by the Enlightenment philosophy – which seems to me to be not universal enough – nor the philosophy of modernism where universality is defined from the perspective of a Western power and where the universal emerges as a peculiarly Western inscribed value. I find Aijaz Ahmad's idea of universality morally useful and politically sound. In an interview published in *Monthly Review*, he states:

Contrary to prevailing fashions, I am a shameless advocate of the idea of universality. This is so despite the fact that colonialism has been intrinsic to the kind of universality that we have had so far and that the only universal civilisation that exists today is the capitalist civilisation...As an idea, universality cannot be given up, because particular rights exist only to the extent that universal rights exist. No struggle against racism or any other kind of collective oppression is possible without some conception of universality...The women's struggles which address the issue of structured oppression of women across national, religious, and ethnic boundaries, and which demand equal rights for women and men, are deeply universalist in their aspiration. (In Repovz and Jeffs, 1995: 46-7)

Before we attempt an analysis of the concept of universality in relation to Maitland's *TTT* and her political and artistic employment of the metaphor of the house, a brief account of the novel is necessary. *TTT* involves three generations of British women, Rachel, her daughter Phoebe, and her granddaughter Maggie, aged respectively seventy-four, thirty-six, and fifteen, at

the time the narrative begins. Through the flashback device, which occupies a lot of the novel's space, the reader is introduced to different phases and aspects of these women's lives. Despite the fact that the three women share the same house, which is bought by Rachel, each of them inhabits a world of her own.

Maggie is depicted to be flying Fenna, a mythic dragon, that takes her not only over the rooftops of London to hiding places, but also accompanies her to her own room and appears in her dreams. Phoebe is her mother who has carried the values of the sixties into the world of the eighties. She broke many conventional barriers set out by her parents by quitting university, taking drugs, and living with lesbians, among other things. Rachel, the grandmother, is an eminent palaeontologist who has published some influential books. At a late stage of her life, she finds herself in situations where she has to confront her dearly long-held ideals and theoretical considerations which she has fought for throughout her professional life. Impinging on the past and the individual experiences of each as shaping the three women's present lives, Maitland depicts a curious event. On one strange night, Maggie's skylight where she lives mysteriously smashes and covers her by "shower of diamonds, in a dust cloud of shattered stars," so Maggie starts screaming "with fear and relief" (*TTT*, 185). On that epiphanic night, it seems that all the illusions of the three women's pasts are faced and the limitations of their mutual bonds are cleared up.

The novel could be said to be feminist in perspective for many reasons. Apart from the fact that it is written by a feminist, it has the lives and actions of three women placed in the centre of the narrative. Other reasons have to do with the novel's emphasis on the so-called feminist themes: the gender roles available in a male-dominated society, the political involvement of characters in the Woman's Movements, the boundaries limiting their experiences as women, the stories of their friendships with each other and with other women, and the sensitive bonds they have with their mothers and fathers. It is true that tackling the above themes is intrinsic to a feminist novel (Felski, 1989; Marcus, 1992; Showalter, 1977), the mere act of

tackling them does not encompass the totality of the feminist cultural project in its ambitious claim for effecting structural changes in all spheres. In this chapter I need to find whether there is enough evidence in *TTT* that can be interpreted as reinforcing feminists' claim for the necessity of transforming patriarchy and its biased institutions, and thus be able to ascribe to the novel a truly comprehensive feminist vision and orientation. DuPlessis, for example, has warned feminist writers from lapsing into some mode of writing where "narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale" and by which nothing emerges "beyond the ending" (1985: 3, 197).

The metaphor of the house in Maitland's novel is central to understanding whether there has been a movement "beyond the ending." The characters move and change, but the skylight of the house collapses only to be fixed. The significance of the house will become clearer once the 'halo' that Maitland places around it is seen through. The house is the locus of the action of the three women. Its real owner is Rachel, a fervent advocate of the Darwinist theory and an absolute opponent of the catastrophe theory (*TTT*, 55-7). She "divided [it] into two self-contained but linked maisonettes where the three women now lived" (*TTT*, 8) with Maggie sleeping in the attic.

It is important to show how Maitland's diction transforms the static entity of the house and endows it not only with human qualities but also with peculiar sort of sensibilities and mysterious controlling powers. The house "always makes its welcome" to its three inhabitants when they come home tired and disillusioned (*TTT*, 46). "Rachel's house" – the phrase is emphatically and repetitively used in the novel – (*TTT*, 8,47), "sense[s] the danger of her [Phoebe's] betrayal in its sturdy foundations, [and] had fought back with outrageous demands...It was a big house; it carved a full-time mistress with its charming banisters" (*TTT*, 47). Even Lisa, a rebellious character in the novel, a lesbian and Phoebe's best friend "was wrong in believing that she was entirely impervious to its charms" (*TTT*, 48). "Rachel was well there and so was Maggie," but "the house was fighting skilfully against her [Phoebe's] possible

rebellion and *the house would win* [my emphasis]" (*TTT*, 48). "The house was the symbol of her defeat and so she loved it reluctantly and with a frequently sulky lack of grace" (*TTT*, 48).

'Home' for Rachel, however, "was strong magic, and this house caught all the echoes of that strong love and casual centredness. It welcomed her now, tired and sad though she was" (*TTT*, 50).

So, the house is Rachel's and it embraces both Maggie and Phoebe. Rachel's attachment to the house is extraordinary while Phoebe's relation to it is strange. It is a reluctant love. The kind of feelings developed towards the house is one conditioned by the individual history of each. Yet, neither the individual history of Rachel, nor of Phoebe, nor even of Maggie is outside their own times. In fact, each of them seems to be a perfectly natural product of a particular phase in the ideological history of Europe. How does this relate to the house? Perhaps the following paragraph from the novel proves helpful in illuminating the relation between the house and its dwellers. Part Two of the novel opens with the following paragraph:

So now it was night-time, and each of the three women had gone to her own room, stacked up like layers of sediment, geological formations each laid down in *different eras* [emphasis mine]. The oldest at the bottom. Rachel down on the ground floor of the house, touching the bedrock almost, she was the bedrock, in her flesh and her brain was the foundation of this world. She was not just the oldest, but the core, the source. The basement, though, was underneath her, as her mother was underneath them all. Two storeys above her Phoebe had her room, and high above them both, nearest to the sun and the rain, still being shaped by these external forces, was Maggie in her attic. (*TTT*, 55)

Rachel is the "core," "the source," and "the foundation and the oldest at the bottom." Actually, she is the foundation not only of this house, but also "in her flesh and her brain was the foundation of this world." She is the core of the world. What is this world? Who is Rachel and why is she rendered the bearer of the above associations and attributes? Yet, each of the three women "laid down" in a different era. What is Rachel's era? Having asked about Rachel's era, then we need to ask also about Phoebe's and Maggie's eras. The women as depicted in the above paragraph achieve a harmonious unity with the house. They are this time endowed with qualities peculiar to the physicality of the house; they are "stacked up like layers of sediment, geological formations."

The narrative yields some instances where the fusion between the house and the three women is almost complete. In these instances the women appear to be losing all signs of their humanness only to become static portraits which, with a touch from the novelist's magic wand, are given life and allowed movements in various, though carefully planned and fully controlled, directions. In the first three pages and in the course of introducing her main three characters, Maitland underscores those moments when the women mysteriously pause and for a while are depicted as frozen entities. Interestingly, she goes on cherishing similar moments throughout the novel (*TTT*, 6,7, 8, 9, 10, 55). For example, the reader is first introduced to Rachel while the latter is "[standing] now, a moment's pause, at the top of the monumental sweep of staircase, under the shadow of her grandiose museum...she needed that moment of standing framed in the massive doorway ...She needed to steady herself. For a flicker of time the pause became a pause...[She was] adopt[ing] those mannish postures" (*TTT*, 3). "At precisely the same moment, several miles further Phoebe Patherington also paused at the top of a flight stairs. A rather different flight this, at the top of an eleven-storey tower block in Hackney" (*TTT*, 4). Maggie also "the schoolgirl had had a tiring day, and she too paused for a moment on her walk across the park" (*TTT*, 4). Yet "[t]here were at this precise moment probably eight million people in London alone, all of them somewhere and going somewhere else...More things than were imaginable were actually happening" (*TTT*, 5). "And later, Rachel came home in a taxi. And later, Phoebe came home on her bike. And later, Maggie flew home" (*TTT*, 46).

The above sketches draw the attention to the necessity of tackling the relation of both the movements and the pauses to the overall structure of the novel. At moments Maitland is interested in rendering her women fixities within a complex scale of alterities. This she does in order to be able to catch historical moments and ascribe to them a certain mode of interpretation. The portrayal of each is representative of a "different era." The seemingly diverse locations of the women extend to become lines dissolving into one locus. If each of them is representative of probably a 'type', a 'way of thinking', or a 'specific mode of temporality', they all eventually

meet in the same place: 'the house', Rachel's house. For "[t]he house, even without its women in it, was filled with the ghosts they had made of each other, and with other shadows" those particularly of their parents and grandparents (*TTT*, 8).

We often grasp moments when the actions and interactions of the women can be seen as weird or least expected. For example, Phoebe falls in love with her breast cancer. She treasures it as her secret which she stubbornly rejects to share with anybody, not even with a doctor. Phoebe's "new lover will take her away to his own house, high and white, where she will be waited on by servants, all immaculately uniformed and universally charming" (*TTT*, 121). Could it be that the only way out of Rachel's house is death? At times, Maitland's diction is devised to draw one to conceive of the house and Rachel as one. Phoebe, on the other hand, is the 'other'. Significantly, it is an exposure of the 'other' that helps in setting out the rules by which the self, entity, and things are more vividly defined.

In the summer of 1968, Phoebe breaks away with her own parents. Bored with the code of ethics they try to impose on her in relation to pursuing a certain field of education, and what type of friends to make, she "smoked a good deal of dope, although she did not like it; she drank a great deal although it made her sick" and indulged herself in sex (*TTT*, 34). Rachel at one time visits her daughter's room and is eaten up with rage noticing that "the top book on the pile was by Hegel" (*TTT*, 86). For Phoebe's socialist and Marxist affiliation stand in a stark contrast with her mother's rightist and conservative beliefs. Most of Phoebe's friends were hippies (*TTT*, 86). Rachel is deeply disillusioned, learning of Phoebe's resolution not to go back ever to Cambridge to finish her university degree since "[t]here doesn't seem any point in Maths now, not with the war in Vietnam and the complete corruption of the whole system. What good has all that academic crap ever done you [Rachel] or Daddy?" Instead, she chooses to travel around (*TTT*, 87). Phoebe believes that "science in general was a crude product of masculist thinking, designed to separate knowledge from experience" (*TTT*, 93). Phoebe at one stage is shown as a fervent advocate of women's rights. Rachel, having joined Phoebe and her friends in one of

these leftist political sessions, observes that their ‘squat’ “at one level...was appalling, squalid, freezing cold; at another it was oddly energetic and beautiful” (*TTT*: 95). This observation indicates that despite Rachel’s disapproval of the kind of choices her daughter makes, she can still recognise in them some appealing notions and beauty. This could also work to emphasise the idea that gaps or differences between generations are not, after all, absolutely unbridgeable.

Phoebe becomes pregnant, sick, jobless, and poor. Her refusal to conform to the system and to her parents’ rules disprivileges her. All that she tries to hold to seems to be ephemeral just like the flowers which become her passion (*TTT*, 115). Even the man with whom she once fell in love, Jim, abandons her for another woman, seeing that she has gone too far in her commitment to the Women’s Movement. Jim, according to Phoebe, is a typical representative of “those extraordinary skinny left-wing men, who had bullied their girl-friends into the Women’s Movement and been surprised when the hand with which they had so kindly offered freedom had been bitten so damn hard” (*TTT*, 129). An account is given of those women who become committed feminists:

Their women, far from being grateful, turned on them, snarling, in late night conversations telling them to shut up; far from setting them free to work for the Revolution, their women demanded that they take emotional responsibility and also clean the loos. And finally, only a year or so later, turned them out of house and home – put them on the street, as women who failed to be properly grateful to the fathers had been put for centuries. (*TTT*, 129)

The above critiques male Marxists or left-wing groups that have proved to be incapable of freeing themselves from androcentric values despite their radical claim for change and freedom. Phoebe’s Marxist and leftist affiliations have not been specifically helpful in relieving her agonised self or in supporting women’s cause in general. Also, “[n]either drugs nor sex had worked” (*TTT*, 124). She no longer believes that her group of women is “going to change the world.” She also finds out that she cannot cope with their intensity and emotionalism (*TTT*, 140-1). So, she decides to move into her mother’s home, to Rachel’s house. On the day she makes the move, she admits her defeat: “she had been defeated, that love, love for her mother and for her daughter, had defeated her. The passion she had tried to feel for feminism was not enough, it

did not give her enough strength to stand up for herself against the demands of these two women" (*TTT*, 141).

Phoebe's recalcitrance does not survive the actual demands of her world. So she finds herself in a situation where she has to submit. Rachel condemns Phoebe's choices, which she sees as solid proofs that "Phoebe had no sense of history, unfortunately" (*TTT*, 62). The implication is that Rachel's vivid sense of history accounts for her present stature, while Phoebe's lack of it is behind her confusion. The daughter's revolutionary mood, her rejection of the system, and her woman-centred visions have all been aborted rather early. Rachel's sense of security, on the other hand, could be attributed to the strong sense of history she has. If Rachel signifies the Western establishment and its long cherished tradition, then a claim to historical sense is inevitable. This stands in contrast with Phoebe who signifies transition and change—a phase usually fused with anxieties and instabilities. Rachel has been there for her daughter's rescue. "Rachel was as safe as a rock" (*TTT*, 172), while "Phoebe was different...unreasonable and distant and dangerous. Phoebe had too short a fuse" (*TTT*, 172). Rachel's follies are all excusable and maybe necessary to legitimate herself as a character in the novel, and repatriate her status or what she stands for.

Driven by a sense of guilt that she might have neglected Phoebe because of her work, Rachel is determined to embrace not only her daughter, but also her daughter's daughter. She develops a passion for palaeontology at a young age—a passion which she significantly inherits from her father who "was a real fossil hunter and had dug in obscure corners of every continent" (*TTT*, 62). Excavating for fossils of dinosaurs is her idea of combining theory with practice, "of learning and then seeing, guessing and then confirming, and proving both learning and sight with the utter physicality of digging and extracting. She had been made for this" (*TTT*, 63).

Rachel "needed so much to prove that the world of science was stronger and more real, more important than the world of the heart, of love and of joy" (*TTT*, 84). Rachel's "idea was a powerful metaphor for the underlying Darwinian understanding that everything developed slowly

and steadily, carried along by the species' determination to survive" (*TTT*, 106). Her empiricism and belief in a linear development of history and unequivocal findings of 'objective' science naturally correspond to the philosophical doctrines of the Enlightenment. It is during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries that spiritual truths and concepts became irrelevant within the materialism of the European philosophies of which Rachel appears to be the legitimate inheritor. The claim that reason is universal and science is grounded in reason dominated the intellectual scene then (Hawkes, 1996: 43, 59-67). Yet, it is "the rationality of the Enlightenment [which] has, in practice, furnished a pretext for all kinds of domination and exploitation...the intellectual triumph of instrumental science and empiricist philosophy...and the rule of the European possessors of reason over the 'primitive' inhabitants of the 'undeveloped' world" (Hawkes, 1996: 141). Rachel at the beginning is not willing to question her long-held beliefs from the perspective of how it has the tendency to affect the 'other'. Other non-European places are viewed with utter detachment. For example, Africa is seen by her as "a superficially untroubled" place that was making her welcome so that she can freely unearth its treasures. She is aware that "Phoebe would say that was racist" (*TTT*, 63).

The empirical world is perceived by many of the Enlightenment philosophers like Hobbes and Condillac as more authentic than anything else (Hawkes, 1996: 61-2). In conformity with the ethos of the Enlightenment is also Rachel's rejection of "the powers of myth and imagination" (*TTT*, 180). This is why when she begins to rethink some of her theories, when she begins to realise that the urge to change and to develop a different insight towards the world, herself, and her relations with others, she is depicted for the first time in her life as catching a vision of Fenna, the magical dragon that accompanies Maggie, her granddaughter, wherever she goes. "Fenna was an assault, an attack, on all that she had stood for. Fenna was the wilful instrument of her own professional disintegration...Fenna was the dark force of the imagination as well as its golden dancing; Fenna was chaos as well as order" (*TTT*, 109).

Interestingly, Rachel is not drawn as a static character with no potential for change. One of her closest friends is a young man, Paul. The two friends often indulge very enthusiastically in intellectual talk. Paul tries to convince Rachel to reconsider her theoretical stands and to quit gradualist theories. He himself is an advocate of the “catastrophe theory” which he insistently uses to support his view as to the extinction of some species like the dinosaurs. Influenced by him and by the findings of a research centre in the USA, Rachel starts seeing that facts could not be made to accord with her original conclusions. For some time, however, she remains refrained from acknowledging her change in public. Something occurs in her house, a phenomenon which she observes herself, leads her to announce her acceptance of “the catastrophe theory”. This is when, mysteriously and suddenly, the roof of the attic where Maggie lives falls down. Witnessing that a catastrophe has already taken place, she transforms her beliefs and actually retires from her monotonous work at the museum to be truly relieved for the first time in ages. Interestingly, Rachel’s transformation is not altogether devoid of irony. The change in Rachel has been brought up in accordance with her own system of logic, one that is grounded in the physical act of seeing. This act of collapsing turns out to be the outcome of exorcising Fenna, the dragon, which goes on haunting Maggie throughout her childhood only to leave her the night she has her period for the first time. Maggie shouts: “Fenna, I command you. Go to Rachel,” for she is the “crone, she knew as she spun downwards. Rachel is the one grown old and weary. Rachel needs, Fenna needs, they need each other...Go to Rachel, the barren one, and fill her with harvest of fire” (*TTT*, 184). On the last page of the novel, Rachel suddenly notices “for the first time, that a medium-sized dragon was sitting in the upper branches of a particularly fine plane tree” (*TTT*, 215).

By way of assessing whether or not the novel yields transformative visions, we need to have a closer look at the dynamics of this change which seems to be affecting the three women and not only Rachel. Phoebe finally consents to seeing her G.P for the treatment of her breast lump urged by her motherly feelings for Maggie. It takes her a catastrophe to realise the panic

incurred upon her daughter by virtue of this extraordinary accident and the kind of security that her presence gives to Maggie. Maggie, after the accident, starts being more independent and more aware of her own womanness. Significantly though, on that catastrophic night “the neon quality vanished and they were all together as one flesh with three faces” (*TTT*, 190). The scene obviously recalls the archetypal image of the old crone, woman, and maiden. The three women could also be said to be representing three Western historical orientations which, despite their diversities, coexist and interact. It is important to point out that these three women meet at a certain point in time and they all inhabit relatively homogenous social and spatial spheres. They together constitute the fabric of the depicted society. It is plurality within some kind of unity. When change takes place, it tends to affect each one of them in different ways, the grandmother, the daughter, and the granddaughter. The change, however, need not incur crude separations between them, nor a dramatic loss with a common history.

Because the women continue to be embraced under the roof of Rachel’s house which has proved easily amenable to amendment, and because the house has been central to the formal structuring of the novel and its content, transformation can hardly be said to be dramatic. Apart from the fact that the change which has affected the lives of the women has been apocalyptic in nature, Rachel has shown an extraordinary resilience unusual in some one as old as she is. The last third of the novel is devoted to illuminating the process of change in relation to Rachel. The necessity of Rachel’s change has been shown to be much more urgent than that of the other women in the novel. Phoebe’s intellectual interests and intensities have become much less in Rachel’s house. She is totally taken by her new lover, the lump in her breast, caressing it in her loneliness (*TTT*, 116-8). Maggie is too young to bother about philosophy or political and theoretical orientations. Also, she is too imaginative to be bothered by the world of reality. Lack of imagination seems to be the only dimension of Rachel’s dilemma. The vision which she grasps of Fenna is highly subjective. It is significantly depicted to help us understand a particular group of Western intellectuals with dogmatic adherence to some theoretical stands.

Rachel's never decaying sense of history along with the kind of learning and education she has received have rendered her a suitable site for change. For she is "the core, the source" (*TTT*, 55). If her beliefs and theoretical positions have proved correct at a particular phase, these very positions have had the genes of adaptability and of accommodating new changes. Unlike Phoebe who has been depicted as cherishing ephemeral things, Rachel has been more linked to the solid ground; she has a passion for digging deep into the earth for fossils.

In fact, I am inclined to see this change as emanating from within the house which is destroyed only from the top and later is amended. The house remains the same house and Rachel grows as strong as ever. On the opening page of the novel "she wished she were dead" (*TTT*, 3). By the time the narrative is about to end Rachel is revived. She has gained further immunity by emerging adaptable to the different mainstreams. The house, despite all, remains Rachel's and all what Rachel represents: The Western establishment. Yet, Rachel has always adhered to "mannish postures" (*TTT*, 3), and has acted up to the moral and social standard of the first two men in her life, her father and her husband. Let us not forget that a mannish female type was the model for woman's emancipation at the beginning of this century. Rachel moves, though sometimes reluctantly, with history and proves to have the potential for change.

Maitland's concern is to transform values and institutions whether those specifically abusive to women or to men. Her proxies for change are women, reinforcing hereby a feminist perspective. The boundaries she weaves between the three successive generations are neither absolute nor insurmountable. The old, the middle-aged, and the young all are shown to experience different moments of change. The kind of transformation envisioned here is evolutionary rather than drastically revolutionary. For it is true that the three women differ in terms of age and ideological orientations, yet they are intricately linked. The inseparable bond they cherish signifies the sense of continuity that the three generations necessarily engrave. History and one's pastness cannot possibly be trashed out. Even more, no one generation has the access to an 'absolute truth'.

Whereas the traditional establishment represented by Rachel has its own dilemmas and dogmas, newly evolving movements advocating change have too their own problematics and mishaps. Revolutionary movements, as signified through the character of Phoebe, for example, have always suffered from a threat of annihilation, futility, or anarchy. On the other hand, older generations are often seen as dogmatic in their adherence to secular laws and scientific advocacy. As such no generation can claim its grasp for the truth which is relative and in a continuous state of alterity. This is of course not to undermine that constructive changes must always be prompted and differences must be incorporated within a particular space. Significantly, the attic collapses, but the foundations of the house stand firm. This is one of the most symbolic events in the novel that works to reinforce Maitland's concept of change. There are occurrences and contingencies which bring forth change within a particular setting. A truly significant change, however, is necessarily based on a foundation: historical consciousness. This foundation is by no way deterministic. Hence, each generation is different and emerges as the outcome of its interaction with its own ever-new temporal and social circumstances. Nevertheless, there remain universal needs which are both dynamic and relatively private. They allow goodness (or may be evil) some mobility within the different generations. The mythic creature, Fenna, is transformed from the younger girl, Maggie, to the old woman, Rachel. Maggie is initiated into womanhood, into reality, the night Fenna is exorcised. At that moment Rachel discovers her need to come out from her positivist and scientific world and inhabit another world where the human imagination is allowed to play. It is Phoebe who is caught up between two generations. She is the transitional phase known to be paying the highest price for any change. Her confusion and depicted loss are expected, albeit for a while. She is located within paradoxical relations. She is in need of her mother, the older generation, and is needed by her daughter, the younger generation. She cannot afford to sacrifice any of them.

More Houses in England

Pierre Bourdieu in the chapter entitled “The Kabyle House or the World Reserved” in his book *Algeria 1961* explains how the organisation of the house in some parts of Algeria is demonstrative of the kind of relations between the public and the private spheres. Despite the fact that the house is declared as “the universe of women” (1979: 140), still within this universe the opposition between the private world of women and the public world of men is clearly structured into the very interior and exterior design of the house. Places where women perform their duties, marital, domestic, and otherwise, are withdrawn to the darker side of the house away from the main entrance opening to the public life. Whereas this observation of the Algerian house has little to do with the design of the Western house, Bourdieu’s point that the house is “a full country” and a microcosm for the society at large (1979: 144, 145) is of considerable relevance here. The house as a metaphor in fiction often emerges as an entity embodying matrixes of values and different strata of human experiences. In *TTT* we have seen how the house is depicted as an embodiment of Western, specifically English, social space encompassing different generations, perspectives, and intellectual orientations peculiar to different eras. The concept of strength as seen by Maitland is grounded in resilience and the capacity to stand strain. Maitland is aware that lack of resilience might result in uprooting or breaking the house—an unaffordable price.

Giuliana Giobbi holds that “without blood ties,” in Maitland’s *TTT* “triangle of emotions, resentments and rivalries among Rachel, Phoebe and Maggie would be unthinkable” (1995: 6). Their living in one house, and not only blood ties, are what actually constitute the catalyst of actions and interactions between the women in the novel. The house is crucial to one’s assertion of identity. While overlapping spaces occupied by different people can work to maximise tensions and anxieties arising from conflicting identities inherent in the different human subjectivities, it also helps in mobilising ideas and interchanging concepts between one generation and another. Subjugating ‘an other’ can often become a demarcation of the self’s sense of identity. Rachel emerges more powerful and her own sense of self-identity is further

asserted not only because the house is hers, but also because she is the more solid and the best equipped intellectually to contain or even subjugate others living with her.

In the remaining parts of this chapter, I will try to elucidate why the house continues to be such an important metaphor in other novels by Sara Maitland and some by Michele Roberts. My detailed analysis of Maitland's *TTT* has been to show that the themes inherent in this novel are firmly rooted in the coherently interwoven structure of the novel—a structure that is strictly organised along 'three times table'. Extracting order from chaos by way of maintaining the entity of the house and solidifying its pillars has been one of the themes of the novel. The urge to hold to order continues to dominate in and inform many of the novels at hand. Moreover, this order discredits some feminists' claim for political commitment and at times proves indifferent to other wider political issues. Such issues do not relate only to 'others' beyond the local borders, but also to other women within the borders.

In Maitland's and Roberts' novels there are no specifically explicit treatments of coloniser/colonised relations. Inspired by Said's assertion that "[n]early everywhere in nineteenth –and early twentieth century British and French culture we find allusions to the facts of empire, but perhaps nowhere with more regularity and frequency than in the British novel" (1993: 73), I will endeavour an explanation of the seemingly absent colonised/coloniser relations. Said underscores narratives older than the ones I am presently dealing with. Still I find in Maitland's and Robert's novels a quest for establishing "ordination." Within a colonial context, Said maintains, "to establish social order and moral priorities at home" is very instrumental to a colonial cause (1993: 73). This is not at all to suggest that my two English feminist novelists intend to appropriate a hegemonic narrative or colonial plan. But, again going back to Said, it is "a structure of attitude and reference" that informs the process of writing (1993: 73, 74-6). In this context summoning Foucault's imagined dialogue between 'Desire' and 'The institution' in his "The Order of Discourse" is useful:

Desire says: 'I should not like to have to enter this risky order of discourse; I should not like to be involved in its peremptoriness and decisiveness; I should like it to be all around me like a

calm, deep transparency, infinitely open, where others would fit in with my expectations, and from which truths would emerge one by one; I should only have to let myself be carried, within it and by it, like a happy wreck.' The institution replies: 'You should not be afraid of beginnings; we are all here in order to show you that discourse belongs to the order of laws, that we have long been looking after its appearances; that a place has been made ready for it, a place which honours it but disarms it; and that if discourse may sometimes have some power, nevertheless it is from us and us alone that it gets it'. (1984: 109)

While the above should not be conducive to discouraging resistance narratives, it still draws attention to those instances where narrative can be seen as held a capture within one paradigm of power or another.

Daughter of Jerusalem (DOJ)

The metaphor of the house/flat operates in Maitland's *DOJ* too. Yet, the house is not as essentially central in the novel as it is in *TTT*. *DOJ* tells the story of Liz who with her husband Ian have been desperate for a child of their own. For five years, Liz has continued to attend a clinic to help her conceive. Tests have shown that she, and not Ian, is the cause of the problem. Her commitment to work and continuous attendance and participation in the women's group sessions could not ease her feelings of inferiority that she is barren. Her gynaecologist tells her that there is no physical cause deterring her pregnancy and attributes the delay to psychological reasons. This adds to her sense of guilt and, thus she starts launching a search for moments or events in her life that might have led to depriving her of 'crowning' her femininity by getting pregnant. She starts thinking, "was she to be punished now, like St. Augustine, for what she had not known to be wrong, assuming that she hadn't known, assuming that it had been wrong? Was she being punished for not being a good woman, for cutting her hair to inch-long stubble and for having nothing to abandon a bra for?" (*DOJ*, 15). The experimental form of the novel helps to underscore how Liz's desire to conceive influences significantly her relations with other women and with her husband. She herself, at one stage, experiences 'change' that culminates in her resolution to move into a new flat. Emphasising the paradoxes raised by Liz's infertility is also the novel's principal feminist theme. The emerging relations and paradoxes are also emphasised through the realist story about Liz being interleaved with re-told Bible stories about women.

DOJ comes out of and is partly about 1970s feminism in England. Many women then engaged in certain public campaigns, including the right of women to abortion on demand – ‘A Woman’s Right To Choose’ was the slogan. The novel basically asks, via the story of Liz’s infertility – ‘yes, a woman can choose not to have a baby. But what happens when a woman like Liz chooses to have a baby but cannot because she is barren?’ The implications of Liz’s experience are profound, and, at different narrative levels, lead to questioning the easy model of autonomy proffered by that ‘right to choose’ slogan. The stories based on the Bible in the novel work to link Liz with other women of the past. (Barrenness is the great curse for women in the Bible.)

Not lapsing into a stereotypical husband-wife relation and carefully rendering Ian an understanding husband to Liz’s situation, Maitland, though, depicts him in one of the scenes fiercely hitting Liz on the face and the body for calling him “faggot” and an “impotent queer” (*DOJ*, 155). Ian is not at all intended to be a chauvinist villain. For Liz’s taunt is, in the context, cruel in all sorts of ways. First, she is demanding that they have sex because it is the right time of the month to conceive, and Ian does not feel like it. Second, Ian was gay before he knew Liz – he was and has been impotent. More, he was a ‘rent boy’ and Liz helped him out of that (*DOJ*, 54-60). Other than this lapse, Ian is represented as a sympathetic, intelligent, and tender husband. Of course, this is not to suggest that she deserves the beating; provocation is no excuse, and Ian certainly does wrong, but she too was not guiltless. The incident is not typical of their relationship, or only in the sense that the intolerable tensions of infertility are telling on them both.

Attacked by Ian, Liz packs her things, leaves the house, and walks in the streets. That very night she has sex with her employer, Tony, in the work place. By way of soothing her pain, having told him of what happened at home, he starts caressing and then making love to her. Liz does not feel that she has been used. She feels fulfilled and thanks him. Having sex with Tony not only helps in easing her sense of dehumanisation caused by Ian’s beating, but also it is an

expression of her revenge on Ian. She likens sex with Ian to a charitable “act of a friend” (*DOJ*, 160). Liz would always try to justify whatever she does within an ethical frame of reference, an assertion of her inherent feelings of guilt. She is never sure of what she really wants and always blames herself for whatever wrong that happens not only to her but also to those around her (*DOJ*, 92, 94).

Her departure from her husband’s house has given Ian the impression that Liz could be independent and go on without him. “She felt a minor victory; for the first time she had been the one able to walk away from a fight, he had been trapped within it unable to move” (*DOJ*, 161). He, therefore, insistently approaches her, apologising and confirming that the only thing he wants in this life is to be with her whether she has his baby or not (*DOJ*, 162). Significantly, the first move she makes out of the house is followed by another move; this time to a new house. Having received a letter from her mother telling her that soon she will send her ten thousand pounds to buy a house, Liz asks Ian if he likes their flat. Ian’s face shows a sign of pain at the idea of having to make a move only to be relieved that the money is coming from her mother (*DOJ*, 178).

The idea of buying a new house has been very appealing to Liz; “[o]ut of the flat where she had gone mad, out of that flat where she had let Ian hit her, out of that flat where there was not enough room to swing a cat: away from that place where she had been unfaithful to her husband. A new life. A new start” (*DOJ*: 178). Liz’s seeking a new house is an expression of an urge to induce a change into her life. The first house is loathed by Liz because it has witnessed her humiliation and self-deceit. The new house this time will be bought with her own money, which means that she can live with Ian in it, probably according to her own terms. “She was going to have a house where she did not feel trapped, where she could lock herself up for an evening and not have to walk the streets” (*DOJ*, 179). The move into a new house symbolises Liz’s need and struggle for an identity and self-understanding that undercut her own sense of

self-guilt and self-humiliation. The house becomes a metaphor for Liz's consciousness and her psychological state. For Liz now is "sick and tired of being disgusted by her house" (*DOJ*, 179).

Liz's agonised self is momentarily relieved by the knowledge that with her mother's cash she and Ian have a lot of buying power; but it was "Ian [who] found the house, and she felt jealous. She had wanted to be able... to say I have found a house for you from me" (*DOJ*, 180). Still, her yearning to have a baby of her own, to be a 'complete woman', continues to be strong. The principal theme of the novel and one of its highest paradoxes is Liz's choice to have a baby. Despite her commitment to feminism, and the positive changes she undergoes which help her to emerge a more confident person and no longer torn with feelings of guilt, she still hopes to conceive. The idea of adopting the baby of another mother does not at all appeal to her; such a baby would always "remind her of what she could not have" (*DOJ*, 184).

Liz is a member of women's group, well exposed to feminist thought, and contributes significantly to feminist discussions (*DOJ*, 2, 8, 15, 50, 219). At times she feels sceptical about her own feminist affiliation and feminism in general (*DOJ*, 90, 92, 94). (She has a good reason in feeling that way *since her particular problem is not addressed by a feminism that defines 'a woman's right to choose' in terms of abortion!*) She is never sure of anything she does and is often haunted by feelings of guilt and self-hatred:

Her father loved her when she was a child because she had been a woman who did not challenge his authority... Ian loved her because she was a woman who did not threaten his timorous sexuality, Nancy loved her because she was a woman who did not encroach on her territory, but sat on the boundaries looking enviously in. That was her own power; she bought love by being inadequate as a woman. (*DOJ*, 186).

"Liz believed in the power of silence. She would not name her fear" (*DOJ*, 229). Confronting her own past and present, reconsidering the terms of her relations whether with her mother, father and friends, and attempting to pinpoint the gaps in her life, Liz comes into new realisations. She stops her visits to the clinic of the chauvinistic, Dr. Marshall, and then promises herself that

she would not cry, she would not pity herself, she would not enter into that mildewed contempt that Nancy and Alice held for her. She did not need her biology to prove herself on, she would not accept those definitions. She did not need her friends. She would not accept their love if it came with these sugared-sorrow wraps on. (*DOJ*, 239).

Liz would like to believe that the new house offers a symbolic resolution. Still, the movement into the new house neither grants her the baby she wants nor renders her desire to have one any less. The act of movement, however, signifies Liz's desire for change.

Also important to Liz is Ian's gift of a puppy, which is, as Liz immediately grasps, both a lovely Christmas present and painful in being a substitute for the child whom they are unable to have (*DOJ*, 238-244). (She sees her friends perceiving this and being 'sugary-sorry' for her, which her pride rightly rejects.) It plainly matters that the novel ends – and ends happily perhaps at Christmas, the festival of the birth of Jesus, which is obviously meant to resonate with all those Old and New Testament stories interspersed in the narrative – 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given' (Isaiah, quoted in endless carols and Christmas services.) And this clearly resonates with the hint that Liz may indeed, this time, have conceived, since it is the first day of her period and, for the first time ever, she has not started bleeding at 8 a.m., which is why "she hopes" (*DOJ*, 247).

At one level, the leaving of the old house signifies some changes in Liz's life. What the scope of this change is cannot be assessed without a closer look at the narrative techniques or structural devices refashioning Liz's experience and its profound implications. Liz desires change and actually works hard to attain it. Within certain contexts, some changes are occluded by various established powers and cultural values. Culturally, womanhood is 'crowned' by pregnancy. Whether wanting a baby is a natural female desire or a need further cherished by social values and cultural constructs, Women's Movements, which are basically transformative movements, have themselves shown a degree of inadequacy in dealing with many problems relating to this desire. Liz's trauma is indeed a complex one. She is a committed feminist who is also aware of the drawbacks of her women's group but cannot possibly withdraw. At the same time she cannot be reproved for, or accused of letting the side of feminism by, this desire.

It is true that the house which Maitland constructs in *DOJ* is not as an ambitious project or a central trope as the one she constructs in *TTT*. Still, it continues to be used as one of the

artistic vehicles fitting the evolving personality and the scope of certain changes, albeit limited. While the house in *TTT* is a metaphor signifying women's dilemmas as linked to other broader national, social, and political issues, the new house in *DOJ* is sketched to tackle specific dilemmas related to one woman even if it does not solve the problem of child barrenness. The sole focus in *DOJ* has been on Liz's own experience which naturally resonates with that of many other women. Liz's new house now is located in a different neighbourhood and is slightly bigger than the old one. Undoubtedly, there have been changes. Liz is not expected to change dramatically the conditions of patriarchy and hence set out all her sex free. Otherwise it will be harking back to the old 'images of women' impinging on that heroines ought to change the world for women – and blaming the victim too. Liz neither breaks away from her old relations nor from her old desires. The transformation she undergoes exposes both the limitation of some feminist movements at a particular era, and a patriarchal society ever reinforcing women's feelings of guilt. Some women's failure to attain more effective realisation of the self and deeper insights as to the reality of their oppression helps to show how immune patriarchy can be to changes and how ever capable it is of aborting attempts of resistance.

Liz has been seeking more "ordination." She thinks that by making a move to the new house, she would be able to do just that. The narrative has not depicted neither a strategy nor instances to render possible an exposure of how, even within the domestic sphere of the house, a domain typically associated with women, the rules of patriarchy continue to take precedence. If, according to Bhabha, "the world[is] -in-the home" (1995: 11), and according to Bourdieu, "[t]he house is an empire within an empire" (1979: 153), the conditions of this patriarchal world or 'empire' will go on being replicated and reproduced in the home.

Home Truths (HT)

In *DOJ*, the movement into a new house has signified some changes in Liz. Her desire to have a baby of her own, however, stays as strong as ever. The changes have been structured along the traditional frame of familial and social relations without really endeavouring to

question the very premises of these relations nor what actually sustains them. Liz at instances has shown resistance, in itself a precondition for change and a positive sign indicative of a human awareness. However, it is enough credit if novelists disseminate in their works seeds for cultivating the necessary insight and awareness of the need to transform particularly oppressive situations. I am appropriating the kind of transformative insight that does not lead to transgressing others' boundaries and, hence, depriving those 'others' from their own rights to effect, or promote the necessary conditions furnishing for any constructive change.

Maitland in *HT* does not transgress boundaries so much as she crosses them to know what lies beyond them. This time, she expands the boundaries of her narrative by actually situating the action in two strikingly different settings, in two houses, one is the house of Clare Kerslake's family in the Scottish Highlands, and the other is the 'house of Zimbabwe'. I will try to find out whether spatial diversity of settings in *HT* contributes to developing a more comprehensive insight sensitive to the 'others' as it attends to the needs of the 'self'.

Clare Kerslake, a glamorous London society photographer, and David Holland, her wealthy lover, have set out to climb Mountain Nyangani, Zimbabwe's highest peak. Clare is found three days later, but David is not. Clare's severely injured hand during the climb has had to be amputated. After the accident she continues suffering from impenetrable post-traumatic amnesia. All she can remember is that she wanted David dead. Six months after the accident Clare is urged by Hester, her aunt and adoptive mother, to spend sometime recuperating in the ancestral house. Clare spends her holiday in the midst of her siblings and relatives who all love and care about her, but continue persistently to push her to tell them about what really happened to David on that distant mountainside. They want to find out if he was abducted and killed by Renamo Guerrillas, or arrested by the vengeful spirits of the mountain for disobeying the rules set by the locals for climbing the mountain, or simply tripped and fell, or at worse was killed by Clare, who had realised how boring, selfish and sadistic he had been. In fact, nobody seems to be missing David or feeling sad for his death. However, family tensions and love, scandals and

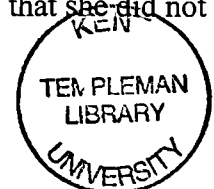
brehtaking natural settings gradually begin to cure Clare's traumatic amnesia. "Scrap[ing] away the layers of forgetfulness has been a process aided through strong family relation." "It is their likeness and their shared history" and the fact that they "[a]ll are, to varying degrees stamped with the family traits: radical politics, Christian ethics, boarding-school erudition and sportiness" (Broughton, 1993: 22) that enrich the narrative and help Clare to pull herself together again.

Unlike in *TTT*, where non-British people and scenes are depicted with utter detachment, Maitland in *HT* shows more involvement with, and awareness of, 'others' and their spaces. An acknowledgement of the complex relations between the 'self' and the 'other' takes different courses and manifestations which by no means can be divested of their political and ideological implications. Nevertheless, we still need to ask if the 'other' has been rendered by Maitland merely a 'tool' devised to assist Clare's quest for an identity. Or has 'the other' been summoned passionately, conforming with Fanon's humanistic plea as he demands "[w]hy not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (1986: 231).

According to Bhabha, "the creative invention into existence" is neither inherent in cultural official performances nor in instrumental hypothesis. Rather, it is to be sought in the self's desire for recognition as it glimpses the "in between" of what is present and hidden in cultural presentations and representations, what Bhabha calls the "cultural interstices" (1995: 9). What the one culture hides might be "the distinctly heard" voice of the 'other'. It is such an exposure which has the potential for enriching the meaning of existence. This is why Bhabha sees that the self can be recreated in the world of travel (1995: 9). This recreation, though, is anything but simply linear. Both Clare and her boyfriend, David, experience what Bhabha calls 'the unhomely moment' in Africa. The 'unhomely moment' is a condition where "'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world...that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation" (1995: 9). For Bhabha, the 'unhomely moment' is an enriching human vision which necessarily cultivates

awareness against what Fanon calls “the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures” and of the importance of not having “the ‘roots’ be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present” (In Bhabha, 1995: 9). “[A]lthough the ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has the resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites” (Bhabha, 1995: 9). In other words, the ‘unhomely moment’ is not peculiar only to the experiences of minorities or immigrants on others’ lands, but is also the self’s experience on the other’s land regardless of that self’s status.

The British David and Clare are in Africa as tourists. It is Clare, not David, who experiences Bhabha’s ‘unhomely’ enriching moments and takes them with her back home to the family’s house in Scotland. Like in Maitland’s other novels, the trope of the house emerges as a central locus for the (re)envisioning and enactment of changes. Clare’s sense of her own estrangement and fear in the house of Africa resonates not only in her dreams of “the revenge of the African warriors on these newcomers,” and of Chirikudzi “making love to David” after the accident (*HT*: 34, 5), but much earlier. Upon her arrival at Harare airport, she felt “frightened, alien, adrift” and embarrassed that “she was white and they were black and therefore she did not have the right to be antagonistic...she knew only that her legs were too white for this country...the things she knew, the skills she had laboriously acquired, the stories she could tell, would not work here” (*HT*, 213-4). David, on the other hand, showed “a certain complacent lordliness” and “patriarchal goodwill” (*HT*, 214). He once told her that “if I were Rhodes, I’d have claimed this country, just to ride across it and be buried at Matopos” (*HT*, 168). Back home, Clare would let David “become her God...[who] knew all the answers, and only his love can sustain her” (*HT*, 100). It is only in Africa that she begins to see David as faceless and grows irritated by his neatness and overwhelming sense of superiority (*HT*: 155). David’s egoistic self prevents him from seeing in people, places, and actions any significant value or any meaning other than those fitted into his own needs. He would force Clare “to play games that she did not



like to play; games that included her humiliation” while making love (*HT*: 154). Although he likes to make rules and have ‘others’ obey them, he shows no respect for the rules set by the locals at the foot of mount Nyangani drawing attention to the potential dangers of ascending the mountain. He mocks them, falls, and dies. David is incapable of developing the insight to experience ‘unhomely moments’. One has to develop an awareness as to the intricacies of being caught up in, and between, two locations. This kind of situation could either lead to extending one’s vision or to immobilising the human potential. David is ‘here’ and ‘there’. He is a British man on the other’s land. Although granted this location, he continues to be encapsulated within his own dangerously excessive, chauvinist, and imperialist desires. He dies homeless.

Unlike him, Clare experiences the ‘unhomely’ for she “knew power when it touched her,” and the mountain, she felt was full of power (*HT*, 139). She shows great sensitivity to houses, people, and places. Her dreams are markers signifying her sensitivity, ever-troubled consciousness, and restless state of mind. Dreams haunt her and threaten her very sanity, dreams of the black Africans, of the spirits of places and of the mountain. The house of the family back in Scotland is as the locus where the load of her experiences in Africa, her past experiences as a child, and her memory of her work as a prominent photographer of London’s elite interact and begin to take new shapes and meanings. Africa has troubled her and exposed her differences from Africans. This realisation produces yet another one: Clare for long has been complying with rules and adopting a way of living which does not correspond with her own true self; before the accident, she was living up to an ‘image’ camouflaging deeper emotional desires. She needs to leave home to realise what she actually desires. Inhabiting others’ world has been conducive to a quest for transformation. Thus, Clare dreams that she “picked up a chrysalis in her own right hand and watched the struggle of the butterfly to emerge from that vacuity. It was a terrible labour, worse than the films she had seen of babies’ births” (*HT*, 105). To be out of home, ‘between two cultural locations’ is never easy. “She had lost in Africa: a camera, a job, a lover, and a hand” (*HT*, 64). The losses signify phases in Clare’s life. On one level, the camera, upon

which her professional career depends, and the hand without which the camera cannot be operated are all tied to a world of images or to a reality which can be only superficially represented. Her loss of David means that part of her self confidence and independence can be regained, for David continuously subjugated her to his own desires. Inherent in these unregrettable losses is a recovery process.

The night, having been removed to the old family house in Scotland from Africa after the accident and after struggling with nightmares, Clare “did not dream. She did not need to. She had come home to the dream world” (*HT*, 49-50). At this stage Clare still cherishes such a romantic image of “the place of her childhood, the land of memories” (*HT*, 50). It is not so long before Africa and the mountain start pressing claims on her life. “The house [which] was a cradle of dreams; [which] rocked itself by the soft lap-lapping of the loch, it rocked them all,” soon becomes a house “built for pleasure, built for innocence despite the fact it was also and deliberately built for killing” (*HT*, 50). The Scottish house now is depicted as the site for rich paradoxes; near the front door there are “children’s swings and see-saws” and next to them places for the “golden eagles and carrion crows, but whose heads lolled down still dark-eyed, bleeding on to the concrete floor” (*HT*, 50). “It was a house designed for the joys of death” (*HT*, 50). The house is anything but pure joy. The sons of the house “had passed through a strange initiation ritual” (*HT*, 198) of stag killing as a demarcation of real manhood. Clare starts wondering if “a genetic predisposition to find in death...the moment of glory and triumph?” (*HT*, 199). Local and socially accepted antagonistic acts, however, parallel others outside the house and outside the homeland. Clare recites to her mother parts of the discussions she had with her mother’s friend, Peggy, who insists to call herself the “white Zimbabwean” (*HT*, 183) and Peggy’s black friend, Joyful. Nowhere previously has Maitland ever been as explicit and sensitive in her treatment of coloniser/colonised relations as in these discussions. A series of accusations are directed against the West and their interventions not only on others’ lands, but also on others’ histories and stories. Joyful, the native Zimbabwean, tells Clare about the

arrogance of the Europeans and their use of Christian missions as pretexts to claim the land (*HT*, 183). She also tells her that despite the fact that those imperialists have introduced European-type clinics, (never enough), still, “three-quarters of all Zimbabwean will consult a traditional healer, wisely and significantly pointing out that “Western medicine treats disturbances of bits of the individual, traditional medicine treats disturbances of bits of the community” (*HT*: 178). Even when Clare attempts to take part in interpreting the ancestor’s myths, Joyful tells her angrily: “Don’t try to put your reading on our stories. Go home and find your own” (*HT*, 215). Significantly, the story of imperialism is linked to that of the eucalyptus trees that were introduced to Zimbabwe from Australia by the new settlers and then “[i]t turns out that they’re a total disaster ecologically” as they “rob the soil, and undermine natural balances and all sorts of problems, but they are very beautiful” (*HT*, 186).

Clare has been listening to myths, stories, and people different from the ones she is already familiar with at home, so she wonders “if it was possible to change one’s home and not be amputated” (*HT*, 181). In fact the amputation of Clare’s hand in Maitland’s narrative, which is condensed with intricately interwoven symbols and images, codifies a yearning for transformation and regret. The price has been high, yet it directly fits into one of the basic themes of the story, namely the dangers of safety and the benefits of risk. The above theme distinctly resonates in Clare’s dream on the last two pages of the novel. She sees herself as a tight rope-walker climbing a ladder with one hand only and on the rungs the following was written: “If you are afraid of falling, you will fall...if you believe you cannot fall, you will fall.” She successfully ascends the ladder and makes a spectacular performance on the rope. The lights swooped and the audience who turned out to be her family were hailing her. So she thinks that “[i]t was a good dream” (*HT*, 294-5). Clare takes the risk by crossing the boundaries of her own house. By the end of the novel, she is even well adjusted to the myoelectric hand which at the beginning she loathed and felt reluctant to use. The hand becomes the marker of her experience in Africa. Her adjustment to the hand is also her coming to terms with her own self and past

experiences. It is not conformity to one set of rules or prescribed modes of behaviour which promotes Clare's change. It is the potential to transgress others' boundaries, to feel 'unhomely' and then to touch the other passionately and perceptively. This touching, however, seems to have opened the way for the realisation of some elaborations of primordial universal human visions.

Despite the fact that the African house is dramatically different from the family house in Scotland, Maitland shows that the two houses, after all, have many things in common. Each house is haunted with stories devised and told to manifest the human's urge to create order out of 'chaos' and to find meanings of the human existence and experiences. Zimbabwean myths and stories are different from Western or Christian myths. Yet, one way or another they all seek to interpret life, creation, divinity, natural phenomena, and people's perception of some deep truths. Maitland in *HT* appears to be appropriating a Jungian concept of universality revealing that behind the different mythic forms and designs there lie common primordial patterns or "a structure of unconsciously held value systems" (Holman, 1975: 334). In seeking universalities, Maitland does not lapse into universalising Western culture, nor does she overrule cultural specificities. By being sensitive to the local African culture, Clare is able to appreciate universal values underlying cultural diversity, hence becoming able to reassess her own cultural identity. This eventually enables her in the process of defining her 'self'. This is why she is able to survive in contrast with David who becomes to signify both male domination and Western superiority in its disregard of the 'other'. Through the 'other' Clare manages to discover that her affair with David is unhealthy and does not stand on equal terms.

Maitland reflects on the strikingly different shapes that universal human 'truths' assume across cultures, locations, and temporalities. Maitland's Home Truths – the title the other does not like admitting – do not emerge as truths about Clare's own personal home. These 'truths' as belonging to the human home where the word home might as well be equated with origin, or primordial human truths. The actions of the novel take place against two remote spatial

locations. The narrative is designed in such a way as to render topographies, scenery, events, and moods enacted in the one setting shrewdly replicated in the other. Despite the differences in the formal aspects of these sketches, they are shown, more or less, to inhere a common human core. The mount of Nyangani in Africa has its counter-part in the Scottish Highlands. What Clare experiences while ascending the mountain at home recalls substantially the Zimbabweans' beliefs that their mountain is the dwelling place of their ancestors' spirits: "this is the mountain of childhood, the mountain of her own ancestors, her own roots" (*HT*, 147). "Mummy's house," the native place of Clare, also has a power comparable to that Clare senses of African places. Anni, Clare's sister, says at one of those warm family gatherings: "Here we all are, we come to drink at Mummy's fountain; we bitch about it, but we come" (*HT*, 265).

One of the most informing passages of the novel is the conversation which takes place between Clare and Joyful at Peggy's house in Zimbabwe. The passage does not derive its significance only from its explicitly moral condemnation of Western imperialism. The narrative in this passage has been woven against a spectacular night felt only in a dream world. The warmth and beauty of the session that night has also been resummoned by Clare while talking to Hester, for she was "trying to catch for herself the sweet soft darkness of...[that] Zimbabwean night" (*HT*, 186). Back in Africa, she lost David. Before that at home, she had lost her real parents in a fire work explosion. David and her parents took the risk but did not take safety measures. The question remains: is taking the risk at home the same as taking it outside?

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said affirms that "cultural forms like the novel or the opera do not cause people to go out and imperialize...but it is genuinely troubling to see how little Britain's great humanistic ideas...co-existed so comfortably with imperialism, and why...there was little significant opposition or deterrence to empire at home" (1993: 97). Although Maitland and Roberts have not been concerned with the consolidation of a vision enabling imperialism, still it is important to locate in their narratives those instances, moments, and attitudes that consciously or unconsciously validate worlds, ideological stands, or images that can prove

detrimental to other worlds. A comprehensive look at the different strands within feminist critiques and theories would clearly reflect that common to them all is the urge to question the validity of cultural, social, political, and religious constructs. Such an interest inextricably stems from some women's true desire to deconstruct those diverse constructs contributing to their subordination.

Silences, absences, and gaps have also been tackled and located by feminists for the purpose of interrogating woman's place in an oppressive hierarchical scheme. Feminist discourses have endeavoured to show that transforming and improving the quality of women's lives would necessarily involve inducing structural changes into the different fields of human activities. In modern and postmodern feminist debates, feminism has become, aided by Third-World women's contribution to feminist scholarship, an epistemological field transgressing its own boundaries. On the theoretical and epistemological levels, feminism does not connote woman only. Conceptually it has become a ground for the codification of cultural change and displacement. Feminist narrative that proves insensitive to the oppression of the 'other' is lacking one of feminism's basic dynamics. According to this line of argument, a novel is feminist not simply because its central characters are females nor because it is written by a woman.

Maitland in *HT* has been attentive to issues relating to the 'other' and to imperialism, and has chosen to break the silence about what it means and what it takes to be on the other's lands. The novel is full of moments when Maitland overtly expresses her moral condemnation of imperialist ideologies. The scenes involving David's manipulation of Clare are intended to signify both male chauvinism and Western centralism/imperialism. David manipulates all, men and women. The narrative evolves to show that David's manipulation and domination of Clare are also emblematic of Western imperialism. He is there to help illuminate aspects in Clare's personality and her quest for personal growth. He is also there to expose Western hegemonic impulses. His moral lacks, superficiality, and obsessively egoistic self underscore Clare's rich

potentials. David could also be said to be symbolising stands in Western patriarchy abusive to both men and women. To attribute to David this level of symbolism is not unexpected in Maitland's fiction which is typically marked by its explicit ideological and moral affirmations that constantly find their echoes and reinforcements in symbolic narrative formations.

Impossible Saints (IS)

The first novel I deal with by Michele Roberts in this study is *Impossible Saints* (1997), her most recent. It could be described as feminist in perspective since it examines closely the lives of some 'religious women' and endeavours to deconstruct traditionally held religious practices and beliefs. I choose to discuss Roberts' *IS* before her other novels not only because the theme of the house is most central in this novel, but also to tackle conceptually, rather than chronologically, the development of Roberts' transformative visions by way of contrasting the novel with Maitland's above novels—novels that cherish change grounded in a historical sense. Like Maitland, Roberts uses mythic material to pursue moral issues specifically related to women. In Maitland's *HT*, the move between two houses, the shifting of positions, and transcending the limitation of the one house have eliminated claustrophobic ties and fashioned for more understanding of the self via touching the core of the other. In *IS*, Roberts' motif of the house has been instrumental in expressing women's needs to transform their lives, yet it has also been so excessive as to pass to the reader irksome feelings typically associated with claustrophobia.

IS opens in the title 'The Golden House' which opens in the sentence, "[t]he golden house was where the bones were kept" (*IS*, 1). It is a storehouse of the bones of women with no announced identities. The central story is of a nun, Josephine. Dressed in her dead mother's clothes, Josephine summons her father and starts rolling her hips like a whore. He, thus, forces her to enter a convent. In the convent, she is visited by an ambiguous figure whom, she thinks, is Christ. The nuns at the beginning are sceptical about Josephine's visions and accuse her of heresy. Later, they befriend her and enter her realm which is anything but that of a strict

Catholic domain. Josephine dies of cancer while still young, having fulfilled the dream of her life which is the construction of “another house.” For long she kept “dreaming of another house and trying to find it. She kept dreaming of founding a different house. This imaginary other house seemed utterly real...Each time, in a dream, she found another house, she thought that this time she had discovered *the* house” (*IS*, 125). Into Josephine’s secret house are admitted other men, women, and saints.

The house again becomes the locus symbolising the enactment of rejecting the structures of patriarchy. In the world of the novel, there exists another officially acknowledged house decorated with the bones of dead women saints, including those of Josephine. Although the two houses differ from each other in terms of both their spatial and temporal locations, they are thematically linked. The house of bones forms the junction not only of different dead women’s bones but also of their different stories. *IS* is structured across a series of these women’s different stories. The longest of these stories is that of Josephine. Christian male authority’s interpretation of the lives of these women stands in complete contrast to those stories Roberts tells. Christian male authority builds the golden house of bones by way of honouring those women martyrs who sacrificed themselves defending the *declared* code of the Christian ethics. Josephine’s own versions of these women’s stories testify to something else. For they are all shown to have committed what a Catholic Church would call sinful acts. Accused of heresy for claiming to have seen Christ, Josephine is asked by the church to write a book acquitting herself. She authors two books, one which carries her own true story and the stories of other women saints, and another, false, which she writes in conformity with what the men of the church need to know to have her freed. Thus, the official book resonates with the golden house and the other book, the one which she chooses to give to her young cousin Isabel and remains in the secret, resonates with the ‘other house’ “[t]he place on the planet where she was meant to be...Her bit of earth” (*IS*, 126). Traditionally held ideas about Catholicism, canonisation, and excommunication are echoed and parodied upon the readers’ knowledge of these two different books on the same

persons. The other house and the house of the bone form the locus where such parody is solidified.

Cath Stowers in “Beatitude and the Beast” says that “[m]any of the hallmarks of her [Roberts’] writing are here [in *IS*]: the sensual imagery, the motifs of houses, madonnas, pilgrimages and food” (1997: 33). In *IS* ‘the other house’ for which Roberts longs is the house of madonnas and pilgrims who indulge themselves in good food and sensual experiences. Nuns in this house are allowed to practice whatever they feel like, regardless to whether some or all of the practices are against the teachings of the Catholic Church. Roberts states that *IS* is her final attempt “to ‘exorcise’ what Catholicism had done to her as a child” (Cowley, 1997: 49). The images of the women, particularly nuns, as depicted by Roberts work to affirm women’s rights to claim their sexual and intellectual freedom. She investigates how women suffer “banishment or internal exile precisely because they are unable to suppress their sexuality” (Cowley, 1997: 49). Saint Agnes, Saint Thecla, Saint Petronilla, Saint Dympna, and others are resurrected in the novel so that the reader has the chance to listen to new versions of their stories. Roberts in *IS* shows that sexuality, holiness, and spirituality do not assume contradictory grounds. In fact, Roberts has always been interested in rendering apart the different and probably contradictory/complementary elements of the one human experience only to have them eventually assembled in an emerging entity. The house which Josephine dreams of having, and actually has eventually, is designed to appear from the outside as one house. From the inside, however, it is divided into parts and each part is prepared for the exercise of certain activities but not others. She wants it to be

nothing like the overcrowded and ramshackle convent which she and Isabel had endured and which they were so happy to have left. Each house would be a double house, looking two ways, with one entrance on one side and one on the other...Nobody except the inhabitants, on entering the double house from either side, would know that the other half of the house existed...Two houses together, back to back; two bodies joined by a single skin. But there would be ways through, from one to the other...The existence of the other side would be kept secret. Each woman who lived here would be able to live two lives: a double life; it was that simple.

One side would be a convent without Catholicism and Catholic beliefs. It would still be called a convent, to signify that when you entered here you gave yourself completely to the life within...A solitude of your own choosing...plenty of books and wine within reach, food, a garden, wood for the fire...when the inhabitants...felt...the need to live a different kind of life,

they would walk into the heart of the double house...[and] would be able to live the kind of life that hermit-nuns do not. The convivial, social, chatty, sexual, dancing and feasting life. (*IS*, 192-4)

About her obsession with the motif of houses, Roberts says: "I have a sense of the house as this material body that can feel quite frightening and quite longed for...you need to go back to that house, and hopefully when you're there you explore it, like Gothic novels. To me it's a place you go into and out of, into and out of" (qtd. in Stowers, 1997: 33). Obviously, the house in *IS* reveals this urge by women to reclaim a religious and a spiritual heritage of their own. Roberts' house and her stories of women saints confirm that despite patriarchy's continuous efforts to disempower women, women cunningly have developed an energy of their own to confront patriarchy.

Nevertheless, I tend to find that in *IS* the quest for change most manifest in the need to challenge an essentially androcentric religion has encountered an impasse. By restricting the actions of those visionary women within the domestic sphere of the house, the narrative has yielded itself to forms of closure, or has conditioned its own claustrophobic trauma. The novel opens in a mythic house and ends in another. Apart from the fact that the house of bones is anything but an attractive image for women's achievements, it is the one that is being canonised and exposed to the public. The secret book remains in the dark, thus paving the way for male clergy to impose their own versions on these bones as befitting their own religiously male-inscribed values. Even the bones of Josephine seem to have melted into the background leaving the foreground for insignificant women 'saints'. The house in *IS* has been rendered a static entity deprived of the dynamics inherent in any process of transformation. It is all bones of the dead visited by spectators. Jason Cowley rightly maintains that "the time may be right for her [Roberts] finally to close the gates of the convent, cast aside those childhood fairy stories and start writing about genuine people in a real society" (1997: 49). The poetic structure which Roberts builds via the construction of her mythic house has resulted in petrification of bones.

Daughters of the House (DOH)

Roberts asserts that “every novel has to embody the theme in its form. I don’t believe you just write a novel and say it’s all in the subject-matter. I think you’ve got to do it through form” (qtd. in Stowers, 1997: 33). In “Questions and Answers”, Roberts asserts that “[y]ou can’t separate form from content” (1983b: 66). In *IS* the reader feels that the narrative is heading towards a closure. Could it be that Roberts has drawn the formal design of the novel in such a way as to invoke exactly these kinds of feelings? Do the ‘static’ images of the two paradoxical houses practically manifest Roberts’ desire to render *IS* her final attempt to “exorcise” Catholicism and “close the door behind it”?

Roberts’ affirmations that themes must be grounded in forms, or contents in narrative designs, are also clearly manifest in her novel *Daughters of the House*, an award-winning novel. The difficulty of the structural design of the novel resonates with the obscure and intricate workings of the unconscious itself. Luckhurst describes *DOH* as a novel full of “puzzles,” some of which are “occluded” (1996: 254). His interesting and perceptive interpretations of the novel is grounded in his knowledge of some psychoanalytic concepts advanced by Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, and Bhabha. Drawing upon these concepts can help the reader first come to a comprehensive and significant grip with the feminist (or feminine) elements in the novel, and second fully realise the potentials that the novel can yield. If untangling the formal design of the novel, perceiving its theme(s), and locating its feminist orientations are all processes inextricably conditioned by acquiring an élitist knowledge, could not this be hazardous to the feminist project? For one of the ambitious claims of this project is the disruption and transformation of hierarchical structures. Drawing as many ‘selves’ as possible into the conceptual domain of the text better energises the dynamics of any such transformation. A feminist text that is essentially élitist is an exclusive text in terms of its readership.

Readers do not withdraw from the text because they happen to lack the epistemological tools necessary for the illumination of the different dimensions that the text encompasses. A work of art might be highly complex and embracing deep thoughts, and yet can be accessed by

all readers. Unlike highly specialised studies which draw a specifically élitist and academic readership, the feminist novel, and other kinds of novels, can attract wide spectra of readers, particularly women, with diverse backgrounds and interests, and can work to stir imagination and energise resistance. Feminists like Felski and Millett have argued in favour of narratives that create interest in women's issues and expose the private and public aspects of their lives. The difficulty in approaching feminist texts can reinforce a hierarchy between authors and readers.

The house is an essential trope in *DOH*. As in *IS* the opening sentence of *DOH* includes reference to the house: "It was a changeable house. Sometimes it felt safe as a church, and sometimes it shivered then cracked apart" (*DOH*, 1). The alteration ascribed to the house will soon turn out to be characteristic of other important constituents in the novel. Histories, characters, visions, and positions continue to alternate and to be caught up within submerging and surfacing powers. The main two women characters are shown at times to be distinctly apart and at others as a whole: one completing the other. Thus, for example, Thérèse and Léonie appear in one of the family photographs "arms about each other's necks, heads close...they looked more like sisters than cousins...The children's faces were smiling blur. You couldn't properly tell which was which" (*DOH*, 29). In another place, Thérèse sitting in the dark thinks: "in the darkness we're equal. One married and one not, one plump and one thin, one truthful and one a liar...It doesn't matter any more, our difference...sisters together under the skin, made identical" (*DOH*, 21). The novel is about these two women who reunite in the family house from which Léonie, English, has never departed even after her marriage. Thérèse, her French cousin, used to live too in the house which is situated in old Normandy before becoming a nun in a contemplative order.

In the past, the house witnessed a sequence of unpleasant events, secrets, lies, intrigues, and massacres. Motivated by uncanny visions, voices, and memories of ecliptic and eclipsed past events, Thérèse is determined to speak the 'unspoken' and to break the 'silence'. Her prior concern now is to expose the identity of the collaborator who informed the Nazis about the

hiding place of the Jews and caused the genocide. Twenty years of silence, starting from the World War II till Thérèse's return, a memorial closure has been reinforced on the event. People do not speak about the genocide any more and try to erase it from their memory. The massacred Jews are buried in a wood near the house. If people do not speak about them any more, the house, the wood, and the shrine which contains the bones of these Jews do: "[the] marks of the Germans' boots...The memory of the house made visible. Scars that would never fade. The injuries of the house lived on, under the carpet which concealed them" (*DOH*, 44). Gathering bits and pieces of stories they hear from those working in the house and from letters that Madeleine, Léonie's mother, used to send to her sister Antoinette, Thérèse's mother, Thérèse and Léonie manage to identify the collaborator. Interestingly, the act of telling is suspended. Other fragments in the narrative continue to be disconnected especially in relation to Antoinette's rape in the cellar and her possible seduction of a German soldier to save whatever is hidden there.

Going back to Freud, or Kristeva, or others can prove instrumental in reading and locating the feminist/feminine in the narrative. However, is it necessarily the case that without drawing on some of their theories the text risks becoming alien from women? Raising this question could have been unjustifiable had the novel been written by a writer with no formerly avowed feminist affiliation. The fact that the novel is written by an acknowledged feminist who has never declined from declaring her 'feminist stands' or advocating women's cause (See, Roberts, "Write She Said" (1986), and "Questions and Answers", (1983b)) legitimises the above question and prepares for an answer thereof. It is important now to tackle in what specific manner *DOH* forms a rich site for the feminine/feminist. (The two terms can neither be used interchangeably nor be denotative of each other. Yet, inscribing the feminine within any form of cultural practices has the tendency to claim for women a central ontological value that for long has been submerged by patriarchy. Femaleness is as inherently constitutive as maleness. The above forms a crucial ground for the French feminists' debates and studies distinctly informed by psychoanalytic paradigms.)

Rosalind Coward wonders if placing women's experiences at the centre of writings makes the work feminist. She maintains that "[w]omen-centred novels are by no means a new phenomenon...[and] that the consciousness of the individual heroine has been a principal narrative device of the English novel" (1986: 155). Michele Barrett in "Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics" stresses that while women-centred fiction "is not a sufficient condition to make cultural production feminist it must at least be a *necessary* condition...[and] it is not possible to conceive of a feminist art that could be detached from a shared experience of oppression" (1986: 163). Feminist fiction is expected to foreground women's experiences and expose structural and cultural practices that contribute to women's oppression. On the other hand, to found an all-embracing definition of feminism or feminist writing based on the specificities of a certain situation has the tendency to decentralise or exclude others whose dynamics of oppression do not necessarily fit in within any of the prescribed specificities. Whether revealing alliance with the Women's Movement, or specifically concerned with problems pertaining to women's social status, their bodies, and psychic formation, or dwelling on their sexual exploitation within an androcentric system of power, a feminist literary text should indispensably reflect a desire for the rejection and transformation of an abusive status quo. This reflection could assume different forms, images, and representations, and could be expressed through different tropes and complex technical devices. The important thing is that the quest for transforming an abusive condition is there.

The issue of readership is also of extreme importance as to defining whether or not the literary work is feminist, as has been argued by Coward (1986). Readership, it seems to me, has its bearing on the process of activating transformation. The fact that a novel might yield itself to elitist interpretations or highly specialised forms of analyses is not exclusive evidence that it is designed to appeal to a particular readership and exclude others. The same novel could be open to different levels of interpretations ranging from the most difficult, evasive, allusive to the simplest and most direct. It could also attract different categories of readers and accommodate

spaces for them to provide their versions of interpretations as conditioned by their different educational levels, positions, and political and cultural orientations. If *DOH* is perceptively interpreted and more comprehensively illuminated by resorting to psychoanalytic paradigms and other fields of knowledge, it does not mean that it cannot be perceived or approached otherwise.

A woman reader might neither identify nor empathise with Thérèse or Léonie, because she might not locate moments or situations where it is possible to ascribe the sufferings of these women to particularly oppressive gendered constructs. The women pursue the truth regarding the person behind the collective act of killing. *DOH* was written in 1993 and by then the overt and conventional representations of women's social demands for equality and their quest for identity in line with the Woman's Movement had been considerably outmoded. It did not take a specialised reader to link discontent and ennui with typical representations or typical quests pertaining directly to women's demands. Of course, this is not to say that women's typical demands in their totality have been fulfilled. The novel is cultivating a vision of extreme value to women. The urge to expose oppression is one of the driving forces in the novel. Léonie does not want to unsettle what for long has been hidden. She does not want to talk about the genocide. Even as a child she was content not to identify herself with the 'other': "she was a mongrel, only half-French, but she wasn't Jewish...she would not starve, she would not burn" (*DOH*, 138). However, it is Thérèse who comes back to the house because she feels that there is "[s]omething unfinished here. Something [she's] got to do. Something to do with what happened here during the war" (*DOH*, 22). The unsettling and the breaking of silences have been pivotal concerns within feminist discourses. A great deal of women's historical and social dilemma has been caused by their reinforced, but also sometimes their chosen silence. While devising tools for breaking silences has specifically aided women's cause, it also has proved instrumental in extending the purview of feminists' concerns and the scope of their interests. Such tools have been geared to undercut the hegemony not only of anti-woman discourses, but also the hegemony

of any system of power or mode of existence particularly oppressive to any other oppressed human groupings.

DOH explores and deconstructs several of the conceptions which by proving harmful to a specific group of people could also prove harmful to women. Even if *DOH* dwells on a political issue related to the status of the Jews during the Nazis' occupation of France, still it addresses issues relating to women. Apart from the fact that the house is central to the formal and thematic design of the novel, it continues to be a reminder of one of the basic domains associated with women. If the house goes on summoning womanly images, it also represents a site where the private inherently interlinks with the public, and the personal with the political. The title of each chapter is a fixed object of the house, starting from "The Wall", "The Doorbell", "The Chandelier" to "The Cigarette Lighter". However, the title of the last chapter of the novel is "The Words". And one of the novel's basic themes is the agony that women might experience due to suppressing their needs and silencing their desires. Words turn out to be one mode of therapy— Léonie's silence is representative of different kinds of silences. Her refusal to empathise with the 'other' is also the arduous story of estranged human beings within a community and estranged women in a world dominated by men. The above themes are of extreme value to women who have always been seen as the 'other' of men.

It is a female self, however, that launches a quest for the truth: Thérèse. And yet it is also a female self that resists any such quest: Léonie. The two women's actions and reactions and the conflicting and complimenting interplay of their emerging activities reflect each woman's view of her female self. Thérèse joins a male-dominated religious establishment by becoming a nun. She chooses to rebel from within her present position as a nun against an establishment which has silenced women for long or relegated them to a marginal sphere. Her quest for the truth exposes the priest's complicity with the act of the collective murder of the Jews. It is paradoxical, though, to find out that it is Léonie, the worldly woman, who adopts an attitude which is not essentially different from the church. She chooses to be silent and continues to

claim that the past better be left undisrupted. As such the dilemma of the genocide parallels women's dilemma within the official and non-official patriarchal institutions. The genocide becomes, moreover, the metaphor signifying women's psychological and political status.

The "changeable house," the house which at times "was very still," listening to Thérèse "making up its mind what to reply [to her]" (*DOH*, 82) is also the same house which would speak the injuries of the dead and the betrayed (*DOH*, 44). The paradox of the house, its fluctuation between silence and utterance, parallels other paradoxes in the novel related to characters and events. Léonie's sexual rapture stands in contrast with Thérèse's religious one. Thus, Léonie thinks: "I haven't got a soul, have I...Thérèse stole it" (*DOH*, 19). Thérèse's urge to finish an unfinished job is met by Léonie's great resentment: "[y]ou're a ghoul...picking over what's dead and gone, what's best left undisturbed" (*DOH*, 24). Yet, underneath these stark differences there lie similarities. Léonie's attachment to the house, to every object in it, is also Thérèse's. Léonie, for example, says: "Everything in this house that's old, that belonged to our family, is precious to me. I'd never get rid of anything" (*DOH*, 10). Thérèse, on the other hand, feels that everything in the house is hers "[t]oo much attachment to objects, she scolded herself. She had spent twenty years trying to practise detachment and she had failed...My house...my house" (*DOH*, 13). Even more, both Thérèse and Léonie have problems with words. Léonie has chosen not to talk about the dead history despite the fact that she preceded Thérèse in identifying the identity of the collaborator. Also, Thérèse "had stripped off language like gold necklaces, pearl rings. She had few words ready for use now" (*DOH*, 22). The convergences and divergences between the two women are problematized by rendering the one as completing the other, or as two phases or elements within wholeness. A sense of confused identity between the two women is revealed through many scenes like when Baptiste embraces Léonie; "he is pretending I am Thérèse ...it's not me he's kissing, she explained to the nun in her head" (*DOH*, 104).

Roberts in her novel has not lapsed into a reductionist mode of narrative caught up within the dualistic paradigm of 'either or'. She conceives of the human self as a too complex process to be subjected to a rigorous one-dimensional entity. Paradoxical relations in her novels are characteristic of the one subject. One of the institutions that are criticised in her novel is the religious one. Her criticism, too, is not an over-sweeping judgement to the effect of reducing all those who are working within the order to one level of moral conviction. When Thérèse, as a young girl, tells the priest that she has seen visions of the Blessed Lady, he looks at her with contempt and goes on humiliating her with his interrogation till "Thérèse's tears splashed on to the tiles at her feet," and "[t]he priest looked pleased at her collapse," (*DOH*, 114). He hastens to say: "A true visionary wouldn't crumple at the first sign of opposition" (*DOH*, 113). The priest's ideal image as a man of God is further distorted when enough evidence is gathered condemning him as the collaborator to have told the Nazis about the hiding place of the Jews. Yet, on another occasion, having seen again the vision of the Blessed Lady, she meets with another man of the church, the Bishop, and tells him, "[o]ur Blessed Lady asked me to ask you to have a small chapel built here in her honour" only to be answered by him that building "it may be for the best. In all ways. A sign of the renewal of faith in these dark materialistic times" (*DOH*, 140).

The vision of Mary which Thérèse sees, however, is depicted differently from that seen by Léonie. Thérèse's vision of the Lady comes to confirm her religiosity. She sees her in blue, a heavenly colour. Léonie's Lady is dressed in red – a colour which typically figures sexual pleasure and earthly lust. The discrepancy inherent in the two women's visions of the Blessed Lady projects the discrepancy between the two women. Nevertheless, the differences in the perception of the visions is undercut by this persistent sense of confused identity between Thérèse and Léonie. Thérèse and Léonie are not distinctly apart as it seems. Léonie is trying to forget something which for long has been torturing her. Thérèse stands as the impetus for invoking history; "Léonie had tried to cut Thérèse out of herself like the bad flesh from an apple. The rotten spot in her. Thérèse stood for...everything that Léonie wanted to forget" (*DOH*, 171).

Thérèse' persistent pursuit of the truth drives Léonie to rethink that covered past. Thérèse's coming back, which on one symbolic level could stand for Léonie's regain of her consciousness, instigates in Léonie's mind the power to utter words, "[t]he words she was frightened to say were fastened up inside this room. She thought she'd lost them, she'd forgotten she'd put them away in here ...Until Thérèse had arrived back and reminded her" (*DOH*, 170). Léonie's encapsulation within the house, her self-imposed confinement, is alleviated; a dramatic change is incurred when she "twisted the handle of the door" and "stepped forward, into the darkness, to find words" (*DOH*, 172). For long she continues to think that uttering the truth would break the undisturbed rhythm of her life. Haunted by visions and by Thérèse she is prepared to take the initiative and reveal to the public the identity of the collaborator.

The house that hides the traces of blood is emblematic of an attitude towards strangers or the 'other'. Invoking images and histories to break silences and to admit the 'other' into the sphere of one's self is one of the general themes of Roberts' novel. (Whether or not the European history has been truly silent about the ugly human trauma manifested in the genocide of the Jews remains such a debatable issue. Roberts is not writing about Europe in general, she is writing about France. That history is still a source of deep bitterness and political tension in present-day France – and is tied up with the Catholic antisemitic strain in right-wing French politics). *DOH* unravels many issues that comply with feminism's ethics by cherishing insights promoting the eradication of all forms of injustices. Visions, cryptic and historical events, ghosts, and dreams render of the novel an appropriate space for pursuing various interpretations based on cultural and psychoanalytic studies. It is not difficult to see how the novel exposes human injustices. Approachability, readership, and interestedness are ultimately interrelated. The difficulty attributed to the semantic and syntactic levels in fiction do not always necessarily result in alienating readers. A rich text may be a difficult text, but it also can yield itself to a wide spectrum of readership. If a text is 'unapproachable', surely it is by definition difficult. Even those texts with poetics and politics which seem to appeal only to a particular audience,

prove utterly dismissive of others, and function more overtly as an inscription of the writer's own self more than anything else, are worthy of our attention. Their interpretations might be politically yielding. For no one text is likely to appeal to all audiences and mentalities. A text is not necessarily approachable or satisfactorily inclusive in the sense that it must prove appealing to all people irrespective of their ideologies, interests, and different backgrounds.

Chapter Three In the House of the 'Other'

Introduction

The problematic relation between art and politics is particularly acute in feminism.

Feminist critiques and feminist aesthetics are relatively recent disciplines. What makes them distinct from other artifices is their commitment to women's politics, diverse as they are. The present study is not concerned with fiction written by women in general; rather, it is concerned with feminist fiction cherishing women's politics and working to promote their status.

Although it is important to stress that the alliance between politics and feminism should not be understood as reducing art for feminist politics nor vice versa, envisaging a connection is indispensable.

To affect conduct and to prevent literary people from "forever be[ing] such helpless victims," Spivak, in "Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties", contends that "[o]ne must fill the vision of literary form with its connections to what is being read: history, political economy – the world...It is a question also of questioning the separation between the world of action and the world of disciplines" (1988: 95). It is not only how the text is written, but also how it is read, that gives the literary field more political value. Neither reading nor writing can be described as perfectly innocent processes. While the act of reading is crucially conditioned by the writing itself, both processes are inevitably informed by ideological notions and other interpretative paradigms. The exposure of the evasive, delusive, and resilient nature of some institutionalised powers and ideological formations abusive to women and 'others' is particularly important in the feminist text. If these powers remain latent in the text or undisrupted by reading and critiquing activities, this will obscure what positive potentials the text has (or does not have) to yield. In the previous chapter, I have tried to point out that thematically and structurally valuable feminist works are those invoking transformative dynamics which as they aid a feminist vision of liberation touch upon other significantly crucial

and problematic human situations. Images and metaphors could be deployed in such a way as to accommodate a wide scope of humanist visions and insights, not exclusively feminist.

Roberts' and Maitland's novels discussed so far have reflected an oscillating movement between various positions. In *TTT* the positions have been peculiar to a Western context and Western ideologies. Women characters have been the locus for interacting ideologies. Maitland in *DOJ* tackles specifically feminist issues and exposes feminist movements at a particular era in the West. Barrenness is handled from within a Western context, and women's groups are criticised for their inadequacy to deal with those problems facing a barren woman. In *HT*, Clare's fluctuation between two positions, 'outside' and 'inside', enables her to gain new insights, and experience self-growth. In Roberts' *IS*, the images of the house are too fixed and too tight to promise disclosure or transcend their own physicality. In *DOH*, alterities are characteristic of people, houses, institutions, and visions. Non-fixities and disclosures of closed histories can promise positive changes and open spaces for 'others'.

The richness of oscillating positions and visions in *HT* and *DOH* has been mostly depicted to pour into one locality, that of Europe. In *HT*, the two settings, that of Zimbabwe and the other of Scotland, have been evoked to enlighten Clare. It is through the 'other' that Clare's sense of identity is enriched. In *DOH*, Thérèse comes back home to expose the ugly crime of the massacred Jews. Although her return is motivated by a concern for the other, she sees the black people as "[a] bad lot, I'm afraid, always looking for trouble. Far too many of them coming in" (*DOH*, 7). The moral quests which Roberts and Maitland set out to realise in most of their novels are not the outcome of a utopian ideal generated by a morally detached self. The highly subjective impetus behind the writing is not after all as 'subjective' as one thinks. It is inextricably influenced by intricate cultural realities. Spivak rejects the notion of an autonomous and detached text which she describes as "the received dogma of the illusion of freedom" (1988: 97) from the "world" and "the state" (1988: 96). She holds that any writings

tenaciously reflect “their ‘age’,” and we always need “to take into account how we are ourselves caught in a time and a place” (1988: 99).

A feminist perception of transformation is inevitably located within cultural atmospheres where the self is formed and a forming process. Yet, what happens if the self is caught up within the historical and cultural moments of the ‘other’? Could this result in a situation where local histories and cultural specificities become subordinate presences? The above can be constitutive grounds for promoting a discussion of some feminist novels within an Arab-Islamic context.

Within an Arab-Islamic context, we need to find out whether or not convergences between an Arabic feminist text and a Western one are conducive to mitigating or transcending the political, social, historical, cultural and religious specificity of the Arab woman. The oppression of women is a universal phenomenon, patriarchy being everywhere. Could it be the case that the centrality of women’s experiences in the feminist novel is responsible for yielding common images connoting oppression enacted at the hand of patriarchy? What can we say about biology? Has not woman’s biology led to the emergence of common themes like those pertaining to motherhood? Pregnancy, breast-feeding, menstruation, and others have been culturally and religiously constructed and interpreted by patriarchy in such a way as to nourish the existence of oppressive social and political structures within which women are made to occupy marginal and private spaces.

Before looking closely at other worlds and other houses in some parts of the Arab world I need to mention that the use of the word ‘Other’ in the title of the present chapter, “In the House of the Other,” is not intended to ascribe to the Arab world or the colonised world a subordinate value typically associated with the ‘Other’, reinforcing thereby those ubiquitous binaries of centre and periphery, Western and non-western. I seek in this chapter to expose those instances where the self can be seen as acknowledging itself through the eyes of the ‘other’, thus rendering itself an ‘other’. While this might be interpreted as an entrapment within

feminist orientalism, it also could imply the writer's egoistic desire to have the self-inscribed in the world of the more powerful 'other'.

The Story of Zahra (SOZ) (Hikayt Zahra)

The image of the house itself as the private domain of living has conventionally been associated with women. In many feminist novels, however, the house has also become the microcosm of an ontologically political and social macrocosm involving men and women, thus invoking not only specifically women's experiences, but also experiences imbued with feminist ethics emphasising the 'other' and working to unsettle abusive and generally debasing systems of powers and cultural constructs.

The focus on the wholeness of the house in the above Western novels is replaced by a focus on parts contained in the house, like bathrooms and kitchens, in *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh. Àfif Farraj maintains in his book *Freedom in Women's Literature (Al-Horreyyah fi adabil mara'h)* that for Zahra "the toilet in the house is the only shelter from the severity of punishment. It is the only space left to the female self. Outside it this female self is negated and can neither think nor behave independently from the will of man, the owner of time and place" (my translation, 1985: 272). In the early part of the novel Zahra's mother escapes the beatings of her husband in the bathroom, and later Zahra is shown to be escaping both the sexual advances of her uncle and then any sort of encounter with the husband whom she hates by retreating to the bathroom, too (*SOZ*, 12, 21).

In the English novels dealt with so far, the house has been the nexus through which woman can articulate her identity or at least express her desire for one. Silence is hardly the word characteristic of these women's situations. In *SOZ* Al-Shaykh shows Zahra as denied all the spaces that would possibly allow her not only the realisation of an identity, but also the mere expression of the need for one. Salwa Ghaly in "Subversive Discourses in Hanan Al-Shaykh- Pushing Out the Boundaries of Arab Feminism in the Novel" argues that "despite cultural and

periodic differences, as well as disparate value-systems and mental tools, common concerns are indeed foregrounded and articulated by the hitherto silenced women around the world”

(1997:15). Silence is relative and its meaning varies from one particular cultural context to another; Léone’s silence, for example, is by no way comparable to that of Zahra. Even while caught up within the restriction of sex-gender system, heroines have still endeavoured, often evasively, the expression of sexual desires and the quest for a personal freedom and an assertion of identity. The success or failure of such endeavours remains a situation contested within the boundaries of each novel. The fact remains that some of these ‘heroines’ have spoken out their desires, or at least have had the potential to set definitions for their needs outside male-dominated conventions and desires. In Maitland’s and Roberts’ novels, women have had their say, regardless of how effective they have been in realising their specific needs, or in challenging patriarchy and its evasive powers. In *SOZ*, Zahra has neither had the space to speak out her needs nor even the capacity to identify them to her own self. The bathroom is hardly a suitable space or a suitable trope for the development of inspirational visions or for an identity quest.

SOZ describes the elder child, Zahra, of a lower middle-class Beirut family. It is divided into two books; the first is entitled ‘the Scars of Peace’, and consists of five sections, one of which is in the voice of Zahra’s ‘Uncle’, Hashem, a political activist in the Popular Syrian Party who has to flee Lebanon for Africa, in the aftermath of the failed coup which took place on New year’s Eve of 1962; and another is narrated by Zahra’s husband, Majed, a friend of Hashem in Africa who proposes to Zahra just days after her arrival to Africa. The other sections are narrated by Zahra. Book Two is entitled ‘The Torrents of War’, and is wholly told by Zahra. In section one and two of the first book, we are offered an account of Zahra’s relation with her mother and the mother’s relation with her husband, Zahra’s father, and the sort of impact the latter relation has on Zahra’s psyche. In her first-person narrative, Zahra remembers how as a child she used to be dragged by her mother as a moral cover for the mother’s

adulterous rendezvous with other men. The father, a tramcar driver, having known of these affairs, hits the wife severely in front of Zahra, the child. The marriage goes on despite the continuous betrayal of the wife and the harshness of the husband, which is hard to understand considering the husband's feelings of humiliation after the exposure of the wife's affairs. Within the general context of an Arab-Islamic society, divorce, and even killing for honour, are much more realistic probabilities than continuation.

While the mother is anything but loving and attentive to her daughter's needs, she is very tender and giving when it comes to Zahra's brother, Ahmad. She would take "all her time searching carefully for the best pieces of meat" to place on his plate, while "never giv[ing] me [Zahra] a single morsel of meat" (*SOZ*, 8, 7). Zahra follows in the footsteps of her mother and falls sullenly into a humiliating and sordid affair with a married man only to have two painful abortions, thus ruining her chances of ever achieving an honourable virginal marriage. Unexpectedly, Zahra travels to Africa to visit her exiled uncle, Hashem. "Unaccountably, Al-Shaykh never names the precise country or town in this immense continent, and the 'African' setting, not important enough to be particularised, seems a scarcely credible artifice" (Wright, 1994: 68). Though the act of moving is hardly convincing within the novel, given the limited horizon of Zahra's family and their refusal to allow Zahra the luxury of a new space for self-discovery, it is imposed by the writer to further consolidate Zahra's sense of disappointment with an evasive and vicious Arab patriarchy. In Africa, Hashem identifies Zahra with Lebanon, his lost motherland, and tenderly approaches her; "I never imagined that one day my feelings for Zahra would reach the pitch they did...After those long years, it seemed that I began to breathe again, and even to touch the fabric of my commitment to family and homeland" (*SOZ*, 57). Suspecting her uncle of incestuous advances and embarrassed to know that he is reading her personal memoir, she again shelters herself in the bathroom and thinks: "There is no parting from you, bathroom. You are the only thing that I have loved in Africa" (*SOZ*, 21).

Overwhelmed by the strangeness of the place and by way of shaking her uncle off, Zahra accepts the precipitous marriage proposal she receives from Majed, another Lebanese expatriate. This marriage is doomed but not because the husband discovers that Zahra is not virgin. Although disturbed by such a discovery, Majed's anger and intensity are soon to fade away as he thinks that

such formidable questions become insignificant here in Africa, where there is no culture, no environment, no family to blow them up out of all proportion... Traditions surface from time to time, but remain transplanted and so lose their former authority... There is no reason why my mind should continue to be so troubled. (*SOZ*, 74)

Majed is also quick to accept Hashem's argument over his niece's virginity that "[t]his is not something to make a fuss about in the twentieth century. Our generation should be seeking to influence our parents and those whose minds and attitudes remain narrow" (*SOZ*, 95). Judged from within a general Arab-Islamic context, the attitudes of both men towards the issue of Zahra's virginity are remarkably unexpected and represent a break away from conventional social taboos. Zahra, though, does not care to assess the two males' responses towards the issue of her virginity nor is willing to incorporate herself in any mode of change. In fact, throughout the novel, Zahra has been depicted as incapable of loving or initiating action. She shows no emotions, no resilience, and no potential for communicating with others including her neighbours, mother, father, uncle, husband, and brother. She spends the rest of her African sojourn either sulking in bed or locking herself in the bathroom picking at her pimples. After she undergoes several breakdowns, she is checked into a mental hospital. It is a relief for both the husband and the uncle when Zahra departs Africa back to Lebanon for good.

Turning now to the second part of the novel, 'The Torrents of War', we find Zahra in Lebanon at a time when the civil war is raging in Beirut. Her parents move to a village by way of fleeing the war, and her brother joins one of the warring parties and prides himself on the money that he steals from dead people and evacuated houses. This situation leaves the family flat to Zahra, her first chance for a life of her own. The war turns out to be in perfect harmony

with Zahra's state of mind: "When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm" (*SOZ*, 107). The advent of war leads her to ask questions such as: "Were there truly these kidnappings? Did they actually check your identity card and then, on the basis of your religion, either kill you or set you free?...Had George, the hair dresser, our neighbour, turned against me? Had I turned against him?" (*SOZ*, 110). Yet, her erotic desires are most manifest and roused amidst the sound of the bombs and collective death. She gives herself freely to a sniper with whom she experiences orgasm for the first time in her life. Once again she becomes pregnant but this time she wants to keep the baby and be married to the sniper. When she informs the sniper of her pregnancy, he immediately asks her to undergo an abortion only to change his mind afterwards and promise her marriage. As she leaves him on the rooftop where they had their most intimate meetings, she feels such unbearable pain that she believes she is undergoing miscarriage. Lying in the street bleeding, seconds before her death, she recognises that her lover/sniper has shot her. The horror of her situation is embedded in the last sentence of the novel when Zahra, dying, only "see[s] rainbows processing towards [her]...across the white skies with their promises only of menace" (*SOZ*, 184).

Obviously, then, Zahra has been oscillating mainly between the confinements of bathrooms, some other marginal places like unseen parts of the rooftops, and then ultimately of the grave. Whether in her father's house, or her uncle's, or her husband's, the bathroom is her final resort: "[l]eave me alone in this bathroom! It allows me to disappear in time and space; it cuts me off from all human relations. It shuts off my memory" (*SOZ*, 82). She sneaks to the bathroom to evade the world of men; "if only I could sleep for ever on the floor of this bathroom...[w]here I can lose myself and not know where I really am." She yearns "to adopt this bathroom as...[her] universe" (*SOZ*, 81). If places, houses, territories within the narrative frame are often envisaged as metaphors paralleling personal and political attainments or desires, then 'bathrooms' can hardly be seen as tropes which signify positive changes in the life of Zahra. Zahra's willed confinement in such a place engenders claustrophobic feelings and other

kinds of closures which the novel's structural and formal designation and tempo help to consolidate. Entrapment within vicious circles, futile repetitions, and closures are the interwoven fabric of the narrative. "Zahra is like her mother ... as much as to establish a cycle of repetition within the family (and perhaps the culture) itself" (Larson, 1991: 15). Zahra's journey to Africa does not contribute in any sense to endorsing, still less to awakening, a quest for self-identity, or a desire for self 'evolution'. Places and people are depicted in such a manner as to reiterate or even add up to Zahra's sense of self-defeat. Even the eruption of the war which, according to Accad, could signify the "revolt against tradition and authority, to break with the rules of the fathers and mothers," has worked to reinforce the older order and "the patriarchal tribal system," and to "lead "women a step further down" (1993: 245).

Evelyn Accad (1993) and Charles R. Larson (1991) believe that the envisioning of Zahra's experience, the general gloomy and frustrating atmosphere of the novel, and the closed circles it depicts are the natural product, or even the truthful reflection of an Arab-Islamic patriarchal society that does not grant the space for human beings, more specifically women, "to develop into harmonious human beings" (Accad, 1993: 244). Larson asserts that "Al-Shaykh's career as an Arabic writer has been shaped both by her own rather peripatetic life...coupled with the rigidity of her traditional upbringing in Lebanon. She was raised in a strict Shiite Moslem household, in which she covered her hair and wore full-length dresses with long sleeves" (1991: 14). Interestingly though, interviewed by Paula W. Sunderman, Al-Shaykh confirms:

My father was a true believer, but he didn't forbid me from seeking to further my education. I was writing for newspapers and even travelling on my own to Egypt at the age of eighteen. He didn't stop me from having my own personality. He never stopped me from having real friendships with men. He knew that my editor and a male writer helped me and gave me advice with my writing. Later in life he forgave me for marrying a Christian. When my mother asked for a divorce, he gave it to her and didn't cause her any problems. (In Sunderman, 1992: 629)

From within a general Arab-Islamic context, Al-Shaykh's life as she discusses it is anything but strict and closed. Judged by a Western criterion of 'development', the mode of life

as pursued by Al-Shaykh manifests a rather early stage within an overall libertarian scheme of Western women's agenda. Unfortunately, it is often the case that the criterion of development as set by the central and the more powerful – the Western – is the one adopted as the measure against which the less powerful and peripheral assess their own achievements. It is true that in the 1980s and 1990s feminist disciplines, and actually other socio-political and literary disciplines, have asserted the importance of founding critiques and studies centred on the dynamics of 'differences', and have endeavoured to conceptualise the ethics of such dynamics whether in relation to individuals, groups, nations, or cultures. Still, it seems that the concept of 'difference' has not yet been fully grasped. Accordingly, it is such a difficulty for the critic to assume a detached role in critiquing the 'other'. Consciously or unconsciously the critic's, including Larson's, own system of value continues to be the frame of reference by which s/he perceives and judges others.

Al-Shaykh herself seems to be caught up within the paradigms of others' discourses by rendering her own indigenous world dormant or devoid of constructive dynamics necessary to engender change. This kind of depiction resonates with some orientalist images constructed by colonial discourses of the Arab world and Arab people as lazy and lacking the potential for enacting their own development. Societies experience instances of an apparently imposed self-destruction which are, after all, not wholly self-generated so much as they are the results of overlapping and conflicting nexus of powers. The site of the battle is never as neutral as a superficial look might reflect. For behind every warring party there are histories, powers, interests, and subjective desires. Zahra's projection of the Lebanese dilemma is superficial. The one-dimensionality within which she is engulfed cannot encapsulate the complex and heterogeneous realities of the Arab situations in general and the Arab women in particular.

Zahra is a static presence immersed in yet more static surroundings and conditions. The uncle, too, is overwhelmed by nostalgic feelings to his country home. After twenty years in Africa, he still cannot accommodate his own self within the African setting. His arbitrary

attachment to an old image of Lebanon is disturbingly projected onto his niece, Zahra, who is soon to interpret his fumbling in showing his emotions as sexual advances. The characters' inability to merge critically within the tempo of history leads the reader to finish with the text the moment s/he finishes the last word of the page. Descriptions and diagnoses are necessarily inherent processes and preconditions for resistance. Immobilised characters and images can be the tropes or proxies for change or stagnation. The narrative mode in *SOZ* is hardly the promise of change. Death, destruction, and barrenness are at work at the different narrative levels. Even more, Zahra is neither the prototype for the Arab woman nor the inherent and sole product of an Arab Islamic-society.

Accad (1993) and Larson (1991) confirm that *SOZ* relates to, or even better copies, the reality of the Arab women within Arab-Muslim societies. The stagnation, catatonic lapses, and inertia characterising the people and their societies recall some of the stereotypical images of Arabic/Islamic societies and women within the colonial discourse. Larson in "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, a Reluctant Feminist" (1991: 14) and Wright in "Sexual Adventures and Sour Marriages" (1994: 18) insist that Zahra has been denounced by her husband for the sole reason that she was not found to be a virgin on the wedding night. Accad makes it clear that despite the fact that the uncle and the husband are such "unsympathetic characters," the uncle took a constructive part over Zahra's virginity, "telling her husband that times had changed, that such customs were trivial and stupid" (1993: 243). The insistence on the part of Larson and Wright to render these two Arab men 'backward' and 'close-minded' is not supported by evidence from the novel, since the husband and the uncle have been shown to come easily and quickly to terms with the fact that Zahra had sexual intercourse with other men without being legally married to them (*SOZ*, 74, 94, 95). Both Western critics would like to believe that Zahra's ordeal is basically caused by her loss of virginity to overdramatise and exaggerate the sexual oppression of Arab women in Arab-Islamic societies. While such an insistence carries an implicit criticism of some Arab men's 'inferior' values – as opposed to some 'superior'

Western ones – it also has the tendency of replicating a colonial discourse where the Arab Muslim men are represented as aggressive, brutal, and most insensitive towards their women. In addition, Larson's and Wright's textual interpretations reflect a desire to judge others' values and others' codes of ethics in accordance with the self's own culturally constructed perspective or ethical matrix. Naturally, critics and novelists can make their own judgements. The (non)credibility of these judgements need be assessed from within a certain cultural context not necessarily to assert the legibility of that established context, but to be sensitive as to how some judgements might work to promote or impede positive changes.

Wright, however, remains convincing concerning other issues in the novel. For him, the extremely repulsive personality of Zahra and Al-Shaykh's "relentless 'realism' toward her bleak subject" (1994: 68) render

The Story of Zahra...harsh and unlovely...The work displays many first-novel flaws, among them the fallacy that if protagonist's life is monotonous and dismal, so must the writing be, in order faithfully to reflect life...These chapters are ugly. Though the reader has struggled to empathise with Zahra, through whose first-person narration the story is filtered, all is lost but the reader ends up with more sympathy for the lonely and homesick uncle than for his niece, and comes to regard the well-meaning but conventional husband as a perfectly reasonable product of Muslim male socialisation...But Zahra is narrowly unrelenting, self-enclosed, unforgiving of both of them, and of her whole troubled family and society...In the West where sex and violence have been treated frankly by women writers for years, such uneven first novels cause little stir. In the repressed, heavily censored milieu out of which it emerged, its notoriety has given *The Story of Zahra* an aura of mystery and danger that may not carry over in our culture. (1994: 68)

It is not that Al-Shaykh transgresses all local cultural barriers in her treatment of sex which might lead to a restricted readership within an Arab-Islamic context. Sex is introduced as very debasing and dehumanising. Denied within the narrative are any symbolic or metaphorical values usually associated with a treatment of sex in an aesthetic text. It is true that feminists are expected to cross barriers and tread usually untrodden areas for attaining change on various cultural and political levels. Still, strategies need be rethought if they prove seriously collaborative in deterring the emergence of constructive changes.

It could be the case that the popularity of the novel and its wide circulation in the Arab world and the West are based on the fact that it is banned in some Arabic countries because of

its explicit treatment of sex. The news of the novel's banning has been included in all the articles I have come across on the novel. This probably would work as a testimony to the injustices and lack of recognition that an Arab woman writer suffers from in the Arab world. As such she seeks, and actually, is granted, support somewhere else. Any such support, however, should not be taken at face value. Mohanty writes:

the mere proliferation of third world women's texts, in the West at least, owes as much to the relations of the marketplace as to the conviction to "testify" or bear witness...After all, the point is not just "to record" one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant. (1991: 34)

As maintained by Wright, the manner by which sex and violence are depicted in *SOZ* does not stir the imagination of the Western reader any more. Their incorporation within an Arabic text, though, could be provocative to some Arab readers. Within a Western context, the interest in *SOZ* is not derived from the aesthetic value the novel has to yield so much as it is derived from the fact that it functions as a witness 'testifying' to Arab Muslim women's oppression under Islamic patriarchy.

Narrative that 'nurtures' the seeds for disrupting and destroying abusive constructs is crucial in the production of 'self' and collective consciousness. As held by Raymond Williams "meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed" (1977: 166). By presenting a narrative that lacks the potential to encode any change under the pretext of 'truthfulness' to life, Al-Shaykh might be reproducing the very conditions of oppression inherent in the forms she is trying to be faithful in copying. In defining creative practice, Williams pinpoints the limitation of transcribing a direct experience or a person "copied from life" (1977: 207). He sees writers' strict adherence to the idea of true "equivalence," to what is, in their artistic presentations as a reproduction of the status quo without adding to it a bit of creativity (1977: 207). These presentations he adds are "ordinarily appropriated for the range from reproduction to performance," and this is one phase of the narrative (1977: 209). It has been difficult in *SOZ* to find images or narrative instances which would fulfil other equally important phases like,

using Williams's own words, "a new articulation and in effect a new formation, extending beyond its own modes" (1977: 211).

*Deer Musk (DM) (Miskul- Ghazal)*¹

When emphasising 'creative art' as not a final product but as a process and an active site for inducing constructive human changes, it becomes pivotal to foreground those constituents and strategies overt or covert in this art which could bring about change or consciousness for the need of one. Concomitant with any such practice is the description of the site calling for change. In Al-Shaykh's *SOZ* writing the site to be resisted has not induced political consciousness for struggle; rather the narrative structure, subject, and tropes in the novel have emerged to create what mostly deters any human move, namely depression.

In *DM*, Al-Shaykh reiterates her interest in producing images of women, three Arabs and one American, under an exceptionally enclosed system of patriarchy. The name of the country against which the narrative takes place is not mentioned, but the topography and other presences suggest that it is Saudi Arabia. Her women, this time, do not suffer from depression or catatonic lapses. One of them, Suha, escapes the desert to Lebanon where the civil war was still raging. Ironically, the setting that Suha seeks as a final resort is the one depicted in *SOZ* as responsible for producing characters such as Zahra. What deficiencies her characters inhere tend to echo some bigger dilemmas which their own societies at different social and political levels suffer from. Jean Makdisi has the following to say about women in Lebanon:

Perhaps nowhere in the Arab world, or at least in the *Mashreq*, do women appear to be freer. Even the most casual visitor must be struck by the visibility, force of character and self-assurance of women here...Lebanese women have had the vote since 1952. They form a large part of the population of artists; there are many women writers and academics...everywhere one goes, one is aware of this great female presence. (1996: 231)

Even if the above works to assert how a perception of 'development' continues to be measured against a 'Western eye', it also leads one to ask the following: If emancipated

¹ The Arabic title *Miskul-Ghazal* literary translates into *Deer Musk*. In the English version it has been translated into *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. As I see no association between the Arabic title and the English translation, I choose to use the literal translation of the title from Arabic into English throughout the study.

Lebanon has yielded such a submissive and self-enclosed character as Zahra, what type of women are other more enclosed and 'rigid' patriarchal systems are likely to produce? Posing this question could have been unnecessary had Al-Shaykh involved herself more critically with unfolding Zahra's political consciousness and impinged more analytically and inclusively on her space and those dynamics rendering her an utterly, and exceptionally, negative person. The negation of spaces where diversely specific and complex, not simply determinist, formations can be seen to develop produces transcendental types and proves, after all, insensitive to subjective differences and many other crucial human intra /interactions.

Suha's escape to Lebanon, with Zahra's story in the background, could accrue some inconsistencies or questions. How is it that Suha who has the freedom of choice can still be seen as a better version of Zahra? The evolution of a female character could have been convincingly expected had Al-Shaykh left or disseminated in *SOZ* some seeds, or fissures, or interstices for hope or life embetterment. Zahra is exclusively delivered as the natural product of a seriously 'backward' and corrupt setting, and is rendered more a type than an exceptional pathological case. The different levels of narrative collaborate to occlude all prospects of change. Although *DM* is not a sequel to *SOZ*, the resolution with which Al-Shaykh renders transformative visions of any kind within the local context an impasse leaves the reader wondering as to whether she can prove, after all, capable of disseminating visions of change in her later novels. One, as such, would like to see if Suha's chances for a better life in Lebanon are less obscured than those of Zahra's, or if a destiny similar to that of Zahra is awaiting her, considering the tenacious, and linear, link Al-Shaykh establishes between places and psychic formations. For, Suha flees the 'desert' to Lebanon, the very place that has produced the pathetic Zahra. In *SOZ*, the elements of death shredding the country intermingle with Zahra's sexuality and cause her to sink deeply into a destructive sexual affair with a sniper, a compulsive killer. Before the war, Zahra "sprawl[s] naked day after day on a bed in a stinking garage, unable to protest at anything" (*SOZ*, 32).

To envisage women as totally helpless creatures incapable of exercising any kind of power or willed action at any level, neither within the public nor within the private spaces, including the more domestic realms of sexuality, promises yet further obstacles impeding the construction of future transformative visions. The erosion of all powers in relation to women reinforces the stereotype of women as such pathetic and negative victims. If women are depicted as essentially and typically devoid of the potential to develop awareness and resentment of their oppressive situation, then what prospects do women have to induce a constructive change? Testimony from life, anecdotes, histories, literatures, and other cultural activities and manifestations attest to the fact that, after all, women are not totally devoid of power. Deprivation has often led women to operate what power they possess evasively and cunningly. Mernissi in *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* emphasises "the subversive power of women to sow disorder through sexuality, sensuality and powers of seduction" in historical times. She also argues that uncontrollable power which emanates from women are "still very much alive and invoked daily" (1996: 56). Power is an immanent human attribute, often blurred by the different forms it assumes and the degree of influence it has. There are always the more powerful in any envisaged labyrinth. Yet 'less powerful' is not the same as 'powerless'. Power is inherent in all human activities and impulses, including 'desire'. To desire change or to undergo liminality with others' positions or others' experiences is a tendency to act one form of power or another. Tamr in *DM*, for example, is aware of the limited potential she is granted by her own desert society and yet exercises this potential to the full to attain some personal fulfilment, whether convincingly or not it remains to be seen.

In *DM* four female characters dominate the narrative, Suha, a Lebanese, Nur and Tamr, Gulf women, and Suzanne, an American. I will try to assess the extent to which Al-Shaykh has succeeded in endowing her characters with the potential to disrupt patriarchal values. It is important to mention that assessing whatever potential the narrative has to yield is not a process measured against the character's own personal achievements or failures in the novel. The

character's personal gains or failures should never be seen as the successes or failures of the narrative to disseminate creative and positive moves. The most tragic endings and the most frustrating experiences in fiction could be conducive to engraving the deepest consciousness to ignite a desire for change. It is not Zahra's death nor the event of the horrendous civil war which quadruples the bleakness of *SOZ* and minimises its potential to instigate political consciousness. It is the structural, formal, and poetic designation of the novel that intrigues to block new formations that go far beyond the proceedings of the plot.

Going back to the women in *DM*, and beginning with Suha, we need to find out whether Suha's rejection of the spatial setting of the Gulf is a sign of rebellion, or a witness of a lack of any political consciousness and a register of self-indulgence. Suha, who has been identified with Al-Shaykh herself, for the two lived in Saudi Arabia and felt that they "did not belong to the desert culture" (Sunderman, 1992: 629) is the first of these women narrators. She tells her own story beginning with how she and her husband flee the war in Lebanon and seek work in the Gulf. Suha is well-educated and 'emancipated' woman. Al-Shaykh mentions: "there is a fragment of autobiography in everything one writes" but "I am a doer and Suha is not" (In Sunderman, 1992: 628, 629). In the Gulf state, working in a department store, Suha hides herself in a packing box whenever the male inspector does his rounds. She has many female acquaintances, most important of whom are the other three narrators of the novel. None of them, she feels, is fit enough for her company. She begs her husband to leave the country fearing that she will go mad if she stays any longer, assuring him that living in Lebanon under the war is much better than living in the affluent desert (*DM*, 72, 73).

Suha's narrative invokes many symbols typically associated with freedom or its absence, like the canary in the cage (*DM*, 5, 21, 64), or high walls (*DM*, 30), thus reinforcing her imprisonment. On the walls of her house she hangs pictures of Swiss houses and lakes to help her imagine realities other than hers in the desert (*DM*, 9). On her arrival she tries to make the best of her stay in the area by pursuing her role as an 'ideal' housewife to the full. Then she

becomes bored and decides to work in a supermarket only to be more frustrated by the restriction imposed on her as a woman in a segregationist society. Suha befriends some Western women like Angrid, the German, and Suzanne, the American. These friendships are a matter of personal convenience. Her visits to Angrid are propelled by the fact that Angrid's garden reminds her of those gardens in Beirut, and the desserts that Angrid prepares for her guests are quite a treat (*DM*, 16). Her relation to Suzanne breaks the rhythm of her monotonous life in the Gulf, for Suzanne has always interesting stories to tell about her affairs with other men (*DM*, 18-20). Suha describes houses, buildings, hotels, airports, streets, and technology as manifesting materialistic prosperity but lacking any sense of refined taste. Her account of events, places, friends, and houses is literally a critical manifesto of women's life in the Gulf (*DM*, 30). The vivid details and accuracy with which surroundings are described are peculiar to biographical writings not necessarily composed by creative novelists, but by eloquent writers. Suha is soon to despair and proclaim that "she has sealed with red wax all presences in this place, including humans, animals and things" (*DM*: 37).

Suha's narrative takes a different direction as she discusses her relation with Nur, a wealthy woman whose sense of boredom is ever intensified by the enhancement of the materialistic luxury. In this episode Al-Shaykh treads a sexual area hardly approached by any Arab writers of fiction, and this is lesbianism. Suha finds herself sexually involved with Nur. She does not comprehend how she becomes dragged into such an unwilled affair and starts reiterating to herself: "I am Suha, twenty-five years old. My mother's name is Widad and my father is Dr. Adnan. I am not a lesbian like Sahar" (*DM*, 49). Finding herself in one bed with Nur leads her to the recognition that unless she departs immediately from the desert, she will soon suffer from insanity or probably a loss of identity. Suha attempts to reclaim her identity by continuously summoning its constituents: She is a woman, married with a child, and she could be nothing if not heterosexual. Suha tries to evade Nur, only to be summoned one day by Nur's mother who surprisingly persists that Suha go to bed with Nur. Suha is traumatised by

such a request and cannot possibly understand how in this strict environment this could ever happen.

No sign can be located in the novel to suggest that Suha's affair with Nur is meant, for example, to uncover inherently suppressed lesbianism peculiar to some females as most fervently defined and defended by feminist advocates like Anna Koedt (1991), or Adrienne Rich (1980, 1986). The overall structural design of the novel helps to envisage Nur's sexual experiences with Suah as indicative of Al-Shaykh's convictions about the impossibility of evading sex. Even under the most rigid systems of patriarchy, suppression of sex is bound to manifest itself in various courses of actions. Al-Shaykh maintains that women "think about sex continuously either to prevent it from happening or to wish it to happen. They know that it is the most important issue" (In Sunderman, 1992: 632). In the absence of heterogeneous sex in a strictly segregationist society, women's needs to have their sexual desires fulfilled, Al-Shaykh seems to be implying, might as well be consummated through lesbian relations. Nur, outside her country, can have sex with men. Inside, where contact with men is very restricted, she has sex with women. The friendship between one female and another is shown to have transgressed its accepted boundaries to involve a physical contact. Nur's heterosexual life is anything but fulfilled. It is not only that her husband is always on a flight but he also lacks interest in women. He is bisexual and gradually grows more interested in men. Suppression of sexual desires is bound to manifest itself through different practices. Within the context of the Gulf area, lesbianism turns out to be one of such practices.

From the perspective of some Western, specifically American, lesbianism "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life" (In Hawthorne, 1991: 316). Hawthorne finds in extreme separatist positions the possible construction of a genuine female power; a willed separatism, and not an imposed segregation, is the way to achieve just that (1991: 312-6). Yet, to argue that either Al-Shaykh or Nur conceives of lesbianism as a political initiative to claim a female power is imposing a Western interpretation

on an Arabic text. The narrative texture does not yield this kind of feminist visions envisaged as strategic for the development of any feminist political consciousness. Al-Shaykh is anyway reluctant to identify herself with feminism in general and would be more reluctant to identify with radical or separatist feminism. Interviewed by Paula Sunderman, she states the reasons which lead her to resist being called a feminist and resist some feminists' definitions of feminism:

If I considered myself a feminist, then I would label myself. And I prefer not to label myself because I feel when writing about women that I am writing by extension to all human beings. If I have something powerful to say, why should I narrow it? Most feminists have fixed political views of the world. They believe in fighting for a certain ideology. This is much too narrow. I like to be loose—and not to use clichés, to be imaginative without having a message or being bound by one. Yet I sympathise with women. I feel for them and their situation. That is why I write about them and show their conditions. (1992: 628)

The above reflects not only Al-Shaykh's superficial and simplistic acquaintance with the different feminist strands and feminists' insightful contributions to the cultural scene, but also her tone renders woman a pathetic 'other' that is worthy of the sympathetic impulses of the writer's superior self. If feminism challenges anything, it mostly challenges 'naming' or 'labelling'. Deconstructing reductionist 'labels' and categories has been one of the major targets of feminist discourses. Feminists, more than any others, are conscious of how women have been subjugated and subsumed under different labels whether nature, biology, sentimentality and others.

It could be argued that lesbianism in the novel manifests what Mernissi might call a cunning and evasive expression of some female powers by way of escaping patriarchal punishment (1996: 56). Al-Shaykh in *DM* is concerned with elaborating how certain spaces produce and shape certain modes of behaviour peculiar not only to women but to men too. Let us not forget that Nur's lesbianism is the counter-part of her husband's homosexuality. The sexuality of each against the depicted setting of the novel is not 'a breaking of the rule' nor is it an intentionally calculated, and politically motivated practice so much as it is an insistent projection of unfulfilled desires in oppressive settings. The self-consolation that Nur seeks in

her relation with Suha turns out to be a threat to Suha's identity. The latter's sense of humiliation is deepened whenever she remembers her physical contact with Nur (*DM*, 61). Tortured by a threatened heterosexuality – heterosexuality being an indispensable constituent of her identity – Suha is more resolved than ever to leave the Gulf State for Lebanon, which she finally does.

Suha is more educated than many other women of the desert are. She is dressed up the Western manner. Her husband is not 'closed-minded' and obviously grants her the space to enact her will. Still, she is neither interested in seeing into her own social and cultural surroundings, nor in inducing meaningful changes into her own life, nor in communicating with other women in the desert who envy her for the 'freedom' she enjoys. She is most reluctant to initiate any dialogue not only with other women but also with herself – the evolution of any such dialogue could be interpreted as a sign of internal growth. She moves out into a new world, oppressive as it is, only to emerge out of it more approving of her older world. No critical vision of both worlds can be located throughout Suha's narrative. Her disapproval of a petrol-funded desert setting and mentalities does not go beyond a superficial assessment of situations. She cannot read in any such situation others' stories and histories informing present formations.

Felski argues that journeys could be essential components in the *Bildungsroman*—a genre that is essentially designed to trace the process of individual self-development. A feminist reading of this genre should be attentive to the criterion by which 'individual self-development' is defined. It is often the case that the character's development or self-enlightenment turns out to be a process of rehabilitation with a wider ideological formation shaping the public life. The enclosed realm of the familial home is sometimes opened only to confront a larger, but still an enclosed realm of public life (1989: 135-137). The journey which Suha undergoes from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia is retrogressive. She has had the chance to experience the richness of Bhabha's 'unhomely' moment defined as beginning with, but later

transcending, fixities. The experience of such moment to the full helps overcome polarities of the 'self' and of the 'other'. Suha has occluded all 'inlets' to the self to prevent others from admitting into her own space. She evades one closure and heads to another by choosing to go back to the starting point—a point which allows her “to open the fridge for a bottle of beer and to listen to the sound of music as loud as she wants,” and a point where she can enjoy the looks of her own mother with “hair that is always elegantly done, while wearing red lipsticks and expensive shoes, and a face that hardly has any wrinkles even though she is in her fifties” (*DM*, 74, 75).

The above constitutes Suha's utmost aspirations: fleeing the desert and its houses surrounded each by a different huge wall (*DM*, 80, 81). The apparent authenticity with which Al-Shaykh attempts to communicate Suha's experience in the desert hardly leaves any space for the deployment of symbols and images other than those fragmented and conventional ones like the canary or the wall (*DM*, 64, 81). In fact, the recurrent use of these images in nursery rhymes and other forms of prose and fiction has made them so familiar that they no longer produce among mature readers any remarkable poetic impact. Furthermore, the story of Suha has been fused with instances where the narrator's, or the author's, job is deemed parallel to that of a camera. Readers are provided with all the details and descriptions which enable them to envision the depicted scene. The description of the physical world of the desert and superficial treatment of some characters' psychology in *DM* have been basic features of the narrative. The cultivation of a human vision through nurturing characters' personal quests, deploying rich imagery, devising symbols, or unfolding the different dimensions of the one human being are some of the elements which could have saved the text from becoming a closed location of human activities and shallow projections of interacting forms of reality.

It is ironic that Tamr, the woman with the least education in this novel, proves the most efficient of the other women in devising a strategy of confrontation to attain some personal gains. Tamr is married when she is twelve, and divorced while still in her twenties. Her second

marriage lasts only for one month. Without impinging convincingly on the socio-cultural or psychological reasons which render Tamr a more positive character in her pursuit of education and change than the other women in the novel, Al-Shaykh depicts her capable of emerging as a person keen on learning how to read and write—in preparation for starting her business as a seamstress. One of the teachers whom she looks at as a model to follow is Suha. Tamr meditates on Suha's hairstyle, shoes, painted fingernails, and tight Western dress very admiringly (*DM*, 191). As Tamr starts the business she is faced by many obstacles set by men and by a society permeated by androcentric values. The men in her family are the first to protest against her project. She announces her rebellion by going on a hunger strike, weeping and shouting till finally she is granted the permission to open her clothes shop. The manner in which men close her shop and speak to her is not devoid of exaggeration, the kind that is typically associated with stereotypical presentations.

The houses in *DM* are surrounded with walls symbolising characters' sense of imprisonment in the desert. For, Tamr, like Suha, is also imprisoned in a house dominated by her brother. Almost every scene in Tamr's story is designed to pinpoint the aggressive practices exercised against women and their freedom by men and society. The exposure of these oppressive practices seems to be the sole impulse energising the tempo of the narrative and shaping the overall atmosphere of the novel. This obsession with underscoring only those codes of practices shown to be dehumanising women and belittling their roles as individuals has been extravagantly carried through at the expense of unfolding some really important relational and structural dynamics determining these oppressive practices against women.

In "Sexuality and Sexual Politics" Accad maintains that "sexuality is much more central to social and political problems in the Middle East than previously thought, and that unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations" (1991: 237). Whereas this could be seen as an overstatement, Al-Shaykh herself asserts that the women in *DM* "are victims of society more than victims of men because

men are sometimes victims of society as well. They have to obey it, but a vicious circle ensues because men are behind the wheels of social change” (In Sunderman, 1992: 629). Despite the fact that Al-Shaykh’s novels broach sexuality as if it were the most central dilemma of the Arab-Muslim societies, her assertion in the above interview with Sunderman tells a different story as she deems both Arab men and women as victims. However, we do not want to end up here with a conception of a society that is abstract transcending social members who become passive cultural dupes. For we need to find out if men are not behind the wheels of change in the Arab societies, then who is? And, if it turns out that men are responsible for maintaining the ongoing system how can this system be resisted? How gender roles are interlinked to other wider cultural and political issues are not satisfactorily handled in the novels. The incorporation of effective literary analyses of sexuality into deeper political and religious stories of the area has been considerably effaced by the writer’s determination to encompass as many situations, or rather pictures, of women’s oppression as possible. This has worked to strip her narratives of an air of ‘freshness’ the reader typically seeks in the act of reading. By the end of the novel, the fragmented images indiscriminately deployed to condemn an Arab-Islamic patriarchy have become so worn off that the stimulation of a protesting vision is seriously occluded.

The story of Suzanne provides yet another simplified and surface picture of a life of a woman, this time a non-Arab. The penetration of Suzanne’s inner world does not result in a deep perception of the workings of her inner mind nor in untangling some intricately interwoven elements of her subjectivity. The interior scenarios which Suzanne is made to rehearse reinforce an oversimplified mental picture of her. Her thoughts about the desert and the Arab men recall orientalist paradigms founded by a Western scholarship within which she herself, a Westerner, is caught up. The mysterious and exotic setting of the Arab desert becomes for Suzanne, the middle-aged American housewife, the utopian ideal and the perfect resort to inscribe her own threatened ‘feminine’ self. When Suzanne’s husband is offered a job in the Arab desert her American friend, Barbara, encourages her to go where she and her

husband can emerge as characters in *One Thousand Nights and A Night*. In fact, before she makes up her mind upon leaving the States, Suzanne is offered two pictures in relation to the life in the desert, contradictory and yet typically inherent instances of a Western orientalist discourse. Barbara, for example, encourages her to go to the desert where there are fabrics embroidered with jewels, palaces and money; “Omar Sharif comes from the desert and so does the empress Thuraya” (*DM*, 146). Suzanne at first does not know whom to believe, Barbara or her father who tells her that if she is ever in an Arab country “then she must be careful of lice and fleas.” Her aunt, too, has warned her against “the bites of scorpions which love to suck the blood of the blond” (*DM*, 146).

Suzanne chooses to leave the States for the desert. She does not regret making this choice. Her ego is very much flattered by gazes of Arab men at her blond hair and her body movements, since in her country whatever she does or says passes unnoticed (*DM*, 144, 156). The attention that the Arabs give to Suzanne, while it makes up for her own sense of inferiority at home, also underscores some Arabs’ sense of inferiority towards the superior Western ‘other’. Suzanne is taken by the new world of the desert, the money she makes out of her affair with Maaz, and the gold she can buy (*DM*, 173). This supposedly ‘liberated’ woman of the West has nothing to say when told by Maaz, her long-sought lover, an alcoholic and affluent Arab of a petrol country, “God created you to bear children and to give pleasure to man, and that’s all.” She pretends that she does not understand what he means, so Maaz says again, “God created women to make children, like a factory. This is the exact word, Suzanne. A woman is a factory, she produces enjoyment for the man, not for herself” (*DM*, 161-2). In the Arab world, all her Western values and upbringing are shown to fade away. She does not mind being mockingly applauded by Maaz when the latter tells her that she is “a blasphemous, a non believer in God” and that she is destined to hell (*DM*, 122). Suzanne wants to show Maaz that she is now used to Arabic food and Arabic eating habits like dipping her bread in stews (*DM*, 132). She is willing to convert to Islam and even to raise her American son, James, as a

Muslim. This is all to please Maaz so that he would take her as his second wife (*DM*, 148). She does not feel the slightest remorse towards the naïve wife of Maaz, Fatima, for having an affair with the latter's husband. She even calls Fatima a woman who is incapable of jealousy or anger (*DM*, 159).

Suzanne's narrative is mostly shaped by her own interior dialogues revolving around money and other materialistic gains. The sense of self-flattery for being such an appealing sexual target to those 'dark men' makes her hold strongly to the new space of the desert. Her interior scenarios are devoid of any concerns for the others, not even for her own son. They also reflect no peculiar richness, inclinations, or interest in any human notions and anxieties. She is obsessed with one impulse, her love for the Sahara. The last time she sees Maaz she almost retches at the sight of his new-born syphilitic boy. The reader expects, then, that her first decision will be leaving the Sahara. She expresses relief that the syphilis has not been transferred to her from Maaz who has caught the disease out of his sexual contacts with other women during his travels to the Far East (*DM*, 184). Surprisingly, her devastation, it turns out, is not caused by the baby's condition, nor by his father's. It is caused by the fact that her chances to stay in the Sahara have become much less, especially that her husband has been notified to leave the country. The final scene ends with another dialogue with the self. It reveals yet a stronger resolution not to leave the desert under any kind of pressure, reiterating to herself: "I will never leave here no matter what. This unequivocal decision of mine made all kinds of thoughts crowd in my mind. I could declare that I have converted to Islam and I could ask to stay and work as a babysitter. Or I could ask David for a divorce and seek to be married just formally to Ringo [her driver] whose visa will not expire before a month" (*DM*, 184).

Before analysing Suzanne's part of the narrative, it is important to describe how Al-Shaykh chooses to tell the women's stories. The form of *DM* is structured along the narratives of four women, namely and respectively Suha, Nur, Suzanne, and Tamr. Each endeavours to give an account of her life and interpret events, persons, and settings in accordance with her

habits of mind as relating to her own specific socio-cultural surroundings. Each also attempts to unfold the hidden aspects of her emotional life and unconscious motives and experiences. The novel is divided into four sections that are not chronologically arranged. Each section is independent of the other and has as a title the name of one of the women narrators. However, all these women share the same desert setting and suffer from an oppressive Arab-Islamic patriarchy. They know each other and often meet at women's parties but cannot be described to be friends, with the exception of Suha and Nur who visit each other and then develop a brief sexual affair. Interestingly, while Suha discusses the affair at length, Nur hardly bothers to mention it in her part of the narrative. Nur is a very wealthy and spoiled Arabian woman who takes people and objects for granted. She does not launch any attempts to question or reflect on events. She is bored most of the time and is constantly seeking fun and 'superficial' entertainment. Her consciousness is not the kind to be troubled by continuously raising questions.

More than the narratives of the other three women in Al-Shaykh's novel, that of Suzanne has been heavily dependent on interior monologue. This dependence could be seen as formally and structurally necessitated since Suzanne cannot communicate with many others around her who cannot speak her language nor she theirs yet. The attempt to unfold Suzanne's inner world does not reveal a human subjectivity that is necessarily the locus of fluidity, desires, and anxieties shaping and shaped by the external world. Suzanne's interior world and external actions are almost immobilised spaces. Her uncanny obsession with the desert erodes the possibility of activating other psychic engagements occluding thereby the spaces for their manifestations. It is a mode of simplification to project Suzanne's inner life as one-dimensional and as lacking the substance to encapsulate complex motives and psycho dynamics. Her external actions, her mood, and her talks are all the catalysts of a sole impulse, the desire to go on living in the desert. One feels that Suzanne is on the verge of madness, for to be

overwhelmingly obsessed by *an* impulse as to end up negating all other impulses and presences is pathological.

On the other hand, the simplification with which the inner life of the character is projected reinforces a conventional inscription of stereotypical images. And in their nature stereotypes are grounded in fixities. They emerge within the narrative inescapably exaggerated presences recalling caricaturist sketches too shallow to sustain any labyrinthical configurations. By deploying clichés and repetitively invoking surface images of her oppressed woman characters, Al-Shaykh has created stereotypes of both some Arab and Western women. We end up with two exceedingly opposed pictures, one showing Arab women extremely resentful of the desert and wanting to get out, and another showing a non-Arab welcoming the desert and dying to remain in. Some readers are pleased if the conjured stereotypes come to be in conformity with images already internalised in their minds prior to the act of reading. For others, an imposed emotional involvement not only exhausts the reader, but worse, it deems the text too exhausted a site to yield speculative readings.

In the Eye of the Sun (EOS)

Houses in the Arab world dwindle into bathrooms and packing boxes. Literally walled-houses become the spatial tropes for the expression of the self or the private worlds of Arab women. Farraj discusses the concept of freedom in relation to many Arab feminist writers, including Al-Shaykh, and goes on to lament the fact that women's literary writings have shown "an incompatible literary talent that fails to render women in fiction symbols signifying lands, homes, life, and ever-emerging new ethics." Such typical presentations, he confirms, "are the landmarks of the writings of our great male writers" (my translation, 1985: 347). Al-Shaykh has declined to render her women symbols conforming to typical male representations of women. Farraj's above comment reflects lack of sensitivity to, and probably lack of familiarity with, feminist approaches and politics. His judgements are necessarily conditioned by male-

centred values and concepts. Feminism has always fought sexist representations of women in the different social, political, and cultural spheres and has sought to inscribe specific identities to women. In literature, too, projecting women as mere signals, or codes, or vehicles – which tends to transcend their specific and actual needs – is not in harmony with feminist politics. This, however, should not imply that women's fiction and women's experiences as depicted in the different artifices need not dwell on larger political or public domains affecting their status directly or indirectly.

Both Al-Shaykh and Soueif show interest in incorporating the specifically political history of their countries and in depicting war scenes in their different works, though not at the expense of emphasising their female characters' familial links. Seeking various relations between the public world and the private lives of the characters has been one of these novelists' important concerns. The Lebanese civil war in *SOZ* has dominated many of the scenes of the novel. Oil-funded mentalities and settings have been highlighted in *DM*. The promise of luxury and materialistic prosperity in oil-rich countries, the novel has sought to reflect, is not the promise of emancipation for the individual whether male or female. In Maitland's and Roberts' works, women's relations to their husbands, families, friends, and work associates are emphasised too. In many cases, these relations are extended to include participation in Women's Movement. Not only women, but men too are brought into relational dialectics within the same 'private' circle. In many of their novels, most notably Maitland's *TTT* and Roberts' *DOH*, houses emerge as the locus where readers can glimpse a vision of the political merging with the personal. In *TTT*, the house is emblematic of Western ideological formations. In *DOH*, the house is emblematic of France that has estranged others, non-Europeans, and disavowed their sufferings at a certain historical era. In both stories public sites or political events like wars are summoned through various agencies most manifest in the symbolic workings of the private. It is rare to find them (re)presentations persistently and explicitly incorporated into the formal designation of the novels. They creep into the texts through

dubious silences, awakened memories, peripheral presences, and vague structural traces. The above is not meant to be a statement describing some aspects of the Western novel in general. Rather, I am emphasising some of the feminist novels by Maitland and Roberts written in the late half of the twentieth-century.

The absence of overt war scenes in these novels or the devising of a mode of mediation to have them summoned is not dissociated from some of the historical and cultural realities of England after the fifties. In the Arab world, many writers whether males or females cannot, and do not want to, avoid an invocation of public events, wars, or other military signs in their fiction. This is particularly true since such signs have been daily occurrences and inherent constituents of the fabrics of the Arab societies especially in the Middle East for almost a century now. These signs or presences have been drawing the Arab-Islamic realities for so long now and have so engraved their marks on the psychic formations of Arab writers that they can hardly afford to disavow their images in any involved process like that of writing.

Since the second half of the twentieth century people in the West have been relatively protected from the sights of wars. (This is of course not to overlook the fact that images of wars like those of World War II are still showering through the media and different sorts of writings.) Wars and other forms of political engagements are presently shown more as international events than directly national enactment affecting drastically and directly the Western individual's private domain. Since World War II, England has not undergone any significant war with any adjacent European neighbour. This is not to say that the British state has not undergone any war ever since. It actually has, yet most of the time fighting has not been on its land. The British army, for example, fought the Falklands war on the Falklands islands in the early 1980s. Both the British and American fought colonial battles on others' territories like those of the Arabs in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Again, the above does not suggest that wars fought by the British and Americans outside their lands did not have any sort of impact inside. (The war in Vietnam, for example, happened outside America, yet nobody can

deny its dramatic political and psychological impact on the American people. In fact no war has touched the English as deeply as Vietnam did the USA). It is important to mention in this context that after World War II, most European countries have witnessed rather stable political conditions whence military attacks were replaced by the cold war – and anyway since the collapse of old Yugoslavia in 1990, talks about the cold war have significantly decreased and even vanished.

Since 1945, Europe has had some major wars like those of Bosnia and Kosovo. However, I am concerned here with discussing not Europe in general but England in particular – the setting within which Maitland and Roberts have produced their works. And even within a British context, the Northern Ireland and the I.R.A conflicts have resulted in political disruptions and instabilities which have affected the lives of many Irish and British individuals. Still, the scope and number of battles that many Arabs have undergone, and are still undergoing, are far bigger. The Arabs are deeply touched by the big military battles that took place in the Middle East, such as the Gulf War led by the USA, Britain, and their allies against Iraq where sophisticated war technology was used, or the 1967 war when Palestinians lost their lands to the Israelis, or the Lebanese Civil War which continued for more than fifteen years causing thousands of civilians to fall dead, and still many others whether in Egypt, Syria, or Jordan. In most of the above wars, many Western armies, especially the British and American, took part. Even in the Arabs' wars with Israel, Western powers have continuously backed the Israelis and provided them with advanced military weapons. Military confrontations erupt outside the Western territories where the powerful Western centre is bound to inflict serious damage upon the less powerful countries. Thus, those inhabiting the centre are unlikely to suffer what those in the periphery suffer being directly exposed to wars.

Being within the site of war is never the same as being outside it, which recalls the drunken words of Mr. Whisky Sisodia from *The Satanic Verses*: ““The trouble with Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means”” (qtd.

in Bhabha, 1995: 6). I believe that many committed feminists know what their histories outside their own lands mean. Maitland's and Roberts' works cannot be said to be utterly devoid of instances of moral judgement to that history. In this particular context, however, I am not concerned with catching these instances and subjecting them to some modes of interpretation. My concern, rather, is to show how specific war sites and war-related international public scenes are more directly exposed in the formal and structural designs of the Arab feminist novels than in the English feminist novels I have dealt with so far. However, the unmediated depictions or summoning of these sights are by no means an inherent source of enrichment to the novel nor an expansion of its boundaries. Resistance and transformation are not the necessary product of any such political enunciation.

In Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, a novel written originally in English, the political history of the Middle East is invoked at length. The story is told in letters, news clips, journal news, and *TV* and radio broadcasting as to encapsulate as many of the details about the wars, massacres, diplomatic and social crises befalling the area from the early fifties till the early eighties as possible. The authentic account which Soueif provides of historical and political events makes the novel a truly rich informative source. An Arab reader familiar with the area and its history cannot but feel nostalgic when some chapters are reopened on the promise of Arab nationalism, the redemption of the Palestinian lands and other ambitious political projects for independence. In *EOS* the historical and political merge with the personal to elucidate issues related to gender roles and colonialialism. Asya's world and her perception of her own self-identity expand as she treads an area of an 'other'.

In analysing *EOS*, I will endeavour to locate moments in the postcolonial narratives which work to define resistance and transformation as opposed to fixities and fetishism. I find Bhabha's theories very illuminating for the novel. My continuous reference to Bhabha, however, should not imply that Soueif writes her novel consciously in Bhabha's shadow or that she is set out to prove his theories. Soueif's and Bhabha's visions often seem to overlap as they

continuously tread on similar areas, considering that both trace perceptively the immigrant's movement between two different cultures, being immigrants themselves, and both are deeply concerned with cultivating humanist images that transgress political and racial boundaries but not at the expense of blurring individual contexts and differences. I find that certain instances in Soueif's novel can be expressively illuminated in the light of some of Bhabha's concepts and theoretical positions.

Al-Shaykh, too, is an immigrant living in London at the moment. She has been interested in exposing cultural conflicts and relations. Still, unlike Soueif, her accounts of such relations have not been profoundly and sensitively handled to yield effective transformative insights. Nur, Suha, Suzanne, and Zahra have been given the chance to experience transitional moments and to glimpse the richness of moving between two settings and cultures. None of them, however, makes use of these moments and as a result their worlds are rendered sites of permanent closures and calcification. In my treatment of *EOS*, I will highlight those instances when Asya, an Egyptian woman, succeeds in evading the destinies of many of Al-Shaykh's women.

Soueif is conscious of the fact that places, positions, and histories are not dormant presences. Her realisations come close to some of Bhabha's. For Bhabha, the prefix 'post', like in postmodernism, postcolonialism, and postfeminism, does not indicate absolute ideological formations and conceptual fixities, nor is it a prefix indicating temporal sequentiality (1995: 1-4). It is when the self is initiated into other different cultures but still continues to be unaccommodated within the boundaries of that culture that "normative expectations of development and progress" are challenged (1995: 2). Constructive visions are those articulated neither from a present position nor from a past one, neither from outside nor from inside, and neither from within one culture nor from within another. Proper and profound locations of cultures emerge from within hybridity, in-betweeness, the beyond, those "moments where the private and public touch in contingency" (1995, 14) and those instances where the self can

attain liminality but not homogeneity with spaces. Bhabha observes that these positions are the privilege not only of the migrants but also of “women, the colonised, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities” (1995: 5). More than others who live safe and content within the borders, “the migrant’s double vision” shaped by his/her geopolitical belonging and disbelonging is the one enabling “the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance” (1995: 5, 6).

The above can ascribe to certain modes of narrative a special transformative value necessarily conditioned by the situation of the author and his/her position. The novels dealt with in this chapter are not only written by women but also by third-world migrants and feminists—conditions emphasised in Bhabha’s conceptualization of resistant narratives. These conditions, one might think, are further enhanced by the fact that these women’s narratives are centred on women whose lives are considerably identifiable with those of the writers themselves. Asya in *EOS* is caught up within the “ambivalences” of different “spaces”, using Bhabha’s words, those of the “hither” and of the “thither” (Bhabha, 1995: 1), this of Egypt and that of England. Invoking the turbulent historical politics in detail is not an endeavour separate from Asya’s private history nor does it fail to provide the tools for commenting on her life.

To Bhabha, the ‘liminal space’ allows “the temporal movement and passage...prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (1995: 4). There are two moments identified within Bhabha’s liminal space; the ‘present’ moment and the ‘historical’ moment. Both are needed: “To dwell ‘in the beyond’ is ...to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality” (1995: 7). ‘Liminal spaces’ between the East and the West are present in Asya’s both dwellings, the one in Cairo and the other in Northern England. Soueif does not leave those liminal spaces as pathways or dormant spatial presences. They are dramatically articulated

through Asya's affair with an English fellow student named Gerald Stone. The anxiety of this relation, Soueif skilfully reflects, is brought about by the fact that its agent is a woman from the Middle East. Soueif's choice of a woman character to mediate between two cultures does not merely work to ally the novel with other feminist inscriptions. It is because Asya is a woman from the Arab-Islamic world that her relation with another, a non-Arab and a non-Muslim male, is intensified—an affair which could have been less intensely carried throughout had it been an Arab male pursuing a sexual affair with an English woman.

Although situated in the middle of Cairo, Asya's family house in which she goes on living till the age of twenty-two, that is before she joins a British university for her postgraduate studies, is a halfway house of cultural origins. One of the rooms of the house in which Asya spends most of her time preparing to sit for the *Thanawiyya Áma* (university entrance exam) has a window which looks out on Brazil street, the new name for Hassan Pasha Sabri Street (*EOS*, 34). Sheltered in the house by way of evading the bombs of the Israeli attack of 1967 on Egypt, Asya conceives of the world as "narrowed down to the inner-living room" where she opens "*Madame Bovary, Middlemarch, Anna Karenina*, and closes them again" (*EOS*, 61). While still at home, Asya's familiarity with many arguments shaping the intellectual and literary scene of the West is emphasised. As a student at the AUC doing a BA degree in English literature she already participates in discussions about "the doctrine of "Art for Art's Sake"" and whether art should be "at the service of society" (*EOS*, 94). Her parents, too, are Cairo University professors holding degrees from British Universities and eager to have their daughter, Asya Al-Ulama, follow in their footsteps and enrol for a Ph.D herself. Soueif is careful not to let these differences or foreign signs merge too harmoniously and intimately into the formation of an indigenous setting. Other events in the novel come to unfold or rather disturb the apparent formal passivity and harmony of these signs. On the other hand, incorporating them into the life of Asya at an early stage foreshadows and prepares for Asya's other successive moves in the novel—moves whose invocation could have shaken the artistic and social credibility of the

narrative had these early signs of hybridity been eroded. Within the Arab-Islamic context of Egypt of the 1960s or 1970s, Asya's practices and sexual involvement would not have been tolerated had it not been for the fact that she is raised within a bourgeois Western-style educated family.

Asya's 'privileged' status, her education, and her family history, might at face value work to discredit her as a prospective initiator of some promising visions and as an agent enacting a resistant narrative. Yet, the moment Asya steps outside her country and willingly surrenders her body to Gerald Stone, a great deal of that privilege is taken away from her. For Stone, Asya is merely one of those exotic women he reads about in books on the East. Kneeling to kiss her he iterates "I'm the one who's the slave, *your* slave, my beautiful, beautiful Eastern butterfly" (*EOS*, 564). He asks from her what he probably cannot ask from many women in the West. He knows that he imposes on her, yet one way or another he forces her to submit to his sexual and other emotional demands (*EOS*, 543, 716). The scenes of the novel handling Asya's affair with Stone not only expose Asya's subjugation in the West but also lead us to question whether Western men have truly come to terms with feminism and with the Western image of the 'new woman'. (The last point will be dealt with in more detail in the chapter "Depictions of Men in Feminist Novels").

The humiliation which Asya experiences in the West through her affair with Stone succumbs whatever privileged status she has had back home. Her sexual experience transcends its personal limit to signify the more complex relation between the West and the East. As Said maintains in his article "The Anglo-Arab Encounter: *In the Eye of the Sun*," the relation as described in the novel clearly reflects that "Soueif does not in the end fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European, formulas" (1992: 19). However, to understand better the dynamics of the relation, tracing specific aspects governing the development of the plot proves necessary. Said in his above cited article finds that

[t]he extraordinary thing about *In the Eye of the Sun* is that Soueif writes of both England and Egypt from within, although for her heroine Asya Ulama (literally translated, Asia [of the] learned clerics) Egypt is the land of her birth, religion and education, Britain the land of her post-graduate education, maturity and intimate expression. (1992: 19)

The liminality between spaces should not be seen as an individual mode of compliance with the West nor a detachment from one's own locality. It is a way of reflecting on postcoloniality as the necessary emergent condition of two overlapping, though conflicting, histories of both coloniser and colonised. While Said is right in assuming that Asya is such "a complex hybrid" (1992: 19), seen from an Islamic perspective, it is difficult to agree with as he asserts that Asya's "upbringing is traditionally Muslim" (1992: 19). There is enough evidence in the narrative which challenges Said's assumption, but works to prove that Asya is brought up to treasure whatever traditionally reinforces her femininity and renders her desirable to men. No crises, whether personal or public, could ever cause her not to have her hair washed and stylised, her legs depilated, her nails filed and painted. Saif, her husband, confirms that all of the above things "*she'd have done ...if she'd been living under nuclear fallout or dying of cancer*" (*EOS*, 650). Despite the pain that *hallawa* (paste of caramelised sugar for depilating unwanted hair from woman's body) causes her, she goes on using it. It is more accurate, then, to say that the vivid description which Soueif provides of Asya's Muslim world, the scattered allusions to Islamic codes, including the continuous citation of verses from the holy Koran towards the end of the novel, veiled women around, sounds calling for prayers, all help to invoke images of traditional Islam. Before Asya's departure to England, she is more than willing to have premarital sex, drink alcohol, wear tight and short clothes, join in communal sex parties, which she does while in Italy (*EOS*, 163-176), and criticise veiled women (*EOS*, 17).

Probably it is this confused liminality with the West that makes Asya's final confrontation with the West a more significant and unexpectedly audacious step. It could be argued that Soueif is suggesting that resistance or opposition strategies need not be necessarily enacted from another extremist pole. While the above could be the position adopted by many

intellectuals like Said, Bhabha, and others, it continues to be unsatisfying for some Islamic women who demand an agency deeply and exclusively rooted in an indigenous ground. In addition, Soueif's book is written in English with a particular audience in mind. Her casual visits to Egypt and her early departure from the country make it difficult for her to think in terms of a different agency. In fiction it could be argued that things, including explicit sexual treatment, need not be considered at face value nor at a literal level. Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* has been received by an outraged audience that refused to see the depicted events as anything but direct advocacy of blasphemy. A distinguished Sudanese Arab writer, Tayeb Salih, has treated sex very daringly in many of his novels, including his most celebrated one *Season of Migration to the North*. No one seems to have objected to it; similarly, Soueif's explicit treatment of sex in the *EOS* has not aroused the rage and anger which Rushdie's novel has (probably *EOS* has not been exposed to a wide Arab-Muslim audience since it is originally written in English). Yet, it is often the case that all can be tolerable provided that the directly and overtly sacred is not profaned.

And yet sex in Soueif's novel transcends its corporeality and becomes the metaphor for Arab and Western houses and for the interactional and problematic relations generated between the two. Not only is Asya's sexual relation with Stone that is given a symbolic dimension, but also her sexual life with her husband, Saif, seems to transcend its boundary and assume a different political level. Soueif is fond of depicting the men in her novel as embodiments of ideas or political notions, apart from being themselves. In *EOS* Hamid Mursi, Gerald Stone, and Saif Maadi have all been significant men in Asya's personal life. Without blurring or reducing the ontological realities of her male characters, Soueif imbues them with different levels of meanings that signify some objective realities in relation to the Arab world. The recognition of these meanings helps to initiate Asya to a more developed level of experience.

EOS opens with the scene of Hamid Mursi, Asya's cancer-stricken maternal uncle, while in London for a treatment accompanied by his niece, Asya, and his sister. Musri is a dear

uncle of Asya and his illness saddens her. The emphasis on his illnesses, physical ailments, and disabilities is a distinctive feature of many of the scenes in the novel. In 1967 he is hit by an Arab army truck and is severely injured: “several fractures including ribs, scapula and base of skull-damaged left hand-neurologic damage to the olfactory and left optic nerves-blindness in left eye-disuse atrophy of left upper extremity...left with atrophy of some of the muscles of the hand” (*EOS*, 11). Worse in 1974, “the patient noted the appearance of a mass in thenar side of left hand. Biopsy revealed a low-grade fibro-sarcoma-led to below the elbow amputation” (*EOS*, 11). At certain moments he is depicted with a tone and surrounded by a halo that invites the reader to think referentially of him. After the automobile accident, Asya goes to the hospital to see her uncle but hardly recognises him. Her mother assures her that he is her uncle since “it could have been anybody for all it is a human form covered in wraps and bandages...[t]he left side of the face is a swollen, purple mass” (*EOS*, 38).

In a novel which takes place against a backdrop of a political history told in the most elaborate manner, one can think of the uncle in terms of that politics too. It could not be a sheer narrative coincidence that Hamid’s accident takes place in 1967, the year of the Arabs’ war with the Israelis. The phantom of this war continues to haunt the whole Arab world with shame until the present. The uncle’s situation also goes on deteriorating as other political events occur. In 1974, he is diagnosed with cancer and in the following five years the disease spreads. During that era, Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem and the Camp David incident occur. Young men spend hours and hours discussing the Arab ever worsening situation caused by the Israeli’s expansionist attacks and the collective genocide, like that of Deir Yassin, which assumed the lives of thousands of Arab women and children. They insist on identifying Israel with the spreading cancer (*EOS*, 155). Mursi’s traumatic medical record starts as early as 1930 while still a few months old. At one narrative level, his deteriorating health parallels or rather symbolises the worsening situation of the Arab world since the beginning of the twentieth century. Soueif’s account of the uncle is significant; he always falls ill and only mysteriously recovers his health.

The traumatic history of Asya's uncle evokes objectively and within concrete term the traumatic reality of the Arab world during imperialism and after. His paralysed hand and his blind eye are indicative of the Arab world's immobility—a world that has been too disempowered by the Israelis' wars and Western interventions, whether political, military, or cultural to initiate a history and vision of its own. The uncle goes on living, not significantly though. He stays in the background, not forgotten, but a passive and deformed presence. Cultural modifications and visionary moments demand seeing “[t]erms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative... produced performatively” (Bhabha, 1995: 2). It seems to me that Asya's uncle objectifies such engagements which Asya emerges to negotiate. He is concurrently the performed essence of the modern Arab tragic history and Asya's inextricable link to that history. Asya will have to go out since “an encounter with ‘newness’” (1995: 7) is a precondition for an enactment of new cultural visions.

Asya has been privileged to experience both antagonistic and affiliative moments of cultural engagements. On the personal level, her hybrid knowledge of others' cultures while in and out her home, Egypt, has rescued her from claustrophobic existences—destinies which realistically speaking, are typical of the majority of Arab women. Asya is aware of the complexity of culturally affiliative moments. While walking in the streets of London one of those days, admiring the scenery, she cannot but wonder how come that she does not “feel resentment or bitterness or anything but admiration for and pleasure in the beauty, the graciousness, the harmony of this scene” before her eyes (*EOS*, 512). Her pleasure even shocks her the more having always had the knowledge that “the great black wrought –iron railings, the intricate tower with the four-faced clock...[were] [b]uilt of course on Egyptian cotton and debt, on the wealth of India, on the sugar of the West Indies, on centuries of adventure and exploitation ending in the division of the Arab world and the creation of the state of Israel” (*EOS*, 511-2). She feels very much like telling an English gentleman with a black hat on, a perfect stranger to her but who happens to be passing by her that:

because of your Empire, sir, a middle-aged spinster from Manchester came out to Cairo in the 1930s to teach English. A small, untidy twelve-year-old girl fell in love with her and lived and breathed English Literature from that day on. That girl was my mother, and here, now, am I. You cannot disclaim responsibility for my existence, nor for my being here – beside your river – today. But I haven't come to you only to take, I haven't come to you empty-handed: I bring you poetry as great as yours but in another tongue, I bring you black eyes and golden skin and curly hair, I bring you Islam and Luxor and Alexandria and lutes ... She smiles, and the man – middle-aged and comfortable, with a florid face and greying bushy eyebrows – glancing up as he passes her, smiles back and walks on. (*EOS*, 512)

Asya's potential and insight would not allow the reduction of her experience to one level of cultural engagement, namely the affiliative. She would reflect on political events, in soliloquy, and often not free her conscience of a sense of guilt. At one moment, she wonders why "we go on studying for our exams" while "million of others" whether, "Palestinians, Armenians, Kurds, and of course the Jews themselves" are "all...bruised" (*EOS*, 234). It saddens her that she acts as "a perfectly normal person, eat ... breakfast in the morning and drink ... tea with two spoonfuls of sugar" while the Israeli police are breaking arms and legs of many Palestinians (*EOS*, 235).

Asya is anything but static or one-dimensional. Her 'evolution' is neither sudden nor final. I disagree with Susan Spano who in "Young, Liberal and Still in Veil's Shadow", insists on seeing Asya as solely "shaped by the Arab Muslim world outside her parents' book-lined walls. And that world, so straitjacketing to women is never far away" (1993: 791). She also maintains that "[i]t is understood that Asya will marry, and do her duty when she does [following the steps of her own grandmother that: 'Every night a woman should ask her husband three times if he wants anything. Only then can she fall asleep with an easy conscience'" (1993: 791). Asya's marriage is not typically arranged. She falls in love with Saif, sleeps, and travels with him on her own even before they are officially married. This is hardly the typical image of a traditional marriage within an Arab-Islamic context. Although Asya cannot be said to be representative of the majority of Arab women understood to be suffering the atrocities of male-dominated societies, still she is shown as nostalgic about, and sensitive to, her own world. Said emphasises that "Asya...is decidedly not a symbol or allegory

of the Arab woman, but a fully realised, if impossibly situated, Egyptian sensibility in, but not totally of, the West” (1992: 19).

Spano’s judgement on Asya’s character reflects a desire to conjure up a stereotypical image of Arab women. It also seems to be influenced by her Western definition of a ‘free woman’. This is of course not to say that women like Asya do not exist in the Arab world. Asya’s relation to her own culture is alluded to throughout the novel, though in a much more complex way than Spano shows it to be. Also, Asya is neither “far too passive,” nor “egotistical” till the end as Spano stresses (1993: 791). The above description can hardly do any justice to someone who feels guilty for eroding others from her mind for a while. In one of the scenes, she rebukes herself for not understanding an article in *Poetics* and not finding hangers for her clothes when she arrives at her new residence at the university. Immediately after, she starts wondering what it would be like if she were “a Palestinian woman living in a camp in south Lebanon, [or] a Polish Jewess in 1939...[or] Ethiopian mother hearing her baby scream with hunger and knowing that her milk is running dry” (*EOS*, 334). As maintained by Said, Asya continues to be “unresolved” but still can “see herself ‘in the sunlight’, an Egyptian woman who has endured the corrosion of modernity and exile, and remained herself” (1992: 19).

One is tempted to think of Asya as somehow a passive creature upon a superficial viewing of her relationship with Saif, her lover and then her husband. Still even within this relationship, Asya evolves. She realises that Saif is always interested in including her when he is talking to someone else by placing his “arm on her shoulder...And yet. More and more she felt distanced. Peripheral” (*EOS*, 243). She is also perfectly aware that “she tries to do what he wants, and when he wants nothing she tries to be that too” (*EOS*, 462). Confronting this reality, she promises herself

[t]o be the best she can be; to create meaning in her life by striving to be the best person she can, not in the ways that appeal to her, not by spooning aid porridge into the mouths of rows of starving children or bringing comfort to sharpnelled soldiers or singing *Carmen* to a hushed

house or writing *Middlemarch*, but in the more difficult way that has been allotted to her – for the moment – and to draw strength from knowing that while she is doing her best for those whose lives most immediately touch her own, she is not at a standstill; she is working towards making her life more the way *she* wants it. (*EOS*, 462-3)

Asya's certainly very problematic relation with Saif will be better understood once the symbolic function of Saif in the novel is highlighted. (I will leave a great deal of the different aspects relating to Saif's personality and his role in the novel to the chapter entitled "Depictions of Men in the Feminist Novel"). My belief is that Saif, like Asya's uncle, stands for something apart from himself. The enigma of his sexual relation with Asya is behind any such belief. In love with Asya, and hardly tied by religion or tradition, Saif declines Asya's continuous pleas before marriage to be inside her (*EOS*, 190). Waiting anxiously to be together on their wedding night, neither she nor he seems to be voluptuously desiring intercourse. And yet when he approaches her, she is the one to reject him and to lie under the sheet trembling (*EOS*, 256-8). Confused about the whole thing, she sinks into a mode of silence enveloping her sexual life with him till he finds out that she is sleeping with someone else while in North England preparing for her degree. Continuing to sleep with Stone, she admits to her mother that "[m]y love for Saif is like the eternal rocks beneath...Mummy 'I am Saif –' he's always, always in my mind"² only to be reproached by her mother: "[t]his is not a novel: this is your life" (*EOS*, 568). Still desiring him and longing for a penetration, when he touches her Asya feels "it had been as odd as though it were Kareem or her father bending over her, and she couldn't do it" (*EOS*, 586). The paradox characterising this impossible relation could be accounted for in terms of an Arab woman's inhibited sexuality.

Throughout the novel, the reader cannot help but feel that Saif transcends his own existence to become something else. He continuously alienates Asya and yet continuously draws her in. In the novel he is a power whose essence cannot be fully understood if the

² The echoes of English literature is very obvious in Soueif's *EOS*. Asya is directly quoting Cathy in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; "Nelly, I am Heathcliff..." Soueif herself is specialised in English and so is Asya. However, the relations between the two novels is beyond the scope of this study which is basically concerned with comparing specifically postcolonial Arab feminist novels with their English counterparts.

character of Saif is seen merely as that of an arrogant Arab man. Saif can be said to be signifying the 'Arab home' with its future potential and past history. Sadly enough, it is a history that has been dehistoricised and a potential that has been incapacitated. Asya's alienation from that home (Saif) drives her to seek 'homeliness' somewhere else. With Gerald Stone, she is in an aftermath location. Breaking up with him, she emerges out of two fetishised places only to have them 'revised' and 'rethought'. It is a process activated through the deconstruction of traditionally constructed cultural locations organised along binary divisions like "Black/White, Self/Other," (Bhabha, 1995: 3), and I would add, East/West.

Being in the North of England for a few days, having registered for her Ph.D degree, Asya writes to her closest friend at home Chrissie, "[i]t's so cold, oh Chrissie it's *so* cold. I'm always cold" (*EOS*, 335). Asya wants to belong, wants to join and catch up with the new world which, despite the fact that many of its signs have been existent in her own home, now has become *the* sign. Her feelings of "unhomeliness" and her sexual frustration with Saif lead to her start a sexual affair with Stone, an MA student at her University. Having allowed him to be inside her, and surprised that after all it has not been as painful as she thought it would, Asya thinks to herself, "[y]ou've committed adultery, you've done it, you've joined Anna and Emma and parted company for ever with Dorothea and Maggie" (*EOS*, 540). Gerald Stone, who sounds like an echo of Gerald Crich in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, exploits Asya and occupies her flat without sharing the rent with her (*EOS*, 550). She feels that she is being exploited by him but does not dare to face him with that. He is so eaten up by jealousy knowing that Asya still thinks of Saif and still bothers to answer Saif's phone calls that he is almost never out of the house (*EOS*, 599). He takes and reads her letters, and haunts her like a ghost. She hates herself for not resenting the situation and for being submissive to him (*EOS*, 605). As he makes love to her, she feels more that his caressing is an act of suffocation (*EOS*, 550, 657). Asya knows that Gerald's love is neurotic obsession of her world. Thus, She collects all her courage to tell him "[y]ou're *choking* me" (*EOS*, 657).

Asya confronts Saif with her affair. He feels furious and hits her. Interestingly, he desires her more and virtually rapes her (*EOS*, 649-53). Afterwards they separate, still feeling that a mysterious bond is tying them together. After the separation, she goes on living with Gerald only to discover more about his nasty moods and exploitative nature. On a trip to New York, Asya feels that she can face and expose his manipulation, underscoring thus cultural most antagonistic moments and engagements. The domestic space of confrontation “becomes sites for history’s most intricate invasions”. The personal becomes to be seen as the political and the world becomes in the home (Bhabha, 1995: 9, 11). As Asya shouts at Gerald it is the political that is resonating. When she asks him why all his girl-friends are from developing countries he refuses to answer, so she offers an answer: “the reason you’ve gone for Trinidad – Vietnam – Egypt is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss – you are a sexual imperialist...or it’s because these cultures retain some spiritual quality lost to the West” (*EOS*, 723). She shouts at him: “there’s nothing, *nothing* that you’ll give for free” (*EOS*, 723-4). Asya prides herself having finally been able to say all of that; “oh boy oh boy oh boy, she digs her clenched fists deep in her pockets and stamps her feet to stop from jumping about and punching the air like a goal – scoring footballer – if she can say that she can say anything, anything at all – *nothing* can stop her now” (*EOS*, 724). The shrinkage of the world of the ‘homeliness’, a shrinkage which leads Asya to dwell in the home and the body of the other, can often be conducive to an expanded self. As held by Bhabha “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (1995: 11). One might feel, though, that Soueif bluntly and crudely exhibits such disjunctions.

Asya goes back home, having obtained her Ph.D, to be appointed a lecturer at Cairo University: “She is reclaimed for Egypt and Islam in the epilogue when, having rejected both Saif and Gerald, she returns to an almost ritualised Egypt, in which Koranic verses, the songs of Umm Kulthum, pictures of Abdel Nasser, recollections of colonial Cairo...mingle with family

memories and a sense of her own lonely identity as a timeless Egyptian woman” (Said, 1992: 19). In Egypt her tendency to go beyond ideological and other constructed fixities grows stronger. Said applauds Soueif’s choice not to draw conclusions or offer satisfactory “phoney balance sheets or, worse, a drawing-up of the final statements” (1992: 19). Asya, Said rejoices, “is neither fully one thing nor another...Soueif renders the experience of crossing over from one side to the other, and then back again, indefinitely, without rancour or preachiness” (1992: 19). Soueif constructs Asya’s house out of several houses. She reinscribes a vision of change and a mood of alterity harmonious with various ethico-political strands, including feminist. A feminist transformative vision is more consolidated by the fact that its initiator and mediator is a woman.

Chapter Four Depictions of Men in Some Feminist Novels

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that writers rarely achieve a satisfactory delineation of the opposite sex. Many arguments and studies are pursued as regards the relation of sex to writing by both male and female writers, but most notably by feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolf, and many others. However, I will attempt to show that weak and shallow depictions of male characters in feminist novels prove detrimental not only to promoting women's politics but also to the aesthetic value of the text.

Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" emphasises that the rhetoric of woman's difference as pertaining to her body can unsettle masculine language and subvert social hierarchy marginalising women; "[w]omen must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing" (1991: 224). On the other hand, Virginia Woolf in the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own* argues that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple" (1945: 102). Unless some marriage or collaboration takes place between the mind of man and woman, the work of art will either be "doomed to death" or doomed to hit life superficially (Woolf, 1945: 103). Stephen Heath disapproves of "a very powerful sexual determination in language and language use, and in particular to valorise sexual difference" (1986, 221). He rightly stresses that any generalisations could be detrimental to both men and women since profound and perceptive delineation of the opposite sex should be contextually assessed from within the text and against specific socio-cultural variables as interacting with some biological considerations: "[M]en and women are not simply given biologically; they are given in history and culture, in a social practice and representation that includes biological determinations, shaping and defining them in its process" (1986, 222).

Stevie Davies in *Key Women Writers: Emily Bronte* argues that there are those who claim that neither men nor women can genuinely impinge in their narratives on women's

emotional needs or ordeals in male-dominated societies because language is inherently a patriarchal mode (1988: 10). Davies, however, attempts to refute any such claim by discussing the phenomenon of the *Muttersprache* that constitutes children's initiation into language. She underscores the fact that through the first five years of life, the mother traditionally authorises language (1988: 10). The *Muttersprache* which Davies highlights is reminiscent of Kristeva's concept of the semiotic. For Kristeva, the structures of subjectivity can still be explored through language as the locus of inherent psychic interactions. The symbolic order is the site where the 'semiotic' can be traced. Kristeva confirms that no signifying system can be either exclusively semiotic or exclusively symbolic. Intonation, puns, verbal slips, and even silences are all constitutive of the semiotic as it merges into language. The pre-oedipal, Kristeva explains, continues to structure the speaking subject, making itself heard in the unconscious of linguistic practice, and concurrently evades and disrupts the symbolic order (Oliver, 1993: 34-6). It is true that the correlative linkup between the semiotic and the symbolic order is one of mutual influence, still the symbolic order acts more as a force whereby the semiotic is restrained. A psychosomatic study of language, whose tools are the semiotic, unfolds many aspects of this relation (Oliver, 1993: 39-41). Kristeva's account of the semiotic in language defies the efforts to envision woman as a lack, or even worse an absence. She argues that woman's language is an inherent presence in the text, any text, even the most androcentric one. This not only helps to reclaim a female heritage in the different intellectual activities by rendering the female or the feminine an inherent presence in any system of signification, but it also propels rethinking strategies to disrupt the symbolic and structural formations limiting gender roles.

While there is a threat of being entrapped in a mode of essentialisation by maintaining that it is exclusively women who can talk about women in any narrative frame, still women need to be critical of their representations at the hand of male writers. Depictions of male characters at the hand of female writers also need to be assessed against some 'ethical' and artistic grounds. Cora

Kaplan in “Radical Feminism and Literature: Rethinking Millett’s *Sexual Politics*”, is uneasy about Millett’s radical feminist reading of images of women in fiction written by male authors. She disapproves of Millett’s “unproblematic identification of author, protagonist and point of view, and the unspoken assumption that literature is always a conscious rendering of an authorial ideology” (1991: 164). Not denying that since *Sexual Politics* it has been difficult for critics to ignore the wider social and political implications of the representations of sexual practices or sexuality in fiction, Kaplan highlights equally important dynamics informing any female representations, including, class, race, culture, ideology, and psychology.

While Stephen Heath in “Male Feminism” is not specifically concerned with images of women in fiction by men, he still tackles the relationship of men to feminism in general:

Women are the subjects of feminism, its initiators, its makers, its force; the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of that subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism – to be a feminist – is then only the last feint in the long history of *their* colonisation. (1991: 194)

Heath seems to be holding a position that is not essentially different from many avowed feminists like Millett and Felski by confirming that women need to be wary of males’ relation to feminism. He contends that “to respond to feminism is to forgo mastery...Feminism makes things unsafe for men, unsettles assumed positions, undoes given identities” (1991: 198). He grounds his argument in the human desire and claim to power. It is important to add that coalition with feminism or at least some of its strands should not be tested solely against a dialectic logic of a power loss or gain. By way of advancing women’s status at different levels, feminist scholarship has endeavoured to rethink the diverse structures of powers oppressing not only women but also other human groups discriminated against by virtue of their sex, religion, class, ethnicity, and culture.

From “Sorties” in *The Newly Born Woman*, an excerpt is quoted listing some of the most commonly-held masculine/feminine binary oppositions characterising also several intellectual and cultural activities:

Where is she?

Activity / passivity

Sun / Moon

Culture / Nature

Day / Night

Father/ Mother

Head/ Heart

Intelligible / Palpable

Logos / Pathos

From, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.

Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding – and dumping ground

Man

Woman

(In Sellers, 1994: 38)

Cixous holds that “things get hierarchical. Organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisations subject to man. Male privilege is inscribed in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity” (In Sellers, 1994: 38). In the light of Cixous’ described hierarchy, the following question can be raised: Has each of Maitland, Soueif, Al-Shaykh, and Roberts based their depictions of males on a reversed male-founded privilege? This is not at all an unexpected trajectory for them considering that by owning the text, by being its true subject and its creator, the woman writer becomes in a position where she can grasp power and found the space from which she can enact her desires, launch counter-attacks, or inscribe a will to change. On the other hand, is it not the case that a reverse strategy hinging on a female supremacy is no more than being entrapped within logocentrism characteristic of patriarchy? It is important to emphasise that Cixous is aware of that male hierarchy organised along woman’s abasement and her subordination to the masculine order is culturally constructed. Man and woman, Cixous maintains, are bisexual, but “by insisting on the primacy of the phallus and implementing it, phallogocentric ideology has produced more than one victim” (In Sellers, 1994: 41).

Images of women, their quests for independence, and their struggle for asserting their individual identities within the narrative by male writers have been considerably permeated by males' values and codes of ethics as, for example, is cogently argued by Kate Millett (1977). Fiction written by women has also been viewed by some feminist critics as lacking the potential to appropriate a vision for transformation and for transcending gender-role limitations. Rachel Blau DuPlessis rests her study in *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985) on the proposition that women writers in the nineteenth century did not break through the ideological formations of patriarchy restricting women's private and public experiences. Even if women have been represented as complex entities within some narratives by male writers, still this is not enough evidence to conclude that women have no reason to complain about their images.

C.L. Inees in her book *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, discusses at length how Irish male writers like James Joyce, for example, coalesces images of women with his own concepts of nationalism and with Ireland itself (1993: 2). Hardly any attention has been paid, Inees maintains, to "the role of Irish women in that [Irish] struggle and how they themselves defined and sought to shape 'the conscience of [the] race'" (1993: 3). Women in different contexts of the Irish struggle against imperialism "do not exist except as passive icons" or are simply included in footnotes (1993: 3). Worse still, Inees contests, is that Irish women writers themselves "have been content either to efface or play down their own personalities and identities as authors, or to allow their identities to be absorbed into symbolic constructs" (1993: 4).

Within an Arab literary context, especially in the so-called literature of resistance (*adabol moqawamah*), woman has also served in the literature of prominent modern Arab novelists and poets like Nagib Mahfouz, Ghassan Kanafani, Tawfeek al-Hakim, Mahmoud Darwish, Nizar Qabani, and many others as a symbolic construct signifying the mother land or the usurped home. Mona Fayad finds that woman has been assigned "a fixed role as an historical metaphor buried deep within the foundations of the narrative. Through this historical

metaphor, Woman is appropriated as signifier of traditionalism, reservoir of a communal identity” (1995: 147). The mythification and objectification of woman can transcend her corporeality and blur defining her actual needs. Accad in “Sexual Politics: Women in *Season of Migration to the North*” points out that women in male fiction remain the real victims of games of power and icons for passivity and acceptance. Their roles remain subordinate to other male characters in the novel and their descriptions are mostly sought within familial relationships (1985: 55-63). Women are typically shown to be stimulating the hero physically but rarely intellectually (Bin Maso’ud, 1994: 143-51). Joseph Zeidan maintains that

[t]he earliest male novelists seldom used Arab heroines—when they needed female characters, they wrote about foreign women or women belonging to ethnic minorities within the Arab world. The reason for this was that Arab women’s freedom of action was restricted by society at that point in history that interesting stories about them would hardly have been possible. (1995: 233)

It is important to find out in the course of the study if the feminist novelists at hand have silenced, subordinated, or victimised men, or shown them to be women’s sole opponents to their quests for freedom and self-identity, or rendered them sexual maniacs, all in response to males’ portrayal of women as whores, or deemed them mere signifiers, symbols, essences, transcendental embodiments, and other ahistorical representations. The fact remains that women’s engraving a mirror image of machismo is an entrapment within the oppressor’s logic. Also, reducing an ‘other’ can be detrimental to envisioning an insightful politics of change. For this ‘other’ may often turn out to be an ambivalent entity constantly oscillating between different positions: one enacting oppression, and another seen as the victim, too, of an oppressive system of patriarchy and powerful ideological, psychological, and social formations. To be caught up in a reverse strategy is inconsistent with feminist moral voices aiming to deconstruct male dominated patterns. In addition, because women’s rights impinge on other broader questions of national and international concerns involving both men and women, representations which reduce one to the other will certainly fire back and prove insensitive to complex forms of reality.

K.K Ruthven cites examples from both the world of literature and criticism suggesting that a mode of separation between the sexes is neither devisable nor tenable in the process of inscribing a deeper and more comprehensive vision of change affecting both the lives of men and women (1984: 6-19). He also contends that many male novelists have been exceptionally perceptive to women's social and psychological dilemmas in patriarchal societies. He holds that a significant part of the feminist critique has been "heavily dependent on men to articulate its position, and continues to co-opt their services" (1984: 11). Ruthven's argument invites one to debate the belief that writers cannot perceptively and satisfactorily account for the experiences of the opposite sex. Conjuring up stereotypical images of men, reducing their ontological value, and trapping them within inherent fixities or limited perspectives by way of demeaning their performances, and failing to integrate them into a comprehensive plan for resistance and struggle are hardly the criteria for a good work of art or for developing transformative strategies positively affecting both women and their societies.

Masculinity/Femininity as Cultural Constructs

An extensive and detailed account of the concept of masculinity as analysed by different psychological and sociological paradigms¹ is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is now widely accepted that both masculinity and femininity are basically cultural constructs and cannot be located or defined outside social relations (See Brennan, 1991: 114-34). As such, they are necessarily produced within a power structure dominated by males. Yet, although 'masculine' and 'feminine' are never really and wholly fixed by biology, the common social discourse on them has always appealed to biology for legitimation. In traditional Arab-Islamic societies where religion is still all powerful, biology interlinks with religion as a major source of legitimation. The masculine/feminine contrast is conceptualised to be grounded in biological

¹ See, for example, Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974); Jacques Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus" (1982); Teresa Brennan, "An Impasse in Psychoanalysis and Feminism" (1991); Christine Di Stefano "Masculine Marx" (1994).

differences which are in turn the work of God. To challenge these differences, and therefore their social consequences, is to challenge nature as intended by its creator.

Masculinity is defined in contrast to the feminine ‘other’. While the first invokes rationality, reason, leadership, strength, self-control, and activity, the other invokes emotionality, sentimentality, weakness, passivity, moodiness, the need to be led, and seduction. Although these constructed contrasts imply supremacy of the ‘masculine’, they are often presented in a discourse strategy that disguises their evaluative implications. This is often done by invoking the meaning of natural and social complementation. Both contrasts are equally needed for ‘natural’ and social life to go on in harmony. The very fact that they are different entails that they are in complementary relations. A child needs the emotional nourishment of his mother as much as he needs the rational guidance of his father. It is a labour division dictated by nature, therefore by God. Within an Arab-Islamic context, the concept of ‘*fitna*’ (seductive attraction) is commonly attached to the ‘feminine’. This implies a sort of power, but only to the extent of excusing the sexual excesses of the ‘masculine’ and his occasional straying. And although in the Koran the original sin is never blamed on Eve, but rather explicitly attributed to Adam,² the Arab-Muslim culture, in general, has found it more convenient to adopt a notion of the role of the typical Eve more in line with the Christian version.

If ‘*fitna*’ is inherent to the ‘feminine’, ‘*fuḥūla*’ (virility; sexual power) is an intrinsic characteristic of the ‘masculine’. It takes a little of the feminine ‘*fitna*’ to stir ‘*fuḥūla*’ to react. Therefore, to protect the typically ‘*fahl*’ (virile) male from the feminine ‘*fitna*’ and its sinful consequences, ‘*fitna*’ must be concealed, but not the ‘*fahl*’ (‘masculine’). Yet, the concept of ‘*fuḥūla*’ has been extended from the purely physical to the socio-cultural. It has also come to

² But Satan whispered evil. To Him: he said, “O Adam! Shall I lead thee to The Tree of Eternity and to a Kingdom that never decays?” In the result, they both ate The Tree, and so their nakedness appeared to them: They began to sew together, for their covering, leaves from the Garden: *Thus did Adam disobey His Lord, and allow himself to be seduced* [my emphasis] (Koran, Sūra: xx (Tâ-Hâ), Verses: 120-121. Trans. ÀYüsuf Àli).

denote courage, competence, and poetic creativity in an Arab culture where poetry has always been considered the greatest form of art. Great poets are typically described as *'fuhūl'* poets.

The fact that the concepts 'masculine' and 'feminine' are socio-cultural constructs that articulate power relations dominated by males applies universally, notwithstanding cultural specificities and variation in both degree and presentation. Yet, when situated in a colonial context involving another level of power relations, it becomes more complex: masculinity interlinks with colonial domination. In this context the concept of the masculine white is extended to furnish not only the subordination of women in general, but also the subordination of the colonised. The masculine white European is more 'masculine' than the colonised 'masculine' himself. He controls those who are not yet in control of their bodies/psyches and so need the hand of an adult and advanced masculine European, hence the contrasts: order/chaos; activity/passivity; stasis/movement become conceptually identified with the contrasts: masculine/feminine, and colonial/colonised. 'Western penetration of inviting virginal landscape' has become obviously an expressive and recurrent metaphor. The white European masculine as naturally born to rule is grounded in a discourse of race and sexuality which necessarily defines colonised people, men and women, as incapable of self-government (See Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994: 141-4); Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism" (1991: 1-47)).

As it will be shown in this chapter "Depictions of Men in Some Feminist Novels", David in Maitland's *HT* is both Care's lover and a chauvinist imperialist. He is depicted to combine in the same conceptual frame his masculine power over Clare and his racial mockery of the Zimbabwean local culture and mountain which he claims as his. On the other hand, Clare's growing resentment to his dominance furnishes her respect to the local culture, which finally leads her to more understanding of her own culture and her place in it. Also, in Soueif's *EOS*, the relationship of Asya, the Egyptian woman, and Gerald, her British lover, who

manipulates her sexually and materially, signifies more than the common masculine domination and feminine subordination, but also calls the dynamics of the colonial relation with the colonised. It is a relation structured along love/hate, repulsion/desire, and domination/submission.

Male Characters as Tropes, Types, and Stereotypes

Analysing male characters along the notions of types, stereotypes, and tropes is intended to examine whether images of males and their experiences in the feminist novels at hand have been simply transcended, or profoundly accounted for by way of inducing a comprehensive vision of change in favour of women in particular and their societies in general. It is useful at this stage to draw, in broad lines though, on some of the basic features distinguishing the three notions in relation to males' images in the novels at hand.

Both 'type-characters' and 'trope-characters' represent something larger than themselves. While symbolic characters signify a concept or an idea, 'type-characters' embody common characteristics of members of a real group in a certain society. According to Holman, "a *type-character*" "embodies a substantial number of significant distinguishing characteristics of his group or class" (1975, 541-2). He is necessarily designed in such a way as to reflect the code of conduct of actually existing groups of people. He neither fanaticises nor exaggerates 'certain' human traits but basically draws attention to them and allows the reader to see through their formations. 'Trope' or symbolic characters, on the other hand, might stand for a particular objective reality, certain situations pertaining to that reality, or to an aspired form of reality. A 'type-character' represents a category of real characters. Emerging situations and structural formations of the narrative can contribute to the making, complexity, and evolution of a certain type rather than another. Development of events, modes of narrative, and structural designations of the novel all work to enhance the profundity and feasibility of deploying both 'type' and 'trope' characters. Finding out whether the writer's impulse to 'typify' or symbolise

can weaken her impulse to individualise (see Scholes, 1981:11-2) is one of the issues to be tackled in this chapter.

A 'stereotype-character', on the other hand, is "anything that repeats or duplicates something else without variation; hence something that lacks individualising characteristics. The term is applied to commonly held and oversimplified mental pictures or judgements of a person, a race, an issue, a kind of art, or anything"(Holman, 1975: 508-9). The use of 'stereotype characters' by feminist novelists need be thoroughly looked at within the narrative, especially in an Arab narrative, and examined against a political context and a colonial discourse. Stereotype-characters are shallow characters who lack the depth which initiates them to yield insightful visions and also lack the individualising impulses that make them believable people within the borders of fiction. Usually, such characters are not surrounded with details from real life and their unconscious motives and emotional experiences are not perceptively accounted for. They might reduce the work's potential if made the main characters or the only characters.

Men as Tropes in Soueif's Narrative World

Some male characters, such as Saif in Soueif's *EOS* and David in Maitland's *HT*, have been endowed with specific symbolic traits, though not at the expense of blurring those male characters' physical entities. They have neither been dehistoricised, nor transcended, nor forsaken for some illusive or diluted 'universal', or even nationalist notions the way some female characters have been at the hand of male writers. The designation of these 'male-tropes' has been tenaciously contextualised within historical moments pertaining to the formation of certain situations or cultural locations as organically structured within the boundary of the text. In fact, one cannot understand the meanings of these tropes outside the general context and structural organisation of the work.

In the previous chapters, I touch upon some of the aspects pertaining to male characters in basically woman-centred novels as necessitated by the context, and by way of appropriating

or pursuing a certain argument. I have alluded to Saif in the course of analysing Soueif's *EOS*, and I have tried to show how his code of ethics and behaviour contribute to the evolution and enhancement of the tension emanating from the growing relations in the novel. Mysteriously he does not seem to be able to grant Asya the physical gratification she desires. This is inconceivable considering that he desires and lusts for her as much as she for him. Nothing in the narrative indicates that he is impotent since he seems to be capable of having sexual affairs with other women. On their wedding night she moves away from him and does not allow the marriage to be consummated sensing that intercourse could be painful. Her sexual life with him before and after marriage turns out to be a series of frustrations. Hence she is motivated to seek physical gratification with another, an English man, Gerald, about whom she thinks: "he made me feel physical again. And because it was a complete novelty to be with a man who wanted to talk and who...*needed* to make love to me" (*EOS*, 592). She betrays Saif while concurrently thinks of him as her only real love; "*I love Saif*. I love him and I'm just too connected to him. I won't ever be able to just walk away. I don't *want* to just walk away. I love listening to him talk. I love his wit, even when it's directed against me... a lot of the time I'm angry or frustrated or conscious that I'm being the way he wants me to be. But I am never ever bored" (*EOS*, 592).

Saif initiates Asya into different modes of actions, whether those he approves or disapproves of. Soueif allows him an autobiographical voice in different places in the narrative by way of enabling the reader to see Asya through Saif's eyes. Saif's account of Asya does not seem to be essentially different from Asya's perception of herself. She and he are aware of the power he has on her. Thus, he thinks to himself "[*t*]here is true helplessness in her voice," and recalls what typical responses she reiterates in his presence: "*Anything. Anything you like*" (*EOS*, 106). Asya's sense of her own identity is significantly mitigated as she draws closer to Saif: "I used to keep a diary, but I stopped – thank goodness – when I was about eighteen – just after I met Saif. I don't know why I stopped then. Probably because it seemed that real life

was beginning and there was no longer any need to yearn for it on the page” (*EOS*, 442). At moments Asya realises that she is disturbingly dependent on Saif and wonders “[w]hat is she, then, that she should need the constant flow of feeling from another person in order to live her own life, do her own work? A vampire? Why can she not take her sustenance from – from Nature, for example, like Wordsworth?” (*EOS*, 454). The paradox of Asya’s relation to Saif is intricately structured. What sort of an impasse could be envisaged as deferring the consummation of their marriage, considering that love and desire are characteristic of the relation? “Saif is my husband and I love him. I look at him as he ties up his shoe-laces or lights a cigarette or puts the car into reverse and I know that I love him. I *care* about him...If he were ill or needed another kidney or another lung or something I should be miserable for him but happy for me because I could give him one of mine” (*EOS*, 590).

Asya cannot reject Saif spiritually while she does physically. With Gerald, it is the other way around. She has no respect for him and yet she cannot resist him physically. It is significant that both men seem to exercise different powers on her. This is why at the end she comes to the realisation that her freedom and independence are obtainable only once she can afford to break free from both. Asya’s relation with the two men is ascribed further thematic value as the narrative evolves to unfold interestingly the intersection of private and public histories. The (in)sensibility of Asya’s relation to both men in the novel is also the (in)sensibility of other more public and political relations. Edward Said sees that one of the basic themes of the novel is examining the dynamics of the relations between the East and the West (1992: 19). A closer look at Saif’s personality and an attentive consideration of the diction with which Soueif chooses to depict him reveal that after all Saif is not merely the one man whom Asya falls in love with. Is it really fear of pain resulting from a first time intercourse which keeps drawing Asya away from Saif? What about Saif himself? He is not shown in the novel to be desiring intercourse with her. Asya becomes pregnant after her marriage to Saif—she conceives a baby without being penetrated by him. Even after her

miscarriage, Asya continues to be frightened more than ever; “the miscarriage had taken care of the hymen and all that. And she had wanted him – so very much... The only thing to be done now is to adapt, to be the person he wants her to be” (*EOS*, 358). Still, she continues to be as inhibited as ever (*EOS*, 460).

Earlier I describe Asya’s relation to Saif as characteristically paradoxical and founded on love/resentment feelings. Having talked with her mother about her feelings towards Saif, Asya reflects on this relation and tries to figure out its essence:

Paradox: Since March 1975 I have – apart from certain moments – felt closer to him when we’ve been separate than when we’ve been together. So my image of him is getting further and further from the reality... I have also tried – am trying – to love him as he *is*, not as I imagine him. In other words he is the imagination and I am the execution: he is the author and the director of our drama and I am just the cast... If I imagine him sleeping with someone else I don’t mind. But if I imagine him looking after someone else, giving someone else that indulgent, tender smile, then it hurts – it hurts badly. (*EOS*, 592-3)

In the above passage, Saif is shown to be oscillating between various positions. He is the lover but he is also “the author” and “the image.” He is the man and the power before whom Asya is only a passive entity. In another place, Soueif explicitly touches upon the metaphoricity of Saif in the novel. Asya looks at her own “beloved Saif, sitting there at the kitchen table – she might be looking at a statue of him for all she feels – for all she is doing about him... as though he were on film, but if this was a film she’d be crying; she’d be sitting in the cinema snivelling and liking the feel of the tears on her face because they meant she was so sensitive” (*EOS*, 625). It is interesting to see how Soueif spots Asya’s sensuality as opposed to Saif’s figurative and momentarily frozen presence. Asya’s “snivelling” and feeling of her own tears are dramatic contrasts to Saif’s statue figure. One wonders why Asya is that attracted to Saif and why she insists on identifying herself with him, “[m]y love for Saif is like the eternal rock beneath.” She goes on telling her mother: “‘I *am* Saif –’ he’s always, always in my mind –” (*EOS*, 568). (Asya’s almost direct quote from Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* works in Soueif’s narrative to heighten the intensity of Asya’s feeling towards Saif) Saif hits her severely on the face, having discovered her affair with Gerald. Still in pain, she whispers: “‘Oh, my darling,

oh, my love.’ She unlaces his shoes and draws them off. She peels off his socks...and strokes his back and his shoulders and kisses his head gently and holds his forehead in her hand until he falls asleep” (*EOS*, 631).

The anxiety and tension emerging out of this torturing love relation go beyond the relation of one individual man to one individual woman. Beating Asya and virtually raping her soon after he finds about her affair with another, Saif says, “*I kept my arms around her all night, but in her sleep she turned away from me. I thought then that I would do anything to hang on to her*” (*EOS*, 653). Why does he insist on being inside her only after he knows that she has been penetrated by another man? In fact, any sexual intercourse between Asya and Saif is continuously deferred when most expected. While still engaged and looking for furniture for their new house, Saif tells her that it has been easy to find all what they needed, but “*we did not see a bed that we liked*” (*EOS*, 222). In London, prior to their marriage, Asya invites him to be “inside her,” but he keeps telling her, “it’ll have to be tomorrow” (*EOS*, 190). On their wedding night, sensing Asya’s fear and hearing her sobbing, he hushes her soothingly: “it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t have to be tonight” (*EOS*, 258).

The deferral of sexual intercourse propels us to think of Saif as an embodiment of an idea or a certain reality outside his own physicality in the novel. “Leave him? ‘Your Honour, my husband won’t perform his conjugal – ’ Absurd. She might as well talk of leaving her father, or her country. She might as well talk of leaving herself” (*EOS*, 359). At one time he insists on alienating her from him, at another he is shown to be such a loving, generous, and tender lover. Is it not possible to think of Saif, at one level, as a symbol signifying an entity beyond ‘himself’? Could it be that he stands for Asya’s home and the potentials inherent in that home? Is his incapacity to establish a productive relation with Asya identifiable with those potentials of an Arab world that is historically incapacitated? There is no absolute condemnation of Saif; he hurts her but she cannot hate him. By making up her mind upon leaving Saif while concurrently promising him eternal love, two things are attained. On a

personal level, Asya frees herself from being ever dominated by Saif, the man, who can paralyse her potential. Deep inside, though, Asya knows that her love for him is eternal. On a political level, fetishising home is as futile as Asya's relation to Saif. Not himself a fetish or fixity, Saif in the novel is the image of the home grappling with the past and clinching to a harmonious unity of the self. One of the rare moments he is depicted to be furiously acting and going out of his way is on his discovery that Asya has been penetrated by another.

At one political level, Asya's story with Saif signifies some of the dynamics featuring the relations of some Arab people (most notably educated) to their home. Those people would like to think of their country as *the* ideal place and continue to believe that it will not be long before they can harmonise themselves with certain given settings within this country. Rejecting to admit some of the frustrating realities of this home and watching passively over the traumas striking it, they go on projecting their own idealised image of 'home' onto the real one. At certain moments and undergoing certain experiences, they cannot but develop some profound insights into what actually weakens this home and threatens to have it apart. Their relationship to that home grows ever more paradoxical – it is a relationship characterised by both love and suffering. They cannot leave because if they do they will be haunted by feelings of guilt. On the other hand, if they stay, they will be haunted and tormented by feelings of helplessness. To think that there is no way out is the route to fixity and enclosure. Soueif does not pave the way for taking the last route. She is also aware of the fact that there is never an easy or an absolutely redemptive route. Hence, Asya is shown at the end to be going back to the real home, Egypt, with Saif in her mind and heart. She looks at places, women, and boys from a new perspective. This time, she does not watch passively. She is shown to be developing more critical and realistic insights into various constituents shaping the character of her country and which she has romanticised long enough.

Asya manages to break free not only from Saif, but also from the other man, Gerald Stone, to whom she is fatally attracted. Like Saif, Gerald has been invested with meanings or

ideas beyond his physicality. My belief is that Soueif has laboured more in developing Saif's character and in weaving his complexities than she has Gerald's. This could be understandable considering the nostalgic bond that the writer has sought to build up between Asya and her own home – a bond that would lead her to envision many elements of that home with a particular sensitivity and complexity. Soueif succeeds in surrounding Saif with a certain halo dissuading the reader from ever feeling repulsed by him. On the other hand, Gerald continues to be an irksome presence in the novel not only to the reader but also to Asya even at their most intimate moments together.

Making love to Asya, Gerald “pulls her head round by the hair and holds it so that she has to look into the mirror. ‘Look at you, baby. Look at you. I never want you to get dressed when we’re married. Be like this for me, babe: naked and perfumed, your hair falling over your shoulders, wearing only your jewels – ’” (*EOS*, 563). Asya feels that his hugging suffocates her but she lacks the power and the initiative to stop him. Gerald is not in love with Asya so much as he is in love with an image of an oriental woman. He is infatuated not only with her body but also with her submission to him. This invites one to ask many questions pertaining to Western men's relations to their women: notably, whether or not some Western men have come truly to terms with women's ‘emancipation’ in the West. The submission that Asya grants Gerald might not be granted by many Western women today. It could be said that Western women's success in dictating several rules regarding their bodies and the terms of their relation with men has worked to disappoint or even suppress Western men's true desires and expectations of their women.

The character of Gerald, at one level, stands for some colonial impulses. He lives off Asya like a parasite. When Asya feels like breaking away from him, Gerald would shout: “I am not letting you go. I have found you and I am not letting you go” (*EOS*, 607). It is not only her sexual frustration with Saif which leads her to start an adulterous affair with Gerald. To render any such relation more conceivable and justifiable within the world of the novel, she tells her

mother: “[y]ou don’t know what it’s like there, Mummy. There’s nothing. *Nothing*. Unless you’re nineteen and like drinking beer –” (*EOS*, 580). At the beginning, Gerald tries hard to impress Asya and attract her to him by pretending that he is interested in her dreams and spiritual impulses (*EOS*, 535-7), and Asya finds in his tenderness and care a consolation for her emotionally and sexually frustrated life. Gerald’s ugly side, however, begins to unfold the moment he feels that Asya considers leaving him. The paradox characterising Saif’s relation to Asya seems also to be inherent in Gerald’s relation to Asya. It takes Asya a long time to decide to break away from Gerald. This is strange, since she realises that he is making use of her husband’s money and is disturbingly treading on her private space: “He moved into the cottage uninvited. He stayed there knowing that it was Saif’s money paying the rent. He would have driven Saif’s car if I’d let him” (*EOS*, 591).

The psychological dynamics of Asya’s relation to Gerald tend to reproduce the complex pattern of the psychical classics structuring the coloniser’s relation with the colonised—a relation which, according to Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is structured along paradoxically ambivalent grounds: hate of and desire for the ‘other’ (1986: 154). Fanon acknowledges that although he undertakes a psychological analysis in accounting for the relation between the black and white (coloniser/colonised), the analysis still entails “an immediate recognition of social and economic realities” (1986: 13). He specifically perceives of the inferiority complex of the black, or the colonised, as “the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalisation – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority” (1986: 13). The colonised is aware of the danger of the coloniser and the damage ‘he’ inflicts on the land and its people, still the colonised unconsciously aspires to be up to the level of the coloniser, to be identified and assimilated with him. For Fanon, “the Negro [colonised] is appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation” (1986: 36). And so at the beginning, Asya believes that Gerald can ‘take her in’ and make her feel ‘her worth’, unlike Saif. Gerald, however, turns out to have his own problems, and his anxiety to possess Asya is

almost pathological; thus demonstrating Fanon's observation that "[t]he Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (1986: 60). Through her affair with Gerald, Asya seeks to assert herself as a woman and as an Arab. The problematic of this assertion is highlighted through the fantasies and frustrations which Asya experiences with Gerald. She fails to realise, using Fanon's words, that she is striving to "make a meaning" for herself "but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for [her]" (1986: 134).

The colonial condition is necessarily made by both histories that of the coloniser and the colonised. Countries which already face internal economic, social, and other developmental problems are more liable to be dominated. Saif, who at one narrative level stands for 'the home', contributes to the process of yielding up Asya to Gerald. Because in Saif's domain she is neither fulfilled physically nor psychologically, she turns to Gerald. Gerald's neurotic obsession with Asya and yet the intricate emotional links which she has with her own history and 'home' give her the impetus to 'free' herself from Gerald. By expelling Gerald from her world, by realising that he is entrapping her within his own domain and his own constructed image of woman, and more specifically an Eastern woman, Asya grows more aware of her own potential.

Soueif is at her powerful best as she gradually explores both some of the dimensions of the dynamics of a colonial history and politics on the one hand, and the dynamics of a sexual politics featuring an Arab woman's relation to man, on the other. The story of colonisation is allegorically woven into the narrative through the representations of basically three men in the novel, Gerald, Saif and Mursi, Asya's uncle. More interesting is the discovery that while the above three men are rendered the tropes of the allegory, Asya emerges as a woman capable of realising her own potential. Asya is made to evoke the allegory and enhance its significance. The male characters in the novel are devised as agents promoting Asya's quest for independence and self-discovery. Saif is envisioned as an entity summoning some of the

aspects and values pertaining to the objective reality of the Arab world. He is not depicted as an enclosure or a passive presence. He is an energy which continues to misfire, but is never dead. It is his bustling and lack of historical visions that leads Asya to accept Gerald's manipulation. The dialectic of this relation proves instrumental in the process of inscribing a feminist vision of the novel. Soueif manages to release Asya as an agent of change, albeit the fact that at many instances in the novel she has been the object or rather the site of manipulation of both Saif and Gerald. Asya errs, blunders, falls, and weakens, yet retains a heightened sense of individuality and deep desire for the right to self-determination. Her final being, however, is not rendered harmonious, resolved, noble, right, or untroubled.

Other male characters in the novel are depicted for the purpose of endorsing the rhetorical relation between East and West. Asya's uncle, Hamid Mursi, is also an embodiment of some tragic performances of a culture and a socio-political situation, traumatised, agonised, and immobilised. Significantly, Mursi is "left with atrophy of some of the muscles of the hand" and the "carcinoma is proliferating" (*EOS*, 11, 12). In the context of his treatment, his niece Nadia, a physician, talks ironically with him and Asya about the possibility of "prescrib[ing] radical surgery for the country – [Egypt] and the whole Arab world" (*EOS*, 16). It is the country which "mourned the loss of the Great Arab Dream" (*EOS*, 90). The horrible reality of his situation drives one to seek transformation and cure as an urgent necessity. Mursi stands for a 'home' that has been wrecked and badly shaken – a home which is soon to collapse if it continues to be with no sustenance. If Saif stands for the 'idealised' home and for an Arab dream continuously aborted, the uncle is pathetically caught up in a tragic historical moment. He is the metaphor engraving the painful political reality of the Arab world. Unlike Saif, who represents deferral, the uncle is the present coagulated, the accumulation of the present and the past not yet caught up in a transforming moment – or rather – the present trapped within an image of the past.

If the corporeality and true desires of some female characters have often been transcended in some narratives at the expense of reducing them into ideas or signifiers, as has been pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the corporeality of male characters, including Saif, Gerald, and Mursi in *EOS* has been maintained and their individual experiences and sufferings have been profoundly accounted for. The figurative function assigned to Saif, for example, does not shake his credibility as a real person within the borders of fiction. He is often the “I” narrator of many sections in the novel (*EOS*, 106, 189-191, 648-53), and is granted the space to tell events from his own point of view. Great emphasis is placed on his sensuality and desires. His physicality, for example, is closely touched upon through Asya’s account of the first kiss he gives her; “[h]is lips are terrific: warm and not hard but kind of firm with a promise of softness underneath. The moustache doesn’t really get in the way as I had thought it might...His mouth was on my neck...and I...could not believe that all this was happening to me...he held me and kissed me very very hard so my head was actually banged into the wall once. I loved it” (*EOS*, 107). Also, Saif’s beliefs and actions are contextualised and made to conform to many of the established traditions of an Arab Islamic-culture; as a character he is not evolving in the abstract. Although he is not a particularly religious person – it is he who invites Asya to her first alcoholic drink (drinking alcohol is strictly forbidden in Islam) – still, before their marriage he declines from having intercourse with her, stressing that it is just not right.

Marginal Male Characters in Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun*

The depiction of some marginal characters, like Mahrous and Sheikh Zayid, can be seen in the novel as illuminating aspects of Asya’s personality and contributing to defining her own world. Though not a pious person, Asya is drawn to Sheikh Zayid who does not represent a religious authority as the title Sheikh may suggest. He is always with the family at times of crises for spiritual support and for performing traditional religious duties. Asya tells her friend Chrissie: “I do like Sheikh Zayid...he just seems very romantic. And now he’s got this grey

beard and the prayer-mark on his forehead, and he's so gentle, but I think he's probably still terrifically strong" (*EOS*, 200). Chrissie, surprised to hear Asya's opinion of Sheikh Zayid, responds by saying that "[h]e's a really old man and you're going on about strong and gentle and how *romantic* he is?" (*EOS*, 200). Asya likes him because he is not a man of religion in a typically strict sense; he is never shown to be preaching or dictating people. Unlike the Islamic Brethren, Sheikh Zayid, to Asya's approval, is inclined towards depoliticisation of religion, condemning those Islamic political groups (*EOS*, 774). Sheikh Zayid represents a romantic notion of Islam – an Islam that does not change, an essence. Generally, men in the *EOS* are mostly depicted as resisting change or not particularly perceptive to the fact that reality demands transformation. Asya, looking at Sheikh Zayid, thinks "[h]e hasn't changed much...and neither has her father. It is the women who change most. The men just dry out slightly, withdraw, get a faintly pickled look, the women expand and overflow" (*EOS*, 751). (Asya's understanding of Islam and Islamists, and the impact her understanding has on the novel's transformative value will be assessed in chapter five of the study).

There is also the Egyptian, Mahrous, who travels to England to do his Ph.D. Coming from a peasant family background, he is shown as incapable of accommodating himself to a different cultural setting and system of values. While walking in a market hall, he is shocked to see an English girl smile at him, so he follows her around and pushes her against the wall shouting: "[w]hy you are smiling at me? Is it sex you want?" (*EOS*, 548). The girl pushes him away and he follows her, so the girl walks to the police station and again he follows her there and the police take him in. His supervisor, John, helps him to solve the problem with the police and tries to explain to Mahrous that the woman "was just being friendly, that the smile was just a hospitality signal to someone who was obviously a stranger" (*EOS*, 548). Learning of the girl's 'innocent' intention, Mahrous "start[s] blaming himself terribly" and grows determined to go back home (*EOS*, 548).

Asya, goes to see Mahrous whom she knows from Cairo and tries to convince him not to go on tormenting himself, assuring him that the whole thing is only a matter of misunderstanding. Asya's tenderness and warmth lead him to confess to her that: "It was the sex impulse... 'I'm sorry. I should not speak of these things. But you are a married woman –" (*EOS*, 550). Mahrous pathetically takes, in Bhabha's words, "the measure of... [his own] dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" only to experience the shrinkage of that world when he encounters another (1995: 9). Whether the world 'expands for him' or whether he remains encapsulated by his own repressed history and by the familiar reductionist divisions between East and West is not explicitly pursued in the novel. Asya, however, attempts to console him by saying: "I don't think you can draw a complete dividing line between all the different emotions a person feels," and then she asks him: "would it have happened in your home town? Or even in Cairo?" Mahrous answers: "Of course not" (*EOS*, 551). His sense of humiliation is heightened not only because of the unfortunate event but also, as he tells Asya, because he hears his supervisor telling the police that Mahrous "live[s] in a mud hut. He was laughing with them" (*EOS*, 552). (Probably John does not mean to insult Mahrous, but within the circumstances, John cannot come up with a better excuse to convince the police to release him). Asya, by way of cheering Mahrous up, tries to convince him to believe that John's words are not meant to be a premeditated insult and that "he was trying... to make them see that you are not one of them – that they should not judge you –" (*EOS*, 552). Influenced by Asya's talk, Mahrous tells her "you will catch cold sitting on the damp ground" and then says "but they are civilised people and I behaved like a barbarian," only for Asya to reply: "would they have known how to behave if they had gone into your village without you to guide them? They wouldn't. And they *know* they wouldn't. And because they are civilised people they make the same allowance for you. Put it out of your mind" (*EOS*, 554).

From a feminist perspective, Soueif attributes to Asya a specific value by representing her as an active force in the life of Mahrous. Her conversation with Mahrous indicates a vision

that goes beyond 'fetishised' understanding of cultural differences and typically fixed definitions of the 'other'. She is aware of the boundaries marking the differences between one individual within a certain cultural context and another within a different one. It might appear ironic that Asya is assigned a constructive role in Mahrous's dilemma considering that she herself at the time is still entrapped within Saif's and Gerald's spheres. Still, Asya's liminality with the culture of the 'other' suspends the occurrence of a crudely blunt encounter with that 'other'. Mahrous's story is suddenly introduced in the last fourth part of the novel largely to help Soueif enunciate a theoretical and political position which can work to alleviate the tension of Western/Eastern relations as articulated through Asya's relation to Gerald. Soueif is vigilant not to be caught up within any totalising vision reducing any of the 'self'/Arab or the 'other'/West. She neither polarises these relations nor reduces their complexity. The girl who smiles at Mahrous is not less victim than Mahrous himself. Not all the Westerners are 'Gerald's', nor are all the Arabs 'Asyas'. Soueif needs Asya's experience more than Mahrous's not only to activate woman's presence in the narrative, but also to promote an intricately dialectical relation between the 'self' and the 'other', and the colonial and colonised. Mahrous's personality, his history, and his space are far too limited to render him a suitable proxy for a complex experience like the one that Asya undergoes.

Men as 'Tropes' in Al-Shaykh's Narrative World

The majority of Al-Shaykh's male characters are sketched as 'typifying' some 'categories' of Arab men, or often 'stereotyping' them. In *SOZ*, Al-Shaykh has not been particularly interested through the organisation of her diction in explicitly endowing the sniper, the man with whom Zahra has an affair, with rich *poetic* symbolism. It is through the sniper's relations to the formal designation and ideas in the novel that it becomes possible to perceive of him as a 'trope'. The sniper, both faceless and nameless, appears only in the last quarter of the novel. Zeidan maintains that the sniper is "the symbol of the war at its most terrifying because the sniper is unpredictable and apparently indiscriminate when it comes to choosing human

targets” (1995: 216). The sniper crystallises rather dramatically some tragic moments peculiar to Zahra’s own personal life as well as the turbulent history of her country. Taking into consideration Zahra’s positive attitude towards the war as it first rages, it is not altogether unexpected that she establishes an affair with a killer. Zeidan holds that the sniper does not only stand for the war but also for phallic power and the rifle which he holds signifies “sexual potency, aggression” (1995: 216). In her article “Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context,” Accad finds the sniper an intensifying agent of the relation between war, sexuality, and death, and envisages of his affair with Zahra as “a metaphor of the Lebanese dilemma” (1993: 244).

The manner by which Al-Shaykh exposes death and destruction in her novel hardly works to appropriate a vision of transformation of social and political relations. “Bullets flew, bombs exploded, smoke rose and bodies bled, but none of it did a thing to touch the decaying regime” (*SOZ*, 121). Al-Shaykh is obviously critical of the attempt to accomplish change through violence, reflecting that change is such an arduous pursuit given the gloomy and highly pathetic reality of the Arab world. Zahra’s relation to the sniper exposes some of the psychological and political obstacles which could hamper the emergence of transformative values. Zahra is insistently rendered the victim of a society that is both sexually and politically repressive. Sadly enough, her code of practice helps to reinforce the impossibility of enacting change on any level whether sexual or political. The sniper, who signifies repression and war, is not shown to be forcing Zahra to have sex with him. At the beginning he is hardly aware of her presence. It is she who offers herself to him after the departure of her parents to the village. Al-Shaykh attempts continually to establish in her narrative that the sniper is not a contingent presence in the novel. When Zahra sees him for the first time she thinks to herself: “I could make out a face in the darkness. It was a face which I recognised, already familiar to me” (*SOZ*, 126).

The affair with the sniper is the formal catalyst objectifying Zahra’s immobility within a corrupt patriarchal system. In the absence of her father and mother, Zahra feels free and

believes that she is perfectly capable of enacting her own free will; “I washed and dried myself, thinking of my father and mother and how their absence had made things easier” (*SOZ*, 128). She rejoices at the thought of challenging her father’s authority: “sniper let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so...Let my father see my legs spread wide in submission” (*SOZ*, 137). The real issue is, however, whether her father’s absence has truly liberated her. Zahra’s affair with the sniper could be seen as substituting one authority for another, her father’s for the sniper’s. As it turns out, the first connotes repression and the second annihilation. Ironically, Zahra is driven into the sniper’s arms either because throughout her past life she never realised the implication of her choices, or probably because she is too egoistic and an enclosed person to experience growth. She also cannot forsake the pleasure she is experiencing with the sniper.

Neither Zahra nor the sniper is endowed with the potential necessary for developing a vision for change or for promoting one within the narrative. (The depictions of characters lacking the visions and stature to effect change can often prove instrumental for the process of cherishing transformative potentials in the work of art in its totality. *SOZ* can be described as a work of art with no transformative value not because it depicts characters like Zahra and the sniper. It is the interworking of various elements within the different narrative levels that is largely responsible for rendering the novel a site devoid of positive changing potentials.) A relationship growing between Zahra and the sniper is naturally doomed to failure. It is significant that on discovering her pregnancy and then the possibility that new responsibilities will be thrown on him, the sniper shoots Zahra. It is impossible to perceive Zahra as an agent of change, since she falls in love with war and one of its proxies, the sniper. “The war had become a perpetual, secure stockade, whose walls were, so to speak, decorated with hearts and arrows drawn in blood” (*SOZ*, 137). Zahra finds that “[d]ays become long during wartime, but my days of war grew short. Each morning I would think about the afternoon and of meeting my sniper. Each night I would think of the warmth of his body on mine. A shudder of pleasure

would run through me” (*SOZ*, 129). The ecstasy she experiences with the sniper does not enable her to see the sniper for what he really is: “[m]y cries as I lay in the dust, responding to the sniper’s exploring fingers, contained all the pain and sickness from my past” (*SOZ*, 131). Zahra is so attracted to the sniper; “[t]he sniper continued to haunt me. In my mind, his image from the first time when I actually saw him” (*SOZ*, 132).

Although the sniper is a destructive presence, Al-Shaykh emphasises his human face:

I recognised his face...I realised I had previously seen it many times in the restaurant before I ever saw it on the roof. Now he sat like any other human being at a table under the awning, brushing the hair away from his eyes... Who would believe me that this man flicking the hair back from his face, who eats like any other man, who enjoys a dish of *hummus* and *foul*, is the sniper? (*SOZ*, 133-4)

The above description works to heighten, by way of contrast, the dehumanising, depersonalising, and defacing powers of war on the otherwise ordinary people. The war whose metaphor is the sniper is a necessarily evolving condition within the Lebanese borders. The sniper as mentioned earlier is not a contingent presence in the novel. He could be this “shy boy from the neighbourhood” (*SOZ*, 135). In *SOZ*, war is neither imposed nor an unexpected event. Its eruption brings to the surface the conflicts and dilemmas of the society. The existing system of power seems to be too invincible to allow for true transformation of values to take place. Zahra lusts for her own killer, she is pathetically drawn to him to the degree that she fails to recognise that he has been feeding her and people venom; he is a compulsive killer. The orgasms which she experiences with him are the nirvana dragging her into silence and surrender. The sniper draws her into his own world, he allows her to settle in his periphery as long as she conforms and abides by his rules, or as long as the space he grants her within his own domain does not cause him to make personal concessions. The moment he feels that his space is threatened and his convenience is disturbed by Zahra, the sniper effects ruthless expelling. So, the sniper is an embodiment of a corrupt patriarchal system. Resisting and transforming this system require a specific agency and deep insight, especially when the system proves capable of repatriating itself through pleasure and suppression.

Men as Sexual/Political Tropes in Maitland's Narrative World

A male character as representative of patriarchy or one of its morally suspect values is also depicted by Sara Maitland in her novel *HT*. While Al-Shaykh has drawn a picture of the Arab society in general and Arab men in particular as so viciously immune to transformation, Maitland shows that, after all, there are females with the moral insight, or potentially ready, to stimulate resistance and effect change. The sniper in *SOZ* is an outcome of his own sexually, politically, and religiously troubled society. Maitland, too, has endeavoured to create some male characters who are in absolute conformity with many of the values and ideological formations of their own patriarchal system. David, Clare's boyfriend, is one of those men. He presses Clare to act in compliance with his own will and, when he is out of his country, he behaves in a manner typically reminiscent of the Western colonial on the land of the 'other'.

In chapter two of this thesis, I attempt to unfold different aspects of David's personality as they emerge in the house of the other, Zimbabwe. Clare's sense of morality has been dramatically intensified as she is brought into a confrontation with herself on the lands of the 'other'. Her previous commitments and their political and ethical implications have been tested against a new emerging reality involving the 'other'. She finds herself in a situation where she can afford to make new choices concerning her past relations. David forms one of these relations which she has to rethink. His fall from the mountain is also the symbolic fall of the values which he embodies. It would not have been possible for Clare to pursue her quest for an identity had she not been able to break away from David.

David represents the superior 'other' on the land of those technologically and politically less powerful. His egoistic self and his sense of his own self-righteousness lead him to refuse experiencing liminality with the 'other', not only the 'other' as a foreigner, but also the 'other' as a woman. In Zimbabwe, while Clare feels her own remoteness within the new setting, David's feelings of his own Western superiority have been considerably heightened. Climbing Mount-Nyangani, he refuses to abide by any of the rules set by the

natives, believing that it suffices him to act in accordance with the knowledge he already possesses as a Western patriarch. He ridicules the locals' rules and asserts not only his difference from the Zimbabweans, but also his 'masculinity' as opposed to Clare's 'femininity'. He always takes the lead and imposes his own interpretations on all phenomena, even the most foreign and alien to him.

On a more intimate level, he has Clare perform sexually to the utmost satisfaction of his own desires. In Zimbabwe, Clare begins to perceive into her relation with David and realises the extent to which she is manipulated by him. Her resentment of him leads her to want "him dead and he was dead. Did that mean that she had killed him? They had climbed a mountain together; a mountain haunted with tragedy, haunted by sudden mists...haunted by the spirits of ancestors who resented her angry presence, who resented David's arrogant presence" (*HT*, 14-5). Clare has not killed David literally. Only on their Zimbabwe trip that she begins to see into her personal life: "on a sunny day in February, on the highest mountain in Zimbabwe, she had lost her lover, her hand and her memory" (*HT*: 33). It is ironic that the losses should occur on a sunny day. Yet, the losses can be preconditions for recovery or for the attainment of different gains. On sunny days one can see things clearer. The clarity of vision helps in the process of recovering belongings rather than losing them. The fact that Clare loses her 'belongings' on a sunny day implies that her losses are necessary for a moral and psychological recovery.

Clare is not only hurt upon her realisation that David has been a force precluding her from realising her own desires and will, but also upon her view of his conduct of behaviour towards others. Her anger while on the mountain is not directed at the mountain, but at David's arrogance and his derision of others' values and convictions. Like Saif, Gerald, the uncle, and the sniper, David is entrusted with two levels of performance within the narrative, one is symbolic (a signifier of Western masculinity/colonialism), and the other is physical (Clare's chauvinist lover). These performances interrelate and interact but none is minimised

for the sake of the other. David's relation to Clare helps to underscore some ethically suspect politics whether pertaining to the colonial relation to the colonised, or males' relation to females. The reader disapproves of David's conduct and the political implication this conduct signifies. True, David's enactment of his own power and his drawing of Clare into a peripheral sphere is not launched in a manner identifiable with that of an Arab male's domination of an Arab woman. Still, male-domination and suppression continue to draw the Arab feminist novel to its English feminist counterpart. Clare is shown to be inhibited from pursuing some personal quests as a result of David's lack of consideration and his desire to undermine and mock her and others. When she feels like co-authoring a book with Mark, a researcher and a computer expert, about the intersection of spirituality and nature with some of the scientific observations and findings, David looks down at her project: "David had laughed at her, scoffed at her arty pretensions" (*HT*, 40).

As in *SOZ*, the quest for resistance and change in *HT* is never rendered easy. When asked by Ben, her brother, why she did not leave David earlier before reaching to the stage of wishing him dead, given that "she was financially independent, she was child-free, she was not unattractive; she was not even married to him" (*HT*, 99), she accounts for the intricacy of the relation. It is that "she had moved into the place of spells...Simple spells practised before he returned to their flat of an evening: a long bath, an excessively generous gin and tonic, a cute joke...And then the magic words, 'I love you, darling'" (*HT*, 99). Clare later admits to herself that "David had been a mechanically brilliant lover," and the certainty of orgasm with him "worked to silence fear, just as bread and water worked to silence hunger" (*HT*, 154). Unlike Zahra whose lack of vision and catatonic lapses work to suppress any expression of resentment or a will to actually effect change on any level, Clare is much more conscious of her surroundings and her relation to them. As in *SOZ*, however, resistance and change are also depicted to be closely intertwined with issues of desire, pleasure, and temporary (in)convenience—issues which render the price for change not easily and willingly affordable

by the overwhelming majority. The influence which David has on Clare is not beyond her perception. She fully understands that “[s]he let him become her God. Like God he had created her, made her from dust. Like God he knew all the answers, and only his love could sustain her, could keep her safe, could make her loveable” (*HT*, 100). Breaking the spell is so hard, though necessary, in order not to continue being created in the image of the other.

The comprehensibility of the vision which Clare ought to develop to be able to construct a position from where she can assess her present position as a precondition for liberating the self has repetitively been summoned often poetically in the narrative. Maitland rejoices in the creation of images which go beyond formal differences and which touch upon some primordial instances where the self labours to fit within a ‘universal’ pattern. The consciousness raising, the change, which Clare undergoes is rendered in terms of liquidity:

Then it rained; and it rained and it rained; a flood with no ark to bob upon it, until the whole land became a lake, a sea without salt. And molecule by molecule, lime and clay filled the crevasses, and turned into rock themselves. Not the hard rock of the burning times, but the soft rock of the wet time; and there was nothing to give consciousness to the growing rock, as it had grown in Clare’s soul. (*HT*, 132)

The above image signifies the beginning of new formations or new births. (The image draws on biblical references and works to emphasise primordial patterns inscribing universal humanist visions). “The hardness of the rock” and the wetness of time are paradoxically combined. Clare would like now to stand like the rock. In the past her vulnerability and inability to make her own decisions lead others like David to manipulate her and paralyse her will. However, the firmness which she comes to acquire is that of the “wet time.” It is not an abhorred or dogmatic firmness. It is firmness combined with flexibility as a quality of fluidity and wetness, or maybe ‘femaleness’. Clare not only succeeds in asserting herself as a woman, but also emerges as more self-confident and more determined to include others in her own private space.

Not forsaking differences or formal variables characteristic not only of the various cultures but also of the one culture, Maitland asserts that a universal pattern, or rather a human

core, is an inherently ontological truth. To be able to touch the core of her own self as well as of others, a momentary elimination of significantly forged barriers or obstacles is a strategic necessity. The barriers could be psychological, technological, cultural, or even imaginary. This is why Clare manages to see David for what he really is in Zimbabwe, and more specifically on a remote ancestral mountain where all barriers are removed and the true self is granted free emergence. It is on their trip to the top of the mountain where the personal is depicted as most dramatically merging with the political. The mountain is uninhabited and is clear of all signs of civilisation or technological progress. The ugliness of David's imperialist character is most clearly manifest there. On their way up the mountain Clare is furious at David and his indifference to her fears: "[h]e liked her pain, he enjoyed her humiliation" (*HT*, 171). It is also on their way up that he declares to Clare: "you know, up the Falls; I am like Rhodes. If I were Rhodes, I'd have done it too. I'd have claimed this country, just to ride across it and be buried at Matapos" (*HT*, 169). Clare's heightened sense of morality drives her to think "[but] it didn't belong to him" (*HT*, 168). Only for him to assure her that "I'd have invented some politics, some ideal that let me do it" (*HT*, 169). And Clare knows "he would have done...and for a while could not see the beauty for her own guilt; guilt because she knew it was true and because she did not dare to complain" (*HT*, 168-9).

Reading rule 15: "*Do not mock, insult or abuse the mountain*" and sensing Clare's fear and inclination to abide by this rule, David tells her, "mocking and superior," "you're letting this silly mountain spook you, my pet" (*HT*, 207). Clare is appalled to hear him shout at the mountain towards the invisible summit: "Fuck you, you stupid bitch. You don't scare me" (*HT*, 207). David ends up violating all of the fifteen instructions written for would-be climbers. Falling, he holds Clare's hand only to be devoured by "bottomless, knife-edged rocky fissures" (*HT*, 281). Clare is rescued, suffering from post-traumatic amnesia and an amputated hand—a proof that she did not kill him and that she was holding him firm to prevent his fall. She later confesses to her father: "When people ask me what happened I get

frightened because I don't know; but also because I am afraid I killed God. Broke the rules and would be damned for ever" (*HT*, 227). But the rules which Clare breaks are by no means identifiable with those that David breaks. David's premeditated violations of the rules one after the other must not to be understood as daring and welcoming acts of rebellion against oppressive traditions or a given system of power. The space of the mountain which Maitland chooses derives its value from its spiritual history and the imaginary stories narrated about it by the locals. As such an attempt to profane the mountain, its history, and the stories woven about it is an overt act of transgression and antagonism. Clare has to break some 'rules' too. The breaking of these rules, however, is indicative of an inclination towards positive transformation.

It has been essential for Clare to tread out of her space to discover more of her self and of David. It is not politically wrong to step into spaces which belong to others. It is the kind of attitude adopted that defines whether one's being out 'there' is morally notorious or not. Clare knows that to travel and to be capable of empathising with the 'other' would reposition her status significantly. This is why prior to her departure she thinks, "[t]hey could have gone to Umbria and left her world intact – to central Italy, where the cathedrals...cradled the stories that she knew; the little baby Godling, the Christ Child, the crucified...Those were her ancestors and Joyful was right" (*HT*, 192). Italy would not bring her into a stark confrontation with the self or with David the way Zimbabwe does because David would not feel significantly superior there, and the intoxicating effect he has on Clare would hardly be eroded.

Marginal Characters in Maitland's *Home Truths*

While Maitland is cautious not to essentialise femaleness and render it as an inherently humanistic quality by deeming Clare and not David an agent of moral stances, she also does not essentialise maleness as inherently oppressive. She draws male characters who, too, are victims of patriarchy. For example, Clare's priest brother, Ben, is stigmatised by his own

society for violating a 'norm'. "Unamusing pictures" were shown of him in a "Sunday rag" revealing his gayness. He was sacked by his Bishop and packed off to the monks "to repent of his wicked ways" (*HT*, 8). Meeting for the first time "since disaster had overtaken both of them" (*HT*, 87) (Clare and Ben feel that they are joined by a sense of fatigue), Ben tells Clare that "we've both been in the wars" (*HT*, 87). Clare is heart-broken to see that her dear brother looks so weary, damaged, and overcome by defeat (*HT*, 87-8).

Like Clare who loses her job as a result of loosing her hand on the mountain of the 'other', Ben loses his job and his self-esteem before his family and social community. His homosexuality, being caught in a gay club drunk and showing off his nipple ring, becomes a public event. He is not tortured by this exposure so much as by his knowledge that his own mother will be badly hurt to know the reality about her son's sexual life. He tells Clare the sick AIDS joke that "the most difficult thing about telling your parents you've got AIDS is persuading them you're Haitian" (*HT*, 98). Clare has always known that her brother has been gay and has understood his passion to become a clergyman. Relieved in his "companionship" and in a laughter "brewed up out of shared disaster," she thinks how Ben has not been "particularly marked by religiosity" and that it must be the "inevitability in his ordination" which has drawn him to be a clergyman (*HT*, 102). At one moment, Ben himself reflects upon the reasons which led him to want to become a parish priest. "He liked the gentle rhythms of prayer, and the robust rhythms of social activism" (*HT*, 230). He thinks that he can have a 'private' life of his own apart from his life as a priest. For, he confesses that he does not want his gayness to be "the whole of...[his life]" (*HT*, 230). Then he realises that "nothing was private." He feels truly sad that "his clergy friends did not ring him up" and that "he had let the side down by getting caught" (*HT*, 230).

Ben is most hurt when he hears Louise, his brother's wife, on knowing that William, her young son, is going for a walk alone with him, shouting 'no'. Ben angrily stands up "in a voice none of ...[his family] had ever heard him use" and cries, "[c]ould you please try to

explain to her that I am neither a pederast, nor incestuous?" (*HT*, 222). Out of anger and indignation, he leaves the house. Driving the car, he begins to see that it is of no avail to go on wanting all the family to live normally with his homosexuality and pretend as if "nothing had happened, nothing that changed him. It wouldn't work. Something had happened" (*HT*, 231). He comes to the realisation that "God did not mind him being gay. But he had to think about a job" (*HT*, 230). At one moment, he admits to Clare, "I like sex...I like it best of all, when it comes to the church, I thought I could have sex and God, but if I have to choose I'll choose sex" (*HT*, 264). Ben chooses to quit the church and is aware of the difficulty of his choice, especially that he really likes his job as a priest. He tells Clare that he "can't exactly regret it," as he is "turning into a gay fundamentalist really" not wanting "to replicate heterosexual joys any more...[and] experiment, go to some limit" (*HT*, 264).

James, Clare's father, is also shown as a loving and understanding male character. He seeks to help Clare order her life and learn from her past experience. The knowledge that his family is aware of the fact that Hester, his wife, runs his life does not seem to offend his manhood (*HT*, 224). Clare always finds in him a good listener. It is true that he wants his family to be safe, but he also wants them to accept the risk of making decisions of their own. He hates to think of God in a limited way. On one occasion, he calls Clare to tell her about her real parents whom he knew very well before their death since the deceased mother is his sister:

I want you to know that there is that other God, and one that Mummy and I, despite our best efforts, are quite unable to introduce you to. The dark God, you know, the wild, untamed, enormous God, who has no laws or dogmas. That was your other parents' God. It isn't mine, I don't like that God, I find him scary, but honesty obliges me to remind you that he does indeed exist. Or she, perhaps. (*HT*, 227)

James is shown to be one of the characters to help Clare rethink her choices and assess her personal involvement from within a new perspective. He introduces her to the challenges of inducing ordination in one's life.

Men as (Stereo)types in Al-Shaykh's Narratives

Some of Al-Shaykh's characters whether males or females emerge more of stereotypes than types, complying with ready-made images often devised by the West on Eastern men and by the East on Western women. The formation of stereotypes has always been a crucial feature of colonial discourses. As Said argues, to be able "to rule distant lands and peoples," it was important for colonial powers to create a discourse which works to justify intervention and domination. An important feature of this discourse rests on "the notions about bringing civilisation to primitive or barbaric peoples" (1992: xi). Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is largely devoted to a discussion of stereotypical orientalist images founded by the West about the Muslim world and the 'mysterious' East. Within this discourse it has been essential to fetishise or stereotype the 'other' or to devise an "ideological construction of otherness" dependent on fixity (Bhabha, 1995: 66). "The objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 1995: 70). It is essential now to try to locate instances in the Arab feminist narrative where stereotypes, modes of fixities, are depicted as replicating and reinforcing some of the strategies advocated by the coloniser.

In Al-Shaykh's *SOZ*, Zahra's father, husband, and uncle are rendered types. Each stands for some traits typical of many Arab men. Zeidan says that it is "difficult to view Hashem and Majed [the uncle and the husband] as stereotypical 'bad' men" (1995: 207). I would add to these the father, despite the fact that he is shown in more than one place in the novel to be beating his wife severely. Beating is the sort of reaction that a husband can take within an Arab-Islamic context, and probably within non-Islamic contexts, upon discovering his wife's infidelity. The wife might even be killed by the husband or even by one of her male kin upon the discovery that she has an adulterous affair. In other situations, though, Zahra's father is shown to be generally much more driven by a moral sense in his judgements than his wife is. Filled with despair and anger at what besets Lebanon during the war and at his son's

joining of one of the fighting factions, he shouts at his wife when she accepts the money that the son may have stripped from a dead corpse or an evacuated house: “Who does he think he is fighting? His brother, his friend, his neighbour! We are all Lebanese, you foolish woman...I wouldn’t touch such cursed money. It belongs to martyrs and orphans” (*SOZ*, 112). When Zahra’s mother curses the Christians thinking that they are responsible for the raging of the war, the husband reproaches her, “[y]ou are so ignorant, woman! You will always be ignorant! This is a war between nations, not between Christian and Moslem woman!” (*HT*, 110). Wright, for example, finds that Zahra’s father is “a dull but decent man” (1994: 68).

Zeidan maintains that despite Zahra’s efforts to deem Hashem and Majed convenient male villains, the reader understands their positions (1995: 207). Wright also argues that one “ends up with more sympathy for the lonely and homesick uncle than for his niece” (1994: 68). Accad praises the uncle for the effort he pays to convince Zahra’s husband not to be angry because Zahra has been deflowered by another man before her wedding night (1994: 243). The uncle asserts that “educated people understand this well enough and would never dream of bringing the matter up” (*SOZ*, 94). The husband himself rather quickly comes to terms with the fact that Zahra has had premarital sex, even though his acceptance is also a matter of convenience (*SOZ*, 61).

Zahra cannot understand Hashem’s *compelling sense of commitment to his country and family* when he flees from Lebanon upon a failed coup attempt and lives in exile in Africa. She interprets his attempts to draw close to her as sexual harassment. Yet, as maintained by Zeidan, for the uncle, “Zahra represents Lebanon, his family, his culture. Her presence causes such turmoil in him that he can hardly contain his enthusiasm...which translates into some sexual interest of which he seems only dimly aware” (1995: 208). From one perspective, the resentment which Zahra shows towards the uncle could be seen as Al-Shaykh’s disapproval of the uncle’s attempt to render Zahra the metaphor for the homeland.

Notwithstanding that Zahra is a self-enclosed and an irritably egoistic person, Al-Shaykh does not render her a site for conventional male inscriptions of women as solely carriers of some nationalist notions.

Neither Hashem nor Majed is intended to embody some noble or ideal sentiments. Majed evaluates his relationship with Zahra on economic basis. He is willing to forgive her past affairs and tolerate her uneasy temper for purely economic and personal convenience. "Here is a ready-made bride waiting. By marrying her I'll be saved from having to go to Lebanon to look for a wife. I'll save the costs of travel and trousseau" (*SOZ*, 61). Considering his social and economic background (*HT*, 62, 71, 72), it is possible for Majed, and other men in his position, to think and act likewise. There is nothing unrealistic in his belief that "it is only money which makes you strong in the world, gives a choice of friendships and achieves equality" (*HT*, 64). Majed's code of behaviour, though not ethically correct, reflects the attitude of many other men in reality. His view of the African woman as the 'other' is also noteworthy. Majed, who for the colonial Western is the 'other', is given the space to reflect upon yet another 'other'. Majed looks at Maha, the daughter of an African woman, and thinks, "[s]he has no future. Who would ever marry her, with that kinky hair and her rusty colour? Poor girl! Do you want to have children who are persecuted like that...?" (*HT*, 69). Majed admits to himself that what "stood between me and the daughters of Africa...was their looks; I could never imagine my body uniting with one of theirs" (*HT*, 69).

Al-Shaykh seems to be implying that the 'other' need not be idealised or envisioned as an utterly honest victim. Majed is in his turn perfectly capable of pressing his own racist notions, and his view of the African girl is also the view of many Arab men. This works to show that the 'victimised' Arab does not necessarily have a higher moral claim than her/his victimiser pertaining to a third party, another 'other'. People change roles as they shift from one relational position to another. The Arabs are darker than the Westerns, but whiter than the black Africans. Arabs often refer to the black as *a'bd* (slave), a word that has come to denote

blackness without being conscious of its original meaning: slave. Arabs might be more tolerant of the blacks in terms of ideological and political positions and social relations. However, they are not tolerant of others in terms of marriage and physical features.

Al-Shaykh's anxiety to expose the corruption of Arab Muslim societies leads her to exaggerate in depicting the personality of Zahra's brother, Ahmad, as an immediate product of the war and of the extravagant cuddling lavished on him by his mother as her only male child. In the war, he is portrayed as hashish addict, a war mercenary, and sexually corrupt. In one of the scenes Ahmad is depicted masturbating and moaning with pleasure in the act of fondling his groin before his sister's eyes, while still conscious of her presence (*HT*, 140-1). Unlike other male characters in the novel who are depicted with more complexity, Ahmad is shown as an absolute villain. He lacks any sort of commitment and is superficially portrayed. True, the war has created deformed presences and twisted loyalties, but it remains hard to think of Ahmad as a representative of a common definitive type. Ahmad does not serve as a type so much as he does as a stereotype of the villain. Al-Shaykh's resentment of war drives her to render Ahmad an utter jerk. His image does not evoke laughter or amusement so much as it evokes repulsion.

In *DM*, Maaz is also one of those characters who is shown to hanker after white, more favourably blond women, and a sip of an alcoholic drink. He is an affluent petrol businessman married with children, but he is never seen conducting business deals or involved in any familial duties. He travels for sex, buys gold for sex, and lies to his wife for sex. Having seen Suzanne, the American woman naked, he starts "mooing like an ox" and lamenting "why God has created foreign women differently" (*DM*, 138). He keeps reiterating while touching Suzanne's body "silk, silk" and while smelling and kissing her foot "more redolent than incense and scented lute" (*DM*, 138). Suzanne bursts into laughter before his amazement and his marvelling at her body and likens him to "a heathen man in a temple uttering words which she mostly cannot understand" (*DM*, 138). All we know about Maaz is

that he is nothing but a sexual maniac and an alcoholic. He emerges as a shallow person, rendering issues of desire and sex drives as utterly devoid from their various complexities and socio-psychic interactions. There is an excessive concentration upon Maaz's obsession with sex. "If the presentation of a single dominant trait is carried to an extreme, not a believable character but a CARICATURE will result" (Holman, 1975: 92). Al-Shaykh caricatures Maaz only to have her last laugh at him. She enacts upon him the concept of the 'Divine Justice': the last time we see him is on his discovery that his new-born child is syphilitic.

Not only Maaz, but also David, Suzanne's husband, is also shown to be an insensitive person and uninterested in his wife who has reached her forties and gained weight. Yes, there are men who lose interest in their wives after a certain age, yet Al-Shaykh is unconvincing in portraying his character and seems to be implying that Western men are willing to trade with their wives' bodies for money under the label of sexual freedom, reinforcing hereby an image held by some Arabs about Western men and women as utterly indifferent to morality. Their opportunism, materialism, individualism, selfishness, greed, and lack of spirituality and concern for each other are emphasised through the account given of Suzanne and her husband. The husband gives away his wife to the wealthy Maaz for money, and Suzanne haunts Maaz and agrees to be a second wife for money too. *DM* conjures various stereotypical images about men as chauvinist patriarchs and shallow beings with no insights or potential. They do not show any sign of progression as the narrative unfolds, nor the potential to effect one on any level.

However, Suha's Lebanese husband, Basem, and Nour's two ex-husbands, Samer and Saleh, cannot possibly be described as stereotypes like many other male characters in the novel. Basem, unlike other Saudi men, does not restrict his wife in any conventional sense. He does not dictate to her when to leave the house or with whom, whom to visit, what kind of clothes to put on, and whether to travel by herself or accompanied. Basem's personality is obviously that of a typical 'modern' Lebanese man. Samer, Nour's first husband, is a bisexual

who gradually begins to lose interest not only in his wife, but also in all women. He is educated and interested in conducting business deals. Saleh, Nour's second husband, deserts her because she refuses to perform the parts conventionally entrusted to her as a wife and then as a mother. Albeit the fact that these men are situated against a strict Islamic background and society, none of them seems to be truly concerned with practising Islam or conforming to any of its doctrines, none of them is even shown to be interested in developing any critique of traditional interpretations of Islam, or institutionalised Islam, as adopted by the state or other individuals. These men are types representing some real Arab men in the different societies.

Male Types: An Historical Context

Maitland in *TTT* does not depict individual men as inherent rivals of women stubbornly occluding women's progress or liberation. Her men speak the language of certain historical moments. Their support of, or antagonisms towards, women or feminist movements are not dogmatically pressed simply in terms of man versus woman. This is not to assume that harmony is a characteristic feature of men's relations to women in her narrative. The conflictual relations between men and women, and men's frequent lack of support to women are structured along historically realistic terms. Not menace, but a deepened sense of historical consciousness which informs Maitland's depictions of her male characters. She attempts to show that patriarchy as an abusive power inflicts harm on both men and women. She integrates issues of male privilege and power into a larger social, cultural and historical tempo. Her grasp of sexual politics is balanced against larger predominant contexts of say religious, ideological, familial, psychological and other important interactive imperatives.

In *TTT*, it is the father who launches Rachel to start a career in palaeontology by financing her first field trip with her husband, Martin, to dig up fossils in Africa. Despite her avowed feminist stand points, Maitland would not project onto the fathers she creates in her novel some vulgarised anti-male sentiments. It could be that this is an effect of her special relation to her own father. In "Two for the Price of One", Maitland says: "I had come to

respect this person who had happened to be my father...I liked him...his death, his absence, was going to mean that I could no longer use the childish device of blaming him for everything that was difficult in my life" (1983a: 33). She goes on to assert that "I am my father's daughter. I cannot love myself unless I love him" (1983a: 34). Maitland's statement does not merely describe a commonly defined human sentiment; the specifically political dimension it takes should not be overlooked. Within a feminist context, males are not contingent presences. Any advocacy of separation would ignore the various social and psychological dynamics intershaping women's relation to men. Maitland's feminist vision and her desire to press constructive change in the lives of women appeal to a more comprehensive *modus operandi*, one that goes far beyond the crude sexual relation of an individual man to an individual woman. The exposure of these relations is a poignant ground shedding light on the workings of powers.

Maitland's male characters are developed in such a way as to communicate significantly her interest in integrating women's issues and the problems they face into history, religion, psychology, ideology, and politics. In spite of the power of history, each of the men in *TTT* emerges as a *distinctive individual representative of others in his own society* within a particular temporality. Major David, Rachel's father, Martin, her husband, Jim, Phoebe's lover, Paul and Tim, Rachel's friends, are all both culturally and historically situated male characters. The father, Major David, motivated by his paternal love for his daughter and by a Victorian male's sense of obligation, provides his daughter, Rachel, with the money she needs to travel to Africa to dig up fossils (*TTT*, 63-4). From Africa, she sends him bundles of letters writing about the things "that she knew would amuse him" (*TTT*, 65). She writes to him about African tribal dances, about ancient African "tales of monsters and witchcraft and huge devouring spirits of the night," and about "how scary hippos are when seen from canoes: and how their heads rise up out of water looking like enormous old rubber" (*TTT*, 65). Reading these letters, the father and his "prosperous cronies" would be laughing while fretting

“about the decline of empire and the general decadence of the younger generation” (*TTT*, 65).

For Rachel, these letters are “acts of love for the two people she loved most in the whole world, her father and her husband” (*TTT*, 65). At that stage of her life, during the first quarter of the twentieth-century, Rachel has not yet developed the sense to judge her father’s convictions. Much later as Rachel grows older and as her moral consciousness is ever heightened, she realises “how much the letters had done for her own capacity to write, to look, to seek the larger context” (*TTT*, 65). Still, Rachel remains apologetic to her father, albeit her recognition that the need to cultivate more ethical and humanist values is pressing and to some extent is already in process. This is why “[w]hen her father had grown old she had found for him a renewal of devotion, which had surprised her” (*TTT*, 88).

As for Rachel’s husband, Martin, it is only after his death that she begins to see the harm he has caused her. At one moment, looking at his picture, she starts shouting: “damn you...because you...promised me that you wanted a colleague not a *housewife*, *that work was* the centre of love and you did not keep your word” (*TTT*, 58). She blames Martin for driving her to work in a “place where just holding on to a slim margin of dignity and professional integrity had to be enough...Because he had taken everything away from her and left her with nothing but this” (*TTT*, 59). While still young and enjoying “wonderful sex” (*TTT*, 63) with Martin, Rachel could not see the reality of other aspects of her relation to him. At the age of forty-seven, she begins to see that it is Martin who has confined her to work in a museum performing dull duties with no chance of ever being creative. At a much younger age, she really wants to be given the chance to do some academic work and not to be “primarily a communicator, a populariser of the important work that real academics did” (*TTT*, 80). In the year 1947, she publishes a book which “to her genuine surprise proved immensely popular.” “It stepped aside from the élitism of a profession which was still trying to claim its scientific credentials” (*TTT*, 68). Her “[f]ellow paleontologists were amused and impressed, or challenged and stimulated. Her father was delighted. Martin was furious. He expressed his

fury in coldness and in his determination to get her pregnant" (*TTT*, 68). She is badly hurt and humiliated as he tells her, "I wish to God ...that you hadn't dedicated that thing to me; it's so embarrassing...I do wish you'd seen fit to use your maiden name for your so-called professional publications"(*TTT*, 69). Surprisingly, Rachel attempts to justify his anger and even blames herself for suspecting one minute that his fury is a sign of jealousy. So she thinks, "[s]he had no right to be so mean and suspicious. And anyway she had used his fossil material in her book" (*TTT*, 71). Martin remains loving and tender as long as she does not exceed the limit he prescribes to her. Only after his death she assesses the terms upon which her marriage has stood. This is why much later she feels "suddenly murderously jealous of the long quite mutterings from Phoebe's flat" (*TTT*, 105) as women's groups would gather and talk about their rights, many of which she has been denied

In *TTT*, Maitland also reflects on the conflictual relation between men and the Woman's Movement, specifically in the sixties, an era which witnessed the creation and evolution of many anti-establishment movements in the West. It was the vogue in some circles for men to join liberation movements and to encourage others to join in too. Jim, Phoebe's lover, is depicted as a socialist advocate. The price he is willing to pay to prove his loyalties to liberation and eradication of oppression need not be more than reasonable. Phoebe wonders:

Where had they all gone, those extraordinary skinny left-wing men, who had bullied their girlfriends into the Women's Movement and been surprised when the hand with which they so kindly offered freedom had been bitten so damn hard?...Their women, far from being grateful, turned on them, snarling, in late night conversations telling them to shut up; far from setting them free to work for the Revolution, their women demanded that they take emotional responsibility and also clean the loos. And finally, only a year or so later, turned them out of house and home-put them on the street, as women who failed to be properly grateful to the fathers had been put for centuries. (*TTT*, 129)

So, Jim tells Phoebe that he is leaving her for another woman since he turns out to be one of those "left-wing" men who embrace anti-conventional and revolutionary values but are quick to drop them once they feel that their support can cause them some personal inconveniences.

Men's relation to the Woman's Movement is also described in Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem*, upon rather different terms from those accounted for in *TTT*. The difference is partly historically conditioned; there is the time lapse between the sixties, when Phoebe Joins the Movement, and the very late seventies when Liz in *DOJ* takes part in the discussion of women's groups. Generally, people started in the seventies to come better to terms with the movement and its condition. Maitland in *DOJ* also remains critical of the Movement's inadequacy to handle issues pertaining to women's right to make a choice outside the slogans raised by the Movement. In *DOJ*, Ian, Liz's husband, does not condemn the Movement nor his wife's commitment to it. On the other hand, we have Dr. Marshall who treats Liz for her barrenness. His arrogant and deriding remarks about the Movement are underscored, thus echoing the impulses and behaviour of many other Western men in similar moments in history. When Liz asks Dr. Marshall whether he had any training in psychiatry or whether his clinic provides group therapy for women with conceiving problems, he snobbishly answers her that a group therapy is an élitist notion and that for most of the women who come to his clinic "it is hard enough...to talk to [him], or other members of [his] team... They are not likely to be able to talk freely and usefully with each other" (*DOJ*, 33). The fact remains that Dr. Marshall's critical note rightly exposes some of the polarities raised by women's groups themselves. Women's different needs, desires, and problems as shaped by their individual psychological and social differences are often transcended under some feminist slogans of the sixties and early seventies.

It is not only the snobbish Dr. Marshall who is given the space to articulate some worthy comments. Paul in *TTT* is depicted as a very sensitive and perceptive intellectual who helps Rachel through her ordeal. Together they enjoy intellectual debates despite the fact that most of the time they do not share the same intellectual position. Paul is critical of the absolutist and monolithic notions or stands that Rachel adopts. He shows remarkable resilience to amend his own stands and beliefs upon the emergence of others more convincing and humane in

perspective. Unlike Rachel, he is quicker to revise and change positions. He is sceptical about terms such as ‘objectivity’ and ‘value-free’ science. Rachel’s sense of self-integrity is seriously threatened beginning to realise that many of the theoretical positions she fervently defended in the past are on the verge of collapsing in a postmodern era. Paul plays a significant part in trying to make her accept new intellectual realities and admit changes as inevitably human conditions rather than personal losses. Interestingly, Maitland renders a *male* character an articulator of ethics and moral voices as cherished by many feminist discourses condemning absolutism and fixities. True, Rachel eventually rethinks her stands, yet it is Paul who first shows resilience and persuades her to change without being tormented by feelings of loss (*TTT*, 13-19, 49, 50, 200). He is also a type character standing for many males drawing the intellectual map of the West today.

Within the space available it is impossible to account for each male character in the feminist novels at hand. However, each of the novelists has endeavoured to depict male-types. Asya’s father in EOS can be said to be a type. His conduct and mood are typical of a particular stratum of Egyptian intellectual men who “in the wake of defeat...are being urged to forgo their isolation, to put their ideas at the service of their country, to assume practical responsibilities” (EOS, 102). Having lived in the West, he “avoids ill-defined foods like Bamia...eats his rice with a fork instead of with a spoon...and never touches anything not even the chicken – with his fingers” (EOS, 102). Like many Arab men who leave for the West to be educated, Asya’s father comes back home very much impressed with the Western civilisation and culture. He is granted prestigious positions and always strives to serve and keep up to a certain image within his country even if he continues to seek identification with the West. When Asya is offered a scholarship to Italy by the Italian Ministry of Culture, Asya’s mother convinces her father to accept the offer by pointing out to him that “it would look very bad if he, the Egyptian Minister of culture, were to turn down a scholarship offered to his daughter by his Italian counterpart” (EOS, 165).

Images of male characters as devised by Maitland, Al-Shaykh, and Soueif vacillate between different social and political positions within the various narratives of the one novelist. Al-Shaykh has produced many stereotypical images of men, yet she also has produced types. Maitland and Soueif have endeavoured to build up deep insights into the formation of their men along the organisations of their different works. Within these diverse formations some are allowed to emerge as symbolic constructs standing for different ideas and situations, though not at the expense of devouring those men's individualised personalities. The different psychic and social dynamics yielding a particular subjectivity rather than another are satisfactorily illuminated within the one cultural context. Saif is Asya's lover who also stands for an 'idealised' image that one would like to treasure for home. Mursi is Asya's tender and loving sick uncle who also signifies in a crude term the deteriorating reality of the Arab world. David in Maitland's *HT* is both Clare's arrogant lover and an embodiment of Western patriarchy and colonial impulses.

Male characters who have been assigned symbolic functions by Soueif and Maitland have received significantly more extensive treatment and emphasis within the narrative space than other marginal male characters who have emerged as types. This is not unexpected considering that the complex historical and political situations men such as David and Saif embody and their complex relations with the main female characters cannot be accounted for in passing terms. In addition, those men are not intended to reflect superficially constructed images, for they either signify relations and power workings within intricate cultural and political situations, or ideas and emotional responses dependent on, or evolving out of, these situations. At one level, 'a trope-character' can be identified with a 'type-character'; each is endowed with realistic tempers and drawn as distinctively individualised presence. However, a 'trope-character' at another narrative level transgresses a 'type-character' and becomes a presence beyond himself.

In a woman-centred novel, female writers are usually stimulated by ‘political’ or by ‘other’ impulses to bring to the fore females’ experiences – rather than males’ – which for long have been submerged or delivered through the male writer’s eye. The representations of men as types, nevertheless, should not be understood as a mode of simplification or devaluation similar to that of stereotypes. ‘Type-characters’ have been structurally incorporated by Soueif and Maitland to promote political visions and account for some oppressive forms of reality. Both ‘male-tropes’ and ‘male-types’ have been necessary formations for developing psychological, social and political visions. Understanding a certain reality and accounting for the different complexities inherent in this reality, rather than reducing its elements, are preconditions for promoting any constructive change. Perceptive depictions of Men’s experiences are extremely important to understanding those dynamic elements informing women’s reality. Reducing these dynamics can lead to crudely reductive images of reality.

As for Roberts’ male characters, her compelling urge to construct primordial images of life often grounded in pure or ahistorical time often makes it rather difficult for the reader to envision her males as solid or identifiable male identities. The coition factor extensively surfacing in her different novels significantly works to obstruct the proper emergence of men as types, stereotypes, or even individual symbolic constructs. For the sake of accuracy, in her first novel *A Piece of the Night* and *Daughters of the House*, realistic male characters appear either briefly or unmemorable. Ben, Julie’s husband, in *PON*, however, is rendered a type historically situated, and his attitude towards the Woman’s Movement essentially resembles that of Jim, Phoebe’s boyfriend in *TTT* (*PON*: 184-186). In the second novel, if we exclude Thérèse’s father and Leonie’s husband, Baptise, there is hardly any realistic representations of men in the novel. Henri Taillé is a name heard in the narrative but never actually seen. He is positively recalled as the actual person aiding the threatened Jews to find a secured hiding place.

In the rest of the novels, men are hardly distinguishable characters by virtue of their inscribed individualities. They merge with the other formal and structural constituents shaping the narratives to help in the process of transcending the whole work either to reinforce a mythical impulse or an essential image informing human relations. Individual men in these novels do not emerge as individual tropes. They are elements of a larger trope whose definite site is the whole novel. Their shadowy presences and unfigured, or often ephemeral, energies wavering between the various levels of the narrative help in blurring biological differences as a precondition for an inherent privileging of one sex over the other. In *TV*, for example, Roberts weaves diverse images that would render Helen's identification with her twin brother almost complete. Even if we meet with the twin brother only occasionally in the novel, the empathy that Roberts projects between Helen and him is highly underscored. Helen often comes to see his face instead of hers when she looks through the glass (*TV*, 177). In fact, any such depictions work to reinforce Roberts' theme that masculinity is culturally constructed rather than biologically given.

Roberts' male characters cannot be described as fully developed characters in a realistic sense. Through the intricate workings of psychology and deployment of several formal devices, including the manner by which male characters are devised, Roberts seeks to forge images of wholeness and universal human truths. It is not specifically history which she aims to underscore. She often constructs historical barriers only to have them removed, revealing hereby a form of 'universal' truth connoting human relations, and more specifically male-female relations. The macrocosmic truths she endeavours to reveal leads her to impinge on larger issues such as religion and faith as powers which for long have constructed human and cultural values. Reinscribing new spiritual values by way of overthrowing older ones is a theme reiterated in Roberts' works. Such a theme is tackled by continuously discrediting and severely critiquing the religious Christian institution and its representatives whether males or females, whether nuns or priests.

Chapter Five

Presences and Absences: Religious Icons, Ephemeral Images

Introduction

Finding out whether an inherently tenacious relationship emerges between the artistic excellence of a feminist narrative, the comprehensibility of its cultural vision, and its capacity to disseminate transformative values is one of the central issues tackled in this study.

Accounting for any such relationship inextricably involves impinging on various matters pertaining to aesthetic criteria, politics, ideologies, and others. It also demands setting out a definition for both the subject and object of change, its proxies, what aspects need be changed, and how.

In spite of their potential sociological value, novels are not meant to be sociological projects. On the other hand, to spot some instances which can be described as mitigating, or deterring processes for inscribing positive cultural changes is an important ground for the assessment of any text, more so of a feminist text. Locating the sites to be changed is a precondition for inscribing and defining change. Accordingly, it is a priority now to try to assess the extent to which the feminist novels included in this study reflect sensitivity to the sites requiring change. Another question needs to be addressed: Do these novelists succeed in cultivating the awareness as to the need of transforming a situation whether overtly or non-overtly oppressive to women.

Treading the problematic area of the ongoing dispute between the instrumental/political and aesthetic theories of the text grows necessary in the present context. I find Annette Kolodny's argument in "Dancing Through the Minefield" a very useful ground for not subduing a feminist politics to aesthetics nor vice versa. She contends that a worthy text is one which can be described as "a locus of many and varied kinds of (personal, thematic, stylistic, structural, rhetorical, etc) relationships," and one from which the reader can do better than being entrapped in "a straitjacket that limits the scope of possible analysis" (1986: 186). A text with the potential to yield itself to different interpretations and to ignite the urge to develop

competing dialogues is necessarily a rich text immunised against a “definitive or exhaustive” point of view. By deploying feminist critical tools informed by “more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any coherent school or shared goal orientation” (1986: 184), Kolodny confirms the possibility of “encoding for women” not only within feminist texts *per se*, but also “within our literary inheritance” (1986: 186-7).

Kolodny’s account helps to make two points clear: first, artistic excellence is not conditioned by adopting a certain ideology rather than another – for Kolodny feminism, though an ideology, is never equated with dogma. So feminist texts are not inherently valuable texts if they are definitive and one-dimensional. Second, regardless of its politics or other ideological orientations, a good text is an open and active text. It is both pluralistic in vision and open to different interpretations. Plurality of vision, Kolodny advocates, does not constitute a threat to feminist politics nor a mitigation of feminist values, since respecting differences and avoiding “the inviting traps of reductionism and dogma” are the forming grounds of a feminist ethics (1986: 187). Christopher Steiner also rejects the idea that a good work of art is one striving for an emulation of canonic principles, stressing that this emulation can be indifferent to the ontological elements informing canons and thus can work to dilute history (1996: 213-5).

Shallowness in depicting situations, characters, and relations among characters themselves or between characters and situations, would definitely render the text an inert site with no transformative value. This does not mean that it is only through a complex language that truly rich narratives originate. However, there seems to be an intimate relation between the artistic value of the text and its politics for change. To reconstruct, decode, encode, and displace are strenuous processes that cannot be introduced or reasonably effected through casting fixities. The portrayal of fixed characters and stigmatised conditions are not definitive criteria for condemning the work artistically and for denouncing its politics. The fixity of the characters need not be the fixity of the text, and the tragic end of the plot need not be seen as the writer’s own ominous voice prophesying the impossibility of eradicating oppression.

Change, as a concept opposing ideological fixation and essentialisation, is particularly important within a colonial context. In order to justify its domination, the reigning ideology or those in power are usually reluctant to attribute the differences between one nation and another to specific histories. In the “Editorial Collective of Questions Feminists,” a group of writers expose the motives which make a group in power work to propagate that “colonised people are generally ‘lazy’ and ‘incapable’ of producing anything from their head themselves... For the oppressor, it is safer to speak of natural differences that are invariable in definition” and of inferiority as essentially unchangeable (In Eagleton, ed. 1986a: 233-4). Thus, exposing what constituents appropriating fetishised modes of existence which could be shrewdly and dimly latent in the text is an important quest. Retaining an understanding of power relations and biased interests as informing the narrative “does not reduce or diminish the novels’ value as works of art: on the contrary, because of their *worldliness*, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting, they are *more* interesting and *more* valuable as works of art” (Said, 1993: 13).

At this stage we need to consider what cultural, social, and political aspects are emphasised in a particular narrative and how they can be detected as hampering women’s progress. Neither Maitland nor Roberts has been immediately concerned with crudely approaching issues of women’s rights as pertaining to formal equality, economic independence, sexual freedom, job opportunities, justice before the law, the right for divorce, or equal participation with men at all levels, within both the domestic and public spheres. Hardly found are female characters stigmatised for breaking any of the sexual taboos or rejecting heterosexual relations. Mostly, we come across educated women seeking self-fulfilment yet never ruthlessly expelled from significant social or familial relations, or punished in any vulgar or blunt sense. Typical women’s issues, it seems, have been transcended to merge within other intellectual and philosophical matters critiquing patriarchy as an oppressive power.

Maitland’s and Roberts’ abstention from explicitly dwelling on typical women’s rights issues is necessarily conditioned, among other factors, by the general theoretical sphere within

feminism in particular and within the Western intellectual scene in general. In the postmodern era, feminism is starting to be more involved with theoretical and intellectual debates which go far beyond woman's access to the public sphere or her struggle for 'equality' with men. The gains in the field of human rights which women in the West have managed to secure whether in the private or public spheres (albeit, there is still much work to be done) have led feminists to consider other engagements and think of them as also empowering to women. Feminists' engagements with theory in the different disciplines at all levels have proved necessary and tenable in terms of effectively inscribing feminist ethics and feminist visions in mapping today's intellectual terrain. Also, the status of the writer herself often affects her choices, and writers generally tend to come from the educated élite, not because the uneducated masses do not have talent, but because the latter do not receive the sort of education and chances that enable them to become writers. This is also true of women across the different cultures. For some, class privilege has historically partly compensated for gender deprivation.

The fact that issues like women and the economy as points of thematic departures have hardly surfaced in some feminist novels should not undermine what value the work holds for change. The ideological stances and the intellectual notions which appear in Maitland's works, for example, are indispensable constituents of the Western culture at one level. Culture is a process continuously activated and revised through performances of different people from different social classes. Some of Maitland's novels show critiques of Western systems of patriarchy and ideological formations. Through tackling Rachel's scientific career in *TTT*, Maitland tries to show how 'absolutism', 'positivism', monolithic thinking, and the notion of "value-free" knowledge are political myths created by patriarchy. Her condemnation of those ideologies fashioning the rule and exploitation of others' lands has been briefly touched upon in *TTT*. However, the issue of Western colonisation is explicitly and perceptively dealt with in *HT*. Also, in *DOJ*, Maitland more specifically approaches some 'women's problems' like barrenness and exposes the social imperatives associated with such problems and their

psychological impact on defining gender roles and the feminine self. She does not uncritically dwell on many issues tackled by the Woman's Movement. She develops a dialectic which, while it critiques the Movement, it actually helps in sustaining its politics and in ever renewing its ethical visions.

The religious and mythic impulses which many of Maitland's works embrace underscore spirituality and imagination as distinctively empowering human activities. She seems to be implying that without imagination and without spiritual strength, prospects of change might diminish. She, more than Roberts, has been careful not to indulge excessively in producing mythic and ahistorical representations as the sole ground for her artistic forms. Maitland experiments with religion and myths either to enforce primordial images seeking a human core or to devise methods enabling her to deconstruct some male-dominated religious presentations. She does not want to displace religion nor deem it an absolutely paralysing power in women's lives. This is also true of Roberts who seems to be so obsessed with Christian symbols and images that no novel of hers escapes the various Christian allusions. Reinscribing religious symbols from a specifically feminist perspective by way of deconstructing official religion and its androcentric and cultural manifestations is one of Roberts' prior concerns.

One wonders how in a 'secular' Britain, some feminists are still haunted by religious images, while in Arab societies which continue to be heavily saturated by Islamic values and codes at all levels, the narrative of many feminists, including that of Soueif and Al-Shaykh, can hardly be seen as emphasising religion. (In a later part of this chapter, I will try to discuss how marginalising Islam within Arab feminist narratives tends to undermine the actual part religion has in informing the Arab-Islamic reality.) Living in England, Roberts and Maitland are free to investigate and rewrite the stories of their religion in a way that Arab novelists are not. The nearest equivalent to the religious feminist images Maitland and Roberts construct in, for example, *WG*, or *IS*, or *DOJ* would be Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. The anger which Rushdie's

novel caused would be much worse if a woman were held guilty of the kind of 'irreverence' this novel shows. The implied rationale of Maitland's and Roberts' aesthetic project is that the secular West may not think religion matters, but in reality religious myths construct identities, especially women's identities, and contribute significantly to nurturing social and cultural values at the deepest psychological levels. Also, the fact that Roberts was educated in a convent has considerably influenced her imagery. Her narrative continuously alludes to the Virgin Mary who stands for "the culmination of womanhood" and "her chastity, her humility, and her gentleness" make of Christianity "a good religion for a girl" (Warner, 1976: xx). Even by way of critiquing male-imposed interpretations of the Virgin Mary, her image continues to haunt Western women at different levels. For Roberts, the Virgin has come to mean what Marina Warner describes as "holiness" painfully "forsaken." It seems that both Warner and Roberts have come to similar realisations as regard their religious experience: "The Virgin, sublime model of chastity, nevertheless remained for me the most holy being I could ever contemplate, and so potent was her spell that for some years I could not enter a church without pain at all the safety and beauty of the salvation I had forsaken" (Warner, 1976: xxi). However, the actual impact of religion as a patriarchal domain in the West has led many feminists to be traditionally anti-religious. In England in particular, feminism has been much influenced by humanist socialism, which has been strongly secular and anti-clerical or downright atheist.

Within an Arab context, religion is generally accepted as part of the ordinary life. It is not that Soueif and Al-Shaykh are expected to deal with Islam the way Roberts and Al-Shaykh deal with Christianity. The rewriting of Islamic feminist myths would be mortally dangerous. On the other hand, to view religion as merely oppressive to women does not work to change the oppressed reality of Arab women. Criticising and addressing religious practices and discourses at the level of ordinary life rather than at the level of myth and dream are a political necessity not only because religious values have always shaped Arab mentalities and relations, but also because Arab women are becoming increasingly religious.

In the second half of the twentieth-century the roles of women in the Middle East underwent massive expansion and transformation. The state of Egypt in 1952 started making primary education free and compulsory to boys and girls between the age of six and twelve, and in 1956 granted women the vote and the right to run for political office. The National Charter of 1962 proclaimed that women and men should be considered equal working partners (Ahmad, 1992: 210). Women's participation in the public sphere was to affect the cultural productions and discourses from 1950s to the 1980s. "Research currently under way indicates that in terms of formal and informal organisational activities as well as in literary terms, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were an era of dynamic feminism" (Ahmad, 1992: 214). However, in 1967, the year that the Arabs were defeated by Israel, Arab people lost faith in the nationalist idiom that was adopted during Nasser's reign. Islamic groups began to grow stronger and more wide-spread. The advocacy was that "Islam should constitute the basis of law and identity" (Azzam, 1996: 218). Sadat's treaty with Israel led many Islamic groups to be very critical of him, and the "religious idiom also became the language of political dissent and discontent" (Ahmad, 1992: 217). Azzam maintains that "the promise of unity among Arab States, the military defeat of Israel and economic progress remained part of many unrealised expectations... This has resulted in widespread disillusionment with present regimes and their ideologies" (1996: 218). In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the Islamic vernacular and veiling grew more dominant among university women. Many women became informally affiliated with Islamic groups believing that their alignment would bring them comfort, a sense of belonging, and a psychological support (Ahmad, 1992: 218; Azzam, 1996: 221). Women's engagement with Islamic movements has rendered the voice of overt feminism and perhaps even feminist consciousness absent (Ahmad, 1992: 224). Ahmad correctly maintains that women's affiliation with Islamic trends "lends support and strength to Islamist political forces which, if successful in realising their objectives, would institute authoritarian theocratic states that would undoubtedly have a devastatingly negative impact on women" (1992: 230-231).

This affiliation, she concedes, can trap “the issue of women with the struggle over culture – just as the initiating colonial discourse had done” (1992: 236).

In Lebanon, Al-Shaykh’s country, Jean Makdisi argues that since the Lebanese women had the vote in 1952, they have proved themselves in the media, banks, journal, televisions, universities, but still “women are almost entirely absent from politics, government, and public administration” (1996: 231). She finds that the Civil War in Lebanon which lasted from 1974 till 1992 has badly affected democracy and economy in the country, stressing that the declining role of political movements demanding equal rights for woman has led to weakening women’s political position. It is not only that woman’s movement is almost non-existent in terms of real action, but it also belongs to privileged class women who often turn out to be incapable of identifying with other less fortunate women (1996: 235). In Lebanon, Makdisi observes, “[m]odern’ women are loosely identified with Europe and America...and behind the word ‘traditional’ looms the spectre of a rigorous application of Islamic *shari’a*” (1996: 238). She sees that those educated and well-dressed modern women often “behave in a manner totally subservient to the husband whose displeasure...[they] dare not risk” (1996: 241). Modern women might be more at ease with exposing their bodies while traditional women are more confident with wearing the veil. Yet Makdisi asserts that costume should not be taken seriously as “a political argument which is insidiously dividing a society and holding back the advancement of women” (1996: 242). Since 1967, the appearance of strictly Islamic dress in Lebanon has been associated with Islamic militant movements and those who wear it “share[d] the power of the movement” (Makdisi, 1996: 245).

The decline of women’s movements in the different Arab countries which coincided with the emergence of Islamist groups and organisations, both Ahmad and Makdisi agree, have tempered a distinctive feminist voice to emerge other than the voices of feminist novelists and writers. Maitland and Roberts have dealt with Women’s Movements and women’s meetings at one point or another in the narrative. Neither Soueif nor Al-Shaykh mentions any such groups

or movements. In reality, women's movements hardly exercise a political power or have a significant impact on the lives of Arab women. Compared with the Western woman, the Arab woman is much behind in the field of woman's rights. The delay in accomplishing 'equality' and securing some legislative gains in the field relating to employment, divorce, and marriage has left some Arab women with a compelling sense of bitterness which can be felt in the different Arab feminist novels at hand. While Al-Shaykh's female characters are not interested in demanding specific rights, their codes of behaviour show extreme resentment to the context in which they are denied rights and equality.

The inability to advance Arab Muslim women's issues efficiently should not be assessed in isolation from the overall socio-economic and political structures of the Arab world in general. Many questions need to be addressed in this context, such as: in what context women's rights issue is being framed, who its proponents are, and upon what terms it is being introduced. It could be argued that setting a definition of 'liberation' upon Western terms of reference is conducive to certain unwelcoming reactions in a world where lots of women and men are Islamically oriented and inclined to view 'feminism' as a Western implant. Although religion has been rendered comparatively marginal in Arab feminist novels, it is important to bear in mind that not only presences, but also absences affect artistic structures and visions.

The Problematic of Religion and Empowerment of Women

Fiorenza in her article "Bread Not Stone: the Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation" argues that "the Bible is not simply a religious but also a profoundly political book as it continues to inform the self-understandings of American and European 'secularised' societies and cultures" (1991: 264). Religion has always been an intricately forming power whose workings and manifestations vary from time to time, and from one cultural setting to another. In Roberts' and Maitland's novels biblical images are significant elements informing feminist politics and shaping various structural aspects of the text.

Even if religion is not an overt presence in the novels by Soueif and Al-Shaykh, it continues to exert an influence on the feminist text and its ideological presuppositions. For example, Al-Shaykh in *SOZ* closely depicts the horrible civil war and its impact on a generally declining economic and political system in Lebanon. While the reader is given the space to link the situation of many characters with an overall social and political reality, the part that religion has in intensifying the difficulty of attaining individual growth is only partly insinuated at. We come across sexually inhibited women, or women who decide to wear the veil, like Zahra's mother, as a purgatorial act to be redeemed from past sins. In the rare cases Islamically oriented people appear in the novel, their presence seems to invoke a nervous condition with which the novelist is quick to dispense.

The Egyptian writer Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid laments the fact that the problematic of women's rights issue within an Arab-Islamic context is continuously debated along a religiously grounded perspective or dialogue. He argues that the Arab woman's liberation should not be considered as a testimony of some secular advocacy defying here and there the call for Islam. He unequivocally states that it is time to have this issue rethought and dealt with on objective social, economic, and humanist bases (1994: 73). The woman's issue has always been manipulated by a political discourse deriving its legitimacy from religion, which, according to Abu-Zaid, "ignores a specific social and historical reality influencing both men and women" (1994: 72). Arab feminist novelists would not be working to advance women's status if they continued to reduce the issue of women to a mere struggle between Islam and liberal notions. Islam, though, like other social and political factors affecting women's lives should be addressed and explicated.

Locating religious signs, symbols, images, and other dimensions connected to religion within the narratives of both Maitland and Roberts does not require delving deeply into the different layers of their texts, since both writers have drawn on extensively potent religious imagery in weaving their narratives. Within the context of Arab feminist novels, specifically

persistent Islamic imagery or direct references to Islam can hardly be located in the formal aspects of the narrative. This is not to imply that the Western feminist text is more religious than the Arab feminist text or that the Arabic feminist text is more inclined towards 'secularisation'. The whole situation needs to be assessed against the larger context of each specific culture and against the kind of attitude(s) this culture has evolved towards the issue of religion—attitudes that have necessarily grown out in association with other political and historical dynamics.

Religion within a Western Feminist Context:

a. A Piece of the Night (PON)

Roberts, more than Maitland, has been specifically concerned with deploying extensive religious images within her narrative either to transform the patriarchal religion from inside or expose religious constructs altogether for their irredeemably sexist traditions. Transgressing religion's patriarchal axioms has been typically concomitant with attempts to found new ways for women to create their own power and identity by emphasising the spiritual strength of becoming a woman or of woman's community as a substitute for the power of religion. In her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, Roberts tries to show that the place of revelation, grace, spiritual fulfilment is not to be sought in official religious establishments, but in the community of women

In *PON*, Roberts passes backwards and forwards in time to tell the story of Julie Fanchot who emerges as a woman torn between two worlds, that of the convent and that of women's communities. She visits her ill mother in France, having left her daughter, Bertha, with her women friends in a house in South London which belongs to her ex-husband Ben. Only after marriage does she realise she can find fulfilment, both sexual and spiritual, by being with other women. So, she chooses to leave her husband and live with Jenny, her friend from the convent school. Roberts in this novel has touched upon economic problems consequent of any such choice in a world where men have the financial supremacy. Despite the fact that the problem at the heart of the novel is the Catholic view of womanhood, the novel ends in a scene accentuating Julie's incapacity to pay for a house of her own. For Ben decides to sell the house and threatens to throw Julie and the other women living with her out of it. He also wants to have the custody

of his daughter and presses Julie into accepting that by threatening her that no court would give her the custody of the girl in the event that her living with her daughter among lesbians is exposed (*PON*, 179-186). (A concern with women's economic and financial needs as a precondition for true independence has rarely surfaced in Roberts' later works.)

Right from the first page of *PON*, Roberts relates different aspects of women's oppression to religious inscriptions and beliefs. Claire, Julie's mother, having given birth to a baby girl, Julie, thinks: "His [her husband's] suffering and her own have been caused by an action of disobedience and curiosity far in the past for which she is responsible, every woman's second name being Eve. Her daughter reminds her of that sin" (*PON*, 2-3). While still a student at the convent, Julie shows signs of rebellion against strict Catholic teachings: "That's what the catechism said, go to bed and think of the four last things: death, judgement, hell, and heaven. Go to confession, cross yourself, and begin. My ghostly father, I wish to touch myself sinfully, in a forbidden place" (*PON*, 17). Julie at the beginning would keep all her rage and discontent to herself. We are given portraits of her as the dutiful daughter, the ideal student, the perfect wife and mother, and the woman who seeks acceptance and recognition by her society. Deep inside her Julie is perfectly aware that she can never accept religious 'givens', especially in relation to women, nor can she conform with social norms; "[u]nderneath my humility lurked all my rage, poured into acts of mortification which could only harm myself, not those I loved. I would become Mother Superior in time, able to punish as I had been punished, to make others do as I wanted. I lusted for power which girls and women do not have in this world" (*PON*, 53).

Millony and O'Rourke point out that "[t]he conflict Julie struggles with throughout the book is her own perception of womanhood – she is trying, simply, to find who she is. One way is through affirmation of her womanhood through sleeping with a man" (1991: 17). Julie's attempt to define herself as a woman is initiated at an early stage of her life while she is still a young girl studying at the convent school. Even if Julie does not find an answer for the meaning of her life in Catholicism for its obvious dehumanisation of women, she still feels the urge for a

spiritual substitute. She continues to seek a self-definition that would redeem her tortured self, and thus,

sleep[s] with Ben in order to discover herself, to see, through his hitherto unknown and unmet sexual eyes, the self she essentially is at the same time as the self she may become...But at the final moment with her lover and mirror, vision distorts: she is presented with a fractured picture of herself. Because she perceives this in wordless ways, in her feelings, in her gut, she does not know which to trust" (*PON*, 67).

Julie attempts to integrate herself with other individuals and groups hoping to understand her relation to the world or how she fits within a divine scheme. Roberts herself confesses in "Write, She Said", that she is "fascinated" by "myth" and "the quest for wholeness" (1986: 233).

However, Being married to Ben does not seem to help her discover herself. Sleeping next to him, she is depicted as "a piece of the night, broken off from it, a lump, a fragment of dark, lying in her marriage bed, her husband's hands and the pills healing her rift with the night" (*PON*, 84).

Earlier, Julie's initial docility, 'attractive manners', amiable appearance and acceptance of social and domestic rules undergo significant changes. At one instance, her father thinks, "how much Julie has changed. Her hair is cut short, sticking up in spikes all over the place...She looks less like a girl than a grubby urchin" (*PON*, 55). However, change in Julie's appearance is a rebellious expression against her strict religious upbringing and a society which pressurises women more than it does men; Ben, for example, "has no need to achieve his beauty...he is simply a man, therefore beautiful" (*PON*, 65). Religion and society seem to be reinforcing each other's patriarchal values, thus rendering woman as an essential emblem of the original sin. Passive and submissive, Julie marries Ben, a lecturer, who never attends to her sexual fulfilment once his sexual desire is fulfilled. Julie's confusion leads her to identify herself with the devil: "If I cannot be a saint, so perfect that I need never suffer or know the pain of loss, then I will be the Devil...I am the witch whom you call your crazy daughter" (*PON*, 108). She does not find peace of mind in defying religious teachings. A mere act of rebellion against a set of traditions whether social or religious is not Julie's utmost aspiration. For Julie is a sensitive person and is never shown as absorbed by her own egoistic self. She has always sought communication with others: her mother, grandmother, father, friends at the

convent, Ben, and later her women friends. She knows that her new appearance and life style offend others, particularly her own parents, which leaves her with feelings of guilt: “the voice [of her father] in Julie’s head... You are unnatural, there must be something wrong with you. You are ill. You are unnatural” (*PON*, 57). “Julie is annoyed; her father’s words push through her preoccupation with herself. She does not wish her parents to feel pain” (*PON*, 55).

When Julie is on the verge of making some daring choices, she feels inhibited. Before deciding to live with Jenny, Julie’s fear maximises; “The memory of Jenny presents her with another mirror into which she is now afraid to look. The terror of positively establishing a whole self, or of discovering that there is no such simple entity” (*PON*, 67). Rethinking her relations with men and women, she begins to see that there are many dimensions of her own self “I am harpy, vampire, monster and whore. I am pure, silent, ice-cold and virginal” (*PON*, 83). Her integration into women’s community not only leads her to experience psychological comfort, but also helps to reclaim some power to women. It is significant to reflect on some instances in the novel where women can be seen as exercising some power over men.

Watching his wife’s women’s group talking enthusiastically to each other, Ben thinks: “Look at them now, four witch heads bent together under the lamp and around them darkness. He turns the stereo up to drown their muttering that beats at his heart like fists” (*PON*, 100). The scene implies that women’s community, their ability to create their own union is the promise of an emerging female counter- power. He, however, demonises them as witches, which tends to reflect his anxiety. This demonising of a powerless ‘other’ is a classic response by the powerful to a challenge from those over whom they hold power. Ben’s responding to this threatening power is typical of an imperialist patriarch.

With Jenny and the other women, Julie endeavours to question the most significant presences in her life. “I must face the fact that it [darkness] is peopled with horrifying presences: ghosts, the devil, vampires. Darkness, loss, my mother, Jenny, the house ... I will enter darkness and explore it, before it overwhelms me and I go mad with terror, and lose

Jenny, Maman, the house, for ever” (*PON*, 104). Belonging to women’s community provides her with the power to launch further quests. She begins to see in religion meanings and values other than those embraced by the patriarchal church. So at one moment, she thinks, “the Virgin Mother reigns supreme, she who represents the impossibility that only more than saints achieve: motherhood without the taint of sinful sex, the flesh unassailed and incorrupt. Her finger, sternly and yet tenderly raised, points upwards...farther than any horizon of earth, towards the almighty presence that gives women life and will forgive them for their imperfections” (*PON*, 143). The image that Julie draws of the Virgin affirms the Virgin’s “queenship.” According to Warner in *Alone of Her Sex*, the Virgin is “the symbolic mother of the church, [who] gives each of its members a part in God’s plan, and also stands as a model of perfect humanity” (1976: xxiii). Julie renders the Virgin an almighty presence that can forgive women “their imperfection.”

PON explores new sources of spirituality. By joining women’s community, Julie finds in her own experience and in the experiences of other women a new religious dimension which is both revelatory and spiritually yielding. In “Why Women Need the Goddess”, Carol Christ argues that religion fulfils deep psychic needs which enable people to order and understand their lives. If religion proves supportive only of fathers, then women are compelled to seek other spiritual symbols to fulfil their needs. The Goddess as interpreted by Christ seems to be performing a function which I tend to find as not essentially different from the one already ascribed to the woman’s group as depicted by Roberts. If women’s marginalisation is the axiom of a patriarchal religion, a spiritual substitute needs to be sought. “The reason for the continuing effect of religious symbols is that the mind abhors a vacuum. Symbol-systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced. Where there is not any replacement, the mind will revert to familiar structures at times of crisis, bafflement, or defeat” (Christ, 1991: 291).

Julie's new affiliation allows her to experience feelings of comfort which earlier she has been denied: "Comfort she gives to herself... Let us hang on, let us hang on, she says, looking at Jenny and Barbara: this is my home, I don't want to leave it" (*PON*, 179). However, Julie is conscious of the fact that the prospective gains of her new position as a woman who has made a choice to live with other women cannot be protected without securing some materialistic grounds. She, thus, addresses her other women friends "it's not so much the house, Julie says: although it feels like ours now. It's the people, all of you I don't want to lose" (*PON*, 180). Their need for a space of their own awakens her to other important realities which threaten to disrupt their gathering and its spiritual fulfilment; "[i]f only I had a large salary, if only I knew a lot about politics, if only I were beautiful... then Jenny would never leave me, then Bertha would be happy, then I would find the right political group to get into the right perspective on things, and then I could start being a revolutionary" (*PON*, 132).

Roberts asserts the spiritual strength which women can derive from being affiliated to women's communities. Concomitantly, she does not underestimate economic and other social inconveniences consequent of any such affiliations. However, at a more general level, a crucial problematic is posed by Ruether in "Renewal or New Creation?" when she assesses how feminist spirituality as a substitute for official religion can be potentially threatening to feminist politics:

Feminists today have to ask, first of all, whether religion or spirituality is what they should be about at all. What function can it play that enhances a liberationist transformation of history, rather than another escapism? Is the new preoccupation with feminist spirituality simply another expression of that bourgeois religiosity that directs women's energies inward while males run the outer world? (1991: 280)

In *PON*, Roberts has been both spiritually and politically attentive to the dangers of romanticising feminist spirituality or carrying it too far. Her religiosity is grounded in activating spirituality as a political incentive and a precondition for women's empowerment. The persistent invocations of religious images, including and most importantly of which the image of the Virgin Mary, are very potent in the novel. For at this early stage of her writing

career, the rhythm of the church, and Christian symbols are all still sources of enduring nostalgia that Roberts is reluctant to forsake to advance women's politics. Hence, she deploys these symbols to engrave feminist visions that are politically empowering.

b. *The Visitation (TV)*

Although in *The Wild Girl*, Roberts opts for women to continue their relationship with religion in the hope of changing sexist beliefs, laws, and customs inherent in official religious institutions, in *The Visitation* she adopts an approach that is not essentially different in its affirmation of spirituality from *PON*. In *TV*, Helen's emotional dilemma is caused by her inability to recognise her own potential to write a novel. Her cultural and religious upbringing makes her feel 'a lack', being a female in a society saturated by male values. She tries to make up for the deficiency that she feels through seeking reassurance from others, whether female friends or male lovers. There are various reasons rendering Helen sensitive to issues of gender and female subordination; she is a twin to a male brother, she attends a strict convent school, and she is brought up in a society structured along fixed gender roles. Via Roberts's weaving of primordial images and other techniques, both specific and universal concerns of women are tackled.

In *TV*, institutional religion is shown as abusing woman's potential and often debasing her humanity. Still, it is religion which cultivates in Helen the desire to be spiritually strong and consequently to question cultural constructs pertaining to gender roles. Helen, like Julie, seeks to come to terms with the essentials of human existence and how she fits within a universal scheme. The religious teachings she receives while still young ascribes to the renunciation of materialistic pleasures a basic value. Even as she rebels against the Christian doctrine at an early age of her life, she knows that she will be haunted by religious forces for long. At one time she recalls how "[t]he nuns teach her how to compose herself for sleep: lie on your back, arms folded across your breast, and think of the four last things. Death, judgement, heaven and hell" (*TV*, 33). She is aware of the fact that "the dictates of the male saints will keep interrupting her, will intervene, cancelling her apocryphal words" (*TV*, 33).

Helen will always be caught up in a religious mode of thinking. She recalls the event when appointed as the head girl by the nun and the nun's words: "My dear Helen, it is God's will. He has chosen you, as His instrument... To refuse is unthinkable. God seems to swoop, with unerring accuracy, on those who don't want Him; it's the indifferent ones he passes by" (*TV*, 25).

Helen's desire to turn away from the church and its teachings is enacted out of her fury with male priests and not with God. Father Briggs's curses of "young girls behaving like prostitutes" with his "mouth work[ing] up and down in a frenzy... his thin lips a pair of shears cutting Helen into pieces... His red face swells to fill all the space between her and the alter so that she... is left only with her hatred of Father Briggs. She wants to kill him, she realises. Her only choice: to destroy him before he destroys her" (*TV*, 34). It is at this moment that she makes up her mind upon not going to Holy Communions any more, for "[h]ow can she, filled with needs for murder and revenge?" (*TV*, 34). Yet, Helen knows that to cut herself off from the sacraments and "their saving grace" would push her "into the outer darkness" where "she will die... like a fish taken out of water, like a bird denied oxygen. Unless some saviour comes" (*TV*, 34). Helen's prolonged search for a saviour culminates as she attempts to construct her own religious myth within ontological rather than transcendental terms. It is extremely important for Helen to be spiritually empowered and to grasp the essence of her own being and her own femaleness. She needs to come to terms with the story of her own creation in order to be able to create other stories. Thus, *TV* could be seen as unfolding the rites of passage initiating Helen into the world of writing. These rites are implicated in the narrative that is structured along the stories of Helen's childhood, with her twin brother, Felix, her mother, and grandparents, of her adolescence at the university with her friend Beth, and of her relationships with men, Stephen, George, and Robert.

Helen's story with her twin brother goes back to their life together while "dancing" in their mother's womb, "two loving punch-balls, each a balloon for the other" (*TV*, 3). The

dilemma of females' subordination in society is symbolically accounted for the moment the twins are born; "she has no choice. Where he goes, she must follow. She plunges after him wildly, awkwardly" (*TV*, 3). The image that Roberts depicts of the twins in the mother's womb is implicative of a unitary relation and a perfect harmony rather than one of an innate domination. As they grow up the space between them widens. Each constructs his/her own world as 'prescribed' by the world of adults. Helen is horrified to see that "the family has suddenly divided itself into two camps, male and female" (*TV*, 9). She is offered books "specially written for girls by a doctor, mixing clinical descriptions of reproduction and menstruation with moral warnings about the danger of accidentally arousing the overwhelming animal passion of men" (*TV*, 22). She is made to see that "sexual women, independent women, are witches, and will be burnt at the stake" (*TV*, 102). Having joined one of those feminist groups, Helen realises that "men rule the world outside...and women rule the home according to male dictates" (*TV*, 152), and as such transforming this oppressive reality is an important ethical quest.

Albeit disagreeing with her closest friend Beth upon the latter's leaving of the Woman's Movement to join a socialist party, Helen is awakened to the importance of considering economic as well as political aspects of woman's struggle. Beth "wanted more formal contact with the organised left, with the male-dominated left...where the power for change lies" (*TV*, 90). Beth's analysis of Helen's dilemma provides some sort of justification rendering Roberts' psycho-religious interests politically feasible and conducive to change. Beth tells Helen that "the problem was probably the same for both of us, but we reached different conclusions about it different solutions" (*TV*, 90). She explains to Helen how the latter chooses to respond to her problems by writing: "you *needed* to write. That was your way of becoming involved in the world. Well, I *needed* to be political, to make the links with other people" (*TV*, 90). When Helen laments the fact that she does not have a house of her own because she is single and has no money, Beth urges her to "get on" with writing her novel to secure herself money and

comfort. Helen is not unconvinced by what Beth says, but she is inhibited from writing as many figures crowd in her head, figures of “the outraged nun, the hurt relatives, the mocking male reviewer, the male militant, the correct feminist. A gang of them lining her up against a wall and firing injunctions at her: stop; you are boring, obscene, self-indulgent, peripheral, *wrong*” (*TV*: 81). The hot debates continually occurring between Beth and Helen are developed as to expose the shortcomings inherent in the positions which each adopts. Thus, Helen addresses Beth,

[y]ou rejected Christianity...but you've simply entered another established church. Don't tell me Marxism recognises women's reality because I don't believe it. The CP has a masculine theory, a masculine view of the world, organises through a male model of the enlightened patriarch-party leading the masses and dealing out punishment for disagreement and transgression. (*TV*: 87)

To this Beth responds, “whereas you simply substitute a female goddess for a male god. What's so liberated about that? *You're* still religious, still believing all that mystifying rubbish about gods and souls and after-life... You'd be better be off if you made more demands as a working writer, if you *organised*, like other working people do” (*TV*, 87). By way of faulting, and also approving of, some of the instances embraced by each, Roberts attempts to bridge the gap between politics and theory, the psychic and realistic. Helen's rejection of official religion leads her to seek the meaning of her existence through sexual contacts with other men and then through launching an inner journey into her own troubled self. Her quest in the different approaches continues to invoke the image of her and Felix in the womb – an image reinforcing wholeness. The novel is imbued with images denoting wholeness: Helen and Felix in the womb, Helen's physical union with other men, her intellectual intensity with other women, and then her acceptance of her female self, both body and soul. Roberts' creation of myth is deeply rooted in envisioning the woman's body and its miraculous performance through conception and birth as a source of spiritual fulfilment.

Roberts' men are featured in a manner which enables her to render the idea of wholeness communicable within narrative images. Robert, George, and Steven, Helen's lovers,

are hardly individualised entities with distinctive physical appearances or subjectivities. They appear and disappear as blurred images and ephemeral presences exposing Helen's need to be touched and to feel whole. Probably this is what leads to the criticism that "the male characters emerge, on the whole, as unmemorable" (Palmer, 1989: 56). Roberts sketches her male characters as elements contributing significantly to images of wholeness through underscoring their sexual relations with Helen. Roberts maintains in "Write, She Said" that "[e]ven though I criticise it [the quest for wholeness], I'm fascinated by it. Jung argued that the image of God inside us, if it's to do us any good, needs to express our knowledge of both good and evil, that we shouldn't split the evil off and call it the devil but should own it" (1986: 233). With George "[s]he shivers, and presses herself against...[him] till he opens his greatcoat and pulls her inside it...hearing his heart" (*TV*: 44). While in bed with him "she wants to melt him down, like fat, in the frying pan. Render him free and runny, smoking and hot" (*TV*, 62). With Steven, she is always "wanting to touch him" (*TV*, 85). He also "wants to match his rhythms to hers. So she...vibrates strongly as she embraces him" (*TV*, 86). With Robert, she curves "herself around him nestled against her...He nourishes her with his wants...regenerates her with his body...This is alchemy, this is a true meeting, a true exchange. Something more than exchange, even: a creation" (*TV*, 144).

Robert at times realises that what sustains Helen is men. When he confronts her with that she insists that it is rather her work and "the love of women friends" which give meaning to her life (*TV*, 154). Helen is not being deceptive in her response. For it is not men who sustain her so much as it is sex and the feeling of momentary wholeness that sex grants her. The way Roberts emphasises 'touch', 'oneness', 'warmth', 'wetness' (*TV*, 70, 85, 159) in the course of accounting for Helen's sexual intercourse with men brings to the mind images of Helen's union with her twin brother in the womb. Sex, thus, emerges not only as a source of physical pleasure, but also as a metaphor for some kind of primordial wholeness. Interestingly,

the peaks of her political arguments with Beth are interrupted by a narrative mode describing a sexual orgasm with one of the men (*TV*, 42, 43).

The manner by which Helen wants men to comply with her physical demands is quite telling. She, for example, asks Robert to turn over so that they can “lie like twin spoons packed together in cottonwool, her arm over his body...a sandwich of white and brown” (*TV*, 159). This integration takes her back to a place where she has been before: “the Valley of the Twins...They inscribe themselves, a lacy script on the valley’s floor, spelling out a word Helen peers at: *incest*” (*TV*, 159). Helen’s lying with “Robert on their sides, cradling and climbing all over each other...wet under the blue quilt, and sticky, and warm” induces in her memories of a landscape she has once visited (*TV*, 158). Later she is described as a woman who “smoulders with sex, she reeks of it...All the sex in the world has leaked out from between her legs and is flooding in the room, has come from this woman” (*TV*, 145). Sex and the yearning for unity express Helen’s felt, but not yet articulated, nostalgia for a mythic past when the masculine and the feminine were swimming in the same pool and drinking from the same fountain, that of the mother.

Helen feels that only love absolves her from guilt, a notion she inherited from Christianity. How can Helen feel true love when she is haunted by feelings of guilt sneaking into her consciousness as to the reality of her femaleness? In order to be initiated into writing, Helen must free herself from feelings of guilt. She has always felt the desire to unite with others and seek beginnings as the location for wholeness and oneness. In other words, Helen is driven by her own spiritual intensity to unite with others. Alone, she feels a lack. Yet, it is this spiritual and religious intensity which takes Helen to different levels of perceptions to be able finally to realise that she in herself is a whole. In fact, this realisation disrupts culturally constructed values about femaleness by emphasising integration and wholeness as an inherent female truth. The novel is also rich with images highlighting ‘wholeness’ and equality, between males and females. Hence, making love side by side denotes equality as a

precondition for complementation within wholeness, in contrast with the common position whereby the woman is mounted by the dominant male. Men are the ones who resist her quest for wholeness with them, lest they lose their upper position; they insist on her remaining subordinate and passive.

Helen, accompanying Beth who begins to have labour contractions while walking across one of those gardens, is visited by a vision which leads her to perceive deeper the wholeness of her own entity as a woman. She realises that she does not have to be caught in the periphery of others to feel her own wholeness. In the vision, Helen sees herself in a heavenly garden speaking up her desire: “all she wanted was her companion back, the lovely boy of the days before the Fall, before she knew his name or hers or that they were different from each other” (*TV*, 171). The vision helps to unfold essentials, beginnings, and primordial patterns. She undoes historical and cultural boundaries to create a new spiritual myth: “Helen has rediscovered Eden; which is paradise. Halting, and leaning her hand guiltily on Beth’s swollen belly, she recognises it for what it is. Paradise is the mother’s body” (*TV*, 172). This realisation invoked by Beth’s pregnancy abolishes differences and other conflicts between the two women friends, for it is only then that “Beth ceases to be Ariadne, holding the magic ball of string” (*TV*, 173). The vision also works to “define *self*, now define *woman*. The heart of the labyrinth is not the end, but another beginning. Start to write” (*TV*, 173).

Despite the fact that Roberts attributes to woman’s body a special spiritual value, privileging one sex over the other is not her ultimate quest. Throughout the narrative, there has been a continuous emphasis on the empathy between Felix and Helen. In the vision she sees Adam and Eve entwined so closely that “their heads look like twin flowers on a single stalk” (*TV*, 170). When they turn towards Helen, their faces “are those of children: Felix and herself” (*TV*, 170). She is even shown to have dreams about incidents which truly happen with Felix while he is in Peru and she in Thailand. She dreams of him making love to a Spanish woman, having asked her things which Helen herself is asked by Steven to do (*TV*, 83- 4, 146-7). The

novel significantly ends with Helen seeing her own face though the glass instead of that of her brother: “she hears his footsteps shuffling on the other side of the door, and when she leans forward again to beckon him, through the glass, to hurry up, she sees her own face hanging there as he steps through it” (*TV*, 177).

c. *The Wild Girl (WG)*

For Roberts, a religious mood is one conducive to launching a quest for wholeness and creating ‘meanings’. Patriarchal religions are delivered to hypocrisy and hollowness and as such have come to blur ways of seeing purpose and meaning of life. The subordination of women in the church and rendering them the emblem of the original sin, have led feminists like Roberts to inscribe their own versions of religious myths to keep the spiritual world alive to women. In *WG*, Roberts sets out to reinscribe a religious myth from a specifically feminist perspective.

Before I start discussing *WG*, I will briefly highlight religious stances inscribed in *DOH* so as to be able to compare them with others which Roberts develops in *WG*. In *DOH*, Roberts’ disapproval of men of the church as custodians of oppressive patriarchal values is most manifest in the encounter between the young Thérèse and Father Monsieur le Curé. When she tells him that she has seen a vision of the Blessed Lady and has actually talked to her, she is struck by the priest’s contemptuous looks at her. She is confused at the beginning and cannot think of him but as a man endowed with “God-given power” and as such must be obeyed. “That was what being a Catholic meant” (*DOH*, 113). He cries out words to make her deny that she ever saw the Virgin Mary or received order from her to build a shrine in the place where the Jews had been massacred: “Impressionable, heated imaginations, hysteria. Romanticise. Idealistic” (*DOH*, 113). His attacks cause her pain; she grits her teeth, wipes her wet palms and “[b]etween her thighs, stuck together, moisture slipped” (*DOH*, 113). The priest takes advantage of her situation and says, “you see? You’re just an ordinary little girl. A true visionary wouldn’t crumble at the first sign of opposition” (*DOH*, 113). Then he turns to address her father, “[a]ll this is extremely bad for your daughter’s reputation...She’s making

herself a laughing-stock. Dangerous pagan nonsense...Low sort of gossip" (*DOH*, 114).

"Thérèse's tears splashed on to the tiles at her feet. The priest looked pleased at her collapse" (*DOH*, 114). The ruthlessness of the priest is generally a reminder of the patriarchal church in its covert and overt stands against women. Within the specific context of the novel, the political implication of the priest's stand is crucial. For it turns out that his rage against the young girl is to prevent the local people from uncovering the grave where the bones of the Jews are hidden in the event that a statue for the Virgin is built over the unearthed bones. Her hatred of the priest does not transform her belief in God. For immediately after, she refuses to listen to him as "God was in the tent, God was the tent. He surrounded her and wrapped her up in the folds of his silence" (*DOH*, 115). She grows up to join the order and comes back to her old house to expose the secret. Inspired by the essence of religion rather than by its secular derivatives, and by Masses celebrating union, community, and common human rhythms, Thérèse becomes a nun.

Thérèse's joining the order does not occlude her political involvement. On the contrary, it leads her to enact positive steps as she admits 'others' into her own spiritual sphere. The political message implied in *DOH*, and the overlapping of this message with religion which forms the potent imagery of the novel at different narrative levels, are intended to create a radical mythic project transforming patriarchal religion from within. In both *WG*, her third novel, and *IS*, her most recent one, Roberts chooses to stay inside the Christian tradition and enact change from within the religious establishment. Any such choice may be seen as a political imperative towards woman's liberation. Many Christian women, as Elizabeth Fiorenza notes, find that "that the Bible has been used as a weapon against us but at the same time it has been a resource for courage, hope, and commitment in this struggle" (1991: 264). Yet, it seems to me that the project which Roberts sets out to construct in *WG* is rendered crudely religious and politically ahistorical.

In *WG*, Mary Magdalene's testimony starts with the confession: "I learned about our faith through the words of men. God was mediated to me, as to my older sister Martha, through the words of my father and brother in the confines of our home, and, outside, through the authority of our village priests and our rulers" (*WG*, 12-3). Her mother dies, and she flees home out of Bethany to Jerusalem "towards a life [she] could construct [her]self and call [her] own" (*WG*, 14). On the road, she is raped by four men. Hungry and abandoned, she is rescued in Egypt by a 'woman of the world' who teaches her that "love of the body is a noble thing, against which the intellect and the spirit need not wage war" (*WG*, 22). She becomes a *hetaira* and well experienced in the company of both men and women. One day she has a dream from which she awakes determined to go back home.

Roberts' challenge of the Christian order is most manifest in having Jesus declare that "Mary loves me completely...body and soul. Our kisses demonstrate that we are lovers of each other and lovers of God, nourishing each other, conceiving and giving birth between us to God" (*WG*, 58), and Jesus' admission to Mary that "you're no ideal woman, Mary, and therefore I love you the more" (*WG*, 96). Roberts is concerned here not only with reconstructing a new image of Jesus, but also a new image of Mother Mary who, witnessing men's resentment of Mary for being the real person whom Jesus trusts, tells her "they are fools who know nothing. Nothing of you, and nothing of how my son loved you. Don't let them hurt you" (*WG*, 98). Roberts shows that women's oppression is not enacted by Jesus nor by his Blessed Mother, but by his male disciples. Simon, for example, finds that "women are not worthy of life" and that "[t]here is a hurt which women carry inside them from birth" (*WG*, 59). Jesus is displeased with Simon's antagonism towards women and states that "I am willing to learn from a woman's vision of the truth" (*WG*, 61). The quest for wholeness and for merging femaleness with maleness continues to be a major theme of Roberts' myth.

Jesus' and Mary Magdalene's advocacy of woman and their conception of femaleness, woman's groups, and woman's body also reflect Roberts' familiarity with various feminist

trends especially those pursued by Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray and others. Jesus' insistence to see maleness and femaleness as a unity and inherent givens of the human self is reminiscent of Kristeva's concept of the semiotic which is an inherent part of the symbolic though essentially deeply grounded in the female desire (Oliver, 1993: 7-11). Jesus addresses some of his disciples, "every woman who will make herself male shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven...every man who will make himself female will enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (*WG*, 59, 60). He also tries to rectify Simon's understanding of some of the ideas concerning women that the latter claims to have heard from Jesus himself. When Simon tells Jesus that "you told us that you have come to destroy the works of women, of femaleness" (*WG*, 61), Jesus replies that what he means is "when you make the male and the female one in unity, so that the male is no longer male and the female no longer female, then you will enter the Kingdom. That is what I meant by destroying the works of femaleness. I have come to destroy the works of maleness too" (*WG*, 61).

Issues relating to pregnancy, motherhood, and the human body are also approached and presented in terminology which is overtly informed by modern feminist debates and studies. Hence, we end up with historical figures forming concepts and uttering language which one directly feels as not genuinely theirs nor peculiar to the depicted historical phase—an aspect which often tends to influence negatively the artistic credibility of the text. Roberts' Jesus is definitely not the historical one; hers is made to embody various constructions of feminist strands. Lacan's mirror is repetitively brought into the different narrative scenes (*WG*, 73). Jesus asks "why are we so often frightened to look for long into our own eyes in a mirror?...[I]s it because we fear to see God reflected there? We must learn from the woman, to look into the mirror more" (*WG*, 74). Even the expression "the Law of the Father" (*WG*, 101), a Lacanian influence, is put in use in the novel on the tongue of the man called Ignorance who is meant to be an embodiment of evil (*WG*, 101). He is made in the novel to confront Mary with her reality as a woman: "you are a woman damned by your desires and by your

freedom...you are nature, matter, temptation, death, and putrefaction" (*WG*, 101). Stances grounded in some feminist studies developed by Cixous and others as relating to binary oppositions and psychoanalytic analysis of motherhood have repetitively surfaced in the novel; "Body and soul. Woman and man. Darkness and light. Matter and spirit. Nature and culture. Death and life" (*WG*, 123). Cixous in "Sorties", for example, talks about a list of binaries: father/mother, head/heart, culture/nature, sun/moon (In Sellers, 1994: 37).

The anxiety to present as many feminist issues as possible has worked to transfer the novel into some sort of a feminist political manifesto. Religious constructs which for long have been manipulated by men of the church to reinforce a patriarchal system are utilised by Roberts to inscribe female values. In *WG*, a divine vision is revealed to a woman like it has been in *IS* and *DOH*. The Lord Jesus has been revealed to Mary Magdalene after his crucifixion. The men's community is furious to learn that it is a woman who has been blessed with this vision. Simon Peter is the first to confront Mary disbelieving and shouting: "I don't believe a word of this. I don't believe that the Saviour ever thought such things. If he had, he would have told them to us while he was still alive" (*WG*, 111-2).

In the vision, the Lord entrusts Mary with the mission of repeating words which "should only not be stored up within our hearts...but also written down in a book" (*WG*, 108). (The allusion is to Luke 2. Vs 19 on Mary the mother of Jesus: "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart," one of the very few, perhaps the only allusion to Mary's own thoughts in the Gospel. Roberts here makes Jesus say that women should not ponder in their hearts, but write.) The revelation which she recounts to her people is intended to challenge all male-founded mythic and religious axioms. She begins by telling the people that the Lord's words she is about to utter "had grown up in the spiritual and fleshly intercourse between Jesus and [herself] while he was alive" (*WG*, 108). She narrates the story of creation emphasising the importance of the body being "the mirror of the soul" (*WG*, 108). For her, the Fall is not an outcome of a sinful act; rather, it is an exile generating fruit and it is "the soul's fall into time,

the world beginning to spin...it also signified the discovery of difference between man and woman... It takes the man and the woman together to produce the child” (*WG*, 110). Through Mary’s vision, Roberts seeks to restore to femaleness and motherhood values that have been denied; “[y]ou must go down deep...and find the other part of yourself that has been lost and missing for so long” (*WG*, 110). Resurrection is regaining the “lost” “knowledge of the mother,” (*WG*, 111). The mother, Mary stresses “was an absence...And she was a presence” (*WG*, 115). Kristeva repetitively discusses the mother as both an enforced absence and an inherent presence in language or the symbolic order (Oliver, 1993: 4-6).

Mary dreams that she is standing in the hall of judgement “where men were being tried for their crimes against women” by a jury of angry women (*WG*, 170). She and the angry women vote for the following verdict: that women “burn all their [men’s] libraries and burn their books. Let us destroy their lies and begin to tell our [women’s] own truth” (*WG*, 173). Having brought “the contents of all the libraries in the world, from the whole of history” to be thrown into the pyre, Mary sees that her “book was among those about to be consumed by the flames, and also the books of many other women” (*WG*, 173). Women’s books as well as the sudden appearance of Jesus lead Mary to change her mind. Her hatred which earlier she describes as “beautiful,” “dedicated,” full of “purity,” “clarity” and “purpose” (*WG*, 172) is replaced by “love lodged in me like a second spear” (*WG*, 173). Jesus approaches Mary and tells her “can you understand now what you are capable of? Can you learn now?” (*WG*, 173). Mary’s later rejection of launching a counter attack-against men who have been fervently accused by all the women in ‘the day of judgement’ of being rapists, of denying women, of creating God in their own male image, of raping “strangers in peacetime and in war,” separating themselves from the woman inside them, calling women whores and of blemishing women’s desires (*WG*, 170-1), resonates with Kristeva’s abhorrence of a militant feminism rooted in an unconscious desire for replicating the oppressor’s system as elaborated in her article “Woman’s Time” (1979).

Like Helen in *TV*, Mary's experience and visions initiate her into writing. Mary's book, which is the present novel, is "uncovered and copied, and passed on" (*WG*, 181). Roberts' myth grounded in biblical images and figures is explicitly feminist and vehemently political. The directness with which meanings are communicated and the emphasis on developing a new level of feminist morality make the reader feel that s/he is being exposed to the kind of narrative that is solely motivated by politico-religious senses at the expense of the artistic ingenuity of the work. Roberts' desire to transform a traditional culture considerably shaped by male-dominated religious values and constructs leads her at times to pursue the role of a preacher. In fact, Mary's vision does not contribute significantly to the development of the plot or ideas of the novel since by the time Mary narrates her vision of Jesus, we are already familiar with the ideas advocated by Jesus before his crucifixion. There are also highly repetitive emphases on concepts pertaining to the links between motherhood and darkness, religion and sexuality, and spirituality and women's empowerment. Reading *WG*, the reader feels exposed to a fable dictating moral lessons that are determinedly structured along the writer's anxiety to encompass as many modern feminist debates as possible in the different narrative layers of her novel.

Maitlands' Big Enough God

Maitland perceives of God as big enough to tolerate all occurrences, differences, and cultural designations. (The expression big enough God has been repetitively used in her novel *HT*, (247, 265) and it is the title of one of her theological studies published in 1995. It also alludes to Winnicott's well-know concept of the 'good-enough mother' which Doane and Hodges contest by asking "what is "good enough" mothering? "Good enough" according to whom? How are standards of maternal propriety established and sustained?" (1995: 1)). Winnicott focuses on mothers' nurturing capacities and natural intuitive powers. This concept of the mother is echoed in Maitland's understanding of God identifying him/her with the mother, especially that she has always showed interest in family life and the role of the mother

in the family in her novels. God, as perceived by her, is both “a transcendent and an immanent” force that forms the “final count larger, cleverer, more infinite than her creation or my theology can describe her”(Maitland, 1995: 3, 7). Being a religious feminist, she acknowledges, does not lead her to view God as a female, which is “clearly as ridiculous as suggesting that God is male” (Maitland, 1995: 23). The female pronoun is used not for the sake of replacement, but for denoting new meanings other than those traditionally ascribed to God.

To Maitland, inscribing a new feminist religious myth is not exclusively based on reconstructing biblical stories and images from within a feminist perspective. Dragons, magic, extraordinary settings, spiritual entities, and supernatural creatures are incorporated into her fictional forms and structures. Even when biblical rhythms, overtones, themes, and characters are recalled, which is often the case, she does not deploy them in a didactic way. Her often heavy dependence on them, as she herself asserts in “Futures in Feminist Fiction,” springs from the fact that “it is extremely hard to decode this literature now, especially as it has so profoundly informed our ideas of what is beautiful in literary terms” (1989: 195). She feels that a “dialectical balance” need always be sought between a mythic experience of the past and the present (1989: 195-6). Recalling myth is a source for spiritual empowerment and one way of triggering the human imagination. In *TTT*, Maggie’s magical dragon, Fenna, is a creature of a strong will with mysterious powers. It is created, summoned, and possessed only by people with imagination. Hence, the moment Fenna is out of Maggie, the latter cries out, “Fenna, go to Rachel...Rachel is the one grown old and weary. Rachel needs, Fenna needs, they need each other” (*TTT*, 184). In *TTT*, the magical element is introduced as a formal design to deepen Rachel’s consciousness and activate her imagination. It is only when she admits the power of imagination that she can glimpse a vision of Fenna. This vision is a sign marking Rachel’s change.

In *DOJ*, Maitland creates a running series of parabolic texts relating, but not necessarily affirming, some of the thematic aspects evoked by Liz's barrenness, notwithstanding the fact that the parables invoke historical settings, while the main is shaped by modern England and informed by feminist instances. Liz's affiliation with women's group seems to be intricately related to the episode dealing with Elizabeth and Mary as they "sing and love themselves towards the new Jerusalem" (*DOJ*: 53). In Maitland's biblical version, Sarah, the old and the barren wife of Abraham, is pregnant at last having been "ignored...too long" by God (*DOJ*, 81). Before conceiving, she takes delight in Ishmael, Hagar's baby. Hagar is Abraham's other wife but with whom Sarah is a good friend (*DOJ* 80-2). Her barrenness does not sadden her as much as conceiving from Abraham does, so that knowing of her pregnancy, she "wishes she were dead. She does not want Isaac, she wants the children of her heart and mind, not this child of her gut" (*DOJ* 83). Liz could have relieved herself from much suffering had she been able to come to Sarah's realisation. While Abraham's insistence that Sarah's pregnancy is enactment of God's preordained will, the social stigmas associated with barrenness and the maternal appetite make Liz anticipate impatiently the event of her conception. Through the episodes dealing with Deborah's killing of Jael and Delilah's betrayal of Samson, Maitland reflects on women's power and what they are capable of. These episodes are depicted as paralleling Liz's betrayal of Ian as she, having been hit by him and having left his flat, goes to Tony and sleeps with him.

Maitland does not seek the construction of an alternative 'woman power', and harmony is hardly the word to describe women's relations with each other. In one of the episodes, Leah and Rachael are sisters married to the same man, Jacob. Rachael is the beautiful and Leah the ugly, but Rachael is the barren and Leah is the fertile. Through their relation to the same man they are made to hate each other. Leah denies Rachael the mandrake that might help the latter to conceive and humiliates her for her barrenness by shouting at her, "you're not even a real woman" (*DOJ*, 220). In the Leah/Rachael story, Maitland follows her original very closely. It

is suggested that the modern equivalent of the 'mandrakes' would be the fertility drugs which Liz wants from her doctor, and which he withholds. (The parallel is not direct though; the Dr. is a man.) Out of depicting biblical episodes and inserting them at the end of each chapter, Maitland shows that some woman's experiences have been similar throughout the different historical phases. They are told in such a way as to draw our sympathy and identification towards their heroines; they parallel ours and complicate ideas of Liz. This is, therefore, not carried out at the expense of blurring the historical forms of the experiences.

In *A Big Enough God*, Maitland advocates that religion is ethical and that it has to "affirm *difference* as something desirable. We are, quite simply, not 'all the same underneath': a person as person is not androgynous, classless, colourless – nor, most importantly perhaps, timeless" (1995: 5). Although there is "no material continuity or integrity...Nor is there any clear intellectual continuity," Maitland asserts, we are tied to a huge movement asserting that we are ever newly made of our past selves (1995:69-70, 117). It is the "creativity of God" which is only continuous (1995: 117). By seeking new links with older patterns and stories, one can become creative. Because "[t]he Church really hates creative imagination," Maitland contends, it should be blamed (1995: 134). On the other hand, in "A Feminist Writer's Progress", she argues that by "using old stories...the narrative could be stripped right down (saving lots of time)" (1983: 18). However, she realises that "taking back even a few of the old stories and telling them anew so that they become ours" does not save the political quest of the feminist writer if she "abandon[s] Social Realism" (1983: 23, 21).

The theology which Maitland advocates is one based on faith as an act of involvement. Retelling myths is a device which induces psychic reverberation leading to involvement and to making moral choices. The moral voices called for in *HT* are informed by an anthology that prevents "the oppression of other marginalised communities as the price of the liberation of my own community, whatever that is – the community of women, the community of feminist theologians, the community of mothers...And *that* means that justice issues can never be

detached from metaphysical issues” (Maitland, 1995: 6). Clare at the beginning of her experience perceives of God as anything that has a manipulative or controlling power over her. At one instance it is David, and at another it is her camera. By expanding her concept of God, by perceiving him as both inside and outside herself, she is internally transformed. God must not be seen as an advocate of matter and body as temporary barriers and of eternal truths as solely spiritual. Making a moral choice can also be an act of worshipping God. When Clare decides that she hates David and that he is unworthy of her love, she wishes him dead. This ‘murderous feeling’, some might contest, could not be God’s. However, she does not literally kill David, but only wishes him dead. And after all, she does not wish to kill a truly loving and altruist partner; rather she wants him dead as she loathes the imperialist/masculinist notions he stands for. The choice to free herself from worshipping an idol of her own making has not been without a risk; she lost her hand and the ‘wonderful sex’ David would grant her. Yet she learns that “beauty and danger walk hand in hand and cannot be separated” (*HT*, 270). Before her trip to Zimbabwe, Clare has always “turned her back on risk and sought only safety” (*HT*: 270). Her true parents “had dedicated themselves to the gods of beauty and risk. They had lit their own pyre and laughed as they died” (*HT*: 215). They never considered ‘a safety net’.

An ‘appropriate’ choice is an outcome of a perceptive understanding of the self as situated against specific temporal and cultural surroundings. In the Scottish Highlands, Clare can construct her own perception of a Christian God. The God that Maitland imagines is big enough to assume other forms. In Zimbabwe, it is not that Clare abandons her Christian God for another; listening perceptively and passionately to the natives’ stories and to their own versions of myths, attaining a level of empathy with others’ selves, she on the top of the mountain hears Chirikudzi, the spirit of Mount Nyangani, singing softly from “no visible source” or “in a yet unseen chasm” (*HT*, 277). Not undermining the ethical dimension of Clare’s experience and the anti-colonial tone which the novel depicts, Maitland shrewdly manages to construct of Christianity a paradigm that is flexible and comprehensive enough as

to provide explanation and justifications of the different religious and mythic formations. Her God is 'big enough' to tolerate all presences just like Rachel in *TTT* who too is resilient and too strong to undergo decay. Hence she is ever 're-energised'.

Religion in Arabic Feminist Narratives

While religious allusions and Christian imagery have been potent presences in the narratives of both Maitlands and Roberts, grappling with one mode of religious thought or another has only occasionally surfaced in the novels by Soueif and Al-Shaykh. To interpret the uses of religion in the narrative of the Western feminist novelists at hand demands producing the religious evidence itself as well as analysing it. In case of the Arab feminist novelists here, the lack of religious evidence is the issue to be interpreted, considering that these novels invoke settings where religion in reality assumes a vigorous presence.

Neither Al-Shaykh nor Soueif has endeavoured to explore the religious spheres as determinedly as Roberts and Maitland have. And it is not expected of them to deal with it in a manner identifiable with that devised by Roberts and Maitland, considering the context from which each one writes. Soueif has included verses from the Koran in *In the Eye of the Sun* (750, 751, 753, 755, 756, 759, 761, 762, 765, 766). The context in which the Koranic verses of "Yassin" are invoked and the manner of their inclusion in the novel have important implications. In the Arab world, the recitation of this *Sura* is commonly recommended for the souls of the dead. In the story, Asya's family brings a young *Sheikh* to recite "Yassin" for the soul of Asya's recently dead grandfather. As the verses are being recited, she starts recalling situations that she experiences and people she meets while doing her part-time job as a family planning expert in some rural areas near Cairo. The verses merge with Asya's memories and become the background for the different incidents that she experiences. By combining the occasion of death with the recitation of the Koranic verses and Asya's recalling of some events while in Egypt, Soueif wants to show how the Koran/Islam is an indispensable component of the Egyptian ethos. The above tends to shed some light on how Soueif thinks of Islam. The

fact that the “Yassin” verses are invoked on a death occasion might reveal Soueif’s deep desire to have Islam dissociated from active political spheres in her country. Other evidence from the novel reveals, as will be explained soon, that Soueif is aware of the fact that religion is being increasingly politicised in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world. Soueif’s insistence to invoke the whole Koranic *Sura* of “Yassin”, which consists of 83 verses, and to interrupt the recitation of these verses with narration of some significant episodes characterising some aspects of religious and social life in Egypt is quite telling. The recitation is interrupted by five significant episodes relating directly to some religious aspects as entwined with other social ones. Asya does not directly develop conscious links between the recitation of the verses and these aspects. The structural design of the narrative works to do that. The first aspect connoting Islam relates to Muslim people’s (not Islamists’) general attitude to Islam. The second describes mainstream religion as practised by some rural villagers. The third refers to veiled women. The fourth alludes to traditional men of religion. The fifth relates to fanatic Islamists, and the last accounts for how some people, including young men, make use of religion.

Listening to the recitation, Asya reflects on some of the people she comes across daily:

Each thing is by God’s command and no thing may come to pass except He command it. They live and they die by God’s command. The cotton comes good or the buffalo falls into the well by God’s command. The government picks up their men and sends them to dig the Canal or die in the Yemen or the Sinai or sit all day holding bayonets in armoured cars outside the university, and it is all by God’s command. They have twelve children by God’s command...And why should it not be so? This is what they know; this is what they feel most comfortable with. (*EOS*, 759)

Soueif is aware of the part that religion plays in shaping the lives and responses of Egyptian people. The majority of them would not contest whatever happens to them since every single event is preordained by God. To change these people is such a hard task. For them, rebelling against whatever ill befalls them is an act of rebelling against God.

The second aspect relates to mainstream religion as represented by the women in the village whom Asya visits to give lessons on the importance of birth control and on how to use contraceptives. These “women...cover themselves up too. But there they do it naturally,

without fuss. They do it because that's what their mothers and grandmothers have always done – because that's the way it is in Baraket Sidi Ahmad or in el-Managel" (*EOS*, 755). Asya likes these village women and is interested in their behaviour. "In a village near Sohag, she had stood behind the lattice in the harem quarters of the headman's house" and "watched them [the women] covered in their black *shoggas*, moving fast and with an air of stealth, staying close to the walls except when they had to avoid a group of men sitting smoking" (*EOS*, 755). When Asya shows these women how to use contraceptives by holding up the drawing of an erect penis with a blue condom being fitted over its head, they all "[fall] over laughing and pointing and covering up their faces" (*EOS*, 756). Those 'natural' and 'simple' women who cover up their bodies do not seem to bother Asya the way other veiled women in the University where she teaches does. Asya is aware of the fact that having those simple women accept new things is difficult. Just before leaving the village, Asya spots the children playing with the condoms that she hands to the women, "blowing them up like balloons and turning them loose to zoom their way round the gallery with loud farting noises" (*EOS*, 757). Asya is not hurt by the village women's laughter. "Asya is in love with these women – oh, she knows her view of them is romantic – but they are worthy of romance: they walk erect balancing heavy pitchers of water on their heads, barefoot... beautiful and adorned" (*EOS*, 758).

The third aspect relates to veiled women. Soueif contrasts the simple and natural women of the village with some veiled and Islamically 'opinionated' women. Her tone while describing the "girls who wear those horrible long pastel-coloured gowns, the gloves and the angled veil [and who have] screened themselves off entirely" (*EOS*, 753), thronging the University, is remarkably different from that she develops while describing the women villagers. Asya is irked by those veiled women and thinks: "how dismal it would be to think that it is for them and only for them that there will be forgiveness and great rewards. But that is what they think. They are certain of it. And there are so many of them in the university now. Of them and of the young bearded men in short *thobs*" (*EOS*, 753). In the class she teaches, there are veiled girls and "girls

in short skirts and tight trousers and amounts of make-up that no one would have dreamed of wearing ten years ago” (*EOS*, 753). The first time she enters her English class, Asya asks her students to give her an honest answer to her question, why they have chosen to join the Department of English. While the answers come back “depressingly predictable – every single one of them to do with learning English in order to get a job in a bank,” one answer says “I want to learn the language of my enemy.” Asya reads the student’s name out, “and sure enough the girl who [sits] shrouded in the front row, dead centre, [has] put up a gloved hand” (*EOS*, 754) is shocked to hear Asya calling her name. Asya describes how “the hooded figure nodded. It was spooky talking to one of them directly – seeing nothing except the movement of a pair of eyes through the narrow slit of a white *tarha* (length of chiffon – usually in either black or white – worn as a loose head covering by women)” (*EOS*, 754). When Asya asks the girl, “Why is English the language of your enemy,” “the veiled head [shakes] once silently and it [becomes] still.” The girl says absolutely nothing and thus Asya asks her whether she is alright. She does not answer, so another unveiled girl speaks up, and says that “[s]he cannot speak...because the voice of a woman is a ‘*awra*’ (should never be exposed in the presence of men).” Asya asks why this girl has not joined Girls’ College or al-Azhar. Again the girl does not answer (*EOS*, 754).

SouEIF objectifies the veiled ‘spooky’ woman and turns her into an unwelcome presence. By rendering her a silent object and a ‘repellent’ figure, she is reducing this girl’s humanity, thus excluding her, along with the group of women she represents, from the novel’s humane dimension. Feminist and humane ethics imply that an exclusion of the ‘other’ is both morally suspect and politically unsound. The veiled woman is the ‘other’ of Asya, the liberal who goes to England and has a sexual affair with a Western man while still married to an Arab. In reality, many veiled women (surely not all, for some could be very outspoken in public) choose to be silent in public, believing that their voices are *awra*. Many of them can be dogmatic and absolutely intolerant of some liberal notions relating to women’s emancipation. Still, the manner by which the veiled girl’s silence is depicted in the novel renders her an entity lacking substance,

potentials, desires, and other diverse subjective and complex feelings inherent of all human beings whether veiled or not.

The fact that the girl does not speak up in the public leads Soueif also to deprive her of the narrative space from which she can speak to the reader, thus deepening her silence. All routes that can enable the reader to understand this girl's inner world, her subjectivity, and her choices are blocked. What are the meanings of her veil? Why does she veil? Whether it is a sign of oppression, or an outcome of a free choice, or an emblem of other psychological, political, or social expressions, we are never granted the space to know. She veils the subjectivity and humanity of the girl with the same determination that the girl covers her body. Soueif herself mentions in the novel that there are many veiled women (*EOS*, 749). In other words, by silencing and objectifying the veiled girl in Asya's class, Soueif is excluding a significant number of women. Naturally, a novelist is free to choose whatever type of characters she wants in her fiction. The fact remains that how choices and exclusions are made is politically indicative. Soueif's main female character is Asya, a liberal and an élitist Arab Egyptian woman; other female characters whom she depicts with sensitivity are Asya's female friends who, like Asya, are liberal with no specific Islamic orientations. The experiences of these other women are allowed a considerable space within the narrative. While Soueif seems to be patient with Nadia, Chrissie, Soraya, and others, she nervously talks of Islamically 'opinionated' and veiled women; they are even not given names.

Soueif is also tolerant of almost all of the male characters in the novel, including Saif, her husband, Hamid Murssi, her uncle, and Sheikh Zayid who represents the fourth aspect relating to Soueif's view of the religion phenomenon in her country. As has been shown in the previous chapter, Sheikh Zayid is particularly loved and respected by Asya as he is truly passive and unwilling to support those "short-*thobbed* fanatics" (a *thob* is a white robe reaching to just above the ankles and has become to be associated with *Salafi* and extremist Islamic groups) (*EOS*, 774). Soueif, through Asya, would like to envisage of Islam as an essence that does not change. She

likes the covered village women because they do everything naturally and cover up their bodies because it is the norm. She likes Sheikh Zayid because he is not oriented towards politicising Islam as the Islamic Brethren are (*EOS*, 774). The *thobbed* men mentioned by Sheikh Zayid constitute another religious aspect that Soueif alludes to in her narrative. Not all ‘*thobbed*’ people are fanatics, nor are all Islamic. Some wear the *thob* and do whatever may defy the Islamic code of behaviour. Significant differences do exist between one individual and another even within the same party. Criticising one Islamic group in passing tends to leave important issues related to them intact. Perpetuating a common reductionist view of some Islamic ‘revival’ trends renders the group itself homogenous presence generally associated with extremism.

The young reciter represents yet another category of ‘religious’ people in Egypt, one relating to religious hypocrisy. Asya is critical of the young reciter since he does not conform to her own idealised and traditional image of Sheikhs. Asya can see “the white boxer-shorts and the vest he wears underneath the thin white *galabiyya* (loose gown worn by traditional men in Egypt).” His cufflinks, gold wristwatch and “his hair is slicked back like a car mechanic’s on holiday” surprise Asya. “His eyes are everywhere. He pretends to close them as he recites, but from under his lids he is examining the legs of the women” (*EOS*, 748). Asya does not approve of the young Sheikh’s anti-conventional appearance; she wonders:

have all the old men gone, the real sheikhs who had to be led along by small boys as they muttered and rolled their sightless eyes, who sat and swayed and coughed on the straw mat before raising their hands to their ears and their strong, melodious voices to heaven... This fat young man perched cross-legged on top of the chair with his undies showing and his high-heeled clogs waiting for him under it is a joke: he has no *imma* (turban). How can he be a sheikh without an *imma*? (*EOS*, 748)

Islam as a site of human activity can be manipulated and transformed just like any other social or political phenomenon. Asya resents any such manipulation of religion or any religious notion or practice that distorts her nostalgic and essentialised view of Islam. This resentment drives her to shy a way from taking a closer look at those people with Islamic orientations or even to attempt to engage critically and perceptively with their tempers, subjectivities, or circumstances. The fact that she is in favour of a ‘romantic’ Islam, Islam that is unaffected by changing socio-

economic and political realities, leads her to be dismissive, though not oblivious, of the actual workings of politicised Islam at both the personal and national levels.

In *EOS*, Islam as a presence is touched upon, but is relegated to the background. Soueif's narrative shows that she is conscious of the different Islamic notions informing the socio-cultural reality of Asya's country. However, these notions surface and quickly disappear. In brief narrative sketches, we are introduced to veiled Islamic women, to mainstream religious women, and Islamic and anti-establishment political groups. The novelist can always avoid reductionism and promote visions that ascribe to different phenomena and different categories of human beings special values. No novelist can give all human phenomena and activities the same emphasis, and naturally each novelist is entitled to be selective, attending to certain human aspects more than others. Novelists, however, can afford to be selective without being reductionist. Not every single 'other' is expected to be included in the feminist text to secure this text a moral dimension. Still, writers can develop moral voices to 'others' without directly including them all in their narratives.

Within a Western context, Maitland and Roberts have highlighted the possibility of transformation through attenuating religious myths to fit a feminist vision. Soueif and Al-Shaykh have both touched rather superficially upon the phenomenon of Islam and have chosen not to grapple or explore its different levels of performance or psychological workings. They have been very reluctant to take further steps to contest or even deconstruct challengingly religious discourses the way Roberts and Maitland reinscribe religious myths to deepen transformative visions. Within an Arab-Islamic context any such challenge is potentially fatal and destructive. Reinterpreting biblical scriptures and attenuating them to promote women's cause has been well-tolerated in the 'secular' West. Attempts to reinterpret Koranic verses or even the prophetic tradition to help adapt Islam to altering relationships and modes of realities have been seriously impeded by Islamic 'fundamentalist' and even liberal parties wide-spread all over the Arab and Muslim world.

Soueif might not be in a position to reinterpret religious texts or reinscribe new religious myths, considering the danger of these endeavours within an Arab-Islamic context. Not only specifically Islamists, but also the Muslim public will be outraged by any such attempts. She, however, could have worked to highlight those political and broader socio-cultural factors encouraging people to adopt Islam as an identity marker and as a comprehensive way of living. Opening the route rather than sealing it to understand the psychic formations of some 'conservative' people can contribute significantly to coming to terms with what forces can be seen to be deterring 'progress' in the Arab world. Conservative people are part of the developmental problem and one of its manifestations. They cannot be simply relegated to the background because voices advocating the Islamic idiom are a significant power informing the political and intellectual scene of the Arab world today.

After the Arabs' defeat in 1967 people came to see that neither affiliation with the West nor secular and nationalist voices proved to be effective in improving social, political, and economic conditions. The need to assert Islam and to revive an Islamic historical model has thus been sought by people as the only solution left to protect a threatened identity and attain development. A revisioning of Islam requires first of all that Islam and Islamic trends be not described indiscriminately. There are mainstream Islam, official Islam, anti-establishment Islam, and political Islamic groups acting outside the Islamic mainstream and state. Even those acting outside the mainstream, Saif maintains, should not be seen as a single homogenous and coherent phenomenon associated with extremism, militancy, and backwardness. This limited view justifies the search for simple generalisations, abstractions, and stereotypes. In reality, there are diverse movements, like, for example, the Islamic Brethren, Hamas, and Al-Da'wa Party that emerged as responses to social, economic, and political circumstances. Their public bases cut across all sectors of society, especially the lower classes, and draw on deeply-rooted religious sentiments and values (Saif, 1995: 120-1). Lack of institutional democracy and absence of social justice in the majority of the Islamic countries are the main causes behind the emergence of these

groups. As held by Said in “What is Islam”(1995: 20-3) and Saif in “Human Rights and Islamic Revivalism” (1995: 119-25), the Islamic intellectual movement includes a wide spectrum of divergent organisations, groups and trends, including a great number of independent individuals who are not affiliated with any specific organised body. On certain points and aims they converge, but on others they sharply diverge. In some cases, it is even difficult to identify one specific movement with a single coherent and an integral mode of thought. Some of these groups could be very liberal, while others very conservative. Sometimes the need to initiate dialogues between the different trends within the Islamic movement far exceeds the need to have debates between an Islamic movement and another known for its avowed secular stands.

Within a feminist literary scene, Islamic women with avowed Islamic voices, not specifically fundamentalist, are totally absent. A considerable number of Arab women novelists, including Soueif, Al-Shaykh, and Al-Sa’dawi, have been exposed to the West and in different ways have been influenced by Western conceptions of Islam as inherently inimical to women’s rights. It is not that Arab feminist novelists are necessarily anti-Islamic in perspective; rather they have not endeavoured to echo within the different layers of their narratives some intricate aspects relating to Islam as one of the forces shaping attitudes of women and men. The awareness that women’s liberation demands a level of engagement with sexuality has led Islamic women to decline from approaching feminist novels where invocation of sex is inevitable, evading embarrassment and fearing the treading of some tabooed religious areas. Within an Arab feminist context, feminist writers not only have frequently emulated the formal aspects of the Western feminist novel, but also have sought an exposure of sex in a manner devised by Western feminist novelists. Because a daring treatment of sex has been an inherent element in the feminist novels, the field of writing feminist novels has been the peculiar privilege of liberal feminists. An explicit treatment of sex has been absolutely unacceptable to Islamists as it does not fit within their constructed moral paradigm. A feminist discourse within an Arab-Islamic context has been associated with modernisation and Westernisation. Whether consciously or

unconsciously, Arab feminist novelists, including Soueif and Al-Shaykh, often find themselves nurturing some values or images constructed by Western codes of ethics, which can work to alienate many Arab and Muslim women from the feminist text.

For many secular intellectuals in the Muslim world, including feminists, Western civilisation and culture are assigned absolute 'truth value' and 'universal' viability and validity. Consequently, its resultant body of knowledge is 'objective' and 'value-free', and it is thus assigned an absolute truth value which makes it applicable in any other socio-cultural context, and qualifies it as a universal frame of reference for measuring and judging other cultures. By way of analogy, it is by relinquishing Islamically oriented values that societies can achieve modernity and women can become free agents. This line of thought has always been met with a strong opposition in the Muslim world, accused of preaching alienation and Westernisation and fostering colonial domination. The conflict for some time has seemed irreconcilable, presenting only two types of alienation: either alienation into the historical past of the collective self or alienation into the present of the 'other', namely the West. Although contradictory in appearance, both represent negative and passive responses to the challenge of the dominant West (Saif, 1995a:16-7).

The assumption that Islam is inherently inimical to women's rights, an assumption considerably fostered by a colonial discourse, has been further sustained by a general Western perception of Islam as circulated by the mass media and inscribed in different writings. Said argues in *Covering Islam* how "the orthodox coverage of Islam" as "medieval," and "dangerous" in oriental discourses and Western mass media by some intellectuals serves the interests of Western powers. It is this affiliation which gives such a hostile representation of Islam "strength, durability, and above all, *presence*" (1981: 149). Saif, likewise, points out that "one needs a villain to make a hero" and that the Western powers are ever interested in creating new enemies whenever an older one is gone so that "the beautiful and the brave...[can] continue their mission of tracking down and casting out the spirit of evil in a battered world"

(1995: 119). Said maintains that the failure to subject Islam to critical assessment can work to train people even academics to think of Islam only in negative terms (Said, 1981: 162). The dissemination of negative images and ideas about Islam in the West provokes some Islamists to create some polar Islamic trends advocating that adaptation and renewal can be a threat to the Islamic identity and a marker of compliance with the Western hegemonic plan to subdue the 'other'. This polarity of thinking characterising various debates in the Arab regions is lacking in potential.

As has been pointed out in chapter one dealing with the historical background of feminism, Arab feminism has been considerably associated with a colonial discourse on Islam as 'backward', and Arab women as inherently oppressed by Islamic doctrines and Muslim men. *This perception has contributed significantly to viewing the issue of women within the general framework governing many Islamists' extremely antagonistic stands towards the West.* Since the colonial era, Muslims have found themselves caught up in a polar opposition of a debate of authenticity invoking past values and reviving so-called pure cultural heritage, and a debate of modernity which means adopting Western ideas, ideologies, and beliefs – advocated by nationalists, marxists and others (Ghalyoon, 1992: 119-26). Feminism in the Arab world has been seen in a wider context of the dominant Western culture representing some threats to the Islamic cultural heritage and identity. The problematic of an Arab feminist discourse is further complicated by any such dualism or polarity of thought. For the woman's issue must not be reduced to a dilemma of making a choice: either one is an advocator of woman's rights and hence exhibiting a mode of complicity with the West, or anti-feminist and hence offering solid proofs of one's true Islamic commitment. The mere posing of the issue on the above two terms promises that the first victim of opting for either approach is the Arab Muslim woman herself.

Feminist narratives are characterised by their political commitment to promoting women's welfare, albeit that this should not be done at the expense of the artistic excellence of the novel. Within an Arab context, promoting an insight for change necessitates unravelling

those important elements, including Islam, forming psychic and social dimensions of most Arab and Muslim individuals. Thus, marginalising religion and its complex workings in Arab 'religious' societies can prove detrimental to the transformative potential of an Arab feminist text. In this context I need to point out that it is not my intention to assess either Soueif's or Al-Shaykh's political or religious orientations. However, since one of the concerns of this thesis is underscoring the transformative potential that a feminist text has, I am obliged to find and assess what dynamics present, marginalised, or absent in the text working to inscribe or deter insights for positive change. By showing that the Arab feminist novelists have been heedless to incorporating a religious vision into their works, I am neither implying that they lack the commitment to the Arab woman's cause, nor am I demanding that they become religious, nor am I, most important of all, insinuating that they ought to be dealing with Islam along the lines with which Maitland and Roberts have chosen to deal with Christianity. My concern is to show that this kind of treatment of the phenomenon of religion reduces the actual value of some cultural elements as operating within the setting of the Arab world, which tends to influence negatively the issue of woman's rights.

Both Maitland and Roberts have sought to empower women by making use of religious values and symbols that have already assumed a degree of authority within a Western context. Although aware of Islam as a driving and legitimating force within an Arab context, Soueif finds those who distort her romantic notion of Islam and who use Islam to empower themselves as intruders on an 'essence' of Islam. Nadia, Asya's aunt, tells Asya, "half the girls are wearing the *hijab*; a particular angular version of the *hijab* that makes them look like the Sphinx." Asya responds, "[b]ut I don't understand how they can – I mean religion for me and Chrissie and everyone was Ramadan (the fasting month) and our grandparents praying and things like that" (*EOS*, 17). Soueif is critical of Islamists. They pass like ephemeral images that the reader can hardly have the time to make acquaintance with. It can be said that Roberts and Maitland have also severely criticised the religious institution and its offensive patriarchal practices as enacted

by men of the church. Yet, the fact that religion and religious images permeate the different layers of their narratives is a proof that they cannot afford to throw away an important part of their heritage and pretend that it has never been there. Their interest in reinscribing a religious feminist myth derived from Christianity also involves a process of adding up and expanding meaning and visions for change. It is making use of a cultural dimension to serve women's cause.

If veiled and Islamically-committed women are a significant presence in the Arab Islamic world, and if religion is such an influential force on the political, social, and psychological levels, why is it that it is persistently subdued or rendered dormant in the different Arab feminist literary texts? If religion manifests itself in different fields, through different expressions, why is it blurred in texts that are supposedly alert to issues of development as intersecting with woman's cause? The fact remains that Islam has been manipulated by different political trends and powers to justify one mode of practice or another. It has often been used by the state to legislate political decisions and acts. Thus, for instance, Sadat in 1970s encouraged the religious idiom as the idiom of political discourse which was inhibited during the rule of Abdel Nasser. Sadat, Ahmad points out, encouraged Islamic activities and allowed the Islamic Brethren to resume their work which Abdel Nasser had banned. "Sadat himself began to use the idiom of religion to gain support and legitimacy, declaring himself committed to a state based on the twin pillars of *Iman* (faith) and *I'lm* (science)" (Ahmad, 1992: 217). Islamic discourses have been manipulated not only to legitimate political action, but also to subdue and relegate women to a marginal sphere.

In *EOS*, Islam, the text seems to be telling, is better left a romantic essence, a memory and a formal marker of Egypt as a Muslim country. How could such an envisioning be possible when the novelist acknowledges in different places of the narrative that lots of women, especially younger women, are wearing the veil at the universities and almost everywhere in Egypt? (*EOS*: 749, 753, 774). She merely mocks the veiled women's appearances. The prostitute, the mother, the writer, the student, the wife, and the spinster, each can have her say in Arab feminist novels

and can be made to draw sympathy from the reader. We hardly come across a veiled woman telling her side of the story. She is the 'other' of the feminist novelist's self. Common or stereotypical images of Islam, and the manipulation of Islamic discourses to suppress women's rights have contributed to instigating antagonistic feelings between feminists and Islamists or Islamic orientations.

Al-Shaykh on the rare occasions she depicts Islamic people also views them with scepticism. In *SOZ*, she underscores religious hypocrisy in relation to Zahra's mother. After becoming of age Zahra's mother wears the veil, goes to Mecca, and becomes a *hajja* (a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca). Although she becomes "[a]worrying mother, concerned for her daughter's future after giving up hope of ever making a future for her son Ahmad" (*SOZ*, 89), still she continues to be selfish and unethical; thus even after wearing the veil, she willingly accepts to take from her son the money he strips out of dead corpses (*SOZ*: 112).

Drawing directly and crudely on religious phenomena can vulgarise the aesthetic notion of art. Soueif in *EOS*, has shown sensitivity to political and social phenomena pertaining to movements between two worlds and two cultures, that of the West and of the East. The place of Islam in the process of shaping these movements has hardly been integrated. At this instance, one cannot overlook the variables and factors impinging on the issue of readability and credibility. Soueif's works are all originally written in the English language, naturally then, with an English audience in mind. So the question which emerges now has to do with whether she has managed to change perceptions and deconstruct stereotypical images of Arab Islamic women and culture. Soueif proves capable of revealing that, after all, an Arab woman is not devoid of powers in many respects and spheres. In addition, she envisages perceptively the dynamics governing the self's relations to some 'others' through devising a distinguished sexual/political drama. On the other hand, she does not seem to have worked, or laboured, enough, to rooting out many of the stereotypical images of Islam and Islamically-committed men and women.

The sketches which Soueif provides of Islamists are in many ways not different from images of Islam already seen in the Western mass media and other parties concerned with 'covering' Islam. By entertaining the notion that Islam need be confined to romantic rituals performed by some individuals, and by attributing to it some formal values differentiating a Muslim Egypt from a Western London, Soueif reduces the phenomenon of Islam and its impact on the lives of the majority of the Arabs. This presentation echoes some Orientalist discourses on Islam as lacking elasticity and the potential to adapt. Said argues: "orthodox coverage of Islam that we find in the academy, in the government, and in the media is all interrelated and has been *more* diffused, has seemed *more* persuasive and influential, in the West than any other 'coverage' or interpretation" (1981:161). Soueif is in favour of a notion of Islam as an unchangeable essence, lest it should become political and dangerous. Thus, she might be seen to be nourishing a negative image of Islam analysed by Said in his exposition of how Islam and the material associated with it have been either 'covered' or canonised by Western powers—a notion that is inherently founded on culturally rendering Islam as dangerous and an "*a priori* touch stone" so that "the task of changing" it becomes "very difficult indeed" (1981: 149).

Soueif's impatience with Islam and Islamists, can also be located in one of her short stories, "The Water Heater" where she seems to be more specific about the threat rigid Islam can pose to advancing Arab women's rights. In this short story, included in her book *The Sand Piper* (1996), she narrates the story of Salah, a deeply religious young man who is punctilious about prayers and cleanliness and is made the butt of jokes by other men of his age and colleagues in the university because he neither drinks alcohol nor has affairs with women (*SP*, 65, 77, 78). Once they meet with him and tell him tauntingly that "they say these 'men of God' are real whore-masters at heart" (*SP*, 78). The most interesting and shocking part of the story (from the vantage of an Arab Muslim reader) is when Saleh spots the naked body of his sister, Faten, through the door of the steamed bathroom, only to have all his lustful thoughts about women stirred (*SP*, 72). Tortured by feelings of guilt and by some hidden incestuous desires, he forces

her into an engagement and then a quick marriage to her cousin, depriving her, thus, of ever entering the university.

The repression of woman is one of the characteristic features of the Arab Muslim societies. That men are the major surrogates and agents of this oppression is a fact. Within the context of the story Saleh's religiosity and his sexual inhibition are the causes behind his preventing Faten from entering the university. Before glimpsing her body, he had plans to admit her into the university. Fearing his own desires if she continues to live with him in the same family house, and beginning to view himself as 'fallen', he hastens to send her away from his sight. It can be argued that Soueif does not mean to say that the lustful thoughts that stir within Saleh's self are peculiar to Islamic men, albeit among other things they could be the outcome of sexual repression. Non-Muslims, or liberals, as well as anti-religious are all liable to such feelings. Men who make women suffer for being the objects of their desires exist in the West and the East. This relates to the psychology of religion bigotry in general. The explicitness with which Saleh's religiosity is depicted as igniting forbidden feelings is the issue which can be seen by an Arab Muslim reader as onerously provocative. (A similar provocation is found when in *EOS*, Asya describes the young Sheikh who comes to recite verses from the Koran as "[h]is eyes are everywhere. He pretends to close them as he recites, but from under his lids he is examining the legs of the women" (*EOS*, 748)). The burlesque characterising the episode involving an Islamist can deepen antagonism between Islamically-oriented people and so called 'modernists' or 'secularists' and engrave polarities. The fact that Soueif chooses the devout Saleh as an oppressor of his sister and not 'a secular' or irreligious male character works to give the impression that Islamically-committed men are more likely to be condemned of incestuous desires than others. Choices in works of art are ideologically telling, and not randomly made. Soueif's choices to condemn Saleh, the particularly religious young man, for some incestuous desires can provoke Islamic readers and lead them to view the story with hostility. Resisting the

text, rather than seeking what transformative potential it has or enjoying it as a work of art, becomes the Islamic reader's main target.

Islamic men and women need be integrated into the feminist text. By integration I mean that the feminist novelist should attempt not to reduce Islamists' subjectivities by rendering them objects and butts of laughter and mockery. Soueif in *EOS*, for example, has dealt perceptively with Mahrous's 'otherness', as has been shown in chapter four. Asya has real sympathy for Mahrous, the Egyptian who comes from a simple peasant family background. In England, working for a Ph.D degree, Mahrous, bewildered by the new setting, harasses an English girl without realising the implication of his behaviour. Soueif unravels shrewdly the different complexities which drive Mahrous to behave in this way, and also provides the ground which makes some Westerners capable of coming to terms with his 'misbehaviour' or 'unhomeliness'. No parallel treatment has been granted to any male or female Islamist in Soueif's fiction. Failing to see the *faux pas* and solecism of Islamic, and non-Islamic, groups and practices will prove unhelpful to construct a vision promoting women's cause.

Much of the above said about religion in the works of Soueif is also applicable to the works of Al-Shaykh. In an interview with her conducted by Richard Swift, Al-Shaykh states: "I never attack religion. I am not interested in it" (Swift, 1995: 31). In another interview entitled "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist" the interviewer, Charles Larson, concludes that "[c]ertainly it is only a matter of time before her dialogue with the Islamic patriarchy is no longer one-sided" (1991: 17). He finds that her works all demonstrate the exploitation and the oppression that women in the Arab world face under a specifically Islamic rule and Islamic codes. The issue of woman's rights, as has been argued in different places of the study, is inextricably related to an overall structural plan that involves a mesh of overlapping and interacting social, political, psychological, and cultural constructs, including religious. Not only religion which remains peripheral, but also current and urgent problems pertaining to food, shelter, development, crimes of honour, imposed marriages, and others

remain hardly broached in the works of Soueif and Al-Shaykh. Sill, Soueif in *EOS* has been so elaborate and insightful in accounting for many of the political events that took place in Egypt at different historical phases.

Rosemary Sayigh in “Palestinian Women and Politics in Lebanon” affirms that “[t]he contingency of women’s political action, and the fact that it is seldom self-mobilised, but is promoted and constrained by other factors, means that no history of women’s movement can be written without attention to its context” (1993: 176). The Lebanese civil war not only affected the political and socio-economic structures of Lebanon but also affected the status of women. Sayigh highlights how the state pushed women into the work force, encouraged a “cultural atmosphere that allowed free play to progressive as well as reactionary currents” and “weakened family control over women at the mass level” (1993: 176). She, however, finds that women’s participation in the war, and in national struggle led “to ideological stagnation around the ‘women’s issue’” (1993: 176). Al-Shaykh has shown interest in merging the political with the personal. The war becomes the metaphor for Zahra’s pathological sexual and psychological status. It is during the years of the war that Zahra’s parents flee their house to the village, being a safer place, giving Zahra the space to become ‘free’ and start a deadly sexual affair with the sniper. Al-Shaykh has attended to her own cultural contexts. The different phenomena characterising the political and cultural scene of that context has been evoked with different degrees of emphasis. Reducing the presence of Islam, or depicting provoking images of Islamists can only stir up a defensive response of resentment resulting in destructive polarisation between cultural enclosure and retreat to a past model on the one hand, and Westernisation in the name of progress and woman’s emancipation on the other. When Al-Shaykh reiterates that she is not interested in religion and yet goes on emphasising in her different stories how offensive religion is to women, then there must be a level of interest there.

In *DM*, she also chooses a country, Saudi Arabia, that is best known nationally and internationally for its avowed commitment to Islam and Islamic code of legislation. This

Islamically-informed setting and its suppression of the human desires are shown to be responsible for breeding corrupt and sexually maniac men and women. It is the superficiality with which the surface reality of the characters and settings is depicted in the novel that generates the feelings that Islam is the direct and sole cause of the degrading situation of women, men, mentalities, social mores and work places. In *DM*, conservative religious attitudes seem to be underlying all ‘backward’ mentalities and codes of behaviour. Women hiding in boxes fearing to be found by a male inspector, sexually inhibited men and women, women denied access to education, infidelity, are all aspects determined by specifically patriarchal Islamic culture. The allusion to other social, political, psychological, or historical dynamics contributing to the formation of these ‘unhealthy’ societies or mentalities, or even accounting in artistic terms for the emergence of an oppressive ‘Islam’ is hardly discernible at any of the narrative levels. Inhibition, obsession, and madness can all become ‘metaphors’ for Islam. At one instance Mariam, Suha’s friend, wonders whether “the man who threw the beautiful blond Syrian girl with acid water to burn the garment she was wearing to see her thighs did that because he was religious” (*DM*: 77).

In “Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context: Arab Women’s Contribution to Literature” Evelyne Accad correctly maintains that “it is not necessarily the role of fiction to provide blueprints for concrete social action – and much bad fiction has resulted from attempts to do so,” still “greater openness” and “integration of individual struggle into larger social context, may well become a force for positive and creative social and political change in the Arab world” (1993: 250). Aesthetic excellence, however, has always been associated with writers’ ability to engrave comprehensive and deep visions, and to interrelate their individual characters to wider social and historical contexts. A good novel need not be directly or crudely representative, nor simply reflective, of the reality from which it emanates. Narratives focusing on photographic representations or “copious” of external realities without attending to deeper and more comprehensive social and political structures necessarily lack artistic excellence. Kolodny, as

pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, has argued that a definitive, one-dimensional, dogmatic, and reductionist text can never be a creative text nor a forming ground for feminist ethics (1986: 187).

Chapter Six

Conclusion

I have endeavoured in this comparative study to underscore in some of the novels by Maitland, Roberts, Al-Shaykh, and Soueif those stances that can be seen as either promoting or impeding constructive changes in the lives of women within a particular cultural context. A constructive vision of change, the study has revealed, is inextricably conditioned by perceptive considerations of the diverse religious, historical, social, and political dynamics as they operate within each specific cultural context. Also, in the course of analysing the different feminist novels in the study, some connections have emerged between transformative visions as nurtured in a certain novel and that novel's aesthetic aspects. The comprehensibility, cultural sensitivity, and profundity of transformative visions have contributed to enhancing the novel's artistic value. Stereotypical images, shallow depictions of characters' subjectivities as interrelating to ontological and ideological values, failing to grasp the intricate workings of social and cultural dynamics as they inform specific realities, and reintegrating ahistorical myth mystifying any prospects for change have considerably worked to discredit the text's transformative value.

I have also attempted to show that the intrinsic qualities of the novel necessarily merge with the external world to which that novel relates. Structural elements, formal representations, and aesthetic devices in literature are not mere vehicles for conveying ideas and contents. Rather, they create awareness of the embedded message and ascribe artistic value to the text. In contrast with other non-literary modes of expression, formal representations in literary texts are contrived to produce aesthetic and stylistic effects which are themselves reflective of the message. That is, the message in a work of literature resides in structures, formal devices, and the irreducible manner of representation. All of these necessarily acquire inherent relations to specific cultures and to the writer's ideological stances and her ability to instigate incentives for constructive changes.

The use of myths and legends, and the incorporation of religious signs are traditional literary devices that have been exploited in the formal aspects of the novels. Houses, too, have traditionally been designed in fiction as metaphors or allegories emblematic of social edifices, ideological stands, forms of cultural enclosures, states of mind, and newly emerging levels of realities or identities. Travel or journey metaphors are other conventional devices evoked to signify the passage from one stage to another, or from the conscious to the unconscious, or from sanity to madness. In addition, journeys could be devised to express processes of discovery, recovery, or even loss. Still, the central issue has been finding out how effective the exploitation of such familiar imagery, metaphors, and narrative strategies have been in deconstructing modes of oppressive reality, and in creating new possibilities for change. Soueif, Maitland, and Roberts have deployed extended metaphorical levels of meaning and complex imagery, and have carefully designed their narrative structures to account perceptively for outcasts, children, various types of women, 'unacceptable' men, outsiders, and 'other' human 'oppressed' categories.

Because congruence between form and content is a marking feature of artistic achievements, transparent language, shallow characterisation, and stereotypical depictions are hardly the criteria for reversing certain values, or exposing the different and complex dimensions of various human phenomena, or engendering a comprehensive understanding of specific contexts and, thus, building up constructive visions for change. Al-Shaykh, whether in *DM* or *SOZ*, has designed settings, images, and plots that reveal how oppressed Arab Muslim women are. None of her characters, neither males nor females, has been endowed with the potential to experience 'growth' convincingly at any level. Even if it is true that Al-Shaykh is not required to resolve tensions nor to offer ready-made solutions in her novels, still, as a feminist novelist, she may reasonably set up tensions, and disseminate oppositions as preconditions for engendering some modes of resistance. The images of war, bathroom metaphors, demeaning actions, betrayals, unworthy deaths, collapsing houses, bitter feelings

of alienation, and venomous atmospheres all collaborate and become a single unity with the characters' moods reflecting one-dimensional psyches and one level of reality. Settings, characters, and plots are mirror images of each other. Tensions at the structural level of the text whether between characters and settings, or between images and plots are leavened. The conformity of the different formal aspects as they shape the plot hardly engenders any transformative insights drawing upon complex and heterogeneous perspectives. Many characters emerge as shallow stereotypes or caricature-like images. Suzanne, the American woman in *DM*, for example, is shown to be hilariously obsessed with money and the Arab desert. The designation of Al-Shaykh's characters conjures stereotypical images of Western women as commonly held by many Easterners. Suzanne's journey to the desert does not invoke any change or 'development'.

On the other hand, the journey metaphor has been significantly exploited by Soueif to unfold the vastness of the human experiences, especially those pertaining to the self's relation to the 'other'. The rites of passage which Asya undergoes in *EOS* to be initiated into the world of the 'other' become a complex metaphor for a vigorous sexual/political drama. As an Arab living in England, Asya has been endowed with the potential to develop a double vision. At times, she belongs to the 'here', and at others to the 'there'. Soueif designs the fabric of her novel out of both Western and Eastern materials. The allusions to *The Arabian Nights* merge with those of *Wuthering Heights* to form an interesting and insightful political and human vision of the Arabs' relation to the West. Asya's sick uncle, Hamid, her husband, Saif, her boyfriend, Gerald, all emerge as both contextualised characters and as extended and complex tropes signifying profound human situations and relations at the different political, social, and psychological levels.

Also, sex as a metaphor is heavily exploited by Soueif, Al-Shaykh, Roberts, and Maitland. It is used to address specifically feminist quests and/or political and moral issues. In *TV* Roberts has sought out sex to emphasise wholeness and integration as far as males'

relations with females are concerned. At certain instances, though, as in *PON*, sex is depicted as one of the relations through which men further exploit and dominate women. Maitland, too, has chosen to ascribe to sex different meanings and values. In *HT*, Clare is fatally attracted to David. She discovers her potentials as a woman the moment she realises that she can dispense with having “wonderful sex” with him. Maitland’s *HT* is also a sexual/political drama concerned with exploring the different moral dimensions implicated in the relations of the more powerful to the less powerful. Within an Arab context, while Al-Shaykh uses sex to connote women’s submissions and catatonic surrenders, as shown in Zahra’s affair with the sniper, Soueif envisions sex as a power drawing Asya, the Arab, to Gerald, the English, invoking hereby *the paradoxical dynamics of the colonised/coloniser relationship*.

Improving women’s status in the different spheres should not be pursued in isolation of other developmental plans within a specific context. As such, feminist novels that attend to women’s experiences solely and fail to incorporate into their scopes the complex relations of these experiences to the other sex are necessarily lacking in potential. However, reductionist representations of males, or any other level of human experiences, have proved to be detrimental to women’s cause and to the artistic value of the text. It is simplistic to assume that the credibility or complexity of characters and situations are issues solely dependent on how much of the narrative space is devoted to handling those characters and situations. My readings of the novels have shown that weakness in depicting male characters can weaken the novel’s political and aesthetic values.

The analyses of the different novels have shown that the same writer has not pursued visions for change at the same level of competence in all of her novels. For example, Roberts has been oscillating between different positions, and some of her novels have been more convincingly structured to effect consciousness for change than others. In *IS*, her latest novel, the imagery invoked in the different narrative layers hardly triggers potential for positive transformation whether in women’s lives or any other aspect of the society. The

dominating image is that of bones. Her deployment of myth is blown up into ahistorical “universal panacea” (Rahv’s words) transcending characters, whether males or females, and depriving events of their temporal significance. Although her grasp of history has not been as sharp as that of Maitland, her desire to disseminate ‘universal’ humanist visions and deconstruct those cultural barriers and others occluding the emergence of those visions is genuinely pursued in all of her novels. The primordial images she invokes to reinforce wholeness and integration between males and females, two females, and then body and soul work to assert that males’ domination is not an essential innate truth so much as it is a cultural construct. Roberts is a prolific writer and all her writings reflect a deep interest in biblical signs and mythic modes. At one level, this shows that religion, even in a so-called ‘secular’ West, continues to be both a spiritual and socio-cultural force which, as many feminists seem to realise, cannot possibly be neglected. Because religion still exerts a strong hold on people’s minds and feelings, its manipulation by feminists like Roberts and Maitland can work to serve political ends.

Roberts’ deployment of myth in *WG* and *IS* as an aesthetic mode of expression tends to induce reified images, and is hardly invested to highlight historical consciousness. The construction of myth, rather than the manipulation of one, becomes an end in itself. As such, addressing certain practical and pressing problems in relation to women as historically and contextually conditioned is palliated. Roberts, however, has been more conscious of time, the historical, in *TV*, *DOH* and *PON*. Religion and mythic impulses are rendered vigorous presences interacting with other specific modes of reality informing the characters’ ‘growth’ and psychological makeup. Maitland, too, has been interested in making use of myth while concurrently enacting changes as relating to a concept of liberation that is not outside the historical time. She has unfolded ‘universal’ or ‘human’ ‘truths’ by emphasising, rather than by blurring, history and social reality as pertaining to specifically different cultural contexts. To Roberts, social reality and historical contingencies need

necessarily be penetrated or dismantled for the discovery of deeper incipient 'universal' and human 'truths'. In *TTT*, Maitland shows that the indulgence in restituting myths or in being utterly absorbed with modes of fantasy is conducive to self-alienation and catatonic lapses. This is why upon sensing that the dragon is pulling Maggie into its centre with its magical powers and stories, Maitland hastens to drag Maggie back to the real world. Nevertheless, she would neither forsake the dragon nor its powers. She treasures it for Rachel.

Although Roberts' and Maitland's novels embrace a diversity of oppositional stances to cultural and religious constructs seen to be oppressive to women, none of them seems to be suggesting that it is only by abandoning Western culture and heritage that Western women can be liberated. However, their engagements with the constitutive forces informing their own contexts have not been traditionally pursued as to affirm conservative approaches based on typical constructions, orthodoxies and exclusions. Significant narrative spaces have been allowed for homosexuals, lesbians, barren women, oppressed men, the elderly, the disabled, the immigrant, the non-white and other marginalised categories to speak up their minds and desires. Maitland, for example, has been interested in expanding a concept of God that is big enough to contain all 'others', a God that "has transformatory potential, that is effective towards political and social change" (Maitland, 1995: 35). The liberation of her own community, her novels have reflected, must not be attained at the expense of "the oppression of other marginalised communities," nor must it forsake the 'Christian' God as an imperative for change. She perceives a God that is "always different," and ethics that "are inextricably bound together" (Maitland, 1995: 6).

Like Maitland, Roberts conceives in her narratives the 'Christian' God as not simply God the father but "as the expression of opposites and conflicts and their integration: good and bad, light and dark, masculine and feminine, creative and perceptive" (Roberts, 1983a: 107). God as a sphere within which different primordial elements are integrated and rendered wholeness is a recurring theme of Roberts' novels. It has been one of her pursuits

to analyse the components of this wholeness and to reflect on how it is essentially fragmented by intricate workings of patriarchy as they permeate directly and indirectly the different levels of human activities. Still, her accurate and insightful grasp of sexual politics has varied from one novel to another. In *TV* and *PON* she has reflected deeply on women's personal experiences by inscribing mythic impulses and deploying predominantly psychoanalytic moods informing gender relations and sexuality. In *DOH*, Christian images and psychoanalytic approaches all collaborate to break sexual and political silences. The unexposed massacre of the Jews in France becomes the trope for women's unspoken oppression.

Roberts' and Maitland's novels, however, are motivated by some moral impetuses towards constructing 'universal humanism'. In *HT*, for example, Maitland has emphasised 'universal' truths by dwelling on differences between not only one individual and another, but also between one culture and another. Out of differences, she has endeavoured to point out, certain common human patterns are bound to emerge. These differences connote substantial values; it is morally suspect to devalue others' cultures especially by those who are politically more powerful or privileged. On the other hand, Roberts' overwhelming desire to render her truths and visions of wholeness 'universally' applicable within the different contexts has often been transformed in such a way as to lead to blurring historical and cultural settings.

Whereas narratives imbued with 'moral' voices comply with feminism's ethics, the manner by which such voices are articulated continues to be inextricably related to issues of reception and credibility. Hence, while the Christian and mythic images that inform both Roberts' and Maitland's narratives might prove conceivable and tenable within a Western context, their plausibility within an Arab Islamic context is problematic. Within an Islamic context, approaching the issue of religion the way Roberts and Maitland do is absolutely unacceptable. Deconstructing, or reinterpreting religious constructs and values, whether

Islamic or Christian, is a generally tabooed practice. Furthermore, specifically religious imagery, sources, or codes hardly evolve to form a significant presence in the Arab feminist novels included in this study.

The fact remains that within an Arab-Islamic context, religion is an important dynamic when drawing on issues of change whether in relation to women or to society at large. The very phenomenon of rendering Islam as dormant, or predominantly negative, in the Arab feminist novels at hand is culturally and politically untenable. Consciousness of the constitutive forces of a certain culture is a precondition for appropriating politics of transformation. The antagonistic relation between Islam and feminism can affect the credibility of a feminist discourse within an Arab Islamic context, knowing that presently a significant number of Arab women are Islamically oriented. Islam at times emerges as the common enemy of both feminism and governmental authority, and at others is rendered a tool which governments can manipulate to legislate hegemonic actions and oppressive codes of practices.

Arab political establishments maintain a measure of both liberalism and Islamism, enough of each to use one to neutralise liberal and Islamic oppositions. Liberalism, it is important to add, is not one unitary, well-defined, and well-demarcated movement to be exclusively identified with feminism or Westernisation. Many liberal Arab feminists would not go as far as advocating full affiliation with the West, or as far as being utterly insensitive to their cultural and historical contexts, or as far as posing the Western model as the only universal model of progress and modernity, as has been revealed in the Arab feminist novels included in this study. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Soueif and Al-Shaykh have invoked several stances nurturing the existence of systems of power. Within a postcolonial and peripheral context, the sustenance of certain powers is often dependent on those powers' affiliative links with Western/colonial powers. My analyses of Al-Shaykh's and Soueif's novels have shown that their depictions of Islam and Islamic women have not significantly

diverged from hostile images constructed of Islam in orientalist discourses persistently disseminated by Western media.

In *SOZ* and in *DM*, Al-Shaykh has laboured to attribute a great deal of women's oppression and Arab Muslims' 'backwardness' to Islamic culture and Islamic codes of ethics. A descriptive narrative, one that underscores the negative aspects characterising certain realities, is naturally a precondition for explicating politics of struggle. However, to deprive the narrative of all transformative potentials by rendering the descriptive mode a finality defeats ethics of feminism substantially informed by politics of change. Rendering Islam and other significant components of Arab Islamic culture and tradition as inherently, and often exclusively, causative of present Arab dilemmas, including women's oppression, is hardly conducive to engendering dynamics of resistance. Representations of Islam in simplistic terms not only fail to account for its complexity as a cultural phenomenon and a legislative socio-political force in the Arab world, but also ultimately proves insensitive to enacting a strategy for promoting woman's cause. Islam and Islamic men and women are relegated to a peripheral narrative space in the Arab novels at hand. Feminist novels are intended to highlight women's oppression. Those who cover up their bodies might prove to be much more oppressed than other women who do not. It is often the case that they are the ones really desperate to make their voices heard or their desires spoken. A discourse of sexuality is more efficiently pursued if considered from within a comprehensive context. Al-Shaykh's narratives seem to reflect that a separatist, or an antagonistic stand from the Arab's past and even present as caught up in a reified past, need necessarily be adopted to promote Arab women's status in particular and Arab societies in general.

Soueif and Al-Shaykh have excluded Islamically committed Arab women and rendered them shallow entities, or caricature-like images. When such a considerable presence in reality turns out to be the 'other' of the writing self, and when significant shaping cultural and religious forces are reductively and antagonistically projected, not only

does this work to alienate the majority of Arab women from a feminist discourse, but also renders change an impossibility. Soueif in *EOS*, however, has proved to be more sensitive than Al-Shaykh in depicting her cultural surroundings and the politics informing those surroundings. Still, like Al-Shaykh, she has projected the Islamic woman as the 'other'. She has denied her the space within the narrative scenes to speak up her mind and needs. The veiled woman thus emerges as 'a spooky' shape or an entity without substance. On the other hand, she has broached Islam as a romantic essence, as an element of a nostalgic past, and as simply one of the demarcations drawing Egypt as a geographical setting distinct from England. Any such envisioning can work to blur the real influence that Islam has on shaping attitudes and mentalities. The oppression that women in the Arab world experience is multiple and diverse. Islamic or non-Islamic practising women are bound to face one mode of androcentric bias or another in both the private and public spheres. It would not serve Arab women's cause if local religious, historical, and cultural specificities are transcended or depicted as merely inherent obstacles occluding change. This offends the majority and engraves polarities. It is most deleterious to women's rights when an Arab Muslim woman is relegated into a situation where she has to choose between improving her status as a woman and abiding by her Islamic faith.

Neither the spread of the veil nor the advocacy of reviving a past Islamic model is a proof or an exclusive marker of an Islamic awakening. For the fact remains that within an Islamic context, specific practices and appearances of an Arab woman are persistent projections of Islamic males' identities and affiliations. Women can hardly be described as exerting real efforts in carrying out developmental plans or even initiating discourses for enacting comprehensive transformation. It is fair to assert that Arab feminist writers like Soueif and Al-Shaykh have shown a real interest in linking Arab women's dilemmas to Arab cultural and political situation. Still, they have not been comprehensive enough in mobilising all powers inherent in their contexts to initiate constructive changes at all levels.

Their reluctance to utilise and address certain contextual forces, like those of Islam, to promoting women's issues is significantly connected to the internal realities of the Arab Muslim world. Within these realities, some Islamic women are relegated to the private spheres of the house and denied the accesses to different social and decision-making positions. On the other hand, freed from religious and 'tradition' restrictions, a liberated and Westernised Arab woman exercises more active presence in the different social, political, and educational fields. As such there emerges a situation where freedom and activism become to be associated with Westernisation, while 'backwardness' and women's seclusion are equated with Islam. The identification intensifies feelings of frustration among Islamic women who find themselves torn between their desires to be committed to 'authentic' Islam and their aspirations to attain self-fulfilment through effective participation in the public life. This might explain the relative absence of Islamic women from different intellectual and political spheres and the relative presence of Arab Westernised women in the same spheres. This also might explain why Islamic women are always on the defensive side when confronted with a feminist discourse.

Arab feminists should take the initiative to develop a transformative discourse building up insights for overall positive social and cultural changes. Al-Shaykh's resentment to an Arab woman's oppressive reality in particular, and Arab societies in general, leads her to reduce all dynamics and constitutive forces or traditions shaping this reality. Not only dynamics such as religion or other various cultural inheritances are being undermined as oppressive, but also a specifically Arab woman's past and traditional roles are also being effaced within the narrative texture. In none of the Arab feminist novels included in the study, Arab women's traditional roles are invoked or utilised as potentially empowering. The emphasis on the domestic roles traditionally ascribed to women whether in relation to cookery, pregnancy, breast-feeding, and others remains a distinguished feature of the novels by Roberts and Maitland. Generally, both Al-

Shaykh and Soueif, however, have declined from any such projections as practised in Arab-Muslim societies. On the other hand, Roberts and Maitland have treasured women's domestic roles and histories as inherently empowering and spiritually redemptive forces. *None of them seems to be suggesting that to build new houses older ones must be totally wrecked.*

Feminist novels, like all other written texts, are not produced in a vacuum. Each is necessarily interpretative of some active modes informed by specific histories and power workings. Still, what holds this comparative study on some feminist novels from two worlds apart with divergent histories and social values is the theme of political resistance and opposition to abusive patriarchy. Any such commonality need not be stretched to a degree as to essentialize similarities. The study does not aim at positing homogenous configurations of Arab and Western women's struggles. Even within an Arab Islamic context, it can hardly be confirmed that women share a perfectly common context of struggle, nor naturally within a Western context. Yet, the study emphasises certain common dynamics informing women's different struggles and the tenability of such struggles in each specific context. The issue is not simply to record one's history of struggle, but to emphasise the manner by which struggle is recorded, received, and perceived.

Issues of power workings, however, should be stressed not only as informing the relation between the West and the Arab world, but also as operating within the one world. In the context of the contemporary structure of global power, we need to emphasise a feminism that is attentively self-critical and conscious of its historical and political 'situatedness'. Ideologies of feminism have much to do with class and colonisation as they have to do with sex. Thus, it has been one of the concerns of the study to show how some instances of a colonial discourse working to colonise the material and historical heterogeneity of the lives of Arab Muslim women have been reproduced and nourished by some Arab feminist novelists. While an exposition of manipulative discourses has been

crucial to the process of unfolding politics of struggle, the study has shown that ethics of Western feminist discourses substantially diverge from a discourse on women as devised by the colonial power by way of reinforcing hegemony. Even if it can be argued that ethnocentric 'universalism' is produced in some Western feminist analyses and that Western feminism presents itself as 'normative', the fact remains that questions of political consciousness and self-identity cannot avoid the authorial subjects as intershaped within a specific context. For there is no such thing as apolitical scholarship or writing which is not contextually implicated. And still, Western feminism as a composite of various strands developed and enriched through different political proxies, and other non-Westerns' contributions, cannot be said to be specifically hegemonic.

While the emergence of an indigenous Arab feminist discourse sensitive to Arab Muslim local contexts is needed to promote Arab women's rights, the mere indulgence in attacking the West or Western feminists' needs as conditioned by their local contexts can only work to deepen polarities and reinforce uneven power relations. Eradicating oppression has been the founding value of a feminist discourse. Various Islamic practices and concepts have been condemned as inherently oppressive to women by Western and non-western feminists. Transformative literary visions are necessarily articulated by moral voices informed by a truly inclusive humane sense, sensitivity to cultural specificities, and familiarity with the real complex dynamics informing a certain context.

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Notes:

* Books, novels, and articles are noted by dates of editions I am using and not necessarily by dates of original publications.

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